

ROMA RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT: COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AND BARRIERS

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Open communication and interaction between political elites and civic society is considered one of the fundamental conditions of a representative, working democracy. Theoretically, this communication ensures that individuals are treated equally, regardless of their race, creed, gender or ethnic origins.

This paper examines the existing situation and some of the problems of communication between professional diplomats or politicians on the one side and Roma rights activists on the other. I believe that many of the difficulties encountered in communication between diplomats and politicians and Roma rights activists apply equally to communication with other human rights activists and civil society groups advocating other causes such as the environment or gender issues.

Several aspects of this process deserve a close look: ethnic cultural differences, professional cultural differences including educational and language barriers, the culture of racism, and finally, the lack of interaction and of a common ground all affect the process of communication. I will start by providing some historical background on the situation of the Roma in Europe.

The Roma in Europe

Seven to nine million Roma live in Europe. Romani people are those who speak the Romani language or who are descended from populations which spoke Romani at some time in the past. The much better known term Gypsy (and its equivalents in the many European languages) is also used to refer to many groups who do not meet this criterion. The word Gypsy and its equivalents in other European languages have strong connotations relating to crime and antisocial behaviour. The *Encarta World English Dictionary* 2003 defines Gypsy as “an offensive term for a member of the Romani people.”

The Roma are the European minority facing the strongest discrimination in Europe and, according to a World Bank study¹, with a living standard in many places close to the poorest countries in Africa. Historically, the Roma have been rejected by society and regarded as unwanted aliens. Despite

the fact that few Roma are unable to speak the language of the countries where they live, communication and interaction between Roma communities and the majority ethnic communities, including the local administration and local civil society groups, is severely limited.

Exclusion, mistreatment and racist behaviour against Roma has a long historical precedent. In Romania, for example, Roma were enslaved until 1856. Mihail Kogalniceanu, a Romanian politician, described the Roma of Romania in the middle of the 19th century as:

human beings wearing chains on their arms and legs, others with iron clamps around their foreheads, and still others with metal collars about their necks. Cruel floggings and other punishments, such as starvation, being hung over smoking fires, solitary confinement, and being thrown naked into the snow of a frozen river, such was the treatment meted out to the wretched Gypsy... [C]hildren [were] torn from the breasts of those who brought them into the world, and sold ... to different buyers from the four corners of Romania, like cattle.²

In 1939, Johannes Behrendt of the Office of Racial Hygiene of Germany issued a brief stating that “all Gypsies should be treated as hereditarily sick; the only solution is elimination. The aim should therefore be the elimination without hesitation of this defective element in the population.”

About 500 000 Roma are believed to have been murdered in Nazi camps (official records indicate around half of this number). In Romania, under Prime Minister Ion Antonescu, authorities deported as many as 90 000 (the official estimate is around 40 000) Roma to the concentration camp of Bug, in the province of Transnistria, a dumping ground for Romania’s undesirables during the racist projects of World War II. More than one third of the Roma sent there perished from exposure, malnutrition and disease (the official number is 19 000).³ Antonescu considered Gypsies to be “pests” with the same value as mice, rats and crows.

I am writing about this subject for a publication on intercultural communication and diplomacy for several reasons. First, my professional training is in diplomacy, and my daily work involves interaction or, more specifically, lobbying, with European politicians. Second, I am deeply concerned with human rights in general and, because I am Roma, with Roma rights in particular. I believe that the process of integration of Roma within Europe could benefit dramatically if the dialogue between politicians and Roma rights activists became optimal. Most of the examples I give here are based on my own experi-

ence as a Roma rights activist in Eastern Europe, and lobbying with European politicians in Brussels.

Lack of Communication

I would like to start with an example of how little communication actually takes place between Roma and human rights activists and the political elite. I decided to focus on the speech given by American President George Bush on November 23, 2002, on the occasion of Romania's acceptance into NATO.⁴ Mr Bush was the first American President to visit Romania since well before the end of communist times.

Mr Bush's prepared speeches are well known for their quality and the strong signals sent. A very large and well-paid team of diplomats and political analysts prepares his speeches. The fact that his speech showed no sensitivity or even awareness of the history and the situation of Romania's minorities, in particular that of the Roma, is a clear signal that communication between the Roma rights movement and the political elites is not taking place.

During his speech in Bucharest, Mr Bush said:

Close by is a church, three centuries old, a symbol of the faith that overcomes all oppression.

In fact, the Romanian Orthodox Church has supported the persecution of Romania's minorities, in particular, the Jews and the Roma, historically and until very recently. The Romanian Orthodox Church proclaimed the spiritual leader of the fascist Iron Guard Corneliu Zelea Codreanu a "national saint." The Iron Guard is held responsible for one of the most brutal pogroms in history, during which 200 men, women and children were driven through all the automated stages of animal slaughter on a conveyor belt. Then the corpses were stamped "fit for human consumption."⁵ The same Church is responsible for the longest and most brutal enslavement in Europe of the Roma minority. The Orthodox Church was also a strong supporter of Marshall Antonescu, who was responsible for the death of tens of thousands of Roma during the Second World War. He thought that Gypsies were pests and as worthless as rats. In June 2001, in the interior courtyard of the same church mentioned by Mr Bush, a bust of Antonescu was unveiled.

President Bush continued:

Since those days of liberation, Romania has made an historic journey. Instead of hatred, you have chosen tolerance.

Romanian society, although not alone in this regard in Eastern Europe, can hardly be described as tolerant. Romania harbours one of the worst cases of social stigma in Europe. The direct result is that important public personalities of Roma origin (government members, writers, professors, doctors, sports celebrities and singers) feel reluctance and in most cases refuse to declare their membership or links to Romania's Roma minority. They fear possible exclusion from social life, scapegoating, or the decline or end of their careers. Even the few Roma politicians elected to represent Roma communities often criticise or insult those communities, in an effort to distance themselves from ordinary Roma and to show the majority that they belong to "high society."

In the latest presidential elections in Romania, second place went to the extreme right wing politician Corneliu Vadim Tudor; his party holds the most places in the Romanian parliament after the ruling party. Tudor has said:

Gypsies and Jews ... stand out amongst the other ethnic groups that populate our country and that have become integrated alongside Romanians in the Romanian society. [It seems] they have schemed to subdue the Romanians by making use of various plans and means; but with the same goal: to enslave Romanians economically speaking, to annihilate their freedom in their own country.⁶

President Bush added:

Instead of destructive rivalry with your neighbors, you have chosen reconciliation.

A poll conducted by the Romanian agency Metro Media just one year before Mr Bush came to Romania showed that 93% of Romanians do not trust Roma. A staggering 99% said that they believed Roma do not deserve any respect.⁷ In the weeks before his speech, numerous racist articles in the Romanian press targeted Roma, Jews and Hungarians.

Let me remind you that President Bush's speech was prepared by an exceptionally well educated team of diplomats and political analysts representing the strongest political power in the world. How can we explain the obvious misrepresentations in this speech? This speech indeed sent strong signals both to the ethnic Romanians and Romania's minorities. The signals suggest that

the minorities, in particular the Roma, are unimportant and, in fact, invisible. Communication is clearly not taking place between those representing the minorities and the political elite.

Political Class *versus* Roma Rights Activists

Communication between the political elites and Roma Rights activists break down in a number of areas. This section will describe some of these, with attention to communication failures on both sides.

Ethnic Cultural Differences

To start with, there are some cultural differences based on ethnic background between Roma and the majority populations in the countries where they reside. These differences or, more specifically, ignorance on both sides about the extent and nature of these differences, affect the effectiveness and, in many cases, the existence of any communication between members of the two groups, including activists and members of the government.

Until recently, little was known about Roma traditions and customs as Roma were isolated and avoided communicating with majority populations up to the early 1990s. Since then, hundreds of articles on Roma culture have been published, but still both the majority populations and the political elites have little knowledge of the Roma. As political policies regarding Roma have tended to focus on assimilation rather than integration within their societies, policy makers see little need to learn more. The phrase “if they want to live in our country they should learn to be like us” is often heard at both the political level and among the general population.

Both the Roma and the majority populations have strong cultural beliefs that teach them not to trust the other. The Roma are suspicious and afraid of being corrupted by *gajikane* (non-Roma) influences. They fear that contact with non-Roma will lead to the disintegration of traditionally strong family and community ties, and result in juvenile delinquency. Many Roma also fear that public admission of being Roma in *gajikane* society will single them out for discrimination and persecution.

The majority population, on their side, are strongly influenced by prevailing negative stereotypes of Roma, which teach them that Roma steal, Roma are dirty, Roma are dangerous and cannot be trusted. Even well educated members of the political elite may be completely ignorant or misinformed about the reality of the situation of the Roma. Many of the commonly held stereotypes

are not necessarily negative, but are simply false. For example, many politicians hold the view that Roma cannot integrate because of their nomadic lifestyle, while in fact very few Roma still maintain or even wish to maintain a nomadic lifestyle.

Only in the later part of this century have Roma children been given access to education. Until very recently, most Roma regarded, with good reason, the educational systems of their countries as a means of forcing assimilation. As a result, few Roma went through the educational system and illiteracy was highly accepted by Roma themselves and seen as a way to preserve their identity. Very respected traditional leaders of Roma communities are often unable to speak or write the majority language well, making them an easy target of ridicule. In addition, their use of titles such as “king” or “emperor,” meant simply to emphasise their social status within their community, are regarded as ridiculous by the majority population.

Due to my personal experience, and despite the fact that for years I have lived and worked with non-Roma, I can well understand the inclination of traditional Roma leaders to advocate limited or no contact with the non-Roma. Half of my family on my mothers’ side perished during deportation in the 1940s. I went through the educational system during communist times and experienced first hand the pressure to assimilate: for about four years in high school I told my classmates and teachers that I was Greek.

Lack of awareness or understanding of such ethnically based cultural differences leads to misunderstanding, at the best, and outright refusal to engage in attempts to communicate, at the worst.

Professional Cultural Differences

Alongside ethnically based cultural differences that exist in all sectors of the two populations, huge differences can be found between the “professional culture” of the political elite in Eastern Europe and that of Roma rights activists. Many of the same differences also exist between the professional culture of western European politicians and Roma rights activists.

As the majority of Roma (around 90%) live in the ex-communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe, it is most relevant to describe the professional cultural of Eastern European politicians. I will begin by describing the political scene inherited by the current politicians of Eastern European countries.

John Locke saw government as the trustee of civil society. This ideal is clearly not applied in the countries coming from the ex-Soviet sphere of influence. Over 40 years of communism destroyed civil society in most of these countries. The state had complete responsibility for looking after the inter-

ests of the people; any civil initiative, whether religious, economic or cultural, was regarded as subversive and was very quickly subdued. Most of the people in power in Eastern European countries today were part of the communist political class or, at the least, were educated during that time. Consequently, although they may be under increasing pressure to respond to civil society, they remain reluctant.

All across Europe, ultra nationalist political movements have gained popularity; in Eastern Europe, in order to retain votes even moderate politicians are adopting some of their characteristics. A cult of personality and very centralised and hierarchical decision making is characteristic of the new political class in Eastern and Central Europe. A “strong hand” capable of controlling the “destiny of the nation” is considered a necessary quality. Rigidity, formality and strong opposition to change can be seen not only as characteristics of the political class but also of their discourse. Patriotism is fundamental for the selection of political representatives and probably the most important quality asked by the electorate from them.

In absolute opposition, Roma rights activists tend to be young people, often with university degrees from western Europe or North America. Through exposure to two very different educational systems, one focusing on assimilation and often openly teaching racist attitudes, and the other advocating tolerance and the importance of multiculturalism, they have a sharp awareness of the problems in their home countries.

In contrast to the nationalistic ideas of most politicians, Roma activism is a very internationalised movement with strong connections to international human rights movements. Roma rights activists are quickly developing strong international networks and a very efficient exchange of ideas and information. As is typical of many civil society initiatives, actions are initiated at the grass roots level and support is gathered and focused as a situation develops. In order to function efficiently, Roma rights organisations must be transparent. They depend on the active participation of all of their members.

Roma rights activists not only strongly believe in the active role of civil society, but often strongly and publicly criticise and accuse the political elites of their countries for the rampant racism and intolerance within the societies they lead. Many of the views held by activists are radical, and politicians and the mass media have responded by denying them access to the political and public scene.

Job Descriptions

Not only are significant differences visible between the professional culture of politicians and that of activists, but the very essence of what they are asked to do in their work is not at all complementary.

Politicians represent the majority. As the president of Malta said yesterday,⁸ diplomats need to represent their governments and the governments represent the will of the people. This sounds fine in theory, but let's have a look at the will of the people as expressed in a Gallup poll from September 2003 in Romania (Romania has the largest Roma population in Europe).

Some 82% of Romanians think that Roma are criminals and two thirds are in favour of refusing Roma the right to travel outside Romania. Almost half of Romanians agree that a demographic policy aimed at hindering the growth of the Roma population in Romania is necessary. A full 36 % of Romanians believe Roma should live separately and 31% think forbidding Roma access to public places (restaurants, clubs and bars) should be legal. Over 75% of Romanians do not know or believe that the Romanian state was involved in the extermination of Roma and Jews during WWII. The majority of Romanians also think that the public interest should prevail over individual rights and a strong and radical leader is needed.⁹

In most states with Roma population, the Roma have historically been perceived as "the other." In a disastrous economical situation, politicians in Eastern and Central European governments need a way to relieve social tensions and the easiest and almost "traditional" way of doing so is to find a scapegoat and to claim they are protecting the majority from their imagined enemies. I have often heard Romanian politicians saying the most outrageous things meant to distract the attention of the public from some corruption scandal in the political sphere. These distractions are taken up by the media and repeated until they seem to become the truth.

A good example comes from late 1994 when Romanian intellectuals and members of the business community were looking for a way to disassociate Roma from Romanians in the European mentality; the Roma were accused of destroying the chances of Romania to become part of the EU. An obscure and extremist nationalist Romanian professor came up with the idea that the word "Roma" is a recent invention and had supposedly been used by criminal factions trying to destabilise Romania by persuading western Europeans that Romania is the country of the Roma (Gypsies). This "discovery" was widely reported in the Romanian mass media. The word "Roma" actually means "human being," and it is much older than the names of any of the modern European states.

As a result, in January 1995 Romania's Foreign Ministry attempted to dissociate Romania and the Romanian people from Roma. The Ministry decreed that the Romanian Roma should be called "țigani" rather than "Roma" as the latter name "was likely to be confused with the Romanians."¹⁰ Imagine the reaction of Michael Jordan, Colin Powell, Bill Cosby, Alice Walker and other Afro-Americans if President Bush decreed that Afro-Americans should be called "niggers" in order that they not be confused with Americans!

The violent reaction of activists abrogated the decree, but, at the same time, shut down any dialogue between the Prime Minister and civil society, as the best thing said about him during the protests was "drunk moron." This is a good example of the approach that activists feel they must take. They feel forced into corners where they must fight their way out, and they consider politicians to be the main enemies. Attacking and exposing politicians is what justifies their job in the eyes of the donors and those whose rights they defend.

Because of these differences in job requirements and expectations, a huge gap exists between these groups when they try initiating dialogue.

Language

During the early days of the Roma movement a serious gap existed between the language of the political elite and the language of the often self-educated, inexperienced traditional Roma leaders. The basic and often unprepared speeches of the traditional Roma alienated them not only from the majorities in general but even from civil society groups generally sympathetic to the situation of Roma. These speeches focused on accusing the ex-communist governments of confiscating their gold and on ways to get it back.

As nationalist movements in Eastern and Central Europe emerged, the political class found nationalistic discourse to be a required tool in their striving for power. The discourse of the traditional Roma leaders provided an easy target for the extreme nationalists who accused Roma in general of not caring about the difficult economic situation of their nations and of trying to use the new democracy to become rich at the expense of the majority ethnic group.

Despite the presence of more and more well educated Roma activists, communication has not improved due to the often radical and non-negotiable approach of the activists. However, the new class of well educated Roma is far more skilful at attacking and dismantling the nationalistic slurs coming from the elites.

Culture of Racism

The politicians in power, particularly in Eastern Europe, tend to hold the same stereotypes regarding Roma as the rest of the population and, in many cases, their stereotypes are stronger and more sophisticated. These politicians represent states created primarily on a basis of ethnic nationalism, and a historically despised minority is often regarded as a danger. Disrespect, arrogance, blatant ignorance coming from lack of interest, and often-racist speech based on stereotype is the result. It is clearly difficult for communication to take place between two groups with mutual dislike, hate, or fear. Communication does not start with insults.

For example, in 1999 I attended a reception given by the Romanian consulate in Strasbourg. The reception was organised for the European interns within the Council of Europe and the European Court of Justice. At the reception, one young diplomat made a joke: “What are 32 Gypsies good for? You can make 8×4 soap from them.” (8×4 was a well-known German brand of soap.) Incredibly, most of the people present laughed. That diplomat was not kicked out of the Foreign Service. In fact, a few months later he was made one of the cabinet directors within his national government.

“You know the problem with you Gypsies? You make far too many children,” I was told during an official dinner by someone holding a PhD and working in the diplomatic field. This was the first thing he said to me immediately after I told him that I was a Roma.

At the end of September 2003, I attended a meeting with a German MEP – a Christian Democrat at the European Parliament in Brussels. The director of Human Rights of one of the European Commissioners had arranged our meeting and I was trying to pursue and schedule a hearing on Roma matters with different players in the EU institutions. To my utter stupefaction, she started our meeting by saying that there are “many problems with you Gypsies and most of them are because of your vagrant way of living.” Too many children, disrespect for Western culture and begging were the next problems she pointed out before I managed to say anything more than my name.

When I first started my job with the European Roma Information Office in Brussels, I contacted a French MEP asking him to meet with me in order to talk about the Romanian Roma (he was also part of the delegation supervising Romania’s improvements for EU accession). He replied that he would meet with me only if the language used would be French. Two months later I received a call asking me to come and help brief the same MEP about the situation of Roma, as he had to attend a round table about it. Obviously, this time

no one expected me to be fluent in French, nor did I request that the meeting be held in Romanian or Romani.

In these situations, it was hard for me to ignore the antagonism and to try to communicate my ideas and do my job. However, I persisted in my effort to communicate and, despite the injury to my ego, every single one of these people eventually helped me to advance very important initiatives on improving the Roma rights situation at the EU parliament level. Unfortunately, very few Roma are willing or able to communicate with politicians displaying arrogance, ignorance or very limited and biased knowledge of the subject, open racist speech, or stereotypes.

Lack of Interaction and Common Ground

No doubt exists in my mind that in order to make communication possible, Roma and human rights activists need to overcome stereotypes and not be afraid of making mistakes even if that will require adapting to a type of speech we might hate.

Rules of communication need to be known or learned in order to make communication work. An example from my first year living in Chicago may illustrate this. I was working in a very white American professional IT environment. Despite the obvious lack of African-American people in the company, I never thought of the people working there as racist. I learned most of my colloquial English in this environment. After four months in this environment I went for the first time to play basketball in my neighbourhood with a large number of African-Americans. After 20 minutes a new player came in and greeted everybody, using the word “nigger” with his friends. Trying to be “cool” and friendly, I replied: “What’s up, nigger?”

Not knowing the rules of basic communication could have been a disaster, but the fact that both of us were trying to help our team win allowed us to overcome what could have been interpreted as racist slur. This incident, which started very badly, proved to be one of the best learning experiences of my life.

Roma and political elites have very little common ground to meet and team up, and little apparent interest in creating this common ground. European institutions in Brussels allegedly representing Europeans in general do not have any Roma working for them. I am talking here of over 20 000 people. The OSCE appointed one Roma to work for them in 1999. Another Roma joined in 2003. This is 2 out of over 30 000 people. The diplomatic missions of the European countries in Brussels follow the same trend and have not a single

diplomat of Roma origin. No Eastern or Central European president or prime minister has visited a Roma settlement despite the fact that in some countries the Roma population is around 10% of the total.

Conclusion

Because of all of these barriers to communication, both politicians and activists feel frustrated and prefer talking among themselves rather than to each other. This only amplifies the problems and the stereotypes. Instead of opening the windows of dialogue, most of the people who should be solving problems prefer to surrender themselves to mirrors.

Professor Geert Hofstede said yesterday in his excellent speech that diplomats risk losing their identity.¹¹ I would be very happy to see as many diplomats as possible lose their ethnically based nationalistic identities, if these could be replaced with broader identities based on our common human identity. I believe that due to their experience with crossing cultures, diplomats are in the position to advise and even correct the sometimes disastrous policies of their own governments. President de Marco said yesterday that diplomats have to serve their governments and respect the politicians,¹² but I think perhaps it is more important for politicians to respect diplomats. I see a need for stronger involvement of experienced diplomats in designing not only foreign, but domestic policies of their governments. We should give these bridge builders the chance to do their jobs both abroad and at home, and to help improve the communication between the majority and minorities.

In the last two centuries, diplomacy focused on power relations between countries in order to counterbalance the explosion of radical nationalism that fascinated the elites. Diplomacy could and should be the way to build bridges between those concerned with human rights and those able to implement policies meant to bring tolerance in a world ravaged by interethnic conflicts.

Endnotes

- 1 Dena Ringold, Mitchell A. Orenstein, and Erika Wilkens, *Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle* (Washington DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2003).
- 2 Mihail Kogalniceanu, *Schita Asupra Istoriei, Obiceiurilor si Limbii Tiganilor* (1837).
- 3 Viorel Achim, *Tigani in Istoria României* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedica, 1998).

- 4 The full speech is available online at http://www.roembus.org/english/journal/bush/speech_Bucharest.htm.
- 5 Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: Random House, 1993), xviii; see also the website of the Simon Wiesenthal Center at http://www.wiesenthal.com/social/press/pr_item.cfm?itemID=8929.
- 6 Published in *Romania Mare* ("Greater Romania," right wing newspaper owned by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, <http://www.romare.ro>).
- 7 Metro Media Transilvania, *Barometrul Relatiilor Etnice* (November 2001), available online at <http://www.mmt.ro/Cercetari/Bare%202001.pdf>.
- 8 Opening Address by H.E. Professor Guido de Marco, President of Malta, for the Second International Conference on Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy, 13 - 15 February, 2003 (<http://www.diplomacy.edu/Conferences/IC2>).
- 9 Metro Media Transilvania, *Barometrul Relatiilor Etnice* (November 2001), available online at <http://www.mmt.ro/Cercetari/Bare%202001.pdf>.
- 10 Decree H(03)/169 and 5/390/NV, 31 January 1995.
- 11 Keynote Address by Professor Geert Hofstede at the Second International Conference on Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy, 13 - 15 February, 2003 (<http://www.diplomacy.edu/Conferences/IC2>); see also Hofstede's paper in this publication.
- 12 Opening Address, Second International Conference on Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy.

