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Communicating the Victim: Nongovernmental Organizations Advocacy Discourses for Roma Rights†

Adina Schneeweis

Department of Communication and Journalism, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309, USA

This article is a study of advocacy communication about the Roma (Gypsies) in contemporary Europe. A movement for Roma rights has emerged and solidified since the 1990s, marked by the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, rising neo-fascist anti-Roma discrimination, European Union enlargement, immigration policies, and moral panics. Based on in-depth longitudinal and historical analyses, this study explains the discourse of victimization as constructed in nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs) communication materials. I suggest here that a vehement position against anti-Roma discrimination is rather self-explanatory in post-World War II and post-Communist Europe; but I also critique the role that NGO communication plays within structures that maintain an anti-Roma system in place—by overly victimizing the Roma peoples.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Roma/Gypsy, Advocacy Communication, Rights, Victimization, NGO.

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> *Do Roma really believe that Gadje will share their power with them? What power-holders have ever shared it with those who are powerless?*
> —The Project on Ethnic Relations [PER] (2003)

It is no longer news that the largest ethnic minority in the European Union—the Roma, commonly known as the Gypsies—is discriminated against in institutional contexts and private interactions. National and international groups have recognized the "Gypsy problem" and have implemented reforms and policies to address anti-Gypsyism (Blasco, 2002; Nacu, 2011; Ram, 2011; Schneeweis, 2011). A transnational movement for Roma rights has also emerged to document and prove

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Corresponding author: Adina Schneeweis; e-mail: schneewe@oakland.edu

discrimination. Given the variety of expressions of support toward the Roma, this article is an inquiry into the communication practices of the newest of these voices. By analyzing materials published by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), I investigate here how NGOs within the movement for Roma rights communicate about the Roma and about discrimination. This research does not attempt to deny or minimize the reality of lived experiences, yet discourse is one aspect of human reality worth investigating.

Although Romani studies have been growing (for instance, Barany, 2002; Hancock, 2000), little scholarly attention has been given to communication about the Roma,[1] and even fewer works deal with advocacy discourses on Roma issues (with the significant exception of political scientist Peter Vermeersch, 2006). This study further contributes to critical scholarship on communication about the Roma, with focus on advocacy communication. It responds to communication scholars Shome and Hegde's (2002) call for investigations that interrogate representations using postcolonial theory, so as to shed light on the complications within communicative efforts, instead of simplifying them or taking them for granted. For this purpose, I here take a critical look at advocacy writing and its discursive construction of the Roma in order to examine the work against Roma discrimination that is often taken as self-evident nobility and social good. (Yet I do not mean to argue that advocacy for Roma rights is by any means unnecessary or that European societies are somehow post-anti-Roma-racism.)

Part of a larger project that investigated talk about Roma in post-Communist Europe, this article chronicles the discourse of victimization—that is, talk about anti-Roma discrimination—that has been one of the strongest advocacy foci of the 1990s and 2000s (Schneeweis, 2009). In doing so, I argue that situating "discrimination" as the focal point of their communication endeavors, NGOs inadvertently ignore the complexity of the Roma experience, reducing it to the single experience of "victimhood." I therefore explore the implications of victimization and question its potential ambivalent meanings. This research bridges studies of communication with critical, cultural, and postcolonial scholarship. On the one hand, this study delineates how NGO work positions itself in opposition to public hatred, violence, and institutionalized segregation. As such, advocacy writing must therefore be seen as intentional and with an agenda to protect, and speak out for, the Roma. On the other hand, drawing from postcolonial studies (Bhabha, 1984; Said, 2003; Spivak, 2003), the analysis looks beyond text and strategy to the historical, cultural, and international hierarchies that motivate and propel communication about the Roma. Advocacy communication must be understood therefore in the context of its relation to the language and political dynamics of mainstream institutional discourses. For these reasons, I use critical discourse analysis—as a method and theoretical positioning—to analyze 115 documents published between 1990 and 2006 in order to understand current practices of communicating about the Roma by Roma intellectuals, advocates, and activists in contemporary Europe. In what follows, I trace the development of the movement for Roma rights and explain what the literature has meant by victimization. After remarks on method and materials,

I turn to the NGO discourse of victimization and then offer some critique about its possible implications.

Regarding terminology, different terms are used to refer to the ethnic communities in various countries and scholarship. Anthropological or sociological research identifies tribal names (such as the Romanian Căldărași), others adopt wider group names (such as the British Travellers), and others use "Gypsy" as an ethnic appellative, rather than as a derogatory word. Romani intellectuals, NGO workers, activists, politicians, scholars, and some ethnic groups themselves have adopted the politically correct "Roma" in reaction to the stereotypical and derogatory usage of "Gypsy"[2] and to build solidarity around the cause for rights. Without suggesting homogeneity of the ethnic minority, I choose "Roma" in this study, the term of choice for most advocacy writing here analyzed. I also recognize the derogatory implications of "Gypsy" and refer to discriminatory sentiments and behavior as "anti-Gypsyist" when they invoke a sentiment found in mainstream media or sociopolitics.

The movement for Roma rights

Identified as the "quintessential outsiders of the European imagination" (Fonseca, 1997, p. 18), the Roma are also Europe's largest minority, numbering millions of people. What I call here the Roma problem resembles what others have termed "intersectional marginalization" (Strolovitch, 2007)—the combination of sociopolitico-economic and cultural struggles that ethnic communities face to overcome poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and low education levels, and poor health. It involves policies and projects toward "integration" and "inclusion," and communities' own challenges to live a better life. Ultimately, overcoming the Roma problem is about the work for harmonious interethnic living, complicated by a history of discrimination and othering, segregation and marginalization. Transnational organizations such as the EU, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations, and various national governments have increasingly paid attention to the Roma for several reasons that include memories of the Holocaust/Pogrom and of post-Cold War segregation, sterilization, and eugenics policies, and media reporting of ethnic and hate crimes (Bancroft, 2005). Significant partnerships between NGOs, the EU, OSCE, national governments, and other supranational bodies have opened lines of communication, roundtables, and initiated policy changes in the region as a result (Ram, 2011).

A movement for Roma rights has emerged in the wake of the 1990s revolutions, building upon attempts at organizing dating back to the 1960s–1970s (Vermeersch, 2006). Its aim has been to focus attention on discrimination, to offer a voice to the marginalized and an alternative representation within a system historically discriminatory, and to call for international protection of the Roma's human and civil rights (Schneeweis, 2009; Vermeersch, 2006). The emerging organizations have critiqued leadership in Central and Eastern Europe for the lack of attention to consequences of policies, especially in a climate made more difficult by NATO and EU enlargement,

which created new patterns of competition and cooperation, and further contributed to interethnic tension. The movement is uniquely characterized by little public and political attention to its cause when compared with other social movements for several reasons. First, Romani activism "has never been seen as a threat to the stability and the territorial integrity of an existing state" (Vermeersch, 2006, p. 2). Second, NGOs have generally failed to rally the Roma into a political mass movement. In addition, others have noted that the Roma have a weak ethnic identity despite public perception of the homogeneity of the various groups (Barany, 2002) and despite the growing number of Romani media outlets that have served the minority (Gross, 2006).

A numerical assessment of the NGOs, institutions, committees, and interest groups working for Roma rights is a difficult feat, yet some have noted a "conspicuous" rise in the number of organizations created in the last decades (Barany, 2002, p. 206). Some advocacy groups are better organized than others; some have clear agendas, while others have been more informal or transitory; some groups have solid financial backing, while others do not. Post-1989, many NGOs hoped to rally endorsement of their cause by establishing ethnically based political parties, while others focused exclusively on improving the quality of Romani life (Vermeersch, 2006). Advocacy in the 1990s focused heavily on legal protection and litigation, adding since the 2000s discussions of representation, identity, and gender, evaluation of training and service projects driven by EU enlargement, and nation-building and territoriality questions (Schneeweis, 2009). The primary focus has always been on the elimination of discrimination — unlike earlier social movements like the women's liberation, Civil Rights, or the labor and socialist movements, which focused on wealth, money, primary needs, and work conditions (Milani, 2002). Activism has accompanied socioeconomic, political, and cultural efforts in Central and Eastern Europe to improve civic and political engagement and voting (Vermeersch, 2006), employment rates, housing and education conditions, or the health status of the impoverished Romani communities (Schneeweis, 2011). Today, the transnational advocacy network is committed to scrutinizing governmental policies and human rights abuses, and policy and legal changes, and to bridging communication between Roma communities and national and international governmental agencies (Vermeersch, 2006). In this context, what is of interest here is the movement's principal insistence on the "reality" of anti-Roma discrimination. I focus on this particular point of argument in advocacy in order to explore the core around which the movement for Roma rights builds itself, which becomes the starting point for all other activism for the Roma: The Roma as victims.

Contextualizing victimization

The notion of victimization has been treated to have both *positive* and *negative* implications. On the one hand, advocacy has had the goal of eliminating anti-Roma sentiments by exposing the construction and treatment of an other that is racially, ethnically, and culturally different. This view of victimization has emphasized that Roma groups continue to suffer today from anti-Gypsyism — and it has been termed

positive because the very goal of this type of advocacy is to put an end to discrimination. In contrast, others have asked about the potential effects of emphasizing victimization, arguing that a continued attention to a victim status also oppresses the oppressed—and this is a *negative* phenomenon. Most famously, postcolonial studies scholars have cautioned against continuing to treat, and write about, the subaltern—the oppressed, the discriminated against—from an all-knowing, superior subject-position (see Bhabha, 1984; Said, 2003; Spivak, 2003).

Most advocacy work (and academic writing) is concerned with the first, *positive* mode of representation. In order to rally support to their cause, NGOs interpret and reframe social interaction "in terms of right and wrong because their purpose is to persuade people and stimulate them to act" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 19). The first analytical task here becomes, then, to describe the NGOs' rich documentation efforts in this arena. But I also question whether the construction of the argument that the Roma are victims of discrimination should be a final step—or an intermediary one. I suggest that a repeated emphasis on the victim status may in fact (continue to) trap the Roma in an inescapable object position, from which there is no self-recovery or self-empowerment. For this purpose, I look for elements of agency, voice, and resistance in NGO communication, since legal and social contexts often offer *agency*—defined as "any measure of resistance and self-determination used … to regain control" (Connell, 1997, p. 118)—to counter the *negative* overemphasis on the victim status.

I necessarily examine the cyclical relationship between discrimination and victimization: Discrimination against the Roma constructs a victim, which struggles (and often fails) to rise above racism, in part contributing to further discrimination. One Romani academic was quoted to have witnessed the effects of internalized victimization: "I have seen Roma myself who told me: 'I cannot go to school, I am a Gypsy. What do you expect of me?'" (al Yafai, 2005). Scholars and activists have called attention to "internalized stigma" or "internalized blackness," where continued discrimination begins to manifest itself as self-marginalization, "self-hatred," and a barrier to living full, satisfying lives (see European Roma Rights Centre [ERRC], 1997c; Lemon, 2000; Perese, 2007).

Remarks on method

I used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2004) to suggest possible links between texts and power, dominance, and inequality, as reflected in sociocultural practices around and about Roma issues. I treated NGO writing as reproducing and creating a fabric of knowledge (Foucault, 1990) that shapes both who the Roma are and how non-Roma interact with Roma. Approaching representations as discourses can help contextualize stereotypes as they are embedded in larger hierarchical social structures, as a "complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 70), further deployed and put to uses that fix those meanings into "truths" and "reality." In this approach, linguistic choices are not accidental, but informed

and *meaning*ful (Fairclough, 2004), and suggestive of systems of rules and practices (Macdonell, 1986; Terdiman, 1985).

Starting with a reading of the NGO materials to identify statements about the Roma, I compared texts to each other to identify the common story—the "parallels and the common genealogies that unite … apparently disparate occasions of discourse" (Spurr, 1999, pp. 3–4). I examined both object positions (discriminatory, cultural, or traditional practices referred to) and subject positions (the people talked about). I categorized these thematically, around subject positions, paying specific attention to the object positions associated with each. I weighed linguistic choices (vocabulary, metaphors, descriptions, images) alongside writing practices of organizing and prioritizing information, by highlighting some key elements, generalizing others, and leaving others out. Guiding questions in the analysis included: How are the Roma described? How is discrimination talked about? How does the idea of "victim" become implicated alongside that of discrimination? To what extent does advocacy writing (re)produce and/or contradict a perpetual victim status? To what degree is the Roma depicted as helpless, needing intervention, and permanently and irrevocably caught in the web of anti-Gypsyism? Is there room for a variety of experiences among the Roma—or are they all, unanimously, victims of the non-Roma?

With attention to not over-generalize the emerging patterns in NGO communication and to not idealize stories either, I continued to probe and question the texts, to compare and contrast them, and to consider how the representations might be playing out within societal structures and power relations, and how and why such modes of talking might emerge consistently. Yet I worked from the assumption that texts and language are not demonstrative of a reality of advocacy (or of discrimination), but rather are part of the message. In what follows, I offer extensive quotations to ensure accurate representation of advocacy writing and to support the connections and interpretations that I suggest.

Description of materials

I read and analyzed 115 documents (workshop notes, memos, newsletters, brochures, and pamphlets) written and published in the 1990–2006 time frame by 5 European NGOs selected because of their size, degree of involvement, and legitimacy with national and international bodies (such as the EU, the Council of Europe, or the European Court of Human Rights). These NGOs are taken to signify political legitimacy and leadership within the movement for Roma rights. The first, the PER, created in 1991 and closed in 2012, was funded by U.S. and European governments and nonprofit organizations.[3] Dedicated to preventing ethnic conflict in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the countries of the former Soviet Union, PER conducted intervention and dialogue programs, as well as training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels. The second selected NGO, the ERRC, formed in 1996, carries out litigation, international advocacy, research and policy development, and trainings. ERRC is a member of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and has consultative status with the Council

of Europe and the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It was the first human rights organization to monitor and legally represent the rights of the Roma. ERRC and PER (at the time) were the largest and most visible internationally. The 2 NGOs also authored most analyzed documents—44 and 36, respectively. Their productivity indicates their visibility in the European sphere, as well as the NGOs' financial backing.

The third NGO was the European Roma Information Office (ERIO), founded in 2003. It conducts antidiscrimination work in education, employment, health care, and housing, aiming to raise awareness and provide in-depth information about widespread discrimination against the Roma. The fourth, the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF), established in 2004, also works in direct partnership with the Council of Europe. It was created in response to public European requests for a single body to represent the European Roma minority, and it unites NGOs, political, religious, and other types of institutions. Finally, the goal of the fifth selected NGO, the European Committee on Romani Emancipation (ECRE), formed in 1999 under the EU umbrella, is to maintain a permanent presence in the European Parliament in Brussels.[4]

Assessing who works and writes for these organizations is problematic. Not all NGO staff members have public resumes or biographies to identify their ethnic background and personal history. It is evident that not all activists are Roma, neither are they all non-Roma. Some scholars have identified ERRC in particular to be a "non-Romani advocacy organization" (Vermeersch, 2006, p. 208), yet at the time of this research, several self-identified Romani authors had published their views in ERRC's materials and several Roma worked as ERRC staff. Most NGOs also include cultural and national diversity in their ranks, having offices located in Western, Central, and Eastern European countries.[5]

The Roma as victims of discrimination: "The most disadvantaged"

All documents across the analyzed time period contributed to constructing the Roma as "the most disadvantaged" (PER, 1994). The purpose of the NGOs' framing was explicit—to raise awareness about, and combat, discrimination and to portray the reality of Romani life as marked by racism, violence, and unfairness. The discourse permeated several areas including (un)employment, education, housing, health care, the law, and media coverage, as well as the construction of the state as the agent to blame for discrimination. Advocates used anti-Gypsyism, anti-Ciganism, Romanophobia, racism, or xenophobia interchangeably to describe the phenomenon of discrimination and the status of the Roma as a victim of such sentiments and behaviors. Advocacy materials typically described a range of racially motivated violence, from individual assaults to mob law, police violence, "war time abuses, killings, beatings, torture, abductions, rape, humiliation, etc." (ERRC, 1999). The writing framed such violent attacks in tones of outrage, illustrating how the Roma have been "hunted down" (ERRC, 2001b) by skinheads, neo-fascists, nationalists,

fundamentalists, and locals alike (see PER, 1992). Oftentimes, photographic and written testimonies underscored this theme of violence. Readers of reports were guided through the pain ensuing from racist attacks, and not just told about it.

From early 1990s, NGOs framed discrimination as a cycle between racism and out-of-the-norm behavior, grounded by the history of the Holocaust and Communist ethnic cleansing. Advocacy materials have deployed constructs of race and ethnicity to explain both contemporary and historic racism—without much definition or preamble of the concepts themselves. NGOs assume the difference of the Roma, as an ethnic nonwhite group, contrasted to "reluctant white communities" (ERRC, 1997a). As such, materials explained that the Roma inevitably has meant the unwanted, the "foreigners" and "outsiders in their own country," largely because of "beliefs about 'race'" and racial hatred (PER, 1997a, 1999).

Advocacy built the case for discrimination very clearly and precisely, from several angles. On the one hand, it highlighted dire living conditions and, on the other, it explained such conditions by pointing to stereotypes in public discourses that have informed institutionalized (mis)treatment of the minority—especially true for the work of the ERRC, whose reports noted the stereotypes of the "simple-minded musicians and tolerated … beggars" (1997b), the stigmatization as "stupid" and "retarded" (2004). To challenge stereotypes, ERRC exposed their role in institutional racism—relating, for instance, crime in Roma communities to police practices and expectations that a criminal way of life defined the "Gypsy," who supposedly is genetically inclined to illegality (1998b). Examples included a Greek Orthodox priest's refusal to baptize Romani children (1998c), "Abusive removals of Romani children from parental care in Italy" (2002), "Death of Roma as a result of substandard living conditions, including electricity cuts, in Bulgaria," "Anti-Romani sentiment leading to discrimination, hate propaganda or racist violence in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden, the United Kingdom," "Austrian campsite has 'No place for Gypsies,'" "Racist game reappears in Internet after removal" (2005), and denial of entrance in pubs, restaurants, discotheques, and sports centers (ERRC, 1997a, 1998b).

All NGOs dedicated a great deal of human and financial resources to gather and present evidence about the difficult everyday life of Roma communities throughout Europe presented to be due *in part due to their victim status*. It is *because* of the social and physical marginalization and segregation in the so-called Romani ghettos, without basic utilities and access to roads and to social services, that Roma struggle with poverty, unemployment, poor health, child homelessness, and crime. For example, "They are not nomadic by choice, but because they cannot afford to rent a house," wrote ERRC (1997b; see also ERRC, 2004; PER, 1992). This discursive direction constitutes a unique contribution of the movement to the knowledge around and about Roma issues, and one that is often absent in mainstream popular discourses (see also Schneeweis, 2009). The more unusual and novel the argument—which it is—the more frequently it must be repeated. This is the justification for giving full attention to the case of discrimination in NGO communications.

Documents often contextualized unemployment as a consequence of "stupefying poverty" (ERRC, 1996b) and as a direct outcome of state failure to provide access to jobs. According to ERRC (2001a), institutional and social discrimination, such as racial animus, exclusion from job interviews once the Roma ethnicity is identified, abusive treatment once employed, and creating bureaucratic obstacles for craft practitioners, discourage employment opportunities. The following passage is suggestive of such connections between unemployment, stereotyping, and social discrimination:

> The massive and disproportionate exclusion of Roma from employment is an undisputed reality in many countries … One reason for governments' failure to undertake proactive measures to challenge the exclusion of Roma from employment is the widespread conviction that the fact that Roma do not work is their fault and is the consequence of poor education and lack of motivation to find work. The presumption is that employment opportunities are equally accessible for everyone, and if Roma are not taking advantage of these it is due to objective reasons — low education, as well as subjective reasons — conscious choices to live from state support rather than work. (ERRC, 2006a)

The writing is unequivocal and unapologetic. It is evident here how advocacy gets to the point: First, it constructs the reality of discrimination — "massive and disproportionate exclusion of Roma from unemployment" — that is "undisputed." Second, what is perceived as otherness is based on a *presumption*. And third, what is perceived as otherness is *not* the fault of the Roma; rather, they are victims of a system (government and public) that is against them.

The focus on discrimination in the realm of education gained momentum among the NGOs in the late 1990s. School segregation, violence, and harassment of Roma children by teachers, administrators, parents, and non-Roma students, along with little to no access to curriculum in Romany, were offered both as evidence of racism and as factors that contribute to low school attendance. Again, advocacy writing identified the ramifications of segregated education:

> At a very young age, many Roma and non-Roma are taught that hate, humiliation and even physical abuse on racist grounds is acceptable or at least tolerated. (ERRC, 2004)

Dismal housing opportunities — the issue of "unhousing Roma" (ERRC, 2000b) — were other proofs of consequences of discrimination, seen in ghettoization projects, forced evictions, threats of eviction, demolitions, uncertain "slum transformation" projects, refusal to rent or sell to Roma, and dire or absent utilities and service for Roma-inhabited buildings (see ERIO, 2006; ERRC, 2006a). Other evidence showed the lack of, or difficult access to, health services on racist grounds (ambulance and emergency services, distribution of health care benefits and insurance, or segregation into hospital "Gypsy rooms"), sterilization of Roma women (a "new example of Romani genocide"; PER, 1997b), which all have contributed to poor health, low life expectancy, and child mortality in Romani communities (see ERRC, 2006b). These

cases were discursively framed as examples of a racist health care system. Similarly, ERRC in particular thoroughly documented frequent lapses in ethics and morality in legal contexts, noting the failure to prosecute cases involving the Roma and a general light-hearted treatment of such proceedings (for instance, ERRC, 1998a).

Reports also repeatedly commented on a sustained, "incredibly distorted" (PER, 2000a) anti-Roma media coverage, with dire consequences, they argued. In this regard, advocates again constructed the case of discrimination against the Roma as a fault of the (non-Roma) system. Furthermore, we see how NGO talk explicitly identifies the victim status of the Roma. Thus, using "[a]nti-Romani hate speech" (ERRC, 2006a) categorically and unequivocally shapes and perpetuates racist public opinion:

> … [The media] *leads to* racist views. (ERRC, 1998c; emphasis added)

> … the media helped to justify the violence and convert *victims* into perpetrators. (PER, 2000c; emphasis added)

The important discursive partner to victimization is the construction of an agent. In the case of the Roma problem, the perpetrators are the state and any other government-affiliated institutions in a position of power (like the European Commission or the Council of Europe). Identifying governmental fault and failure has been a primary goal of the movement. As such, advocacy writing persistently argued that it is the state that must be blamed for not protecting and defending the rights of the minority; it is governmental policies that continue to trap the Roma in poverty. This discourse completes the image of the Roma as victims by constructing the villain — a corrupt, failing, and aloof system:

> Whole communities of Roma in Romania live on dumpsites, and the efforts of non-governmental organizations to assist Roma in enrolling their children in school have met with *obstruction at nearly every official instance*. (ERRC, 2004; emphasis added)

The state does not protect the Roma, or is it willing to. In ERRC's materials: "Official inactivity creates impunity and tacitly vindicates violence against Roma" (1996b); "Romanian officials commonly blame Romani victims for crimes committed against them" (2001c); or, clearly a strong claim, ERRC documented more tragic outcomes, when "[h]ousing conditions lead to death of Romani baby in Sarajevo" (ERRC, 2001b).

Of the 5 NGOs, the ECRE used the strongest language to judge official apathy and corruption, at times echoing propaganda:

> This financial incentive is used as *an excuse to effect fraudulent classifications* of children's capabilities and their physical separation to a status of *educational denial* …. (2003a; emphases added)

> The more recent rise in significance of the Special schools has only intensified the impact of the system in *robbing* the majority of all generations of Roma in

> Central Europe of an adequate education. … This *tragic and unfortunate outcome* is … the result of the *covert actions* of mainstream society leaders and officials. … This system maintains a *horrendous* annual tradition [of separating Roma children to other schools in front of non-Roma children]. … Special schools are invariably badly kept, ill-equipped and dull. … This system reflects a *failed political leadership*. (2003b; emphases added)

ECRE detailed how "a tiny sum" and "grossly insufficient funds" are allocated to Roma projects, marked by "fraudulent accounting and reporting within the governments, ministries of education and local authorities. It is *clearly totally irresponsible* of the European Commission" (2003b; emphasis added). State abandonment, alongside institutional and individual acts of racism, has real consequences, advocates documented. NGOs wrote about Roma who give up out of distress, despair, and resignation ("people were afraid to talk"; ERRC, 1997b).

I have asked at the outset of this article what the voice of advocacy communication tells and examined how discrimination is constructed in advocacy materials. I have thus far shown the thick, well-documented, and eloquent discursive construction of the Roma as a victim of discrimination — "eloquent" because the NGOs' communicative efforts are well articulated, maintaining their main advocacy purpose of persuasion in focus (see Keck & Sikkink, 1998). I also asked to what extent NGO discourses (re)produce or resist majority views. I have suggested here that the advocacy crafts a fairly unique path in the public sphere — one that emphasizes the cycle of discrimination, in which it is difficult (and undesirable) to confine oneself to imagery of the other as one realizes the relationship between centuries of discrimination and racism, on the one hand, and the impoverished living conditions of many struggling European Roma communities, on the other hand. I argue that this is a *new discourse* in the post-Communist European context — not so much "new" in the sense that it has never been conceived or uttered before, but in the sense that concepts related to the cycle of poverty, the cycle of discrimination — so central to the NGO discourses of the Roma victim — are finally taking root in the European knowledge system. They are finally visible in advocacy for Roma rights — and, significantly, in political circles around the EU, the Council of Europe, and other supranational bodies, where they have become more frequent than ever before, due in great part to the efforts of the NGOs.

The paradox of victimization discourses

I now turn to explore potential issues with the construction of the victim, accompanied as I have shown, by the perpetrating, oppressive agent of the state (and other government-affiliated bodies). In asking what representations of Roma circulate in advocacy communication in contemporary Europe, Foucault's (1990) theorization of knowledge and truth production via discourses has been particularly useful. Whether a text uses stereotypes or exposes them and explains their potential implications becomes important to note. How often certain imagery is invoked and repeated is

telling as well because knowledge is produced by repetition, emphasis, by grounding an event contextually, by linking new information to commonly held truths, to emotional and moral codes, and so forth.

As such, NGO writing constructed the truth of the Roma's status of a victim of discrimination by grounding anti-Gypsyism historically. Stories of suffering in the Holocaust or under Communism were reiterated: "We have never recovered from this blow" (ERRC, 1997b).[6] Tellingly, an advocate wrote about post-Holocaust and contemporary discrimination in an ERRC *Roma Rights* editorial:

> The trouble for me is not so much the concentrated suffering that comes undiluted from the reality of Roma lives, past and present. It is difficult to read because it is monotonous. It is banal. … We may soon become numb and not want to hear more. Please keep in mind: it is not the horror, it is the banality. Banality is more difficult to resist, and whether we choose this kind of resistance is entirely up to us. (ERRC, 1997c)

What is striking here is the duality of victimization. There is both urgency in the need to tackle discrimination, and hopelessness because it has been attempted so many times and the public is desensitized to it (Chouliaraki, 2006). This is the crux of activism: Something must be done and there is so much to be done, but not much is achieved. Not only is it difficult to construct and publicize the knowledge that the Roma suffer of discrimination, but that argument in itself becomes meaningless because it has been repeated so many times. Yet without repetition, how can it be constructed, asked the advocates. This editorial is compelling in that it shows how the notion of the perpetual victim becomes established—and banal at the same time—because of the difficulty of escaping its binds.

The paradox of the discourse of victimization is that it is necessary for the call against discrimination. Yet I question here, like the ERRC advocate, whether a continued celebration (by emphasis, repetition, and preference over other representational modes) of the discourse does not in fact risk further objectifying the Roma. In other words, I call attention to the "never" in "We have never recovered from this blow" (ERRC, 1997b), which not only takes away the possibility of change, of an escape door, but also homogenizes all Roma experiences. Some other examples are as follows:

> To be clear and short, … in the eyes of the gadje [the non-Roma] you are not a girl or a woman first, you are a GYPSY. (ERRC, 2000a; emphasis in the original)

> [T]o the Gadje the Roma remain *Tsigan*. (PER, 2002; emphasis in the original)

> Often the Roma, who are generally *at the lowest level on the social scale*, are blamed for the decline of living standards and other hardships of the current difficult transition. (PER, 1994; emphasis added)

> Denying the Roma access to education will keep them in a perpetual and vicious circle of poverty, where they will live as adults who are illiterate or

> under-educated, unemployed or, if employed, condemned to low-paying, menial jobs. (ERIO, 2006)

The writing here married the perceived otherness of the Roma with a *permanent* status of the Tsigan victim, "the less fortunate … at the lowest level on the social scale" (ERRC, 1996a), the "forgotten minority" (PER, 2000b).

These images abound, and bring up 2 issues. First, advocates are not ignorant when it comes to the potential implications of the perpetuation of the victim status. They put it in plain words that the Roma are frozen in a victim position in sociopolitical contexts. As early as 1992, PER explained how the Roma *become* victims, experiencing an "[i]nternalized unworthiness, due to system of prejudice and marginalization" (1992). And again in 2003, PER asked, "[d]o Roma really believe that Gadje will share their power with them? What power-holders have ever shared it with *those who are powerless*?" (2003; emphasis added). Second, I argue that NGO writing also *contributes* to this construction of the object as it repeatedly makes the argument that they are the "powerless" (PER, 2003). Foucault's theorization on power (1990) is useful here to understand that power and oppression are not only exercised top-down but also infiltrated in the fabric of public discourses—including advocacy discourses. This is a more qualified approach to victimization, in which the construct of the victim is seen as it is *produced* by a variety of discourses, not just oppressed and repressed from the top.

Such objectification becomes even more significant as it stands alone, often unaccompanied by images of Romani empowerment. Although the movement for Roma rights and the existence and work of the NGOs alone constitute resistance, there is little diversity in the voices included and described in the advocacy materials. In other words, their communication efforts offer a rather homogeneous and limited perspective of Romani life.[7] While some of the documents (particularly the work of the PER and of the ERRC) discussed the absence of one nation, one culture, one ethnic group across Europe, NGO writing has tended to homogenize instances of discrimination, specific living conditions, or the effects of pertinent policies on local communities. Clearly, their purpose has been to raise awareness about anti-Roma discrimination; this discursive choice toward uniformization of experiences is certainly an essential rhetorical strategy of a social movement for minority rights. Yet, I argue that it is also problematic as it contributes knowledge to a larger script in which the Roma share the same story, the same path, from which the Roma cannot escape, and there is no out-of-the-norm story.

It is precisely in this context of repetition, where NGO materials construct the Roma to be perpetually caught in a web of anti-Gypsyism, that I ask about the possible *negative* implications of the discourse. There are too few examples illustrating the variety of experiences among the Roma. I recognize that it may not be the purpose of the NGO movement for rights to focus on inner-group diversity; but as the main public *voice for the Roma*, it might be(come) a significant expectation of those interacting with advocacy, and therefore a role the NGOs should consider.

Conclusion

The starting point of this research was the recognition that advocacy for Roma rights has attempted to "invest situations and symbols with meaning" (Vermeersch, 2006, p. 150). This article chronicled the discourse of victimization as constructed and communicated by NGOs working for Roma rights. I presented evidence gathered from materials published by 5 European NGOs between 1990 and 2006, and showed how advocacy groups have demonstrated discrimination against the Roma. In nearly 3 decades, the discourse has stayed fairly stable and consistent. The fact that the Roma are victims of racism and discrimination has been undeniably the point of agreement in advocacy documents. I have also suggested that this discursive direction, which emphasizes the cycle of discrimination, is a fairly unique construction in the contemporary European public sphere.

I also interrogated whether victimization as an essentializing act is always a beneficial representational choice. In doing so, this article sought to respectfully disrupt the subtle hegemony of the discourse of discrimination and interrogate its implications and legacy. That is, though I recognize the importance and necessity to raise awareness about anti-Roma discrimination, it is essential to move beyond such narrow definition of the Roma community and the Roma problem. I attempted to escape, to borrow Rhadika Parameswaran's words, those "traditional approaches based in the identification of blatantly … racist stereotypes in media content" (2002, p. 312) that characterize scholarship about the Roma *and that stop there*.

A similar critique has been raised before in some circles (see Shome & Hegde, 2002, for instance)—and I urge scholars and communicators to do the same—and to problematize the idea of a unified, homogeneous construct of the Roma (victim). Further attention to voice and who speaks for whom in communicating about rights is needed. Taking the example of Dara Strolovitch's (2007) work on affirmative advocacy in the United States, I suggest a further investigation of European advocates' claim to speak for the "intersectionally marginalized" Romani groups at the operational level, on the ground, when they decide distribution of resources and access, and policy lobbying and intervention. A postcolonial intervention for the activist must problematize the politics of communication and the intellectual tradition of speaking for a marginalized group (see Parameswaran, 2002; Shome & Hegde, 2002). At the same time, attention to the Roma voice and the degree of initiative in speaking must be examined ethnographically; the critical scholar must continue to interrogate the forms of adaptation, resistance, integration, assimilation, or decision to not speak—any and all of such gestures communicate about the politics of speaking and representation of the Roma within and without the movement of Roma rights.

At the same time, I recognize the complexities that advocacy for Roma rights faces in its work, the various commitments, pressures, and loyalties that NGOs must keep in balance in order to offer the movement for rights as a legitimate political presence on the European scene. Such pressures come first from the political world

intent on integrating the Roma; it is this world that must, above all others, recognize the advocacy groups to be legitimate conversation partners. NGO loyalties lie also with those elements of the movement more committed to the grassroots, which seek to resist what appear as assimilation efforts, which uphold tradition, which hesitate to mingle with the non-Roma majority (for a host of reasons), and which remain critical of elitism within a community that has been historically disadvantaged. Finally, public figures, thinkers, scholars, and activists themselves, who question the movement's role in formulating an identity and a uniform agenda for all Roma communities, are another type of influence. The communication output of any successful NGO must, therefore, very intentionally reflect and navigate all such factors—especially as advocacy must overcome the banality of repeating the same story report after report, newsletter after newsletter, press release after press release. And the challenge also becomes to grapple with, and resist, the "banality" of advocacy for the Roma, even when NGO workers see the case documenting discrimination dying out, as it is spoken, because of its repetitiveness.

Notes

1 See Guarrasi (2009) on communication and education; Herakova (2009) on communicating identity; or Schneeweis (2011), on health communication, to name but a few.

2 With its linguistic variants of "tsygane"—the German "Zigeuner," the Hungarian "cigany," the French "tsigane," or the Romanian "ţigan," to name a few—or the British "pikeys."

3 PER receives funding from the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID), from a number of American foundations, among them the Hewlett Foundation, the Rockefeller Fund, and the Carnegie Corporation, as well as from the Governments of Switzerland, Great Britain, and Romania.

4 Of these, 10 were documents issued by the ERIO—newsletters, press releases, and country reports, detailing ethnic conflict in the Central-Eastern European region. Seven European Roma Travellers Forum documents were press releases and the ERTF Charter, emphasizing both the uniqueness of the creation of the Forum and the plight of the Roma. I analyzed twenty documents by the ECRE—reports and correspondence, primarily concerned with school segregation and EU financing governmental initiatives that support "special schools" for Roma children. The Project on Ethnic Relations published yearly bulletins, policy papers, and summaries of international workshops and trainings concerned with bringing together Roma and non-Roma activists and political leaders working on minority rights and identity issues (36 analyzed materials). The most productive of the NGOs (with 44 documents analyzed in this study), the ERRC published position papers, pamphlets, fact sheets, country reports, and the ERRC periodic publication, *Roma Rights Quarterly* (34 issues in the analyzed time frame). ERRC's work covered a wide range of topics related to the situation of the Roma in Europe, from public and institutional discrimination, to specific issues of poverty, unemployment, problematic access to health and housing services, violence, and criminality. Given the NGO's primary drive toward an agenda of human rights, every issue of its periodical, *Roma Rights*

Quarterly, reported successful and problematic litigation for rights. ERRC also offered news feeds on Roma issues, written by its staff or gathered from other news sources (such as the Associated Press, France Press, newspapers-of-record and smaller European papers, and other organizations). (Two of the documents had both ERIO and ERRC as authors.)

5 PER has offices in Serbia, Romania, Kosovo, and Belgium (and Princeton, USA), ERRC is based in Hungary, ERIO in Belgium, ERTF in Strassbourg, and ECRE in the United Kingdom.

6 The Roma are recognized victims of the Great Pogrom when 500,000–1,500,000 European Roma were murdered in their homes or in deportation camps, subject to medical and genetic experiments (de Vaux de Foletier, 1984). Actual figures are difficult to estimate, due to the system of ethnic cleansing and deportation, the absence of census organization within Roma communities, and the fear of self-identification as Gypsies. Some accounts deny the Holocaust against the Roma altogether, whereas others inflate the death roll to over 3 million. Still, the Romani Holocaust has been acknowledged by national governments with much delay in comparison to that against the Jewish population. The Nuremberg Trials of the political, military, and economic leadership during the Nazi regime did not include witnesses on behalf of the Roma, nor were the Roma paid war crimes reparations (Kenrick & Puxon, 1972). Some recent court proceedings throughout Central and Eastern European countries seek to remedy this situation.

7 In fact, Roma communities are characterized by rich diversity, from traditional to modernized families, from rural to urban living, from nomadic to stationary groups, and so forth—as Roma of various backgrounds have themselves repeatedly testified in personal interviews.

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