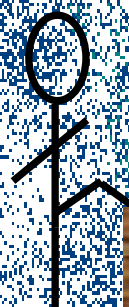


# Roma Role Models





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The **European Roma Information Office (ERIO)** is an international advocacy organisation that promotes political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing information to the EU institutions, civil society and governments. Through its wide network, it aims to combat racist discrimination against Roma through awareness raising, lobbying and policy development.

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## Introduction

Media tends to reinforce and reproduce existing stereotypes of the Roma and constructs them as useful scapegoats in times of economic crisis. These representations greatly influence individual attitudes and strengthen racist discrimination against this community, prejudice, xenophobia and even incitement to ethnic hatred. Success stories of Roma are rare to find in mainstream media. However, there are many positive examples of Roma who have excelled in various fields of work.

All young people need good role models, and Roma youth especially need positive and real examples. An important factor in fostering the self-esteem in young Roma has been providing them with role models who are Roma. Stories of positive cases might inspire them to pursue a professional career or do the necessary work to achieve their dreams.

Therefore, we have produced this booklet with a dual purpose. Firstly, we expect that the Roma role models in this booklet can inspire Roma, especially the younger generation to achieve their full potential in whatever field they decide to focus on. Secondly, that they can also counteract the negative stereotypes and prejudices about the Roma that persist in mainstream society.

This booklet features profiles of Roma who achieved success in various walks of life. They explain how they achieved success in their lives and they share their experiences of racism for being Roma. Moreover, these role models provide some advice to young Roma on how to succeed in life and recommendations to non-Roma on how they can contribute to the inclusion of Roma.



# Ana Dzhumalieva

**Nationality:** Bulgarian

**Year born:** 1974

**Job:** Chair of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination

***The path that leads forward is studying, personal improvement, and constant interest for what is new.***

Associate Professor Dr Ana Vladimirova Dzhumalieva was born in Razgrad, Bulgaria. She graduated from the Technical University in Varna with a Master's degree in Law. She is fluent in Bulgarian, Russian and English. In 2008, she received her PhD in Private International Law. From 2010 to 2012 she held the position of Regional Representative of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in Varna. Additionally, in 2012 she became Chairlady of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. Furthermore, Ana Dzhumalieva is a member of the Varna branch of the Union of Scientists; of the Commission working with young scientists, at the Union of Scientists in

Bulgaria; and of the Scientific Council at the Institute of Maritime Law and logistics at VSU. Furthermore, she is the author of over 40 publications in the field of discrimination, human rights, international maritime law, and private international law. In 2005 she participated in the drafting and signing of the "Academic standards for the organization and operation of legal clinics in the Bulgarian law schools." As a part of her work as Chairlady of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, she is the project manager for numerous projects under the Operational Programs "Progress", "Human Resources Development", and "Harmony in Diversity".

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

My purpose throughout my whole life was subordinated to the idea of self-fulfilment through becoming a necessary and valuable person. I seriously devoted myself to my ambition of studying and improvement, and in the end I achieved what I desired. I defended my ambition every day; I started publishing, teaching, and ended up reaching the high position of Chairlady of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. To achieve this goal, apart from anything else I have achieved until that moment, I suppose my choices were influenced by my Roma origin; as I had in mind the requirement that the members of the Commission should also be elected representatives of different ethnicities.

**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

Over the years I have been impressed by the culture and traditions of the Roma, as well as by their pride to be different. On the other hand, the attempt to present the Roma community as lacking the desire to cross the threshold of its own inertia regarding education has motivated me to prove that this concept is distorted. I managed to prove this incorrect perception over the years; as well I am still doing so today. As I have already mentioned, I suppose my Roma origin has influenced my choices to now be in the position of Chairlady of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination.

**What advice can you give to young Roma with regards to how to succeed in life?**

My advice would be for them to build their lives through ambition for their own fulfilment. Also, to escape from the inertia of the common, and to build their own stereotype, this will make them intelligent, clever and wanted. In this way they will put aside the isolation and the marginalisation as being their future, and they will instead meet the next day as prepared, smart and capable people. The path that leads forward is studying, personal improvement, and constant interest for what is new.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion process of Roma?**

I believe that social and economic inclusion of the Roma is a bilateral process which requires a change in the attitudes of the non-Roma communities and also in the members of the Roma communities. The start should be with education, with the abolition of the segregation. There needs to be efforts to implement education, in order to develop citizens who will not be public and socially isolated. As a Chairlady of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination I am often confronted with problems of unemployed Roma university graduates. The graduates complain to me about the employment offices and the tendentious lack of job offers. The employers can also be intolerant towards Roma workers. The workers are mistreated, have an excessive work load, and have optional and tendentious reduction of their wages. The employers often say "Let him go, he does not deserve more." I can even give you an example from the Commission for Protection against Discrimination itself, where many representatives of different ethnicities find a place for realization and for expression of their knowledge and experience. Improving these aspects is only a small part of the way for the inclusion of the Roma. Their inclusion will not only lead to social benefits, but also to economic benefits for the whole society.



# Vanessa Matos

**Nationality:** Portuguese

**Year born:** 1994

**Job:** Project monitor of the Tecla Generation E6G project aiming at the inclusion of children and young people with fewer opportunities promoted by the Portuguese Red Cross - Delegation of Braga and funded by the Choices Programme.

***Dreams can become reality if we set goals in life and work to achieve them. We are the change.***

Vanessa Matos was born in 1994 and has always lived in the social neighbourhood of Santa Tecla in Braga, Portugal. She was raised by her grandparents, for whom she has deep affection and admiration. Until 2007 she studied in mainstream education but had to drop out of school after her older sister got married and when she became the "single" one with important domestic and family obligations. Fortunately, in 2009 she went back to school despite much criticism of her grandfather and father who, despite all, have always supported her. The Schools Cluster in Lamações started an Integrated Plan for Education and Training to reduce school absenteeism, especially in Roma communities. Thus, she studied for three

years and graduated from 9th grade. Later Vanessa met the delegation of the Portuguese Red Cross of Braga and in 2013 was recruited as a Community Animator/Facilitator for the project Tecla Generation E5G. During this time, she continued her studies and finished secondary school with a course on "Technical Health Assistant". She now works for the project as a Project Monitor. She doesn't want to stagnate. She wants to get into university and that's why she grabbed the opportunity to work once again in the social area that made her grow up and allows her not to resign, and help to deconstruct stereotypes about her community and their evolution.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

The technical team of the project Tecla Generation helped me a lot both at a professional and motivational level showing me that nothing is impossible and that with great effort and work dreams can come true. Today I'm able to perform many tasks that I wouldn't imagine myself doing them 3 years ago. My development is noticeable and this is also due to the challenges I faced during the Choices Programme that have exactly this goal, empower young people with different skills.



**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

The only time I felt that being Roma has had an influence in my life was when I was recruited as Community Animator/Facilitator, since this position needs to be carried out by someone from the community. Apart from that, I didn't feel any influence.

**What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

I really would like that young people become aware of what they can be and what they can achieve. Dreams can become reality if we set goals in life and work to achieve them. If our previous generations have failed to progress in the labour market, then it's up to us to do so by taking advantage of the opportunities offered to us and by creating others. We shouldn't forget that all these dreams begin at school where besides learning, we become more autonomous, creative and prepared. We are the change.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

Although mainstream society already recognises that Roma all over the world face discrimination and continue to be stigmatised, it should urgently adopt a strategic intervention. It's necessary to adopt a targeted approach for the inclusion of Roma, especially in education and employment. We still lack active inclusion and effective anti-discrimination and segregation measures. Obviously much has been done already but there's still much to do.



*“If you do not know where you go,  
never forget where you came from.”*

Sandra Jayat, artist



# Fernando Macías

**Nationality:** Spanish

**Year born:** 1984

**Job:** Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Barcelona and Researcher at the Roma Studies Group of CREA (Community of Research on Excellence for All)

***Positive interactions and high expectations helped me to be confident in myself.***

Fernando Macías was born in Barcelona, Spain. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Education from the University of Barcelona (UB), and also has two Master's degrees, one in Social and Educational Interventions and another in Teaching, Training and Educational Assessment. Thanks to his first Master's degree dissertation about the benefits of Roma families' participation in schools, Fernando achieved the "Distinction Award 2013" from the UB. He is currently completing his PhD research regarding how to overcome poverty and racism against Roma through successful educational actions. Being the only one in his extended Roma family who has graduated beyond primary school, he is especially involved in research and initiatives related to access of Roma to university, social

and educational success of Roma, and anti-Gypsyism. Fernando actively collaborates with the Integrated Plan for the Roma in Catalonia, coordinated by the Government of Catalonia, and with other Family Educational Programmes. He is part of the integrated plan in order to help other Roma to access higher education, graduate from high school, or complete other courses to improve their educational background. He is also involved in social movements related to Roma rights and closely collaborates with associations and networks that work in the most excluded Roma neighbourhoods in Catalonia. Fernando dreams of "a world where being a Roma would mean to have the same opportunities and successes as a Gadge."

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

In my opinion, there were several factors that influenced me to become successful in life. First of all, most of the time, I am not recognised as Roma by the Gadge, because I do not fit their prejudices and stereotypes about us. The colour of my skin and being assistant professor at the university, are some of the characteristics that helped me to not be discriminated against. However, when I was young, I remember many situations where my teachers and neighbours made racist or negative comments about my family and I. No one in my family had achieved a high educational degree before I did, and many people thought that I could not be successful in school. Thankfully, there are different kinds of teachers. I especially remember some of them that always said to me "Never mind what your family has achieved, you can do it; you are good; you will go to

university". These kinds of positive interactions and high expectations helped me to be confident in myself. In addition, the role of my family was (and is) crucial in my success. Unfortunately, they could never help me economically (I have received several scholarships), but I always felt their support and enthusiasm regarding my educational successes. Their support was something very important for me; to feel their presence with me at every step. Finally, thanks to these teachers who believed in me, to my family that always did everything they could for my future, and also thanks to my dedication and efforts, I have never been segregated in school. Not being educationally segregated means that I received the same curriculum like other students, and thus I was able to have similar opportunities and achievements.

### **Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

No question about it! Unfortunately, to be Roma has both a positive and negative influence in your life. In regards to the negative influence, it is not because you are Roma, but because many people have prejudices and stereotypes about you. This influences you negatively in many aspects of your life: not recognising your origins in some places and environments, or being distrustful of people and of yourself.

However, to be Roma also means that you have a positive influence in your life in many ways. I would like to highlight one: our vision regarding family as a one of the most important things in our life. This vision helps us to be more confident and successful, because we never feel alone.

### **What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

I would like to tell them that they can be whatever they want to be. To be a Roma means whatever the Roma can dream of. Unfortunately, our history is not a "successful" history, but it is changing. You can live with the same facilities and opportunities than the Gadje, still being a Roma. Be strong, constant, and work hard to achieve your dreams!

### **How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

The inclusion of Roma without Gadje is not possible. This process should be developed with the efforts from both Roma and Gadje. For sure, Roma, as any other community, need to discuss and reorganise many negative aspects of our points of view, but the major part of prejudices and stereotypes are coming and are deeply rooted in the Gadjes' minds, not in our culture.

In this sense, the Gadje should understand that Roma inclusion is a concern for all of the society; it is a human rights issue. If there is Roma exclusion, it is also negative for non-Roma communities. Gadje can help us with fighting alongside us in our inclusion process, and through taking into account our voices in all the matters that concern us. As an old Roma man said to me few years ago "Nothing about us without us". Roma inclusion is a matter that concerns Roma, but also Gadje. However, it does not mean that Gadje can decide in the name of the Roma. All initiatives and actions should be developed together; this cooperation should take place in daily life, in all neighbourhoods, in all cities around the world, and between all communities.



# Miranda Vuolasranta

**Nationality:** Finnish

**Year born:** 1959

**Job:** Expert on human rights and international Roma policies

***To achieve my final goal, the best option for me was to preserve the best of my own cultural identity.***

Miranda Vuolasranta is a Finnish Kálo Romani woman. At her home they spoke three languages: Finnish, Swedish and Romani. She graduated as teacher of Romani language and history, and worked as teacher in comprehensive schools in Sweden and Finland. Later on, Miranda took part in a Council of Europe working group, which produced a European Romani curriculum. After completing her studies she was awarded an expert diploma on human rights and International Roma Policies. She has worked in the Council of Europe as an advisor on Roma issues from 2002 to 2006; and for the European Commission's Directorate General of Justice as a Policy Officer from 2013 to 2015. Miranda is also the co-founder of 4

national and local level Roma organisations, and 3 international Roma NGOs: International Roma Women Network (IRWN), European Roma Information Office (ERIO), and European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF). Additionally, she was a speaker and lecturer in numerous seminars, conferences, and university-level events. Due to her work in the field, she had the honour of knowing and interacting with the majority of the prominent European Roma leaders. Furthermore, through her work, Miranda had the possibility to travel to most of the European countries, which allowed her to learn about the reality of the European Roma population from many different perspectives.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

I believed and trusted in myself, and held the principle 'I can if I want' as my maxim. Also, I was committed to helping and working for those who are disadvantaged, without seeking my own personal benefit. This commitment has also brought success into my life.

### **Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

I was raised in a traditional Roma home within Romanipe (Romani identity pattern: a system of rules and values, including Romani traditional law) as the code of conduct and ethics for my identity. Both of my parents were illiterate as the time of the Finnish independence wars was during their childhood. However, they were firmly committed to educate their 5 children. When I was 17 years old and in high school, my school counsellor told me that if I ever want to succeed in my studies and professional career, I would have to hide my Roma background and I should not wear the traditional outfit of Finnish Roma women. That drove me into deep identity crises, where I had to consider whether or not to preserve my own identity, outfit and mother tongue. World history and different cultures have always been my passion, so I knew a lot about that subject. During my identity evaluation I made a lot of comparisons between various cultures and came to a conclusion that none of them is actually better than the other. All of them have their negative and positive sides. Choosing a gadžikano (non-Roma like) way of life would mean that I would have to live with fear of disclosure for the rest of my life, and partially abandon my family and kin ties. I was not ready for that. I felt proud of my own identity and refused to deny it. My identity and culture was not inferior in relation to other cultures. To achieve my final goal the best option for me was to preserve the best of my own cultural identity. To change the situation of the Roma to the better I could not fit anymore into today's modern society, which was somehow harming our existence as Roma. Of course I was aware of the price I had to pay for my decision. It meant a lifelong struggle for the right to be a Roma woman. During my life, I have met discrimination and even racism, hatred and contempt; but I also walked on the red carpets of the kings and presidents' palaces, and discussed human rights and equality with high-ranking personalities. However, my identity is not only tied to ethnicity; because identity is like a cut diamond with hundreds of reflective surfaces. Culture is a living part of our identity, constantly changing and hopefully growing into something better, without us abandoning our past. Preservation of my own cultural identity has given me strength throughout my life, and I am still glad of my decision when I was younger. Life has not been easy and I have gone a long way from a bare footed Roma girl to an international expert; but then again life is never easy for anyone. Paving a healthier path in life for our children demands that we Roma and we women are ready to stand up and fight for our own rights.

### **What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

There is 'nothing' in the world, which can stop you, except yourself. Nothing is too difficult to learn in life, if you are interested enough! There is no repetition in life, you live only once, use your time wisely.

### **How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

Roma related policies should be inclusive and empower the Roma themselves to grow, and they need to deal with the existing challenges. It is wise to allow the Roma to make the same/similar mistakes that other communities have done in the past during their inclusion process. The best way to learn is through trial and error. When Thomas Alva Edison invented the light bulb, he failed nine hundred and ninety-nine times, and only in the one thousandth time he succeeded. Social exclusion has been going on for centuries and it will not be defeated overnight, but progress takes place when individuals come to see their responsibility and ability to influence. The role of political decision makers (Gadje) is to provide fair opportunities for the Roma, and to develop a sustainable infrastructure and equip it with sufficient resources and administration.

**ADVICE 1:**

*The path that leads forward  
is studying, personal  
improvement, and constant  
interest for what is new.*

(Ana Dzhumalieva, p. 7)

**ADVICE 10:**

*Be proud of your ethnicity.  
Educate yourselves and be  
active in the Roma Civil  
Rights Movement.*

(Soraya Post, p. 32)

**ADVICE 9:**

*There is 'nothing' in the  
world, which can stop you,  
except yourself.*

(Miranda Vuolasranta, p. 15)

**ADVICE 8:**

*Have faith in yourself, don't  
try to avoid making mistakes,  
instead learn from them  
because no one is perfect.*

(Amet Jasar, p. 27)

**ADVICE 7:**

*Through our achievements  
we demonstrate that we can  
study and at the same time  
maintain our identity.*

(Jelen Amador, p. 23)



**ADVICE 2:**

*Dreams can become reality  
if we set goals in life and  
work to achieve them.*

(Vanessa Matos, p. 9)

**ADVICE 3:**

*Be strong, constant, and  
work hard to achieve your  
dreams!*

(Fernando Macías, p. 13)

**ADVICE 4:**

*What defines your value is  
what you are able to do.*

(Damian Drăghici, p. 30)

**ADVICE 5:**

*If I want something, I will  
work twice as hard as others  
to achieve my goals.*

(Petr Torak, p. 18)

**ADVICE 6:**

*Aim to be perfect, then (you)  
will have the respect of the  
society, and (your) ethnic  
background will not matter.*

(Hristo Kyuchukov, p. 21)



# Petr Torak

**Nationality:** Czech

**Year born:** 1981

**Job:** Police Officer and Executive Director of the Gypsy Roma Traveller Police Association

***If I want something, I will work twice as hard as others to achieve my goals. (...) Never forget our background.***

Petr Torak was born in the Czech Republic and is of Roma/Gypsy heritage. He has fled from the Czech Republic in May 1999 to seek asylum in the United Kingdom after several racially motivated attacks by skinhead groups. Petr is a serving Police Constable in Cambridgeshire in the UK. Since 2006 he has also been actively engaged in improving the living and working conditions of Roma families in the UK and other European countries. He is the co-founder and current Executive Director

of the Gypsy Roma Traveller Police Association (GRTPA), Project Coordinator at COMPAS Group and has provided tactical advice to police forces across the EU and to the OSCE. In 2013 Petr became a qualified ROMED Mediator under the Council of Europe. His work has been recognised by the “Exceptional Effort and Support Award” in 2010, by Medway Area Commander’s Award in 2011 and with the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2015.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

In my opinion there are a number of factors that had influenced my success. First of all, my parents did. My father has always been very keen on education and had worked all his life very hard to be able to pay for my school fees.

The second factor is my determination to succeed. If I want something, I will work twice as hard as others to achieve my goals. Often, this means that inevitably you have to sacrifice things you enjoy and love but, if you really want to achieve something, you have to be prepared to do so.

The third factor is my attitude in life. I am a great believer that selfless goodness and humanity in the form of helping other people, being truthful, respectful and approachable will always be harvested in measurable happiness, acknowledgement and respect.

**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

My Roma background definitely had a huge influence in my life. As a child, I was very upset that my peers treated me differently only because I was Roma. I wanted to prove people around me that I am as good as they are and therefore I started putting extra effort in everything I was doing. Soon this approach turned into my life mission – to prove to everyone that no ethnic group is better or worse than other.

**What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

I would like to encourage young Roma to set their goals very high and then create a clear vision of things that will have to obtain or learn in order to achieve the goals. My other advice would be to never forget our background. We are Roma; we have our history, language, hymn, flag and cultural values in the form of Romanipen and we must be very proud of it.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

Non-Roma people must start treating Roma as equal citizens and respect differences in every minority. Roma history is full of persecution and discrimination and therefore extra effort will have to be made by societies to include Roma whilst embracing the Roma culture.



# Hristo Kyuchukov

**Nationality:** Bulgarian

**Year born:** 1962

**Job:** University Professor in Romani Language/Child and Youth Psychotherapist

***Discrimination made me believe more in myself and I studied more and this was the only way to fight the racism and discrimination.***

Prof. Dr Hristo Kyuchukov was born in Bulgaria and is an expert in the field of Romani language and education of Roma children in Europe. He holds three PhDs in Education and Psycholinguistics, from Bulgaria and the Netherlands. He is currently a Professor of Romani language at the European Institute of Romani Studies in St. Elizabeth University, in Bratislava, Slovakia. Hristo is also a guest Professor at the Institute of Turkology at the Free University of Berlin, Germany. Previously, he has taught in Bulgaria, Slovakia, USA, Russia, Germany, and Poland. During his career he has introduced the Romani language in the primary and secondary school education in Bulgaria.

He also established and was the editor of the "International Journal of Romani Language and Culture". Additionally, Hristo was part of the development of the first Theory of Mind Test in Romani language, and the first psycholinguistic tests in the Romani language. Moreover, he is the author of various scientific publications and books, including the children's book "My name was Hussein". For his exceptional work in the field of Roma education Hristo has received the honourable title of "Corresponding Member". Also, he received the prestigious title of "Academic" from the International Academy of Educational Sciences in Moscow, Russia.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

During the course of my primary school education I was in a segregated class. However, in secondary school and in Gymnasium I was studying in mixed classes with Bulgarian and Turkish children. I was an ambitious student and I was always competing with the other children. My ambition made me a very good student. After I finished school, I was still ambitious and I wanted to study in university. I went to complete my studies, although my parents did not agree with this idea. My parents were always afraid that something bad could happen to me. Although they were scared, I believed in my abilities. I was not ashamed to declare openly my ethnic background, although sometimes it brought me problems, discrimination at school and in the society. However, the discrimination made me believe more in myself and I studied more and this was the only way to fight the racism and discrimination. I always believed that

one day I will prove to my classmates that I will succeed in life. The most shocking thing for them was that after my Bachelor degree I studied and finished my MA degree and later a PhD. After my studies in Bulgaria, I continued to study in European universities in Stockholm and Amsterdam. After I finished my studies, I taught and did research in different universities in Europe and in the USA. In my experience the inclusion process happened somehow by itself, but I did have a good educational background. I don't think there's a problem for highly educated and qualified people to integrate into society.

### **Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

In a way it did have an influence, because it made me stronger. I was very often discriminated against in my life, because I cannot hide that I am Roma. Discrimination was part of my everyday life since my early childhood. It brought me anger, and the only way I could fight against it was by studying hard at school and later working hard. It didn't matter where and what I was working. I was doing my best to be perfect in my studies and work. My Roma background and the discriminatory attitudes towards me made me become a perfectionist; it was the only way to fight against the discrimination.

However, at the same time I didn't forget my traditions and culture. I had a close relationship with the Roma community all my life. I always respected my relatives; it doesn't matter where I was studying or working. When I'm with my community I behave not like an "educated man" but rather like an ordinary Roma who knows and respects the cultural rules. I think that my close relationship with the Roma community makes me a "normal" human being.

### **What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

My advice would be for them to be perfectionists. It does not matter what they want to do in their lives, but whatever they do should be perfect. If they aim to be perfect, then they will have the respect of the society, and their ethnic background will not matter.

Also they shouldn't be ashamed of their ethnic background. Many people hide their Roma identity but living all their lives under a different identity doesn't make them happier. They should respect the Roma communities and be in continuous contact with them. This will help them to be close to their people and to know what their needs are.

### **How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

I had the opportunity to work and to learn from many Gadje, but the biggest influence in my life was Professor Milena Hübschmannová, a Romologist from Charles University in Prague with whom I was in contact with for 15 years. I will never forget how she interacted with the Roma. She came to Roma families with respect and she was "learning" from them and not the other way around. Her approach was not what usually happens with many Gadje researchers and scientists. The Gadje often come to the Roma to teach them what is right and wrong, and to treat them like they are not as intelligent as they are. The Gadje should first learn to accept and respect Roma as they are. The Gadje learning from the Roma is the first important step in the inclusion process, and then the other issues can be solved. This approach in attitude based on respect when communicating with the Roma was also showed by Professor Peter Bakker from Aarhus University in Denmark. Inclusion does not mean assimilation and unfortunately for many Gadje the process of inclusion is actually understood as assimilation.



# Jelen Amador

**Nationality:** Spanish

**Year born:** 1990

**Job:** Assistant professor at the University of Girona (Spain) and researcher at the Roma Studies Group at CREA (Community of Research on Excellence for All).

***I wondered if going to university meant to be less Roma. Now, I realise that after my university experience I feel more Roma and I also maintain my identity.***

Jelen Amador was born in Barcelona, Spain. She holds a Law degree from the University Pompeu Fabra (UPF), and a Master's degree on Citizenship and Human Rights from the University of Barcelona (UB). Due to her educational accomplishments, she stated "Now, I feel more Roma, because with my current educational background I can defend and more effectively fight for my rights as a Roma woman, and also for the rights of my whole community". As a Roma woman, she is especially involved in research fields and initiatives related to Roma women's inclusion, Roma women's rights, access of Roma to university, and anti-Gypsyism.

Currently, she actively collaborates with the Romani woman association Drom Kotar Mestipen, in order to help other Roma women like herself to improve their opportunities and fulfil their ambitions. She is also a member of the Evangelic Pentecostal Church. Due to her religious background currently she is completing her PhD research on the role of Roma women in the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, helping them overcoming gender inequalities.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

When I was at high school there were no Roma students, I was the only Roma. However, I always dreamt of going to university and studying law, but I thought that achieving it was very difficult. I did not have a Roma role model to follow, no one in my family, in church, or in my neighbourhood had been to university. Moreover, I was afraid because my family could not support me financially. I finished all my studies due to receiving several scholarships. Nevertheless, my parents always encouraged me to continue with my dream of going to university. They knew that it meant more opportunities in the future. With their moral support, I decided to study Law; it was an important challenging experience for me.

I always believed in the benefits that you can obtain with a high educational background. For this reason, going to university has presented me with more opportunities. Now, I enjoy my work and I'm

very happy for empowering other Roma to increase their academic and future expectations. I am aware that my family and community are glad with what I do.

### **Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

Without a doubt, being a Roma (and a woman) has influenced my life. I am aware of the discrimination that we (Roma women) suffer because we are Roma, women, and frequently with low educational levels. This encourages me to work hard to improve the situation of Roma women. I know that to achieve this goal it is necessary to study to overcome the social inequalities and to fight against discrimination.

Being a Roma does not have to be a problem. Roma solidarity is very important at this point. In my experience, to decide whether to go to university was an important challenge for me. In this sense when I went to register at university, I realised that the class schedule was at the same time that I usually attend church. Therefore, I went back home without registering for my classes. When I came home, my parents which are pastors encouraged me to continue with my studies. Moreover, the first day at university was the first time that I took the underground alone and I was very afraid. However, I found support from other Roma women. During my second year at university, on a Sunday, while I was working with my parents in the market, a Roma friend told me about a Roma students meeting. This meeting was organised by Drom Kotar Mestipen, and they invited me to explain my experience at university to encourage other Roma women to do the same. The impact of these kinds of meetings is very strong. For instance, before the meetings started, Roma girls said that they wanted to be hairdressers, and after, they wanted to be lawyers.

I think that Roma role models are very important. When I was in high school I spent a lot of time looking for a Roma woman with a degree, because I wanted to ask her a lot of questions. I wondered if going to the university meant to be less Roma. Now, I realise that after my university experience I feel more Roma, and I also maintain my identity.

### **What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

My advice is for them to study hard and overcome whatever barrier they may face due to their Roma identity. For me overcoming those barriers was a very positive experience. Likewise, through our achievements we demonstrate as Roma people that we can study, and at the same time maintain our identity.

### **How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

I think that non-Roma people have an important role in the inclusion of Roma. I think that to construct a better society without inequalities and discrimination, it is necessary to work together. It is especially important in the case of women. As women we suffer gender inequality, therefore we understand what it means to be a woman. To overcome these barriers our departure point must be solidarity. In this sense the partnership between Roma women and non-Roma women is very important.





*“Do not hide your origins, do not forget your traditions because they support your freedom and I am proud of the journey.”*

Sandra Jayat, artist



# Amet Jasar

**Nationality:** Macedonian

**Year born:** 1979

**Job:** Project controller and Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Board for Sinti and Roma for the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

***Have faith in yourself and do not try to avoid making mistakes, instead learn from them because no one is perfect.***

Amet Jasar is a Roma who in the mid-nineties came as a refugee to the Netherlands with his parents. They received a permanent residence and a Dutch passport. Originally he is from Shuto Orizari, the largest Roma settlement in Macedonia, which was built by the government after the earthquake in 1963 on the outskirts of Skopje. Amet grew up in a

Dutch neighbourhood in a family which paid great attention to traditions and culture; with special focus to inclusion, education, and responsibility for social success. He works as a project controller and is also the Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Board for Sinti and Roma for the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport in the Netherlands.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

I succeeded because I put a lot of effort and work for this success. I had to double my efforts since I was an immigrant in the Netherlands. It is important to mention that in the Netherlands, all my work and will to integrate was appreciated by the Dutch society. This is something I may not have achieved in Macedonia, my home country, where minorities are less likely to succeed. Success has different dimensions depending on how high is your goal. The problem is that when all doors around you are closed because you belong to the most disrespected minority, you don't have high goals; you don't believe you could go far. At the same time, you should not give up. Since my childhood, I knew I should have a good education and I should work hard if I wanted to succeed. I am lucky as I had to fight for my success in the Netherlands.

**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

Yes definitely, especially when I compare myself to the non-Roma (Gadje). Instead of thinking that we are all human beings, I think that I have to do things better than the Gadje, so that I am accepted. It is difficult when you feel limited because of your background and still try to change things, because the world is still unfair. As I said, as a result of my Roma background I had to fight two, three times more than others. Possibly being Roma and considered as an outcast has motivated me more to show that I can be as good as others. Moreover, the feeling of being the first Roma expert in my profession in the Netherlands has inspired me a lot.

**What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

First of all be a good student and after you finish college try to learn from your boss. After you do this, do the things that you are very good at. Don't live a limited life, have passion for the things you do and enjoy them. Don't do things because of the money; instead think about doing things for the long term. Also, don't hold back and express yourself, because no one is going to do that for you. Above all, have faith in yourself and do not try to avoid making mistakes, instead learn from them because no one is perfect.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

It's all about inclusion. I think justice is the greatest principle for dealing with one another. The non-Roma (Gadje) will have to understand that the Roma are not asking for more than what they deserve. The first thing that non-Roma should do is to eliminate their prejudices by giving the opportunity to the Roma to demonstrate how they really are and that they don't fit the general stereotypical image of society. They should ensure access of Roma to different fields so that they also realise themselves and become equal participants in society.



# Ethel Brooks

**Nationality:** American

**Year born:** 1967

**Job:** Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology, Rutgers University

***Never be ashamed of who you are. We come from a strong, brilliant, dedicated people and we can be proud of that.***

Dr. Ethel Brooks is an Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology at Rutgers University and a Tate-TrAIN Transnational Fellow at the University of the Arts London where she was also US-UK Fulbright Distinguished Chair from 2011 to 2012. Brooks serves as a member of numerous boards and commissions, including the USC Shoah Foundation VHA External Advisory Committee, the RomArchive, Alliance for ERI, the European Roma Rights Centre, and the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. She served as a Public Member of the US Delegation to the Human Dimension Implementation meetings of the OSCE, and is a member of the US Delegation to the

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and its Roma Genocide Working Group as well as of the US Holocaust Memorial Council. Brooks is the author of *Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women's Work*, winner of the 2010 Outstanding Book from the Global Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. She edited, wrote, and curated the Autograph/ABP Newspaper *Roma: Europe is Ours* (2013) and is a co-founder of the *Kakka Collective* and the PRISaC Network. Brooks is the editor of the 2012 Comparative Symposium on "Romani Feminisms" for *Signs*, and co-editor of the 2007 special issue of *WSQ* on "Activisms".

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

I came from a strong, loving family. We children were the centre of our community and I always felt supported and surrounded by love: from my mother, my father, my grandmothers, my aunts, my uncles and all of my cousins. I was very lucky to have grown up in such a close-knit, caring atmosphere, and I have carried that love and support with me throughout my life. My parents were always in conversation with each other – they would talk together about everything, from our family and the events happening to the people in our community to the politics and events around the world. I was brought up in a family that treasured discussion, allowed for critique and valued each other deeply. My mother, especially, gave me everything that she had - her love, support, care, advice, acceptance and affection and was my role model in how to live a life that is marked by care

and compassion for others, intellectual inquiry and a love of books. Even though my mother was not able to go to school beyond 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, she loved to read, to think and to learn - and she passed that on to me. She would bring me to the library several times a week, where we would both get books and read together. She would demand the best from me, and would encourage me to dream.

**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

How could it not? I grew up in a Romani community, and my sense of home, of belonging, is in my community. At the same time, my community was a target – of eviction, of educational deprivation, of discrimination. At the same time, we created a space for ourselves within the larger society. These contradicting experiences have marked my ideas around what it means to be a citizen, and have sustained my pride in who I am and where I come from. All of this is central to my deep commitment to being in and serving Romani communities in all aspects of my life – from raising my children to carrying out my academic, activist and artistic work in the public sphere.

**What advice can you give to young Roma with regards to how to succeed in life?**

Never be ashamed of who you are. We, Romani people, have given so much to the world and our knowledge, our being, our communities, are valuable. We come from a strong, brilliant, dedicated people and we can be proud of that. Our language, our culture, our community has sustained us for centuries in the face of persecution, discrimination and marginalization. Our pride and care for our people will carry us forward.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the success of Roma as fellow citizens?**

We have to fight anti-Gypsyism, anti-Romani racism together, and to strengthen the position of Roma in society for the good of everyone. It is important for Gadje to recognize that we are citizens of Europe, of the world, and that we have contributed to Europe across centuries of our presence here. We belong to Europe, to the world - and Europe, the world belongs to us. It is time for non-Roma to recognize our place in the world, to work with us to educate Roma and non-Roma alike in what it means to be equal citizens, to work with us to build our educational systems to include Romani history, to build our police forces to support Romani rights and security, to work with us to create equal opportunity in health care and in all aspects of human rights. Gadje can work with us to build public institutions so that everyone has a chance to succeed, to be supported and encouraged, and to thrive in peace and security.



# Damian Drăghici

**Nationality:** Romanian

**Year born:** 1970

**Job:** Member of the European Parliament

***Our ethnic background should motivate us to prove what we are made of because ultimately, what defines your value is what you are able to do.***

Damian Drăghici is a Romanian politician and militant for Roma rights and social inclusion and a former international artist. He is the first Roma Romanian Member of the European Parliament. He holds degrees in arts, psychology and public administration. Drăghici is the first Romanian to ever graduate from the Berklee College of Music (USA), with *Magna Cum Laudae*. In 2006, he launched the cultural project "Damian and Brothers" to raise awareness about Roma discrimination and change people's stereotypes and perceptions. Drăghici became Ambassador for the European Year of Equal Opportunities (2007), the European Year of the Intercultural Dialogue (2008) and the European Year of Volunteering (2011). He

fought for Roma inclusion through H.H.E.E. (health, housing, education, employment). In June 2012, Drăghici was appointed State Counsellor with the Prime Minister's Working Cabinet (later with an *ad-Honoraris* Counsellor title for Roma rights). He also became the National Contact Point for the implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. In the same year, he was elected as a Senator of the Romanian National Parliament. From 2012 to 2014 he was a member of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Roma issues, as well as member of the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe. In 2014, Drăghici was elected as Member of the European Parliament.

## **How did you succeed in life?**

I have succeeded in life because I had the chance to do it. I think, based on my personal experiences and observations, that social inclusion is about having chances and opportunities to achieve beyond family and individual efforts. My family was able to offer me two things: to go to school and to develop my musical skills, since my parents would have never imagined their children being less educated than non-Roma and inheriting the family musical tradition was an important part of my family education. I often remember my father dreaming about me becoming an "educated musician". By this he meant that he wanted me to acquire a formal basic education. I had the courage to aim high and go beyond the limits I thought I had, as any other person. Asking more and more from myself is what makes me who I am.

**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

When someone is born Roma he inherits a social stigma. It is more like a social stamp that is meant to express the value of a person of Roma ethnicity, which is always inferior compared to the majority or to other groups. For many of the Roma people I know and meet, this stigma affects the way they see themselves and the life they live. It's not easy being always in a defensive position not to generate suspicions in others, to prove that being a Roma does not mean pariah or outcast. We always have to fight prejudice, stereotypes which set out social barriers for Roma and break the multiethnic communities apart. I am a Roma and I am proud of who I am. I think we should all accept ourselves and be proud of who we are. The ethnic background should not be something that discourages people, but a motivation to prove what we are made of, because ultimately what defines your value is defined by what you are able to do. What I have learned in my life is that in order to succeed, a Roma must work more than a non-Roma, because we, the Roma, face discrimination. Personally, I do not consider obstacles as barriers. I see them as stairs and all my life I have been climbing them up to achieve my high goals. This is how I saw my dreams come true.

**What advice can you give to young Roma with regards to how to succeed in life?**

Having doubts about yourself or denying a certain ethnic background will not help you to have success in your life. You must accept who you are because this is what everybody needs in order to succeed. Being proud of who you are is essential in order to be able to go after your dreams. So I would definitely say that in order to succeed, you need to have faith in yourself and have at least one dream.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

The non-Roma people have a tremendous role to play in the social inclusion process of Roma people. Eliminating discrimination and improving the quality of education at schools, improving the access of Roma to the labour market, providing support for the Roma to enable them to get access to decent housing conditions and, last but not least, supporting the Roma communities in getting a better access to health services are some of the ways the non-Roma people can contribute in the social inclusion of Roma. I believe the non-Roma have the most important role in making the society more inclusive for Roma because the decision makers are not Roma and our minority community will not be able to contribute more in the societies' development if its marginalization continues in the future.



# Soraya Post

**Nationality:** Swedish

**Year born:** 1956

**Job:** Member of the European Parliament

***You belong to a very civilised culture that has managed to survive during several hundreds of years of deprivation and exclusion...without any use of violence...***

Soraya Post is a Roma activist and a member of the European Parliament on behalf of the Swedish political party Feminist Initiative. She is the first Member of the European Parliament from an ideologically antiracist and feminist party and the first Romani in Swedish history to stand as a priority candidate for a political party. Ms Post is a Roma rights activist focusing on the empowerment of Romani women and the self-determination of the Romani society and used to work as a Human Rights Strategist in the County Council for West Sweden. She has founded the International Roma Women's Network and is one of the founders of the

European Roma and Travellers Forum. Moreover, she has acted as advisor to government bodies in Sweden and has been a member of government inquiries on human rights, discrimination and Roma rights. She has also advised the Council of Europe and the European Commission on Roma issues. Ms Post is currently a member of the Swedish Commission against anti-Gypsyism. One of her priorities in the European Parliament is to work against anti-Gypsyism. She initiated the work on the resolution on International Roma Day – anti-Gypsyism in Europe and EU recognition of the memorial day of the Roma genocide during WWII.

## **How did you succeed in your life?**

I have made a great effort to change my self-image, which was negatively affected by society and I have strengthened my self-confidence. Moreover, I have acquired knowledge about my rights as a citizen, I have worked hard and I have also had a lot of luck.



**Do you think being a Roma has had an influence in your life?**

Yes, it absolutely did. I grew up expecting to be excluded from society, since I suffered discrimination from birth on the basis of my ethnicity. Anti-Gypsyism is an old and very strongly legitimised position which, of course, has an impact on my daily life in all areas. At the same time, this strengthens my commitment to work hard against anti-Gypsyism and racism as an MEP.

**What advice can you give to young Roma on how to succeed in life?**

My advice to them would be to never feel ashamed of your origins. Be proud of your ethnicity. For one thing you belong to a very civilised culture that has managed to survive during several hundreds of years of deprivation and exclusion from mainstream society without any use of violence against this oppression. It is also important to educate yourselves and be active in the Roma Civil Rights Movement.

**How do you think non-Roma (Gadje) can contribute to the inclusion of Roma?**

They can contribute to the inclusion of Roma by realising that it is their responsibility to improve the living conditions of Roma. They have to recognise anti-Gypsyism as a form of racism and work hard to eradicate it at all levels. Furthermore, they need to promote awareness of the Roma issue in the mainstream society.



European Roma Information Office