

Why plans for a European Roma Institute might be a setback for Europe's Roma

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The Council of Europe has announced a joint-initiative with the Open Society Foundations (OSF) to establish a European Roma Institute (ERI). [Yaron Matras](#) writes that there is a danger the ERI could have negative consequences for academic freedom in the area of Romani studies. He argues that as the endeavour is guided by the philosophy that self-ascribed ancestry should override formal qualifications, the ERI could end up marginalising the study of Romani culture rather than affording it the respect and rigour that it deserves.



Over the past year negotiations have been taking place between the Council of Europe and a small group of activists who claimed the title “Roma elite”. Backed by the Open Society Foundations (OSF), the formidable civil society enterprise led by billionaire philanthropist George Soros, the group drew up plans for a European Roma Institute (ERI). It would, they said, “license” research on Romani culture and ensure that the dissemination of information on Europe’s largest ethnic minority would be “Roma-led”.

The group seemed to come from nowhere: They had no track record of local leadership, no experience in cultural management, and no academic publications to their names. But they claimed a connection to Romani ancestry and appeared to have powerful friends. Pre-empting a discussion at the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly and a formal consultation with member states, Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland lent his name to a [joint statement](#) with George Soros on 26 March 2015, announcing the creation of a European Roma Institute.

The first sentence of their comment read: “For more than four decades Europe’s Roma community have wanted to establish an institution that would give their music, art and unique traditions their own stage”. The text was accompanied on the [OSF website](#) by a photo of Romani musicians playing violins and guitars. It went on to promise that the institute would not only educate about Roma culture but also act as policy advisor to the Council of Europe and member states. Dozens of OSF-grantees from Sweden to Ghana hurried to replicate the statement on Twitter. There was some bewilderment among the rank and file in the Council of Europe, where diplomacy usually means adherence to protocol, and arm-twisting is usually kept away from the public eye. Why the rush and the aggressive promotion campaign?



Two Council of Europe projects on Roma come to a formal end this spring. The first is an agreement with an umbrella organisation of Romani NGOs known as the European Roma and Travellers Forum. It was set up in 2004 and was considered a historic breakthrough, for it granted Roma, for the very first time, consultative status in a European political organisation. The Forum has made some enemies due to its reluctance to support the Council of

Europe's growing role as a contractor of "mediation" projects for Roma, which, it said, were self-serving and did little to support participation or combat exclusion.

A second venture, arguably of lesser importance, is a network of academic experts sponsored by the Council of Europe to make research on Roma more accessible to policy makers. This too triggered discomfort among managers who feared that their projects might come under unwelcome scrutiny. Also ending is the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an initiative of ten eastern European states launched and co-sponsored by George Soros. It faces criticism for leaving little by means of a legacy save a generation of Roma activists who are about to lose their jobs in dedicated NGOs.

ERI is a quick fix: It offers a handful of jobs to a group of people who present themselves as Roma, and it gives Soros his very first impact legacy within the heart of Europe's political establishment. It rids the Council of Europe of the burden of an untameable Roma representation in the midst of its corridors and protects it from prying academics. Best of all, it downgrades Romani participation, from a consultative role on human rights to artistic performance – such is the imagery transmitted by the Jagland and Soros commentary; the musical stage is the one place where Europe has always been content to embrace its Gypsies. All this is happening to the cheers of those who see ERI as a "Roma-led" initiative and therefore a triumph for emancipation and empowerment – a perfect alibi.

The danger is that the identity-politics will come at the expense of open debate and academic freedom. In order to legitimise itself, ERI seems to be on an overt confrontation course both with Romani grassroots activists and especially with academics specialising in Romani studies. It is guided by the philosophy that self-ascribed ancestry should override formal qualification. Statements of its leading members, so far limited largely to social media, are full of aggression against the supposed "power monopoly" of researchers who have spent their careers educating the public about Roma and supporting calls for Romani rights.

Their discourse resembles what Canadian anthropologists Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard describe as native participation in an *Aboriginal Industry*: As funded projects on Roma become self-serving, individuals who self-ascribe as Roma are given incentives to aspire to influential positions, if they use their "authenticity" to provide projects with the legitimacy that they require. There is a real risk that ERI will not only decorate Europe's strategy of marginality-management toward Roma, but that in the process it will seek to control information and knowledge; that it will sanction ideas as scientific if they are put forward by those who claim Romani ancestry while trying to ban any enquiry that questions those ideas; and that in this way it will end up marginalising the study of Romani culture rather than affording it the respect and the rigour that it deserves.

The Council of Europe once had a reputation for spearheading human rights causes and for drawing on evidence to formulate policies. It should seek to re-gain that reputation, not sacrifice it in the name of political correctness.

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About the author

Yaron Matras – *University of Manchester*

Yaron Matras is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Manchester and editor of the journal [Romani Studies](#). His most recent book is [The Romani Gypsies](#) (Harvard University Press, 2015).

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