

Conference Publication

**LGBT+ ROMA IN EUROPE:**  
**PATHWAYS TO VISIBILITY**  
**FEBRUARY 24-25, 2022**  
**PRAGUE**





Conference and this publication are part of projects (A) Roma LGBTIQ go visible: supporting activities for the Roma LGBTIQ minority' (funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) and (B) Make Roma LGBT+ more visible (funded by Bilateral initiative, Norway Grants 2014 – 2021).

Projects were coordinated by ARA ART, z.s. with partners Quo Vadis (Slovakia), Diverse Youth Network (Hungary) and FRI – foreningen for kjønns- og seksualitetsmangfold (Norway).



Conference publication

**LGBT+ ROMA IN EUROPE:**  
**PATHWAYS TO VISIBILITY**  
**February 24–25, 2022**  
**PRAGUE**

**АЯААRT**  
2022



<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	4
<b>Citizen advocacy through roundtables</b>	6
<b>Bringing the topic into spotlight: LGBTQ+ Roma in Norway</b>	10
<b>CONFERENCE PAPERS</b>	11
<b>Part 1: Roma LGBT+ minority and its status in selected EU countries (CZ, HU, SK)</b>	11
SLOVAKIA: <b>Mikuláš Lakatoš</b>   ARA ART-SK, PR manager and lecturer	11
<b>Part 2: Art, Media, Sexuality, and Gender</b>	14
SLOVAKIA: <b>Robert Gabris</b>   Artist, Human Rights Activist	14
AUSTRIA: <b>Sandra Selimović</b>   Actress, Director and Singer	16
HUNGARY: <b>Joci Márton</b>   Human Rights Activist	22
<b>Part 3: Interface of Academia, Activism, and Politics</b>	25
HUNGARY: <b>Dezso Mate</b>   Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)	25
NORWAY: <b>Miriam Aurora Hammeren Pedersen</b>   FRI – The Norwegian Organisation for Sexual and Gender Diversity	36
<b>Part 4: Identity Crossroads: Roma Trans People and Health</b>	40
CZECH REPUBLIC: <b>Mgr. Karel Pavlica, Ph.D.</b>   Prague Pride, z. s.	40
ROMANIA: <b>Antonella Lerca Duda (1990)</b>   TGEU-Board Member	44
USA: <b>Kirill Ivan Staklo</b>   PeerPride	46
<b>Part 5: My story: LGBTIQ Roma in the Balkans</b>	51
BULGARIA: <b>Biser Alekov</b>   Bravo	51
ROMANIA: <b>Iulian Stoian</b> , National Agency for Roma, Government of Romania	53



# I NTRODUCTION



I am honored to present to you the publication resulting from our final conference on the Roma LGBT + community in the European context. This is a key moment for our organization, which has been dealing with this topic for 10 years.

I am very pleased that so many experts and personalities took part in the conference.

This conference was the final part of a long-term project called “ROMA LGBT + GOES VISIBLE IN EUROPE” implemented with support from the European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC 2014-2020), the Heinrich Boell Stiftung, Dreilinden, the Embassy of the United States of America to the Czech Republic, and Norway Grants. Thank you.

We are responding to the critical situation of those LGBT+ people of Romani origin who find themselves targeted by different forms of disadvantage and intersectional discrimination in such a way as to be displaced from official inclusion and integration measures and policies. The peripheral position of this community intensifies their vulnerability and increases the risk that they will be targeted with hate speech, stigmatization, homophobia and lack of acceptance by society overall.

I am also convinced that the project was successful thanks to our cooperation with our partner organizations Quo Vadis from Slovakia and Diverse Youth Network from Hungary. Thank you.

Let me introduce the activities of this project to you.

## **Analysis of the state of the LGBTIQ Roma minority**

We prepared an analysis of the situation of the LGBT + Roma minority. We asked not just the target group, but also non-profit organizations and government institutions what they are doing for this group of people.

## **Advocacy**

We presented the results of the analysis at round tables to those who have the power to change things.

## **Website**

I am glad that we have succeeded in fulfilling our intention to create a website with crucial, comprehensive information about the Roma LGBT + minority, including examples of good practice, LGBT+ Roma stories, and an interactive map of the help available across Europe.

## **Awareness campaign**

We launched an online awareness campaign called “Life is too short to hate our children” which was visible across Europe in five languages, including Romanes. We also focused on the prejudices held by Roma community members.

## **Our aims are:**

- To improve the information available to crucial stakeholders about the position of LGBT+ people of Romani origin in selected countries.
- To raise awareness and increase the amount of information available to the public about LGBT+ people of Romani origin.
- To strengthen the European Union’s call for national-level policies on the integration of Romani communities in the Member States such that these policies reflect the needs of the diverse composition of the groups representing the population of Roma.
- To increase advocacy for applying an intersectional approach to combating discrimination against LGBT+ people of Romani origin.
- To consolidate and expand the functionality of the International LGBT+ Roma Platform.

I believe that information, opinions, concrete proposals and recommendations for improving the quality of life of the Roma LGBT + community have emerged from the conference and will fulfill our common aims.

David Tišer, ARA ART director

In order to protect the rights and interests of the Roma LGBTIQ+ community and to identify the issues that diminish their quality of life and deepen social inequalities to which the community has long been exposed to, targeted activities - analytical work, recommendations and campaign - have taken place through selected tools of citizen advocacy.

The activities were based on an analytical report on the situation of the Roma LGBTIQ community in selected EU countries (Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia) in the context of multiple discrimination against this minority. The outcome, in the form of conclusions, provides a set of recommendations as a starting point and as a call for an expert discussion to define specific proposals reflecting the problems of Roma LGBTIQ men and women.

For this purpose, national roundtables were organised, to which a wide spectrum of experts were invited including representatives of relevant central state authorities, local governments, scientists, academia, Roma and non-Roma non-governmental organisations, human rights institutions, etc. The series of the first national roundtables held in each of the countries included a plan to process an analytical report, methodology and key findings which led to the following conclusions:

- There is persistent marginalisation of LGBT+ Roma due to them being a minority within a minority,
- There is a low level of awareness of the specific situation of the Roma LGBT+ community and their needs (lack of data),
- There is no institutional support reflecting the specific needs of Roma LGBT+ men and women,
- There is a lack of systematic and targeted support for the non-governmental non-profit sector to undertake activities in the field of combating prejudice, stereotypes, anti-Roma behaviour and hatred,
- Institutional homophobia is also reflected at the level of subsidies, grant allocation, including the setting of calls for proposals - funding is provided for either “Roma” (state/EU) or LGBT+ (donors),
- The annual funding of the few non-governmental non-profit organisations working for the Roma LGBT+ community is limited to the point that they merely survive and provide basic services: they lack core funding or funds covering more than one year (this badly impacts their systematic and long-term operations),





- National legislation does not contain any provisions on multiple discrimination,
- Multiple discrimination is not explicitly prohibited by law and there is no case law on multiple discrimination,
- Human rights instruments and institutions (CZ, SK, HU) are getting weaker,
- The monitoring mechanism is insufficient.

**It is necessary to add an intersectional approach to social policies and law and to place intersectionality at the heart of national and supranational “hard” EU law, for example through a horizontal directive not yet adopted.**

The moderated discussion and evaluation questionnaires of the participants provided suggestions framed in areas that require an increased level of intervention to achieve a better quality of life for the Roma LGBTIQ community.

Education and awareness-raising were identified as the highest priority area in each roundtable held in all three countries, followed by change in legislation, specifically in criminal law and in anti-discrimination law, to ensure it explicitly defines multiple discrimination.

Implementing a mechanism for targeted financial support for non-governmental organisations working with the Roma LGBTIQ community and adopting specific measures is the third priority area.

The first national roundtables have also shown that in order to achieve systemic change it is necessary to:

- Conduct regular analytical and research activities to accurately map the needs and problems of the Roma LGBTIQ community for more targeted policy setting,
- Extend and fund services and support for LGBTIQ Roma and their relatives to ensure the availability of appropriate forms of assistance that are in line with their needs while also reflecting and applying a culturally sensitive approach,

- Implement measures aimed at combating anti-Roma racism, homophobia, transphobia, starting with primary prevention (educational, informational and awareness-raising materials), activities aimed at raising awareness of LGBTIQ Roma in the area of protection against discrimination, hate speech, homophobia and transphobia, and changes that will strengthen protection against hate speech in the online environment,
- Promote the provision of legal advice and free legal representation in court proceedings involving multiple discrimination (gender, ethnicity, social status, orientation) as a necessary step to create conditions for affordable services and to increase the likelihood of discrimination being reported,
- Establish state-funded centres for primary and secondary support to the LGBT+ community,
- Monitor judicial practice in proceedings involving multiple discrimination (ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second part of the national roundtables took place primarily online or in hybrid form. Through the application of a participatory approach, the framework of the above proposals was extended to include more measures and activities to be incorporated into public policies in the national context. These include: Embedding and ensuring systematic education of state and local government personnel - teachers and non-pedagogical employees of schools and educational facilities, social services workers, field workers, community and low-threshold centres, institutional and health care, municipal and state police.

Providing such education will, in particular, improve the way the above personnel treat this vulnerable group or their relatives, as well as effectively help to eliminate stereotyping, stigmatisation or prejudicial behaviour. Through education and methodological support, the personnel will gain experience enabling them to apply practices or implement activities that raise the level of knowledge and awareness among the wider public.





Sharing information to raise awareness of the situation of the Roma LGBTIQ community to help strengthen the right for self-determination and mitigate the risk of pressure or exclusion – excommunication from the core or wider family and community. Ensuring funds for proven forms such as peer programmes, self-help groups, support clubs, etc. Particular attention in this area needs to be paid to sensitisation through the media.

Putting a cross-sectional approach in place by creating a network of services provided by supporting professions, prevention specialists and non-governmental organisations working with the LGBT+ community. Initiating cooperation with registered churches and religious organisations.

In addition to these intersectional measures, the following suggestions were specified at the level of the national roundtables:

- Creating methodological guidelines how to proceed in the event of multiple discrimination (SK).
- Creating litigation tools (litigation practice) in the area of gender equality and specifically in the area of LGBT+ for judicial practice (SK).
- Starting discussion about the collection of data on people living in marginalised Roma communities - data collection methodology (SK).
- Changing the competences of the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (SK).
- Recognising same-sex unions (SK, HU).
- Changing laws - marriage, abolishing sterilisation of trans people, measures for non-binary people (CR).
- Of these three countries, the Czech Republic is currently the only one to have a draft government strategy for equality and the removal of barriers to a dignified life of LGBTI+ people for the 2021 - 2026 period, which contains measures identical to the recommendations of the national roundtables.



## **RINGING THE TOPIC INTO SPOTLIGHT: LGBTQ+ Roma in Norway**

While the analytical report “The Roma LGBTIQ minority and its status in selected EU countries” explores the situation in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, a national roundtable conference was held in Norway, focusing on the topic of LGBTQ+ Roma in the Norwegian context. This was the first ever public discussion concerning the LGBTQ+ Roma community.

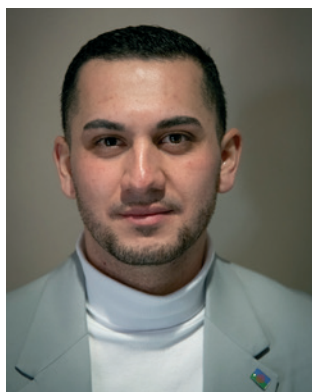
The status of Norwegian Roma is specific in that they are currently one of only two Roma groups officially recognised as national minorities. Having been launched in mid-2021, the research on sexual orientation, gender diversity and wellbeing shows that the proportion of persons who identify as members of an ethnic minority is actually higher among binary, transgender people than among the general population. This also applies to those who identify as Romani (the second group of Roma) and Roma/Tatar. Given these specifics and historical development, the problems faced by LGBTQ+ Roma are identical to those in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. This community can be described as invisible even in the Norwegian context, both within the Roma community and the larger LGBTQ+ community.

Their vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that sexual orientation and gender identity remain a cultural and religious taboo. Their closed community way of life limits their self-determination, awareness and knowledge about, for example, forms of support and help available from the majority Norwegian society. LGBTQ+ Roma are mistrustful of the institutional help system. Their social isolation or limited social contact with the wider community increases the risk of exclusion from the family and community. These problems also include discrimination affecting the LGBTQ+ community as such and anti-gypsyism.

The constructive discussion and mutual exchange of information and experience charted a direction in the area of the inclusion of Norwegian LGBTQ+ people with Roma origin in society. This includes:

- Creating space for networking and sharing experience and practices in working with the Roma LGBTQ+ community,
- Enhancing the knowledge and awareness of non-governmental organisations that work with the LGBTQ+ community about Roma groups/ethnic minorities, and improving their skills to apply a culturally sensitive approach,
- Undertaking activities aimed to raise awareness among the Roma LGBTQ+ community,
- Ensuring non-governmental organisations are empowered with funds and staff to provide psychological, social, legal and material support to the Roma LGBTQ+ community.

## PART 1: ROMA LGBT+ MINORITY AND ITS STATUS IN SELECTED EU COUNTRIES (CZ, HU, SK)



### SLOVAKIA:

#### **Mikuláš Lakatoš / ARA ART-SK, PR manager and lecturer**

*Mikuláš Lakatoš holds a BA degree in General Nursing from the Slovak Medical University of Bratislava and a specialization certificate from Central European University in Budapest in the International Interdisciplinary Romani Studies Postgraduate Specialization Program. Mikuláš is currently completing his M.A. studies at Comenius University in Bratislava in the Public Policy program. During his work as a registered nurse practitioner, he has observed the shortcomings in access to healthcare services for national minorities in Slovakia and the legislative issues regarding implementation of*

*access in clinical practice. Mikuláš also has several years of experience in educating, facilitating for, leading and working with youth; in recent years, he has mainly focused on working with Roma youth.*

In 2021, Mikuláš was selected to be a National Minority Health Consultant for the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Communities. Mikuláš also participated in the drafting process for the National Strategy for Roma Integration by 2030, where he focused on improving access to transcultural and community nursing. Nowadays he is mostly focusing on his responsibilities as a Minority Health Consultant at the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, preparing minority-sensitive public health policies.

Mikuláš joined the ARA ART-SK team in 2021 as a volunteer activist. Recently time he has been serving as the organization's PR manager and as a lecturer. He is focusing on raising awareness a the very invisible Roma LGBTQIA+ community in Slovakia.

### **Stronger visibility for the invisible community!**

ARA ART-SK – Who are we?

ARA ART–SK is the first LGBTQIA+ pro-Roma non-governmental organization in Slovakia focusing on preparatory activities aimed at improving conditions for this “invisible community” in the Slovak Republic. Our civil society organization was established in December 2020 and is currently based in Bratislava, Slovakia. The main focus of the organization is improving public awareness about multiply, intersectionally discriminated individuals or groups, concentrating on marginalized Roma communities.

On the one hand, the ARA ART–SK “civil society brand” can be considered a “new NGO” in the field of policy-making in Slovakia with respect to groups of sexual minorities, but on the other hand it is very important to mention that the organization relies on long-term expertise in the development of anti-discriminatory and equal treatment policy, based on its employed and involved experts and activists cooperating with the organization who have several years of experience in this topic. Since 2020, ARA ART – SK has been a partner organization of ARA ART–CZ, and that has been possible due to the i cooperation of representatives from the Slovak organization in the activities of ARA ART–CZ.

Last but not least, it has to be mentioned that the ARA ART–SK team is first and foremost a team of individuals fighting for a more sensitive society, which makes all of the agenda-setting and policy preparation work even more meaningful.

ARA ART–SK – Why do we exist?

Slovakia, unfortunately, is one of the EU countries where it is appropriate to speak of a community that is invisible when we discuss the community of LGBTQIA+ people of Romani origin. This means both the community of LGBTQIA+ people as well as the mainstream population in Slovakia are unaware of the fact that a certain percentage of those who self-identify as ethnic Roma also belong to the community of LGBTQIA+ people.

Another reason our organization exists is the lack of attention paid by institutions publicly to multiple, intersectional discrimination from the perspective of Romani people, as well as the low level of interaction between LGBTQIA+ community members who are non-Roma and those who are Romani.

A dearth of informal education and/or training on the topic for community members and others interested also poses a huge problem, as society has no opportunity to learn about its natural diversity and about our common strengths, based on which social consensus, mutual understanding and tolerance towards each other could become stronger.

The lack of any developed or implemented state level policies aimed at improving the situation of LGBTQIA+ community members is an alarming problem; in the Slovak Republic we still do not have any legislative regulation of same-sex partnerships and their rights in comparison with the rights currently enjoyed by heterosexual partnerships in the country.



## ARA ART–SK – What do we do?

**Supporting visibility** – Based on our good relationships with partner organizations in Slovakia such as QUO VADIS, in 2021 we had the opportunity to co-organize the first Roma Pride Parade in Slovakia in the eastern metropolis of Košice. During event's official program, visitors had an opportunity to learn more about Romani cuisine, Romani traditions, and most importantly, to learn more about the community of LGBTQAI+ persons of Romani origin.

**Connecting communities** – We regularly organize or co-organize with our partner organization discussions, forums and round tables in Slovakia about the community of LGBTQAI+ persons here, about its difficulties, and also about its future vision of achievements in the years to come.

**Educating and learning** – Knowing that the Slovak Republic is not offering any formal or informal education possibilities related to the community of LGBTQAI+ persons of Romani origin and its leadership preparation, we decided this year to organize the Roma Leadership Academy 2022, an informal educational opportunity for LGBTQAI+ Roma youth to learn more about leadership and policy making in this field.

**Researching** – We are monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the needs of the community, which means we are continually monitoring this community of interest from multilevel perspectives with regard to its specific needs; the collected data is carefully analyzed and then forwarded to international and state-level institutions and national organizations aiming to improve the challenging situation of communities of LGBTQAI+ persons of Romani origin in Slovakia.

**Developing** – We are formulating policy, lobbying for it and negotiating it with institutions. These developed policies are based on analyses of data from our field work and advocate for actual community needs. The policies also rely on expertise and good practices realized by international organizations working with multiple, intersectional discrimination as experienced by groups of sexual minorities.

**Cultivating** – We are cultivating social sensitivity, understanding and tolerance in Slovakia. We believe that through our demanding work, we are supporting the strengthening of the existence of acceptance and sensitivity in Slovak society.



## PART 2: ART, MEDIA, SEXUALITY, AND GENDER



### **SLOVAKIA:**

#### **Robert Gabris / Artist, Human Rights Activist**

*I was born in the former Czechoslovakia. Today I live and work in Vienna, Austria as a freelance artist. I graduated with a B.A. from the Academy for Applied Arts in Bratislava, Slovakia in 2010 and received my Master's (Mag. art.) from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria in 2015. describe the content of my work as a critical confrontation with identity issues, especially confrontations of different groups who are excluded from society. The starting point of my work deals with new, experimental forms of drawing as resistance to exclusion and racism. I belong to the Romani ethnic group, but I do not define*

*myself as a Romani artist. My work shows a much more constant interest in multiple questions of diverse and convertible identities, in the queer body and its existence possessed in different physical and mental bodies in relation to normative society and its boundaries. My medium of choice is conceptual drawing and its experimental implementation, the de-construction of forms, and the quest to push all possible limits. My works are mostly autobiographical, imagined as a constant, obsessive search for exact proportion and symmetry.*

### **ERROR**

#### **ROMANI PEOPLE'S CORPOREALITY AND THEIR NON-BINARY SPACES**

This project was created in 2021 at the Kair Artists' Residence in Košice, Slovakia, at the MeetFactory in Prague, Czech Republic, at the Jindřich Chalupecký Award Show in the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic, and will be included as a solo exhibit at documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany.

We\* are an Error

We are a glitch in the system forced upon you; we are a Mistake to you.

Our physicality is a concept that confronts and dismantles the normative architecture you have built upon hatred and repression.

Our Identity is an unsettling gap in your conscience.

The Roma body's exoticism is a fetish of painful pleasure to you.

Roma physicality becomes a radical technology of self-armoring.

We strategically use our bodies as material, the material as an instrument, the instrument as a weapon against your heteronormative linearity.

We have strategically learned to use our ERROR as self-defense.

Up until today, you have created deceptive and dirty opinions of us, therefore you don't know who we are.

Today, loudly and with sovereignty, we\* are speaking up demonstratively to reframe the image of Roma identity.

We met in dating applications, we arranged a meeting to build a common foundation that would allow us to naturally merge. In our “digital alternative reality” we interactively create new alliances with each other. This is how our new, non-binary space of Roma queer identity was created. Through dialogues and encounters, we physically translate our desires. We experience either a beautiful bodily intimacy, or the anger and frustration that is present in our bodies every day. In this interactive way, we create a kind of non-physical armor on our naked bodies for the healing of our long-wounded identities. We heal from traumas, we share experiences and kindness. The tattoos of first lashes, the asymmetrical features of these bodies, their scars, bruises, tears and other bodily fluids are traces in these photographs which symbolically describe our non-binary safe spaces. Our connections do not end with these photographs, they are not the result of a project. The friendship and collaboration continues because of the necessity to continue to intensively process all of this. With such intimate interventions we are discovering knowledge about us, about Roma physicality, its otherness, and its equality which is still hidden, still taboo in society.

Among other things, we used dating applications to inform ourselves about experiences and practices in the Roma queer community, for whom homosexuality and queerness are always taboo, forbidden or punished. The most scientific theme was the systematic reduction of gender identity, not just in our country, but also in the Roma community itself, to two accepted genders, as well as the perfectly ignored, mocked, and degraded identities that are non-binary, non-gendered and Transgender. A very important aspect of this rebranding is that we inform ourselves about sexual survival and its risks, exempting ourselves from the boredom of the forced sexual practices that are welcomed and universally accepted by the white, privileged audience using these dating applications. Sex work is a short-term solution to the issue of the absolute poverty that is the fundamental problem of these bodies. From the conversations I have had, I have often sensed that there is a dangerous grey area in which hopelessness and existential needs for survival are exploited to the maximum. That is why, in such dating applications, \*we\*, the multi-marginalized community, must inform each other, formulate strategies, and put them into practice so we can resist the abuse and exploitation of our powerlessness.



## AUSTRIA:

### **Sandra Selimović / Actress, Director and Singer**

*Sandra Selimović is an actress, director, rapper and activist. Born in 1981 in Zajecar (Serbia), she has been performing since 1994. Currently she is acting in “Die Ärztin” by Robert Icke at the Burgtheater in Vienna, Austria and in “Roma Army”, directed by Yael Ronen at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, Germany. As a free-lance artist she has worked in the Volkstheater Wien, Schauspiel Essen, Staatstheater Kassel and on the independent stage as an actress and director in Austria, Germany and Romania. At the age of 12 she shot her first ORF TV series, “Operation Dunarea”. With Tina*

*Leisch she co-directed her first documentary “Gangster Girls” in the Schwarza Women’s Prison and made it to the Viennale and the Munich Documentary Festival. In 2010, together with her sister Simonida Selimović, she founded the first feminist Roma theater association, Romano Svato, and at the same time began making music as the rap duo Mindj Panther. In their productions they deal with racism, sexism, identity, feminism and exclusion, breaking through the stereotypical images and clichés about the ethnic Roma. As a self-confident, queer Romni, she is on the one hand a pioneer for equal rights for women in the Roma community while on the other hand she is committed to fighting antiziganist (antigypsyism) discrimination. In 2013 she won the audience award from the “Junge Burg” as the youngest director at the Vienna Academy Theater with her first directorial work.*

### **Sandra Selimović shares experiences from her life and career with regard to Media, Art, Sex and Gender**

I have been an artist since the age of 12. My first role was that of a Roma girl from Romania. The Roma family that we portrayed in the film was beyond cliché. Long skirts, caravans and horses. And of course, we danced almost the whole time. I had to learn Romanian for my role because the director/writer had no idea that we spoke the Romanes language. I didn’t realize it at the time, it wasn’t until many years later that I realized how limited and ignorant the film people were! I have had to navigate between different worlds for many years - Gadge, Roma, BPOC, migrants, refugees - to understand that our Romani stories are always used by non-Romani dramaturgs, anthropologists or researchers to build their own careers. For me it was a normality to live in their worlds and in the things they created.

I have lived in Vienna since the age of five, but I was born in Serbia into a very traditional family with strict rules. My life experiences have helped me to build my career: my Roma family, the Gadge world, and the queer spaces that I started to hang out in 20 years ago. I realized by the age of 14 that I was more attracted to girls. I had to run away from home and I lived for two years on the street. Dealing with my own sexuality, my art and my family was not easy at that time.

I got my first professional engagement in the theater at the age of 21. In the beginning, I performed a lot in the independent stage in Austria. Mostly I acted in modern plays, rarely classical ones, since my appearance was rather atypical for that time. Most young actresses were blondes with long hair who were white. I cut my long hair short when I was in my early 20s.

Meeting directors who firstly had staged many interesting socio-critical plays and secondly consider my talent and looks to be a strength, I soon became known in the independent Viennese theater scene and was able to make a living by acting right from the start. I got very different roles - on the one hand, I played parts where my ethnicity was irrelevant, and on the other hand I was sometimes specifically cast because of it. I was less fortunate in film - mostly I was sent to auditions when they needed a prostitute, beggar, or maid. In 2005 I was asked by a director if I was crazy enough to play the female lead in a play that she wanted to set in a real prison with delinquents, juveniles who were male. It sounded interesting, so we rehearsed with the boys for half a year; 99% of them were migrants, of course. Since it was a challenge, I supported the director as an acting coach. That was the first time I discovered my talent for directing and the fun of it.

Three years later we were asked to do that same work plus the filming of a documentary in the only prison for women. The film ("Gangster Girls") was screened at the Viennale Film Festival. There, too, a striking number of the women behind bars had backgrounds in migration and were Roma.

One of my biggest career interests has been working with marginalized groups. I have worked with refugees, women, addicted adults and young people, people living with disabilities, people with mental illnesses, and young people with a migration back-





ground. My favorite group so far has been teenagers with a migration background. Remembering what I was like at their age, I could relate to them. They were very talented and energetic, but had no one to encourage them. They enjoyed no privileges and had difficult circumstances at home. Of course, there were also many Roma among the students who were very talented. Most lacked self-confidence when confronted with the Gadjé world.

One of my greatest successes was when we won the prize for the best play in the largest theater competition for youth groups at the State Theater. That was my first major directing job back then.

Working more and more with underprivileged youngsters and women with different backgrounds made me understand how important it is to tell such stories and to be part of those who design the story-telling, as my own perspective was closer to their particular realities.

In 2006, I was cast in a play for a third time to play a Romni. The difference this time was that almost all the actors were Roma and one character was a lesbian. The play was written in three languages, but the two authors were Gadjé, as was the director. Although in this production our topics were treated very politically and respectfully, I was starting to think critically about my position, about the Gadjé, about my queerness, about the body and about the sexuality of Romnja where old traditions such as blood weddings and patriarchal structures dominate. The Gadjé often took up a lot of visibility and space as soon as the production became successful. And Gadjé can only talk about Roma from their own point of view. Also, when it came to lesbians' visibility, the stories in the movies have been so conservative, so shy, without showing bodies or lesbian sex and the reality of it all, and they have been made by men for men, especially in the porn industry. That made me very angry and I decided to communicate my perspective on this phenomenon.





In 2006, therefore, I wrote, directed and performed in an art drama movie with two lesbians experiencing love, tensions and drama through sexual rituals. It was projected in many queer film festivals in many cities in Europe and the reactions were very positive as there were not so many productions made for women by women.

From around 2010, a new trend began in the professional theater scene that spilled over from Berlin to Vienna. Suddenly, migrant and post-migrant theater could be done. My foreign looks were in high demand. Before this, I had thought that me not fitting into a white role was a disadvantage. My ethnic appearance was reducing me to certain roles. However, my experiences made me realize that I can actually do the opposite, make use of my identities, that they are in fact a “plus” and that I can create a new niche to contribute to greater diversity of new narratives and roles. Roma, queer, POC people were making political theatre more diverse. Thus, I was happy that finally we could gain more visibility and I decided that it was also time to start creating our own niche. That’s why I founded Romano Svato with my sister in 2011, the first feminist Roma theater association in Austria. In our first production, I played a Sinti boxer, based on a true story from the Holocaust. That was the first time I wanted to break the gender norms and let the audience decide for themselves whether they were seeing a woman or a man. I trained for the role for one year and gained 10 kilos in muscle.

Playing with gender norms became my new work. I shaved my hair or let it grow, I played different characters just to challenge the images of femme, Roma, or queer. Since I had danced and sung in competitions and on theater stages from an early age, I decided to form a Hip-Hop band with my sister in 2013. This is how Mindj Panther came to life, where we rap and sing multilingually (but mostly in Romanes) about our experiences of racism, sexism, capitalism and homophobia. We also wanted to show pride in our language, in our culture, and encourage young Roma to also be proud, not to hide their identities, and to keep speaking their Romanes language with confidence!

For me, “Roma Army” is the highlight of my work, the best-known and most successful of my productions in 2017 that premiered at the Maxim Gorki State Theater in Berlin. It was the first play to premiere in a state theater that was created by and with professional Roma actors from different countries. “Roma Army” was the first piece to reflect the true diversity of Roma. It relates with my experiences as Roma, queer and migrant, but it was a collective story. Since our ensemble was at least half queer, we realized that we absolutely had to let our sexual orientation, gender identity and “coming out” flow into the piece. Our costumes were provocatively sexy - we glittered, we wore military uniforms, heroes’ indoor costumes, etc. We wanted to rebrand the image of the Roma, to expand it, to show our pride, while critically examining the Gadje and ourselves.

We were nominated for the Faust Prize for “Roma Army”, which is the highest prize in Europe in the theater world. After that, we performed it all over Europe. However, the Faust Prize Gala was a shocking experience for me and my sister. All of the nominated people, the most important leaders and celebrities of the German state theatres were

invited, but my sister and I were the only people in the entire ceremony who were not white!

It is strange that I still get offered very stereotypical roles, where directors or writers believe that if they put a Roma, a queer or a POC person in a play they can “check the boxes” of intersectionality. That is not enough, though. Hiring people from these categories without creating content and stories about them/us, without having representation by different groups in terms of the writing, directing, casting decisions and storytelling will be just about “ticking the boxes” of diversity. Diversity, sexual orientation, class and ethnicity have become a big trend in the last five years. Netflix and others have recognized that minority stories are a focal point and that political awareness is needed for society to awaken and change. However, their commercial purposes for developing such material still need to be questioned.

It is very important to be seen and recognized in all different worlds. First: I started acting and directing in the independent scene. Second: I started writing my own stories with a queer group, or with my own Roma theater company, where we are the ones who determine how we tell stories. Third: I made it to the State Theater, where it was recognized that they could no longer do without various actors. This is also not enough, though. One successful story is not enough to serve as an example, to show that a Roma queer can make it in an industry where racism, sexism and homophobia exist still. Stories like mine obscure a lot of struggles due to stereotyping and prejudice against Roma, against non-white skin, struggles due to the insecurity of performing in independent theatre for so many years, due to the lack of support from state theatre and to the excessive elitism that white people design. Doing art when you have very few opportunities, when you struggle with your ethnicity, your queerness and your migrant status was really not an easy task. As an artist, to take up an attitude against injustice involves a big risk of being isolated from the artistic world; therefore, it took many years for me to build up this system to support my work, to build alliances, to create my own narrative by directing a lesbian story, or by working with different underprivileged youngsters and women, or with my own company (Romano Svato), or to benefit from other Roma artists' work. All of this has defined my career and developed my critical point of view about art. I think that when you do political art, you need to already have a system built up to express your views. I did not have that 20 years ago. Even today it's not enough, but political art now is creating movements everywhere in the world, intersecting with activism to break new boundaries. “Roma Army” was, in this way, a breaking point for talking in art about the intersectional issues of Roma, such as poverty, migration, queer Roma, sexism, feminism, etc. It was also my coming out on a stage as a lesbian. As a result, I started to receive roles as a lesbian, such as in the Burgtheater in Vienna, which is the largest and most important dramatic theater venue in Europe.

We need more work of this kind to educate Gadjé societies and LGBT+ movements. We need to break through into our own Roma communities with the LGBT+ stories that have always existed but were invisible. Art is automatically political for me, other-

wise it would be just stories for entertainment where you do not have to empathize with characters, think about injustice or the position of the underprivileged. We need more representation of diverse actors\* from the BPOC and queer community in state theatres and big mainstream film industries. In most movies and in the theater industry, migrants, BPOC and Roma do not perform in leading roles, but in supportive ones, and they almost always have to die in the story, whereas the white people (usually men) survive or play the hero.

### **Article DW**

<https://www.dw.com/de/simonida-sandra-rampenlicht/a-60613420>

### **Mindj Panther Hip-Hop Video**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02\\_R1AjFYe](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02_R1AjFYe)

### **Article about the Award for Viennese Diversity in the Best Actress category**

[https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20150219\\_OTS0123/preis-der-wiener-vielfalt- preistraegerin-sandra-selimovic-inszeniert-theaterstueck-im-novomatic-forum](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20150219_OTS0123/preis-der-wiener-vielfalt- preistraegerin-sandra-selimovic-inszeniert-theaterstueck-im-novomatic-forum)

### **Interview**

<https://kijuku.at/buehne/schuld-dass-ich-schauspielerin-wurde-war-michael-jackson/>

### **“What did you perform, Ms Selimović?”**

<https://datum.at/ist-ihre-leistung-frau-selimovic/>

### **Interview about Sandra**

<https://www.fluter.de/sinti-und-roma-im-film-bitte-keine-bettler-rollen-mehr>

### **Presenting International Roma Day**

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=166098427894141>

### **Interview, Budapest Festival Hero's ?**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXiybmdLWTI>

### **Interview, Roma Armee**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAaJvaxlISQ>

### **Romani Cultural and Art Company**

<http://www.romaniarts.co.uk/portfolio-item/sandra-selimovic/>

### **Projects**

<https://kosmostheater.at/produktion/she-he-me/>

### **Bibi Sara Kali**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAEtHduoC6E>

### **Cinderella**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-nsf38l1Pc>



## **HUNGARY:**

### **Joci Márton, Human Rights Activist**

*Joci Márton is a Roma LGBTQ+ activist from Hungary. He was born in 1985 and grew up in a small mining town in northeastern Hungary. Márton received his degree in pedagogy with a specialization in Romani Studies, and right after college he began to teach in a public primary school in the 8th district of Budapest, where almost all the students were Roma. He has also worked in the Department on the Hungarian Minority Abroad at the Office of the Prime Minister, an officer on minority and educational affairs. Márton took part in the Roma Studies Program at the Central European University*

*and has many years of experience with Roma civil society. He was a volunteer at the Uccu Roma Informal Education Foundation, where he moderated discussions among young adults about Roma identity and racism. These personal experiences taught him a lot about how the majority thinks about Roma, and these encounters trained him in how to engage in honest discussions about difficult topics. He was a scholar at the Open Society Foundation's Youth Exchange Program, where he organized "Owning the Game", a Roma LGBTQ+ community photo exhibition. Márton's work focuses mainly on intersectionality and identity politics, and he is a founding member of "Ame Panzh", an informal Roma group that broadcasts content on social media to inform the public discourse about minorities, thematizing recent topics from a feminist / Queer Roma point of view.*

### **Roma LGBTQ+ visual self-representation**

I organized a Roma LGBTQ+ community photo exhibition in 2020, and in my presentation I would like to talk about the reception of an intersectional project like mine in Hungary. I would like to focus mainly on what we need to take into consideration when we decide to build our own narratives.

### **REPRESENTATION MATTERS**

It is truly difficult to explain how important representation is to those who do not suffer from its absence. Nor is it easy to explain just how much harm a one-dimensional portrayal can cause to those whose representation is really multifaceted and moves along a broad identity spectrum.

A large portion of the intellectual elite in Hungary is watching the revolutionary changes occurring within minority representation in the US and Western Europe uncomprehendingly, pushing away the problem by engaging in the self-deception that "We Eastern Europeans have nothing to do with this."

No. We have a lot to do with this! We are not a monocultural, "only white" society, even if when we look at what is present in the public space, we might think the opposite. Our absence in the public space makes the elite feel we do not exist, and that is exactly why we need change.

We need to challenge those who categorize questions of minority representation as

something distant, something that touches us just as spectators from afar, those who see the role of Hungarians in this as simply to follow events in the world in order to be informed. I myself, or Roma women, or lesbians, or transgender people, or people living with disabilities, or any number of cross-sections of these groups would be justified in not comprehending such a perspective, though.

All the while, according to estimates, Hungary has one million Roma inhabitants who live under systemic oppression due to the racism that has formed and maintains systemically unequal relations to the present day.

If I had to describe Roma representation in Hungary with just two attributes, I would say that it is extraordinarily paltry, and that even that little bit is harmful.

The Roma LGBTQ+ intersectional group that I belong to is downright pitiful.

This is what led me to engage with the visual self-representation of the Roma LGBTQ+ intersectional community, and together with members of the community we are producing material that is capable of taking up public space for ourselves.

#### 1. What does “Owning the Game” mean, in my interpretation?

To me, “owning the game” means that we have control of our own representation, in our own hands. My project title also refers to my awareness of what characterizes it: That in order for a community to truly “own the game”, we need to develop narratives that serve our own interests by utilizing our own strengths.

#### 2. The Difference between Representation and Self-Representation

The difference between representation and self-representation seems obvious, but even when I listen to liberal intellectuals talk about it, I feel the need to clarify it.

I have never said or written that it is just Roma people who have the right to portray Roma people. Nobody is seeking the impossible - total control over representation of our community - but we would like to be allowed to criticize any representation that we feel is harmful. More importantly, self-representation needs to be the bigger part of the whole, we are tired of others telling our stories. I do not think that is a radical thing to ask.

Self-representation can surprise people, which makes me think that many of them are simply just not ready to accept it.

Minority self-representation does not serve the majority

Our self-representation cannot serve to satisfy the curiosity of a majority society. We cannot subjugate our own aims for representation in the interest of offering the majority a glimpse into the life of an “unusual” and “exciting” community to whom they do not have access. We need to make people aware that an authentic view can only be proffered by self-representation; anything else is an illusion.

The aim of our self-representation is not to reinforce your view

One of the criticisms I have received is that the participants in my photo project are “too beautiful”. I did not select the people for their looks, but it was part of the master plan that we would like to be represented as beautiful and strong. If you are not able to connect Roma LGBTQ people with beauty, well, this tells us a lot about your preconceptions, and we are not here to reinforce them. Moreover, this is also a good reason why we need to take part in the process of representation, because we need to get rid of the constant role as victim.

### Portrayed as victims

Many viewers are questioning the credibility of our representations when we are positive and strong, visually, because this also goes against the perception that we are always victims and weak. We do not want to hide the difficulties we face in society, but if we are always portrayed as victims, that makes it impossible for the majority to connect to us as equals. In such a case they just feel pity and they feel the need to be a savior rather than an ally.

### Challenging stereotypes

When I shared my project plans with non-Roma people, they would get excited and, with absolutely good intentions, they would come up with ideas on how to challenge stereotypes against our intersectional Roma LGBTQ+ community. There is no doubt that challenging stereotypes is a really important part of Roma activism, but when it comes to self-representation, our narratives have to come to the surface. When we think about stereotypes, we need to look at ourselves through the eyes of the majority, and this brings up the question: Where are we again? We have nothing to do with these stereotypes, they are something that is coming from the majority. We need to think about ourselves and not always waste energy reacting to stereotypes, because in that case we are never going to build our own narratives.

### 3. Anything more than zero may seem to be a lot

Previously there was virtually no LGBTQ+ Roma representation whatsoever, now anything more than zero may seem to be a lot.

Groups who are oppressed and their representation is not a passing whim – the reasons why we need to own our representation are well-founded. When people are invisible, then so are their problems.



## PART 3: INTERFACE OF ACADEMIA, ACTIVISM, AND POLITICS



### HUNGARY:

**Dezso Mate /**

**Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)**

*Academy in Exile Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, Kulturwissenschaftliche Institut (KWI) - Essen, Germany*

*Dr. Dezso Mate holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Sociology. Currently he is an Academy in Exile Fellow at the Kulturwissenschaftliche Institut Essen (KWI). In his dissertation, he focused on Romani intellectuals' generational, resilient lifepaths. He earned his MA degrees at the University of Pécs in Media Studies – Film Theory and in Romani*

*Studies. He also gained further academic experience in the Netherlands at the Fontys University of Applied Social Sciences. He is a former Advanced Research Fellow and Course Leader at the Central European University's Romani Studies Program in Budapest. From 2015-2017 he worked as a Visiting Research Associate at the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research at the University of Sussex. Dezso has had experience since 2013-2018 at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Institute for Minority Studies as a Junior Research Fellow. He was an international consultant and mentor of the Open Society Foundations' Community Youth Fellowship Program 2018-2020, which focused on LGBTI Romani people's intersectional challenges in public healthcare settings. Dezso's research interests focus on: dimensions of intersectional antigypsyism, structural racism, and LGBTI-phobia; social movements, injustices, feminism, gender rights, hate crime and speech; and public health –mental and physical health and the prevention of pathology, social resilience and resistance.*

### Roma LGBTI Emancipation and the Politics of Alliances<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade in the international Roma LGBTI and feminist movements we have learned lessons from the past and from the challenges of the present to support and empower each other for future generations.

In 2022, Romani women are still being objectified, sexualized, and forcibly sterilized; Romani transgender people are being raped, abused, and ostracized Romani people who live with disability(ies) are being dehumanized and victimized; and Romani LGBTI people are victims of LGBTI-phobic motivated hate crime and hate speech by the heteronormative majority society and by leaders and members of our own movements (LGBTI, feminist and Romani) as well. Romani LGBTI people face and resist intersectional oppressions, normalized public shaming, and scapegoating. They are violated in and excluded from multiple social dimensions because of their identities and/or their characteristics as people living with disability(ies), social class statuses, intragroup

<sup>1</sup> This critical study serves as the basis of my article "Roma LGBTI and Feminist Movement and Scholarship", in the Critical Romani Studies Journal.

differences, gender identities, sexual minorities, age characteristics, or any intersections of these (Baker 2015, Bitu 2009, Brooks 2009, Carmen 2016, Corradi 2018, Fremlova 2017, 2021, Jovanovic 2009, Kutić 2013, Matache 2009, Mate 2015, 2020, Tiser 2015).

When we critically consider the past 50 years (1971-2021) of the international Romani movement's development, we can note that feminist and LGBTI Roma visibility was rarely addressed or located, which does not signify that Romani LGBTI people were not part of the mainstream Romani movement. Despite all this Romani LGBTI people have consistently been influential members of emancipation movements, human rights movements and politics and play a decisive role in the Romani movement. They resisted together for the first-ever cultural and identity self-representation as the first generation of Romani activists from the 1940s until the 1970s, to promote visibility, equality, and dignity for all. They established our current autonomy and freedom for Romani arts and culture, emancipation of identity, and leadership in a united way (Junghaus 2014, Kallai 2000, Marsh 2007).

Since 1971, cultural identity politics in the resistance of the second generation of Romani intellectuals has shifted into a political movement and into organizational representation, which, by the 1990s, strengthened activism for civil rights in public by Romani people and human rights defenders' visibility across the world (Marton 2021). From the 2000s, the third generation of Romani human rights activists/scholars' main objectives were to resist antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism, and LGBTI-phobia with reflective, self-narrative knowledge production, "talking back" to academia and the human rights movement (Fejzula 2019, Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018, Rostas 2019, Rovid 2021). Between the 1940s and 2010s, because of antigypsism's normalization in society, LGBTI-phobia, and the structured forms of social, institutional, and academic oppressions, the previous activists and intellectuals who were feminist, LGBTI and/or Romani hardly had any voice, visibility or representation in mainstream (feminist, LGBTI and/or Romani) movements, human rights policies and knowledge production. In Romani history (in the early 2000s) there was a remarkable turning point when physical resistance started to slightly transform into mental resilience, into our own knowledge production to combat these structured forms of oppression, violation and exclusion (Bogdan, Ryder, & Taba 2015, Costache, 2018). Consequently, the civil rights involving physical resistance by Romani people was transformed into an interior outbraving, a resilience based on critically "talking back", on confrontation with antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism and LGBTI-phobia as they have been normalized systemically.<sup>2</sup>

During the last decade, from the 2010s, Romani LGBTI and feminist voices have been increasingly recognized in academic and activist discourses. The Roma LGBTI and feminist movement and scholarship tackle issues of personal freedom and collective emancipation (Daroczi & Jovanovic 2015, Heljic 2017, Kocze 2009, Mate 2017). This contributes to the social sciences, to policy making, and to community services. This present recognition is the result of the struggles of pioneering Romani LGBTI activists,

---

<sup>2</sup> These results are based on my Ph.D dissertation. Dezso Mate (2020), *Generational Changes of Romani Intellectuals' Life Paths. The Effects of Social Resilience*. PhD Dissertation. Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) Faculty of Social Sciences, Doctoral School of Sociology, Interdisciplinary Social Research Programme.

scholars, and their supportive allies (Corradi 2018).

When, on 12 October 2014, Vera Kurtic, David Tišer, Jelena Jovanovic, Joci Marton, and I met at a workshop in Budapest on “Coalition building and transforming the Roma movement: feminism, LGBT rights, trade unions” within the framework of a meeting of activist-scholars titled “Nothing about us without us”, organized by the Roma Research and Empowerment Network<sup>3</sup>, I am not sure whether we were aware of our leadership position or our power in international Romani LGBTI and feminist activism and scholarship. Beforehand, each of us had worked separately and individually, mostly at the national and the grassroots levels. We realized that our voices and efforts must unite and support each other, no matter the cost.

In 2015, at the first International Romani LGBTI Conference in Prague, we declared that our intersectional identity must be celebrated and protected and that we must build reliable, supportive alliances to minimize the oppressions within and between our communities. Romani LGBTI people face intersectional social oppressions and violations between and within their own communities (Romani, LGBTI) on a daily basis. It is essential to openly manifest our community’s lived experiences, to combat antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism, racialization, exclusion, intolerant attitudes and hate crimes in a way that is intersectional and united. Before this groundbreaking event, organized by David Tišer, we as activists, scholars, and policy-makers were struggling as to how we could conceptualize our identities in an academic framework. It was a challenge to apply terminologies and produce knowledge on Romani LGBTI intersectionality or on the forms of our intersectional, lived experiences in correlation with our identity politics. The employed notions from the Afro-American movement definitely require more development and recognition in our Roma LGBTI movement and scholarship, and therefore in my work I have developed the concept of intersectional antigypsyism as one that could properly represent our lived experiences. However, we have a lot to do; we have to figure out how these concepts fit into our movement and into academia as well. As a critical reflection, in academia we can produce knowledge and build notions, but I am not sure if the people on whose lives the narrative is based are accepting our notions or not. We must remember not to dispossess or oppress those who at the moment are invisible.

As activists, social scientists, artists, curators, political and community leaders, we are responsible not just for our own statements and actions but also for the future generations’ identity development, visibility, and self-esteem.<sup>4</sup> Ever since the mid-2010s, the movement has had ups and downs and its members have shared sensitive emotions, debates, arguments and disagreements. Some movement members got hurt, others caused harm, some became more visible, others stepped back. Our community members are intersectionally vulnerable. I am vulnerable, even if in public I seem to be resilient. As a testimony, I have never intended to hurt anybody else’s feelings or self-esteem, and if I have done so, I hereby express my apology.

Based on the knowledge production and lived experiences of the last decade of feminist, LGBTI and Romani academics and activists, it is timely to critically discuss and challenge

---

<sup>3</sup>Roma Research and Empowerment Network - Nothing about us without us? Workshop on coalition building and transforming the Romani movement: feminism, LGBT rights, trade unions.

<sup>4</sup>Prague Declaration - First International Roma LGBTIQ Conference (13–14 August 2015), ARA ART, o.s.

antigypsyism and anti-Romani racism across Europe in an intersectional way. It is crucial to critically reflect on the controversies of human rights protections, movements, and scholarships. The present acknowledgment is the reward of those openly out Romani LGBTI activists and scholars and their supportive alliances who pioneered and raised their voices to question the social system. To challenge the status quo is a collective aim in which Roma, LGBTI, People of Color, racialized communities, feminists, sex workers, AIDS and HIV+ communities who are stigmatized, and people living with disabilities must stand together and demand – not just ask for – our fundamental human rights.

## Vulnerability, Resistance and Resilience

Walking in these shoes as an initial member of the international Romani LGBTI movement and its scholarship is challenging not just mentally, but also physically. The cost of our work, our efforts and actions, is our health, our personal security, and our relationships. We are targeted, labeled, dehumanized, stigmatized and socially exiled on a daily basis. Is it truly worth it? Acknowledging the evidence that an increasing number of Romani LGBTI people and supportive alliances are constantly joining our movement with pride and dignity, I am pleased to state that yes, it is worth it!

We are vulnerable, but we are resistant and resilient. Our time is a critical landmark in Romani her/they/hi(s)story, due to the recognition, on all levels, of LGBTI people of Romani origin, and to the fact that the foregoing physical resistance is slightly transforming into mental/psychological resilience.

Resilience and resistance have become often-used - and frequently misused - terms. Resistance and resilience are each based on a state of power that involves rethinking the relationship and practices between those who are dominant and those who are subaltern. The notion of resilience appeared in the early 1970s in ecology and then was adopted in the socio-ecological context. The phenomenon in the 1990s was observed and noted in social psychology, education, and development studies as well. In 1991, Mexican-American students were observed who, despite their low socio-economic status and the discriminatory institutional environment achieved outstanding results in school with the mentoring of a supportive educator. These students were called “invulnerable” (Alva and Padilla, 1991).

In the European context, Edith H. Grotberg came to similar conclusions when she was examining children who had experienced early childhood trauma. Grotberg’s research results and observations verified the phenomenon of resilience as well. The students examined by her have achieved outstanding performance in their careers and their assumed motivation was their compliance with and conformity to the majority. She named these children “resilients” (Grotberg H. 1995).

Resistance is not just social action, but also silences or various forms of symbolism, art, cultural and knowledge production and representation. Resistance has a solid correlation with the material environment, through which people physically are able to challenge the status quo via different places, such as walls, buildings, institutions, streets, squares or all over a country. These civic actions shift and strengthen the paradigms of identity politics. To sustain resistance and disempower social structures,

these actions must be constantly repeated, evaluated, and reconsidered. Resilience refers to one's inner balance despite being subjected to the forces of oppression. It is a flexible adaptation that is able to regain its previous solid state despite the mental or physical shocks or unexpected violations. Resilience undermines power structures and strengthens the political and epistemic position of the subalterns to develop their leadership positions and knowledge production.

Resilient persons are part of resistance movements and actions. Resistance can be associated with visible places, whereas resilience is an ability that is flexible and internal; therefore, resilient persons are the foundation of resilient movements. Resistance and resilience are only complete with each other: one cannot exist without the other (Mate 2020, Selling 2021).

## The politics of (mis)representations and alliances

The ideology of antigypsyism and heteronormativity has been generated by external, non-Romani, cisgender, heterosexual, privileged discourses that often present a racialized, classicist, sexist, and objectified conceptualization of intersectional LGBTI people. These dehumanizing stigmatizations have excluded our narratives and representations, have limited our access to knowledge and to its production about the needs, visibility, representations and lived experiences of intersectional LGBTI people. LGBTI persons, People of Color, Roma, sex workers and people living with disabilities face similar structural oppressions, unspoken violations and harassments.

There is a constantly-repeated dilemma as to who can enjoy absolute rights and freedoms in today's movements, politics, and allyships. To have engaged, honest, incentivized support from our allies is essential because some of us simply have no access to the privileged places and spaces where the majority lives the everyday lives that actually determine and shape our own representations, social mobility and visibility. Our power, one way or another, (still) depends on their public presentations of our lived experiences, often without our credited involvement and/or recognition. It is crucial to acknowledge those who can speak about representation and who are essentially part of the movement – in this case LGBTI people of Romani origin; however, it is appreciated when our alliances express their support in the form of presentations involving the LGBTI Roma voice. I am not being critical at all with this thought, but simply briefly evaluating the past five years. It is discouraging to see and recognize that allies frequently obscure our visibility, knowledge and cultural productions. Currently, there are more presentations about the lived experiences of LGBTI people of Romani origins than there are representations of them. As Romani LGBTI people we have the right to be visible, respected and recognized on all levels.

Collective action theory states that cooperative strategy is a value because it causes common goods for all, ideally. Such a strategy could generate a commonwealth's solid status, as it can be accomplished only by group cooperation and reliability (Mancur 1965). The general challenge to enjoying the results of collective action is open cooperation with those who are dominant in so-called supremacy.

Recognizing my cisgender male privilege while feeling proud to be an LGBTI person of Romani origin, my conclusion in general is that I acknowledge, with delight and

respectfully, that there are coalitions in these cross-movements which fundamentally preserve safe places and spaces, even as we in these movements share similar forms of oppression, social exclusion and violation. As a criticism, academic vs. activist positionality and the tensions between these positions are challenging both the Roma movement and more recently, the LGBTI Roma movement. Their joint aim is to promote social change, but the patterns of these identities, such as Romani versus non-Romani identity, social class status, sexuality, gender identity, and life experiences are shaping the movements' common drives, expectations and results. The critical concern in this matter is that we must appreciate and respect each other's identities, characteristics and boundaries, not hurt, publicly shame, or violate one another, and not reinforce our oppression as it is socially structured.

If we critically comprehend the leadership, representation and visualization of the Romani LGBTI movement, then it is essential to acknowledge the academic, cultural and life experiences of movement members and allies. This is a constant dilemma, as alliances - even with supportive intentions - can either lead this knowledge production and representations of Romani feminism and the Romani LGBTI movement or, through their embodied positions, can (re)colonize the movement and its scholarship. It is also an arguable question whether non-Romani LGBTI voices and knowledge can endanger Romani LGBTI members' visibility and movement building? Based on the politics of recognition and epistemic justice, the privileged ones cannot direct the representations and knowledge production of the vulnerable ones, simply because they have never experienced the reality of being an LGBTI person of Romani origin or Romani women.

In my reflective point of view, personal and social privileges must be applied to promote and strengthen our communities for collective goods - the movement members who have fundamental privileges, should promote and support the oppressed ones, and not cause more oppressions with their privileges on the vulnerable once.

Common or shared identity(ies) do not legitimize leadership in any movement, most precisely not in the Romani LGBTI movement. Self-centered power practice by the privileged is damaging for those who are invisible, vulnerable, and powerless. Ego-centric competition generates oppressions and misrepresentations about hidden members in the movement. The position of the oppressed, with a slight addition of "puppet" power, easily can shift to the oppressor's stance, with no acknowledgment or acceptance of the reality of this subconscious self-colonization.

In a utopist movement, allies recognize when they are suppressing a community member's representation and leadership and do not cause more harm and inequality than they provide in reliability and support. If one person gets hurt by allyship in the movement, then the whole community is a victim of epistemic violation. In this case, allying with one another and acting in solidarity first requires an understanding of what the individual is acting in solidarity with and why. Alliance building faces two challenges. First, the role of the allies in conceptualizing and deliberating about the values of emancipation. Second, the position and power of the allies within the movement, bearing in mind issues of visibility and representation.

Academic and activist discourses - even with good intentions - often reproduce "othering" images of Roma. Narratives about Roma as an "underclass", "ethnic minority",



“disadvantaged group”, or about Roma “catching up” play such a role. Critical self-narratives are necessary to analyze the social and historical embeddedness of such categories and distinctions as “Roma / Gadjo” and “Gypsy / Peasant”.

In cases where the scientific “discourse” is about the underclass, the poor, the minority, the disadvantaged, the one catching-up, or ethnicity, everyone clearly knows the “Gypsies” are the subject. These positions are currently still at odds with what practitioners of privileged science call the “suffering discourse”. On the other hand, in order for forward-looking social change and mobility to take place, scientific self-narrative, objective reflection, is necessary.

“Even though we need alliances, we, as Romani LGBTIQ people, have the right to shape our own movement, our own narrative. Non-oppressive alliances can be part of our movement and part of our lives as long as they do not silence us. We have the liberty to structure our lives, narratives and movements without others.”<sup>5</sup>

## Terminologies and identity politics

### Council of Europe - Roma and Travellers Team

“The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term ‘Gens du voyage’, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.”

About us ([coe.int](http://coe.int))

### Council of Europe - Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI)

“The Council of Europe standards and mechanisms seek to promote and ensure respect for the human rights of every individual. These include equal rights and dignity of all human beings, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons. Sexual orientation and gender identity - Homepage ([coe.int](http://coe.int))

### European Commission - Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU

The new strategic framework for the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma in EU countries and preparation of the post-2020 initiative. Timeframe: 2020-2030.

“The umbrella-term ‘Roma’ encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.)”

Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU | European Commission ([europa.eu](http://europa.eu))

European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture e.V.

---

<sup>5</sup> The quote was uttered on 6 February 2020, at the “Resistance and resilience: Romani women and LGBTIQ persons” roundtable organized by the Romani Studies Program and the Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Budapest.

ERIANC as part of the struggle for self-definition and self-determination

“The 1971 first World Romani Congress was a historical milestone which marked the beginning of a new era of [the] international Roma movement. This process of gradual political awakening among Roma was accompanied by a parallel process in the field of arts. Indeed, one of the major achievements of the First World Roma Congress was the creation of important symbols intended to unite all Roma – namely, the Roma flag and anthem. Symbolism, and its aesthetics, meant to reaffirm a political Roma identity shaped and articulated by Roma themselves.

Cultural and artistic practices were a powerful premise which sought a similar political agenda – that of Roma self-emancipation. After the first World Romani Congress in 1971, Roma visual artists started to claim recognition as a group. This collective consciousness of the European Roma community was essential in disrupting the exclusive operation of the cultural scene and criticizing the age-old practice in which Roma people were the victims of representations created exclusively by non-Roma. Furthermore, it pointed out how this European imagery and iconography had forced Roma into the conceptual ghetto of ‘the Gypsy’.”

<https://eriac.org/about-eriac/>

## References

Alva, Sylvia Alatorre – Padilla, M. Amado. 1991. “Academic Invulnerability Among Mexican Americans”. In *The Journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students*, Vol. (15) Winter. Boise State University, Boise.

Baker, Daniel. 2015. “The Queer Gypsy”, “‘Nothing About Us Without Us’? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production’ Issue, *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, No.2, Budapest: ERRC, p. 87–93.

Bitu, Nicoleta (2009), “The Situation of Roma/Gypsy Women in Europe”, *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal*, Vol.1, No.1, Summer. pp 222 -233.

Bogdan, Maria, Ryder, Andrew, & Taba, Marius. (2015), “The Roma Spring: Knowledge Production and the Search for a New Humanity”, “‘Nothing About Us Without Us’? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production’ Issue, *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, No.2, Budapest: ERRC, pp.33-37.

Brooks, Ethel C. 2009. “(Mis)Recognitions: Romanies, Sexualities,Sincerities”, *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal*, Vol.1, No.1, Summer. pp 21-29.

Corradi, Laura. 2018. *Gypsy Feminism. Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism*, Routledge, London.

Costache, Ioanida. 2018. “Reclaiming Romani-ness: Identity Politics, Universality and Otherness Or, Towards a (New) Romani Subjectivity”, *Critical Romani Studies*, Vol.1, No.1, pp.30-43.

Daroczi, Anna Csilla & Jovanovic, Jelena. 2015. "Still Missing Intersectionality, the relevance of feminist methodologies in the struggle for the rights of Roma", "Nothing About Us Without Us"? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production' Issue, Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre, No.2, Budapest: ERRC, pp.79 – 83.

Fejzula, Sebijan (2019), The Anti-Roma Europe: Modern ways of disciplining the Roma body in researurban spaces, Revista Direito e Práxis, Rio de Janeiro, Vol.10, No.03, pp.2097-2116.

Fremlova, Lucie. 2017. "The Experiences of Romani LGBTIQ People: Queer(Y)(Ing) Roma." Doctoral thesis, University of Brighton.

Fremlova, Lucie. 2021. "Queer Roma" (1st ed.). Routledge, London.

Gheorghe, Carmen. 2016. "Envisioning Roma Feminism", Analize: Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies, 7. pp. 15-18.

Grotberg, H. Edith. 1995. "A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit." Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections (8) Bernard van Leer Foundation. The Netherlands, Hague.

Heljic, Arman. 2017. "I am Not Sorry for Being Different: The Hate Speech Monologues", The London Reader Summer, pp.37-39.

Junghaus, Tímea (2014), "Roma Art: Theory and Practice", Acta Ethnographica Hungrica, Vol.59, No.1, pp.25-42.

Jovanovic, Djordje (2009), "The Difference That Makes a Difference; We Need More Guts!" 'Multiple Discrimination' Issue, Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre, No.2, Budapest: ERRC, pp.41–47.

Kállai, Ernő. 2000. "The Roma and research on the Roma. In: Böszörményi, Jenő; Józsa, Márta (szerk.) Caught in the Trap of Integration: Roma Problems and Prospects in Hungary Budapest, Magyarország : Bureau for European Comparative Minority Research. pp. 54-58.

Kocze, Angela. 2009. Missing Intersectionality. Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Current Research and Policies on Romani Women in Europe, Budapest: Central European University.

Kutic, Vera. 2013. "Dîuvljarke: Roma Lesbian Existence", European Roma Rights Centre Gender Research Fellowship, Nis: European Roma Rights Centre – ERRC.

Mancur, Olson. 1965. "The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups". Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1965

Marton, Jozsef. 2021 "Owning the Game: Intersectional Self-Representation in the Roma LGBTQ+ communities", RomaMoMA Blog, European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture e.V.

Marsh, Adrian. 2007. "Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity", 'Perceptions' Issue, Roma Rights: Quarterly Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre, No.3, Budapest: ERRC, pp.17-30.

Matache, Margareta (2009), "Gender Equality, Sense of Belonging, Both?", Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal, Vol.1, No.1, Summer. pp 45-59.

Mate, Dezso. 2020. "Generational Changes of the Romani Intellectuals Life Paths. The Effects of the Social Resilience." Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) Faculty of Social Sciences Doctoral School of Sociology Interdisciplinary Social Research Programme. Budapest: PhD Dissertation.

Mate, Dezso. 2020). "Framing Romani LGBTQI Equality Emancipation and Intersection", Mijn Verhaal, Mon Historie, My Story, Faber Publishers, Belgium, ERGO Network, Balkan LGBTQI pp.128-131.

Mate, Dezso. 2017. The First Sparks of the Romani LGBTQ Movement, Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER), School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, pp.1–6.

Mate, Dezso. 2015. Faced with Multiple 'Values' – From the Perspective of the Roma LGBTQ Community, 'Nothing About Us Without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production', Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre, No.2, Budapest: ERRC, pp. 93-97.

Mirga–Kruszelnicka, Anna (2018), "Challenging Antigypsyism in Academia: the Role of Romani Scholars", Journal of Critical Romani Studies, Vol.1, No.1, pp.8-28.

Selling, Jan. 2021. "Romani resistance and the struggle for historical justice in Norway and Sweden". In: Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Anna & K. Dunajeva, Re-thinking Roma Resistance. Berlin: Eriac.org.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1995. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In The Post-colonial Studies Reader, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 24–28. London and New York: Routledge.

Rostas, Iulius. 2019. A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail, Budapest & New York: Central European University Press.

Marton Rovid. 2021. "From tackling antigypsyism to remedying racial injustice", Ethnic and Racial Studies, , DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2021.1972126

Tiser, David. 2015. "They become stigmatised in their own family" "Nothing About Us Without Us"? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production' Issue, Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre, No.2, Budapest: ERRC, pp.99-100.

#### Online references

ARA ART, o.s. "Prague Declaration - First International Roma LGBTIQ Conference". Prague:13 – 14 August, 2015.  
Prague Declaration\_final (araart.cz)

Council of Europe - Roma and Travellers Team "About Us".  
About us (coe.int)

Council of Europe - Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) "Homepage"  
Sexual orientation and gender identity - Homepage (coe.int)

European Commission - Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU  
"The new strategic framework for the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma in EU countries and preparation of the post-2020 initiative. Timeframe: 2020-2030."  
Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU | European Commission (europa.eu)

European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture e.V.  
"ERiac as part of the struggle for self-definition and self-determination".  
<https://eriac.org/about-eriac/>

Roma Research and Empowerment Network - Nothing about us without us?  
"Workshop on Coalition building and transforming the Romani movement: feminism, LGBT rights, trade unions". Budapest:12 October, 2014.  
Roma Research and Empowerment Network (wordpress.com)





## **NORWAY:**

### **Miriam Aurora Hammeren Pedersen, FRI – The Norwegian Organisation for Sexual and Gender Diversity**

*My name is Miriam Pedersen. I represent FRI – The Norwegian Organisation for Sexual and Gender Diversity. We are Norway's largest and oldest LGBTQ+ organisation. Among other things, we focus on advocacy work, sensitivity training, advisory work, and social events. We are very honoured to be invited to this conference, and I am honoured to represent my organisation in this important conversation.*

In Norway, there are two Romani communities that are recognised as two distinct national minorities (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, n.d.). One group is known as the Romani/Tater people<sup>6</sup> (and often, unofficially, as Travellers), a first-diaspora Romani group (Hancock 1992) that has been living in Norway since the 1500s. The other group is known as the Norwegian Roma, a Vlax Roma group that has been living in Norway since the 1800s.

When we were planning the Norwegian national roundtable conference on LGBTQ+ Roma as part of our ongoing partnership with ARA ART, we liaised with the Roma and with the Romani/Tater communities by way of trusted intermediaries. We were told that nobody from either community wished to take part in the conference, due to cultural and religious taboos on this subject.

Our main impression is that there seems to be little or no openness about LGBTQ+ issues among the Romani communities in Norway (cf. Elnæs 2022). Despite the lack of openness, however, LGBTQ+ people do exist in both communities, as shown by recent research (Anderssen, Eggebø, Stubberud, & Holmelid 2021).

At the FRI, we are concerned that the lack of openness within Romani communities, as well as Romani people's lack of visibility within the larger LGBTQ+ community, may have negative consequences for the lives of Romani LGBTQ+ people in Norway. It is difficult to say anything for sure, since there has been no in-depth research done on this topic in the Norwegian context, but we find it likely that many LGBTQ+ Roma in our country will receive little or no support from their own family networks if they come out as LGBTQ+, and we also find it likely that they will be met with ignorance and lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding by the majority of non-Romani LGBTQ+ people in Norway. This places LGBTQ+ Roma in Norway in a very difficult situation, as they face the choice of either keeping their sexuality and/or gender identity a secret, or of risking isolation not just from their ethnic community, but from the LGBTQ+ community at large.

---

<sup>6</sup> "Tater" is an exonym originating in a historical confusion between Romani people and Tatars (Wogg, Pawlata, & Wiedenhofer, n.d.; Sundt 1974 [1852]: 38). The term is considered by some to be derogatory, but community members have reclaimed it and it is part of the Norwegian Government's official name for this particular Romani group.

To help put LGBTQ+ Roma on the public agenda in Norway, we organized a national roundtable conference on 24 January 2022, with participants from five different countries representing various organizations, groups, experiences and academic fields. The conference was given the title Ways to Visibility: LGBTQ+ Roma in Norway. For details on the various participants and presentations, see Pedersen (2022).

For practical reasons (one main reason being the limited extent of our network and access), we chose to focus on the group known as the Norwegian Roma, one of the two national minority groups of Romani origin in Norway. As mentioned, this group is descended from Vlax Roma, who came to Norway in the 1800s. They were harshly persecuted during the Holocaust (for details, see Rosvoll, Lien, & Brustad 2015), with the vast majority of the group being killed, mainly in Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp. Because so many were killed, the Norwegian Roma are currently very few, numbering only around 1 000 people (Elnæs 2022). The trauma inflicted on the community during the Holocaust, as well as subsequent exclusionary policies directed towards the Roma by the Norwegian authorities (Rosvoll & Bielenberg 2012), has led to widespread distrust towards the Government – and Norwegian mainstream society – among Norwegian Roma today (Elnæs 2022).

This distrust is another part of the reason why it was difficult to find Norwegian Roma participants for the conference. The Roma community was represented by international speakers, as well as by a non-Roma representative of Romano kher, the Norwegian Roma cultural centre.

The main conclusions from the conference were as follows:

LGBTQ+ Roma are largely invisible in Norway, both within the Roma community and in the larger LGBTQ+ community. They need to be made visible.

The LGBTQ+ community in Norway needs to focus on combatting its own internal racism and antigypsyism.





FRI and other LGBTQ+ organisations in Norway need to actively reach out to LGBTQ+ Roma so that they know that they, too, belong in the larger LGBTQ+ community just like everyone else. FRI and other LGBTQ+ organisations also need to provide adequate social, emotional and possibly even material support to LGBTQ+ Roma individuals who have been excluded from their Roma community. Exactly how such outreach and support work should be done is a matter for further discussion.

FRI needs to connect with already-existing international networks of LGBTQ+ Roma in order to facilitate support for LGBTQ+ Roma individuals in Norway.

FRI hopes that this conference will be the first step on the way towards a greater focus on LGBTQ+ Roma in Norway. FRI intends to continue to work with Roma matters in the future, and to continue to actively seek knowledge about the topic of LGBTQ+ Roma.

We hope that the Norwegian national roundtable conference can serve as a starting point for an increased focus on LGBTQ+ issues in the Romani communities in Norway. We do, however, acknowledge that such work needs to be done in a “bottom-up” fashion, in direct cooperation with the Romani communities themselves, and with members of the Romani communities taking an active lead. This kind of work is not something that we in FRI can do on our own. We therefore call for greater collaboration between the LGBTQ+ and Romani communities in Norway and organisations and networks in other countries that focus specifically on LGBTQ+ issues among Romani people. This would, of course, include ARA ART in the Czech Republic, and also organisations and institutions in Sweden, where the Romani population (which includes several subgroups) is significantly larger than in Norway, and where there is much more openness about LGBTQ+ issues. We have already started to make connections with such organisations and institutions, and also with individuals in the larger world of international LGBTQ+ Roma activism. Going forward, we want to build on this, and to put LGBTQ+ Roma even higher on the agenda in Norway.

## References:

Anderssen, N., H. Eggebø, E. Stubberud, & Ø. Holmelid (2021). Seksuell orientering, kjønns mangfold og levekår: Resultater fra spørreundersøkelsen 2020. Bergen, Norway: University of Bergen.

Elnæs, C. U. (5 February 2022). “Den usynlige dobbeltminoriteten”. Blikk. URL: <https://blikk.no/balder-carstens-hasvoll-diskriminering-dobbeltminoritet/den-usynlige-dobbeltminoriteten/212653> (retrieved 7 February 2022)

Hancock, I. (1992). “The Social and Linguistic Development of Scandoromani”. In: E. H. Jahr (Ed.), *Language Contact: Theoretical and Empirical Studies*, pp. 37-52. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (n.d.). "National minorities". URL: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/indigenous-peoples-and-minorities/national-minorities/id1404/> (retrieved 7 February 2022)

Pedersen, M. A. H. (30 January 2022). "Å synliggjøre en usynlig dobbeltminoritet: Romske LHBT-personer i Norge". Magasin DIKKO. URL: <https://dikko.nu/a-synliggjore-en-usynlig-dobbeltminoritet-romske-lhbt-personer-i-norge/> (retrieved 7 February 2022)

Rosvoll, M., & N. Bielenberg (2012). Antisiganisme, stereotypier og diskriminering av rom. Oslo, Norway: The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies.

Rosvoll, M., L. Lien, & J. A. Brustad (2015). Å bli dem kvit. Utviklingen av en «sigøynerpolitikk» og utryddelsen av norske rom. Oslo, Norway: The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies.

Sundt, E. (1974 [1852]). Fante- eller landstrygerfolket i Norge. Gjøvik: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.

Wogg, M., U. Pawlata, & C. Wiedenhofer (n.d.). "Arrival in Europe." Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz: Factsheets on Roma. URL: [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/Source/FS2/2.0\\_arrival-europe\\_english.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/Source/FS2/2.0_arrival-europe_english.pdf) (retrieved 9 February 2022)



## PART 4: IDENTITY CROSSROADS: ROMA TRANS PEOPLE AND HEALTH



### CZECH REPUBLIC:

#### **Mgr. Karel Pavlica, Ph.D., Prague Pride, z. s.**

*Karel Pavlica is a graduate of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ostrava in the field of Social Work with a focus on Counselling (Mgr.) and Social Counselling and Management of Social Services (Ph.D.). He currently works in the field of science and education, namely at the National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic as a guarantor for Personal and Social Education; at Prague Pride, z. s. as a coordinator of education for the helping professions; and at the Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ostrava, as an external lecturer. He is also volunteering in the LGBT+ online counselling center Sbarvouven.cz.*

### Introduction

This presentation focuses on the possible consequences of minority stress on the physical and mental health of Roma trans and gender diverse people, and in the second part it offers some possibilities to promote their health and well-being.

### Minority stress and its consequences

Minority stress is a term that encompasses stressful situations and experiences in the form of prejudice and discrimination because of one's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.

Minority stress is social, individual and chronic.

It has been documented that exposure to incidents of stress, prejudice, and discrimination related to one's oppressed identity leads to serious negative consequences for both physical and mental health.

Individuals from oppressed groups experience a lack of political representation as well as rejection or discrimination in employment and housing. This can lead to stress, emotional fatigue, and depression.

Being part of more than one marginalized population can lead to expecting rejection and to avoiding situations that could prove stressful.

The consequences of minority stress can be very serious. For example, each individual victimization experience increases the likelihood of self-harming behaviour by two and a half times on average. This does not just have to be an experience of open violence, but also of what is called microaggression.

### Microaggressions

Microaggressions are verbal, behavioural or environmental slights, intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward people from oppressed groups.

Microaggressions can become so commonplace that most people don't even notice them. It is therefore important to talk about them, to know about them, to be able to identify them and to avoid them in relation to people from oppressed groups or anyone else.

Examples of microaggressions:

Assigning intelligence to a person of colour or a woman based on their ethnic group or gender

To a Roma woman: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist."

Colour blindness – denying the significance of a Roma person's ethnic experience and history

"When I look at you, I don't see colour."

Assumption of criminal status

Someone clutches their purse or checks their wallet as a Roma person approaches.

Denial of individual racism/sexism/cisheterosexism

"I'm not racist. I have several Roma/gay/transgender friends."

Denial of gender diversity

"There are only two sexes: male and female."

Sexist/cisheterosexist language – terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT+ persons

Use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people.

Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms.

"You don't look like a transgender at all."

Other examples:

Making assumptions about someone based on their gender, gender expression, or ethnicity;

Deliberately not using a transgender or gender diverse person's preferred pronouns;

Underrepresenting persons of different genders and ethnic groups in the media;

Using outdated or offensive terminology;

Considering certain people to be of more value than others based on their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity.

Transgender people and the risk of suicide

Transgender and gender diverse people experience higher rates of discrimination and victimization than cisgender people. In addition to external stresses, they are more likely to attempt suicide or report a history of suicidal ideation.

Research carried out in 2020 within the international project SWITCH (Supporting

Wellbeing and Integration of Transgender victims in Care environments with a Holistic approach), was realized by the National Institute of Mental Health and the organization Transparent on behalf of the Czech Republic, involving 223 trans and non-binary respondents living in the Czech Republic, and 30 % of them stated, among other things, that they had experience with attempting suicide.

## Legal gender recognition

One specific of being trans is what is called the gender affirmation process and the opportunity to go through it. If there is an opportunity to go through this process and the person is able to meet its conditions, it usually has a positive effect on their health. However, legal gender recognition may be and is different from country to country. For example, there are still countries in Europe requiring that trans persons undergo sterilization before their gender identity is officially recognized, including in the Czech Republic.

The Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe has critically remarked that “Transgender people appear to be the only group in Europe subject to legally prescribed, state-enforced sterilization.”

Other requirements for legal gender recognition may include diagnosis of a mental disorder, medical treatment, invasive surgery, assessment of time lived in the new gender identity, and being single or divorced.

Such requirements violate a person’s dignity and physical integrity, the right to form a family, and the right to be free from degrading and inhumane treatment.

## How to support the health and well-being of transgender people

Here are some tips on how to support the health and well-being of trans and gender diverse people, in combination with responses from the research carried out within the SWITCH project focusing on the experience of trans and gender diverse people with medical and psychological care.

**Believe, respect** – every identity is valid. This is not a fad or something that these people make up.

Don’t doubt the ways in which the person talks about themselves. Use the language they prefer.

“I’ve been through a lot of psychologists and psychiatrists, and most of them have not been able to understand that I’m a man, they have seen me as a woman trying to be someone else, or as a lesbian who likes to be a man. Even those who understood that I was a man still treated me like a woman.”

These prejudices not only discouraged me from all medical care, but also led to suicide attempts. I spent my hospital stay in the women’s ward and was told that they would only address me as a female. I was forced to use ladies’ toilets (and showers), which caused all sorts of reactions among women who were not at peace with me, and I myself had to suffer the fact that I was considered an indecent man.”

“It would be nice if psychologists do not treat me as someone who needs to be

repaired, and if there is no misgendering from them.”

**Respect boundaries**, including the fact that someone may not want to talk about their trans experience.

“When the dermatologist found out from my ID that I am trans, he started asking me questions about my childhood, etc. Even though I told him I didn’t want to talk to him about it, he kept asking. I cried and then I had a breakdown when I left his office. He certainly didn’t realize he was doing anything wrong. I would survive his questions, but he didn’t stop even though I asked him to. It made me feel small and helpless compared to a tall man in a white coat who tried to force me to answer what I didn’t want to answer.”

**Be open-minded** and educate yourself on the topic of gender identity:

“The hardest part is to find a psychologist who knows what gender is. It’s such a lottery, because psychologists don’t usually mention it on their web pages that they respect trans people and have enough knowledge about the topic, so you don’t feel like an animal at a ZOO during the therapy session.”

Finally – **social support is essential**. Any social support is good, but a crucial role is especially played by friends and mothers. A relationship between support from one’s friends and support from one’s mother and the frequency of suicide attempts was found by analysing data from the research undertaken by the SWITCH project. Such support reduces the risk of suicide attempts by almost half in both cases.







## **ROMANIA:**

### **Antonella Lerca Duda (1990), TGEU-Board Member**

*Antonella Lerca Duda is a Romanian Romani actress and trans activist who was born in 1990 in Iasi, Romania. Antonella grew up in a traditional Romani family alongside seven siblings. She revealed in an interview that she felt attracted to the world of femininity from an early age but was bullied for it at school. Her parents did not accept her transition into womanhood at first: they took her to an endocrinologist and psychologist with the hope that, somehow, Antonella could be “cured”. However, they eventually made peace with their daughter’s new identity and supported her when she decided to*

*start hormone therapy at the age of 14. At 17, Antonella moved to Italy and became a sex worker. Although Italy became a second home for her, she longed to return to Romania and to be able to live in safety and dignity.*

*Antonella made her debut as an actress in the play “Sexodrom”, created by the Romani theater company Giuvlipen, and thus became the very first trans sex worker to perform in Romanian theaters. “Sexodrom” explores the topics of the harassment, sexual exploitation, and physical and emotional abuse committed by the majority population towards minority communities.*

*Antonella is an activist in the European LGBTIQA+ Romani Platform. She has also been involved in local politics, running for a position in a Bucharest municipality in 2020 as the first Romani trans woman candidate.*

## **My conference speech, Prague, 2022**

Hi everyone. I am Antonella lerca. I am a proud Roma transwoman. Yes. You heard very well. I’m Roma. LGBT people exist in the Roma community. We must talk about them. It’s time that we forget it is a taboo subject. I’m standing here in front of you to remind you. To remind you LGBT people exist. Intersectionality. It’s issues are real. It’s time that all Roma organizations have a discourse on intersectionality. We are tired of Roma men occupying space for the Roma activists who just want power. We go back to masculinity, patriarchy, toxicity.. No, we must have an intersectional discourse. Intersectional speech. That includes everyone. How should I, Roma Transwoman, feel when a Roma man says “We want Roma Rights” but never talks about intersectionality. The Roma man never talks about Antonella, who is here, struggling with transphobia, with the terf, with the swerf, with everyone. We don’t just want visibility because of some needs as people think, though. We want rights to have access to healthcare, housing, legal documents, a job. Our problems intersect in so many ways, from access to health care where we find even more hate when we go for a regular check-up, medical staff who know nothing about us and judge us using their religion. Landlords who refuse to rent to us because of the way we look. Employers who do not want to hire us because they are afraid of our skin colour and our presence. We are still seen as a danger for so many people -- and in all our history we were never violent.



We are attacked by politicians in the laws that they want to change because they are afraid of us. Recently, UDMR made a proposal for a law to specify that a person can never change the biological gender they were born with, never in their life. They use “gender ideology” in their speech to target us directly as a danger for society. In 2022, Roma people are still blamed and condemned by society. By the White privilege society. Even if we try to change their mentality, they never want to change. I just experienced an episode of racism at the airport, so if you wanna see how it is to be a Roma transwoman, just come with me to the security check at the airport. Let’s pass through the security check at the airport together and let’s see if you, the White privileged person, will get the same reaction from people and from the authorities as I do or not. Roma people there are still followed in the supermarket by bodyguards who think that if you have little dark skin, you’ re gonna steal. All the stealing in this world and all the bad things are always believed to be done by Romani people, never by white people. Never. You want me to talk about racism? You want me to talk to you about the ugliest and most terrible disease of this world? Racism, and discrimination, and transphobia will never have a cure because people don’t want to find the cure, because they like their comfort, they like to have their privilege. They like to have a position of the power vis-a-vis we Romani people. Do you think Romani people have the same equality and equity like White people? No. The gadje will always have privilege. They will always find the perfect place in the university, the perfect place at their job, and they will never have to fight racism. Please question your privilege and your position of power and learn to shut the fuck up when it’s not your turn to speak and it’s not your space. Don’t occupy Romani space. You have taken all our space for centuries, it is time to stop. Don’t come here, you White privileged men and say: “I’m gonna save you.” I don’t need your White savior. I fight for myself. I have been fighting my entire life. Where were you White saviors then? I’m sick and tired of crying to myself about all the racism that I struggle with in this society. Our Romani people die every day. Here. The Czech police killed a Roma man in the same way the American police killed a person of color. When will this hate stop? When will this hate ever stop? We must take action. You must protest. We must fight together. Also, I want to say that our LGBT spaces are always more occupied by straight activists or academics and this should not be. Only very rarely will you see a Romani transgender and a Romani lesbian deciding about a conference, its topics, and the people to invite. I think it is time to change this. In our own spaces we should not create even more room for those who still have more access than we do. We need LGBT people of Romani origin to occupy these spaces with our topics, people and projects, where we can build our own stories. Because we will learn one from another. I know one thing that gives me more power, though. I know that my community is strong and it gets stronger. Day by day it’s growing. I get in touch with transgender women every day. Women who need support, who have experienced aggression, humiliation, transphobic attitudes and racism. They don’t have access to spaces to get more support for their treatment, they don’t have access to jobs, they can’t afford therapy to get over their difficulties. We need more spaces in which to tell our stories, to get more solidarity and more allies to fight for our rights. We must all stand up. Fight for human rights. Leave all our tears behind, because our tears are what White men and White privileged people want. So let’s put our tears

away and take action, take a position. We all must fight, because only by fighting will we take our rights, we have tried the diplomatic way. What did they give us? They just give us promises. Promise. Promise. Promise. Promise - but never something. It's true. Politicians come, politicians go, everyone will find a solution, nobody finds a solution. We must take care of our own people and create communities. We must be radical. We must stand up and fight for our rights because human rights are equal rights. Human rights don't know privilege. Only people make privileges out of rights. We are not free until everyone is free. Now say it with me!



### **USA: Kirill Ivan Staklo, PeerPride**

*Kirill Ivan Staklo is a trans and intersex advocate and a peer support, crisis and suicidology expert at PeerPride, Inc. He specializes in the creation and development of remote peer support programs with a focus on informed consent, harm reduction and honoring the lived experience of marginalization. Before co-founding PeerPride, he directed an international crisis hotline run by and for trans people, where he also assisted with the administration of the first United States-based Trans Mental Health Survey. Today, he assists multiple mental health and peer support agencies as an advisor on best practices in equity and incorporating informed*

*consent, anonymity and confidentiality into policy. He is also providing programmatic guidance for the development of PeerPride's novel open-source peer support software, which prioritizes data privacy, accessibility, adaptability, confidentiality and avoiding non-consensual interventions. His educational background is in psychology and law. Kirill has also spent the last 10 years as a community organizer in antiwar, anti-racism, LGBTIQ advocacy, healthcare access and Roma rights movements. He is from the Moscow Oblast in Russia and currently lives in Connecticut.*

### **Trans Roma Mental Health Considerations**

Finding oneself in a space where two especially marginalized identities converge and you don't have to choose which one to embrace is a unique opportunity. In my entire time doing trans peer support, I have not once had the opportunity to work with a trans Roma person – and I have worked with thousands of trans people. In my time doing Roma advocacy work, I never had the opportunity to share space with a fellow Romani trans man until I attended this 2022 conference. Trans individuals and Roma individuals share a number of experiences which, because they are similar, are magnified exponentially when an individual is both trans and Roma. It is important to see the connection in our communities' struggles, because far too often we are encouraged to believe that one identity makes the other impossible – whether it is cis people within the Roma community rejecting transness, or trans gadjé not knowing that Roma trans people exist and matter. For the communities to have resilience and hope, we have to reject this false dichotomy. I will approach the subject of convergence between trans and Roma identities by breaking down this double oppression and its harms as

well as the benefits of our common lived experiences into different facets.

The focus on healthcare access in this conference discussion is poignant to community members in the diaspora everywhere, but in particular in the United States, where healthcare is privatized, inaccessible, absurdly overpriced and stunted in its development compared to countries that have fewer means but more economic rights guaranteed to their residents. However, barriers to healthcare access for trans individuals and ethnic minorities exist and overlap in both the United States and Europe. In the European Union, more than half of all trans and intersex people and 90 % of Romani people live below the poverty level. Anti-Roma and anti-nomadism laws, displacements and deportations also impact healthcare access. In the United States, a clear analogy to draw is with the experiences of immigrant and undocumented populations, some of whom are also Romani and some of whom are trans.

Disenfranchisement in a legal sense is the first step in either Europe or the US to jeopardizing the safety and wellness of populations of either Romani or trans people.

In many countries, including the United States and Canada, state-sponsored healthcare is available to individuals living below the poverty level, but it is often formally or de facto predicated on their being citizens, having stable housing, and/or having employment. Acquiring accurate, valid documentation is a struggle for all migrants, and particularly Roma community members, in Europe. For trans individuals, accessing accurate documentation involves its own dangerous, often insurmountable barriers. Different countries, counties, states and regions have different requirements for gender marker and name change permissibility, and in some places the requirements break down further depending on the document the individual is seeking to change. Discrepancies between documents – especially between internal passports / IDs and foreign travel passports – create dangerous situations and may prevent people from traveling, being stably or gainfully employed, accessing housing and of course, accessing healthcare. Requirements for name and gender marker changes can range from letters from a therapist or doctor, to years of being “out” without access to gender-affirming care, to invasive, undesired surgeries, including sterilization. This gatekeeping by both legislators and healthcare providers discourages trans people, especially trans people facing multiple forms of marginalization, from even attempting to access accurate documentation. Therefore, many trans people have the wrong name and gender marker on their documents, singling them out for employment discrimination, harassment and denial of care.

Discussions about mental health considerations often engage with mental health struggles from a misleading vantage point – namely, from the notion that symptoms are inherently innate and originate with the individual alone, with no consideration for the material conditions that directly influence psychological wellness. Consequently, many psychologists believe transness is a cause of mental health struggles. This dates back at least in part to the history of transness being a priori treated as a mental health issue, an approach that is still rampant in both the US and Europe despite (rather recent) changes made to the DSM and ICD.

The DSM made the slow plod from “transsexualism” to “gender identity disorder” in 1994, and from “gender identity disorder” to “gender dysphoria” as a diagnosis

introduced in 2013. Only in 2013 did the DSM-V explicitly state that transness in and of itself is not a mental health disorder. The “dysphoria” diagnosis, while still pathologizing and exclusionary of trans people who don’t fit its arbitrary and inaccurate diagnostic criteria, is integral in the United States for trans individuals seeking to access gender-affirming care from the insurance companies that are gatekeeping such access. The ICD, which is supposed to be the global standard for coding health information, is even further behind the DSM – the ICD-11 in 2019 was the first version of the ICD to do away with “transsexualism” and “gender identity disorder” as diagnoses.

Gender-affirming mental health care, or “gender therapy”, also has messy roots and creates massive barriers for people seeking gender-affirming healthcare. Historically, mental health providers have been, and continue to be, trained to believe that they are the authority on the identity of the person to whom they are providing care. The Harry Benjamin system, which laid the initial foundation for the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care, placed absurd expectations on trans individuals who were tasked with “proving” to a mental health provider that they are truly trans. These expectations, which manifest in psychologists’ and psychiatrists’ offices in Europe and the US alike, include expectations of heterosexuality, that the person lack interest in any activity or presentation stereotypically associated with the gender the individual was assigned at birth, willingness to present as their true gender in public even in unsafe circumstances, and many more requirements. Trans people are often interrogated about their childhoods and private lives and are barred from accessing gender-affirming care if they have any existing mental health diagnoses.

Experiences of intersectional marginalization – such as being trans and Roma at the same time – are a crucial example of why agency, self-determination and understanding of the material conditions that a person faces are the only way to provide genuinely affirming care. Roma trans individuals have a unique cultural background, and even if the reductive stereotyping that white ethnic majority trans people face from providers were accurate for them, it cannot be accurate for other cultures.

It is important to place the blame where it belongs. Crisis, suicidality, substance use, trauma and other mental health concerns are byproducts of an anti-Roma society and one that is transphobic and converge on the overlap between our communities with double force. Additionally, the political climate has been shown to impact mental health directly: statistically, for instance, calls to crisis lines go up whenever right-wing political activity is on the rise. It is also important to note that when it comes to reactionary political currents, anti-Roma and anti-trans political trends tend to go hand-in-hand.

In order to work towards equity and empowerment of vulnerable communities in mental health, it is crucial to understand the phenomenon of minority stress. The key concept here is that mental health is directly impacted by the ongoing societal conditions a minority demographic experiences as a result of their marginalization and disenfranchisement. In other words, Roma people are not more likely to experience suicidal ideation because we are Roma; we are more likely to experience it because it is natural to question being alive in a society that does not want us to be alive. Analogously, being trans does not make a person more likely to experience mental health crises (in fact, the 2017 Trans Mental Health Survey showed that socially and/

or medically transitioning decreases a person's chances of experiencing suicidality when compared to being closeted). Living in a transphobic society is what increases those chances, which is supported by the dramatic statistical increase in the quality of mental health for trans youth who are supported and treated as their genders by their families and close social circles.

My colleague Dr. Rylan Testa researched gender minority stress and resilience and found some important things to note when we work on putting the blame where it belongs. He found that the risk factors for minority stress - the things that negatively impact our mental health - include negative stereotyping; violence; denial of access to healthcare, education and stable employment; rejection by family and immediate community; and isolation from a community that shares your lived experience. On the other hand, his research on resilience factors - which are the things that help us survive and thrive, and are woefully under-researched in the field - include having community that shares our lived experience, having opportunities to advocate for ourselves and each other, having support from the people around us, and having material stability.

These risk and resilience factors are comparably applicable to both trans and Roma community members, and for those of us who live at the intersection, they only become more impactful. Employment, healthcare and education discrimination, hate crimes, stereotypes, erasure and siloing all plague both communities. As such, the life expectancy for Roma people is 10 or more years less than the average across Europe, while trans people in Europe are two to three times more likely to die of treatable diseases or suicide than are cis people.

Pausing for a moment on suicidality and crisis, it is important to note the unique dangers that come into play when a marginalized person accesses crisis-oriented care.

Non-consensual psychiatric intervention can be performed in ways that are devastatingly culturally incompetent for a Roma person and can similarly result in severe trauma for a trans person. For example, in the United States, hospitals are one of





the locations with the highest level of reported sexual assaults experienced by trans people. Additionally, having a history of a psychiatric hold (a medical stay at a hospital or a psychiatric facility to evaluate a person's mental state) can adversely impact a person's employability or ability to access gender-affirming care, and can incur other stigmas within a community. For this reason, among others, our communities are often unwilling to speak openly about our experiences with suicidality. In my experience as a suicidologist, the answer can only be to create community-led channels of support where trust is inherent. In spaces like the International Roma LGBTIQ Conference, one of the greatest treasures the trans Roma can find here is one another – members of a community that understands what you're going through and the opportunity to hold on to these connections.

In order to face all of these challenges head on and place the blame firmly where it belongs, it is essential that we take two steps. The first is identifying and fighting back against the elements of the society we live in that create barriers for our communities. This work must happen with trans, intersex and queer Roma voices, which are often the most vulnerable voices, being centered in the Roma liberation movement, and Roma and other racialized communities' voices must lead trans liberation movements. If lived experience is a form of expertise, then our movements will be most effective when the people with the most expertise lead. By doing so, we will reject the propaganda that comes from all sides declaring transness and queerness to be white phenomena, as well as the racist notion that Roma people would never embrace LGBTIQ community members.

The second step we need to take is embracing community care and building culturally competent alternatives to the mental health systems that do harm to our communities. When we focus on the things that make us strong and advocate for one another, we not only lay the foundation for a more resilient future generation, but we also remind ourselves and each other that we deserve care, which is what anti-Roma and anti-trans institutions and movements hope we will forget.



## PART 5: MY STORY: LGBTIQ ROMA IN THE BALKANS



### **BULGARIA:**

#### **Biser Alekov, Bravvo**

*Biser Alekov, Roma activist, is the founder of Balkan LGBTQIA vzw in Brussels. He speaks seven languages and works in the community development domain in different structures. He holds a PhD on the language of Romanes. He has lived in Belgium since 2009.*

### **BOOK PRESENTATION – summary**

My Story is a book that brings together eight life stories of Roma and non-Roma from Balkan countries who live in Belgium. Balkan LGBTQIA is an organization that has existed for five years, and to celebrate this we decided to “come out” by presenting to you our experiences as migrants from Balkan countries living in Belgium.

The book contains experiences of multiple discrimination: within our families, out in society, and discrimination perpetrated by institutions. The aim of our publication is to make the reader understand how racism, exclusion, double standards, prejudices, antigypsyism and homophobia are reflected in our daily lives.

For many of us, Belgium has become home. Our problems are not solved, though. We have realized that the more different you are, the more excluded you become (even though these differences are not defined by us). Our rights to housing and health services are still limited, as members of our community frequently have to make double or triple the effort to solve issues that others do not even have on their agendas. This book should not just be read once. The stories are very strong and emotional but, beyond that, they also highlight certain issues and address the problems of the diverse, sometimes forgotten, sometimes invisible members of communities of LGBTQIA people of Romani origin.

The problems we look at in the book are:

Challenges of everyday life for members of the LGBTQIA community. Often their troubles start at home and follow them for the rest of their lives. Very few LGBTQIA members of Romani origin succeed with overcoming these issues: “The troubles at home started. My father beat me and kept me locked in a room at home for a month.”

**Coming out:** Often Roma come into society with more than two identities and that complicates their interactions given the presence of existing stereotypes and prejudices. “My coming out to my parents was shocking. I was in my second year at Conservatory. On the day, I decided to tell my parents I am gay, on the very same day, my



biological sister discovered me on Facebook and she sent me a message.”

Refugee. Many representatives of this community, after all the troubles they have gone through, decide finally to seek refuge in a country where rights are respected - but then other barriers confront the person related to their fear and uncertainty in the new country: “The refugee officer told me that they could forcefully return me back to Ukraine. I agreed but told her that I will come back the next day and that I deserve a chance to prove myself here, without being dependent on social assistance, but working. I was lucky. They approved me.”

Drugs and dependencies. Drug use, frequently leading to addiction, seems like an easier way for many LGBTQIA community members to escape their problems. Prevention actions are necessary as well as awareness-raising within the community and in society. The vulnerability of these individuals leads to their even greater vulnerability in this regard (if there is a certain scale): “Once we mixed the doses. I took a big quantity of GHB and ended up in a coma in the hospital. Fortunately I woke up. My mother was worried and wanted to know the reason I did all this. Then I shared with her that I am gay.”

Access to information. Being an intersex person during the communist period was taboo, and still today very few people speak about it. Intersex persons still maintain secret lives just within a small community. Society does not accept the existence of their differences. Intersex persons are surrounded by layers of problems, including limited access to their own medical files: “Last summer I went to Bulgaria, I wanted to find the doctors who had been treating me. I wanted to ask questions about my childhood and what had been done to my body. I did not have access to my medical file. The hospital officials said that if I wanted to see my file, I should go through a lawyer. My childhood remains a very dark period for me still.”

Housing rights. Refusal of shelter is a violation of basic rights, but for the community of Romani sex workers who are trans it is an everyday challenge: “Now I cannot find a room to rent. Not so many landlords allow a trans person to rent a room or apartment. The reason is that sometimes we bring clients home who do not want to go outside after receiving the service. Today the prices have gone down. I work on the street.”

Harassment and hate speech. Institutional discrimination is widespread in the Balkan countries and harassment toward LGBTQIA community members is a normality within many structures and well-accepted by society. A lot of work should be done to train people to use appropriate language and actions toward LGBTQIA people: “Every day we were together at the police station, literally. I was calling the police. The police in Macedonia did not help me at all. The police themselves were very homophobic. I do not know whether this is because of the homophobic Government at that time, but if you told the police that someone attacked you because you are gay, they would say: ‘Of course, you are a faggot, it is normal that people will attack you.’ This is not normal!”



## **ROMANIA:**

### **Iulian STOIAN, National Agency for Roma, Government of Romania**

*Iulian is currently Head of the Public Policies Department at the National Agency for the Roma, Government of Romania, and previously was a consultant to Council of Europe/European Union joint programmes on Romani issues (the ROMED and ROMACT programmes in Romania). Prior to that he gained extensive experience from the NGO sector as a Program Manager and Researcher/Expert on Roma-related issues such as Social Inclusion, Anti-Discrimination, Trafficking in Human Beings and Social Economy at the Open Society Foundation and*

*also as Executive Director of the Roma Civic Alliance of Romania, an advocacy network of 16 Roma NGOs active in the field of Roma inclusion. Formerly he was a Director of Programs at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (USA), piloting the Roma Political Participation Program in Romania for two years starting in 2006. He also has a wealth of professional experience in EU affairs from serving as a Public Service Coordinator and Public Information Officer at the Information Centre of the European Commission in Romania. For the last 16 years he has been a dedicated human rights activist, volunteering for NGOs advocating for vulnerable groups such as the LGBT and the Roma minorities.*

## **Prague Declaration – the kick off for LGBT+ Roma activism in Europe**

I will start by evoking the 2015 Prague Declaration, since which the issue of intersectionality as regards the Roma and/or LGBT+ communities has gradually increased on the public agenda. The Council of Europe and the European Commission have become more and more aware of the challenges raised by Roma LGBT+ activists. They have proposed numerous recommendations be taken into account by their member states when elaborating public policies or national strategies for Roma inclusion. This has been accomplished at the executive political level, with a direct link to the legislative process still to be improved. As regards mainstream society and public awareness, the Prides held in most European countries have initiated special sections of Roma LGBTIQ+ activists, and public debates and projects have been developed in order to assist both adolescents and adults who are in need with overcoming the challenges they face in our societies: homophobia/transphobia within the Roma community, and existing racism within the LGBT+ community.

### **Legal protection in Romania**

As regards legal protection for ethnic, sexual and gender minorities in Romania, Emergency Ordinance No. 137/2000 is in line with EU Race and Equality Directives (2000/43/EC and 2000/78/EC), having one of the most comprehensive definitions:

“By discrimination is understood any difference, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social category, personal views, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, non-contagious chronic disease, HIV status, category of disadvantage, or any other criteria that has as its goal or its effect the restriction or removal of the recognition, use or exertion, in conditions of equality, of human rights and fundamental freedoms, or the rights recognized by the law, in the political, economic, social and cultural fields or any other fields of public life.”

Anti-discrimination legislation in Romania protects communities, groups and their individual members along with clearly defining direct and indirect discrimination, victimization, and harassment. An order to discriminate is also subject to sanctions under the law, while more recently (August 2020) new provisions were added to sanction moral harassment at the workplace (also known as mobbing) either disciplinary, administratively or penally, upon case.

The legal framework has continuously improved over time and covers most discrimination grounds that have possibly arisen from practice with increasingly dissuasive measures (e.g. increased fines for discriminating groups). Multiple discrimination is defined in Romania’s anti-discrimination legislation and constitutes an aggravating of an offence, thus increasing the penalties applied. However, few cases are registered or documented on multiple grounds of discrimination. There are different motivations for this, from lack of knowledge about discrimination victims as regards the importance of their stating the relationship between the discrimination(s) and their identities, including their intersectional layers, to a lack of sensitivity, interest or training of those enforcing the law, who in most cases ignore the dimension of the discrimination victim’s actual or perceived gender identity, racialization, or sexual orientation when conducting an investigation proceedings. This has a direct result in a lack of multiple discrimination or intersectional discrimination cases being investigated by police, equality bodies and courts, contributing to a state of impunity for those who commit discrimination, hate crime and/or hate speech against intersectional victims with either a homophobic, racial, or transphobic motivation.

However, numerous NGOs, as well as the Equality Body in Romania, have been conducting specialised trainings for public officials, police officers, prosecutors and judges for years, in various cases illustrated by jurisprudence from the Council of Europe’s European Court of Human Rights, or the EU’s Court of Justice jurisprudence in related cases, in order to improve implementation of the existing anti-discrimination, anti-hate speech and anti-hate crime legislation in Romania.

Nevertheless, intersectional discrimination is not defined in Romania’s anti-discrimination legislation. Some NGOs active in this field (Centre of Legal Resources, MozaiQ Association, ACTEDO and the Civic Union of Roma Youth in Romania) have been proposing a possible definition. In 2020, within the INTERSECT project (<https://www.mozaiqlgbt.ro/intersect>), they proposed this definition of intersectional discrimination: “When two or more discrimination criteria operate simultaneously and interact inseparably and could lead to certain discrimination or specific, hostile situations faced by individuals meeting these criteria.” For example, a Romani woman discriminated against on the labour market, because of both her gender and her ethnicity; or the situation

of LGBT+ individuals who are Muslim being exposed to homophobia, Islamophobia and/or transphobia.

The importance of reflecting intersectional discrimination in legislation is essential to exposing discriminatory situations that remain invisible by analysing the criteria of such discrimination. (See the brochure “Abecedar de antidiscriminare: Etnie, orientare sexuală și identitate de gen din perspectivă intersecțională” on the project’s website). Recent improvements to the legal framework in Romania are Law No. 2/2021 for preventing and sanctioning antigypsyist actions/activities, and criminal law measures for antigypsyist actions that are specific and separate from those sanctioning hate speech and hate crime.

## NGO and CBO involvement

The INTERSECT Project was implemented in Romania between 2020-2021 by a consortium of NGOs: The MozaiQ Association, the Centre for Legal Resources, ACTEDO, and the Civic Union of Roma Youth in Romania, in five major cities (Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj, Iasi and Timisoara). Involving numerous LGBT+ individuals of Romani origin, including myself, the project was trying to overcome our lack of information by collecting more than 120 testimonies, the personal stories of Roma LGBTIQ+ individuals. This needs assessment exercise was complemented by numerous training programmes for both NGO representatives (Roma, LBGT+, and Roma-LGBT+), local public authorities, and students involved with the workshops and information campaigns organised in each of the five counties (Bucharest municipality, Braşov, Cluj, Iaşi and Timiș). When organizing workshops for students and youth, the project was seeking to identify multipliers to enrol with partner organisations in local initiatives/campaigns. Additionally, five training courses for representatives of local public authorities were organized and revealed a tremendous need to organise specialised training for civil servants, especially those working directly with vulnerable groups such as social workers, health care representatives and police officers. The project benefited from support and created an online campaign for non-discrimination with the involvement of students (both Roma and non-Roma), Roma youth and Roma LGBT youth.

The project contributed to knowledge in the field by conducting an exploratory study as regards discrimination against LGBT persons of Romani origin and other Roma in Romania, with best practices and case studies presented to policy makers, as well as with a set of public policies recommendations for future proposals to amend and improve the existing anti-discrimination legislation.

## The National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) and intersectionality in Romania

The National Agency for the Roma is a governmental agency responsible for the elaboration, management and evaluation of public policies for Roma inclusion in Romania, including drafting the NRIS.

The NRIS 2022-2027 was elaborated in broad consultations with Roma NGOs, Roma activists and Roma experts at the local level, starting in February 2020. It has six major chapters: Education, Health, Housing and Infrastructure, Identity, Culture and

Reconciliation with the Historical Past, and a chapter dedicated to Anti-Discrimination, Combatting anti-Roma attitudes and the fight against hate speech.

The Action Plan for Anti-Discrimination in the NRIS approaches intersectional discrimination in a number of policy measures, such as: (i) Training for law enforcement in the field of anti-Roma racism or ethnically-motivated hate crimes; (ii) Creating and disseminating educational resources in the field of preventing and combating anti-Roma attitudes for both private and public employers; and (iii) Creating an online dissemination tool with good practices of public and private employers in the field of combating racial, multiple or intersectional discrimination.