



New insights into the East-West migration of Roma: Preliminary observations from the MigRom project

Speech by Professor Yaron Matras, Coordinator of the MigRom research consortium, at the annual plenary of the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF), Strasbourg, 18 November 2014

Dear friends,

It is an honour for me to be here today to speak at your plenary. For many years I've been following the emergence, the expansion and the strengthening of the Romani political movement. I've been following your struggle and your campaigns to gain recognition and respect for your people, and I've had the privilege, during a short period many years ago, to play a very small and modest part in those campaigns. This is a part of my biography that I'm very proud of. I'm also delighted to see that a young generation of Roma leaders has emerged: people who are confident, who continue the ideals that many of you set for them over a generation ago, people to whom many of you have served as role models and mentors.

I'm here today to speak on behalf of a research consortium called MigRom, which I co-ordinate. It brings together several research institutions at Universities in different countries, together with the ERTF and local authorities. It's a four-year research project focusing on the issues encountered by Romani migrants from Eastern Europe, in particular from Romania but also from other countries, in the West.

I'd like to start by explaining our focus on migration: why do we choose to focus on issues of Roma migration? I think there is little doubt, if we look at the history of the past twenty-five years or so, that it was the migration of Roma from Eastern to Western European countries that caught the attention of Western governments after 1990, which created the impetus for involvement and interest on the part of Western governments in the plight of the Roma in central and Eastern Europe and as a result, put the issue of Roma rights on the agenda of the European institutions.

This began immediately after 1990, it continued in the process of the enlargement of the European Union. Twenty years on in the course of continuing migrations and the enlargement of the European Union, the migration of Roma has remained an issue of friction between local governments, national governments, and EU institutions, culminating in 2010 with the mass expulsion of Roma migrants from France and partly from Italy, which triggered large condemnation from European institutions leading to the process of National Strategies of Roma Inclusion.

So there's always been, for many years, a direct link between issues of migration and the main changes of European policy towards Roma. Indeed just recently a recommendation by the council of the European Union on efforts to support Roma integration, from December 2013, flagged the issue of transnational co-operation around the mobility of Roma. There is to my knowledge no other ethnic group that is singled out in Europe resolutions in regard to freedom of movement in the European Union, yet the mobility of Roma receives special attention.

And so once again, as in many centuries of history of Roma in Europe, the freedoms that Roma have are an important and interesting test case for the general freedoms that citizens have in society. The freedom of Roma to move within the European Union is a test case for the sincerity with which governments and European institutions apply the principle of freedom of movement.



MigRom was set up as a four year project to investigate the causes of migration, the effect that migration has on the Roma, but also the relations between Roma migrants and the communities in which they live and the policies that address them. We have a structure that is unprecedented in the history of research on Roma. We are a European consortium of universities in Britain, France, Italy, Spain and Romania, and the non-academic partners European Roma and Traveller Forum and Manchester City Council. All of the research institutions employ Roma research assistants who are directly involved and active in the research. For the first time, we really have the potential to explore new ways of doing research, not just on migration, but also to change and set new standards for the contribution that academia can make to policy drafting on Roma.

MigRom has a novel and unique vision. Its vision, and my own personal vision, is that we should set a standard by which local authority policy on Roma should be evidence based: Not based on supposition, not based on rumour, certainly not based on prejudice, but based on actual evidence. We should set a standard that interventions by local authorities on Roma should be monitored and scrutinized, and if necessary critiqued. And we should set a standard by which academia is there also to provide Roma representatives with the evidence that you need to make your case to policy making bodies and of course to your people, to inspire them to continue to work for recognition and respect.

For many years and for many centuries, Roma communities have regarded research as an intrusion, as something that is there to meddle with their culture and their day-to-day affairs. Research was regarded as a threat, as an intervention. Governments in turn, for many years and for many centuries, have regarded

research on Roma as an instrument that they can use to contain and control the Roma. With the standard that we are trying to set in our research, through our partnership, we're trying to change that. We're trying to set a standard for research on Roma that is there to support participation, to support emancipation, but to do that in a way that the research maintains its credibility and its standard of scientific rigour.



One of the issues that we're looking at is whether there is anything specific to the migration of Roma that differs from the migration of other people, because Roma are not the only people who are emigrating, and in fact, all the evidence suggests that the number of Roma immigrating from Eastern European countries to the West, is very much proportionate to their numbers in the respective origin countries. But Roma are known to emigrate partly in order to escape very extreme poverty and exclusion, more so than other groups. The migration of Roma is very much a migration of families, which makes them more conspicuous, more so than other groups. And Roma, who have endured hardships over many years and generations, are very much prepared to take risks, more so than other groups, in the areas of housing and employment. And so features that we find among other migrant groups are to some extent amplified when it comes to the Roma. But probably the most particular feature of Roma migration is not what Roma do, but is the perception of Roma by outsiders.

This perception, historically, has followed two trajectories. The first is the perception that the Roma are a threat to others. The second is that Roma are a threat to themselves. As a threat to others, we are all familiar with the accusations targeting Roma in general and Roma migrants in particular when they arrive, that Roma spread crime, that they are a burden on the benefit system, that they create noise due to gatherings outside on streets, that they are a burden on schools, that they are responsible for littering and dumping rubbish in the streets. These are accusations that we can try and confront when we challenge those making them at local government level to produce the evidence. And we see that if they go down that path of evidence based justification, most of those accusations disintegrate.

More complex and a bigger challenge to tackle, is the allegation that the Roma are a threat to themselves. We hear local agencies and local government sometimes saying that Roma live in overcrowded settings, that their children do not attend school voluntarily because Roma culture prevents them from attending school, that parents are neglecting their children, that Roma culture forces them into early marriage and so children move away from their parents creating issues of safeguarding and child protection. These are accusations that lead to a pathologising of Roma culture and a patronizing attitude toward the community. They are issues that we try to challenge, once again by calling on local governments to produce evidence, to justify those policies, and countering those with the evidence that we actually find.



We have been talking over the past couple of years, to migrants and their families, and we've been looking at documentation produced by local authorities in relation to Roma migrants. We've been studying the reciprocal relations between government interventions and the Roma and how it affects their lives. One of the questions raised is: does migration really lead to a short term or even long term improvement of people's lives? Obviously, people would not be emigrating if they didn't think that even in the short term, certain earning capabilities that they can find would allow them to survive in a way that is not possible in the places of origin.

But now, twenty and something years on into the process, after the migration began, we are seeing some changes over a generation, such as a drop of literacy rates, as a direct result of repeated eviction and expulsions. People who weren't allowed to stay over a long period of time and to attend school regularly, have suffered, and have lower literacy rates than their parents. And this is the generation of people who are now in their late teens or early twenties; to the extent that we can even talk about a lost generation. A generation lost because of this vicious circle of expulsion and eviction and repeated migrations. There are of course traumas associated with these repeated evictions, which are not yet well understood and which are something that we're also trying to investigate.

But we also see that access to housing and the stability of housing them becomes a key to general participation. Where Roma are allowed access to housing, where they're not subject to eviction and expulsion, we find by and large regular school attendance. We find regular access to healthcare. We hear no reports after a while about friction with neighbours or with police or other authorities. And since the lifting of restrictions on employment last January, we are noticing in all the places in which our survey is taking place a rise in employment, and a rise in the interest in employment: Roma are seeking jobs, they're seeking training opportunities to get jobs which until January 2014 they were not allowed to apply for. They're seeking support in writing up their CVs and many of them are actually successful in getting jobs. People who have been living in immigration countries for quite a few years without having access to employment, are now part of the labour market, a development that is very encouraging and which gives a good answer to the question why do Roma not adapt, to the calls that Roma should change their behaviour: It is not the Roma who lifted the restrictions on employment. It is government that lifted the restrictions on employment, which created an opportunity that Roma migrants are now making use of.

We also see the beginning of changes, which in the longer term might indicate some kind of shift in the demographics of the communities concerns. We see an emerging shift in the age of women at the birth of their first child, from an earlier age to a somewhat later age. We see larger intervals between the birth of children, all of which indicates that women are acquiring more opportunities outside the home, including employment opportunities. We see evidence that people are engaging with services; young people are engaging with youth centres. One exception are the social services. In all the countries that were looking at, the biggest fear, apart from evictions, is the fear of social services and the campaign that we encounter over and over again in the various countries that we're looking at, to patronize Roma families, to be very quick to take away children from Roma

parents and put them into care. This is a development that we are familiar with throughout history: for centuries governments have been intervening with and criminalizing the family structures of Roma.

Once again we see our role here as challenging these policies by asking for evidence. This is a very tricky area because authorities then hide behind the confidentiality of individual cases. We cannot get access to records. We can see the perspective of the Roma but this is often dismissed for lack of evidence. But we know of Roma migrants who go back to Romania to give birth, because they are afraid that in hospitals children might be taken away from them. This is an irrational fear, and we have no evidence that babies are actually being taken away in hospital; but the fact that people would go to that length indicates that there is some kind of trauma there that needs to be tackled. And it needs to be tackled once again by holding local authorities and the agencies that work with them to account and requiring them to provide evidence rather than just supposition and prejudice to justify what they are doing.

On the economic side, we see a large involvement of Roma migrants in the development of the origin communities from which they are from: People send back money and they support dependants and relatives. People go back and serve as role models to those who have stayed behind. They come back with language skills, with vocational skills. They invest in housing. They invest in businesses, and in some cases that we've documented Roma migrants go back, and open businesses that employ non-Roma, creating a shift in the traditional relations between Roma and non-Roma. In fact we can say on the basis of a number of qualitative studies that we've carried out now, and we're looking for more information on this and more data, that the contribution that a small number of Roma migrants are making to the development of Roma communities in the origin countries, by far outstrips the contributions made by European social funds and other affiliated resources. In other words, Roma migrants are doing more to improve the long-term situation of Roma in the origin countries than the European social funds and other resources.

One of the things that we're putting under scrutiny in the project is local authority engagement with Roma. Let me, in a footnote, just clarify: Some of you are no doubt aware, of the term *Romani Studies*, the designation that we give to an array of different disciplines, different methods, that have been in use to study Romani culture, language and history. 'Romani Studies' is often associated with the study of Roma culture and Roma communities and Roma behaviour and as I was saying before, something that has often been perceived by Roma as an intrusion into their lives. We understand 'Romani Studies' as the study of relations between Roma and non-Roma. We understand 'Romani Studies' as the study of institutions and the way they react to Roma, and their attitudes to Roma. We're putting local authority engagement under scrutiny in our research, and this is very high on the agenda of this project. We're seeing a range of different reactions and different approaches by

local authorities. We see those who are insisting on a policy of eviction and refusing co-operation with research or indeed with Roma representatives. We also see those who continue to view research as an instrument of control and containment, who say they want to work with us on condition that we carry out research into issues of child protection to give them the legitimisation that they need to carry out policies that they've actually figured out that they want to carry out even before they consult us for research. And naturally that's not our mission and that's not our purpose.

But we also see many positive reactions to the research and to our activities. We see local authorities drawing on our structures for case-by-case advice. But some are also interested in setting up projects such as long-term advice services for Roma and capacity building in Roma communities. We also see local governments that are interested in a holistic strategy to tackle perception of Roma, in other words, who recognise that the issues facing Roma are not so much issues that are triggered by Roma culture, but issues that are triggered by the perception of Roma through outsiders. And some are investing now in training to raise awareness of staff of those issues of anti-Gypsyism.



We also see a trend that worries us: A trend to outsource services from local authorities to so called third sector or voluntary sector organisations, non-Roma NGOs. This seems to have become a very lucrative niche, especially with the availability of European funding that NGOs can compete for. One would think that generally, more support is always welcome. But this is problematic, at least in certain aspects, because the argument that many of these interventions are based on, is that Roma require special provisions, and that for those special provisions to be set up, they require special expertise: not generic expertise on housing, not economic expertise, but special Roma expertise. And underlying that assumption is the notion that Roma have special problems that they create special problems that are not the problems that other people have. This brings me back to that narrative that is very difficult to tackle, that Roma constitute a threat to themselves. We see these initiatives, in particular around the issue of child protection and safeguarding. There is talk of early marriage as an aspect of Roma culture. This is an issue that ERTF has been looking at and has produced some very useful position papers which have inspired us and which we have, as part of our research, disseminated further.

Such attitudes pathologise Roma culture and patronise the community. They create a risk because special support provisions for Roma might serve to perpetuate the dependency of Roma on external services. And they might also run the risk of perpetuating the image of Roma as needy subjects who require external support and are unable to run their own affairs. In particular it is self-serving for those organisation who seek a permanent role in delivering services, and who flag their expertise to that end. We've been observing this trend, among other areas, also in the education sector. Some provisions are being made to train Roma mentors and mediators, but they give them a specialised training that enables them only to work in the Roma sector. So they are basically left with no other career options but to be professional Roma mentors or professional Roma mediators. In that role, they become dependant on those organisations that give them the jobs. This of course

means that potentially a whole generation of Roma mentors, mediators, people with some education and talent, and obviously people who care about helping their own people, are put into this almost dead end street of not being able to think critically about the nature of interventions because they risk their own jobs.

We have been carrying out many interviews with people in this sector. And some, not all, but some, show signs of gaining various skills, but losing their self confidence, losing their pride, losing their self esteem, and adopting the narrative that Roma need to adapt, that Roma need to change their behaviour. We see this in classroom support. There's an argument that Roma require special provisions at school. Many Roma arrive in extended families with many children. It's a young population, and within a very short period of time a large number of children come to a local school because they all live close to one another to preserve family ties. The schools are often being told by local government and local education authorities that the school has no resources to cope with the Roma, that they will constitute a problem. They are flagged as a problem pre-emptively. Schools are advised to make special provisions, to buy into the services of those who provide those services, or to make their own arrangements, and this often leads to segregating the Roma pupils. This is a problem that has received much attention in Eastern European countries before 1990, but also after 1990, but we see it replicated now in Western countries, not as an overall policy but in practice, implemented at local level.

In many cases these Roma pupils who are segregated from normal classrooms, from the mainstream classrooms, are being put under the supervision of Roma mentors and mediators, trained for that purpose, who are not teachers. The word that we've recorded in the local jargon of teachers, a very condescending word, is they are being "babysat" by other Roma – an institutionally condescending, term for that practice. Of course, the segregation is a vicious circle. Teachers lose aspirations. They don't expect much from the Roma, and the Roma themselves then under-achieve. The under-achievement is then taken as an indication that Roma are unable to go back to the mainstream classes and so the segregation must continue.



These are worrying trends within an overall picture that also has some positive light. How do we overcome the negative issues? In the policy briefings that we've communicated so far we compare different cases to see what works and what doesn't work in the different countries. It's very clear that it is beneficial to direct resources away from external agencies that provide services to the Roma, and invest them instead into capacity building within the Roma community.

It seems absolutely crucial to open up local authority interventions to scrutiny, to monitoring and assessment and if necessary to critique. I am aware of calls in this direction made by the European Commission and also the Council of Europe's RomAct program. But we think that we can implement this at local level, with our partners, and set a standard of how this should actually work, beyond just the declarations and the conference level commitments. This is work that needs to be done continuously, and not just over a short period of time. We need a permanent commitment to monitoring, scrutinizing and where necessary also

critiquing local authorities. And authorities need to be told that their policies need to be open to such scrutiny, to ensure that they are evidence based and not based on supposition, rumour or prejudice.

The ERTF has supported the project so far in particular in helping us draft policy briefings and in taking the lead on the dissemination in policy briefings. I'm very grateful to the Secretariat – to Robert Rustem and Clémentine Trolong-Bailley – for their role in this over the past few months. We've received quite a bit of attention and are accomplishing one of the aims of the projects, which is to engage stakeholders in a critical discussion of those issues. Today I'd like to invite you to take this partnership to a new level. We need your help, and we think we can contribute to your work by raising the standard of local government intervention on Roma by ensuring the scrutiny and monitoring of local authority interventions. Roma representatives must make this a public demand. But we can help as academics by accessing the evidence, by putting in place ways and procedures to monitor the evidence and where necessary to counter it with real evidence if no actual evidence is produced: to make local authority intervention accountable and to support capacity building. Once again, it is the call of Roma representatives to train your people, as many of you have been doing over the past generation. But we as academics have a role to play. We can introduce ways of monitoring policy, we can introduce evidence and we can certainly make the case that capacity building works better and that it is more effective than handing services to outsiders for their self-interest.

Thank you again for having me today at your conference.

*Note: Reports from the second phase of the MigRom project will be published in June 2015 on the project website:
<http://romani.manchester.ac.uk/migrom>*