

## PHD REVIEWS

# ‘Romani Women in European Politics: Exploring Multi-Layered Political Spaces for Intersectional Policies and Mobilizations’

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How should the disadvantaged position of Roma in Europe be remedied, or at least improved? Over the last few decades this has become a frequently asked question underlying a variety of efforts in different fields. It has been asked by policymakers, Roma activists and human rights organizations. It has also been on the mind of academic researchers, who have written about it when responding to normative discussions related to minority protection in places where Roma are targeted by public intolerance and hate (for example in electoral campaigns), but it has also been researched as an empirical puzzle: what circumstances have an effect on the inclusion of Roma in mainstream society and politics? One important aspect in the context of that last question has been the ways in which policies on Roma have become Europeanized.

That is precisely the topic of Serena D’Agostino’s work on Romani female activism. The societal and scholarly relevance of this work is clear. Throughout Europe, many Roma belong to the socio-economically most

vulnerable parts of society; they often live either in urban ghettos or in segregated localities in the countryside, and, as for example the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency has documented, they continue to face alarming levels of discrimination. Because these problems appear across national borders they can easily be conceptualized as part of one and the same issue, a bigger Europe-wide problem. Some go so far as to speak of the rise of a specific form of Roma exclusion and discrimination, often dubbed ‘antitsiganism’ or ‘Romaphobia’. Moreover, Roma are often seen as members of one and the same transnational (European) ethnic group, even if they are citizens of different countries. So it seems natural that European institutions take up a special responsibility for them and create spaces for Romani activism.

D’Agostino’s thesis, *Romani Women in European Politics: Exploring Multi-Layered Political Spaces for Intersectional Policies and Mobilization*, shows how multifaceted the implications of this ‘Europeanization’

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are and how difficult it is to navigate that European institutional landscape if you are a female Romani activist. Through a series of more or less connected articles this study attempts to deal with the question of the precarious position of Romani activism in the European context on both the normative and empirical levels, but the project is kept manageable by not taking the whole question into account; instead it focuses on the smaller sub-top of female Romani activism. The overall ambition of this work is to understand what the political opportunities are for such specific form of activism.

Although it is indeed only one dimension of the larger issue at hand, and in terms of empirical research D'Agostino has to zoom in quite drastically on just a few cases and some fine-grained empirical fieldwork to accomplish her ambition, the focus is still useful because it uncovers the larger mechanisms at work. The study of the position of female Romani activists – who are often seen as people who represent a minority within a minority – is pertinent because it reveals something about the whole landscape of Romani activism and about the institutional contexts in which such activism takes place. It is also relevant for the study of intersectional activism in Europe today.

This PhD thesis engages fully with the literature on Roma while also taking the concepts of political opportunities (as well as broader conceptual frameworks from the social movement literature) on board to push that literature forward. What is particularly important is D'Agostino's examination of political opportunities that have been specifically designed for Roma on

the level of transnational institutions. On the basis of an analysis of developing EU policies on Roma (which is in fact an analysis of the changing institutional context for female Romani activism) and interviews with policy-makers and female Romani activists, a rather ambiguous picture seems to arise. This is especially the case for the parts where it concerns the 'intersectional' voice of female Roma activists. D'Agostino concludes that there is indeed growing room for those activists if they seek to position themselves as 'intersectional' but that at the same time there are also serious new constraints. Although this type of activism might in theory be a great way forward, in practice activists continue to struggle. According to D'Agostino, they are, for example, faced with intricate processes of bureaucratization and high demands for professionalization, which effectively excludes certain grass-roots organizations from the necessary EU funding, even if they work on intersectional matters.

Overall, this is an excellent thesis, and it is at its best when such problems are detected and analysed. D'Agostino has interviewed Roma female activists to gain a direct insight into their predicament and spends most of her time situating these findings against the background of a larger analysis of the institutional context. But by setting up the thesis in this particular way D'Agostino has also created a bit of a downside for the reader who is interested in knowing more about the activists themselves. When reading the thesis one can be left longing for more ethnographic detail and a more sustained narrative showing the opportunities that activists encounter and obstacles they face when they

want to speak in the name of a minority that is often unheard. What are the specific circumstances in which these activists have to operate? How do they experience their encounters with EU institutions (and for that matter, the national bureaucracies that often function as gatekeepers). We do get glimpses of an answer throughout the thesis, but a more structural story about the specific experiences of Romani women activists – and indeed, any kind of Romani activism – would have been interesting, especially so for the two countries that D'Agostino has done most of her research on and evidently knows best: Bulgaria and Romania. But, of course, I also understand why the study was written in this particular way – leaving out thick description allowed D'Agostino to win space for theoretical reflection and analysis.

And that reflection and analysis is indeed extensive. Although this is overall a rather concise dissertation, D'Agostino manages to reserve quite a lot of room for issues that revolve around the core question and even some that go beyond that core. One of the chapters, for example, addresses the issue of safe and unsafe spaces for female Romani activism. Some of the political opportunities designed 'from above' are felt to be 'unsafe' by activists, D'Agostino argues. The point she is making here is an important but subtle one. It is not the case that transnational European institutions do not provide enough access points for Romani (female) activists or have actively hindered Romani activists from having a say in policymaking debates. The existing access points may even actively take into account the intersectional dimension of such activism. But still, D'Agostino argues, a

problem remains. The quality of the spaces may not be good enough to provide assurance to activists that their efforts may in the end make a difference. She is not saying this literally, but what I take from that analysis is a warning for all those who engage in efforts for including vulnerable groups in transnational policymaking through special processes of participation and consultation. If these participations and consultations are felt to be more about form than substance, and if they therefore boil down to some sort of tokenism, they may jeopardize the position of those who take part in it. Nominally, these places seem to ensure a voice for a group that goes often unheard, but in practice they may disrupt the necessary trust between vulnerable communities and (European) institutions.

That is an intriguing problem and, once D'Agostino makes the reader see how difficult the position of activists may be, many additional questions can be asked. I highlight two:

- 1 A large part of the thesis discusses the (lack of) accessibility of European funding. But what is left open is the question of what difference European funds can make (or have made) once activists have secured funding. A similar question applies to spaces for Romani participation at the European level. In those cases where the quality of these spaces is good and the spaces are felt to be 'safe' for participation, what can they accomplish for Romani communities back home?
- 2 The thesis, furthermore, puts a lot of emphasis on the bureaucratic obstacles that Romani activists

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may encounter when they compete for EU funding. But that in itself provides no answer to the underlying question whether vying for EU funding is the right way for Romani activists to accomplish change on the ground. Are there examples of activism (in the field of Romani women activism or Romani activism in general) that have been developed completely outside of the context of the existing transnational opportunities but have still managed to have clear positive effects on the ground?

I am asking these questions not to point out shortcomings in the work of D'Agostino, but to show that the findings we can read in this work will be useful for a much needed broader discussion about minority activism and EU institutions. The discussion on that topic is clearly far from settled at this point, and more research on political opportunities for the inclusion of vulnerable groups in European policymaking is needed. D'Agostino's work has been a highly useful contribution to the debate on the way to further research along these lines.