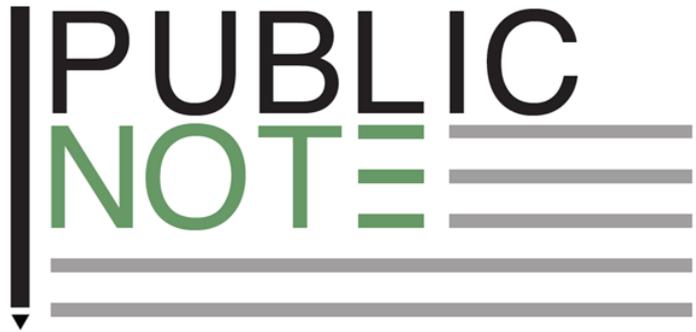# How to enhance the political representation of marginalized groups through the European Union's policy? Four policy suggestions for improving the Roma strategic Framework

Marta Kakol

Ethnic minorities across Europe are often under-represented in policymaking processes. Most minority groups are perceived as passive agents with little or no influence. The lack of comprehensive ethnic integration further legitimizes public discrimination and leads to expanding socio-cultural cleavages. Overall, the European Union inclusion policy has led to a higher representation of minority views in recent years, but there is still misinformation and disagreement within political institutions. This paper offers four suggestions for policy improvement, namely increasing communication capacity, raising awareness through education, empowering interest groups and ensuring a framework to fight antigypsyism.

Lessons for Practice

- Policymakers across supranational, national and local levels should regularly communicate with minority interest groups and between themselves to become more mindful of structural inequalities created by their institutions and adjust their policies accordingly.
- Political actors should enable minority interest groups to freely express their interests and opinions. They should actively encourage feedback and empower the interest groups to become less state dependent.
- Legislators and governments should take a more proactive stance on fighting antigypsyism by promoting education on discrimination and taking a harsher legal stance on acts of racism.

Introduction

The wave of populist nationalism in the European Union incited by the vast refugee influx has led to a racial crisis (De Genova, 2018, p. 1772). With the re-emerging "Black Lives Matter" movement in the United States, the European Union found itself under public scrutiny for not encouraging more diversity (Onyeji, 2010; De Genova, 2018, p. 1767). Those developments prompted the von der Leyen Commission to promote a 'union of equality' as a political guideline for 2019-24 (European Commission, 2020a).

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There are 12 million Roma estimated to reside across Europe, with over 6 million residing in the EU, making Roma the largest European ethnic minority (European Commission, 2020b). The EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-30 aims to increase Roma inclusion and equality (European Commission, 2020c). Although the current framework is expected to bring significant improvements, many Roma still fall victim to discrimination and find themselves underrepresented across EU institutions (EU Observer, 2020), see Figure 1.

This paper proposes four policy suggestions that could increase the capacity of Roma-related policy to enhance representation. The focus is on substantive representation, which relates to one's interests and goals being represented either through descriptive representation, when part of the minority participates in politics, or non-descriptive representation, when an external representative is involved (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209-16).

Policy Suggestions

Even though binding regulations are the most effective, it must be acknowledged that in the area of Freedom, Security and Justice, shared competence between the EU and the Member States is established with an intergovernmental sentiment. Therefore, binding policies are challenging to achieve (Bache et al., 2020, p. 230). Hence, alternative suggestions are discussed.

Increasing communication capacity

The EU should encourage more effective and consistent vertical and horizontal communication across Roma and non-Roma stakeholders. The EU Roma Strategic Framework for 2020-30 states that better channelling of resources should be established through the involvement of many stakeholders, ranging from small NGOs to large intergovernmental organizations (European Commission, 2020c, p. 3). However, only the relation between the national and EU levels is emphasized.

The European Commission should additionally provide more guidance on successful communication between stakeholders on a local, regional, national and supranational level to improve resource management and increase effective policy coordination across multiple areas. The Commission does already aim to facilitate communication by using the European Roma platform, stimulating discussions regarding the implementation of the EU Roma Strategic Framework (European Commission, 2020c, p. 14). Nonetheless, solid collaborative structures should also be established to exchange data and provide mutual learning opportunities on a much larger scale, including the smaller regional stakeholders and Roma Contact Points.

Effective monitoring and communication are crucial for successful Roma policy implementation. Increased transparency and data collection depend on the political responsiveness of governments (Brusis, 2003, p. 3). Responsive and open political systems are more successful in democratization and Europeanization (Sambati, 2018, p. 29; Sobotka & Vermeersch, 2012, p. 802). Crepaz (2016, p. 42) argues that this subsequently results in further strengthening of minority representation. To that end, increased communication capacity is a necessary suggested development.

Raising awareness through education

The European Commission already plans to develop a seminar series on discrimination, encourage the development of role models, and raise awareness of Roma culture and history (European Commission, 2020c, p. 10). However, more emphasis should be put on raising awareness through education on a local level. This can be achieved by implementing tailor-made educational strategies.

School curricula should include Roma history from primary to higher education. Every child in the European Union should be aware from an early age of who Roma are, where they come from, and learn their history as well as cultural heritage. The history of Roma should be strongly emphasized in history classes, specifically while discussing five centuries of Roma slavery in Romania (Hancock, 2002, p. XI), the Roma Holocaust and the communist era, as well as the post-communist period. The Roma contribution to European history should be highlighted, and positive role models should be identified and promoted.

A Member of the European Parliament suggests that the success of Roma policy is influenced by the political will of individual Member States (European Parliament, 2020), which is influenced by public opinion (Williams, 2000, pp. 30–7). To that end, a minority group should be perceived as favourable for improving the state's well-being (Williams 2000, pp. 30–7). Therefore, the main priority for the EU Roma Strategic Framework should be raising awareness through education to improve public attitudes towards Roma.

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Empowering interest groups

While the EU Roma Strategic Framework for 2020-30 highlights the involvement of civil society organizations (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 3–4), there is too little emphasis on empowering interest groups. Promoting pro-Roma civil society organizations should go beyond financial contributions and focus on capacity-building to increase autonomy and efficacy.

Pro-Roma organizations, especially youth organizations, require intensive training across a broad range of tasks, from fulfilling basic administrative duties to lobbying and fund-raising. As suggested by the Open Society Institute, it is crucial to "include content-based policy training in the issues that impact most upon Romani communities." (Open Society Institute, 2006, p. 23). Additionally, workshops should be organized to foster the essential leadership and advocacy skills for members of civil society organizations and aspiring Roma youth. Such an approach requires substantial involvement on behalf of the Commission and national governments. However, it also creates a firm foundation for the long-term development of pro-Roma organizations. This approach would allow Roma interest groups to hold policymakers accountable, participate in political discussions, and effectively collaborate with other organizations.

Research has pointed out that governmental support positively affects the mobilization and capacity-building of pro-Roma organizations (Bird et al., pp. 13-4). Nevertheless, it could also reduce autonomy in civil society groups, preventing them from holding political bodies accountable. Interest groups often become dependent on governmental funding linked to specific instructions. Funding can be withdrawn if organizations fail to follow these guidelines. Only with high mobilization and capacity can the interest groups become voice entrepreneurs and improve minority representation (Urbinati & Warren, 2008, pp. 388–9).

Ensuring a framework to fight antigypsyism

The European Commission aims to enforce the Racial Equality Directive by "investigating systematic discrimination and launching infringement proceedings, if necessary, to prompt changes in national legislation and policy." (European Commission, 2020c, p. 11). However, the Commission should take a much stronger stance on fighting antigypsyism as a potential crime.

The European Commission should strongly encourage national governments to "legally recognize this specific form of racism [antigypsyism] in their domestic law." (Matarazzo & Naydenova, 2019, p. 29). The Commission should also emphasize monitoring antigypsyist attitudes, not only on a national scale but specifically on a local and regional level. Improved communication and accountability structures mentioned

above would empower local and regional offices to monitor antigypsyism and share their data with national agencies. Special attention should also be paid to acts of racism and discrimination resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Roma minority is often affected by the long-term forged perceptions of culture, history and "Europeanness" (Sambati, 2018, p. 43; Alliance Against Antigypsyism, 2016, p. 7). By framing Roma as non-European cultural outsiders, the problems faced by the minority are misidentified. Politicians, media and the general public spread misinformation by suggesting that Roma culture is the cause of socio-economic inequality (Vermeersch, 2012). Ensuring a framework to fight antigypsyism is thus essential.

Conclusion

Although Romani people are the largest minority group in Europe, there is a lack of comprehensive policy initiatives to account for this fact. Therefore, this paper presented four policy improvements for increasing the substantive representation of the Roma minority. Notably, some of the suggestions also apply to the general policy on minority inclusion. The problems experienced by the Roma minority can also affect other ethnic groups, as well as religious, racial, and gender minorities.

It is important to remember that the success of policy improvements depends on political will, especially in the case of a non-binding policy. Thus, the willingness of the political actors to implement new strategies determines the effectiveness of the implemented policies. For the aforementioned reason, I focused on the non-binding policy as binding policies are challenging to achieve. Moreover, the decision-making and implementation processes must be seen as legitimate to reduce democratic backsliding.
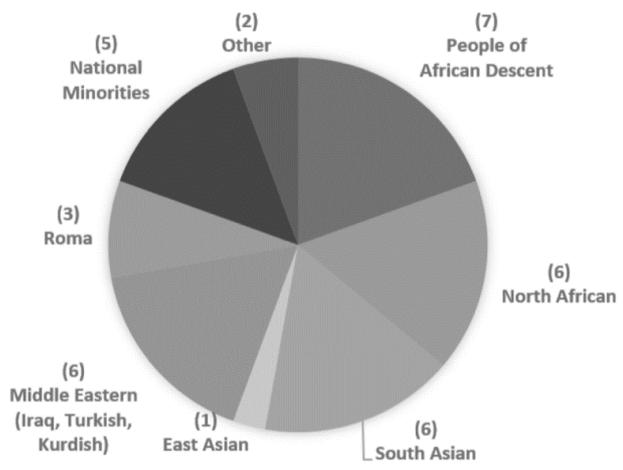
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Appendix: Figure 1. Racial and ethnic minority representation following the results of the 2019 European Parliament elections

Source: ENAR's Election Analysis - Ethnic minorities in the new European Parliament 2019-2025.

A note from the author

Marta has recently graduated from Utrecht University, obtaining a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Thanks to her interdisciplinary education, she can apply multiple perspectives to complex political issues. Her interest in public policy stems from the wish for fairer and more transparent policies. She vocalizes her interest in political affairs in a multitude of ways, from participating in Model United Nations conferences to organising speaker events. Marta currently works at Policy-Insider.AI as a Junior Source Manager under the guidance of a senior public policy expert and plans to do her Master's in Public Policy next year.