

Political Inclusion of Roma: Optimizing the National Roma and Sinti equality, inclusion and participation strategy (2021-2030)

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Political Inclusion of Roma: Optimizing the National Roma and Sinti equality,
inclusion and participation strategy (2021-2030)

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Abstract

This research investigates the political participation of the Roma communities in Italy within the framework of the new National Roma and Sinti equality, inclusion and participation strategy (2021-2030). Previous studies have already addressed several issues surrounding the Roma, ranging from being accused of causing an emergency because of their lifestyle and precarious living conditions in institutionalized camps to debates on their legal status, citizenship, antigypsyism, and the limitations of the previous National Strategy (2012-2021). However, insufficient attention has been given to political inclusion as a means for Roma empowerment. This study aims to suggest optimizations to the current National Strategy (2021-2030) to address antigypsyism through the promotion of political inclusion. A qualitative approach to data-collection is employed, combining semi-structured interviews with the analysis of existing documents. The theoretical discussion critiques Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism, advocating a political process perspective to address the Roma's diverse identity and activism while avoiding tokenism in representation. The findings of this research clearly show a discontinuity between the normative side presented by the National Strategy (2021-2030) and the way in which the strategy is being implemented to foster Roma participation. This research is of importance as it attempts to address the political emancipation of a historically vulnerable group, by providing suggestions to improve an already existing strategy, and it conveys the message that marginalised communities, like the Roma, must be genuinely included in policy formulation.

Keywords: Roma, National Roma and Sinti equality, inclusion and participation strategy (2021-2030), Political inclusion, Law 482, Activism, Antigypsyism

Dedication

Questo è dedicato a te, mamma. Grazie per essermi sempre stata vicina in questo mio percorso.

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List of Abbreviations

ANCI: Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani (National Association of Italian Municipalities)

ERRC: European Roma Rights Centre

ERGO: European Roma Grassroots Organizations

ERIO: European Roma Information Office

EU: European Union

ISTAT: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Institute of Statistics, Italy)

IRPPS: Istituto di Ricerca sulla Popolazione e le Politiche Sociali (Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies)

RSC: Roma, Sinti, and Camminanti

UCRI: Unione delle Comunità Romanès in Italia (Union of Romani Communities in Italy)

UNAR: Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali (National Office Against Racial Discrimination)

NATIONAL STRATEGY (2012-2020): National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti, and Camminanti Communities

NATIONAL STRATEGY (2021-2030): National Roma and Sinti equality, inclusion and participation strategy (2021-2030)

Introduction

Roma make up the largest diaspora in Europe and are also the most discriminated and stereotyped minority group, unfairly associated with nomadism, non-conforming to broader societal norms, and even crime (Vitale, 2010; Ryder et al., 2020, Lauritzen, 2018). Their condition is precarious in many European states, as efforts to ensure that Roma coexist within society have been scarce. Instead, efforts to further push them outside of society and belittle their rooted culture have been more successful (Vitale, 2010). Today there are around 10-12 million Roma in Europe (European Commission, 2011). According to Santino Spinelli in Italy alone there are about 120,000 to 180,000 Roma people (Vitale, 2010), who are at risk of “prejudice, intolerance, discrimination and social exclusion” (European Commission, 2011, p. 2). Although Roma have long been part of Italian society, their first arrival in Europe dating back to the Middle ages, it is a reality that they have been excluded as targets of institutionalised racism on the part of the State and mainstream political parties, using Roma as scapegoats to “security problems” and categorising them as nomads to place them forcibly into camps, whereby they could be better controlled (Sigona and Monasta, 2006).

Much has been written on the construction of Roma as an emergency in the early 2000’s and about their precarious living conditions in state institutionalised camps. The lasting debate over their legal status, citizenship, and previous attempts at framing a successful National Strategy for their inclusion are topics which have been covered extensively, not to mention how much literature has been dedicated to defining antigypsyism. Even though many issues surrounding the Roma question have already been addressed, no concrete attention has been given to the issue of political inclusion as a tool to make Roma protagonists in addressing those same issues previously put forward.

Due to the complexity of the case, the literature review for this study will be divided into two parts: first, a detailed historical background of Roma international ethnic mobilisation,

and second, a theoretical framework that contextualises the ongoing challenges and potential solutions. This approach will illuminate the historical context that has shaped the current marginalisation of the Roma community while also providing a theoretical lens through which to analyse contemporary issues of the specific case study.

Despite a large body of literature already existing on the systemic marginalisation of Roma, there is a notable gap in research focused on political inclusion. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how the current National Strategy (2021-2030) can be optimised to actively promote the political inclusion of Roma. It will explore the changes that have been implemented to mitigate the gaps of the previous National Strategy (2012-2020) concerning the legal recognition of Roma, and the specific gaps that persist hindering the framework's effectiveness in addressing antigypsyism. This research is significant as it attempts to address the political emancipation of an historically vulnerable group, by providing suggestions to optimise an already existing document to make it more effective in combating antigypsyism and contributing to a more equitable society for Roma people in Italy.

The objectives of this research are threefold: Firstly, the study seeks to assess the extent to which the implementation of the National Strategy (2021-2030) boosts political mobilisation of Roma and Sinti. Secondly, it will evaluate the efficacy of the National Strategy (2021-2030) in resolving the issue of legal recognition for the Roma minority by addressing long-standing obstacles. Lastly, the study endeavours to find out if the implementation of the National Strategy (2021-2030) has had any positive effects in mitigating antigypsyism.

Chapter 1: Historical Background

The aim of this historical background chapter is to outline core themes regarding the topic of political participation and representation of Roma in Italy in relation to the newly established National Strategy (2021-2030). It will do so by elucidating the existing debates and literature regarding the legal status of Roma, and the weight antigypsyism posed to previous attempts at including Roma in the social, economic, and political fabric of Italy. The scope of this historical overview extends from the origins of Romani political mobilisation to the role of the EU and of Transnational Romani Organisations in enhancing the visibility of national Roma and pro-Roma movements. This section will then discuss the construction of Roma as a security issue in Italy and the heterogeneity of the various Roma communities. It will provide insights into the previous National Strategy (2012-2020), and the persistence of institutionalised antigypsyism.

The origins of Roma political mobilisation, within Europe, can be traced back to the post-WWII period, where Roma communities began their struggle for the recognition of the Roma genocide – known as Porrajmos or Samudaripen. With the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, Roma were considered “alien people” (McGarry, 2010, p. 21) by the Nazi regime, and with that a systematic and imposed segregation of Roma from those considered Aryans began. In 1937, an even more targeted decree was passed which allowed for the imprisonment of anyone deemed likely to have criminal tendencies, even if they had not committed a crime, based purely on supposed racial grounds. Though the decree could have appeared neutral, it was primarily directed at the Roma, leading to their mass arrest and confinement in camps starting that year (McGarry, 2010).

Although Roma had already been confined in camps prior to the start of WWII, the bulk of their confinement in concentration camps began after the decision by the Reich to implement the “Final Solution” (McGarry, 2010, p. 22). One key date in the Roma calendar is May 16,

1944, when Roma rebelled against the guards at Auschwitz. As a result of their rebellion and resistance on the night of July 31 to August 1, 1944, most of the Roma held at Auschwitz were tragically killed in the gas chambers, an atrocity now remembered as “*Zigeunernacht* (the Night of the Gypsies)” (McGarry, 2010, p. 23). August 2 has since become the day when Roma commemorate the victims of their genocide.

Following Nazi Germany’s defeat in the war, the Nuremberg Trials were set up by the Allied powers to pursue justice by sentencing the main actors who orchestrated the Final Solution. Yet, Roma were never invited to testify in the trials as their extermination was never explicitly justified on racial grounds. Instead, the narrative took a different path: it was argued that their mass killing was due to their “perceived criminality” (McGarry, 2010, p. 24). The Nazi discriminatory laws and extermination enacted during the 1930’s to 1940’s targeting Roma are still not universally recognised as genocide but are merely seen as a crime against humanity. The demand that European states give due recognition to the atrocities inflicted on the Roma communities and recognize the Porrajmos as genocide, led to the first mobilisation of Roma post-WWII.

The 1970’s marked the rise of several international Romani organisations, particularly the Prague based International Romani Union (IRU) which was charged with the role of lobbying and negotiating the interests of Roma “with and within the international community” (McGarry, 2010, p. 143). The IRU is the executive body of the International Romani Congress, which held its First World Congress in London in 1971. During the meeting the creation of the Romani flag was inaugurated and the anthem “Gyelem, Gyelem” established. The creation of a common identity through symbolism helped in “mobilising and galvanising” (Ryder et al., 2020, p. 2) Roma activists across Europe.

Aside from solidifying national unity, the First World Congress also nailed down the key demands Roma communities had in relation to the war crimes committed during WWII

(McGarry, 2010, p. 143). Simultaneously to Roma undergoing their ethnogenesis and consolidating the foundations of their “ethnic” group, a growing interest for Romani affairs also emerged within both Western and Eastern states. Governments began commissioning research and showing interest in the work of Roma academics, which helped elevate the status of Romani studies (Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018, p. 93).

By the early 1990’s, with the fall of communism in Eastern European states, growing violence and hostile behaviour were inflicted upon Roma communities. The process of liberal democratisation and the apparent gain of “liberty” brought turmoil and large-scale unemployment in post-communist societies. Roma paid the highest price, witnessing pogrom-style persecutions and large-scale unemployment (McGarry, 2010, p. 28). With the introduction of a very competitive free market economy, many Roma lacked the skills to compete in such a system. Thus, due to rampant poverty and difficult living conditions, many Roma now depended on a weak welfare state, begging, and migration to Western states.

On the other hand, Roma organisations and political elites flourished post-1989. Roma individuals participated in the first free elections in Central and Eastern European countries. For example, Aladár Horváth became the first Hungarian Roma parliamentarian to be elected under “the faction of the Alliance of Free Democrats” (McGarry, 2010, p. 120). This period saw the rise of a wave of Roma intellectuals and leaders who proudly embraced their Romani heritage and advocated for their communities. These emerging Roma elites, shaped by the rigorous and compulsory education system of the previous communist regimes, took advantage of the newly established political arena (McGarry, 2010).

Following EU enlargement, further resentment and increased xenophobic attitudes towards Roma have emerged in many Central and Eastern European States. Enlargement forced these post-communist states to convert to neoliberalism and the introduction of the EU single market, which guaranteed four “undeniable” freedoms: free movement of capital, goods,

services, and people (Kóczé, 2018). The possibility to move freely among and between the member states caused a wave of Roma migration to Western Europe (Ciaschi, 2018).

In the context of Italy, this migration was not welcomed, instead it was referred to as an “invasion” (Kóczé, 2018, p. 465). Furthermore, it was addressed by the media as excessively nomadic or irregular, further reinforcing a narrative of Roma as abnormal migrants in comparison to the standard of “white migrants in the EU” (Kóczé, 2018, p 460). This narrative of Roma nomadism in Italy was consolidated in the 1980s when regional councils implemented laws aimed at protecting what they saw as Roma culture, particularly their supposed nomadic lifestyle. This approach led to the creation of nomad camps, focusing on both Italian Roma and Sinti, as well as Roma migrants from the former Yugoslavia, many of whom were not actually nomads (Daniele et al, 2018).

In 2008 the “Nomad Problem” emerged as a national issue, driven by increased Roma migration from Romania and four incidents in major cities : “the fire in the Opera shantytown, a camp entirely made up of tents located just outside Milan; the hyper-visibility of Roma minor “pickpockets” in the main train station of Milan; the pogrom of Ponticelli in Naples (May 2017); and the murder of Giovanna Reggiani in Rome (October 2007)” (Daniele et al., 2018, p. 114). Although the focus on nomadism aimed to avoid ethnic profiling, it overlooked the two-thirds of Roma and Sinti who lived in mainstream housing (Daniele et al., 2018). Following the victory of the centre-right coalition in the 2008 national election, an “emergency law” (Kóczé, 2018, p. 465) was passed as part of a bigger “security package” (Kóczé, 2018, p. 465). It declared nomad camps to constitute an emergency in several regions of Italy, including Campania, Latium, Calabria, and Lombardy (Kóczé, 2018). That same year the emergency was extended nationwide, which led to mass evictions and fines for minor offences (Daniele et al., 2018).

Tosi Cambini and Beluschi-Fabeni (2017) highlight the use of antigypsyism as a political tool, especially during election periods, to sway the masses and foment them against a scapegoat. Piero Colacchi (2008) further emphasises how it was employed by both right-wing and centre-left politicians during elections to seek consensus, as in the case of former mayor of Rome Walter Veltroni's "securitarian propaganda" (p. 36) and the concept of "terrorise and win" (Colacchi, 2008, p. 36). The terms "Roma" and "Romanian" were used interchangeably, which further aggravated the many preexisting misconceptions and the process of "othering" of Roma as outsiders and non-Italians. The subsequent investigation on Mafia Capitale in 2014 revealed corruption within the management of programs regulating social services and actions aimed at the Roma, further complicating the lives of these communities in Italy (Daniele et al., 2018).

Following the discriminatory political decisions taken by the Italian state against Roma migration, it quickly became clear that domestic governments were not the place where "protection lay" (Plaut, 2012, p. 61). Like Plaut, many other scholars argue that the true strength of the Romani diaspora are the Transnational Romani Organisations and their collaboration with European institutions (Plaut, 2012; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022).

Transnationally, several entities and NGOs contribute to strengthening the political identity of Roma domestically. Most of these organisations focus their intervention on the issue of combating antigypsyism within the framework of human and minority rights. These organisations are divided into three main categories: "1) agencies run by non-Roma but that deal with Roma problems; 2) agencies run by Roma dealing with Roma issues and 3) agencies run by both Roma and non-Roma" (Bunescu, 2014, p.73). Some of the agencies which have had the most impact on Roma issues belong in the third category, as they have diverse perspectives and expertise. This makes them better suited to navigate the challenges and gaps between the Roma communities and the authorities (Bunescu, 2014).

At the European level, the Council of Europe and European Commission are the two entities which push for greater attention to the issues of antigypsyism (Bunescu, 2014). As pointed out by McGarry (2010), transnational organisations like the ERRC, ERIO and ERGO not only advocate and lobby for Roma rights at the EU level, but they also effectively create networks for local/national Roma and pro-Roma movements, offering training, research, and reporting violations by states. Ivasiuc (2018) stresses how “powerful top-down advocacy initiatives” (p.4) have materialised in the creation of institutions like ERIAC and its aim in promoting Roma culture by Roma themselves. Yet, given the significant political and financial support provided by the Council of Europe and George Soros’s Open Society Foundation, it has effectively restricted alternative forms of activism that prioritise addressing economic inequalities over symbolic or identity-based recognition (Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018).

ERGO is a transnational organization which connects grassroots Roma communities across borders. It supports networking and facilitates cross-border collaboration, enabling the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices among local Roma organizations. Effectively connecting Roma communities in many Balkan countries, it enables them to learn from each other’s experiences and strategies for successful local mobilisation. This collaborative exchange of ideas allowed the grassroots organisations domestically to adopt practices from other regions which were successful in negotiating with authorities, improving local infrastructure, and building unity (van Baar, 2005). Van Baar (2005) illustrates the experience of the Roma community in Kriva Palanka, a town in North Macedonia, where a local Roma organisation, Fundatia Avundipe, successfully negotiated with the electricity company to restore the electricity, which was intentionally cut off, in exchange for labour.

By sharing tactics for community mobilisation, transnational networks like ERGO support local Roma communities in developing their own solutions to problems like poverty, lack of infrastructure, and social marginalisation. Through these transnational connections,

grassroots organisations gain tools to address local challenges while remaining autonomous. ERGO's decentralised, non-hierarchical structure enables Roma communities to form temporary alliances with other groups facing similar issues, creating a flexible approach to grassroots organising. This transnational support fosters self-empowerment, helping Roma communities advocate for their own needs (van Baar, 2005).

Understanding the heterogeneous composition of Roma communities enables further understanding of their political mobilisation (Clough Marinaro & Signona 2011; McGarry 2010). The reason why Roma are so diverse, specifically in the Italian context, is partly due to the different migration flows which have taken place through history, from the late Middle Ages to the early 2000's. As highlighted by UNAR in the National Strategy (2012-2020), the heterogeneity of the Roma complicates creating a single approach to "integration". Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the socio-economic, geographical, cultural and legal contexts which the Roma communities are located within when drafting a framework which is cohesive and inclusive (UNAR, 2012). Aside from policymaking, the internal diversity of these groups creates locally heterogeneous social movements, differing from national level groups which focus on "culture politics" (Clough Marinaro and Daniele, 2014, p. 788). As "identity and interests are mutually reinforced" (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022, p. 26) it becomes more difficult to spell out common interests when the identity is heterogeneous, as will be covered more in detail in the theoretical chapter that follows.

To mitigate the long-established exclusion of Roma from European societies, the European Union developed several legal instruments and initiatives for the purpose of protecting and recognizing the Romani minority. In 2011 the biggest step towards socio-economic inclusion of Roma was taken by the European Commission which implemented the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies by joining forces at different levels: the EU, regional, and national levels (European Commission, 2011). Yet, this framework was

criticised by the same European Commission in 2020, as the proper implementation of the framework by member states was ineffective. The problems affecting socio-economic conditions and instances of segregation of Roma pupils in education have not decreased. There is limited access to medical coverage, lack of employment opportunities for Roma, and the housing situation remains a challenging area of intervention. Although there has been some reduction in discrimination experiences among Roma, issues such as antigypsyism and hate crimes continue to be significant concerns (European Commission, 2020).

The Italian National Strategy (2012-2020) was drafted on the guidelines provided by the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. It focused its scope of intervention on four main pillars: work, education, housing, and health (Bortone, 2016). This intervention was a structured multilevel system with a strong inter-ministerial coordination, regional tables, and municipal inclusion plans (Bortone, 2016). At the national level, there was an effort to constitute a strong centralised framework, especially in the first two years of the implementation of the strategy (Bortone, 2016). Roundtables coordinated by the Ministries of Health, Labour, Infrastructure, and Education collaborated with national working groups which focused on the undefined legal situation of *de facto* stateless Roma, while a task force composed of UNAR, ISTAT and ANCI dealt with the collection and classification of statistical sources on the presence and needs of Roma, Sinti, and Camminanti locally (Bortone, 2016). Local level of intervention was considered a priority; thus, it moved along three lines: to grasp the needs of various Roma communities on the territory and verify the proper implementation by local government of the National Strategy (2012-2020); support to Municipalities for the formulation and implementation of integrated local action plans; cooperation between Municipalities regarding Local Action Plans (Bortone, 2016).

Following the launch of the National Strategy in 2012, the public debate concerning the lack of formal recognition of the Roma minority intensified (Bortone & Pistecchia, 2019). In

Italy the concept of minorities is closely tied to linguistic traits, which are safeguarded by Article 6 of the Constitution. Law 482 enacted in 1999, recognizes twelve historical ethno-linguistic minorities concentrated in specific geographical areas (Bortone & Pistecchia, 2019). Unfortunately, the Italian legislator neglected the singularity of the Romanès language by favouring “territorial presence” (Bortone & Pistecchia, 2019, p. 206) as the key requirement for recognition, which excluded Roma as a minority, due to their dispersal throughout the Italian territory (Bortone & Pistecchia, 2019). The EU recommendation on the National Strategy (2012-2020) suggests an “implicit recognition” (Bortone & Pistecchia, 2019, p. 207) of Roma as a group. As a response, the Italian government committed to the creation of working groups tasked with defining an “omnibus/ad hoc” (Bortone & Pistecchia, 2019, p. 208) piece of legislation to recognize Roma as a minority.

As pointed out in a joint statement by Amnesty International, Associazione 21 Luglio, and ERRC, the implementation of Italy’s National Strategy (2012-2020) was not up to standard. According to these three organisations, the human rights of Roma communities continued to be infringed (Amnesty International, 2016). Particularly concerning was the area of housing, as segregated camps continued to be a reality. Roma were – and are still today – particularly discriminated against in access to social housing which forces them to live in camps, not all of which are authorised and which later results in evictions (Amnesty International, 2016). The three organizations called on the European Commission to act against the Italian state for its improper protection of human rights and dignity of Roma Communities.

According to Clough Marinaro and Sigona (2011), the phenomenon of antigypsyism is the act of degrading Roma for the purpose of labelling them with “negative stereotypes” (p. 585). Such labels are easily inflicted yet difficult to erase, to the point where such stereotypes affect the day-to-day life of Roma communities, especially since no efforts have been made by the Italian government to launch a campaign on eradicating such prejudices based on ethnic

and socio-economic grounds. This tactic involves exploiting the deeply rooted prejudice prevalent in the Italian society and amplifying the negative stereotypes and portrayal of Roma as a security threat. According to Pasta (2019), this phenomenon aggravated by the higher level of antigypsyism in Italy compared to the other EU member states. By channelling public discontent towards the Roma, politicians deflect attention from broader socio-economic grievances which the political system is unable to address.

This overview of Roma mobilization internationally and the challenges faced by this minority in the EU and Italy shows that while there have been significant steps forward regarding Roma political participation, substantial barriers remain. Roma political mobilization post-WWII to present day activism, illustrates the growing role of EU institutions and transnational Roma organizations in supporting grassroots movements. The heterogeneous nature of the Roma communities presents both opportunities and challenges for political mobilization, as the many diverse perspectives but a burden on collective action. The overview of the National Strategy (2012-2020) underscores its limited scope of intervention, due partially to the lack of formal recognition of Roma as a minority under Law 482, as well as the persistence of institutional antigypsyism. These themes will inform the following sections where the new National Strategy (2021-2030) will be examined in its ability to address the gaps identified in the previous strategy, and its capacity to promote Roma political inclusion.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This theoretical discussion covers a variety of themes to help understand and analyse the complexities of Roma political participation. It begins by engaging with liberal multiculturalism and its drawbacks. Then it incorporates Tremlett's (2014) proposal to focus on superdiversity as a new framework for policymaking as it acknowledges how intersecting factors like ethnicity, immigration status, and socio-economic position shape minority needs. Additionally, this chapter investigates how Romani identity is constructed and mobilised, emphasising its fluidity and the strategic decisions Roma activists must navigate to achieve legitimacy.

Will Kymlicka's discussion of liberal multiculturalism is a very influential perspective which theorizes how liberal democracies should accommodate the cultural diversity of minorities and their social and political participation, without forcing them to assimilate (Kymlicka, 2007). The central idea in his theory revolves around group-differentiation as an approach to address the needs of different minorities. This entails "tailoring" cultural rights to those specific needs of minorities, instead of merely adopting a universal approach (Guérard de Latour, 2023). Kymlicka distinguishes between two main categories of minorities namely, national minorities and immigrant groups (Kymlicka, 2007). He defines national minorities as indigenous people, groups who have historically claimed self-determination, and possess a specific territoriality (Kymlicka, 2007). Instead, immigrant groups are defined as those who have migrated into a new country and now claim cultural accommodations (Kymlicka, 2007).

In his classification, Kymlicka points out how European states have always been reluctant to recognize Roma as a national minority due to their lack of territoriality (Kymlicka, 2007). As pointed out by Sophie Guérard de Latour (2023), this is a limitation to his theory because Roma are considered by Kymlicka as a transnational minority, which contrasts the binary categorization of national minority or immigrant group. This "anomaly" suggests his

typology may need to be expanded to include the Roma people, which have no specific territorial definition of nation-state affiliation, but instead exist as a diaspora throughout the countries of Europe (Guérard de Latour, 2023). Moreover, the Roma diaspora, unlike other minorities, is very culturally diverse internally, which creates issues in presenting a single approach to cultural rights which would encompass all Roma communities.

The over-emphasis of liberal multiculturalism on the component of ethnicity and cultural identity is a limiting factor to this theory. As suggested by Tremlett (2014), Steven Vertovec's theory of superdiversity allows for a post-multiculturalist approach which recognises "the importance of other "additional variables" including different countries of origin, ethnicities, differential immigration status, entitlements or restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, spatial distribution patterns, and mixed local responses" (p. 3). This research will use the theory of superdiversity as a crucial framework for understanding these complex intersections for the case study of Roma communities in Italy.

At the core of superdiversity lies the belief that multiculturalism's focus on ethnicity is outdated as it does not reflect the modern-day dynamics of how people live (Tremlett, 2014). Approaches which focus solely on ethnicity and cultural identity are often insufficient for understanding individual needs or the complexities surrounding inclusion and exclusion (Tremlett, 2014). Superdiversity is a perfect application for the case of Roma in Europe, as they are an extremely heterogeneous group with contrasting political priorities, mainly due to their different countries of origin, ethnicity¹, language, gender, access to structural resources, and migration (Tremlett, 2014). All these factors have an impact on their political views, participation, and representation (Tremlett, 2014). For this reason, it is best to keep in mind

¹ By ethnicities, Tremlett refers to the various "subgroups" which are present under the Romani umbrella namely: "Roma, Sinti, Kale, Gypsies, Romanichals, Travellers, Yenish" (2024, p. 4)

how a single Roma community does not exist, but rather one should refer to the many Roma communities.

The literature on Romani identity presents three primary areas of focus, namely historical diaspora, lifestyle and behaviour, and lastly biological kinship. The historical diaspora perspective suggests that Roma are a historically distinct community with shared roots and migration patterns, which can be traced back to their migratory path from India to Europe in the Middle Ages (Vermeersch, 2007). This perspective faces criticism, especially since many anthropologists argue that linguistic connections to Indian languages do not necessarily indicate a common origin (Vermeersch, 2007). They warn that such a narrative may run the risk of homogenising diverse groups.

The second perspective focuses on lifestyle and behaviour, emphasising common cultural practices, including nomadism and social habits (Vermeersch, 2007). While this view acknowledges Romani ethnicity, it runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes of Roma as nomads and outsiders. The third conceptualization, biological kinship, argues for genetic links among the Roma, even considering the absorption of non-Roma during migration (Vermeersch, 2007). This view remains controversial due to its association with eugenics and Nazi racial theories that classified Roma as biologically inferior (Vermeersch, 2007). Altogether, these conceptualizations show the difficulty in defining Romani identity, by highlighting the ongoing scholarly debate surrounding it. While a “correct” conceptualization of Roma identity does not exist, the use of the term “Roma” represents a conscious effort, made by those same communities, to move away from the negative stereotypes (Vermeersch, 2007).

The introduction of this term is closely tied to the process of Romani political mobilisation post-WWII, which ties it directly to the movement. As suggested by Vermeersch (2007), the conceptualization of Romani identity may be interpreted through different lenses and approaches. It is important to point out how, on the one hand, a strong portion of academia

still seems to reduce Roma identity to tangible “properties and objective characteristics” (Vermeersch, 2007, p. 13). Instead, Nicolae Gheorghe and Thomas Acton, two scholars involved in the international Romani movement, highlight that not everyone who identifies as Roma chooses to use that name (Vermeersch, 2007). For instance, some groups, like the German Sinte, may reject the term due to feelings of being “overshadowed” by claims of authenticity from the Vlach Roma. Indeed, modern scholarship rejects essentialist views over ethnicity and a fixed ethnic group. As suggested by Roger Brubaker, one should view ethnicity beyond the “reification of boundaries” (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022, p. 23), and instead picture ethnicity as a set of dynamics, processes, and disaggregation.

Ultimately, the promotion of a single category under the umbrella term “Roma” led to policy measures being targeted at this constructed identity, disregarding the needs of the various sub-groups (Vermeersch, 2007). After 1989, the Roma were no longer viewed through general social policy categories – poverty or unemployment — but were now treated as a “special target group” (Vermeersch, 2007, p. 214) requiring aimed policies. This had a huge impact on Romani activism, as they began to push for the notion that Roma identity encompasses a variety of different sub-groups.

As pointed out by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022), the theme of ethnic mobilisation has a diverse range of theoretical approaches. While they all contribute towards understanding ethnic mobilisation, this section of the research will include the elements which help explain how it has been used as a political tool in the specific context of Italy.

The political process perspective emerges as the most relevant for understanding ethnic mobilisation as it emphasises the significance of three elements: political opportunities, mobilising structures, and framing processes. It argues that ethnic mobilisation is not influenced by one single element, but instead it is a combination of processes shaped by the institutional environment, within which the political actors are required to engage and make

strategic choices (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022; Vermeersch, 2007). The political process perspective proposes that ethnic identity is consolidated through political action. This idea reflects the relation between grassroots dynamics and macro-political factors.

By political opportunities, Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022) refers to conditions, both informal and formal, which facilitate collective action. These include openness of institutional political systems, elite allies, and the shifts in political allies which create opportunities for mobilization. While traditionally political opportunities exclusively comprised “state-level developments” (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022, p. 35), the current narrative in academia highlights the influence of the transnational sphere, especially since the patterns of oppression on Roma are similar cross borders (Guérard de Latour, 2023). This perspective is shared by McGarry (2010) who underlines the importance of international institutions and NGOs that supported the Roma political projects. Since the late 1990’s, Roma elites have pushed issues affecting their communities onto “the political agenda in the European Union (EU) and its member states” (McGarry, 2014, p. 759).

The second element of the political process is the presence of mobilising structures. Concisely, mobilising structures refers to the leadership, resources, and networks required to “engage in collective action” (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022, p. 36). These include NGOs, political parties, unions, and activists, and are structures that facilitate and organise the mobilisation into collective action and are the expression of the collective will to engage with the authorities, constituencies, and allies (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022). They set the agenda and publicly articulate and represent the collective claims. Mobilising structures do not only include social movements; micro-level mobilizations may also include family and friends, which make them relevant avenues for the recruitment process (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022).

Mobilising structures are dynamic in nature. They may transform over time and their core attributes may be multiple, combining political mobilisation with advocacy, self-help, and

service provision (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022). Even more relevant to our case study is the representativeness and quality of the leadership, as leaders decide on action strategies and shape the group identity. As rightly pointed out by Mirga Kruszelnicka (2022), if groups strive for social change, then their leaders must be credible intermediaries between them and the establishment, and not spokespersons of their own personal agenda (Surdu and Kovats, 2015). Therefore, given the heterogeneity of mobilising structures, it is important to analyse them not as a stand-alone identity, but in relation to one another and the environment they operate in, essentially as a whole network of interconnections.

The last element of the political process are the mobilising frames i.e. identity and interests. This section examines whether identity is prerequisite or a product of mobilisation. Collective identity frame construction is key to articulating political objectives and justifying mobilisation. In fact, identity framing is a fluid process, which changes with the evolving goals and opportunities (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022). Therefore, identity frames are activated during mobilisation and tailored to fit the political and social environment (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022; Vermeersch, 2007). Identity frames are narrated through various means, including discourse and performances which effectively delineate the constituency group (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022). Ethnic mobilisation is not just shaped by pre-existing identities but, instead, those identities are actively shaped by mobilisation as it progresses.

Heterogeneity of a group is not a weakness in the construction of mobilising frames; it is the essentialist concept of identity which should be reviewed. Cultural essentialism perceives culture as homogenous without taking into consideration important socio-economic factors which have an impact on the perception of self and interests of constituencies (Surdu and Kovats, 2015). This perspective is reinforced by McGarry (2010), who insists that ethnic identity is a unifying force for Roma heterogeneity. Roma as a social movement struggle to identify common interests and values due to fragmentation, yet a certain sense of solidarity

denotes a collective effort for “the improvement in the living conditions of all Roma” (McGarry, 2010, p. 171).

McGarry argues for an increased Roma political participation and representation through two ways. Firstly, through parliamentary representation and secondly through civil society organisations. The former may be achieved through: Romani political parties, Roma candidates in mainstream parties, and Roma standing as an independent candidate (Aidan McGarry, 2010). While Romani political parties offer the opportunity to express their interests, such a representation is often limited to local level governance. Roma candidates running either independently or with a mainstream party usually do not “legitimately represent and articulate the interests of his or her minority community” (McGarry, 2010, p. 34). Moreover, all these three ways are contingent on the level of political experience of the candidates, which in the case of Roma is usually low, and the political visions of the candidates, which is rather fragmented.

The latter, through civil society organisations, offers the opportunity for Roma activists to advocate outside the “formal political arena” (McGarry, 2010, p. 35). Roma activists strategically engage with formal institutions and identity politics. McGarry (2010) and Vermeersch (2007) highlight the critical choices Roma leaders face: whether to collaborate with established political institutions as partners or adopt more contentious approaches, such as civil disobedience and public protest. Another key decision concerns the framing of Romani identity—whether to emphasise it as a distinct ethnic or national identity or to align it with broader solidarities, such as socioeconomic struggles (Vermeersch, 2007). Additionally, Roma activists must weigh the benefits of cooperating with non-Romani actors, including mainstream political parties and NGOs, against the option of maintaining a separate, Roma-exclusive approach through their own political parties or organisations. Vermeersch (2007) notes a growing preference for institutional cooperation among Roma activists, reflecting the

increasing institutionalisation of the Roma movement and the decline of confrontational strategies. Even though the shift to cooperation with institutions may offer opportunities for engagement, it is not conducive to building self-sufficient Roma communities. Unfortunately, as highlighted by Nasture (2015) within the context of the “Gypsy Industry”, many of these actors are often more focused on their own survival, as leaders of organizations and the acquisition of funds, than on effecting meaningful change for the communities they claim to advocate for.

Within liberal democratic systems, minorities like the Roma often lack proper representation structures within the domestic political arena and such groups are pushed to develop alternative structures of representation to articulate their interests. As pointed out by McGarry (2010) and Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022), Roma civil society organisations are often detached from the material issues affecting the Roma communities they claim to represent, and most importantly, lack legitimate democratic mandate. Due to their fragmented and divergent political visions, leaders of these civil society groups often engage in internal conflict among themselves, undermining their legitimacy as leaders (Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018).

This same lack of legitimacy is also attributed to transnational Roma organisations and activism. Although both are extremely influential in articulating the interests of Roma beyond state borders, these organisations are not elected nor are they formed by civil society, which creates problems for their legitimacy. George Soros particularly stands out as he played a crucial role in financially supporting transnational Roma organizations through his Open Society Institute (Trehan, 2009). Open Society became central to the Roma rights movement and development of the Roma NGO sector. The considerable financial and ideological guidance, based on liberal values, marked the steady “NGOization of Roma rights” (Trehan, 2009, p. 60). Recently, concerns have arisen from the influence exerted by Open Society on the direction of the Roma rights movement, sparking debates on whose interests these groups

are truly representing (Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018; van Baar, 2011). The newly established Roma Foundation, founded by Open Society Institute, is yet another example of top-down decision making. Critics argue that the foundation's creation proceeded without first consulting the relevant stakeholders, highlight a significant lack of inclusivity in decision-making prior to its launch (Ryder et al., 2022).

This lack of legitimacy is further aggravated by accusations of tokenism, especially when Roma elites are placed in governmental agencies, or provided a seat in the parliament under a mainstream party (McGarry, 2010). Critics argue that such placements are only symbolic, and that they do not empower Roma participation (McGarry, 2010). As Ryder (2022) points out one way of understanding Roma exclusion is through Arnstein's ladder of participation. His ladder frames a vertical scale of empowerment levels. The bottom levels representing non-participation, the middle levels representing "tokenistic participation" (Ryder, 2022, p. 44) and the top levels representing true citizenship power.

In conclusion, this theoretical discussion highlights the dynamic nature of Roma political participation and representation. By examining the limitations of Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism approach and integrating the broader perspective of superdiversity, it becomes clear that the Roma, as a diverse and transnational minority, require more than a simplistic, ethnicity-based approach to minority rights. Romani identity reflects the fluidity of Roma ethnic mobilisation, where identity is shaped both by internal diversity and the external political environment. For this reason, the political process perspective provides a critical understanding of how Roma activism navigates political opportunities and mobilising structures to push for the interests of the Roma, both domestically and transnationally. Lastly, this framework also illustrates the challenges faced by Roma activists in legitimately representing their communities both within formal political arenas and through civil society organisations without incurring the risk of tokenism.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The aim of this study was to investigate the political inclusion of Roma in Italy, with particular focus on the current National Strategy (2021-2030). It examines the changes that have been introduced to mitigate the limitations of the previous National Strategy (2012-2020) concerning the legal recognition of Roma and identifies the persistent gaps that limit the framework's effectiveness in combatting antigypsyism. The research operationalized the following constructs: Optimise, political inclusion, legal recognition, and antigypsyism. By optimization of the current National Strategy (2021-2030) this paper means to propose policy changes for the framework to be more effective. Political inclusion refers to Roma protagonism in decision making concerning their self-determination, representation in political offices, and franchise to political life. By legal recognition the paper specifically refers to the acknowledgment of Roma as a historical linguistic minority under Law 482. Lastly, antigypsyism encompasses any action or attitudes which use hate speech, prejudice, and stereotypes to construct a negative image of Roma, which only marginalises them further.

The research was based entirely on qualitative data collected by the researcher through ten semi-structured interviews and attendance at four events: a conference by UCRI hosted in Sapienza University during Romani week 2024, IRPPS REGARD - REmembering Genocide Against Roma Discrimination project event on 8 May, European electoral platform hosted in the Gordiani Roma Camp on 23 May, and the New Romalen Fest on May 25. Data was also collected through a comparative analysis of the old and new National Strategies published by the inter-governmental agency, UNAR.

The target population of this study included Roma and pro-Roma activists, Roma party leaders, and experts in the field of Roma studies and politics who worked at UNAR or who had written extensively on the topic. This triangulation of sources ensured an accurate sample of people involved in the field for the purpose of validity and for upholding the representation of

multiple perspectives. It would have been meaningless to interview non-Roma people, or others who are not directly involved in the drafting of policies and research concerning the conditions of Roma in Italy as they do not have the required expertise and knowledge.

Purposive sampling was used for the sole reason that it is a non-probability approach and is instead aimed at selecting a group which had characteristics needed for the research. Furthermore, snowball sampling was also employed to broaden the sample pool using the recommendations given to me by the interviewees on who to interview next. Inevitably, this method has its limitations, as the recommended person is usually someone who holds a similar narrative as the interviewee, making this subjective to the person who is giving the recommendation. However, given the niche field of the study, any recommendation is helpful to broaden the pool of perspectives.

Written consent was asked for the interview to be recorded, occasionally when interviewee refused to sign informed consent, verbal consent was asked. The interviews were loose in nature, semi-structured, and were employed as they are less bound to strict frames and provided the researcher and the interviewee with space to explore themes which were relevant to the topic and had not deductively been considered while drafting the questions. An interview log was kept which included jottings on important information regarding the person being interviewed, first impressions, relevant concepts outlined by the interviewee, and connections made with insights previously presented by interviewees and with the theoretical framework.

All interviews were fully transcribed, using a software called “TurboScribe”. Following the transcription, the text was proof-read to pick up any mistakes made during the generation of the text. The transcriptions were then coded using “Taguette”, with codes that were both deductively and inductively created. The deductive codes were the constructs operationalized at the beginning of this section, and key words present in the questions asked during the interview. Meanwhile the inductive codes were recurring themes which all participants

mentioned. Lastly, the method used for analysing the National Strategies involved applying six questions to both documents using the same methodology. Each question was administered one by one for each strategy, to then move onto the next one. This was to minimise any disturbance or inconsistency with the data collection. The data collected from the documents was processed and simplified for it to be put into a chart, as can be seen in the findings chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This section of the findings chapter analyses and compares the old (2012-2021) and new (2021-2030) National Strategies. It aims to highlight the evolution in their goals, participation frameworks, and implementation approaches. Through this cross examination, this analysis identifies the shift in priorities and methodology, spelling out how the new National Strategy (2021-2030) seeks to address the limitations of its predecessor. This comparison highlights the extent to which the new National Strategy (2021-2030) is in line with the objectives of promoting Roma political inclusion and fighting systemic antigypsyism.

Table comparing the Old and New National Strategies

ASPECTS	OLD (2012-2021)	NEW (2021-2030)
Aims/Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Inclusion - Ending the “Emergency Phase” of RSC - Long term planning and improvement of living conditions - Resolve issue of legal status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promotion of culture as key - Enhance participation of RSC in design initiatives, monitoring, and implementation - Resolve issue of legal status - Monitoring of fund allocation - Combat antigypsyism
Involvement in creating the strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UNAR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UNAR - National Roma and Sinti Platform - Community Forum
Specific actions towards Roma inclusion and political participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishment of National network to implement the strategy - Testing of participatory model - RSC participation locally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Empowerment of Roma and Sinti in decision-making - Consolidation of the National Platform and Community Forum. - Enhanced funds allocation - Bottom-up monitoring - Transnational collaboration with other

		EU organisations.
Legal Status	- Ad hoc working group	- Persistence of Ad hoc working group
Key Entities	- Establishment of synergies between: Central administration, regions, municipalities, National Roma and Sinti Platform and Community Forum.	- Multi-level governance model involving: - Municipalities - Regions - Anti-discrimination centres - National Roma and Sinti Platform and Community Forum
Monitoring	- Top-down monitoring by UNAR and central administration entities. - Consultative role of RSC federations/groups	- Monitoring and Evaluation unit coordinated by National Contact Point. - Formal involvement of Roma and Sinti in bottom-up monitoring

i. (UNAR, 2012; UNAR, 2021)

The table above is an illustration of the main differences between the approach, aims and objectives of the old and new National Strategies. The focus of the old strategy was centred around the promotion of social inclusion. It emphasised the need for improvements in the living conditions of Roma and Sinti communities and began advocating for the participation of these communities in the decision-making process (UNAR, 2012).

The key objectives of this strategy focused on the inclusion in the socio-economic fabric and resolving the issue of the legal status. The old strategy focused heavily on the social inclusion of Roma, to move beyond the “emergency phase” established in 2008 (UNAR, 2012), which saw Roma issues being tackled as an emergency by both right-wing and left-wing governments, as well as by local authorities. Therefore, the main objectives of the old strategy were based on four main axes of intervention: “employment, housing, schooling and health”

(UNAR, 2012, p. 29). Despite its aims, this strategy lacked the component of political participation. It was under the first strategy that the participatory model and consultative forum and platform were established to involve the Roma communities in discussions about their own inclusion, however they were not embedded structurally within the National Strategy (2012-2021) (UNAR, 2012). This meant that while these avenues allowed for dialogue and consultation, they lacked the authority to impact the decision-making process. Therefore, the forum and platform reminded advisory in nature.

The new National Strategy (2021-2030) marked a major shift towards the participation of Roma and Sinti in the design, implementation, and mentoring of the projects sponsored by the National Strategy (2021-2030) to promote cooperation and legitimacy (UNAR, 2021). While the old strategy was centrally drafted by UNAR, the new strategy empowered the entities previously created by the old strategy – the National Roma and Sinti Platform and Roma and Sinti Community Forum—granting them major roles in respect to funds allocation, initiatives and even monitoring of the efficacy of the actions promoted by the strategy (UNAR 2012; UNAR, 2021). These two entities’ empowerment signalled a decentralisation of governance. In the old strategy the central administration, regions, and municipalities had just established a synergy with the National Roma and Sinti Platform and Community Forum (UNAR, 2012). Instead, the new strategy incorporates these two entities within the “multi-level governance” (UNAR, 2021, p. 9) system.

The main objectives of the new National Strategy (2021-2030) are based on six major thematic areas: “antigypsyism, education, employment, housing, health, cultural promotion” (UNAR, 2021, p. 4). The introduction of cultural promotion, as a core objective of the new strategy, departs from viewing Roma exclusively through the lenses of social problems. In promoting culture, it increases the participation of Roma by allocating funds to cultural initiatives aimed at fostering their history and strengthening their identity (UNAR, 2021).

Lastly, another significant element present in the new strategy is a strong commitment to combatting antigypsyism. While the previous strategy made limited reference to this type of discrimination, the new European approach places the fight against antigypsyism as a priority (UNAR, 2021). The new strategy aims to address this form of discrimination systematically, tackling it across all levels—from societal prejudices to institutional biases within the framework of intervention outlined by the new strategy (UNAR, 2021).

Following this comparison of the formal dimensions of the two strategies, we now turn to the differing perspectives of key experts regarding these shifts, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the new National Strategy (2021-2030). Several experts I consulted, including policymakers, Roma activists, Roma party leaders, and scholars specializing in Romani studies provided relevant insights for analysing the practical implementation of the current National Strategy (2021-2030). While the comparative analysis of the two strategies provides a foundational understanding of the normative dimension, the qualitative insights from these interviews are essential for understanding the descriptive dimension for several reasons. Firstly, they offered a practical insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the National Strategy (2021-2030) and its implementation. Secondly, the interviews provided the perspectives of Roma communities' needs and aspirations, which are not captured in formal documents. By integrating these expert insights to the analysis of the National Strategy (2021-2030), we can grasp the limitations of this framework and include the voices of relevant stakeholders who represent the otherwise excluded perspective of Roma communities.

A critical point raised with near unanimity by interviewees is the lack of formal recognition of Roma as a historical-linguistic minority. This gap has created significant attrition in the strategy's implementation, undermining efforts to address the challenges faced by Roma communities. As Roberto Bortone – who works at UNAR and coordinated both National Strategies – explained, the Italian state does not legally recognize Roma under Law 482, passed

in 1999. The reason for this non-recognition is that Roma do not qualify under one fundamental criterion: the law “si basa proprio su un principio di territorialità” (R. Bortone, personal communication, March 18, 2024). Many of the Roma activists and party leaders pointed out that the law was implicitly drafted in such a way as to exclude Roma, specifically due to Lega Nord opposing the inclusion of Roma under this law. Therefore Law 482, excludes Roma on the basis of lack of territoriality, due to their distribution along the entire Italian peninsula.

Effectively, the lack of minority recognition under Law 482 poses difficulties in the proper implementation of the National Strategy (2021-2030), especially in addressing the issue of antigypsyism. Party leader of Mistipè, Gulia di Rocco talked extensively about the issue of Roma not being recognized as a minority. While referring to the strategy and how it aims to combat antigypsyism she said: “Quindi dire che l’antiziganismo esiste o fare politiche per i Rom è controproducente, perché tu come stato non riconosci [formalmente] i Rom come minoranza” (G. Di Rocco, personal communication, March 28, 2024)”. This perspective was also shared by Roma activist and vice president of Movimento Kethane, Fiorello Miguel Lebbiati, who stressed: “il riconoscimento della minoranza storico-linguistica ci permetterebbe di avere qualche strumento in più per difenderci, per divulgare la nostra storia, la nostra cultura e per non essere più narrati solo come un problema sociale, ma saremmo effettivamente un soggetto riconosciuto” (F. M. Lebbiati, personal communication, April 11, 2024)

Other interviewees pointed out how the recognition of Roma under Law 482 would provide their associations with more autonomy and access to funds and projects outside the boundaries of the National Strategy (2021-2030). Dijana Pavlović, president of Movimento Kethane, specifically pointed to the “big funds” available within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan: “Quando tu chiedi di rientrare nel budget per esempio del PNRR, che sono fondi immensamente più grandi, immensamente più importanti, che comprendono tutte le

questioni, anche che riguardano per esempio i Rom, ti dicono che voi [associazioni Rom] avete la strategia.” (D. Pavlović, personal communication, June 6, 2024)

The main outlier within this discussion is Carlo Stasolla, president of Associazione 21 Luglio. He pointed out how such a recognition would not help decrease antigypsyism or enhance the implementation of the National Strategy (2021-2030). He argued that the recognition of Roma under Law 482 would further enlarge the differences between Roma who live in houses and those who live in the camps:

Noi lavoriamo con le persone che in quanto riconosciute come Rom vivono in condizioni di privazione e povertà. E secondo noi una legge di questo tipo non ha alcun impatto su di loro, ma al contrario creerebbe una differenziazione sempre più ampia, allargherebbe la forbice tra quei Rom che vivono nei campi e quelli che vivono nelle case. Inoltre, manca il riconoscimento del territorio, la dimensione territoriale. (C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024)

Stasolla further highlighted how one of the main difficulties in legislating in favour of the recognition of Roma as a minority is the lack of clear criteria to define who belongs to this minority, since there is a lack of a territorial dimension and a precise census.

Secondly, the National Strategy’s “success” is contingent upon the type of government in charge, and its willingness to empower the UNAR in combating discrimination. UNAR is Italy’s National Office Against Racial Discrimination operating under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. It works to combat discrimination based on gender, religion, and ethnicity through awareness campaigns, advocacy, and policymaking. As highlighted by several interviewees, UNAR is an intergovernmental agency and not an independent body. This means that its priorities are dictated by the political agenda of the ruling government. UNAR’s lack of independence creates issues when the legislature ends or is changed, as the actions of the past government may not be “recognized” by the new party in charge. This creates a domino

effect on all the projects, strategies, and actions under UNAR's supervision, as the priorities shift.

Giulia Di Rocco pointed to the current situation, where a right-wing coalition governs Italy, stating that UNAR is unable to distance itself from “le politiche messe in atto nei confronti dei Rom da parte di certi esponenti politici che adesso governano, che sono l'estrema destra, loro [UNAR] non possono fare niente” (G. Di Rocco, personal communication, March 28, 2024). Gennaro Spinelli, president of UCRI, shares the view of Di Rocco on the matter of UNAR's lack of independence, explaining how the UNAR director is appointed directly by the President of the Council of Ministers in charge at that moment, adding that “tra un anno e mezzo il nuovo direttore sarà di Fratelli d'Italia” (G. Spinelli, personal communication, April 23, 2024). During the electoral platform held at the Gordiani Roma Camp (23 May 2024), Fiorello Miguel Lebbiati and Paolo Cagna Ninchi also alluded to the constant turnover of UNAR directors over the years, some serving for as little as a few months.

As McGarry points out, political will to implement policy, which is effective and truly inclusive must be present, especially since the various National Strategies are not legally binding. “Many countries across Europe, Italy included, have more right-wing governments, and they are not interested. They're just not interested in Roma” (A. McGarry, personal communication, June 28, 2024).

Thirdly, there appears to be insufficient resource allocation for projects, and the effectiveness of monitoring these initiatives is widely debated. The views on the success of monitoring efforts related to the strategy are quite varied. On the one hand, UNAR representative Alessandro Pistecchia describes the importance of European funds, such as those from PON, as well as other funds specifically targeted at the Roma population, which strengthen national-level interventions (A. Pistecchia, personal communication, March 25, 2024). He further describes the synergy between the National and European funds as crucial,

ensuring complementarity and establishing clear boundaries to avoid overlapping interventions at the national level (A. Pistecchia, personal communication, March 25, 2024).

Ultimately, European funding helps to boost areas of intervention that regions, municipalities, and ministries try to address with national funds or their own resources. To ensure that funds are properly allocated there is a constant monitoring of the National Strategy (2021-2030) and the actions undertaken by the Italian state on the part of the European Commission and Council of Europe: “Il quadro europeo sia a livello di Commissione Europea, quindi Unione Europea, sia a livello di Consiglio d’Europa dà uno stimolo perché poi c’è anche un costante monitoraggio delle azioni che si fanno” (A. Pistecchia, personal communication, March 25, 2024).

Yet this perspective contrasts with that of Pavlović, who criticises the monitoring efforts by the European Commission regarding the funds allocated to the projects managed by UNAR: “i paesi nazionali semplicemente non usano i fondi che sono stati a loro dedicati. La Commissione Europea non ha nessun tipo di possibilità di intervenire, imporre, o chiedere. Si accontenta di un report semplice degli enti come UNAR che gestiscono le strategie nazionali dicendo “è andata bene, è andata male...” (D. Pavlović, personal communication, June 6, 2024) Paolo Cagna Ninchi and Carlo Stasolla point out that the costs and benefits of projects are not always clearly evaluated, as money is spent excessively on areas of intervention which benefit only a limited number of people. Carlo Stasolla illustrated this point by alluding to a previous project where it had been estimated that over 15000 Roma children were *de facto* stateless.

Fino al 2020 ti troverai tantissimi documenti che parlavano di 15.000 minori Rom a rischio di apolidia, perché privi di documenti. Noi non siamo mai riusciti a trovare questa fonte” [...] Nel 2019 noi abbiamo fatto una ricerca, il risultato che emerge è che i minori sono 860 a fronte di 15.000, quindi inutili i disegni di legge, inutili i fondi [...] Queste ricerche diventano il quadro nazionale delle politiche sui Rom, da cui

discendono le strategie e quindi i fondi europei (C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

Giulia di Rocco, Gennaro Spinelli, and Dijana Pavlović point to the problematic allocation of funds for targeted actions. The money provided by the European Union often fails to reach initiatives that could effectively address the needs of the Roma population: “Con tutti i soldi che arrivavano dalla Comunità Europea, non arriva un soldo effettivamente per azioni mirate. E come azioni mirate, intendo azioni che possono poi risolvere da qui a 10 anni, a 20 anni, la situazione dei Rom” (G. Di Rocco, personal communication, March 28, 2024).

Lastly, there appears to be a consensus that the promotion of culture is a positive aspect of the new strategy. However, some interviewees heavily emphasised its importance, while others acknowledged it as an asset, but considered it insufficient on its own. Giulia Di Rocco highlighted the importance of Roma culture as an aggregating element of the Roma community. Furthermore, Gennaro Spinelli stated how the previous strategy was focused exclusively on the social issues affecting Roma, while the new strategy was enhanced by including cultural promotion as an axis:

La strategia nazionale precedente era solo incentrata per il sociale. È un difetto immenso, veramente distruttivo. Per dieci anni non si è parlato di rom e sinti in quanto cultura, ma in quanto problema sociale” [...] Invece si è creata una nuova strategia che punta molto di più sulla cultura, infatti con il nuovo direttore Matteo Peradotto, per fortuna, si è stabilita una linea non solo culturale, ma di qualità culturale, perché non tutto è rappresentante o rappresentativo (G. Spinelli, personal communication, April 23, 2024).

Fiorello Miguel Lebbiati emphasised the importance of cultural promotion as a key axis in the New Strategy, noting that culture serves as an instrument to convey a new narrative of Roma people, which goes beyond labelling them as a social issue. This idea was also pointed

out during the electoral platform held at the Gordiani Roma Camp by Christian Raimo, candidate for Verdi-Sinistra, who stated how it is paramount to fight the negative stereotypes and objectification of Roma culture used by the right to create divisions and marginalisation (May 23, 2024).

Dijana Pavlović and Paolo Cagna Ninchi disagree with this perspective, though, arguing that cultural promotion alone is not enough to tackle the marginalisation faced by Roma communities.

La questione del riconoscimento, la questione della cultura sono importanti, ma quando si va in una situazione concreta, a Milano piuttosto che a Roma, piuttosto che a Messina, piuttosto che a Bari, si fanno i conti con le condizioni che proviamo e che sono condizioni spesso di marginalità materiale molto grave. (P. C. Ninchi, personal communication, June 6, 2024)

This perspective is also shared by Carlo Stasolla, who maintains that cultural promotion is ineffective in eradicating the widespread perception of Roma as being economically disadvantaged. While referring to cultural promotion Carlo Stasolla, excluded that it had any concrete impact on combating antigypsyism: “Però non diciamo che impatta sull’antiziganismo, perché non è un concerto Rom che impatta l’antiziganismo assolutamente” (C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

The Roma, Sinti and Camminanti Forum, also known as the Community Forum, is a tool officially introduced in 2017 during the first National Strategy (UNAR, 2021). It is a consultative tool that extends participation to Roma associations to provide suggestions and input on the projects established on each of the axes of intervention of the National Strategy (2021-2030). It is important to distinguish the RSC Forum from the RSC Platform, which instead is made up of pro-Roma associations.

The associations which participate in the Community forum do not have control over agenda-setting for the meeting sessions; this responsibility is in the hands of the UNAR office: “Tendenzialmente noi [UNAR] prepariamo un ordine del giorno di proposta, c’è una convocazione, questa è la modalità online più semplice, poi c’è una parte di discussione, c’è una parte in cui raccogliamo proposte da parte loro [le associazioni nel Forum] da mettere in ordine del giorno” (R. Bortone, personal communication, June 12, 2024).

As Carlo Stasolla points out, while the Forum meetings provide an opportunity for each association to take the floor and speak, the type of “discussions” which characterise the assemblies have an element of individual self-referencing: “É una modalità assembleare dove tutti hanno la parola, che però era molto autoreferenziale” (C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

Stasolla criticizes this element as it is not conducive to improvement. This perspective is shared by Pavlović, who admits that during these meetings the movement leaders only talk about their own achievements without engaging in a constructive dialogue with the other associations (C. Stasolla, personal communication, 19 September 2024; D. Pavlović, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

An important position about the representativeness of the members within the Forum is that of Daniele, who points out a structural problem of the forum itself. It is an avenue of discussion set out by Gadje²; not all Roma communities necessarily want to have a dialogue with the Italian institutions through such modalities. This limits the franchise of the forum to those associations who “accept” this form of dialogue as legitimate.

Quando noi parliamo di protagonismo dei Rom, c’è il rischio che stiamo parlando di qualcosa che i Gadgì chiedono ai Rom. Ovvero stiamo chiedendo ai Rom di dialogare con le istituzioni italiane, nella forma in cui le istituzioni italiane, dal municipio al

² “non-Roma” in Romanes language

comune, possono parlare. Stiamo chiedendo in qualche modo ai Rom di mettersi su quel tavolo lì. E non è detto che questa sia la modalità effettivamente praticata. (U. Daniele, personal communication, June 19, 2024).

It is important to underline that not all the associations that are part of the Forum are necessarily representative of the wide spectrum of Roma communities and interests present in the Italian territory. Gennaro Spinelli's position on representativeness of the Forum is that it encapsulates too many associations that focus on Roma communities and their socio-economic problems, mainly concerning those who live in camps. "Ricordati che l'UNAR, come la nuova strategia, si basa sulle organizzazioni e ricordati che chi apre un'organizzazione non è il meglio di una cultura, è chi ha bisogno di risolvere dei problemi. Quindi non si andrà a parlare solo di cultura, ma di problemi." (G. Spinelli, personal communication, April 23, 2024).

On the other hand, Carlo Stasolla emphasises a critical issue within the Forum concerning associations representing different members of the same family, where each member claims to represent a different "community":

Esistono tre associazioni che sembravano rappresentare un ampio universo, ma in realtà rappresentano solo tre persone. Questa situazione è comune, poiché molte associazioni sono caratterizzate dal personalismo, dove l'associazione stessa è di fatto identificabile con una singola persona, spesso sostenuta da prestanomi" (C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

This perspective is shared by Paolo Cagna Ninchi, who argues that:

Non è possibile che in una famiglia ci siano cinque membri e ogni membro della famiglia rappresenta una di queste associazioni. Che poi si presentano al forum affermando di essere cinque entità distinte. Questi "giochetti" hanno una duplice funzione: da un lato, possono apparire come potenziali rappresentazioni, ma dall'altro lato mirano anche a conferire legittimità, poiché rappresentare qualcuno è un atto

politico. Non si tratta di un semplice gioco per raccogliere fondi e organizzare due concerti all'anno (P. C. Ninchi, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

Dijana Pavlović highlights a certain power dynamic between some Roma associations in the Community Forum and UNAR. She admits that UNAR is managed more like an association than a government body, so it has no real decision-making power (D. Pavlović, personal communication, June 6, 2024). Furthermore, there is a system of favouritism tied to various associations. In her view, funds are handed out in fragmented amounts while UNAR organises cultural events, and makes decisions without consulting the associations, leading to a complete lack of transparency (D. Pavlović, personal communication, June 6, 2024). This system not only blocks legitimate participation of the associations through the Forum, but also makes it dependent on who is appointed by the government to lead this office at that moment. According to Pavlović, the previous director managed to accomplish something she referred to as “concrete”, despite the organization’s limited scope. With the new director, Pavlović feels that everything is based on personal connections, maintaining this network of favouritism with certain associations over others (D. Pavlović, personal communication, June 6, 2024).

As stated by Roberto Bortone, the Forum meetings are meant to take place twice a year, but this schedule is not followed (R. Bortone, personal communication, June 12, 2024). Similarly, all the other stakeholders I interviewed highlighted the inconsistency of the Community Forum meetings. There was wide consensus among the Roma and pro-Roma activists that the last meeting was held before Covid, around the year 2019, yet UNAR has contested this date, counterarguing that the last meeting was held on October 27, 2023.

The meeting in question exclusively centred around UNAR’s presentation of the funds allocated to the projects of the new National Strategy (2021-2030), including an overview of the projects and funds allocation, and detailing what had been accomplished under the previous strategy. The meeting held in October 2023 involved limited active participation by the Forum

members, as their role was passive, and did not entail substantial participation in the discussions.

During the interviews, a prominent theme emerged concerning the possibility of political action outside the boundaries of the National Strategy (2021-2030). Nationally, there have been efforts by Roma candidates running with mainstream parties in regional councils, such as Melena Halilovic, Fiorello Miguel Lebbiati, and Dijana Pavlović.

There are also examples of Roma establishing their own identity-based parties as in the case of Gulia Di Rocco and her party, Mistipè, whose scope is regional and focuses its representation on Roma women and Roma within the boundaries of Abruzzo and Marche.

Yet, as Fiorello Miguel Lebbiati points out, Roma are a very small minority in the Italian context, less than 0.25 % of the Italian population (M.F. Lebbiati, personal communication, April 11, 2024). A Roma candidate running with an identity-based party would not be granted a seat in the parliament even if the entire Roma population voted for them. Furthermore, such a form of representation based on identity runs the risk of marginalising Roma communities politically:

Esattamente come tutti gli altri partiti monoetnici, sono ghetizzanti e assolutamente errati. La questione Rom si va ad inserire in un contesto sociale molto più ampio rispetto alla sola cultura romani, perché finché si parla di cultura Romani noi parliamo di lingua, di storia, di usanze, di tradizioni, e costumi. Ma un partito è rappresentanza, e la rappresentanza è qualcosa di molto più sociale. (G. Spinelli, personal communication, April 23, 2024).

Aidan McGarry expressed similar concerns regarding political parties based on Roma identity: “Very often the clearest route that Roma communities must have representation in parliament is through organizing Romani political parties. So, these are identity-based political parties. One of the challenges that they face is that they become marginalised simply by

definition. And the danger is the interests and needs of Roma communities, which should be for the whole parliament to discuss, because they are a section of the population in every European state, in Italy too, in a significant number. And that should be something that should be debated by all the parties” (A. McGarry, personal communication, June 28, 2024).

McGarry thereby emphasises how Romani political parties, when they attempt to bring to light their needs, are treated as marginal. The issues facing Roma communities are not unique to them, though. In fact, they often intersect with broader social realities. Romani political parties do not have the resources to address the wide range of issues faced by their communities – access to social provisions, health, housing, education, employment – on their own. “Structurally, these big issues cannot be addressed simply by Romani political parties” (A. McGarry, personal communication, June 28, 2024).

There is also the question of representation itself. McGarry raises the issue of “What does it mean to be represented? A parliament should be like a social microcosm of the nation, and therefore Roma should be there too. But a better way of doing that is to ensure, in addition to Romani political parties, also having Roma on the lists of the mainstream political parties, on the left and on the right” (A. McGarry, personal communication, June 28, 2024).

Mainstream political parties, within the Italian context, have often “attempted” to include the needs of Roma within their political agenda, specifically focusing their campaigns on issues like housing, closing camps, schooling. An example of this was the Electoral Platform hosted in the Gordiani Roma Camp. During the 2024 European election campaign, political candidates from both Alleanza Sinistra-Verdi and Pace, Terra, Dignità made promises to the Roma community of Gordiani (May 23, 2024). This community, being instrumental for their votes, found themselves in a situation for bargaining commitments in return for electoral support. This dynamic was made evident by Santino Spinelli, during the REGARD - REmembering Genocide Against Roma Discrimination event (May 8, 2024). Spinelli

highlighted how Roma are granted only one of the five rights of citizenship, the right to vote, thus they are used for votes: “Politici comprano i voti dai Rom” (May 8, 2024).

My fieldwork research also revealed how independent political action at the national level is influenced by the dynamics within transnational Roma activism. Daniele outlined the top-down input of transnational associations on Roma activism and advocacy at the national level. Along with Carlo Stasolla, he pointed to the huge financial contribution, granted by George Soros’ Open Society Institute, to domestic Roma associations (U. Daniele, personal communication, June 19, 2024; C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024). As a result, both interviewees confirmed how the financial contributions from transnational Roma and pro-Roma organisations provided leverage in choosing their preferred intermediaries, thereby influencing the standards for political mobilisation domestically (U. Daniele, personal communication, June 19, 2024; C. Stasolla, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

McGarry highlighted a different aspect of Roma transnational organisations, which is that of pressuring national states: “Transnational Roma organisations provide such a pressure on national governments. Even though these are not democratically elected institutions, their legitimacy comes from the quality of their work, monitoring, researching and lobbying for Roma rights” (A. McGarry, personal communication, June 28, 2024).

To summarize, the analysis of the old and new National Strategies signals an evolution in the objectives and participation model of Roma and Sinti communities in Italy. The previous National Strategy (2012-2020) prioritized social inclusion, yet it lacked structural mechanisms for political inclusion and failed to recognize Roma and Sinti as a historical linguistic minority under Law 482. The new National Strategy (2021-2030) was developed to fill these gaps by promoting Roma empowerment through cultural promotion, decentralised governance and a strong commitment to fight antigypsyism. However, several limitations such as the continued lack of minority recognition under Law 482, the dependence of the National Strategy (2021-

2030) on the political context, insufficient resource allocation, inconsistent monitoring, and the structural and participatory flaws of the Community Forum complicates Roma political mobilization.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this research clearly show a discontinuity between the normative side presented by the National Strategy (2021-2030) and the reality of how the strategy is being implemented to foster Roma participation.

A recurrent theme was Law 482 and the exclusion of Roma from the recognised minorities. The conception of Law 482 recalls the typology of Kymlicka (2007), who defined national minorities as having a specific territoriality, effectively excluding Roma from being recognized as a cultural-historic minority. This lack of recognition is viewed almost unanimously as an obstacle for empowerment of Roma and their cultural preservation. A major critic proposes that recognition under Law 482 would only deepen social divisions and fail to address the real issues of poverty and marginalisation within Roma communities.

Several stakeholders proposed that a formal recognition of the Roma minority would grant them protections from discrimination. Currently the missing legal recognition hinders policies from being effective at contrasting antigypsyism. More cultural protections and larger funding to civil society organisations would strengthen the mobilising structures of Roma by extending their scope of reach to more Roma communities within the Italian territory and better support projects aimed at mobilising collective action.

However, the significant heterogeneity among Roma makes their recognition as a single group difficult. According to Stasolla, the recognition of Roma under Law 482 would further enlarge the disparities between those Roma who live in camps and those who live in houses. His perspective recalls Vertovec's superdiversity and the point he makes on multicultural approaches focusing excessively on ethnicity and culture and not taking into consideration the many socio-economic factors which have a significant weight in the dynamics within a group (Tremlett, 2014.). Yet, as pointed out by McGarry (2010), the heterogeneity aspect of Roma is not necessarily a weakness. While Roma movements often struggle to find common grounds,

a general sense of solidarity and collectivity is found in the Roma communities (McGarry, 2010). This solidarity derives from the understanding of ethnicity not as an essentialist definition of a bounded group but insisted as a fluid and dynamic concept (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022). Therefore, the formal recognition of the Roma minority under Law 482 would consolidate political mobilisation by strengthening Roma identity irrespective of the heterogeneity in social and economic status.

At the macro-level, a flaw of the National Strategy (2021-2030) is its dependence on the political context and the government position on Roma issues. The issue lies in UNAR overseeing the National Strategy (2021-2030), as it is not an independent body. The dependence of the National Strategy (2021-2030) on the current Italian political context links to the idea of political opportunities proposed by Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022) and Vermeersch (2007) which either facilitate or impede collective action. In the case of the current National Strategy (2021-2030) the right-wing coalition government is an impediment for effectively leading Roma as a priority on UNAR's agenda, as the politicisation of UNAR is detrimental for long-term actions, due to the destabilising high turnover of directors appointed by each new government. The new appointee may want to change priority directions, or not recognize past projects and action plans.

As the National Strategy (2021-2030) is not a legally binding document, it depends entirely on the commitment of the government to address Roma related issues. To many of the stakeholders it appears purely as a token document for symbolic inclusion of Roma within the political arena. The National Strategy (2021-2030) does not confer any power to the relevant stakeholders to pressure the government, in absence of political will, into following the aims prescribed by the strategy. Consequently, the National Strategy (2021-2030) can be qualified as tokenistic participation under Arnstein's ladder of participation (Ryder, 2022).

A micro-level flaw is the allocation and monitoring of funds for the projects promoted on the six axes of intervention of the National Strategy (2021-2030). European funding is crucial for boosting national level intervention, yet the allocation of the funding is contested by many, especially since the monitoring and evaluation of projects is not efficient. Firstly, the monitoring efforts of projects sponsored by European funds are inadequate. According to Pavlović, the reports produced by UNAR are overly simplistic. She also argues that the European Union has no power to intervene to ensure that money is spent on impactful projects. This links to the issue of funds being spent for projects which benefit only a limited amount of people. Therefore, the allocation of funds is inadequate as there is no clear measurement of their impact or long-term effect on Roma communities.

Related to the theme of projects sponsored by the National Strategy (2021-2030) is the cultural promotion of Roma. While there is a consensus that cultural promotion is a positive aspect of the new National Strategy (2021-2030), a minority opinion thinks that it is not sufficient. Spinelli and Di Rocco stress the importance of promoting Roma culture to strengthen cultural identity and mobilisation, with particular emphasis on the quality aspect of cultural promotion and the idea of selecting legitimate representatives. Lebbiati stresses the use of cultural promotion as a tool to frame a new narrative of Roma people, with Roma being the protagonists of their narration. This view was also shared by Christian Raimo who emphasised the need to combat the negative stereotypes used to divide and marginalise Roma communities. Pavlović, Ninchi, and Stasolla do believe in cultural promotion being a positive asset but warn that it cannot alone contrast the deeply rooted marginalisation and material deprivation experienced by many Roma communities.

The Roma and Sinti Community Forum was established to provide associations with a consultative tool where they could express inputs on the projects implemented under the

National Strategy (2021-2030). While theoretically the Community Forum is a positive implementation of the previous National Strategy (2012-2020), it has multiple defects:

The major criticism of the Community Forum is its lack of representativeness and legitimacy both structurally and in its composition. As pointed out by Daniele a structural problem of the Community Forum is that it is a consultative avenue set out by Gadje through Gadje standards and modalities of dialogue, which limit the franchise of its members, as only those Roma associations and activists who agree to engage with authorities through predetermined non-Roma standards are included in the discussions. This narrows the participation and representativeness of the Forum, as Roma communities who do not accept these standards are excluded.

Those Roma associations that accept the Community Forum as a legitimate avenue for dialogue are not the true protagonists in agenda setting. The UNAR is vested with the responsibility to decide the topics and set the discussions. This diminishes the decision-making ability of the associations within the Community Forum and their ability to set priorities. This is a limitation under the definition provided by Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022) of mobilising structures as facilitators of collective action through the expression of the collective will to engage with the relevant institutions by setting the agenda to represent the relevant interests of the communities.

The member composition of the Community Forum lacks representativeness as it has been criticised for representing leaders' own interests rather than those of the Roma communities they claim to speak for. This issue arises as members of the associations are often established by narrow groups, families or even individuals who prioritise their own networks. According to Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022) micro-level mobilization based on family ties and individual relationships is not inherently problematic. However, the instrumentalization of the Community Forum—where multiple associations from the same family, each association being

a member of the Community Forum, claim to represent the interest of different Roma communities—becomes an issue when these associations serve the interests of that one family at the expense of the broader community. This heightened personalism described in the case study mirrors the concerns raised by Surdu and Kotvas (2015) regarding the representativeness of leadership for it to achieve social change and not become mere spokespersons of their own personal interests. As pointed out by McGarry (2010) and Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2022), civil society organisations often lack a democratic mandate, and personalism is detrimental to the democratic potential of the Community Forum, as it first decreases its credibility and secondly it is used as a tool to manipulate capital and power.

UNAR plays a prominent role in decision-making within the Forum, fostering a clientelist system where certain organisations are favoured over others due to personal connections, and where decisions are often made without due transparency or consultation with the member associations. This structure reveals the lack of effectiveness of the Community Forum, which functions more as a token instrument rather than an effective platform with representative abilities and power. The inadequacy of the Forum to fulfil its original task is further underscored by its irregular meetings taking place less than twice a year. When these meetings do happen, they are characterised by limited participation on the side of associations, as occurred in the last meeting held in October 2023, further emphasising the tokenistic nature of the Forum.

As the current National Strategy (2021-2030) is proving to be ineffective in empowering Roma activists and party leaders in their role as representatives of their communities, many of the stakeholders have taken alternative routes to political representation and participation. Nationally, there have been efforts by Roma candidates like Melena Halilovic, Fiorello Miguel Lebbiati, and Dijana Pavlović running with mainstream parties. At the same time, there have also been efforts to consolidate a Roma political party, Gulia di

Rocco's Mistipè, which offers a regional identity-based platform for Roma communities in Abruzzo and Marche with particular focus on Roma women.

However, representation along identity lines poses several risks. Lebbiati points out that the numerically limited demographic reality of Roma on the Italian territory makes electoral success difficult. Furthermore, Roma identity-based parties only reinforce the marginalisation of Roma issues from mainstream political discourse.

As pointed out by McGarry, the lack of resources, expertise, and fragmented vision on the part of Roma party leaders makes representation along identity lines ineffective at addressing Roma concerns, such as housing, health, education, and employment. The intersecting nature of these concerns are part of broader social realities that extend beyond the scope of Romani political parties. It is for this reason that the burden to address these issues should be on mainstream parties. Roma, therefore, need to be included in mainstream political lists across the political spectrum, rather than being confined to niche identity parties. This links to the theory put forward by McGarry (2010) whereby both Roma candidates running in mainstream parties or in identity-based parties often only obtain positions at local level of governance, and usually lack the resources and expertise to legitimately represent their communities on a broader scale.

However, mainstream parties do not always engage with Roma communities to take their issues on board, instead using Roma as vote banks. The example of the 2024 European campaign elections illustrates how the Roma community of Gordiani was leveraged for electoral support by candidates of mainstream parties. This system of "vote buying" is used to symbolically include Roma in the political discourse. This relationship leads to Roma being passive recipients of policies and never active participants who can shape them.

Moreover, the influence of transnational Roma activism on national political action is another key insight. Mobilising structures like the Open Society Institute have shaped the

domestic landscape of Roma activism through important financial contributions (Trehan, 2009). According to Beck and Ivasiuc (2018), Open Society Institute, through its financial contribution was able to create a whole network of activists and intermediaries that promoted a certain narrative which prioritised culture and identity over economic inequalities. This financial input was seen with a critical eye by Daniele and Stasolla, as it often results in certain actors within the Roma advocacy network being favoured over others, shaping the direction of mobilisation and identity framing (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2022). By shaping the local direction of Roma advocacy, it revealed a lack of inclusivity and genuine pluralism in decision-making process (Ryder et al., 2022).

However, other perspectives argue that the financial support from transnational organisations not only gives material support to Roma associations, but it also provides them with means to exert more influence and pursue their political objectives. The ability to monitor, research and lobby for Roma rights while also exerting pressure on the domestic governments, are all features which make transnational advocacy legitimate (McGarry, 2010; A. McGarry, personal communication, June 28, 2024). This pressure from transnational organisations offers an important layer of advocacy that can compel national governments to act, even if it does not necessarily result in democratic representation for the Roma at the state level.

In summary, the findings of this research illustrate the disjunction between the objectives set forth in the National Strategy (2021-2030), and the lived realities of these communities. A factor which inhibits the full potential of the National Strategy (2021-2030) is Law 482, which perpetuates the exclusion of Roma from recognized minority status. Formal recognition is a prerequisite, not only for combating antigypsyism but also for improving access to resources and funding, which are a crucial element for boosting mobilisation.

The heterogeneous nature of Roma identity complicates collective representation, while at the same time it fosters a sense of solidarity which aids mobilising structures. However, the

current unfavourable political context and its influence on UNAR shifts the priorities away from advocating for Roma political inclusion.

A positive tool introduced by the National Strategy is the Roma and Sinti Community Forum. Yet the structural flaws within the forum undermine its potential as a representative body. The lack of legitimate representation and the prevalence of personalism among the organisation's leaders highlight the need for it to be reformed to reflect the interests of diverse Roma communities.

The exploration of alternative political representation through Roma candidates and identity-based parties may increase visibility; however, this approach risks marginalising Roma issues within the broader political landscape unless integrated into mainstream political discourse.

Finally, the role of transnational advocacy and funding is both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand it provides financial resources for local Roma organisations, on the other hand it upholds narratives of cultural identity while sidelining those of socio-economic inequalities.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis has been to investigate the implementation of the National Strategy (2021-2030) and specifically how it can be optimized to foster the political inclusion of Roma and address the gaps left by the previous National Strategy (2012-2020) concerning the missing legal recognition and lasting issue of antigypsyism. Through an analytical and qualitative approach to data collection, this research was able to investigate how the Italian National Strategy (2021-2030) has changed from the previous strategy, and how it has been implemented in practice. The findings have identified a discontinuity between the normative side and the practical implementation of the strategy. While the strategy proposes tools and actions aimed at promoting Roma political inclusion and fighting antigypsyism, the findings reveal the ineffectiveness in translating the strategy guidelines into practical actions.

On the basis of the analysis in the previous chapter, several recommendations can be made to close this gap between theory and practice. Firstly, Law 482 needs to be reformed to include Roma. Although this will not resolve the socioeconomic challenges they face, it will give more legitimacy to their cultural identity and initiatives.

Secondly, the National Strategy (2021-2030) should not be in the hands of a governmental agency such as UNAR. Instead, it should be overseen by an autonomous office, independent of political pressures. Thirdly, it is paramount to improve the funds allocation and monitoring efforts towards projects and initiatives as currently a lot of funds are misspent on projects with limited efficacy.

Fourthly, to ensure pluralism and legitimacy, the Community Forum must overcome its structural limitations by ensuring broader and more legitimate representation of Roma communities. Furthermore, addressing internal clientelism, inconsistent frequency, and lack of transparency in meetings is essential to enhance the Community Forum's effectiveness as a consultative tool.

In addition, mainstream political parties should incorporate Roma issues into their political agendas, as well as promote the participation of Roma in their parties, enabling them to take an active role in the formulation of policies that affect them.

Finally, although transnational Roma activism has successfully increased visibility and financial support to grassroots movements, it is important to avoid sidelining socio-economic disparities in favour of cultural promotion. Fostering material support alongside cultural initiatives will ensure a holistic inclusion of marginalised Roma communities.

This research has contributed to the previous literature by providing theoretical implications as to how the current National Strategy (2021-2030) could be optimized to be more efficient in promoting the political empowerment of Roma. Formal minority recognition is a prerequisite for the National Strategy (2021-2030) to have a concrete impact on the Roma communities. Addressing the structural issues within the UNAR and tokenistic nature of consultative platforms like the Community Forum would promote active and representative Roma participation. This research is particularly relevant to national policy advisors and governmental bodies who are involved in minority policies as it provides possible improvements to national policies targeting marginalised groups like the Roma.

While this thesis provides valuable insights, certain limitations may have influenced the findings. First and foremost, this research is based heavily on qualitative data and stakeholders' perspectives, which was essential to grasp the practical functioning of the National Strategy (2021-2030), yet it is limited as it is based on the personal interpretations of the interviewees. While the scope of the research was purposely limited to the national context, broader comparative research with other EU countries' approaches to Roma policy frameworks could offer a more nuanced understanding of what makes an effective strategy.

Future research on the political participation and representation of Roma and Sinti in Italy could focus on tracking the long-term developments of the National Strategy (2021-2030)

on Roma communities through longitudinal studies. A key recommendation would be to quantitatively assess the actual level of Roma participation, as both my research and that of others have not yet gathered such data. This would provide a clearer picture of the effectiveness of these policies through measurable data. Additionally, it would be helpful to explore the role of grassroots organizations and activists in the implementation of the National Strategy (2021-2030). Lastly, engaging with transnational Roma organizations could shed light on how transnational advocacy currently shapes the political mobilisation of local Roma movements.

Finally, I would like to reiterate how this research highlighted the importance of bridging the gap between policy frameworks and the lived experiences of marginalised communities for whom the policies are intended. In uncovering the systemic weaknesses within Italy's National Strategy (2021-2030), this thesis contributes to an ongoing discussion about Roma political empowerment and the role of policy makers in ensuring genuine inclusion. By addressing the critical areas highlighted by this thesis future strategies can create more sustainable and inclusive pathways for Roma political representation and participation.

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