

Iulius Rostas. 2019. *A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail*. Budapest: Central European University Press

Book review by

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Critical
Romani Studies

A Task for Sisyphus

Iulius Rostas's book *A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail*, published by Central European Press in 2019, investigates the everlasting question of why policies towards Roma fail despite countless "Gypsy issue" advocacies, projects, and initiatives over the decades.^[1] The monograph addresses the development of the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (hereinafter: EU Framework for Roma; European Commission 2011) and its implementation in three European countries, particularly the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania. The author critically examines the policy failures aimed at supporting Romani people. The book presents a critical theoretical framework for analysing policymaking related "issues" to Roma by incorporating social sciences, including racial, ethnic, policy, and Romani studies. This necessitates an interdisciplinary approach; therefore, Rostas examined policy failures from multiple perspectives and disciplines, utilising critical race theory and policy design theory, as well as interviews, policy, discourse, content, and legal analyses.

In 2025, people around the world face various forms of social inequality, racism, and oppression (United Nations. n.d.). This constant issue has defined our history over the centuries, posing a threat not only to long-term economic, political, and social development but also restricting individuals' access to social goods. Meanwhile, it is undermining their economic status, harms poverty reduction efforts, and destroys individuals' sense of fulfilment and self-esteem as underlined in Strategic Development Goal 10 (United Nations. n.d.). Inequality can be measured and assessed through several factors, including age, background, disability, ethnicity, income, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and social class (*Ibid.*, n.d.). "Confronting inequalities has moved to the forefront of many global policy debates" (*Ibid.*, n.d.) has become one of the main goals outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 10: "Reduce inequality within and among countries"), which are part of the global development agenda adopted by all Member States of the United Nations from 2015 to 2030 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, n.d.). These goals not only serve as an overall framework to guide global and national development policies but also offer opportunities to build bridges between human rights and development (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. n.d.). Furthermore, inequality is not only a critical debate at the international level but also prominently integrated in European policy discussions. Despite the countless initiatives, policy developments, and measures that aimed for Romani "inclusion, integration, and assimilation" in Europe, Romani people are facing structural antigypsyism through racism, including deprivation, discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation (Rostas 2019, 8).

A Task for Sisyphus consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, "Ethnic Identity as a Social Category and Process", examines the definition of ethnic identity by analysing it within sociology, anthropology, and critical social studies. It explains why scholars reach no consensus on the definition of identity, its components

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this book review are solely those of the author, who writes as an independent and unaffiliated researcher. They do not reflect the positions or policies of any current or former employer, institution, or organization. This review is the product of the author's professional research and scholarly analysis.

or scope. This chapter also points out the heterogeneity of Romani ethnic identity and how it has been shaped over the centuries, with a special focus on antigypsyism. To support, from an identity perspective, analysis of policies towards Roma, Iulius Rostas approaches the “issue of Roma” ethnic identity as a social category as well as a process. To conclude, the author proposes an operational definition of ethnic identity in policymaking based on four dimensions:

1. Ethnic group participation in the policymaking process;
2. Ethnic claims and grievances expressed formally by social actors who speak on behalf of the group;
3. Representation of the group or the problems faced by this group in the public sphere by the different social actors involved in policymaking: policymakers, researchers, representatives of the group, among others.
4. Causal relationships that determine the current state of affairs identified by analysing public policy documents (Rostas. 2019, 39).

In Chapter 2, Rostas addresses the questions of policymaking and policy models in relation to Roma through critical approaches. Furthermore, this chapter gives information about public policy processes that focus on theoretical difficulties – in framing Roma – as part of broader policy paradigms. Certain concepts, such as social integration, multiculturalism, social inclusion, or combating poverty, are often used in a biased manner by authorities.

Chapter 3 critically examines “Policies towards Roma in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania” by focussing on Romani representation models in national and transnational contexts. Moreover, readers can learn in detail about the development and implementation of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), a joint commitment to advance action plans in favour of Roma. Under this lens, Rostas provides a historical perspective as to how Roma have been framed and categorised within the policymaking process in the region. The book considers a constant burning issue about a lack of Romani participation in policy and decision-making processes – alongside the effectiveness of Romani movements. More particularly, it illuminates how the challenges faced by Roma were addressed after the fall of communism and before the three countries’ EU accession, including internal and external peculiarities that influenced policymaking and decisions concerning Roma.

Rostas is not alone in this belief. Ismael Cortés Gómez also confirms the failure of strategies for economic inclusion due – to a large extent – to the lack of political involvement of Romani communities at both national and local levels (Cortés Gómez 2019, 381). As Cortés Gómez noted in 2019, the European Parliament lacked mechanisms to enhance the political representation of ethnic minorities (*Ibid.*, 378). Specifically, the representation of minorities, particularly Roma, is blocked by the EU’s institutional design (*Ibid.*, 381).

Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of the EU Framework for Roma and its implementation in the three EU member states examined in the research. In 2011, the EU Framework for Roma set minimum standards for their member states, which is regarded as the most intricate policy arrangement targeting Roma. However, considering those standards of the EU Framework for Roma which were met, the author evaluated and critically inserts into academic debates the point where the policymaking process and

content of the EU Framework for Roma failed – as Sisyphus failed when condemned to roll a rock to the top of a mountain. Rosta's key criticisms include:

1. The failure of policymakers to learn from past policy implementations and their inability to define the policy objectives, problem statements, or the target group clearly.
2. The absence of reliable data – in alignment with the applicable data privacy laws and regulations – for policymaking and a lack of indicators and effectiveness monitoring continue to pose a significant challenge.
3. The EU Framework for Roma lacks a human rights approach, and it does not address intersectionality either.
4. It fails to mention antigypsism or the structural discrimination faced by Romani communities.
5. It does not consider the migration of Romani people, which has caused pressure on certain EU member states. Furthermore, Rostas argues that this migration issue has been used as a justification to compel Central and Eastern European countries with large Romani populations to implement appropriate measures.
6. Since the EU member states received a short deadline to submit their national strategies, the national adaptation process resulted in negative consequences, inconsistencies, limited participation from Romani communities, and insufficient involvement of relevant local authorities.

In Chapter 5 ("Conclusion: Failure, Data, and What Comes Next"), Rostas concludes the research findings based on a critical review of the implementations of the EU Framework for Roma, which is unlikely to significantly improve the situation and social positions of Roma in Europe. Rostas notes that to achieve meaningful change, a paradigm shift is necessary. Otherwise, policies aimed at supporting Roma are expected to fail again, which could result in dissatisfaction from both Roma and society-at-large over time.

Although the book provided many comprehensive answers as to why Roma policies fail, Chapter 3, based on my practice and experience, might have benefitted from an introduction to the new Fundamental Law of Hungary from 2011 (as in force on 23 December 2023), particularly Article 30, in addition to Act CLXXIX of 2011 on the Rights of National Minorities (hereinafter: the new National Minority Act) in Hungary that were already in force when the book was published in 2019. The new National Minority Act replaced Act LXXVII of 1993 on the rights of the national and ethnic minorities analysed in the research. In line with the new Fundamental Law, the new National Minority Act offers an improved framework and some progress as a result of negotiations among policymakers, representatives of national minorities, relevant stakeholders and experts (Kállai 2014, 1, 4). For instance, it introduces the preferential quota system that provided a real chance to obtain preferential mandates in parliament for Roma and German national minorities – taking into account the population of national minority communities living in Hungary, their election activity, and the rules concerning preferential seats (Sándor-Szalay and Kiss 2022, 65). However, in reality, the amendments failed to address numerous regulatory deficiencies and made no substantial changes to the system, except to diminish the previously independent status and role of minority ombudspersons (Kállai 2014, 5–6).

Rostas acknowledges how significant these ethnic claims and grievances are – expressed by social actors representing specific groups – but criticises the fact that these injustices are often unheard or unrecognised.

Here, the research might have taken a more in-depth turn to analyse the different remediation mechanisms through which grievances can be raised and investigated, with particular concern for the importance of equality bodies and ombudsperson-type institutional practices.

Equality bodies in the EU promote equality and combat discrimination concerning one, some, or all grounds of discrimination pursuant to the EU law.^[2] The ombudsperson is an independent public sector institution, preferably established by the legislative branch of government. Its primary role is to supervise and monitor the administrative activities of the executive branch by investigating complaints impartially received from citizens, free of charge. An ombudsperson can act as a human rights ombudsperson with administrative oversight and human rights functions. In addition, some ombudsperson may have responsibilities related to anti-corruption, enforcing leadership codes, or protecting the environment. Overall, ombudsperson institutions play a crucial role in protecting and promoting human rights (Reif 2004, 1–2).

Moreover, the causes of failures listed in EU policy implementations, summarised in the last chapter, could be expanded by considering policymakers' willingness to act, and the extent to which they wish to address the "issues" faced by Roma.

Updating Knowledge in Practice Today

In my case, Rostas's book enables the recognition of corresponding patterns between policymaking and human rights due diligence conducted by business enterprises as required by international standards, namely United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, or applicable laws and regulations at EU and national level.

Business enterprises are specialised organs within society that perform specific functions, they are also required to comply with all applicable laws and to respect human rights (United Nations 2011). They are also required to avoid violating the human rights of others and should address adverse human rights impacts in cases in which they are involved. This responsibility is independent of the ability or willingness of States to fulfil their own human rights obligations and does not diminish those obligations (*Ibid.*, 13). The purpose of human rights due diligence in the field of business and human rights is to identify and address potential and actual adverse human rights impacts – by using a risk-based approach – that a business enterprise has caused, contributed to, or is linked to.

This process – just like policymaking – requires reliable information and data that comply with applicable data privacy laws and regulations. One of the tools for information gathering is the so-called human rights impact assessment. In addition to the geographical, sector, product and service specific risks; claims, notifications, and grievances should also be considered as valuable information sources, that were raised through, for example:

2 Equinet, "What are Equality Bodies?". Available online: <https://www.archive.equineteurope.org/-Equality-bodies->. Accessed 9 March 2025 at Equinet – What are Equality Bodies?

- state-based judicial mechanisms (for example, prosecution, litigation, and arbitration)
- non-judicial remediation mechanisms (for example, specialist government bodies, consumer protection agencies, equality bodies, ombudsperson),
- operational grievance mechanisms of business enterprises (OECD 2018).

It is fundamental to identify what rightsholders may be affected by business activities – they could be Romani people, as well – and catalogue the relevant human rights standards and their violations (UNGP 2011, 19). These assessments help define target groups and what adverse impacts they may face. Meaningful consultation with potentially affected individuals, groups, other relevant stakeholders and experts is also essential for effective information gathering (*Ibid.*, 22).

Once the findings have been obtained, assessed, and prioritised based on severity and likelihood, business enterprises should take appropriate measures to prevent potential adverse impacts, mitigate or bring actual adverse impacts to an end, and provide remedies where necessary.

To verify whether adverse human rights impacts are adequately addressed, businesses should monitor and track due diligence processes and responses. This should be done using suitable qualitative and quantitative indicators, along with meaningful consultations with affected stakeholders, including rightsholders, to evaluate the effectiveness of these processes (*Ibid.*, 19; OECD 2018, 89). As is expected in the context of policy implementation. Hence, there are similar patterns between policy-making and human rights due diligence, policymakers and business enterprises could mutually learn from each other how to adequately identify and respond to human rights violations.

A Task for Sisyphus uniquely integrates answers into the academic and human rights agenda as to why Europe's Roma policies fail. Even if the EU Framework for Roma has been considered a remarkable achievement in Romani "integration" policies, it is not in practice.

Considering the practical usage of the book, including language style and structure, I am confident that this monograph is easy to follow, accessible to anyone, regardless of their prior knowledge of ethnic identity and policymaking. It clearly explains the historical background and dimensions of Romani identity (politics), as well as the process and challenges of policymaking and how to interpret the reasons for failures. As the school of Critical Romani Studies has developed since the publication of Iulius Rostas' book, some terms have been changed to meet current contemporary standards.

This book not only meets high academic standards, but it is also a changemaker in public policy development and human rights protection. Therefore, it may be valuable reading for:

- Policymakers who can benefit from the analysed lessons of past experiences in policy development and implementation;
- Scholars who can gain advanced critical knowledge on ethnic identity, antigypsyism, and intersectionality, which might be considered during policy analyses;
- Civil society organisations, movements, and grassroots initiatives that could have a constructive and feasible understanding of the power of collective action and structures;

- Lawyers and legislators who can gain a clearer understanding of how legal frameworks should provide real solutions for marginalised communities;
- Business enterprises are also encouraged to benefit from critical frameworks and experiences to adequately identify and address adverse human rights challenges and impacts in which they are involved.

A Task for Sisyphus was published in 2019, which was followed by the release of the new EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in 2020 (hereinafter: new EU Roma Strategic Framework) to achieve greater and faster progress by promoting effective equality, socio-economic inclusion, and meaningful participation of Roma (European Commission 2020, 2). This new EU Roma Strategic Framework states: “[...] nevertheless, overall progress in Roma integration has been limited over the past 10 years, even if there are significant differences across policy areas and countries”.

Following the publication of the new EU Roma Strategic Framework, the ERGO Network published its analysis and commentary in 2020 – in order to provide recommendations for national governments as they were required to develop their national strategic frameworks (hereinafter: NSFs) in the first months of 2021 (ERGO Network 2020, 4). In their publication, the ERGO Network points out that some progressive changes are noticeable when compared to the previous Framework. These changes include – reflecting also on Rostas’s criticisms – for example:

- Finding a better balance between social inclusion, human rights and empowerment objectives;
- Asking EU member states and enlargement countries to develop their NSFs;
- Proposing an intersectional approach to tackle discrimination;
- Defining intersectional discrimination as such – for the first time;
- Including a good reference to antigypsyism by using the spelling as suggested by the Alliance against Antigypsyism (*Ibid.*).

Despite these positive developments, the ERGO Network challenged the new EU Roma Strategic Framework and its guidelines based on their policy and monitoring work findings. They presented numerous findings and constructive recommendations regarding the lack of specific links to relevant initiatives (such as the Social Pillar, the European Green Deal); objectives and targets that are too low, inadequate, or missing; and horizontal and sectoral priorities. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of Romani participation multiple times throughout the publication (*Ibid.*, 4–31).

In 2025, nearly five years have passed since the European Commission (hereinafter: Commission) adopted the new EU Roma Strategic Framework. During this time, several monitoring activities have been conducted. In January 2023, the Commission released a so-called ‘stock-taking report’ that assessed the national Roma frameworks against the commitments made by member states and provided guidance on any improvements where needed (European Commission 2023). The Commission published another report in 2024 which assessed specific areas identified in the initial ‘stock-taking report’ (2023) as requiring further improvement and monitoring. The second report also briefly covered other sectoral areas and the use of funds (European Commission 2024).

Two cycles of civil society country monitoring assessment have been conducted since 2020 under the umbrella of Civil Roma Monitoring (a consortium of Central European University, ERGO Network, Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), and European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)). The first cycle, in 2022, focused on the quality of the new national Roma strategic frameworks developed by the member states. In 2025, the second cycle's monitoring reports assess the implementation of those new national Roma strategic frameworks (Roma Civil Monitoring 2021–2025). Additional reports and statements are also available from various civil society organisations, movements, grassroots initiatives emphasising the need for systematic changes. These organisations also provide valuable data, strong grassroots evidence, and present best practices related to the sectoral priorities outlined in new EU Roma Strategic Frameworks, for instance, accessing to quality and affordable housing (ERGO Network 2023).

It would be highly beneficial to continue research with a particular focus on the national implementation of the previous and new (current) EU Roma Strategic Frameworks in various European countries, including some Western European countries. It would be also interesting to explore how the three examined countries designed and implemented their national strategic frameworks for equality, inclusion and participation after 2020.

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