

# Chapter 5

## ‘Modern-Day Fagins’, ‘Gaudy Mansions’ and ‘Increasing Numbers’: Narratives on Roma Migrants in the Build-Up to the British EU Referendum



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### 5.1 Introduction

The increase in migration flows within and into Europe has been accompanied by a growing policy focus on migration management, namely on the development of effective tools to select those migrants that can best contribute to productivity and economic growth. This technocratic concern is part of public debates about the perceived inability of national and EU actors to deal with the causes and impacts of migration. As in any policy debate, actors are mobilising both factual claims and assumptions about the problems to be tackled and the population groups involved, in turn fashioning narratives that shape the concrete policies intended to solve the identified problems (cf. Ricoeur 1984; Roe 1994; Banerjee 1998).

This kind of policy narratives will be the focus of the present article. More specifically, I will show how the mobilisation of images about Roma migrants to the UK contributed to reshaping the debate around the impact of migration on the welfare system. I will highlight how the policy narrative shifted from the need to reform the benefit system, to the need to reduce migrants’ access to the system.

I will combine textual analysis of national media reports, parliamentary debates and national law with observations at the local level, precisely in Manchester and drawing on the author’s engagement in the MigRom research team, which has worked with the local City Council in the development of their Roma Strategy (cf. Leggio and Matras 2017: 12–17 for details about the project and its engagement with local authorities and Roma migrants). The analysis will cover the period between the enlargement of the EU to Romania and Bulgaria (January 2007) and

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Cameron's announcement of his agenda for the negotiations with the EU (November 2014). I will first introduce the analytical framework proposed by Boswell et al. (2011) to describe how cohesive policy narratives develop and become accepted in the face of conflicting knowledge claims put forward by actors such as policy makers, pressure groups, researchers and the media. I will also provide an overview of how Roma migrants have been presented, and stigmatised, in the UK and in the rest of Europe. I will then move on to analyse the policy narratives, showing how, following a small number of benefit fraud cases involving Roma migrants from Romania, images of Gypsies as criminals were mobilised. These images merged with a highly mediatised attempt to secure additional funding for Roma integration through the publication of academic research on the numbers of Roma migrants present in the UK and the likelihood of their increase following the lifting of employment restrictions on A2 migrants in January 2014. I will argue that these images and claims, although resting on weak factual bases, appeared plausible as they matched well established stereotypes and fears about the Gypsies. The emergence of this narrative led prominent politicians to argue for, on one side, the Roma to change their behaviour and, on the other, for measures to curb "welfare tourism". The public pressure eventually led the then Prime Minister Cameron to include this last issue in the agenda of items to be renegotiated with the EU prior to the British referendum on EU membership in June 2016. In the conclusion, I will consider how, in the case of Roma migrants, popular stereotypes play a crucial role in shaping policy narratives, often to the point that facts emerging from academic research are misinterpreted, if not taken out of context, and end up as arguments in favour of restrictive policies. Given this risk, I will argue that researchers working on Roma migrants should avoid sensationalising their findings in an attempt to gain support for inclusive policies.

## 5.2 Migration Policy Narratives

It is undeniable that debates around migration see conflicting views on issues of culture, values and interests. Ideological clashes on these topics, however, are only a part of the debates about migration. Equally crucial, especially in a time of austerity and budgetary cuts, are seemingly technocratic concerns about the most effective tools to select those migrants that can best contribute to productivity and economic growth. These concerns fuel popular anxieties about the perceived inability of national and EU institutions to deal with the causes and impacts, particularly on existing services, of migration.

It has been observed that, when faced with popular concerns and anxieties, policy makers develop policy narratives, in an attempt to stabilise "the assumptions needed for decision making in the face of what is genuinely uncertain and complex" (Roe 1994: 51). Through narratives, policy actors offer an account that "groups together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events" (Ricoeur 1984: x), in turn identifying "causal relations between actions"

(Banerjee 1998: 193). Policy narratives thus offer a coherent account of complex phenomena which can gather support for concrete policies intended to solve the identified problems.

Boswell et al. (2011) note how this potential to motivate action is also characteristic of policy frames (cf. Schön and Rein 1994), but that narratives can nonetheless be distinguished based on their cognitive content: narratives focus on facts while frames represent the set of ideas informing policy actors' beliefs, perceptions and appreciations. In this respect, they argue, the concept of policy narratives offers a better lens to understand how factual claims, and the knowledge behind them, can inform the development of policies.

In the case of migration policy, Boswell et al. suggests that narratives revolve around three sets of claims, in turn drawing on sources ranging from lay or populist arguments, to expert and practitioner knowledge or academic research. A first set of claims attempts to define the problem to be addressed, that is, its nature and scale and the characteristics of the population involved. A second set of claims is instead about the causes of the problem and the extent to which it can be controlled. These claims often establish causal links, implying the attribution of blame to determined factors or actors. Finally, there are the claims about the possible solutions to the problem: how interventions have affected or will affect the problem. These, in particular, are the claims that "not only construct a specific reality, but also call for action upon this reality" (ibid.: 5).

At any given time, many competing narratives, and the claims around which they revolve, will be mobilised. Boswell et al. note how policy actors tend to adopt those narratives that match their predetermined interests. However, they are careful in stressing how interests and narratives are mutually constitutive. While interests shape the way in which actors produce and deploy narratives about migration, narratives can, in turn, shape actors' perceptions of interests. Crucial in this regard, are the cognitive features of any given narrative. To be successful, and potentially alter actors' perception of interests, a narrative must "fit" with available facts. That is not to say that narratives must be representationally accurate, rather they have to appear plausible. A further condition making a narrative successful is its persuasiveness, how much understandable and compelling it appears to a variety of actors.

Boswell et al. furthermore argue that these three conditions – actors' interests, internal plausibility and persuasiveness – not only make a narrative successful, but also influence its potential to spread to other policy sectors. In particular, actors trying to secure legitimacy or resources, might embrace new narratives which are available to them through regional and international fora or the media. The diffusion of narratives, however, is not a neutral, catch-up process and the content of policy narratives is often developed or reinvented as they spread.

Since policy narratives revolve around factual claims, a fundamental role in their construction and diffusion is played by the knowledge produced by researchers. This role has been further accentuated by expectations that policies should be 'evidence based' and the resulting proliferation of research units within both governmental and non-governmental bodies. Boswell (2009), furthermore, notes how research on migration is often used not to change narratives and thus adjust policy

outputs. Rather, its deployment appears to serve symbolic functions such as providing support for pre-existing narratives or to enhance the legitimacy of actors and organisations. As a consequence, much migration policies very often still respond to popular pressures or simply rely on the practical knowledge of front-line officers and bureaucrats.

The framework proposed by Boswell et al. (2011) emphasises the mutual relationship between actors' interests and the cognitive content of policy narratives. Analysing this relationship, however, does not aim to assess the value or effectiveness of narratives in order to produce better ones. Rather, they suggest, the point of a policy narrative analysis is to describe how and why only some of them become widely accepted and actually influence policy interventions. Furthermore, it offers a tool to study the role that research can play in the development of policies. In particular, it can allow to shed light on those cases in which research is mobilised for political ends different, if not diametrically opposed, from those originally envisaged by the researchers.

### 5.3 Representation and Stigmatisation of Roma Migrants

The first instance in which Eastern European Roma migration to the UK attracted national media attention was the arrival of Czech and Slovak Roma as asylum seekers in 1997. Although Home Office figures amount to a total of around a thousand applications during the entire year, Clark and Campbell (2000) note how “no one newspaper source had a clue as to the ‘true’ numbers” (ibid: 35) and how they engaged in wild speculations, resulting in the impression that the UK was hit by a “trickle”, “flood” or “invasion” of Roma. Similarly, they note, the press devoted much attention to the estimation of the cost of such an “invasion” for the British asylum and welfare systems. At the same time, Roma migrants were presented, particularly by tabloids, as “Gypsies”, drawing on an imagery about local English Gypsies and Irish Travellers as criminals and fraudsters dating back to the Victorian period (cf. Clark and Taylor 2014). These discursive strands, the authors argue, were combined in the stigmatisation of Roma as ‘bogus refugees’ engaging in an organised racket to take advantage of the British asylum system and to access a number of welfare benefits. As a consequence, Clark and Campbell argue, the then Labour government proposed far-reaching policy changes to the British immigration and asylum system. The representation of Czech Roma as criminals taking advantage of British asylum law even featured in a private letter, dated 4 July 2002, by the British Prime Minister warning the Czech counterpart of the consequences of continuing arrivals of Roma from the then EU candidate state (Sobotka 2003: 113–4).

At the local level, Grill (2012) and Clark (2014) note how in a working-class, multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Glasgow, Roma migrants were similarly associated by other residents with various kind of anti-social behaviour, petty crime and the

exploitation of children and prostitution. These representations, they found, were common in popular discourses even if data by the police did “not indicate any statistical increase in levels of crime [...] since the arrival of the new EU migrants” (Grill 2012: 44). The persistence of these images, even if unsubstantiated in official data, is taken by Clark (2014) as an indication of the Roma status as the racialised scapegoat in a neighbourhood struggling to cope with the consequences of budget cuts to public and voluntary sector services. Furthermore, Grill (2012) notes how problematic behaviours are regarded as stemming from Roma culture and thus attributed to all Roma, homogenising the population irrespectively of the actual backgrounds of individuals. He shows how this supposed “cultural distinctiveness” of the Roma has become a central concern for both governmental and non-governmental institutions, resulting in two approaches to Roma migrants. A paternalistic one attempts to understand the cultural source of Roma behaviours in order to change them. The other instead demonises Roma culture as the source of the Roma own problems and presents them as “a menace to any neighbourhood where they are to be found” (ibid.: 51).

It is worth noting that representations of Roma migrants “as a serious and dangerous ‘threat’ to the existing social order” (Clark and Campbell 2000: 38) and the co-existence of patronising and demonising approaches are not limited to the British context. Stewart (2012) links increasing xenophobia, feelings of loss of sovereignty and disillusion with political elites felt by citizens across Europe to the proliferation of populist movements that “turn the Roma into a suitable ‘target population’” (ibid.: xxxviii), leading to a rise in ethnic violence and hate crimes and to the increasing acceptability of disparaging depictions of Roma people. Matras (2015a), on the other hand, notes how the simultaneous representation of Roma as a threat to others and to themselves because of their cultural difference is characteristic of EU institutions’ approaches to Roma migration and inclusion. In this climate, the promotion of mediation programmes has gone hand-in-hand with increased control measures. At the national and local levels, this tendency can be observed in the simultaneous implementation of unprecedented measures such as ethnic profiling, expulsions of EU citizens from another member state (van Baar 2014) or of containment in dedicated Roma settlements (Clough Marinaro and Daniele 2011; Nacu 2012) and of targeted social support interventions in the fields of employment, education and access to services (Timmer 2010; Cools et al. 2017). The implementation of these measures, as they acted upon stereotypical images of the Roma rather than rejecting them, has further entrenched stigmatisation, whether the Roma were presented as criminals (Maestri 2017) or as victims of their own culture (Leggio 2017).

Clearly, the tendency in the UK to represent Roma migrants through references to well established stereotypes is a wider, European phenomenon. Common to both contexts are paternalistic attempts at changing Roma behaviours to favour their “integration”. However, while in the rest of Europe control measures have largely focused on removal or segregation, in the UK, as I will show below, the focus has been on the Roma access to the welfare system.

## 5.4 Migration, Benefits and the Roma

### 5.4.1 *Early Developments at the National Level*

The first mention of a connection between migration and the British welfare system appears in a briefing paper published by the right-wing think tank Migrationwatch UK in January 2008.<sup>1</sup> By comparing the net income of British citizens relying exclusively on benefits and that of British citizens working for the minimum wage, the paper argued that, given the minimal differences, the benefit system acted as a disincentive to move into employment. The Chairman of Migrationwatch further added that, unlike British citizens:

Poles have very strong financial motivation [to get into employment]. On the minimum wage in Britain they are earning 4–5 times what they would earn at home and, by living in multi-occupancy, they can afford to send considerable sums of money back to their families.

The report concluded that:

The problem of a lack of financial incentives for work is a perverse effect of attempts to lift families out of poverty rather than a direct result of immigration. However, it is made more difficult to tackle by large scale immigration which, according to the Bank of England, has reduced inflationary pressures by holding down the wages of the lower paid. There would be very substantial benefits in policies which encouraged the employment of indigenous workers.

Among the advantages, they suggested, there would be a reduction of pressure on the welfare as less British will require support. Migrationwatch UK thus argued that changes to the welfare system were needed not to discourage migrants from coming to the UK, but to encourage British citizens to compete with them for jobs. It is also interesting to note that, at that point, there was no mention of Roma, rather Poles were used as an exemplar category.

The report by Migrationwatch UK came as the then Labour government was consulting local authorities as part of their revision of migration policy. In the plan<sup>2</sup> that preceded the approval of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, it was stated that:

Despite the rising claimant count, people are still finding work. Large numbers of people are still moving off benefit and into jobs with 244,000 people moving off Job Seekers Allowance in January 2009. [...] Our aim is to increase the skills of the existing population to ensure that employers can find the talent they need in the UK workforce and decrease their reliance on migrant labour.

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<sup>1</sup>Migrationwatch UK, 02/01/2008. Incentives for work. *Employment & Welfare Briefing Papers*. <https://www.migrationwatchuk.org/Briefingpaper/document/27>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>2</sup>Department for Communities and Local Government, 19/03/2009. Managing the impacts of migration: Improvements and innovations. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919213058/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1179350.pdf>, accessed 16/11/2017.

While essentially rejecting suggestions that there was a need to revise the welfare system, in the same plan the government also acknowledged that “migration can place short term pressures on local public services including councils, schools, NHS and the police” and launched the Migration Impacts Fund to support local authorities.

While these debates were ongoing, issues about Roma migrants were brought to Parliament by Conservative MP Anthony Steen, at the time chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Trafficking which, since 2006, had been working on an Action Plan on Tackling Human Trafficking.<sup>3</sup> The plan did not specifically highlight Roma as a problem population but it mentioned that “child trafficking for labour exploitation or domestic servitude, benefit fraud and organised street crime has also been the subject of intense anxiety”.

On 6 February 2008 Mr. Steen called a Commons Debate on the subject of enforced criminal activity of children<sup>4</sup> and informed the parliament that

[...] organised crime networks are trafficking Roma children into Britain and other EU countries [...] and using them to milk the benefit system and for criminal activities such as shoplifting, pickpocketing and ATM theft [...] The police believe that there are between 1000 and 2000 trafficked Roma children in the UK.

He expressed his concern over insufficient police resources in fighting criminal gangs, arguing that “the trickle of Gypsies will increase to a flood. Free right of access across EU frontiers makes it possible for the first time for the Roma communities to come from across Europe”.

Mr. Steen’s intervention followed police raids conducted as part of Operation Caddy, the first stage of Operation Golf, a partnership between the London Metropolitan Police and the Romanian police. Founded in 2007 by the EU, Operation Golf was intended to tackle a suspected child trafficking ring coordinated by Romanian Roma from the town of Țândărei.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the communist period, these Roma had engaged in informal adoption practices, referred to in local police files as cases of ‘child kidnapping’. Similarly, official documents from the same period presented the Roma of Țândărei as a savage, untamed and anti-social population and regularly associated them with begging and crime (Toma et al. 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Home Office, March 2007, UK Action Plan on Tackling Human Trafficking. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/human-traffic-action-plan.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>4</sup> Commons Debate, 06/02/2008: Column 235WH. Enforced Criminal Activity (Children) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080206/halltext/80206h0001.htm>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>5</sup> Operation GOLF – A UK and Romanian Joint Investigation Tackling Romanian Organised Crime and Child Trafficking. [https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/eu-projects/operation-golf-%E2%80%93-uk-and-romanian-joint-investigation-tackling-romanian-organised-crime\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/eu-projects/operation-golf-%E2%80%93-uk-and-romanian-joint-investigation-tackling-romanian-organised-crime_en), accessed 16/11/2017.

Between 2008 and 2010 Mr. Steen joined police raids conducted by Operation Golf, as he reported on 5th February 2010 during the second reading of the Anti-Slavery Day Bill he was sponsoring<sup>6</sup>:

In another case involving trafficked children, a gang is believed to have forged documents for the purpose of at least 500 claims worth £4.5 million. In all, some £300 million is thought to be involved in benefit frauds.

Let me explain how the system works. These people are European Union nationals. A couple will bring in perhaps three or four children claiming that they are theirs, sometimes with forged passports. [...] A house that I visited during a police raid in east London conveyed no sense that it had been lived in other than by the nine or 10 children – in one instance, there were 12-sleeping on the floors with rugs, upstairs and downstairs. It was quite a Dickensian picture.

In both debates, Mr. Steen was using the information received by Operation Golf as part of a wider narrative to gain support for his campaign to introduce legislation to tackle human trafficking. The campaign was successful, leading to the Anti-Slavery Day Bill becoming law<sup>7</sup> and to the UK joining EU legislation on the topic.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Mr. Steen campaign introduced a connection between Roma migrants and suspected cases of benefit fraud. At the time, this connection did not influence debates about migration, but as I will show below it was to resurface later on.

#### 5.4.2 *Local Developments: Țăndărei Roma in Manchester*

Roma families from Țăndărei had also settled in Manchester, some arriving as early as 2000, most of them, however, after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. In the spring of 2009 the leader of the Liberal-Democratic opposition, Mr. Simon Ashley, forwarded a petition on behalf of a small group of residents, accusing the Roma of littering, truancy, anti-social and criminal behaviour. The Council response was the setting up of a dedicated Roma Strategy Group (Cools et al. 2017).

The Roma Strategy Group commissioned a report from the Romani Project at the University of Manchester. Based on interviews with the Roma and published in October 2009,<sup>9</sup> the report highlighted the language problems of the Roma and the

<sup>6</sup> Commons Debate, 05/02/2010: Column 536. Anti-Slavery Day Bill, Second Reading. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100205/debtext/100205-0004.htm>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>7</sup> Anti-Slavery Day Act 2010. [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/14/pdfs/ukpga\\_20100014\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/14/pdfs/ukpga_20100014_en.pdf), accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>8</sup> Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:101:0001:0011:EN:PDF>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>9</sup> Matras, Y., Beluschi Fabeni, G., Leggio, D. V. and Vránová, E. (2009) The Roma community in Gorton South, Manchester. Manchester: Romani Project, The University of Manchester. <http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/downloads/2/report.pdf>, accessed 16/11/2017.



restrictions on employment imposed at the time on Romanian and Bulgarian nationals as barriers to employment. The latter, combined with low levels of education, meant that most adult Roma were limited to self-employment as scrap-metal collectors or vendors of the *Big Issue*, a magazine published by the Big Life Group, a nationally active charity. This self-employment, however, the report noted, allowed the Roma to access welfare support. The report also emphasised that all interviewed Roma expressed their ambition to find employment. However, minutes from the Roma Strategy Groups noted that

[...] the issue of benefits policy remains a major concern both in terms of continuing inward migration and risks to community cohesion. [We] need to consider whether the self-employment [sic.] being declared can be considered genuine work. (22 January 2010)

According to conversations with members of the Roma Strategy Group, these concerns had been expressed by Councillor Ashley. He confirmed that in an email interview dated 21 March 2017:

Yes. I met privately with senior officers of the Big Life Group with senior Council Officers [sic.]. I also met with senior Labour Executive members and Council Officers, who agreed that the Big Life Group should be asked to review their policy. The Big Life Group Officers felt that it was the Government's job to close any loopholes in the law.

In February 2010, the Roma Strategy Group wrote to the Big Life Group, asking to exclude the Roma as vendors of the *Big Issue*. The letter reported that research commissioned by the Roma Strategy Group had shown that Roma used the *Big Issue* to establish themselves as self-employed to be able to claim state benefits, but that they did not intend to seek alternative employment. The Big Life Group, having consulted the Romani Project's report, regarded the letter as misrepresenting it and sought legal advice from Cherie Blair, human rights lawyer and wife of former Prime Minister Tony Blair. In a statement from March 2010 she wrote:

In my opinion, this attempt to use the public order powers of the Council to achieve a reduction in the benefits given to Roma only vendors is both for an improper purpose and discriminatory and therefore void and the *Big Issue* is entitled to refuse to comply.

The Big Life Group thus continued to allow Roma to sell the *Big Issue*. Furthermore, in May 2010 they decided to implement the recommendation contained in the Romani Project's report for a short-term investment in capacity building to train young Roma as interpreters. Once trained, the young Roma were hired as freelancers by the Council and third sectors agencies working in partnership with it thanks to the availability of resources from the Migration Impact Fund (see above).

The subsequent developments of the Manchester Roma Strategy and its overall positive effects on the local Roma have been described in detail elsewhere (cf. Cools et al. 2017; Leggio 2017; Matras and Leggio 2017). What is relevant for the present article is to highlight how the Romani Project's report was used in an attempt to deny Roma migrants access to benefits, but the intervention of an influential figure like Cherie Blair prevented that. Furthermore, the Big Life Group commissioned Ciara Leeming, a free-lance journalist, an article to present the training for young Roma as an example of good practice. Besides being published in the *Big Issue*, the

article appeared on the reporter's personal blog and on the Travellers Times Online<sup>10</sup> in September 2010. The article also featured an interview with Councillor Ashley:

I believe The Big Issue in the North is allowing itself to be used as a gateway to benefits dependency. Fundamentally, these people aren't homeless – they are all in houses. But because they've found a loophole which gives them access to benefits, selling the magazine is now an end in itself and not about genuine self-employment.

### 5.4.3 *The Big Issue “Loophole”: From Local to National Concern*

As the confrontation between the Big Life Group and Councillor Ashley was developing, national media covered the court cases stemming from Operation Golf's investigations. In one case, a Romanian Roma activist employed as outreach worker by the Big Issue in London had provided false references and employment contracts to Roma migrants, allowing them to claim almost £3 in benefits.<sup>11</sup> In July 2010, a Sunday Express article<sup>12</sup> covering the case reports the following statement by Matthew Elliott of the TaxPayers' Alliance, an influential right-wing pressure group campaigning for lower taxes:

This highlights the need to reform the welfare system as the introduction of better checks and balances would prevent one person costing the public so much money in future.

In September 2010, the Daily Mail reported on the trial, taking place in Romania, of trafficking suspects identified by Operation Golf. Titled *In the dock: Modern-day Fagins who “sent 200 Romanian children to beg and steal in UK”*,<sup>13</sup> the article revealed how the suspected gang operated from Țândărei and sent children to the UK “to beg, steal and commit benefit fraud”.

Țândărei was mentioned again in October 2010, when following more arrests for exploitation of children for criminal activity and benefit fraud, Superintendent Bernie Gravett, lead officer of Operation Golf, declared<sup>14</sup>:

<sup>10</sup>Leeming, C. (2010) Minority report. The Big Issue 842, 20/09/2010. <http://www.ciaraleeming.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/BI-ROMA-PROJECT-2010.pdf>, <http://travellerstimes.org.uk/News/A-promising-land.aspx>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>11</sup>BBC News, 08/11/2010. Roma rights campaigner jailed for £2.9m benefits scam. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-11347134>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>12</sup>Sunday Express, 27/07/2010, Gypsy in £3 million benefit scam. <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/189378/Gypsy-in-3-million-benefit-scam>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>13</sup>The Daily Mail, 28/09/2010, *In the dock: Modern-day Fagins who ‘sent 200 Romanian children to beg and steal in UK’*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1315672/Modern-day-Fagins-sent-200-Romanian-children-beg-steal-UK.html#ixzz4vC8xNjIc>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>14</sup>The Independent, 12/10/2010. Police smash Romanian ‘child trafficking ring’ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/police-smash-romanian-child-trafficking-ring-2104694.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

The most visible aspects of the profits being sent back to Romania are the building of large houses, the purchase of expensive vehicles and the possession of large amounts of disposable cash.

Commenting on the same arrests, Ms. Beddoe from ECPAT UK (a global network of civil society organisations dedicated to ending the commercial sexual exploitation of children) explained to the BBC<sup>15</sup>:

If they are good, the children are traded between gangs. It is like the Faganism of children trained to be pickpockets in the 19th Century. [...] Tândărei [sic.] is relatively small and impoverished. But the criminals have lives of luxury. There is a juxtaposition between the villagers living in shanty town huts with unmade roads and horse-drawn carriages. [...] Then you have criminals in Gypsy palaces; you see high-value cars, many with British number-plates.

These arrests prompted the Cambridge Centre for Applied Research in Human Trafficking, a network of academics, social entrepreneurs, enforcement personnel, third sector organisations and political lobbyists, to publish a blog entry about their research on the “growth in the deployment of children for Fagan style personal theft, street robbery and social security scams on the streets”.<sup>16</sup>

BBC's Panorama also devoted attention to these cases. In a documentary broadcasted in October 2010,<sup>17</sup> the programme crew followed Roma children begging on the streets of London, and visited the newly built villas of the supposed gangsters in Țândărei.

A second conviction for benefit fraud was achieved by Operation Golf in November 2010. Although the convicted was a Țândărei Roma, the media did not mention it, but indicated how the fraud profits had been invested in the building of a nine-bedroom house.<sup>18</sup>

All the prosecutions emerging from Operation Golf were discussed in a BBC Radio 4 reportage,<sup>19</sup> on 7 February 2011. The reporter, attempting to offer a balanced picture, highlights how “[w]ith restrictions on work, and without automatic rights to benefits, many live in poverty. Increasingly Roma now sell the Big Issue magazine to make ends meet” and how “poverty leaves them open to exploitation by criminal gangs in their own community”. The Big Life training programme in Manchester was also presented, through interviews with some of the trainees, as an attempt to break barriers. The reportage also featured interviews with Superintendent

<sup>15</sup>BBC News, 12/10/2010, Roma children ‘fund gangster luxury’. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-england-london-11524734>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>16</sup>CCARHT, 18/10/2010, Romanian child trafficking – the challenges for the future. <http://www.ccarht.org/blog/2010/10/hello-world/>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>17</sup>BBC Panorama, 19/10/2010, The secret lives of Britain's child beggars. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/panorama/hi/front\\_page/newsid\\_9618000/9618038.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_9618000/9618038.stm), accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>18</sup>The Express, 20/11/2010. Gypsy ‘child smuggler’ jailed for benefit fraud. <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/212558/Gypsy-child-smuggler-jailed-for-benefit-fraud>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>19</sup>BBC radio 4, 07/02/2011, The truth about the Roma. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00y5htm>, accessed 16/11/2017.

Gravett and Councillor Ashley, both of them making the same points presented above. On the same day, the Telegraph<sup>20</sup> picked up on the reportage, but exclusively focused on the link between self-employment as Big Issue sellers and the possibility to claim benefits, flagging it as a revelation in the article sub-heading:

Romanian immigrants are becoming Big Issue sellers in order to gain state benefits through a tax loophole, it has been disclosed.

As evidence for their claim, the author also reported, in their entirety, Councillor Ashley's declaration from Leeming's article in the Big Issue.

A couple of months later, Leeming herself republished Councillor Ashley's statements on the Guardian, in an article titled Efforts to integrate Roma people are under threat from cuts.<sup>21</sup> The article came as a reaction to the newly elected Cameron government's decision to discontinue the Migration Impacts Fund<sup>22</sup> which was negatively affecting the third sector agencies collaborating with the Big Life training programme for Roma in Manchester.

Following the third, and last, conviction for benefit fraud of a family from Țândărei in mid-May 2011, the Telegraph reported the following statement by the sentencing judge:

This was a major undermining of the UK benefit system. It was a professional fraud that occurred over a significant time frame and resulted in a very serious loss to the UK authorities.<sup>23</sup>

Two Sunday reportages appeared immediately after, both featuring Councillor Ashley's statement from Leeming's original article. The Telegraph's one<sup>24</sup> included a statement from a Home Office spokesman:

We are determined to protect the interests of the taxpayer and the benefit system from possible abuse. This government will push for stringent controls on workers from new member states being able to access our labour market.

The reportage on Mail on Sunday, titled Benefits Boulevard: Gypsies' gaudy mansions built in Romania... with YOUR money [emphasis in the original]<sup>25</sup> featured

<sup>20</sup>The Telegraph, 07/02/2011, Romanian immigrants 'sell Big Issue to gain benefits'. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/romania/8306850/Romanian-immigrants-sell-Big-Issue-to-gain-benefits.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>21</sup>The Guardian, 27/04/2011, Efforts to integrate Roma people are under threat from cuts. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/apr/27/roma-manchester-tensions-big-issue>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>22</sup>The Guardian, 06/08/2010, Fund to ease impact of immigration scrapped by stealth. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/aug/06/fund-impact-immigration-scrapped>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>23</sup>The Telegraph, 18/05/2011, Gypsy gang jailed for 'sophisticated' £800k benefit fraud. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/8520031/Roman-gypsy-gang-jailed-for-sophisticated-800k-benefit-fraud.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>24</sup>The Telegraph, 21/05/2011. Romanian families use Big Issues loophole. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/8527950/Romanian-families-use-Big-Issue-loophole.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>25</sup>Mail on Sunday, 21/05/2011. Benefits Boulevard: Gypsies' gaudy mansions built in Romania... with YOUR money. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1389282/Benefits-boulevard-Built-Romania%2D%2DYOUR-money.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

interviews with British vendors of the Big Issue who complained about the competition from Roma. The article ended with the following statement:

Roma gypsy people who blatantly use this magazine to milk our welfare state, deprive the real homeless and have spawned a huge criminal industry.

An attempt, based on the same arguments about genuine work used in 2010 by Manchester Roma Strategy Group, by Bristol City Council to deny housing benefits to a Romanian Roma vendor called new attention to the 'Big Issue loophole'. As a court rejected the attempt in January 2012, the Daily Mail presented the case in indignant tones and emphasised the amount of benefits claimed by the vendor. The article reported the opinion of Chris Grayling, minister for employment:

We disagree with the court's decision. We have to remain in line with our national and international obligations. However, it is absolutely necessary to protect the taxpayer and the benefit system from possible abuse.<sup>26</sup>

The Mail on Sunday then published a reportage, featuring interviews with British vendors. Based on their declaration, it presented Romanian Roma as wealthy gangsters muscling their way into a "[j]ob once reserved for Britain's homeless".<sup>27</sup> The reportage also presented the position of Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, which said:

The British people will understandably wonder how on earth it can be fair for people to come here with no job, but enjoy the right to access our benefit system.

Similarly, Conservative MP David Davies was quoted as saying that

The Big Issue was set up to help the homeless, not as a racket to allow people to migrate over here so they can play on people's generosity and claim benefits.

Finally, the report raised concerns that the numbers of Roma might escalate once Romania and Bulgaria achieved full membership of the EU in 2014.

#### ***5.4.4 Benefits as a Pull Factors and the "Roma Flood" Scare***

As Operation Golf had come to an end with the convictions in 2011, specific mentions of Roma migrants almost completely disappeared from the public debate. However, concerns about the arrival of large numbers of Romanian and Bulgarian citizens characterised public debates throughout 2012. These concerns were ignited by the formalisation of Cameron's electoral pledge to reduce net migration to the

<sup>26</sup>The Daily Mail, 19/01/2012. Romanian Big Issue seller given legal right to claim housing benefit (on top of the £25,000 she already claims). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2087857/Romanian-Big-Issue-seller-given-legal-right-claim-housing-benefit.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>27</sup>Mail on Sunday, 03/02/2012. One-third of Big Issue sellers now Romanian: Job once reserved for Britain's homeless has been swamped by Eastern European immigrants. And many of them have homes AND claim benefits. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2090012/One-Big-Issue-sellers-Romanian-homes-AND-claim-benefits.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

tens of thousands.<sup>28</sup> An influential intervention was, once again, a report by Migrationwatch UK.<sup>29</sup> By comparing the income from benefits between Poland and the UK, the report argued that the British benefit regime acted as a pull factor for European migrants and raised the alarm for the potential increase of Romanian and Bulgarians from 2014. The Migrationwatch chairman argued:

In fairness to the hard-pressed British taxpayer, this must be changed. [...] The whole EU benefit regime must be renegotiated otherwise there is a clear risk that the number of East European migrants coming to seek work in Britain will shoot up placing even greater strain on our public services and putting the government's immigration objectives at considerable risk.

These debates culminated with Cameron's pledge, in January 2013, to renegotiate the relationship between the UK and the EU and to put the results of such negotiation through a referendum if the Conservative Party had won the general elections in 2015.<sup>30</sup> At this stage, Cameron did not mention what powers he intended to attempt to repatriate. Concerns about an influx of Eastern European migrants and their impact on services, however, persisted and were successfully used by the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP) and its leader Nigel Farage to gain an unprecedented level of support at the May 2013 local elections.<sup>31</sup>

Roma migrants were brought back into the debates on 30 October 2013 when researchers from Salford Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford exclusively shared their latest report with Channel4 News.<sup>32</sup> Commissioned by Migration Yorkshire, a consortium of local authority and voluntary sector agencies, the report<sup>33</sup> presented a "conservative" estimate of the number of Roma migrants in the UK at around 200,000, placing it far above than the official estimate of 50,000. The report also suggested that it was "likely that this population will continue to increase" and that there is "a strong demand from local authorities for help in working with migrant Roma communities". During the interview that accompanied the report's release, the lead author, Philip Brown, argued that local authorities were struggling to cope with such numbers due to the cuts implemented

<sup>28</sup> BBC News, 14/04/2011. In full: David Cameron immigration speech. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13083781>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>29</sup> Migrationwatch UK, 04/04/2012. Benefits Regime Makes UK Attractive Destination for East European Migrants. <http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/press-release/318>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>30</sup> BBC News, 23/01/2013. David Cameron promises in/out referendum on EU <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21148282>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>31</sup> The Telegraph, 03/05/2013. Local elections 2013: Nigel Farage's Ukip surges to best ever showing, winning 150 seats. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ukip/10036463/Local-elections-2013-Nigel-Farages-Ukip-surges-to-best-ever-showing-winning-150-seats.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>32</sup> Channel4 News, 30/10/2013. UK Roma population one of biggest in Europe. <https://www.channel4.com/news/immigration-roma-migrants-bulgaria-romania-slovakia-uk>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>33</sup> Brown, Scullion and Martin (2013). Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom: Population size and experiences of local authorities and partners. <http://www.salford.ac.uk/research/care/research-groups/shusu/projects-migration-and-integration/migrant-roma-in-the-united-kingdom-population-size-and-experiences-of-local-authorities-and-partners>, accessed 16/11/2017.

by Cameron's government. He then added that knowing the actual number of Roma migrants was needed for local authorities and third sectors agencies to better target EU funds and compensate for the lack of governmental support. The interview was accompanied by a reportage from a neighbourhood in Sheffield, emphasising tensions between the local residents and Slovak Roma.

Although the study's methodology was opaque in several respects and the data on which it was based inaccessible and unverifiable (Matras 2015b), its highly mediated launch was effective in getting the attention of senior politicians. On 12 November, the former Labour Home Secretary David Blunkett and MP for Sheffield, speaking to the BBC,<sup>34</sup> warned that

We have got to change the behaviour and the culture of the incoming community, the Roma community, because there's going to be an explosion otherwise. [...] We've got to be tough and robust in saying to people you are not in a downtrodden village or woodland, because many of them don't even live in areas where there are toilets or refuse collection facilities. You are not there any more, you are here – and you've got to adhere to our standards, and to our way of behaving, and if you do then you'll get a welcome and people will support you.

Quoting the SHUSU report, he criticised the government for not acknowledging the scale of the problem and thus preventing accesses to EU funds to replace the discontinued Migration Impacts Fund. On 25 November, Mr. Blunkett also signed an Early Day Motion, tabled by Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn and sponsored by representatives of all parties, calling on the government to acknowledge the significance of SHUSU's report and asking for a review of the government approach to Roma migrants and to EU funds available to tackle their inclusion.<sup>35</sup>

The BBC report also included the reply to Blunkett's comments by a government spokesman:

Salford University figures should be treated with extreme caution, as they are estimates based on replies from only a third of local authorities and rely on anecdotal information [...] Coalition ministers did not view the [Migration Impacts Fund] scheme as particularly effective or value for money, especially given the need to tackle the budget deficit inherited by the government.

Farage's reaction was also included in the coverage:

Mr. Blunkett should be admired for the courage he has shown by speaking so plainly on this issue. Of course, the type of language he has used I would have been utterly condemned for using. [...] My question is if they [ministers] won't listen to the dangers of opening the door to Romania and Bulgaria next year when UKIP speak out on it, will they listen to David Blunkett? I certainly hope so.

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<sup>34</sup>BBC News, 12/11/2013. David Blunkett riot fear over Roma migrant tensions. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24909979>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>35</sup>House of Commons, 25/11/2013. Early day motion 788: Roma migrant communities. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/business-papers/commons/early-day-motions/edm-det-ai1/?edmnumber=788&session=2013-14>, accessed 16/11/2017.

The day after, deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, also an MP for Sheffield, defended the government's decisions. When talking about the tensions in Sheffield, however, he argued that

We have every right to say if you are in Britain and are coming to live here and you are bringing up a family here, you have got to be sensitive to the way life is lived in this country. If you do things that people find intimidating, such as large groups hanging around on street corners, you have got to listen to what other people in the community say.<sup>36</sup>

Blunkett's comments also led to the emergence of previous comments by his predecessor as Home Secretary, Jack Straw. Writing for a local newspaper a few weeks before, Straw had declared that the immediate lifting of restrictions on citizens from countries that joined the EU in 2004 had been a "spectacular mistake" as it had led to the rocketing of migration.<sup>37</sup>

Exactly as these declarations were coming out, YouGov UK carried out a poll for The Times, highlighting growing popular discontent on migration policies, their impact on services and increasing demands for the government to renegotiate the rights of EU migrants.<sup>38</sup> The poll results were commented upon on the Telegraph which also anticipated that Cameron

has promised to clampdown on "welfare tourism" and is due to unveil more details proposals [sic.] to limit EU migrants rights to benefits [sic.]<sup>39</sup>

This was confirmed on 27 November, when Cameron listed the measures he planned to introduce and, in an article on the Financial Times,<sup>40</sup> argued that the EU had to reform "to regain the trust of its people". He demanded "new arrangements that will slow full access to each others' labour markets until we can be sure it will not cause vast migrations" and declared his intention to put the issue at the centre of his proposed renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU.

While there was no mention in Cameron's article of any particular group abusing the system, it became clear that the concern about Roma accessing benefits had influenced the decision when, in April 2014, Iain Duncan Smith announced the details about the restrictions. He stated:

we have taken action to make sure our economy delivers for people who want to work hard, play by the rules, and contribute to this country. These reforms will ensure we have a fair

<sup>36</sup>The Guardian, 14/11/2013. Nick Clegg: Roma in Sheffield have to listen to others in community. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/nov/14/nick-clegg-roma-community-sheffield-migrants-britain>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>37</sup>The Guardian, 13/11/2013. Jack Straw: Labour made mistake letting Poles in early. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/13/jack-straw-labour-mistake-poles>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>38</sup>YouGov UK, 25/11/2013. What we believe about immigration. <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/11/25/what-we-believe-about-immigration/>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>39</sup>The Telegraph, 23/11/2013. Cameron to clamp down on migrants' rights to benefits. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/10469625/Cameron-to-clamp-down-on-migrants-rights-to-benefits.html>, accessed 16/11/2017.

<sup>40</sup>The Financial Times, 27/11/2013. David Cameron launches attack on EU migration. <https://www.ft.com/content/b2b10574-56c3-11e3-ab12-00144feabdc0>, accessed 16/11/2016.



system – one which provides support for genuine workers and jobseekers, but does not allow people to come to our country and take advantage of our benefits system.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, as Cameron announced his full agenda for renegotiation with the EU on 28 November 2014, he noted that “this Government has already taken unprecedented action to make our welfare system fairer and less open to abuse, all within the current rules” and stated his intention to negotiate the introduction of “longer re-entry bans for all those who abuse free movement including beggars, rough sleepers, fraudsters and people who collude in sham marriages”.

## 5.5 Concluding Remarks

The case of the British debates around the impact of migration on the welfare system highlights how pervasive stereotypes about the Roma are. Both narratives on the criminal nature of Roma migration and those about a sudden influx of Roma in 2014 (which never materialised) matched well-established images about the “Gypsies”. This, I will argue, made both narratives convincing as they fitted expectations about the Roma, to the point that their very weak factual basis was essentially ignored.

Furthermore, the case shows that, as suggested by Boswell et al. (2011), policy narratives can migrate from one context to another. Operation Golf and Mr. Steen, respectively looking to secure resources (EU grants) and legitimacy (for the anti-slavery campaign), embraced the Romanian communist authorities’ narrative about the Țăndărei Roma as involved in crime and child trafficking. According to the London Metropolitan Police’s reply to a Freedom of Information request submitted by the MigRom Project, Operation Golf resulted in just 12 arrests for child trafficking, of which only 8 resulted in convictions. However, the three uncovered cases of benefit fraud brought the Țăndărei Roma to the public attention as an organised network of “modern-day Fagins”.

This representation, combining the stereotypical image of Roma as organised criminals with one of the most despicable characters in Dickensian literature, I would argue, made the narrative about the Țăndărei Roma compelling for the British public. This was further enhanced by the broadcasting of images and publishing of descriptions of the “gaudy mansions” built by some Roma in Țăndărei. The building of large houses in the village of origin is a practice common among Romanian Roma migrants which in this way display their success both to Roma and non-Roma and, more importantly, achieve territorial de-segregation from mono-ethnic neighbourhood (Benarrosh-Orsoni 2015; Tesár 2016; Toma et al. 2017). However, again against the background of stereotypes about Roma criminality, British media presented that as the result of fraudulent behaviours.

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<sup>41</sup>The Guardian, 19/02/2014. EU migrants face new barrier to accessing UK state benefits. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/feb/19/eu-migrants-welfare-benefits-earnings>, accessed 16/11/2017.

The way in which Roma self-employment as Big Issue vendors came to public attention shows how, as argued by Boswell (2009), actors can appropriate research to enhance their legitimacy. In our case, the Roma Strategy Group, under pressure from the leader of the political opposition in Manchester City Council, attempted to use the Romani Project report to legitimise an attempt to exclude Roma migrants from the benefit system. Notwithstanding that the attempt failed and that later developments have been considered positive by Manchester City Council (Manchester City Council Equality Team 2016), the publication of Ashley's statements by Ciara Leeming and the Big Issue brought the "Big Issue loophole" into the public discussion. The publication of Ashley's statements was most likely intended, at first, to offer a more rounded picture of the problems faced by Roma migrants and, later, in an attempt to avoid the discontinuation of funding for support. However, picked up by right-wing tabloids, they ended up reinforcing the narrative about Roma migrants as fraudster and firmly linked it to their representation as a threat to the welfare system.

The latter point shows the risks involved in academic attempts to influence policy making and those deriving from the mediatisation of policy debates. These risks are even more strongly exemplified in the consequences of the attempt to push Cameron's government to reconsider its funding priorities. Research commissioned by local policy actors that had seen their funding cut, although methodologically questionable, was sensationalised to achieve maximum effect. That a cross-party motion was put in parliament, asking the government to acknowledge this research, could be considered a success, if it was not for the ways in which politicians, including one of the signatories of the motion, presented the Roma. This led, on one side, to senior politicians that had always been in favour of migration, to publicly reconsider their positions, in turn giving further ammunition for arguments in favour of a crackdown on migrants' access to the benefit system. Popular pressures stoked by the UKIP and confirmed by polls, not only led the government not to reconsider its funding priorities but also to include the questioning of the right to free movement, with the attached rights to employment and welfare, in the renegotiation of the UK membership of the EU.

It is true that the SHUSU team later acknowledged that their communication strategy backfired (Brown et al. 2014), yet their botched attempt is a clear warning to researchers working on Roma migrants. Because of the pervasiveness of stereotypes, it is crucial that whenever we write about Roma we avoid, on one side, generalisations that might reinforce such stereotypes. On the other, and more importantly, we should at all cost avoid sensationalising our findings, even if this is seen as an attempt to gain support for more inclusive Roma policies.

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