

Go After the World – Creating a Roma Education Movement

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*“Conquer your neighborhood, conquer your city, conquer your country,
and then go after the rest of the world.”*

– Grandmaster Flash

Nested in the architecture of the brain, emergent with body language as one of the first modes of communication, stereotypes help humans navigate and process the world around them. Stereotypes, or oversimplified representations of others, allow humans to make decisions by avoiding or coping with threats to their daily lives. These decisions appear to be automatic.

For many minority groups positioned outside mainstream society, stereotypes are not benign but rather are conditioned to perpetuate ideas of otherness and exclusion. Whether gender or sexuality, ethnicity or race, representation is framed and shaped within the norms of media narratives that saturate the public sphere. For better or worse, stereotypes help humans to interpret and understand their environment.

For Roma, portrayed within the deficit narrative, stereotypes perpetuate their exclusion from full participation in public life. Efforts to counter and refashion this narrative that simplifies the multifaceted dimensions of exclusion, particularly concerning abject poverty, are embedded within the field of communication for development (C4D), notably the universal communication approach for all agencies of the United Nations.²

Countless development organizations around the world like mine follow similar principles. By recording how the educational experience changes outcomes in people’s lives, we express our vision and tell the story of our mission. We rely on narrative and storytelling of those who have made the story to report on the journey. Ultimately, this model seeks to create space for empathy and shared values.

At the Roma Education Fund (REF), the international foundation working both in praxis and policy to challenge discrimination and segregation in schools where I work, we propagate positive stereotypes about the education pathway. The Fund underlines messages of resilience, emancipation, pride and self-determination of the Romani people to support, market and fund the Roma education movement.

So who are the agents of change, the everyday heroes, in whom we both believe and invest?

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² See, for instance, at UNICEF. Available online: <https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/>

- Roma children attending formal education in mainstream schools in desegregated classrooms, developing the skills and competencies to transition to further schooling.
- Roma high school students graduating and transitioning to university or trade schools.
- Roma university graduates joining the labor market as qualified professionals in their given field.

At the heart of this vision, we believe in healthy societies anchored in values of cohesion, equity, inclusion and social justice. They should be flexible enough to absorb challenges and solve conflicts, with ample space to accommodate multiple narratives of diversity and difference within the boundaries of human potential. We believe in Roma families housed, employed, educated and ultimately integrated into the fabric of their societies.

One percent of the Fund's annual beneficiaries have been at the forefront of its ambition to support the creation of Roma professionals, knowledge producers and critical thinkers. From this one percent benefiting from a quartet of tertiary education scholarship schemes,³ roughly a dozen exceptional, eligible Roma students who are studying in higher education abroad become recipients of the Roma International Scholar Program (RISP) each year.⁴ Evidence from their experience of international education, despite the trauma of being detached from home and community, shows that it has a deep impact on the outcome of their professional and personal lives, and their journeys as cultural ambassadors prominently feature in REF's annual reporting⁵ and social media posts.

Promoting the experience of RISP students and alumni serves two purposes: they are instrumental to expressing the aspirations and needs of Roma families and communities to international audiences, while at home they can also dismantle Roma perceptions of schools as sites of oppression consonant with policies of forced assimilation, loss of identity, and most traumatically, genocide as experienced by Roma communities during the Holocaust. This strategy simultaneously targets Roma audiences with a message that wider participation of Roma in education is a value to be invested in by families and communities. In brief, we believe that it is neither unique nor extraordinary for Roma students to study at home and abroad.

Creating positive Roma stereotypes for both mainstream and Roma audiences sounds easy. The tactics may appear straightforward but are actually an interplay of marketing, messaging and packaging. Creating them involves partnerships and trust between Roma and pro-Roma knowledge producers in order to succeed. Even if the interpretation of their role symbolizing the Roma higher education student body in various national contexts may hinge on the production of narrative theories advanced by Levi-Strauss (binary) or Todorov (equilibrium) –

³ REF Scholarship Program reached 1,269 university students in 2016 and has supported over 10,000 individuals in its 12-year lifetime of widening Roma participation in higher education.

⁴ RISP accepted 11 students from 21 who were eligible in 2016. This tiny fraction of Roma scholars receives financial support for tuition and living costs averaging EUR 6,400 per year.

⁵ Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.org/sites/default/files/documents/roma_annual_report_2016_correction.pdf

and the reception by audiences as underlined by Bell Hooks and Stuart Hall may be unstable and subjective – their value as a product and symbol of the Fund’s investment is undeniable. To cut a long story short, Roma scholars are an exceptional human resource because:

- They embody and express the Fund’s ultimate but unspoken aspiration to create future community leaders.
- They give voice to Roma narratives and highlight Roma contributions to their host societies.
- They validate the Fund’s existence to its core allies, stakeholders and donors.
- Their academic achievements contribute to the values and strategies shared by the Fund’s Roma and pro-Roma staff.

Here, the appearance and voice of educated, neat Roma professionals in the mainstream media narrative may surprise national audiences conditioned to a deficit narrative inflected with the trio of discrimination, prejudice and racism that dominate the portrayal of Roma. Throughout REF’s public events from 2011 to date, students portray themselves as integrated, with a common desire for a normal life, but with their Roma identity intact. To achieve their aims, Roma deliberately have remade themselves in the image of their harshest, most skeptical critics, *gadjo*,⁶ with all the rights, privileges and mobility that *gadjo* ideally enjoy and share.

Underlying the representation of sleek, smart Roma students are deeper messages: that change is possible, even for seemingly intractable issues surrounding Roma, that change is made possible by outstanding people who may need encouragement on the ground and that even persistent problems can be solved if communities work together step by step. Nonetheless, caution is needed here, and mainstream audiences, not to mention governments, in Eastern Europe are notoriously allergic to affirmative action or positive discrimination, with local populations sometimes reacting with outright hostility, even resorting to vigilantism when it comes to desegregating schools or other threats to the status quo.

Pro-Roma knowledge producers embedded in organizations with similar missions focusing on development and human rights have borrowed, developed and modified media tactics from a variety of historical struggles of race, gender and class: the portrayal of respect fused together with strategic litigation pioneered by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s; the bold charge of feminists to dismantle the legacy of the imperial and colonial project and to create space for herstories in the academy; the ongoing global battle, most recently known as Occupy, to discredit neoliberal ideologies of access and replace them with the participation of social justice and the empowerment of human potential narratives.

Techniques borrowed from independent media make it possible to challenge public policy with notions like equality and equity, integration and inclusion, diversity and multiculturalism,

⁶ Outsider, i.e., non-Roma.

even if such words may be problematic or misunderstood, particularly when faced with the prevailing socio-economic and legal order. Peeling away the strands of these critical theories and counter-narratives reveals a commonality at their core: altruism, respect, empathy and a wish to achieve better outcomes in life – resonant for the future prosperity of not only Roma but for everyone around the world.

Honestly, we do not expect that Roma inclusion in education will happen overnight: governments continue to avoid their responsibilities and refuse to allocate their resources to Roma education.⁷ Undaunted, REF continues to document, implement, shape and advocate for Roma inclusion in education. By working together with communities big and small, REF can make its vision easier to imagine, achieve and perceive by building and publishing positive stereotypes and constantly challenging how the mainstream perceives, represents and portrays Roma. For example, among many communication products developed over the history of REF, we recently produced *Rising to the Top*, a dozen video episodes with leading Roma academics, activist and artists speaking about their educational journeys as they negotiated the barriers, challenges and obstacles to education.⁸

But how will pro-Roma employees like me know they have achieved their goals? Well, what better indicator than successors to whom to pass the torch? Smiling, glittering-eyed junior staff who are no longer an exercise in imagineering. Who sit alongside you and do your job even better than you. Who fight to keep European schools open to all, equal for all. Who guarantee in actions and words that being Roma means being educated. Who no longer find themselves being shunned or avoided but being embraced and involved. Who are no longer cast as villains but heroes, protagonists righting imbalance in their neighborhoods, cities and countries – the narrative kernel of any story worth telling.

⁷ To date, REF has spent nearly EUR 80 million in 12 years, reaching approximately one million Roma with its programs and campaigns. The estimated Roma population in Europe is estimated to be between 10 and twelve million individuals.

⁸ Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgri0MZ_PKM