

# *Timeo Danaos* – Blaming the Victim in Roma Inclusion Policies

**Csaba Fényes**

csaba@angoltanszek.hu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9225-001X>

Csaba Fényes is an independent researcher and policy analyst, mainly focusing on Roma education. He is a Hungarian Roma who holds three university degrees (teacher of English and Russian, theoretical linguistics, study of religion) and a doctoral degree in education. His research interests include language policies, comparative studies in minority policies, and the study of the trends in and global approaches to minority policies.



## Abstract

In this research I examine the integration strategies submitted to the European Commission (EC) starting in 2011 by the five countries with the largest Romani populations: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Using a mixed methodology that draws primarily on content analysis, I show that all integration strategies employ a discriminatory approach known as “blaming the victim.” I refer to qualitative data gathered from the strategies as evidence for this approach. I conclude by recommending that a change be made in policy evaluations, and analyze the extent to which NGOs and social science researchers also frequently, even if unconsciously, blame the Romani people for a large part of the problems they face.

## Keywords

- Victim blaming
- Roma policies
- Antigypsyism
- Roma integration strategies
- Culture of poverty

## Introduction

Why Roma integration policies do not work is a thorny question frequently raised in discussions across all Roma-related<sup>[1]</sup> domains. Most analyses provided by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) point to the lack of tangible, practical results in most fields; and even when there is progress – illiteracy has ceased to be a hot topic, for example – it eventually may turn out that the change was not the result of government policies and/or that it is nominal progress at best, which means that the gap between Roma and non-Roma either has not changed significantly or it has even increased in some instances.<sup>[2]</sup>

Answers to this question about the failure of Roma integration policies mostly point at what I will call *technical details* in policies. One of the most frequently mentioned problems is the lack of ethnic data, a topic which has received much attention in recent years (Decade Secretariat 2015; OSF 2010; OSF 2012). This attention, however, is problematic because it usually comes without evidence-based arguments. There is no evidence showing that it is impossible to create a successful Roma integration policy that lacks precise ethnically based data and relies only on estimates. We have yet to see evidence (as opposed to assumptions) that the failure of these integration policies is caused at least partially by the lack of data. Other problems that are mentioned by most evaluations include the lack of clear budgeting, the failure to include and to reach out to Roma, or that discrimination and anti-Gypsyism are not addressed properly by policymakers. These are important and relevant points to consider in future research, but in this paper, my objective is to show that there is an even larger problem with Roma integration policies that affect the very foundations of policymaking and is consequently the issue that requires priority attention. The specific problem I am referring to is what William Ryan (1976) calls “blaming the victim,” a phenomenon both embedded in but also distinct from processes of pure discrimination and racism. This issue of “blaming the victim” is especially dangerous because it is not easily recognizable but nevertheless can cause as much damage to those targeted as other forms of discrimination.

This paper builds on the results of a larger research study that I carried out between 2013 and 2016. Since then, a few of the participating countries have prepared new versions of their national Roma integration strategies. Although some parts have changed, and even a few strategies have been revised and updated, the main approach has remained the same among the majority of the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) documents that still are valid today. Victim-blaming is a phenomenon that does not disappear easily: it was present in minority policies almost 60 years ago when William Ryan conducted his research, and we have reason to believe that it was not a novelty even then. I would like to show that victim-blaming is present in modern Roma policies today at least as much as it was in policies for “Negroes” in the 1960s

---

1 In this paper I use Roma and Gypsy interchangeably primarily because in my community (Hungarian Gypsies) we exclusively use the Hungarian equivalent for Gypsy to refer to ourselves.

2 This has been the case in regard to the completion of primary school and higher level education completion. A “widening gap” is repeatedly mentioned in policy analysis reports, see Decade Secretariat 2015 or the Roma Education Fund’s regular reports at: [https://www.romaeducationfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/bg\\_country\\_assessment\\_2015\\_web.pdf](https://www.romaeducationfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/bg_country_assessment_2015_web.pdf) or one of the World Bank’s analysis about Romania at: <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/romania/OutputEN.pdf>.

(the population that Ryan originally wrote about), even if the wording has partially been modified in a second version of some of the documents that I have examined.

## 1. Victim-blaming and its Context

William Ryan coined the term in his book *Blaming the Victim* in the mid-1960s. “Blaming the victim” has been used across numerous disciplines since, ranging from psychology to political science, in addition to its integration into everyday language. To blame the victim, according to Ryan’s (1976) definition, is the act of “justifying inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality” (xiii), and at the same time “justifying a perverse form of social action designed to change, not society, as one might expect, but rather society’s victim” (*ibid.* 8). Blaming does not usually happen in an explicit manner. Instead, it tends to involve indirect implication, although in most cases, the blaming is very clear and unmistakable after careful research and analysis. Such is the case, writes Ryan, when,

in education, we have programs of ‘compensatory education’ to build up the skills and attitudes of the ghetto child, rather than structural changes in the schools. In race relations, we have social engineers who think up ways of ‘strengthening’ the Negro family, rather than methods eradicating racism. In healthcare, we develop new programs to provide health information (to correct the supposed ignorance of the poor) and to reach out and discover cases of untreated illness and disability (to compensate for their supposed unwillingness to seek treatment). Meanwhile, the gross inequalities of our medical care delivery systems are left completely unchanged (*ibid.*).

Shockingly, these words remain valid for contemporary Roma integration strategies to this day. Ryan argues that victim-blaming is not necessarily a racist exercise and that it does not have to be driven by discrimination. Blaming is very often carried out by “sympathetic social scientists with social consciences in good working order” (*ibid.* 7), the difference being that while racism and open discrimination attribute inferiority to inherent, sometimes genetic characteristics, the latter points to the circumstances or environmental causation. These environmental causes will lead to a scenario in which it is the excluded groups or individuals that are unable to achieve results, rather than pointing out that it is exclusion and discrimination that prevents them from succeeding.

There is an abundance of academic literature dealing with Gypsy environments and analyzing how detrimental they are to the group’s educational progress (the type of socialization, the lack of a culture of literacy, or the “cycle of poverty” – a term which was already criticized by Ryan and others more than half a century ago) or how Roma culture prevents Roma people from using medical services the way they are designed to be used (i.e., the way everyone else is using them). Most, if not all, (pro)-Roma NGOs think mediation is not only useful but necessary between Roma and non-Roma people in education, healthcare, and other fields, which implies that there is something “special” about the Roma that requires the use of interpreters: the extraordinary element is linked to Gypsies and not to the healthcare professional or the educator/teacher. All these are instances of blaming the victim, even if it is not obvious at first sight: it identifies something out of the ordinary, something that is “out of place,” related to the Roma population,

and not to majority society. Intervention measures are thus expected from the part of the Roma since they are allegedly the ones who have qualities (or circumstances) that hinder progress.

It is important to note that what Ryan wrote about the African-American population in the United States in the 1960s/1970s also *precisely* describes what is happening currently in Roma policies across Europe. Extracurricular activities and “compensatory education” is what most policies, together with many professionals and NGOs, recommend as one possible solution for educational problems, but without targeting the school or the educational system as such. Racism and discrimination on the structural and institutional levels play almost no role in action plans but “race relations” do. What happens in healthcare for black people in Ryan’s analysis is also *exactly* the same as what happens in healthcare policies for the Roma: even Roma NGOs and advocacy groups will find it a suitable measure to educate Gypsy people about the importance of education, health, and even basic hygiene – just like in the case of the “Negro” family in Ryan’s book.

The central mechanism of victim-blaming is closely related to problem definitions and framing. Some of today’s policy analysts also deal with this aspect of problem definitions, such as Carol Bacchi (2012) who writes about gender income inequality, claiming that besides explicit definitions in policies, recommended actions also serve the purposes of problem definition and framing. To cite Bacchi’s example, if policies for gender equality propose training programs for women, with this, they are also saying that at least one of the causes of the inequality in wages is that women lack the necessary qualifications. Similarly, if Roma policies plan to educate Roma parents about the importance of education, they define the problem as Gypsy parents’ unwillingness, negligence, or ignorance, which means that the failure is caused by the Roma and not by the segregation and the racism present in the school or the (educational) system more broadly.

What purposes does victim-blaming serve? To find an answer, we may turn to more recent developments in policy analysis, such as Schneider and Ingram’s (1993) theoretical framework called the social construction of target groups. The fundamental idea behind this approach is that one of the most important goals of governments is to be re-elected. While solving public problems also is expected to be at the center of their activities, when trying to address problems, governments distribute benefits and burdens to different groups on the basis of two parameters: power and deservedness. The former may seem more like an obvious variable in this equation: powerful groups have an influence on policy decisions either through mobilization of voting power or in some other forms, and decision-makers can gain benefits from giving advantages to these groups (and suffer disadvantages in the opposite case), while powerless groups do not possess such qualities.

The latter parameter, on the other hand, is less obvious. The notion of deservedness is connected closely to the image of the given group among the general public. These public images have a strong influence on decision-makers in devising policies and in distributing benefits to and imposing burdens on groups. Schneider and Ingram (1993) look at this phenomenon as something that necessarily follows from the political and social situation, writing that, “there are strong pressures for public officials to provide beneficial policy to powerful, positively constructed target populations and to devise punitive, punishment-oriented policy for negatively constructed groups” (334). Public opinion holds that some

societal groups are deserving (positively constructed), while others are undeserving and should be punished (negatively constructed). Public policies are also expected to send a clear message in line with this public expectation if political gain is to be achieved. The policy and the distribution of burdens and benefits can thus be described in a matrix entailing two axes: power and image. The result is four types of target groups: advantaged, dependent, contender, and deviant groups (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Target Populations – Based on Schneider-Ingram (1993)

		IMAGE	
		POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
POWER	STRONG	<b>Advantaged</b> business people scientists veterans	<b>Contenders</b> the rich minorities big unions
	WEAK	<b>Dependents</b> children mothers disabled	<b>Deviants</b> criminals drug addicts gangs

For the purpose of this article, the most important group is the contenders. The image that is available about Roma today is one of the most negatively constructed images that exist in Europe. This would imply that government policies should explicitly target Roma with punitive policies. On the other hand, Gypsies do have considerable power in today's societies, mostly originating from supranational and international sources: the European Commission, the Council of Europe, large international NGOs, advocacy groups, as well as several human rights organizations. Ideally, this should make governments cautious about explicitly targeting Roma in a negative way. One "solution" for governments is to blame the victim since it is normally done implicitly, but in a way which is clearly understandable to the general public.

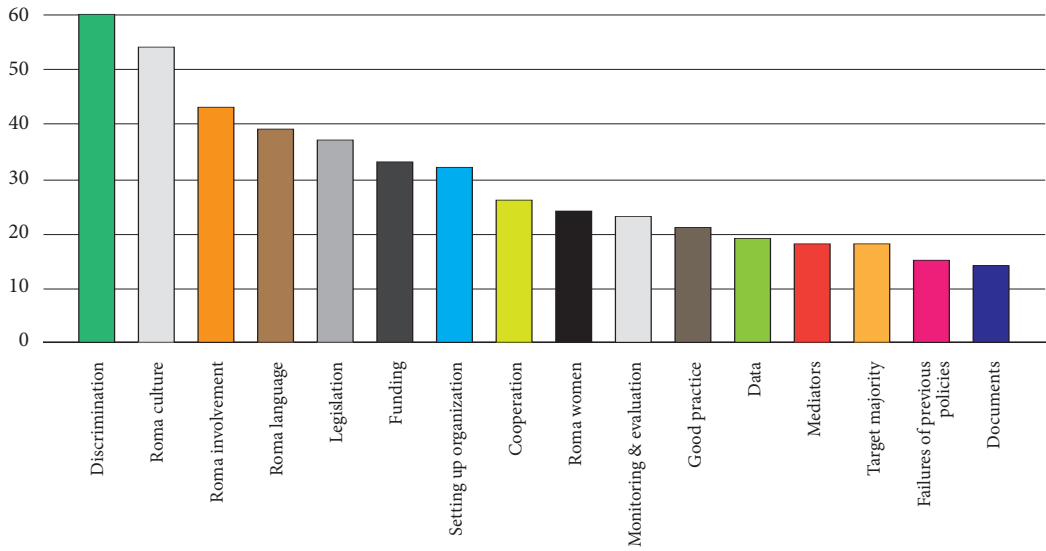
## 2. Roma Culture and Language

A simple look at the frequency with which topics are mentioned in policy documents<sup>[3]</sup> shows that language and culture are two of the most frequently mentioned topics.

The figure below shows the result of an analysis of all the documents that I have included in the coding, which explains why discrimination is the most frequently mentioned topic: international policy documents and analyses place it at the top. Roma involvement is another topic that most policy recommendations prepared by international institutions emphasize. If we account for these two topics, what we have is that language and culture are the most often mentioned topics in policy-related national documents.

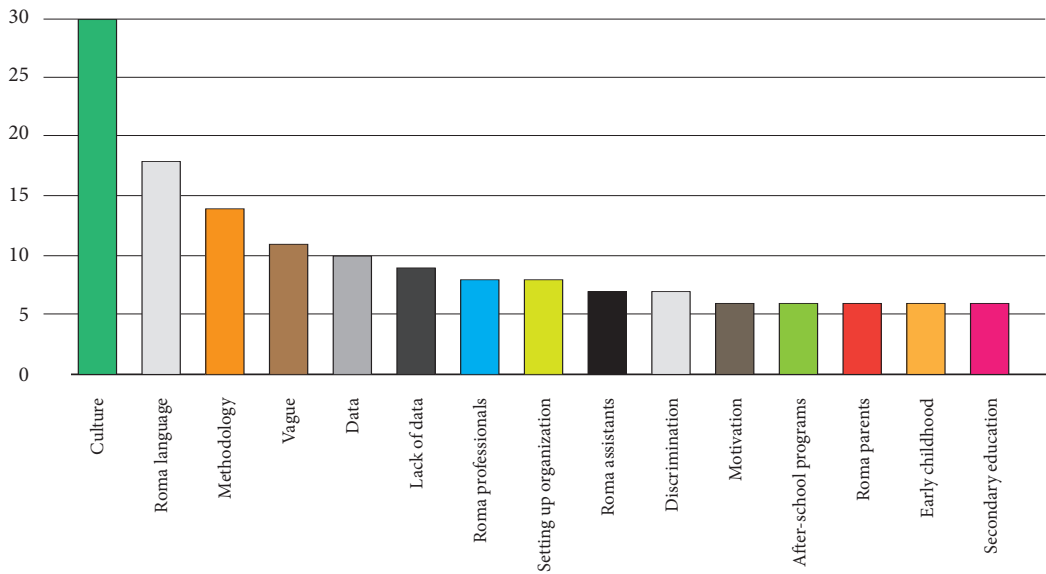
<sup>3</sup> I have included 49 documents in the analysis (Council of Europe, European Union institutions, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe (CoE), and national integration strategies from 2011).

Figure 1. Frequency of Topics Mentioned in All Policy Documents Analyzed (First 15 Codes)



If we limit the scope of analysis to only include national Roma policies, the situation becomes even more interesting.

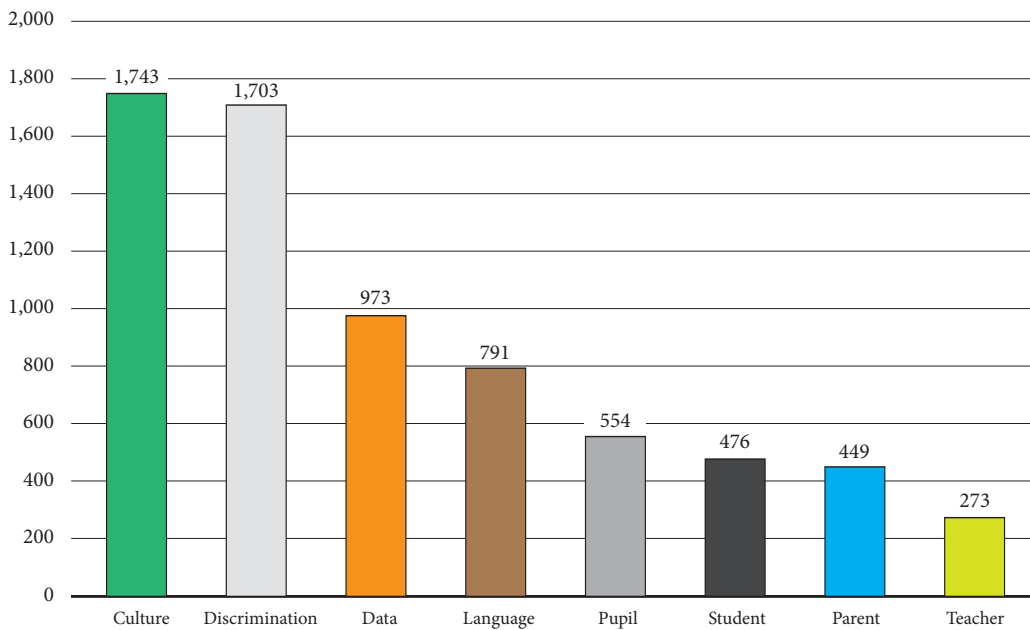
Figure 2. Frequency of Codes in National Roma Integration Strategies 2011 (First 15 Codes)



Roma culture and language are already at the top of the list, with culture mentioned more than twice as often as the next topic, methodology, which itself is something that we are surprised to find in a prominent role. The material examined includes both the policy documents and the action plans, but this does not account for the strange fact that culture and language are mentioned many times more than the topic of discrimination, which is at the top of the list in the overall analysis.

In the above analysis, I used the classical coding technique of content analysis. A simple lexical analysis may also be revealing, especially because we can include documents not covered by the coding analysis. The figure below shows the results of a lexical search run on all the documents submitted to the European Commission in 2011 or later, including the annexes (37 documents).

Figure 3. Lexical Search on National Roma Integration Strategies (28 Countries, 37 Documents)



What is surprising is that “cultur” (culture, cultural<sup>[4]</sup>) is used more often than “discrimination” and related words and many times more than some of the words expected to be highly important like “student” or “teacher.”<sup>[5]</sup>

4 In the lexical search, I have used truncated words to find all occurrences of derived words, e.g., “cultur” for both “culture” and “cultural,” “discriminat” for “discrimination, discriminatory, discriminating.”

5 Obviously, I did not include some of the most frequently used words, but it could be interesting for a comparison. The word “Roma” is used 15,300 times in the 37 documents, while “educat” (education, educating, educator, etc.) is used 4,178 times. The word “school” is used 2,457 times, less than one and a half times more than culture.



“Culture” is thus a term that is extensively used, including in academia and NGO communication. One would expect that such a central term at least would be defined in policy documents, but this is not the case. None of the policies I have analyzed tried to define or at least clarify what they mean by “Roma culture.” What is at stake here is much more than mere philosophical speculation or academic perfectionism. This word is obviously used as one of the central technical terms in policy papers and strategies, and consequently we should be able to see what the authors want to convey through their use. In the following section, I will show how Roma policies look at Roma culture and what role they assign to it.

The Romanian strategy lists its cultural goals as follows: “preserving the minority language / languages, preserving / developing the ethnic written culture and media, preserving their material heritage (museum and ethnographic collections), preserving their intangible patrimony (performing arts, traditional crafts, living human treasures, holidays, festivals)” (RO-11, 9). This goal is obviously a welcome one, but later the Romanian strategy does not only aim to preserve Roma dances and music but also includes an interpretation of culture: it claims that Roma culture is basically oral, *the result of a lack of training*. Roma culture, the policy says, is “low-literature folk culture” as opposed to the mainstream Romanian “modern culture,” which can be characterized by “contemporary values” – and by logical consequence, Roma culture lacks such contemporary values. What “contemporary values” might mean unfortunately is unexplained, but it is clear that this type of values is more desirable than non-contemporary values such as those found in Roma culture. Consequently, not all parts of Roma culture are to be protected, and moreover, some parts of it are harmful according to the Romanian strategy. This is made very clear in the document: “a reconstruction of values is urgently needed, by promoting measures to fight against the social and *cultural gap between the Roma culture and the Romanian culture*” (RO-11, 13, emphasis added). Sadly, the Romanian strategy stops at this point, and we are left without an explanation of what particular values are to be “urgently reconstructed.” But one thing remains obvious: Roma culture is responsible for at least some of the problems that Roma face – otherwise there would be no need to change or extend it.

Attempting to change “Roma values” and/or ways of behavior seems to be a standard aim in most Roma policies I reviewed and analyzed. Making Roma parents understand the importance of education, and making Roma women understand health- and reproduction-related issues are just some of the more surprising examples. This goal does not simply fail to employ an evidence-based approach (we have yet to see in-depth research to prove that Roma parents do not understand how important education is or that Roma women are unaware of reproduction issues), but more importantly, it has a framing effect, and ultimately serves the purpose of victim-blaming: the root of the problem is Roma people’s attitude and culture. Since other reasons are mentioned rarely, these policies construct an image where Roma are responsible for most, if not all, of the problems they face.

Another way of blaming Roma culture is to classify certain negative conditions and tendencies as traits that are inherent to the culture of a group, even if it is not explicitly stated that way in the documents. One way of doing this is when the policy is talking about attitudes or *mentality* in Roma policies. The Hungarian strategy aims to “*encourage* the parents of children with multiple disadvantages *to start enrolling their children* in kindergarten” (HU-11, 74, emphasis added), which essentially means that the reason why Roma children do not attend kindergarten is because Roma parents are not motivated to enroll them, implying at the same time that kindergarten education would otherwise be readily available

for them – which is a factually false statement for the Hungarian case. The Hungarian strategy also uses the “mentality” card several times throughout the strategy, for example, claiming that there is a need to “induce a parent mentality that places the learning of their children in the focus” (HU-11, 77), with which it claims that these parents do not regard their children’s education as highly important on the one hand, and that the problem is to be found in *their* mentality on the other hand. The Romanian strategy also claims that there is a need to change the “mentality” of Roma (RO-11, 5), although it adds that the mentality of the majority also needs to be changed. The focus, however, is placed on Roma mentality, another example of how policies blame the victim.

Talking about the “culture of poverty”<sup>6</sup> or even “the subculture of criminals” is also part of some of the policies under review. The Hungarian Strategy includes the following,

Due to abject poverty, hopelessness and the lack of contact with people in a higher social status, these individuals [Roma] more frequently reject the goals and means of the middle classes and are therefore unable to take part either in production or in the creation of social values. They follow the specific *values and goals of the sub-culture of the poor* which the public opinion associates with the *sub-culture of criminals*” (HU-11, 101).

The sentence is problematic in various ways, starting with the fact that it is talking about individuals rather than groups (a characteristic feature of the Hungarian strategy, which is unwilling to even acknowledge in the title that it is a Roma strategy after all) all through to claiming that the Roma reject the supposedly desirable (but unspecified) goals of the middle class. But the most relevant point in the context of this article is that this statement identifies the root of the problems in the culture and the values of Roma, which is labelled by the Hungarian policy as the subculture of the poor and criminals, thereby placing the blame on them for the problems they face. Moreover, the problem is defined here not as the exclusion of Roma by institutions of mainstream society, but as Roma people’s failure to take part in the production of values.

Roma policies are sometimes surprisingly obvious about connecting criminal behavior to Roma. “Crime” itself is a term that we should be highly surprised to find in social inclusion policies in large quantities but appears frequently nevertheless. A lexical search reveals that in the 28 national Roma inclusion strategies, the word “crime” and its suffixed forms are used 307 times. The Czech Republic strategy alone uses the word 51 times, with Hungary taking second place with 41 occurrences. Most of the instances are descriptions of Roma communities and locations, where “Crime and ethnic conflicts are particularly rife” (HU-11, 25). It is shocking to see how some of the policy documents openly blame Roma for even the most blatant crimes that are targeted *against them*. The Hungarian strategy claims that the “paramilitary organisations against Roma” and the spread of “uniformed crime” against Roma was partly due to and a response to “crimes committed by Roma perpetrators with a presumably ethnic motivation that intensified the existing conflicts” (HU-11, 29), essentially trying to find an “explanation” (or legitimization) for the serial killing of Roma people. This is also an example for how

---

6 On the culture of poverty, see section four of this article.

policymakers can turn the tables on human rights advocacy groups, international and supranational bodies, and a long list of human rights treaties and declarations to which they are signatories and how they are using even legal measures meant to protect human rights against Roma themselves rather than for protecting them: in Hungary some Roma individuals were the first to be charged with and sentenced for the newly introduced “racist or ethnically based crimes” claimed to have been committed by Roma against majority Hungarians.

According to the policies reviewed, crime is prevalent in Roma communities and amounts to a large part of the problems. The Hungarian document claims that the strategy cannot be successful without crime prevention and means for ensuring public security. To be clear, the crime, according to the policy, is committed by Roma and the state of insecurity is also caused by Roma. The Hungarian strategy admits that the “the Roma do not only emerge as crime perpetrators but, *by virtue of their* social situation and *specific socio-cultural features*, also constitute the most endangered victim group” (HU-11, 101, emphasis added). That is, the Roma are mainly the perpetrators, but if and when they happen to be the victims (exceptionally, one should understand, see the use of the phrase “not only,” and the occurrences of texts about crimes against Roma), it is caused by their social situations and their *culture*, which has already been labelled by the policymaker as the “culture of criminals” (HU-11, 101). The Czech strategy also claims that Roma live in “an environment where crime and other high-risk forms of behaviour become *the norm*” (emphasis added) and that this is “dangerous from the viewpoint of the upbringing and integration of children and young people from excluded Roma localities who can adopt and apply these behavioural models in their own life in future” (CZ-11, 63, *sic*). This is *exactly* the same approach that policies used in and prior to the nineteenth century, when Gypsy children often were forcibly separated from their families and transferred into the care of non-Roma. This kind of argument is repeated several times throughout the strategy, and claims that excluded Roma environments are home to criminal behavior, drug abuse, and other crimes – that is, Roma ghettos are a problem because of the prevalence of crime committed by Roma and not for other reasons such as the violation of human rights (segregation) by local authorities and others from outside of the minority group. The Bulgarian strategy blames the “traditional practices of the Roma community that violate the rights of women and children” (BG-11, 11), which, similarly to the Czech policy, claims that it is Roma themselves who act against the best interest of Roma children. Talking about “traditional practices” suggests that this is what they are used to: it is in their culture – the responsibility rests on them.

As we have seen above, even when a strategy acknowledges that Roma are the victims of racially motivated crimes, there is usually an important note that indicates how Roma themselves are at fault. The Slovakian strategy uses another way of blaming Roma for becoming victims of discrimination by stating that, “surveys show a high extent of Roma discrimination on one hand, and a low level of awareness of their rights and defense mechanisms, accompanied by low trust in institutions and the police as a public interest service on the other” (SK-11, 42, *sic*). The claim that Roma are unaware of their rights is frequently cited in many integration strategies. However accurate the fact might be, the wording and the context still strongly imply that there is something wrong with Roma themselves, rather than the institutions or those who discriminate against Roma. After all, it is *they* who do not know something that they are expected to – a cynical approach, to say the least, but a good tool to blame the victim.

In most cases, policies try, to some extent, to be careful to not *explicitly* blame Roma culture for most failures. One policy paper, on the other hand, leaves no doubt at all. The Croatian strategy talks shamelessly about what is only suggested or implied in other strategy papers. Since it summarizes much of what has been said above, I will quote at length from the Croatian policy strategy paper talking about Roma culture and how it is to be regarded:

The cultural marginalization of the Roma is apparent at the level of value systems and way of life. This marginalization comes down to the fact that Roma customs, behaviour and attitudes appear as an obstacle to the greater participation of the Roma in the dominant culture of society, because they are qualified as deviant, or the entire culture is viewed as having lesser value in comparison to the general culture in society. The cultural traits of the Roma reflect a specific way of life, and its manifestation in outside appearances, everyday conduct and institutions and interpersonal relations. The Roma originated in a cultural/civilisational sphere that is fundamentally different from that of Europe. They brought numerous customs and attitudes with them from their original homeland which did not fit into the way of life of the European population. They also brought with them a different system of values in which Western materialism was not a supreme value, which dictated their attitude toward employment and work. By accepting the value orientation of the societies in which they live, the Roma were condemned to live in an anomalous situation and thus forced to exploit ‘informal’ ways to exercise generally accepted values.

The differences between the Roma and the majority population are also great in the areas of family and education. Some Roma marry early, leading to pregnancy among minors, which is also one of the causes for their absence from the educational process. Thus, most of the Roma population experiences an abbreviated adolescence and youth and does not participate in the adolescent sub-culture which plays an essential role as a transition period prior to assuming social roles (HR-11, 33-34).

The government of Croatia is so unambiguous in its description of Roma culture and how it is the obstacle for any integration, that there is hardly any need for interpretative comments. It is worth pointing out that this report repeats almost verbatim what William Ryan and other researchers were calling a racist agenda in the 1960s in the United States and which has no place at all in the Europe of the twenty-first century.

### 3. The Culture of Poverty and Victim-blaming

There has been a lot of research and debate related to the culture of poverty since Oscar Lewis (1966) introduced the term in the 1960s.<sup>[7]</sup> A number of authors point out that the idea of the culture of poverty in itself is a form of blaming the victim, as far as it suggests that individuals could improve their chances if

---

7 Originally phrased as “the subculture of poverty,” but in most publications it is mentioned as “the culture of poverty.”

they gave up their cultural traits. Even though this seems like an oversimplification, it is undoubtedly true that the term itself may be used and abused for such purposes. It is especially true for policy documents and political arguments (as opposed to academic debates), where “the culture of poverty” very often stands for some inherent lack of desired behaviors or attitudes: “it is in their culture to be like that” – and this consequently leads to blaming the victims for any hardships they may face. Many authors (see, for example, Emigh and Szelényi 2001) draw attention to how the original idea of a subculture of poverty became adopted by right-wing actors who used it purely for the purposes of victim-blaming. Even though there are arguments in defense of the notion of the culture of poverty (e.g., Harvey and Reed 1996), it cannot be denied that the idea today is synonymous with dependence on welfare, avoidance of employment, and attitudes, time-frames, and views that have a negative influence on a large number of important factors such as education, health, and employment.

A central problem in the culture of poverty debate is the definition of culture, a topic that has received more than its fair share of attention during the last decades but without reaching a consensus in the meantime. Here, it is only relevant to point out the fact that in the area of policymaking and even in policy analysis, the term is very often left undefined. I think this is impermissible in the case of such terms, especially because this allows for attributing a wide range of *ad hoc* elements to culture, without feeling the need to examine cause-and-effect processes, such as strategies that communities or individuals follow to escape the hardships of poverty, and instead regarding these as elements of culture.

Another serious problem with the idea of the culture of poverty is that it focuses on poverty, and thus explains an entire range of behaviors, attitudes, priorities, strategies, and other aspects through poverty as the one single factor or cause. We know from existing research (see, e.g., Lamont et al. 2010) that even within communities with the same economic conditions there may be various attitudes and behavioral patterns. It is thus necessary to avoid pathologizing certain minorities while also ensuring that they are not portrayed as one uniform group. The idea of a culture of poverty itself carries this danger.

However, Lamont et al. (2010) also point out that culture, or rather cultural and culture-related aspects, do have an important role for researchers studying poverty and related phenomena, but the idea of a possible culture of poverty requires revisiting – in fact, they do not employ this notion or use this particular terminology at all. Instead, they offer a system with seven aspects of analysis: values, frames, repertoires, narratives, cultural capital, symbolic boundaries, and institutions. While all of these aspects utilize the notion of culture to some extent in the analysis, Lamont et al. emphasize the importance of heterogeneity, and rather than accepting a simple cause-and-effect relationship, they focus on probabilities.

There is one further important criticism explaining most, or at least many, of the problems that Roma face through the culture of poverty approach which leaves no room for accounting for the considerable differences between the situation of poor Roma and poor non-Roma: for instance, some groups of Roma who can be considered anything but poor, face challenges that are common to all Roma like discrimination, racism, and segregation that are based on ethnicity and not financial or economic health. The “culture of poverty card” seems an easy tool for policymakers to use as a way of deflecting responsibility of problems of segregation, racism, discrimination, and antigypsyism more generally. One example for this is the Hungarian strategy, which is unwilling to even title the strategy as a Roma inclusion strategy and places

poverty at the center of attention, only including the Roma as a third target group (“Extreme poverty, child poverty, the Roma”).

Poverty seems to be linked to the Roma in other spheres, too. Timmer (2010), for example, shows that NGOs often use the topic of poverty for tactical reasons, to “construct a needy subject” and to ensure their ongoing (financial, moral, and other) support. While poverty is a very serious problem for many Roma, we cannot account for the overall problems on financial and economic grounds only.

## 4. Targeting the Excluded

Targeting in problem-solving should be based on the same general principles. Most importantly, attention should be directed towards the root of the problem, which is to be identified through root cause analysis. Even if there are disagreements regarding the details, there seems to be consensus among academic researchers, practicing professionals, and international organizations that one of the major root causes of the problems that Roma face is exclusion and segregation, which in turn is caused by ethnic discrimination.

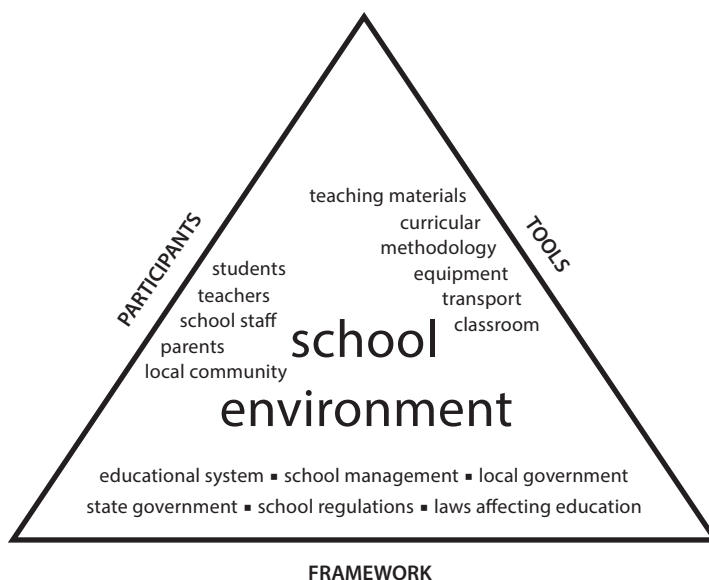
This should imply that the lion’s share of policy attention must be directed towards discrimination and racism, together with segregation, in major policy areas. This would also imply that it is the segregator and not the segregated, the excluder and not the excluded who should be targeted in the first place. This is not the case in national Roma integration strategies. In fact, more often than not the opposite takes place: most actions aim to target the Roma, and not always with a benevolent approach, as previously shown. In healthcare, policies plan to give advice to Roma people about how important it is to visit a doctor or teach Roma women about reproduction and sexual health; in employment, there are plans to offer Roma courses on self-employment. In education, Roma parents are educated on how to become better and caring parents who understand the importance of education, while Roma children are offered out-of-school extracurricular remedial classes or tutoring. When it comes to special schools, some policy papers claim that it is the Roma parents themselves who send their healthy children to special schools for financial gain and, ironically, the parents are even threatened with legal consequences for this (SK-11A, 17). None of these strategies want to target or even mention the role of widespread discrimination on the part of the system at large, which includes schools, health institutions, and workplaces. This is in line with the aims of victim-blaming: the focus of attention is obviously where action needs to be taken, and consequently, that will be the area (or people) where it is perceived that the problem originates.

To show how distorted the targeting is and how it serves the purposes of blaming the victim, one of the most important policy areas, education, offers particularly convincing evidence of the fact. While it is possible to analyze the educational environment from different perspectives, I will be using a structure with components that are most likely to appear in educational policies.

I have constructed this frame of analysis (see Figure 4) with the formal school system in mind (most often found in European countries today). The formal educational environment includes three tiers: participants, tools, and framework. Participants include recipient parties (students, pupils, trainees, etc.), teachers, parents, and local communities. The list is incomplete and could include other actors. The second tier is

labelled tools and refers to the infrastructural setting. This includes material and non-material components, mainly teaching materials, curricula, methodological resources on the one hand, and the actual physical environment on the other hand, from classroom equipment to transport provisions. These together make up the facilities that are designed to support the educational activities. The third tier is the framework for educational activities or the institutional setting. This includes local, regional, and higher levels of legislation, as well as the country's general legal environment that has an influence on education, but also school regulations, school management solutions, and other organizational tools.

Figure 4. The School Environment for Educational Policies



The educational environment is not built up of separate parts: what is inside the triangle is one indivisible system, albeit with different modules that still can be identified. This system is influenced by several factors, which may arrive from three angles. But once they become part of the system, they may influence the other “modules” and thus the entire system as well.

But most importantly here, this system also can be interpreted as a kind of typology, especially when viewed in the framework of policy interventions. The policy tools used for the three different sides may differ considerably and require different theoretical, organizational, and practical solutions. However, since they are not separate modules, policy interventions in any one of them may and very often do require interventions in one or both of the other two. Consequently, it is expected that policy interventions targeting one side only will be an exception rather than the rule if policies are to achieve tangible results.

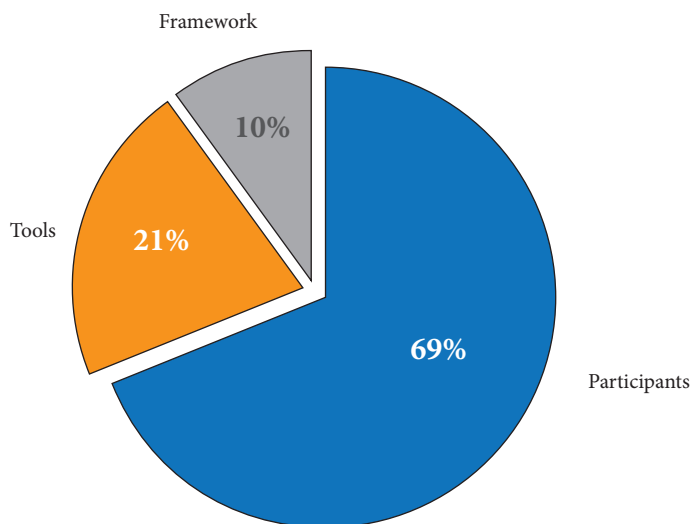
At the same time, policies must also decide which sides of the triangle they want to primarily focus on. This should depend on where they identify the most acute problems and where they think actions are expected to have the most effective influence. Let us now examine which sides Roma education policies usually select as the target of interventions. I have examined the action plans of the 2011 inclusion strategies of five countries

with the largest Roma populations. Where the action plan was missing, I have used the action plan prepared within the Decade of Roma Inclusion. The figure below shows the overall results for the five participating countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia). This shows that the vast majority of actions target participants, which is followed by tools, and only a very small proportion of actions are directed towards the framework. Actions targeting participants typically include second chance programs, extracurricular activities, scholarships, mentoring programs, counselling, on the job trainings for teachers, special places for Roma students (positive discrimination), summer schools, or Romani language classes. The common element of all these types of actions is that they aim to provide *remedial* assistance to Roma people, implying that the problem lies in *their* inability to achieve results – the typical approach used by victim-blaming in general.

Actions targeting the tools tier include providing school meals, developing (or supporting the development of) Romani language teaching, incorporating information about Roma culture in educational materials, revising tests for school competency, or developing other teaching materials. This group of actions already includes elements that may, theoretically, target the majority, such as the inclusion of Romani culture in teaching materials, but practically these measures rarely are carried out, and they constitute a negligible part of all the recommended actions.

The framework tier is targeted by actions such as proposals for school advisory centers in connection with diagnosing children with special needs, revising the contents and requirements of teacher training, developing desegregation plans, training school inspectors and school management with a focus on inclusive education and desegregation, or making kindergarten education compulsory. This may look promising, but again we find that the implementation very often fails, and these types of actions are the exception rather than the rule in action plans of this kind.

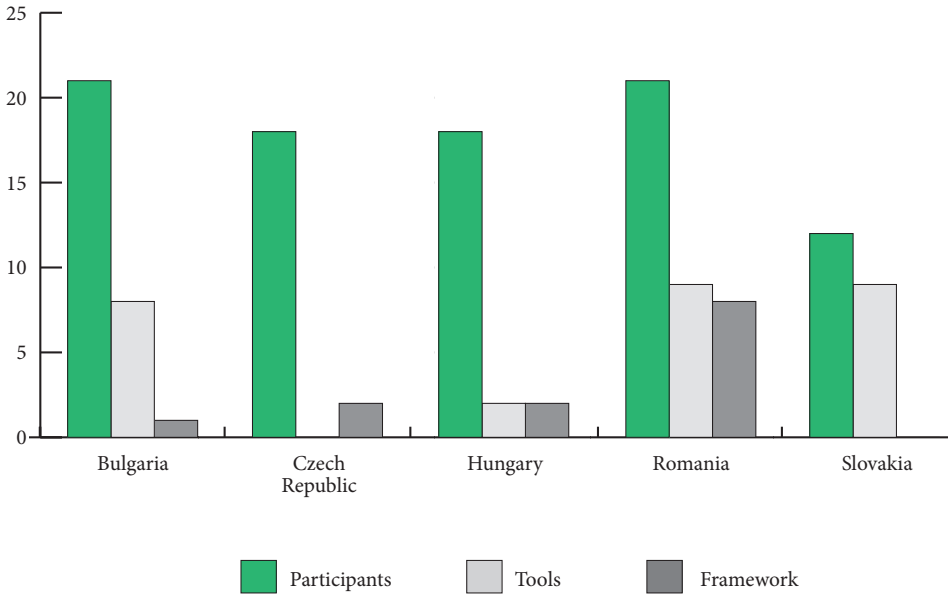
Figure 5. Actions Targeting Participants, Tools, or Framework (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia)



If we look at the detailed diagram, we can see that although there is a slight difference between individual countries, the distribution is very similar in most of them.



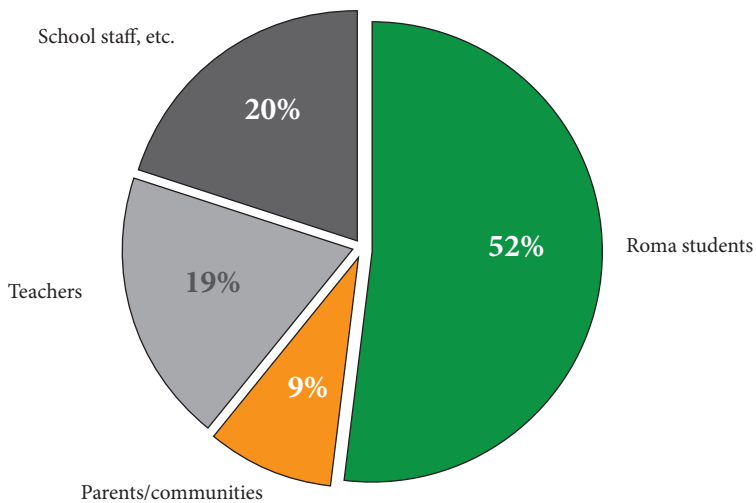
Figure 6. Number of Actions Targeting Participants, Tools, or Framework – Disaggregated Data



All Roma inclusion strategies focus their attention primarily on participants. Only in the Romanian strategy do we find a noticeable amount of attention devoted to framework, but again I do not see a considerable difference between the situation of Roma in Romania and the rest of the countries examined.

There is still a possibility that discrimination (although not segregation) could be addressed this way, for example, targeting the majority students, the teachers, or the majority community and the community in general on the participants tier. But the results show a different picture.

Figure 7. Actions within Those Targeted at Participants in Five Countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia)



In Figure 7, I have looked only at actions that target participants, aggregated for all five countries. Out of the 90 actions, 47 items or 52% target Roma students, with the ratio approximately the same in each of the national strategies examined. The actions themselves show great variation, ranging from organizing contests (Romania) and even sports activities (Hungary) through scholarships and other financial benefits (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania) to providing extra classes or extracurricular activities to Roma students (almost all strategies). Most of the actions are clearly not suitable for addressing the most pressing issues that have been identified by researchers or professionals, but they are perfectly suitable for blaming the victim: if it is Roma students who need to be targeted the most, then they must possess some qualities that prevent them from achieving results.

If we look at the breakdown of the data for the remaining 48% of actions, we find that parents (and communities) are also targeted, but almost all of these actions also target the Roma only,<sup>[8]</sup> rather than majority communities and parents or both (e.g., through community building), again suggesting that a large part of the problem stems from Roma themselves.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

When the Greeks presented their famous horse to the Trojans as a gift, Virgil writes that Laocoon rushed down to warn the people, since they had already seen what the real intentions of the Greeks were. This is when he utters the famous lines: *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes* (I fear the Greeks even when they bring gifts).

In 2007, Romanian President Traian Basescu referred to a Roma journalist as a “stinking Gypsy.” In 2017, Hungarian top minister Zoltán Balog, who was also responsible for Roma integration in the country, said that “the government still hasn’t decided whether Hungarian speaking Roma living in the neighbouring countries are a burden or a resource.” Romanian prime minister Victor Ponta repeatedly tried to distance Roma from Romanians in a BBC interview in 2013, and he could not be deterred even when the journalist reminded him that those Roma are Romanian citizens anyway. The list could go on: leading politicians from all five countries examined in this paper have enacted discrimination and racism against Roma in their public appearances or even official statements.

Roma inclusion policies are prepared under the guidance and political leadership of these same people. This already should be alarming even if the policies themselves were technically well designed – we should be careful with the “gifts” presented by people who already have shown their racism and discrimination before. And as we have seen above, it is worth remaining watchful. The inclusion policies analyzed in this paper are full of either open or covert forms of discrimination and racism. But what can we do when the wooden horse turns out to contain an army ready to attack?

---

8 One exception could be a point in the Bulgarian strategy: “Organizing seminars and other training forms for parents with the aim to overcome negative stereotypes and develop tolerant interrelations,” but it is not clear whether the action is targeting Roma or non-Roma parents, or both.

First of all, this state of affairs must be explained to all parties concerned. The policymaker must understand that the policies ultimately blame the victim – as Ryan (1976) points out, victim-blaming does not necessarily happen knowingly or in a planned way. Therefore, we must make the policymaker aware of what is happening, sometimes perhaps behind the scenes or even unknowingly. Any meaningful policy work can only start after this stage has been completed – the stage of agenda setting and problem definitions.

## Epilogue: The Responsibility of Intellectuals

A very important point is related to policy evaluations, most of which deal with technical details such as the lack of data or budget figures. The people responsible for evaluating policies should stop highlighting details and start focusing on the most important aspect: policies employ an approach that blames the victim, which reinforces discrimination and antigypsyism.

Discrimination and racism still do not get enough attention in academic literature compared to other aspects like culture, data, or languages. This shifts the focus away from much more important problems. As an example, the latest evaluations of the Civil Society Monitoring Reports always start by highlighting some positive results, and even more importantly, they want to evaluate the *implementation* of strategies, in particular the ones that are rife with antigypsyism and discrimination – a move that is as useless for achieving progress as it is detrimental to it.

This is not helped by the fact that various NGO-run programs such as after-school programs and employing mediators in both education and healthcare get too much attention relative to what they are able to and what they are designed to achieve. Hungary, for example, already considers the so-called “tanodas” (after-school remedial programs for Roma children) their flagship program, while they are clearly not a solution to the widespread, systematic, and systemic discrimination and racism which is the number one cause of segregation, poverty, health problems, and unequal access to quality education. We should certainly welcome NGOs and small teams of volunteers in various localities who devote their resources to helping the Roma however they can – but a government is not a small NGO: it has vast amounts of legal, financial, and human resources to plan and implement large-scale and efficient programs, ones that would or should be capable of changing the system of discrimination as well. Tanodas, mediators, sports clubs, and Roma dance and song contests at select primary schools obviously are unable to achieve these goals.

These and similar programs and ideas may only be relevant if one wanted to “strengthen” the Gypsy family instead of eradicating racism.

## References

- Bacchi, Carol. 2012. “Introducing the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ Approach.” In *Engaging with Carol Bacchi*, edited by Angelique Bletsas and Chris Beasley, 21–25. Adelaide: University of Adelaide.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9780987171856>.

- Decade Secretariat. 2015. *Roma Inclusion Index 2015*, Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, Budapest.
- Emigh, Rebecca Jean, and Iván Szelényi, eds. 2001. *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Eastern Europe During the Market Transition*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger.
- Harvey, David, and Michael Reed. 1996. “The Culture of Poverty: An Ideological Analysis.” *Sociological Perspectives* 39 (4): 465–495. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1389418>.
- Lewis, Oscar. 1966. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York*. New York: Random House.
- Open Society Foundation (OSF). 2010. *No Data – No Progress*. Data Collection in Countries Participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. Budapest: Roma Initiatives, Open Society Foundations.
- Open Society Foundation (OSF). 2012. *Review of EU Framework National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS)*, Budapest: Open Society Foundations.  
<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/review-eu-framework-national-roma-integration-strategies>.
- Ryan, William. 1976. *Blaming the Victim*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Schneider, Anne, and Helen Ingram. 1993. “Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy.” *The American Political Science Review* 87 (2): 334–347. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2939044>.
- Small, Mario Luis, David J. Harding, and Michèle Lamont. 2010. “Reconsidering Culture and Poverty.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629 (1): 6–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716210362077>.
- Timmer, Andria D. 2010. “Constructing the ‘Needy Subject’: NGO Discourses of Roma Need.” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 33 (2): 264–281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1555-2934.2010.01114.x>.

## Documents

All references to National Roma Integration Strategies can be found online at the following address:

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-and-eu/roma-integration-eu-country\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-and-eu/roma-integration-eu-country_en).

References are titled with the international initials commonly used to refer to the individual countries.

BG-11: Bulgaria: *National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012–2020)*.

CZ-11: Czech Republic: *Roma Integration Concept for 2010–2013*.

HU-11: Hungary: *National Social Inclusion Strategy – Extreme Poverty, Child Poverty, the Roma (2011–2020)*.

RO-11: Romania: *Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to Roma Minority for the Period 2012–2020*.

RO-11C: Romania: Annex No 1e to the Strategy, Culture.

SK-11: Slovakia: (without title).

SK-11A: Slovakia: Revised National Action Plan of the Decade of Roma inclusion 2005–2015 for years 2011–2015. Accessed August 15, 2015. <http://www.romadecade.org/article/decade-action-plans/9296>.