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The Limits of Operational Representations: Ways of  
Seeing Roma beyond the Recognition-redistribution  
Paradigm

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### Abstract

Since 2011, the EU has called upon its member states to step up their efforts to improve the socioeconomic conditions facing many Roma. It has also sought to secure the ethnic representation of the Roma in these efforts. By doing so, the EU has tried to strike a balance between redistribution and recognition: it has recognized the ethnic specificity of this group, but it has also framed the issue as one that requires a socioeconomic solution. Using insights from frame analysis, visual theory and governmentality studies, we argue that the EU's balancing act between recognition and redistribution has its limits. Current redistribution policies may be open to forms of group representation, but the deeper operational representations which underpin that openness still conceptualize the Roma in restricted ways. These operational representations determine how the Roma become publicly 'visible' and 'governable'. In this article, we speculate about a possible trajectory out of this impasse and argue in favor of a repertoire of representation that allows for more fluid and contestable images of the Roma.

*Keywords:* Europeanization, Operational Representations, Hypervisibility, Visuality, Recognition, Redistribution, Participation, Roma.

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Since the fall of communism, members of Europe's Roma minorities have increasingly participated in political debates about the ways in which their position could and should be improved. By developing their own heterogeneous social movements, Roma activists have entered the post-1989 political scene as active agents of representation, not mere passive 'victims' of representation by others (van Baar, 2011a; Vermeersch, 2006). They have become more than simply the subject of discourses and programs of inclusion, development, and empowerment; they have now also become critical voices in debates about their status as European, national or ethnic minorities. In this capacity, they have tried to influence the policy fabric around their position. The momentum of 1989 and the ensuing dynamic interactions between a range of organizations – formal and informal Roma groups, advocacy networks, non-governmental organizations and international governmental structures – have created a wide and diversified landscape of Roma activism in and beyond Europe (Ram, 2011; van Baar, 2011a; Vermeersch, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

This is in many ways a positive story, but it is hard not to see the more tragic reality that is also still there. Many reports raise concerns about the perilous socioeconomic and political conditions that continue to face the majority of the Roma and warn against the emergence of a reinforced racialized divide between the Roma and others (see also Sobotka and Vermeersch, 2012; van Baar, 2017a). Across Europe Roma citizens often lack access to public services and face severe obstacles when seeking to exercise their rights. Research has pointed to several social and political mechanisms that make the Roma into 'non-regular' societal subjects. This predicament has been approached and studied from a range of conceptual angles, including, for example, stigmatization (Bogdal, 2011; Lucassen et al, 1998), racialization (Agarin, 2014; Stewart, 2012; van Baar, 2017a), orientalizing (Willems, 1997), securitization (van Baar, 2011b; van Baar et al., 2018), and nomadization (Drakakis-Smith, 2007; van Baar, 2011b, 2015). The Roma's declining living conditions have not only been a continuing concern at the center of Roma-related activism; they have in recent years also led the EU to engage in more robust policy-making efforts.

In this article, we assess recent developments related to the EU's policy framework on the Roma, which was launched in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Policy initiatives on the Roma have usually emphasized either their lack of status as a legal or ethno-political group (in other words: their need for recognition) or their need for a more equal share of the available socioeconomic and political resources (the need for redistribution) (Kostadinova, 2011; McGarry, 2012; Szalai, 2003; Tremlett et al., 2014). Recognition and redistribution are also key terms in discussions that focus on participatory minority governance, i.e., those addressing the participation of Roma in decision-making and policy formation (McGarry and Agarin, 2014) and their empowerment through inclusive education and community development (Richardson and Ryder, 2012; Rostas, 2012a; 2012b; Ryder, 2014; Ryder et al., 2014a; 2014b). According to

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<sup>1</sup> We do not represent the post-1989 broadening and diversification of the Roma movement as a progressive and linear development for reasons we clarify later in this article.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2011) *An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*. Brussels: European Commission.

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many scholars and policymakers, Roma policy programs are problematic when they are one-sided. Policies that focus primarily on minority rights (recognition) tend to neglect the detrimental dynamics of socioeconomic interactions between the Roma and others, while those that focus narrowly on social inclusion (redistribution) ‘forget’ to increase measures against discrimination, human rights abuse and ‘Romaphobia’. Therefore, the remedy often put forward is to find a balance between these recognitive and redistributive dimensions; something that can be done by developing socioeconomic inclusion policies directed specifically at the Roma while increasing the dialogue with the Roma themselves at both ‘elite’ and ‘grassroots’ levels in devising, implementing and evaluating these policies – a methodology that is often dubbed ‘Roma participation’ or ‘Roma representation’. We argue that combining recognitive and redistributive trajectories, and securing the participation and representation of the Roma in the development of such combined strategies, are necessary steps – but they may not be sufficient. In order to be more effective, we need a more critical approach towards ‘Roma participation’ and ‘Roma representation’ – buzzwords that have so far been incorporated in policy discourses in a too perfunctory manner. Using insights from frame analysis, visual theory and governmentality studies, we seek to develop a more elaborated notion of ‘representation’, one which lays bare the problems with current initiatives and may help us to imagine better practices.

We structure our argument as follows. In the first section, we examine recent EU Roma-related policy initiatives in more detail and show why they indeed can be described as a balancing act between recognition and redistribution. In the second section, we argue that, in the context of neoliberal imperatives in countries with large Roma populations, there are several limits to this balancing act. Such combined policies, we posit, might in the end not help that much to improve the position of many Roma, and in some cases, they may even create new obstacles. We explore the empirics of the problem briefly in the third section of the article. In the fourth section, we then argue that to go beyond the restricting categories of recognition and redistribution, we need to envision a better and thicker conception of ‘Roma representation’. Our argument is based on an analysis of current ‘operational representations’ of the Roma, which are thin representations that have been institutionalized in decision- and policy-making bodies. They are thin because they tend to limit the ways in which the Roma are ‘seen’. They categorize Roma as either ‘risky’ or ‘at risk’ and may therefore, in some ways, rather contribute to their marginalization than resolve it. We diagnose this problem, but we also think about a possible trajectory out of the impasse. We conclude our article by exploring briefly what might be helpful: the development of a repertoire of representation that allows for more fluid and contestable images of the Roma.

### ***1. European Policies on the Roma: Balancing Between Recognition and Redistribution***

The emergence of European Roma-related policies has sometimes been described as a momentous, constructive and even progressive shift towards materializing opportunities for the Roma. The roots of that idea go back to the early 1990s. With an undertone that seemed to echo the claim about the ‘end of history’

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(Fukuyama, 1992), many observers hoped at the time that the material suffering and gross human rights violations that plagued many Roma would eventually and inevitably become a thing of the past. Since the authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe had collapsed and Western liberal democracy had triumphed, just accommodations for the region's Roma could finally be implemented and would automatically deliver results. International structures went along with this reasoning. European institutions such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, alongside a variety of Roma activist networks, non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups, argued it was time to recognize Roma cultures, histories, and experiences (including the experience of their victimization of Nazi and communist regimes). This was not only needed as a matter of principle, it was argued; it was also to be a necessary step towards the improvement of their societal position and would directly foster their inclusion into mainstream European societies. As a result, throughout the 1990s international organizations gradually developed a framework for policies on the Roma that emphasized their special position and also expanded transnational political opportunities for ethnic mobilization and activism in the name of the Roma (Vermeersch, 2005a).

Throughout the years, many scholars have commented on key developments in European Roma-related policy formation. We cannot do justice to the rich analysis that has been made, but we can discern a couple of common denominators in several of these scholarly reflections. For example, many have pointed out that minority rights-based approaches and discourses (McGarry, 2010; Vermeersch, 2006), and the identity paradigm more generally (Tremlett et al., 2014), have tended to diagnose the problems facing Roma as primarily caused by the widespread (and historically rooted) denial of their cultural specificity. And some have been critical precisely of this diagnosis. Martin Kovats, for instance, in his analysis of emerging European Roma policies, has warned against the 'growing tendency to view the Roma issue isolated from the wider political, economic, social and cultural context' leading European institutions to promote the homogenization of policies 'based on the limited ... definition of the problem as fundamentally one of 'culture' (discrimination)' (Kovats, 2001: 110).

In Kovats's critical reading of the post-1989 decade of European Roma-related policies, there was a growing need to counter, even if only partially, a culturalized 'framing' of the Roma (Vermeersch, 2012) by one that would place a stronger emphasis on society-wide structural socioeconomic causes. The EU's policy trajectory towards a combination of, on the one hand, minority rights promotion, anti-discrimination laws, and cultural initiatives in the field of anti-racism and Holocaust remembrance with, on the other, policies that are explicitly dedicated to social inclusion and the application of regional cohesion and development funds to Roma issues can be considered a response to such criticism.<sup>3</sup>

To some extent, the EU's approach, which gradually came into being after the start of the negotiations about the accession of Central and East European countries to the EU in the late 1990s, can be read as an attempt to merge recognition and redistribution (Sobotka and Vermeersch, 2012). The recognitive dimension has

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<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere (van Baar, 2011a; Vermeersch, 2006), we have extensively discussed the variety and heterogeneity of post-1989 Roma-related European policy initiatives.

primarily been articulated by the development of non-specific and generic EU minority policies, the adoption of anti-discrimination laws such as the Race Equality Directive,<sup>4</sup> and the introduction of several European Parliament resolutions (i.e., on the position of the Roma in the EU, the remembrance and recognition of the Roma Holocaust, and combatting racism against Roma). On the other hand, events such as the launch and reinforcement of several EU funds (structural, regional and social funds such as PHARE and its successors), the introduction of an EU strategy toward the social inclusion of impoverished minorities, and the inauguration of a generic method of open coordination of policies and policy initiatives (OMC) in this domain, exemplify the correlated redistributive dimension.

Expectations were high, but the results fell somewhat short of the mark. The merging of recognition and redistribution, although at first sight impressive and promising, did not lead to a structural improvement of the living conditions of Europe's poorest, most marginalized and segregated Roma; nor could we witness the rise of a broad popular acceptance of the Roma as European fellow citizens. After a series of highly mediatized events in the period 2004-2011, in which Roma became the explicit target of civic and institutional violence in several EU member states (Italy, Hungary, the Czech Republic, France, Bulgaria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Romania and Slovakia), the EU's policy machinery went a step further and finally went along with a bolder embrace of the 'ethnic turn' that several advocacy and activist groups and networks had appealed for. Now, for the first time, a clearly ethnically defined European framework for policy-making on Roma emerged. Nevertheless, this was in a way also not that much more than a symbolic turn. In what the EU established as its 'EU Roma Framework'<sup>5</sup> both the recognitive and redistributive dimensions remained confidently embedded. After the establishment of the Integrated Roma Platform (2007) and after the development of the Ten Common Basic Principles of Roma Inclusion (2009) and the Roma Inclusion Road Map (2010), the EU Roma Framework has turned out to be, most of all, an endeavor to bring all the previously introduced measures comprehensively together and solidify the policy conditions under which Roma-related recognition, inclusion, and redistribution could go together. But, what made things different from earlier periods was that now new channels for representation and participation of Roma (for example, the regular meetings of the European Platform for Roma Inclusion) were introduced at various levels of policy formation.

This development, too, has received criticism. Several scholars have responded to the supposed inclusiveness of this new scheme and the ways in which it has been articulated in its multiple policy translations from the European to the national and subnational levels. Aidan McGarry and Timofey Agarin (2014), for instance, have discussed what they consider the underspecified character of what is frequently referred to as 'Roma participation'. They argue that, although policymakers and documents often use this term (alongside with the phrases 'Roma inclusion' and

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2000) *Council Directive 2000/43/EC*. Brussels: European Commission.

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‘Roma integration’) to qualify ‘progressive’ political programs, they usually refrain from specifying what exactly it means (or should mean) in practice. Moreover, McGarry and Agarín suggest, the ways in which ‘Roma participation’ has been articulated in policy and political circles, as well as in recent policy transformations, are ‘thin’ and tend to be restricted to forms of tokenism or to what Sherry Arnstein (1969), in her famous paper on the ‘ladder of participation’, would have called ‘non-participation’.

In what could be considered an adapted version of Arnstein’s ladder, McGarry and Agarín distinguish three increasingly ‘thicker’ levels of participation, referred to as ‘representation’, ‘voice’ and ‘influence’. At the lowest level of participation (‘representation’), Roma are politically represented in bodies, councils, committees, organizations and boards that, in one way or another, and at various institutional levels, deal with Roma-related policy formation and that, through consultation and advice, allow the Roma ‘to have their say’ in processes of policy-making. McGarry and Agarín accurately explain that, although this ‘representation’ may lead to a higher visibility of the Roma, it is ‘unlikely to translate visibility into voice, because the institutional constraints they face are, for the most part, beyond their control’ (McGarry and Agarín, 2014: 1978). Therefore, at the middle level of participation, that of ‘voice’, McGarry and Agarín stress the importance of focusing on the ‘structural conditions that allow a minority to sustain its difference from the majority and as such be accepted by the majority with its difference at no additional costs for political participation’ (2014: 1979). Only if this prerequisite is fulfilled, we will see recognition of minorities as equal participants, i.e., as agents with their own distinct voice. Finally, ‘influence’, they conclude, is a form of participation that ‘allows minorities to enjoy substantive voice as agents of policymaking in their own right’ (2014: 1976). Only on this level participation results in the power to enforce change.

We agree with McGarry and Agarín that the EU Roma Framework has led to certain policy interventions and institutional arrangements that could be qualified as merely ‘representation’ or, at best, ‘voice’, but remain far from effective ‘influence’. Likewise, we endorse their observation that ‘if the Roma are unable to exert influence in majority-dominated institutions and discourses then negative perceptions of Roma will remain in the ascendancy’ (2014: 1986). Yet, we believe it is possible and necessary to think further. McGarry and Agarín call for a substantially thicker political participation of Roma and, by extension, for a more adequate merging of recognition and redistribution in institutional and societal contexts, but their call seems to bypass the need for a critical interrogation of the sociopolitical and politico-cultural climate in which these initiatives are or should be launched. To use Arnstein’s metaphor once again, what exactly is the ground on which the ladder of participation stands? We could call for ‘more’ and ‘thicker’ forms of participation of Roma, but what if, with every attempt to climb higher on its rungs, the ladder also sinks deeper in the swampy political landscape in which it is situated? Put differently, it is one thing to describe theoretically, ethnographically or empirically the diverse steps or levels of the ladder, but we also need to think about the *conditions* under which it can be climbed. Although these conditions are mentioned by McGarry and Agarín, or at least implicated in their reflections about voice and influence, we believe they need to be highlighted and made more explicit.

Arnstein's ladder of participation has also popped up in other critical reflections on the EU Roma Framework and, particularly, in scholarly calls for what has been called 'inclusive community development' (Richardson and Ryder, 2012; Rostas, 2012b; Ryder, 2014; Ryder et al., 2014a; 2014b). Andrew Ryder (2014), for instance, has been mindful of the conditions we have alluded to. In his work on the attempts of British Gypsies and Travellers to organize their social movements and communities on their own terms, Ryder discusses, for instance, the delicate role of power relations in participatory governance; the risks of narrowing down minority inclusion and participation to veiled forms of assimilation, and the so-called 'rhetoric-reality gap' of the EU's emphasis on dialogue and partnership with Roma-related civil society.

We sympathize with Ryder's assessment 'that there is scope for community development to be achieved by Gypsy and Traveller communities on their terms fusing the old with the new [groups, ethnicities and identities] and through asset-based development predicating such development on existing cultural traits' (Ryder, 2014: 33). Yet, what remains much less clear is how and to what extent these forms of development, based on 'assets' and 'cultural traits', will manage to challenge the major political and societal barriers that have been put up by 'the majority-dominated institutions and discourses' (McGarry and Agarín, 2014: 1986) and, thus, how they will articulate Roma-related recognition and redistribution beyond the current impasse.

Implicitly, these authors seem to assume that the policy frameworks throughout Europe already fulfill the basic conditions under which Roma-related recognition and redistribution could be articulated. The only thing that is then left to be done is to discuss the next moves to be taken on the (modified) ladder of participation. We doubt, however, whether this is the case. To show why, we have to discuss more in detail the ways in which, at various levels of government, recognitive and redistributive measures have been introduced. We also need to discuss why they so far have mostly 'failed' to address the predicament facing many Roma.

## *2. The Limits of Balancing Recognition and Redistribution*

What are the larger conditions that need to be addressed when we discuss the issue of Roma representation, voice, and influence? And why do these conditions pose important limits to the combined policies of recognition and redistribution? To explain our view, we need to start from the observation that the introduction of Roma-related recognitive measures in Europe in the 1990s happened under profoundly changing political and socioeconomic circumstances. The drafting of the novel European human and minority rights agenda as well as the emergence of Roma-related policies of recognition began at a time when European social democracies and welfare regimes, including the communist varieties of the latter, started to become frayed under the pressure of neoliberalization. Not only did candidate EU member states engage in large-scale privatization, the decentralization of governance, and the

rebuilding of state-civil society relations,<sup>6</sup> they were also faced with the sweeping impact of EU membership conditionality.

The relationship between the dynamics of neoliberalization and the recognitive side of policies on the Roma, however, is far from straightforward. To analyze it thoroughly one should not, as some have done, ignore the context of larger economic developments in Europe and beyond (Ladányi and Szelényi, 2006). Nor should one assume an all-too-easy identification of minority rights discourses with neoliberalist ideology (Sigona and Trehan, 2009). Proponents of the latter idea have an easy answer to the question why Roma-related policies balanced between recognition and redistribution have not resulted in success. They have suggested that such policies have failed because they are simply part and parcel of a ‘neoliberal ideology’ that is aimed at the ‘Americanization of Eastern Europe’ (Sigona and Trehan, 2009: 3). However, as van Baar (2011a; 2013) has argued, a distinction should be made between the advancement of minority rights discourses (and the participatory ideas embedded in them) and the neoliberal project. We should also critically examine the ways in which the ‘perverse confluence’ (Dagnino, 2008) of minority participation and neoliberalization – which consists of a severe tension rather than a perfect convergence – has impacted on the abilities of governments to articulate minority rights publicly. In other words, what we see is not so much an *ideological* confluence of minority rights discourses and neoliberalism, but a hollowing out of minority rights *through* neoliberalization<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, the fact that the Roma-related politics of recognition have frequently departed from promoting equality and, instead, resorted to valorizing or even reifying (ethnic) difference (Vermeersch, 2005b) has not been the *direct* result of the merging of rights discourses and neoliberalism but, rather, of the latter’s ‘sustained assault on the very idea of egalitarian redistribution’ (Fraser, 2005: 298). The result of that assault is that minority policies became largely void of redistributive demands and gave prominence instead to processes of culturalization, ethnicization and territorialization (van Baar, 2011a; 2012). In her reflection on the development of feminism at about the same time, Nancy Fraser draws a conclusion that is relevant also to the case of the Roma:

Under *these conditions* [of the deflation of the idea of egalitarian redistribution], a culture-centered politics of recognition *could not succeed*. To the extent that *it neglected political economy and geopolitical developments*, this approach *could not effectively challenge* either the depredations of free-market policies or the rising tide of rightwing chauvinism that emerged in their wake. (Fraser 2005: 296, emphasis added)

<sup>6</sup> In this context, we consider Nancy Fraser’s (2005) historicization of and reflection on the (rise of a) politics of recognition and redistribution – in her case *vis-à-vis* several phases of the feminist movement – as insightful to rethink the post-1989 development, ambiguities and barriers of the Roma movement. Although we do not share much of her geopolitical framing of this development, we think that her historicization of social movements in the context of co-emerging neoliberalism, culturalism and nationalism has relevance beyond her focus on feminism.

<sup>7</sup> We do not approach neoliberalism as a new ‘grand narrative’ or as a set of policies or an ideology that is omnipresent and omnipotent in the sense that it represents everything that is bad. Rather, we understand neoliberalism in terms of complex, situated processes of neoliberalization in which neoliberal rationalities and technologies significantly intersect and intermingle with other types, ways and styles of governing (see van Baar, 2011a: 28-49, 163-74).

Furthermore, the limits of minority rights discourses should be seen in the context of key developments in the global and European political economy. In the EU, most notably, the neoliberalization of policies intersected with the policies of EU membership conditionality towards the candidate states. This seriously diminished the candidate states' room for maneuvering, particularly when it came to prominent socioeconomic and institutional reform agendas.<sup>8</sup> Fox and Vermeersch (2010) have argued that, under these conditions, a culturalization of East Central European politics took place that led to the renewal and reinforcement of nationalism, including the reemergence of Romaphobia, anti-Semitism and homophobia. In other words, indirectly the EU has to some extent contributed to what Fox and Vermeersch (2010) call 'backdoor nationalism', a counter-politics of identity that, in tandem with the Roma-related politics of recognition, has led to a highly problematic emphasis on now racialized difference.

Crucial to observe is that post-1989 attempts at combining a strong social democracy with neoliberal marketization either shipwrecked only to favor the latter (Eyal et al., 1998) or did not go together well with measures to mitigate the socioeconomic inequalities caused by neoliberal labor market flexibilization. Instead, in the West as well as Central and East European versions of a politics of redistribution, attempts were made at getting over status hierarchies, primarily through multicultural and anti-discrimination programs (Fraser, 2005). However, in a context of resurgent nationalism and increased local competition over resources in the wake of weakened social welfare protection systems, the combined politics of recognition and redistribution quickly turned into a rhetorical battle about who were the 'deserving' welfare beneficiaries, and, by extension, who the 'non-deserving'. It also popularized the idea that a distinction should be made between those 'able and willing' to adapt to the post-socialist conditions and those who are socioeconomically or even racially 'inadaptable'. In other words, a reductive politics of recognition and redistribution facilitated narratives that pit 'normal' citizens against those who are allegedly 'undeserving' and 'inadaptable', and - in the transnational dimension - discourses, promulgated by populist politicians and intensified by media, that make an equivalence between the supposed threat of poor 'welfare migrants' and that posed by the Roma (Stewart, 2012; van Baar, 2011a; 2012).

In her thorough discussions of the struggles for Roma minority recognition in Hungary, Júlia Szalai argues that '[w]elfare redistribution, with its sharp bifurcation into systems for "citizens" and systems for "the poor", alongside the decentralization of the provisioning for the poor, has intensified the competition among the poor for meager local resources' (Szalai 2003: 211). Although Szalai's analysis is focused on the effects of the Hungarian minority self-government system on the position of the Roma - who have been overrepresented among the poor - we consider her analysis also useful to assess the influence of the 'ethnic turn' implicated in the EU's Roma Framework. Nowhere in the process toward the establishment of that framework, nor in the elaboration of the procedures toward its domestic implementation, have we seen room for serious reflections on the potential problems of reinforcing and

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<sup>8</sup> Here we particularly mean the EU's encouraging of processes of privatization and the decentralization of governance, as well as the EU's support for, for instance, active labor market policies. As van Baar (2011a; 2012) has argued, in many of these policy areas the Roma have been negatively affected.

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institutionalizing ethnic competition. Yet, such competition has emerged. Measures that have been taken to develop Roma-related policies have in some cases led to a sharp and often ambiguously institutionalized bifurcation: there are systems in place for ‘regularized citizens’ and others for ‘the irregularized poor’ (meaning the Roma). An example is the way in which the EU’s right to free movement has been applied to the Roma (van Baar, 2017b; Vrăbiescu, 2018) or how EU-supported development programs have failed to reach particularly the poorest and most segregated Roma (van Baar, 2017a; van Baar et al., 2018). Observing this is not equal to saying that most or even all Roma-related policies have ‘failed’ or are doomed to ‘fail’, but rather that the current articulation and implementation of these programs, although in theory based on a balance between recognition and redistribution, need further attention.

### *3. Additional Problems Created by Contemporary Policy Formation and Implementation*

This policy impasse is important to address not only because it leads to a standstill on the ground, but also because it might create additional problems related to popularizing and further embedding stereotypical images of the Roma. Our argument is that inequalities between the Roma and other social groups persist not only *despite* recent efforts at designing modes of participatory governance with minority representatives, but to some degree also *due* to these efforts. While these policy measures may indeed increase the opportunities for Roma participation in policy creation and implementation, they fail to address – and sometimes even reinforce – the underlying view of the Roma as an exceptional category. Measures that are aimed at social inclusion through Roma participation often end up being implemented as part of a wider range of practices that build boundaries between the Roma and other social groups. As a result, such measures fail to counter the essentializing categorization schemes that have produced earlier forms of categorized inequality.

We see examples of this in several areas of policymaking. Sobotka and Vermeersch (2012) have detailed such a process in the field of housing. From their case study, they are able to show that a policy decision to offer Roma ‘adequate social housing’, even if that decision is made on the basis of consultations with Roma, can lead to a practice of eviction. In the case they describe – the Czech town of Roudnice nad Labem – the local government framed the eviction policy as an improvement of the local social housing situation for everyone; in reality, however, it meant a substantial reduction of the Roma’s chances for social inclusion because they were placed in new housing in a separate (and racialized) area outside the center of town. The key observation here is that seemingly well-intended policy measures, even if they are monitored by the EU and have come into being against the backdrop of ongoing policy-related discussions involving Roma representation and participation, do not always break down the boundaries between the Roma and others; sometimes the opposite happens. Even in cases where there is financial support from the EU for non-segregated housing renovations through programs like the European Regional Development Fund, such subsidy is in practice likely to be framed as ‘for the Roma,’ a tendency that reinforces the social distance between the Roma and others. As Sobotka

and Vermeersch write: ‘The spatial segregation that contributes to this detrimental situation is further exacerbated when local policymakers portray Roma citizens as a burden on the local economy, not as a group that deserves economic support as equal citizens or inhabitants who can help to build up the potential economic and social strength of the local community’ (Sobotka and Vermeersch, 2012: 818).

Other examples include targeted and racialized deportation and eviction regimes in France, Germany, Spain and some other countries, which have appeared next to, and even emerged out of, policy constellations that are on paper meant to improve the situation of the Roma (van Baar, 2015, 2017b; Vrăbiescu, 2018). We have seen, for example, that France in its national Roma strategy, which it has drawn up in response to the request of the European Commission, explicitly refrains from targeting ethnic populations in the field of poverty reduction or housing; but the Roma in France *are* targeted by authorities when it comes to ethnic profiling, forced evictions, and other instances of heightened tension around perceived security threats (van Baar, 2011b). This is even more tangible in the case of policies that are aimed at dismantling trafficking networks and stepping up efforts to protect children in marginalized communities, initiatives that ironically enough are often couched in a humanitarian narrative and executed in the name of children’s and women’s rights (Vrăbiescu, 2018).

In Belgium, to give another example, it was not so long ago common police practice to indicate whether someone is ‘zigeuner’ in offender as well as victim profiles in the General National Data Base.<sup>9</sup> This practice happened against the background of policy discussions on how to address the situation of the Roma from EU countries who had migrated to Belgium. The government aimed at fulfilling commitments to the EU’s Roma Framework, but simultaneously that commitment served as a pretext for singling out Roma for policy measures that were meant not to promote their social inclusion but to control and police them, or even to discourage them from entering Belgium. In March 2013, for example, Geert Bourgeois, the Flemish minister of governance and integration, proposed a measure to introduce an obligatory program of ‘civic orientation’ (*inburgering*) especially and only for the Roma from other EU countries; the proposal was to introduce financial fines for those Roma who would refuse to attend such a program. While the measure was legally impossible to implement – in fact, the proposal received strong criticism from many sides: EU institutions, NGOs as well as the Belgian equality body (Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism, currently known as Unia) – the accompanying official discourse found affinity with the moral ambiguity that was already palpable in media and political debates about the Roma.

In other words, policy proposals that are specifically aimed at policing and controlling Roma can apparently be rhetorically introduced as part of a concerted EU effort to alleviate the problems facing the Roma; they seem part of one and the same benign strategy of recognizing Roma identity. Simultaneously, these initiatives allow authorities to target Roma for special monitoring activities that resonate well with, and might even sanction and reinforce, the overall public discourse about the presence of

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, <http://www.demorgen.be/binnenland/politie-onder-vuur-voor-registratie-zigeuners-a2287416/> Accessed: 13 December, 2017.

the Roma as an external nuisance and even a potential danger for European cultures, states and societies. These and similar examples illustrate how – despite as well as *because of* currently omnipresent narratives of minority rights – specific kinds of Roma representational schemes and narratives have been *operationalized* to govern the Roma in ambiguous ways.

#### ***4. Out of the Impasse: The Importance of Challenging ‘Operational Representations’***

It is one thing to state that narratives about the Roma and their societal status that circulate in political debates tend to depict them as ‘irregular’ citizens or migrants (see, e.g., Sigona and Trehan, 2009; Stewart, 2012; van Baar et al., 2018), but quite another to discern the reasons why this might be happening and what may be a way out of it. Elsewhere, van Baar (2011b; 2015; 2017a) has approached the question from the angle of critical security studies and securitization theories. Van Baar has argued that the Roma have become the subject of *securitizing moves* at the level of political communication and debate. These moves tend to result in *securitizing outcomes*; that is, they ‘successfully’ construct the Roma as a (social, public, human, national, urban, etc.) security problem (see also van Baar et al., 2018). The security studies perspective, however, does not always take into full account how routinized policy practices often continue to be based on the previous circulation of stereotypical perceptions and representations. Seen from the angle of critical race studies, one could approach the issue in terms of the effects of racializing and racial discourses on policy formation. That explanation is certainly relevant here too, but the analysis should go further than simply pointing out that policy discourses are intermingled with racism and racialization (Araújo, 2014; Bhopal and Myers, 2008; Maeso, 2015; Stewart, 2012); we should also check how these policy discourses are articulated and incorporated in policy formation, and how they, over a longer period of time, are reinforced by earlier and more established forms of policy-making (see: Sokolova, 2008; van Baar, 2011a). What is at work here, we believe, are *operational representations*. These are discursive, visual and material frames that contribute to making the Roma ‘visible’, ‘legible’ and ‘governable’ within the context of their general ‘avisuality’.<sup>10</sup>

We borrow the term avisuality from media scholar Akira Lippit (2005: 32), who has used it to describe a situation in which someone is made visible but nevertheless remains in certain ways overlooked and ignored. This person (or group of people) are ‘seen’ only in restricted ways. Lippit illuminates his notion by referring to Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. The ‘invisible’ black man, who is the novel’s main character, is highly visible in society, but, at the same time, he is and feels reduced to mere matter. ‘I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me, Ellison’s character says. ‘Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass.

<sup>10</sup> Our concept of operational representations has been inspired by the way in which the artist Harun Farocki has discussed ‘operational images’. These are related to a regime of visibility that is produced and demarcated by automated images, such as those taken by drones or satellites (see Paglen, 2014).

When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me’ (Ellison, 1995: 3).

Avisuality is the state in which the Roma find themselves in a lot of authorized bodies and processes of policy-making, including bureaucratic organizations with executive power (social and public services, migration offices, taskforces, police, Europol, Frontex, etc.). This is not simply about a literal system of visual signification (how images of Roma are presented); we are concerned here with a broader and more encompassing phenomenon, with ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see’ (Foster, 1988: ix). Put differently, the question of avisuality is, following poststructuralist philosophies of perception and aesthetics (Crary, 2001; Foucault, 1994; Rancière, 2004), ‘about the modes of articulation between forms of action, production, perception and thought’ (Andersen et al., 2015: 89). To research the avisuality of the Roma, one should therefore examine processes of policy articulation on the Roma against the background of a dense network of policy instruments, cultural legacies, public debates, inter-subjective relations, and, last but not least, forms of knowledge and expertise. One of the crucial issues to note is that, in policymaking, the Roma almost always and exclusively fall within the categories of either ‘risky people’ or ‘people at risk.’ This happens in discussions about development – in which they are primarily seen as at risk of underdevelopment, precariousness, vulnerability and poverty – and in those about security – in which they are considered threats to the security of others, including other Roma.<sup>11</sup> At a time when Europe’s Roma minorities are problematized at the nexus of development and security and have, as a result, become the target of intersecting processes of developmentalization and securitization (van Baar, 2017a; 2018), operational Roma representations have become intrinsically related to preemptive risk profiling. The modalities of risk profiling primarily concentrate on the biopolitical qualities and qualifications of the targeted Roma. To a considerable extent, current labor market interventions and educational, housing or health care programs focus on the deficiencies of their Roma ‘clients’ (Araújo, 2014; Maeso, 2015; Messing et al., 2013; Piemontese, 2015; Powell, 2010; van Baar, 2012). Even when these deficiencies are formulated in positive terms or situated in their historical contexts, the Roma are nevertheless portrayed as in need of a remedy; they need to improve *their* skills, attitudes and behaviors (*their* ‘social capital’). Generally, the focus of these programs is not on minority-majority relationships but explicitly, even sometimes exclusively, on the involved Roma, and specifically on their (supposed lack of) readiness and capability to change their supposedly ‘cultural’ and ‘behavioristic’ attitudes.

These diverse programs – whether they focus on employment, education, housing, health care, security, empowerment, non-discrimination or culture – tend to render the Roma ‘avisual’. In other words, these policies make them visible, legible and governable only in *very specific* ways; they operate in a regime of avisuality that affects Roma agency negatively. While practices of securitizing and controlling the Roma lead to their criminalization and commodification, approaching them from the

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<sup>11</sup> Van Baar (2014) has criticized the trend in criminology and policymaking to consider the Roma themselves as a threat to their fellow Roma citizens, most notably through a questionable culturalization and racialization of approaches to the combatting of trafficking, banditry and domestic violence in which Roma perpetrators have been involved.

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viewpoint of developmentalism or humanitarianism victimizes them and, thus, reduces their capacity for agency. Within this regime of avisuality, the lenses of the policy cameras are usually and predominantly trained on tracing Roma somewhere on the thin and sterile line between those ‘at risk’ to those who are ‘risky’ and, consequently, these policy formations and interventions leave us with a narrow and reductionist two-dimensional vision of the Roma’s future (see also van Baar et al., 2018).

The problem of the Roma’s avisuality also explains why the current policy roads involving a balance of recognition and redistribution have not resulted in the pathways towards more sustainable success. Operational Roma representations have made the Roma governable in Europe’s current complex policy machinery, but they have done so without conceptualizing them as full fellow citizens and co-partners in processes of decision-making; in several cases they have even irregularized the Roma in ways that have contributed to worsening their societal position. Relatedly, the EU’s qualification that the national Roma integration strategies need to target the Roma ‘explicitly but not exclusively’<sup>12</sup> has become ‘a matter of both positioning in the sights (targeting and identifying) and visualizing through a projected line of sight (pre-empting, making actionable)’ (Amoore, 2009: 24). Some may suggest that the current EU policy framework helps to improve the situation of the Roma because it promotes social inclusion and secures Roma representation, but this view usually ignores the more structural reasons behind the problems of exclusion and non-representation.

What can be done? A way out of the impasse will inevitably have to address the issue of representation. In abstract terms, it means we will have to come up with methods of representing Roma that challenge the usual ways in which the Roma are seen and presented. But what does this mean in practice? Are there any examples to be found that might illustrate such alternative representations?

We think there are indeed some examples to be found, however scant they are. And we also think it is useful to stimulate a scholarly discussion that highlight those places and contexts in Europe where alternative imaginaries of the Roma appear or have a chance of emerging. Some of these places and contexts are to be observed in social movement actions, but they often also occur in the artistic field, and areas where creative production is often narrowly intertwined with social and political engagement. Of course, to engage in a serious attempt to promote such a discussion through the analysis of real-life examples would require another article; here we can only briefly mention two examples that we think would fit and inspire such a further analysis.

Across Europe several instances of ‘youth work’ might provide the type of image contestation we have been discussing. This youth work has happened, for example, through the actions of the deliberately ethnically hybrid networks (the ‘ternYpe: International Roma Youth Network’ is one that springs to mind). While the activities of a network like that may still squarely focus on issues that concern Roma history – indeed, in the case of ternYpe they stay true to the commitment of telling Roma history as part and parcel of the dominant narrative of European history – participation in it may be diverse and not restricted to young Roma. This multiple identity is not only important for those who participate and are of Roma descent –

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<sup>12</sup> European Commission, 2011: 8

they can more easily gain access to a variety of identity groups, which in itself might be a form of social mobilization – but also for the non-Roma participants and the (Roma and non-Roma) audiences involved in the initiatives of such a network. Such a network creates opportunities for members and audiences to become active, and thus visible, in different ways – as ‘Roma’ but also, for example, as ‘youth.’ Initiatives like this cut across different ethnic and socioeconomic identifications and affiliations. Their actions may ultimately lead to the emergence of new collective action frames and protest identities – and new visualities.

Another example that may fit this call is *Metropoliz* in the outskirts of Rome (see also Careri et al., 2013; Maestri 2016). This is an abandoned salami factory that through the initiative of an artist has been turned into an improvised shelter home that is at the same time a community house, a modern art exhibition, a tourist destination and an experiment in radical democracy. The almost 200 people who squat the building – among them many Roma families – may from a certain perspective be framed and interpreted as homeless communities at the edge of society. However, they are also the well-respected hosts of an art collection that is revered by visitors and art critics. In addition, the art serves as a protection for the inhabitants against forced eviction.

## *5. Conclusion*

The purpose of our article has been to draw attention to an important challenge inherent in the current EU framework on the Roma and, more generally, policies that start from the idea that it is sufficient to balance recognition and redistribution in order to improve the situation for the Roma. There is a deeper problem to be addressed, a problem that is related to the current use of operational representations of the Roma in all spheres of policy-making. We want to highlight the importance of challenging these operational Roma representations to discover routes of escape from the current narrow sphere of Roma avisibility. For now, however, we do not want to formulate a final conclusion on this issue but, rather, open doors to encourage new discussions about possible ways forward. For example, we are aware that we should not idealize the examples we mentioned at the end – they may ‘fail’ as political and social projects, and they may suffer from the same ambiguities as some of the other modes of representation that we have discussed. It is important, however, to take heed of the new possibilities that such initiatives might create, even if they are modest. By giving them attention, also in scholarly research, a modified, plural and more fluid imagery of the Roma might grow.

We want to underline the importance of breaking the widely held and often invoked assumption that there is a tight, even inherent, link between the ‘Roma’ and ‘risk’. Such a link is reinforced when the Roma are portrayed only in a context of poverty and danger, and especially when the focus is on the social ills that follow from that context (which often results in politicians, media and the broader public blaming the Roma for their own predicament). Those who do not fit this particular socioeconomic frame are often not even ‘visible’ as Roma. In a context where stigma is both historically and socioeconomically prevalent, it is important to study the situation of the Roma in less biased ways – e.g., creating, in research as well as in other

forms of public representation, a mode of visibility that not only focuses on the dynamics of marginalization and exclusion but also includes a view on social mobility across Roma and non-Roma communities, on useful internal and external reframing processes and changing social interactions.

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