



INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**THE DECADE OF ROMA INCLUSION –
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN THE NEW EUROPE?**

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The author assumes the recently launched initiative on Roma inclusion as an attempt to institutionalize affirmative action policies in Central and Eastern Europe.

Criticizing the drawbacks of such an approach, the author takes a neo-liberalist stance prioritizing the effective implementation of individual rights over compartmentalization of group identities.

He offers recommendations for dealing with Roma policy gaps through advancing the notion of entry points of interaction between Roma and non-Roma as well as applying segmented strategies when designing policies for Roma minorities.

The author also underscores the importance of adequate communication and public debate of/on ethnic politics and juxtaposes affirmative and confirmative actions exposing and giving preference to the institutional rationale behind confirmative action approach.

This article was set off by the recently launched Decade of Roma Inclusion, and especially by the claims that it is to mark a new stage of Roma politics in Europe. But how innovative and timely is this initiative? Is it a policy augmentation or just cultivation of a new political domain? The initiative proclaimed seems too bold and therefore requires certain questioning of its reasons and potentials as well as discussing its repercussions and broad public impact, both nationally and internationally.

Reading the program documents and publicity material related to the initiative prompts some thoughts and comments. The aim of this article is to organize these comments in a critical way as well as outline some of the deficits in handling and approaching Roma issues. Eventually, the article presents a structure of the modalities of

interaction between Roma and non-Roma citizens and institutions. A major point of departure for all the arguments developed below is advancing the notion of *entry points of interaction between Roma and non-Roma* as means of *shortening the social distance between them*.

The Implicit Theoretical Vagueness of Roma Politics¹

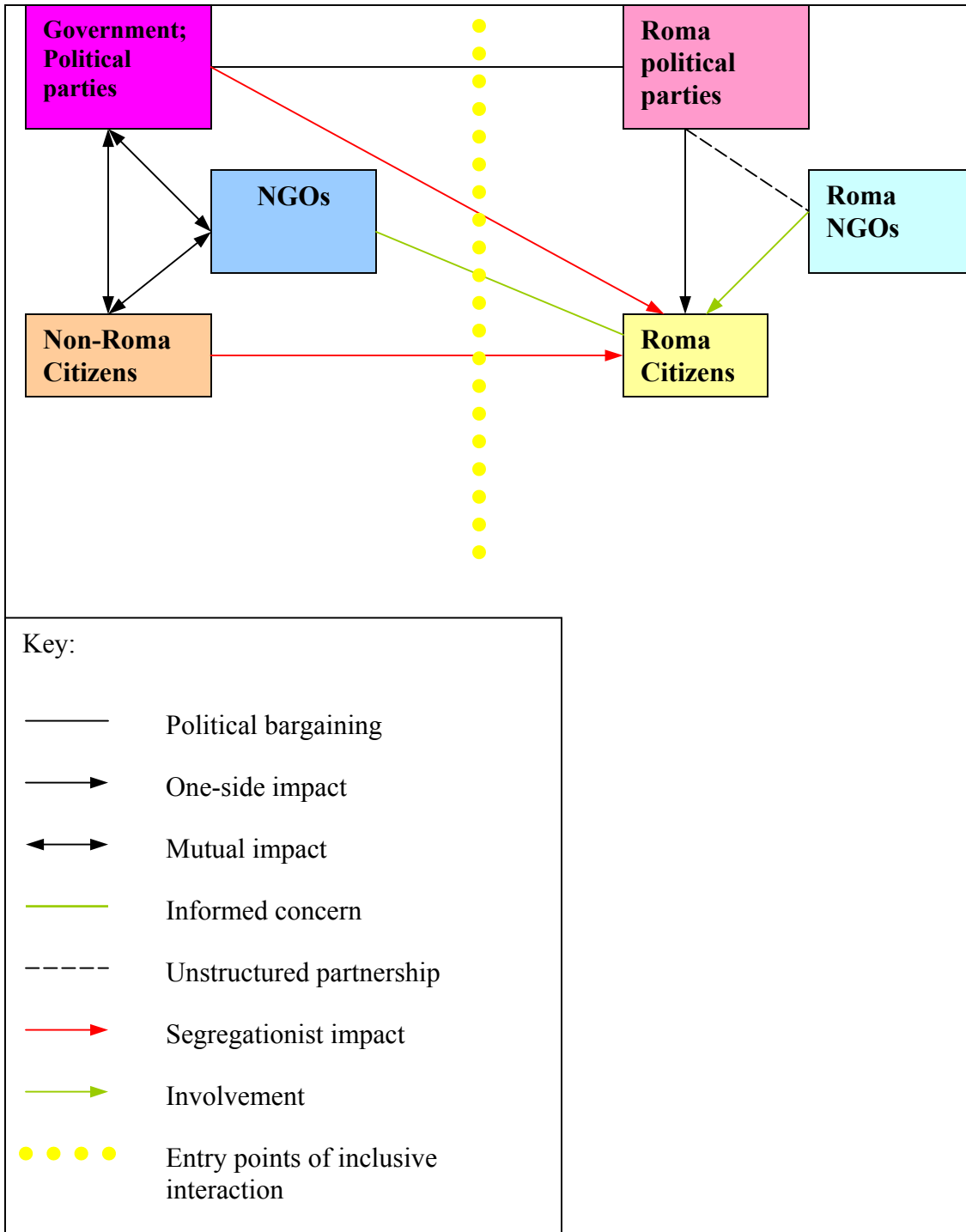
Roma politics lack a fundamental methodology capable of explaining, organizing and implementing Roma policy. Firstly, its basic theoretical grounds are quite uncertain and secondly, there is hesitancy between advocating anti-discrimination and promoting human development approach.

The uncertainty of the theoretical grounds, in brief, means that we are inexplicit when we talk about Roma minority and its integration, inclusion, anti-discrimination, etc. Do we refer to it as a group or do we actually mean Roma individuals? Without considering properly this question any attempt to vitalize a strategy is bound to remain shaky. Two consequences of this question reasonably follow and they are embodied by the long-standing dichotomy of individual and group rights. A major shortcoming of Roma policy is that it considers Roma as a homogeneous group rather than related individuals. It is what tarnishes the design and implementation of Roma policy. Many scholars, who subscribe to the thinking of multiculturalism, will disagree in principle with the last comment, arguing that once we have group prejudice, hatred and discrimination, it is only group treatment rendered to be appropriate and efficient. The counterpoint to this argument is the practical incapability of Roma individuals to exercise their individual and fundamental human rights, which they are entitled to. Due to structural and functional deficiencies they cannot enjoy these, especially in times of social and economic transition, a process that the countries in Central and Eastern Europe had to undergo during the last 15 years. This process of transition further doomed Roma minority to a second-class status.

¹ The term ‘Roma politics’ does not refer to political mobilization and representation of Roma minorities in particular. It is used in a rather broader sense to indicate the politics concerned with Roma minorities.

It is worth considering how the transition process affected other minority groups and the level of implementation of their rights. In Bulgaria, for example, the first largest minority group – Turkish, is much better off than the second largest – the Roma. It does not suffice to explain this with the better political organization of the Turkish minority, its representation in Parliament and even in Government. Yet, the reasons may appear multi-faceted or multi-dimensional but what is crucial is the higher degree of implemented individual fundamental rights that the Turkish minority members enjoy, whereas Roma minority members do not. Therefore, what Roma need most to compensate for their low social status is practical implementation of their *individual rights*. Approaching this task with an encapsulated vision of Roma minority however is simplistic and ineffective. What the target should be is augmenting the interaction of Roma individuals with the institutions of state and power, the economic institutions and the mainstream/ majority society. Fig. 1 presents the status quo of Roma – non-Roma interaction. The ideal (long-term goal) would be when all interaction lines are black double arrows. The mid-term objective is to initiate as many entry points of interaction (yellow dash line) as possible.

Figure 1. Roma – Non-Roma Interaction Model



Roma Decade as Political Campaigning or Affirmative Action

As set out on the official website, “the Decade is a political commitment by countries to reduce disparities in key economic and human development outcomes for Roma through implementing policy reforms and programs designed to break the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion.”² Each country is responsible for developing an Action Plan, which will be approved by a steering committee and closely monitored. The official statement further describes the Decade of Roma Inclusion as “a major international effort to meet the common European challenge of Roma inclusion in a coordinated, open and transparent way.”³

What is worrying about such a description of the Decade is its comprehensiveness, broad and overburdened agenda, matched with a deficit of structural and functional capacity. This deficit is implicitly stated in the Decade concept, noting that “the Decade is not another new institution or bureaucracy, nor is it a new pot of money.”⁴

What is the Decade about then? Is it an expression of good intention? Is it an attempt to bring to the fore affirmative action for Roma in the New Europe? Is it just a misleading enchantment or disenchantment? Will it put Roma at governments’ and public mercy again, due to the presumed “reallocation of existing resources in national budgets”?⁵

Roma issues are usually integral part of political campaigning at times of elections when Roma votes are needed. This however also leads to blackmailing Roma population rather than having their voice heard. What is worse is that Roma are even blackmailed by their self-declared leaders. The only counter-measure to this is promoting Roma civil society, which is totally non-existent regardless of what James D. Wolfensohn and George Soros argue in their program article about the Decade of Roma Inclusion⁶.

² <http://www.romadecade.org/en/index.php?action=2>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wolfensohn, J., G. Soros, Roma People in an Expanding Europe, <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ECA/ECSHD.nsf/docbyid/269514C0F5CF2BA4C1256F9B005EB406?OpenDocument&Start=1&Count=5> (Accessed February 17, 2005)

The Decade of Roma Inclusion and its declared objectives fit very well to the concept of affirmative action. Though deliberate or not, this model of developing the initiative is supposedly less productive. Affirmative action for Roma could be considered as a *positive apartheid*, which can hardly provide the integrity of society. Even in a country such as the US, pioneering in affirmative action politics, there are vociferous opinions now against this policy.

It is true that Roma suffer partly due to their ascriptive group characteristics but *prescribing affirmative action* for compensating the injustice caused to them is *no remedy*. What it will trigger first is a backlash in reaction from the mainstream society, rejecting any affirmative action measures and government spending of scarce resources for Roma. It may well provoke extreme right neo-Nazi or skinhead groups' activities to an even greater extent than have already been seen.

Therefore, approaching Roma issues with a Grand Strategy, regardless of who initiates and supports it, is nothing but a Grand Mistake. What Roma inclusion should mean is just and improved treatment of Roma individuals and having their individual fundamental rights practically fulfilled. In addition, Roma inclusion requires *non-Roma understanding and informed consent*. The government *cannot impose on the majority* the policy of Roma inclusion. In case it does so, it will be ineffective policy having the opposition of the majority. The government should communicate and persuade the majority of the need to implement specially designed Roma policy. It seems the only way to make this policy work - making non-Roma supportive, not antagonistic, to Roma concerns.

Roma inclusion will never happen if a crucial phenomenon is overlooked. This phenomenon is represented by the gap of distrust, sometimes mutual, sometimes one-sided, between Roma and non-Roma. This is an invisible barrier with visible effects. Lifting the barrier of distrust is complex and time-consuming task and what is named as integrative/ integrated education of non-Roma and Roma students is only the first step in this direction.

Last comments point at a weakness in the Decade's concept. Is the Decade meant to be *Roma-centric* by stating that "Roma participation will make or break the Decade"?

If so, it seriously runs the risk of overlooking the above mentioned phenomenon by keeping the barrier, encapsulating Roma as a group and stiffening non-Roma rejection of Roma affirmative action. The beneficial mode is when Roma and non-Roma can effectively communicate and interact. Ultimately, it will bring some meaningful substance into the abstract and obscure term ‘inclusion’. Inclusion is not a linear function, nor is it a linear transformation. It is a multi-dimensional and crosscutting social polymerization of individuals and groups.⁷

What is to be changed indeed? What should be changed is the way we think about Roma politics. Roma are viewed as recipients of treatment, object rather than subject of policy-making. Besides, the concept of Roma inclusion has a less explored flip side - the inclusion of non-Roma, or the involvement of non-Roma in Roma politics. Thus, the notion of inclusion will bring together Roma and non-Roma to participate in an open debate to discuss, articulate, defend and negotiate their opinions and interests. They will also participate in defining the criteria for inclusion and equal opportunities.⁸

Achieving such an involvement requires very subtle communication strategy targeted at the majority for uprooting prejudice and misperceptions. Ultimately, Roma will cease to be viewed by non-Roma as the least desired neighbours. Through entry points of interaction (Fig. 1), there is a chance for decreasing the social distance between Roma and non-Roma, bridging the gap between two parallel societal cultures and developing common loyalties.

Policy Gaps

Generally, the strategies and programs targeted at solving Roma problems are too excessively comprehensive, which results in their low effectiveness and deficiency. The comprehensiveness of the approach towards Roma stems from the fact that it is mostly community-based and group-based. It claims to encompass and include the minority group as a whole. What is needed is a more *segmented strategy* when addressing Roma

⁷ I use here the term ‘social polymerization’ to describe the multiplicity of different combinations of and amongst individuals and groups. I also refer to ‘social polymerization’ when I discuss multiple identities.

⁸ Squires, J., “Equality, Diversity – and Democracy?” (Conference paper), Connections 4, 25 February 2005, University of Bristol

issues. A segmented strategy, borrowed as a marketing concept, is viewed as a strategy targeting a particular segment of a larger group. Like any other larger group, Roma minorities are comprised of various segments. Reaching the whole Roma community and influencing all its segments seems hard to accomplish at once. It is more feasible to reach certain segments by devising proper approaches and strategies to influence those segments. Particular segments should be chosen and focused first and then replicating and multiplying the effect is to be sought. The segmented approach has yet unexplored but promising potential for dealing with Roma issues.

The segmented strategies have also a lot to do with breaking down the group terms to individual terms. This certainly relates to one of the leading problems when the integration of Roma is discussed – whether integration of Roma communities or integration of Roma individuals is sought. In Central and Eastern Europe Roma population is regarded mainly in collective terms, while most of the efforts fail to address individuals. Why would the individual approach bring more targeted solutions to pending problems? Because approaching individuals could promote and instigate driving forces within the Roma community that will eventually help it reorganize and modernize itself. So, efforts, such as those of the OSCE, for investing in capacity-building and training of Roma individuals capable of driving and steering the undergoing processes within the Roma community is a useful approach to the group as a whole. It will foster the process of establishing Roma civil society and grass-root organizations, which are still nascent.

Another gap in the strategies for integrating Roma is the inadequate communication of ethnic politics, and Roma issues in particular, to the majority non-Roma public. Communication policy on Roma issues is badly needed and this policy should be pursued both on national and local level. This policy should have four aims: (1). Awareness; (2). Comprehension; (3). Conviction, and (4). Action. Proper communication policy should be complemented with relevant media policy that will eventually help both Roma and non-Roma blur the dividing line between them.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that the *entry points of interaction* could be benchmarks of a successful Roma policy of inclusion. This will be achieved through

segmentation of Roma minority, bringing forward Roma individuals' identity (rather than group identity) and effectively functioning institutional environment. Finally, instead of affirmative action approach, which installs institutional processes, we should consider what Lani Guinier labels **Confirmative action**. It is the “critical importance of linking institutional processes to institutional goals. (...) Confirmative action builds on the values of affirmative action but does not limit the practice to a historically disadvantaged group.”⁹ Disadvantages cannot be considered as restricted to a single group only, e.g. different groups experience poverty. What we should bear in mind however is the need for differentiating factors and integrating solutions.

Taking confirmative action as a point of departure, it follows that Roma politics concern not only governments and Roma minorities. It is also a concern for non-Roma, civil society at large and different levels of governance and policy-making. Privatizing Roma politics and its encapsulation only to the group reduces the options for policy maneuvering and the scope of policy actions as well as undermines the overall non-Roma public support.

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⁹ Guinier, L., Affirmative action; in: The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World, Oxford, 2001, p. 11