

The Romani LGBTIAQ Movement and the Role of ARA ART

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David Tišer studied the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. He is the first LGBT Romani activist in the Czech Republic. In the past he was a member of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs. He is currently on the Committee for the Rights of Sexual Minorities, part of the Government Council for Human Rights. He is also a founder of the Romani NGO ARA ART, an organization dealing with creatives and organizing cultural events. ARA ART is for the Romani LGBT+ minority and looks at issues of intersectional discrimination.



I'm very glad that I was invited to this conference and would like to thank the organizers for holding this panel.^[1] My speech looks at the role of ARA ART in setting up the LGBT movement. In 2009, I, along with my fellow student Rozálie Kohoutová, shot a semi-fictional documentary *Roma Boys* based on my partner's story. The film deals with the intersectional discrimination against the Romani LGBT minority. The documentary points out the major discrimination against the LGBT community in Romani families. It was a great success, not only in the Czech Republic but in other countries as well.

Since then I have been approached by many Roma who underwent similar experiences. At the time I started to look at other such stories, meeting people and trying to help them. In the summer of 2012 I organized a Romani LGBT evening for Prague Pride. We turned to well-known Romani celebrities from various fields and organized an evening with a fashion show by the famous Romani designer Pavel Berky, a concert by the well-known singer Jan Bendig, an exhibition of photographs by Lukáš Houdek, and a screening of the documentary *Roma Boys – a love story*. During the evening, we also set up the first email counselling centre for the Romani LGBT minority. It attracted enormous interest, the event was well attended, and more than 400 people came. I introduced the first online counselling for Romani LGBT which, during its first month of existence, received more than 300 emails. I realized that I could not implement this alone over the long term, so I started to negotiate with individual Romani organizations so that they focus on Romani LGBT issues as part of their work as nonprofits.

Although they were very liberal nonprofit organizations, they didn't want to deal with this issue for fear of damaging their reputations. That is why, in the autumn of 2012, I decided to set up my own organization, ARA ART, and started working on this issue consistently. In traditional Romani society, sexuality and its related themes, including different sexual orientation, are huge taboos.

People with different sexual orientations are exposed to great pressures in their communities and can often be excluded from them. The Romani LGBT community is therefore subjected to intersectional discrimination: excluded by the majority society on the basis of ethnic origin, excluded by their own Romani society due to sexual orientation, so they become a minority within a minority. This intersectional discrimination is very stressful and may lead to suicide. The aim of our project is to break this taboo and to work on bolstering the confidence of Romani LGBT people.

In 2014, I organized the first-ever Romani national LGBT meeting in Prague. A total of 20 young people from all over the country participated. In fact, interest was much higher, but we could only select a limited number of people due to limited funds. This involved participants learning about the activities of ARA ART, and we held several workshops on identity building, swapped life stories and, afterwards, each of these young people started to help and be supportive of other Romani LGBT. Young people themselves defined what ARA ART should do. And we listened.

1 Speech delivered at the *Critical Approaches to Romani Studies* conference held at Central European University 15-17 May 2019.

2015 was a crucial year for the Romani LGBT community because of the first international Romani LGBT conference in Prague. This was a key moment for us. It was critical for the Romani LGBT community because it was not about individual activists from different countries but, for the first time in history, people from many countries met and worked on the issue together. We invited 28 Romani LGBT activists from 12 countries to a two-day conference (Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom and USA). On the first day the thematic panels covered: (1) the reality for Romani gays and lesbians across Europe and (2) how national legislation affects the lives of LGBT minorities. The next day focused on the future: participants planned a joint strategy directed at European institutions and subsequent further cooperation. This resulted in setting up an informal International Romani LGBTQ Platform and a joint statement, the so-called Prague Declaration.

In parallel, a national meeting of the Romani LGBT community took place in Prague. Forty young people from all over the country, who had been working with our organization, came to the city. As the part of the programme, these young people performed for conference participants a Theatre of the Oppressed show, looking at a minority in a minority.

In the same year we attended Prague Pride for the first time. We designed a Romani allegorical float, which garnered a lot of attention from the public. For the first time we also staged a cultural programme on the main stage of Prague Pride, performing to more than 30,000 people. The LGBT festival hosted many Romani bands that previously had trouble participating at this event. In short, 2015 was the year that the Romani LGBT community became visible and audible.

In 2016, an international conference was again held in Prague, and in 2017 in Strasbourg. The number of activists and participating countries grows each year. For example, people from Turkey, Finland and other countries came, too. In 2018, a number of smaller meetings took place in various countries. In 2019 the largest LGBT conference, ILGA Europe, was held in Prague and we lobbied for the inclusion of a Romani panel in the main programme.

National gatherings take place several times a year. In 2016, we launched a unique project with Romani LGBT consultants who help disseminate information about various sexual orientations to Romani families directly. A project "I will say it" was set up as a counselling centre for those members of the Romani LGBT community who need support. In addition, this project offers advice from consultants who currently operate in four regions of the Czech Republic. They work in the regions which showed the greatest interest: Prague, Ostrava, Ústí nad Labem and Plzeň. However, our consultants also help in other regions, too. As the part of the project, a parental advisor helps parents who do not know how to manage their child's distinct sexual orientation. The parental advisor is a heterosexual parent who has been through the same experience. On average, about 100 people from the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, and United Kingdom turn to the counselling centre every month.

Our consultants were properly trained in 2016 and are undergoing further training.

Now I will outline several cases that are most commonly addressed by our consultants. It must be said that I am outlining the stories of those who seek counselling and therefore cannot be seen as indicative of the whole Romani population living in the Czech Republic. Our consultants most often deal with excommunication from the family – this is the most common punishment. There are differences between different groups of Roma. There are six Romani groups in the Czech Republic – Czech Roma, Moravian Roma, Slovak Roma, Sinti, Vlach Roma-Lovari and Hungarian Roma. The most frequent punishment, excommunication, is meted out in the most conservative groups of Vlach Roma and Sinti. This form of punishment is based on cultural traditions.

Another common problem is bullying. This manifests in several ways – social control. For example, swearing naked to a holy picture or swearing by the grave of his or her relatives, being subject to mockery in the family and community including the disposal of utensils the subject has used, and if a family member, their crockery always must use the same crockery in the home. This is a targeted demonisation. The third most common is fear of coming out, resulting from the above-described actions.

Severe psychological problems require special intervention and the input of mental health professionals. Our organization provides assistance to deal with such crises. We try to provide victims with protected housing. In the meantime, we will negotiate with Prague 3 borough council to provide council flats in such cases. Furthermore, we offer mediation with family and community: putting the excommunicated person into a new environment, helping with job searches, negotiating council assistance, providing professional help, and life coaching. Based on our long experience in working with this target group, our organization has issued Methodological Procedures for Working with the Romani LGBT Community, also available in English.

We are engaged in national activism. ARA ART is on the Committee of the Government Office for Sexual Minorities. One of the goals of the Prague Declaration was to integrate the Romani LGBT issue into the Governmental Strategy for Roma Integration after 2020+. Today, I can proudly say that our long-term negotiation with the Czech Republic is over; we have succeeded by defining the Roma LGBT community in a strategic document.

We are involved in the government project “Effective support for the health of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion”. We also educate public administration institutions (representatives of ministries, offices, educational institutions) and nonprofit organizations. We hold training for young Romani LGBT activists and set up Romani LGBT self-help groups.

We are engaged in international activism. There is a unique initiative to set up an informal International Romani LGBT platform and coordinate its activities. To inform the general public about the Romani LGBT community through projects. To publish a newsletter on the Romani LGBT community in Europe. To provide expertise via consultations to create programmes focused on Romani LGBT topics – we have helped set up fellowships, a methodology of how to work with the Romani LGBT community, disseminated good practices, provided expert advice and counselling on organizing themed meetings, project activities, research and analyses. We have negotiated with European Institutions in regard to

the setting of grant terms and international research to intercede and prioritize the Roma LGBT community.

As you can see in our seven years of existence, the LGBT Roma community has taken a huge step. It is appropriate to thank Open Society Institute – Human Rights Department and Mariana Berbec for both financial and moral support. The train has already left the station but much more support is needed. We have yet to come up with a grant procedure framework for this forgotten yet numerous minority.

