**Roma migration, anti-migrant sentiment and social integration: A case study in South-east England**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the settlement and residential patterns of Slovakian Roma migrants in Chatham, Kent where a significant number have been moving since the mid-2000s. This process is analysed in the context of growing hostility to European Union migrants and of fundamental changes to the local economy, labour markets, social and demographic structures and of growing neighbourhood polarisation. Vertovec’s ([2006](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0269094218766456)) notion of ‘hyper-diversity’ is used to frame the analysis allowing for a shift away from homogenising categories that conceive of Roma as being qualitatively ‘different’ to other migrant populations and towards the generationally specific hybrid group dynamics that evolve at the grassroots level (Tremlett, [2014](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0269094218766456)). The discussion will highlight the relationship between the participants’ migratory strategies, social ties and settlement patterns in the UK and the increasingly diverse intergenerational experiences of life in their adopted hometown. While many Roma are following a similar path of absorption into the lower end of the working class followed by other migrant groups, structural changes to the local economy and the deterioration of poorer neighbourhoods mean this equates to integration into the social exclusion and marginalisation experienced by large swathes of the contemporary working classes as captured by Wacquant’s ([2008](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0269094218766456)) concept of ‘advanced marginality’.

**Keywords**

acculturation, ethnicity, European Union migrants, hyper-diversity, inter-group relations, migration, nationality, neighbourhoods, Roma migrants

**Introduction**

Following enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007 there has been a significant westward migration of Roma. It is thought that the UK now has one of the largest migrant Roma populations in the EU though in the absence of reliable evidence and significant variations in population estimates (between 200,000 and one million) the UK population of migrant Roma cannot be verified (Brown et al., 2013; Fremlova and Ureche, 2009). What is known is that Roma migrants from Central and Eastern Europe have settled often in low income, ethnically diverse, urban areas of the UK with sizeable populations of Roma found in the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber regions, the East and West Midlands and in London. Many are living in poor quality overcrowded private sector housing (Brown et al., 2013; Smith, 2014). Among adults, English language and literacy skills tend to be low, with low-wage temporary and casual work a common form of employment. Restrictions on welfare benefits for EU migrants and benefit sanctions have left rising numbers destitute and/or homeless (Dagilyte and Greenfields, 2016) and a number of small-scale studies indicate poor physical and mental health among the UK migrant Roma population (European Commission, 2014; FRANET, 2012; Tobi et al., 2010).

Notwithstanding the conceptual and methodological difficulties in categorising people on the basis of ethnicity (Acton et al., 2016), Tremlett (2014) cautions against the unreflexive use of ethnicity as the basis of individual and collective identity as this apportions groups into discrete spheres that rarely exist in reality. One consequence of ethnic categorisation, particularly with regards to inequalities experienced by members of this category, has been a focus on Roma ‘difference’ and a neglect of similarities and experiences shared with other populations. As a result, Roma ‘culture’ is either viewed as synonymous with poverty, or else poverty is regarded as the defining feature of this culture. This image of ethnic distinctiveness then becomes self-fulfilling in the manner of ‘evidence-based policy’ as survey and interview samples of Roma are drawn from those who are known to statutory service providers and/or those who access community-based organisations – generally the poorer and more marginalised sections of those communities (Acton et al., 1997). Those who are from the ‘semi-assimilated milieu’ (Stewart, 2017) or who may choose not to identify with the ethnic ‘community’ are rendered invisible in this ‘culture of poverty’ perspective (see Nagy, this issue). The amplification of Roma difference, which is reified through the ‘methodological chicanery’ of ‘objective’ data collection (Acton et al., 2016) has important policy consequences. For example, many of the programmes and interventions to achieve the EU drive towards the social integration of Roma populations proceed from a ‘cultural deficit’ model (Silva, 2014). This treats the precarious economic and social position of significant numbers of Roma not as the accumulated outcome of institutional racism, discrimination and socio-economic forces, but of inadequate skills and low competency rooted in a cultural worldview lacking in the necessary attributes for social and economic advancement. In response to this impasse, Tremlett advocates contextualising the contemporary situation of Roma minorities in terms of ‘super-diversity’. The term was originally coined by Steven Vertovec (2006) to refer to a phase of migration in the UK that is quantitatively and qualitatively different to earlier phases.

The ‘new immigration’ and its outcomes in Britain … has resulted in a contemporary situation of ‘super-diversity’ – named so in order to underline the fact that such a permutation marks a level and kind of complexity surpassing what Britain has previously experienced … the 1990s-early 2000s have seen more migrants from more places entailing more sociocultural differences going through more migration channels leading to more, as well as more significantly stratified, legal categories … and who maintain more intensely an array of links with places of origin and diasporas elsewhere. (p. 25)

Tremlett contends that this refocusing away from homogenising categorisations and discourses towards ‘hybrid group dynamics’ can connect with the diverse life experiences and structural locations of people under conditions of far-reaching economic, social and demographic changes. This involves not eschewing Roma as a category but of acknowledging and incorporating complexity into the analysis and ‘recognising that claims made about Roma people should always refer to how people actually live – “everyday constructs and practices”’ (Tremlett, 2014: 23). The issues Tremlett raises are also an outcome of the myopia that has pervaded much of Romani Studies where Roma populations are often studied as unique and in isolation from wider socio-economic and ideological processes whose impact is felt throughout society albeit stratified by social class, ethnicity, gender and generation and with impacts weighing heavier on certain groups than others. Within this structural framework such a perspective would emphasise how the lived realities of what are often disparate and diverse groups sharing neighbourhood proximity and broadly similar sets of socio-economic locations, shape attitudes and experiences to a greater extent than shared cultural identities, values or worldviews.

This article, based on qualitative data from interviews, focus groups and discussions with Roma and non-Roma migrants from East and Central Europe, community workers, teachers and other local residents of a low-income socially deprived neighbourhood in a town in southeast England will discuss how for the largely Slovakian Roma participants, social relations and identities can both reinforce dependence on the ‘ethnic network’ while particularly for Roma youth, new relations and identities are evolving that cut across ethnic boundaries and which require ‘a new repertoire of behaviour, associational ties and valuations’ (Fantasia, 1988: 14). The discussion will highlight the relationship between the participants’ migratory strategies, social ties and settlement patterns in the UK and the increasingly diverse intergenerational experiences of life in their adopted hometown in the midst of high levels of neighbourhood poverty; widening inequality between the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest; significant changes to the ethnic make-up of the area; and a political climate increasingly opposed to unrestricted immigration.

**Background**

The findings on which this article is based were collected as part of the preparatory stage of the Fundamental Rights Agency’s Multi Annual Roma Programme Local Engagement for Roma Inclusion (LERI).1 LERI ran in 21 localities in 11 member states between 2013 and 2016 and originated in the EU Commission’s EU framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020. Of particular relevance is the emphasis on the promotion of empowerment, active citizenship and development of meditation channels as set out in the European Council’s (2013) Council recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in member states. The main aim of LERI was to develop horizontal and vertical mediation and communication channels to enhance the social participation and engagement of Roma at the local level and to implement small-scale projects that were attuned to local circumstances and needs, based on the issues identified in the fieldwork. It was intended that LERI would yield longer term benefits in applying the various experiences of implementing the interventions across the 21 localities to improve the design, implementation and evaluation of future Roma integration interventions.

The programme was based on a Participatory Action Research methodology and involved a preliminary phase of desk-based research of national and local social and economic databases and reports to develop an in-depth profile of the chosen locality supplemented by interviews with local stakeholders: community workers, local authority staff, housing officers, police officers, teachers and others with knowledge of the locality. The second phase took place between 2014 and 2015 and involved interviews, focus groups and discussions with local Roma and other East and Central (E&C) European migrants. These also continued throughout the implementation of the project in 2016, some of the findings from which are reported below.

The fieldwork took place in a neighbourhood of Chatham in Kent. The town is part of the Medway Towns, a wider conurbation approximately 40 km to the southeast of London which in 2016 had a population of 268,0000. The Royal Dockyard at Chatham and its associated industries were the main source of work for over 400 years providing the conditions for a working class culture centred on the traditional father-to-son mechanism of social reproduction based on unionised, skilled craft apprenticeships and regular employment for generations of local school leavers. Closure of the dockyard in the mid-1980s was ‘nothing less than a cataclysmic disaster’ as this ‘defunct industrial-military complex’ experienced an economic collapse with over 20% unemployment and the departure of many families in search of employment elsewhere (MacDougal, 2011: 2). Employment levels have recovered since, with unemployment in Medway in 2016 at 5% against a UK average of 4.5% as Medway’s economy was recalibrated ‘within the London orbit’. With the largest population outflow from London the character of Medway has changed since the 1990s with the creation of ‘isolated extra-London oblasts’ (O’Donnell, 2014). Median earnings, however, are below the national and regional average and Medway is ranked the 118th most deprived of 326 local authorities nationally. This is lower than its 2010 ranking with a worsening of its most deprived neighbourhoods. Thirty-two of Medway’s neighbourhoods are ranked in the 20% most deprived nationally, 12 ranked in the 10% most deprived and one in the 1% most deprived (Medway Council, 2016b).

As Vertovec (2006: 1) notes the diversity found in London and other urban areas of the UK is finding its way to other parts of the country and what is significant about the most current phase of migration is that the increase in ethnic minority populations has been highest in areas like Kent where there were fewest minority residents in 2001 (Jivraj, 2012). Simpson and Finney (2009) report on the complex residential patterns emerging as a result of this trend, which belies any simplistic notion of either ‘white flight’ or ‘ethnic clustering’ and note that

All ethnic groups except Chinese have been migrating away from areas of minority ethnic concentration for some time … most movement into areas of highest white concentration is of minority groups, and movement away from highest minority concentrations is equally of white and minority groups. (p. 53)

Kent’s Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population grew by 103% between 2001 and 2011 and in Medway it increased from 5.5% of the population in 2001 to 14.1% in 2011 with the largest rise among ‘Other White’ – largely from the EU – followed by Africans then Indians (Medway Council, 2013). Roma migrants have been arriving in Medway since the early 2000s when the early settlers (largely Czech) were asylum seekers and refugees, with a larger influx arriving in the area following the accession of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 2004 as many came to join relatives, forming patterns of ‘chain migration’. There are no official statistics concerning numbers of Roma, though officials and community workers estimate there are as many as 2–3000 in the Medway towns with many concentrated in the Luton and Chatham Central wards where the LERI project was based. Housing officers and community workers identified the key issues facing the Roma locally to be the impact of stricter eligibility for receiving welfare support, which has left some families destitute, a lack of skills that match local patterns of labour market demand and language barriers, which limits employment options and exacerbates low engagement with statutory services and substandard, overcrowded housing. Reluctance to present to service providers may also reflect a desire not to become conspicuous and to remain ‘invisible’ an important strategy in dealing with external agencies and individuals, a strategy that Matras et al. (2009) identified among Romanian Roma in Manchester.

**The neighbourhood national and local politics**

The neighbourhood where the LERI project was based and where many of the Roma and other E&C European migrants live is comprised of largely terraced housing (built in the late 19th century as the town grew rapidly to house dock workers) and areas of public housing constructed after the Second World War. It has a population of approximately 13,000 and ranks among the 10% most deprived wards in Medway in terms of income, child poverty, employment, educational outcomes, crime and housing (Medway Council, 2016a). Almost 23% of the population were from BME groups in 2011, the largest of whom, comprising 7.5% of the neighbourhood, define as ‘Other White’ (Medway Council, 2013). Unemployment is almost double Medway’s average with ‘elementary occupations’ the largest employment type, and 40% of households with an income of less than £20,000 per year. One-third of pupils at the local nursery and infant school are from the ‘Other White’ ethnic category, largely Slovak and Roma, and the school has double the national figure for disadvantaged pupils (Ofsted, 2016).

As the number of EU migrants rose from the early 2000s onwards, the local authority received EU funding through the Achieving the Integration of Migrant Communities and Ethnic Residents and Action to Generate Inclusion for Residents of Migrant Background projects. Community workers who worked on those projects observed that as these programmes were aimed at general migrant inclusion they had not benefited the local Roma community who had mostly not engaged with such programmes (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011: 51). This, it was argued, was because other EU migrants tended to arrive in the area as individuals, couples or nuclear family units; speak better English; and arrive with more marketable skills than most Roma. Most respondents who had experience of working with the Roma were of the view that a more focused approach requiring more time and resources was required to engage this population, first to nurture and establish social relations among the community as a platform for participation, and second because many of the adults’ low levels of schooling meant that the training provided through the above programmes was not appropriate for them.

Social and economic problems, caused by the economic context following the financial crisis of 2008 and the political decisions made in response to it, intensified both for the Roma and for many other residents of the neighbourhood. At the same time as an increasingly diverse assortment of poor and newly arrived EU and non-EU migrants were moving into similar neighbourhoods to Chatham located throughout the UK where they joined the poor, socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the local working classes, those same neighbourhoods were increasingly being stripped of public funds. Between 2010–11 and 2015–16 the government reduced local authority funding by 27% in real terms, the impact of which fell disproportionately on poorer local authorities in terms of job losses and cuts to services. As poorer neighbourhoods felt the brunt of the cuts, poverty levels increased, as such neighbourhoods fell further behind the rest (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016; National Audit Office, 2014). Medway Council’s spending cuts and job losses led to a downgrading of social regeneration and the loss of several community and regeneration officers with extensive experience working in the neighbourhood representing an important loss of knowledge. As austerity led to the withdrawal of many local authority services the voluntary and community sectors were left to fill the vacuum. Chatham and Strood Salvation Army formed a Roma Church in Chatham in 20132 and several community organisations were active in the neighbourhood with varying degrees of success in engaging the Roma arrivals. The local secondary school, which would later become the main hub for the LERI project, had a substantial number of Roma pupils with numbers rising significantly in 2011. It had established good relations with the Roma pupils and their families, employing Slovak liaison and support workers and organising out of school and other activities and, despite initial tensions, was making real progress in integrating the new pupils into the UK’s education system (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011: 49–53).

However, not all long-term residents of the area welcomed the arrival of increasing numbers of migrants settling in the area nor the allocation of resources to assist their integration, which local authority staff reported had led to accusations that the council were favouring foreigners over locals in the distribution of resources.

For Guy Standing (2011) such conflicts reflect underlying changes in the labour market structure and employment relationships experienced by those in the working classes. Standing emphasises how social and economic changes driven by a neoliberal ideology which promotes the free market over public provision, reductions in state expenditure and which celebrates free trade, open borders, individualism and competitiveness; intensifies divisions between groups who are broadly similar in class terms. Thus, the increasingly precarious and competitive conditions of existence (particularly in labour and housing markets), faced by broad swathes of the manual and working classes argues Standing (2011: 42), drives intra-class divisions that frequently manifest themselves as ethnically based tensions.

A long-term resident of a low-income area urban area will easily be led to see incoming migrants as taking better jobs and leaping to head the queue for benefits. Tensions within the precariat are setting people against each other, preventing them from recognising that the social and economic structure is producing their common set of vulnerabilities.

In their analysis of white working class reactions to the type of demographic and social changes detailed above and the way in which such concerns became forces behind both the Brexit vote and growing support for right wing parties, Winlow et al. (2017) write of an ‘inarticulate anger’ among sections of the white working class. This has been fuelled by industrial decline, economic precarity, the subsequent dissolution of the pillars of working class culture: family, work and community and the rise of identity politics which ‘ripped apart potential class solidarity along cultural fault lines as it simultaneously ripped apart potential cultural affinity along class fault lines’ (p. 65). In such an ideological climate, crucial debates about the impact of mass immigration and ethnic diversity on working class communities were systematically avoided and political discussions tilted in favour of one set of arguments. Politically, many working class people felt abandoned by the Labour party whom it was felt had abandoned their core working class supporters for urban middle class liberals – the most enthusiastic adherents of open borders and multiculturalism. Many working class people felt increasingly incredulous at the failure of those in power to appreciate the changes unrestricted migration was imposing in working class areas or to offer any solutions beyond condescending platitudes. As Winlow et al. (2017: 205) observe while their respondents were accurate in their analysis of the relation between the decline of traditional forms of work and neighbourhood decline, this loss was not connected to the imposition of 30 years of neoliberalism but to increasing immigration, meaning that ‘for many working class people, growing diversity and continued inward migration is inextricably bound up with the context of their own declining fortunes’. Indeed the notion of neighbourhood decline is identified as featuring prominently in much anti-immigrant discourses (Bashir and Flint, 2010).

This notion of negative change plays out too in the study location, as the neighbourhood is widely regarded locally as dangerous and crime ridden, with poverty, ethnic divisions and public violence accumulating in the same area.3 Longer term residents were concerned that the demographic changes to the area would worsen its already poor reputation and increase the pressures the area was experiencing. The most frequent locus for these concerns was the increasing presence of Roma migrants. Criticisms concerned groups of Roma youth congregating at night which other – especially elderly – residents found intimidating: noise, litter, rowdiness and drug dealing. The local residents association were particularly vocal in their criticisms, and one attempt at community mediation resulted in the Roma spokesperson being expelled from the meeting by angry residents. One comment on a BBC website captured the concerns of some residents, offering an invitation to supporters of open borders to

Come down to Luton in Chatham, Kent. See the groups of East Europeans, mostly Roma, who do not work, wander the streets in gangs, schools up to 50% Roma, Medway Maritime Hospital maternity unit struggling with their women turning up 9 months pregnant as their first appearance … yeah, tell me unlimited migration is a good thing, all you goody goodys come and live amongst it. (Cited by Moir (2017: 73))

In 2013 the far right British National Party capitalised on residents’ concerns and reported on antisocial behaviour among Roma youth and the impact on the lives of elderly residents on their website which were posted on YouTube.4 In the same year Conservative David Carr was forced to resign as Medway’s cabinet member for community services following derogatory comments he made about Roma and Travellers.5 The nearby Rochester and Strood ward elected Mark Reckless as only the second UK Independence Party (UKIP) MP in the country in 2014, and Britain First a far right organisation became a prominent local presence holding street protests to oppose the building of a mosque in nearby Gillingham and entering a candidate for the 2014 Rochester and Strood by-election. In the increasingly polarised ideological climate fuelled by the rise of UKIP and Prime Minister David Cameron’s promise of an EU referendum, Medway found itself ‘at the centre of an electoral maelstrom’ (O’Donnell, 2014). Labour MP Emily Thornberry’s derisive tweet of ‘white van man’ and his Rochester house draped in the St George flag meanwhile, for many commentators epitomised the key ideological division of the era which, according to The Economist (2016) cut across traditional divisions of left and right and was between advocates of open borders and those in favour of more protectionism and less immigration. For many, Thornberry’s tweet also symbolised the disdain with which the so-called metropolitan liberal elite regarded white working class people and the negative response to her intervention led to her resignation from Ed Miliband’s shadow cabinet in November 2014.

Against this backdrop, in June 2016 the Medway Towns voted to leave the EU with 64% of referendum voters in the locality opting to leave, against 36% in favour of remaining in Europe. This compares to a national figure of 52% opting to leave and 48% wanting to remain (The Political Medway, 2017).6

**Migration, marginality and territorial stigma**

For Loic Wacquant (2008) the channelling of many newly arrived immigrants into the same poor and spatially segregated neighbourhoods as the socially excluded elements of the working classes represents the emergence of a new regime of urban poverty, a process he termed ‘advanced marginality’. This concept refers to a combination of economic restructuring and welfare retrenchment that has imposed ‘massive structural violence from above’ on large sections of the unskilled and migrant labour force in post-industrial nations throughout the world. The notion of ‘advanced marginality’ captures

the novel regime of sociospatial relegation and exclusionary closure … as a result of uneven development of capitalist economies and the recoiling of welfare states (and) the way these two forces bear upon the segments of the working class and the ethnoracial categories dwelling in the nether regions of social and physical space. (2008: 2–3)

Residents of such areas argues Wacquant have been consigned to ‘neighbourhoods of exile’ where they experience the ‘territorial stigma’ of living in areas perceived by both outsiders and insiders as ‘social purgatories’. Neighbourhood stigma can accordingly impact negatively on relationships with colleagues, family and friends, while residents of such areas perceive they are disadvantaged in gaining access to employment due to employers’ preconceptions of residents. Moreover, they pay higher house and car insurance premiums and have difficulties accessing credit and financial services based on presumptions of risk associated with a specific postcode or locality (Dean and Hastings, 2000). Importantly advanced marginality, ‘rather than being disseminated throughout working-class areas … tends to concentrate in isolated and bounded territories’ (Wacquant, 2007: 67) which diminishes the potential for social integration; a theme captured by William Julius Wilson’s (1987) concepts of social concentration (the increasing concentration of poor and socially disadvantaged people within specific neighbourhoods) and social isolation (geographic and social isolation from other sections of the population). In low-income neighbourhoods the ‘production of disrepute’ is further strengthened by the public nature of activities, many of which would be considered more legitimate in the private sphere (Sampson and Raudenbusch, 2004: 321). The visible presence of such activities means area reputation is solidified through class and racial structures, which reinforce the stereotype that disorder is primarily a problem of poor and ethnic communities.

The following sections of this paper examine how the structural transformations and ideological climate discussed above are played out in the localised contexts within which lives are experienced, and through which practices, relationships and identities are developed. For some, these processes allow the maintenance of a measure of social integration within an overall picture of economic and social marginality which, despite differences of ethnicity and nationality, are the key coordinates shaping the lives of all residents of the neighbourhood.

**Migration networks and settlement patterns**

This section examines the role of kin and communal networks in influencing decisions to migrate to the UK and to Chatham in particular, and how those networks shape the nature of the participant’s lives post-arrival. In exploring motives for coming to the UK a questionnaire administered to 30 largely Slovakian Roma participants at an adult language class run as part of the LERI project found that the main reasons for coming to the UK were for a better life (31%), work (22%), to join family in the UK (22%), education (16%) and social benefits (9%). It was clear in focus groups and discussions that both structural factors such as a lack of work opportunities and discrimination in their home countries as well as better work opportunities and a perception of greater tolerance in the UK were all important motivating factors in making the decision to migrate. Grill (2013: 92), however, cautions against the use of simplistic ‘push-pull’ models to conceptualise Roma migration as this fails to capture the specific conditions of Roma emigration and ‘the concrete pathways through which Roma come to migrate, navigate and experience their movement’. Roma migration tends to involve entire family groups, rather than individuals or nuclear family units and rather than a linear origin–destination model, often comprises ‘patterns of long-term multi-sited residence’ with prolonged and frequent visits to other parts of the UK and Europe (MigRom Briefing, 2015). Some participants had lived or worked in other European countries or different areas of the UK previously, and reported moving to stay with relatives in other parts of the country where they remained for varying periods of time, often due to work opportunities. One male noted the advantage of geographically dispersed kin networks as sources of information and knowledge regarding work, explaining that ‘[relatives live] in London and Sheffield. If they call and say “come we have work” my wife and kids we go’.

Like the Slovakian migrant Roma in Hajská’s (2017) study in Leicester, the early settlers in Medway were families with greater economic resources and/or husbands who arrived first and who then formed ‘migratory bridges’ for relatives back home or in other parts of Europe. Social networks and information channels thus influence not only migratory patterns and destinations, but post migration behaviour (Vidra, 2013). This occurs in several ways, not least in reinforcing the perceived economic and social advantages of moving to the UK through communication networks operationalised by phone and social media, as well as orally when migrants return home to visit and regale relatives and friends with tales of life abroad. As Sorhando and Pattullo (2009) note, many migrants are selective in what they tell family and friends about life in the new country and may omit the more negative aspects such as separation, hardship, prejudice and culture shock. One woman observed how ‘when my uncle came back he said England was much better than Slovakia … so after he went back we said we would go’. Such narratives can result in an exaggerated and romanticised version of life abroad as one participant remarked, ‘life is better here but still very hard. It is still harder back home but in other ways’. Many originated from the same regions of Slovakia and formed part of several interconnected kin networks, which acted as conduits of information and resources prior to leaving their home country and after arrival. Access to the information and resources that circulate through social networks thus make it possible to adapt and respond better to the risks and uncertainties of migration and are vital resources that also influence choice of location once in the UK, leading to area-based ethnic concentrations.

One male, for example, reported that ‘I came here because some people I knew already came and I knew they would teach me about the English life’. A woman added that ‘my sister and her family sent the money for us to travel and my relatives live in Gillingham [nearby town] so we lived there then we came here’.

While ethnic networks can facilitate migration and initial settlement into ethnic enclaves and economies they can also hinder social integration in the wider sense, as reliance on extended kin-based networks characterised by a high degree of bonding capital has implications for the pattern of local social relations. A local authority regeneration officer attributed some of the difficulties in increasing the local political and civil participation of Roma by training community champions and leaders, to the fragmented nature of its community and its internal subdivisions, each with their own hierarchy but with no clear community structure or leader. The properties of intra-network relations based on principles of ‘bounded solidarity’ where group cohesion is reinforced through the trust and norms emerging from (real or perceived) external threats can promote a high degree of conformity with network norms and behaviour (Hannerz, 1980; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). This can hinder the development of bridging social ties with other social groups that are important for migrants looking to establish themselves independently in a new country. First, it is these more diverse social contacts that are vital for securing access to work and opportunities. Second, the establishment of social ties with people outside one’s own national and/or ethnic group make community cohesion (in the wider sense of neighbourhood solidarity) possible and generates the potential for collective action that can transcend the limited ambitions of identity politics (James and Smith, 2017). Ties that cross ethnic and national lines take time to develop, and for newly arrived migrants are influenced by factors such as language ability, the degree to which different migrant groups are accepted (or not) by others, opportunities to interact with other residents in public spaces and the potential for mutual benefit through nurturing inter-ethnic social relations all of which will influence the strength or permeability of boundaries between different groups.

The majority of the Roma and non-Roma Slovaks in Medway arrived after Slovakian accession to the EU in 2004 and as relatively recent arrivals occupied a lower strata in the neighbourhoods’ social order than (for example) did the Polish who are longer established and who are a much larger population.7 Interestingly, local officials reported a preference among the Roma for engaging with South Asian and particularly Punjabi staff when engaging with public services, and speculated that this may be due to commonalities in language and heritage although many Roma chose to identify as Slovak and to use the Slovakian language (discussed below). Despite the growth of other BME populations, South Asians (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) still form the largest ethnic minorities locally, comprising approximately 3.5% of Medway’s population in 2011. It was reported that many of the landlords renting (often overcrowded and substandard) property to the Roma were South Asian though it is also possible – as noted by a housing officer – that these were the only landlords willing to rent property under terms they could meet, as most landlords require a large deposit, one month’s rent in advance, proof of employment and bank statements, which most would not be able to produce. The extent to which established minority groups exploit newer migrant groups is an important question in the context of ‘hyperdiversity’ and a co-resident multitude of different ethnic populations, some of whom are accustomed to with poverty and exploitation. To answer it fully would require consideration not only of possible exploitation in terms of employment and housing rights, but conversely the possible advantages that these types of arrangements and understandings can confer on both sides and of the social, economic and legislative framework that fosters or inhibits such practices (Tibrewal and Leonard, 1993). Certainly deregulation and the pursuit of labour market ‘flexibility’ as political objectives, in addition to the withdrawal of the state as a major provider of affordable housing and the concomitant rise of the private rented housing sector, have created contexts in which such practices can thrive. It is notable that while housing issues and overcrowding were identified by officials as a key issue facing the Roma in the area during the preparatory stage for LERI, none of the Roma participants mentioned this as a significant problem.

Exploitative employment relationships were another concern of officials and community workers and while the majority of Roma men are employed this is often in small shops, takeaways and restaurants, typically owned by South Asian or Middle Eastern migrants. According to community workers these jobs are often paid in cash below the minimum wage and offer none of the employment-based protections that other employers can expect. Others can be seen driving around the Medway Towns in vans collecting scrap metal or selling the Big Issue outside supermarkets and on the high street. Seasonal agricultural work is another significant source of work, due to the town’s proximity to the agricultural heartlands of Kent and the East of England. Some major public service cleaning contractors also appear to have a preference for employing female Roma as cleaners. In these types of work participants were largely working with other Roma or EU nationals. As one man noted, ‘at work I’m working with Slovaks, Poles and some Turkish guys the only English there is our boss’. The Medway towns also has a large Gypsy and Traveller population and a concentration of long-established housed Gypsies in the neighbourhood though many of the local officials and community workers were not aware of this. Many are descendants of the residents of Ash Tree Lane camp, a site which existed from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century and was located on a hill overlooking the neighbourhood. One male labourer had secured occasional building work with local Gypsies and explained ‘when they need the help I lift, carry, dig do this work when they have a job they call me ‘find this many workers’. Despite this example it would be mistaken to assume there is more than a residual sense of commonality or shared identity between most Roma migrants and Gypsies and Travellers. The latter are often critical of the migrant Roma and concerned that the negative stereotypes attributed to these newcomers would also be applied to themselves if they were associated too closely, further entrenching their already poor societal image (Greenfields, 2010). ‘Passing’ which is a social management strategy for avoiding disclosure of one’s identity (Kanuha, 1999) also inhibits the forging of social and economic ties with other Roma and Traveller groups, which may increase the relative importance of ties based around nationality for some respondents. As strong ties tend to expose network members to the same information, they may reinforce a cycle of low skill, low paid, casualised work; with evidence suggesting that immigrants in the ‘open’ economy tend to earn more than those working in ethnic enclave economies (Sanders and Nee, 1987).

**Identity social ties and local ‘structures of belonging’8**

Social capital depends on reciprocity and thus strong ties can be counterproductive, placing excessive demands and expectations on community members. This was apparent in the evidence gathering stage for the LERI project where, despite participants identifying poor language skills as the main barrier to social integration, familial and childcare responsibilities were the main impediment identified to prevent women from accessing language courses. As one woman noted, ‘no time [to learn English] I have my kids, my family all the time I’m looking after them so I never learn [English]’. Networks based on shared identities and ties and spatially situated within particular neighbourhood thus constrain individuals and the options and possibilities open to them. As another woman commented ‘I would like to move [to a new area] and see how to live … like English people but that’s not how it is’. Simultaneously, such ties provide benefits to network members within the overall framework of opportunities provided by local housing and labour markets. Among the Roma adults there was little social interaction outside their own networks though during the LERI project, which was open to all members of the neighbourhood and also attended by non-Roma EU migrants, there were signs of increasing interaction and sociability, and an offshoot of the LERI project was the formation of a local Slovak society attended by both Roma and non-Roma Slovaks. It was posited by some participants that migration had brought the two groups closer together on a national basis, due to a dilution of the social, economic and geographic differences between the two communities that had pertained in their own countries. As one non-Roma male observed, ‘It isn’t like home. Here we are all in the same position and we are all Slovak’. Indeed many of the Roma preferred to identify on the basis of nationality rather than as Roma. Kanuha (1999) suggests that ‘passing’ represents not a rejection of a stigmatised identity, but a situational strategy employed to avoid societal discrimination. One woman noted how this strategy was grounded in collective experiences of discrimination and the anticipation of it in unfamiliar and new social environments, commenting that ‘most Roma in my country were discriminated so why would I then come here and say I am Roma? I want that they call me Slovak or Czech’.

Halej’s (2014) investigation into the attitudes of white British people towards Eastern European migrants indicates that many people tended to categorise Eastern Europeans not by nationality or ethnicity, but regarded them as a homogeneous group; though few felt that cultural differences were a particular barrier to social integration. In a society characterised by ‘superdiversity’ and a multiplicity of ethnic and racial groups, the advantages of blending into the larger and amorphous ‘East European’ population were obvious, given difficulties accessing employment and public services in their own countries, a point noted by one participant who commented that ‘when they fill in the admission forms [for school] they say we are white European not Roma because of the bad experiences they had in their countries’. The tendency of ‘locals’ to homogenise different European nationalities and ethnicities thus resulted in Roma all being classified as ‘Kosovans’ or ‘Romanians’ by the local population.

Many Slovak participants rejected this labelling, by way of references to what Hatzopoulos (2008: 162) refers to as ‘internal hierarchies’ that are ‘involved in the political processes through which the West and the Balkans and the relation between them are all constituted’. These hierarchies are based on status distinctions and competing representations of who is more ‘eastern’ and who is more ‘European’. During focus group discussions for example, one participant asked ‘Why do English people call us Kosovans? I was insulted because people from Slovakia are higher than Kosovans’ with another adding ‘I lose my pride when people think I am Kosovan or Turkish it is shameful I am Slovak’. The utilisation of exclusionary and nationalistic distinctions is a ‘passing’ strategy that asserts status differentiations between groups who may be similarly located structurally and spatially, while affirming a new and more positive identity than the one that many had migrated to escape (McGarry, 2013). One male elaborated on this, arguing that moving to the UK gave him the opportunity for a fresh start where he could feel liberated from a stigmatised ethnic identity noting that, ‘I don’t want what we experienced [in Slovakia]. Here I’m not Roma I’m a foreigner like the blacks the Polish and everyone else’.

Sampson and Raudenbusch (2004) note that assessments of their neighbourhoods among residents of stigmatised areas are rarely as negative as those held by outsiders. Such assessments are therefore relative, and like Matras et al.’s (2009) study in the Manchester area, few of the Roma participants in Chatham voiced any misgivings about their locality, considering it a significant improvement to where they had lived in Slovakia. Given the media and political discourse that became increasingly hostile to EU migrants, with Roma migrants singled out as an exemplar of all that was wrong with free movement and open borders (Smith, 2016), participants unsurprisingly recalled widespread hostility to their arrival in the area. Physical and verbal attacks were common and the right wing newspaper the Daily Mail reported in 2007 on the exodus of children from a local junior school that had experienced an influx of Slovakian born children (Daily Mail, 2007). The alleged assault of a 10-year-old boy at the school by a Slovakian woman and of growing tensions in the area – 13 racially motivated attacks in six months in 2007 – were also widely reported by the BBC and in the national press. Despite these narratives, many of the more sensationalist claims were rebuffed in The Independent (2007) which cited the school as an example of good relations and community cohesion under extremely testing circumstances. Fremlova and Ureche (2011: 52) report that by 2011 relations between the Roma and other pupils at the school had improved significantly and that the involvement of Roma parents in social events and school activities was increasing. Some of the mothers who had children at the school at the time recalled ‘two groups’ of parents in the playground; with one remembering ‘when I came I had the feeling the neighbours didn’t want me here in Chatham’. However over time as more people in the neighbourhood became familiar with the presence of Roma, and as many of the previously workless young men found jobs (and were often working long hours meaning they were a less visible presence in the streets), tensions subsided and an uneasy coexistence prevails. One woman argued that hostility towards them as a community was to be expected, given the negative stereotypes of Roma. She attributed the decline in animosity to the reality that the majority did not conform to negative stereotypes. She observed that ‘after a few years they [neighbours] find out about us that we are normal and now they accept us’. Another who had lived in the town for three years added ‘I have a good feeling here. No negatives, no bad experiences with neighbours’ and her husband also reported ‘no problems. It is nice here I like it. My wife and kids are happy. They [children] have many friends’. Relations with the local population were cordial but also marked by a mutually sustained distance in the manner of Erving Goffman’s (1972: 249) notion of civil inattention, whereby, ‘we demonstrate that we recognize the other person’s presence, are not seeking a sustained interaction, and have no hostile intention’.

One male participant commented that ‘English people. Perhaps they don’t like us but they are too polite to say. The others [EU migrants] they say what they think about us’. At the neighbourhood level therefore, social distance accompanies population diversity with notions of community and everyday social relations defined and limited by ethnic and national boundaries. These patterns are ‘structurally located at the contradiction between the demands of capital for socially disunited “abstract labour” and the demands of states for culturally unified “abstract citizens”’ (Silverstein, 2005: 364) which also revealed significant generational differences as discussed below.

**Generations locality and belonging**

Structures of belonging and attachment demonstrated a significant divergence between older and younger generations of Roma migrants. Fremlova and Ureche’s (2011) study of Czech and Slovak Roma pupils in UK schools reported that 85% had previously attended special or segregated schools or classes in their own countries and were in general adapting well to mainstream schooling in the UK. Their attainment in numeracy, literacy and science was just below average, and 89% were fluent or near fluent in English. In seven of the eight case study areas covered by Fremlova and Ureche (2011) the pupils said they had not experienced racism at school and the majority of Roma pupils and parents interviewed were extremely positive regarding the schools in the UK, in particular their multicultural composition and emphasis on equality. Many of the younger LERI participants were attending the secondary school where the project was based and had spent most or a significant portion of their lives in the UK.

As children and young people generally come to share in the assumptive world of their parents, peer group and neighbourhood and adopt similar outlooks to those around them (Furlong et al., 1996), the attitudes, aspirations and friendships of Roma youth shared more commonalities with local working class youth of various ethnicities than with those of their parents’ generation which were centred largely around kin, ethnicity and nationality. Hickman et al. (2008) note that at the neighbourhood level locality trumps ethnicity, gender and class as the main vehicle through which local ‘structures of belonging’ are expressed and articulated. Consequently, processes of acculturation have resulted in a widening of generational experiences between older and younger Roma cohorts and for the latter, a convergence with local youth, and the construction of new identities centred more on locality, generation and youth culture than the ethnic and nationally based distinctions that characterised the social relationships of their parents.

While teachers identified a tendency for the Roma pupils to congregate together and recalled fights between Roma and other boys, such incidents were diminishing as the Roma pupils became socialised into the wider culture of the school and neighbourhood. All of the secondary school pupils reported socialising in mixed ethnicity peer groups that were based around shared interests such as musical tastes. One Roma girl reported that ‘Outside school it is fine. I have lots of English friends. I got English, Polish, Indian friends’. None of the pupils reported any serious racist incidents. During a focus group discussion one girl noted that ‘at school we talk in our language and people sit near us at lunch they are basically racist and tell us to talk in English’ but she was reprimanded by her friend who replied ‘I agree with the English students. You should speak English we choose to come here’.

After school activities organised by the Slovak liaison worker had also soothed some of the initial tensions following the arrival of significant numbers of Slovak pupils, resulting in increased socialising and interaction as (for example) a dance class was attended by girls from various backgrounds all curious to learn ‘Gypsy dance’. Likewise sport and sporting prowess transcends ethnic and national prejudice, as one Roma boy stated, ‘we like to play football. It doesn’t matter what country they come from. If they play well they can be in our team’. In hyper-diverse contexts increasingly fluid cultural and ethnic boundaries exist among younger cohorts, with the construction of plural and composite identities that go beyond binary Roma/non-Roma distinctions while maintaining important continuities and attachment to the parent culture.

As social relationships, identities and experiences increasingly digress on a generational basis, mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction become progressively weakened, as Roma youth are more familiar with and amenable to external influences. Within families an inability to communicate effectively due to the different language abilities of older and younger generations may undermine traditional age- and gender-based hierarchies. One high school pupil, for example, remarked that ‘My sister her English is better than mine so she goes to the office or the doctors [with parents] to explain mum doesn’t speak English and my dad a little bit but they are ashamed that their daughter has to speak for them’. Another girl commented that ‘I know what things are but I can’t explain in Czech and my mum gets angry with me. She can’t understand me because she has learnt to speak Czech but she can’t explain what things in English mean in Czech’. Janka et al. (2018) note that younger and employed Roma are less willing to declare their ethnicity than older and unemployed Roma, indicating further the processes impacting public (and private) identities. Over time the social processes outlined in this article may thus result in a diminution of Roma identity and the construction of a hybridised identity based on commonalities in lived experience and shared social space with other working class youth (Smith and Greenfields, 2013: 185–186). While this may result in a splintering of collective experiences and identities, evidence suggests that for young migrants who mix in multi-ethnic peer groups, the ‘letting go of traditional ways’ make them better placed to manage the psychological transitions associated with migration and to take advantage of educational and labour market opportunities in their new social environments (Gilchrist and Kyprianou, 2011: 10), which appears to be the case for many of the Roma youth who took part in the LERI project.

**Conclusion**

In many respects the Roma migrants in Chatham are following similar generationally specific trajectories to other migrant populations, with many adults lacking in language and job-related skills, confined to low paid manual work and remaining immersed in the language and ways of the country they have left, albeit with a propensity to identify themselves by nationality rather than ethnicity, and with increased social interaction with other Slovak nationals. Nevertheless as discussed in the ‘Introduction’ section, a preoccupation with ethnicity as the core of individual and group identity leads to a magnification of vertical societal divisions and Roma distinctiveness. At the same time, the social structural processes and political decisions enacted in response to those processes have increased horizontal societal divisions and inequality. Accordingly, impacts which are felt throughout society are neglected, with the consequence that similarities and affinities between different groups who are similarly located in the social structure and who are facing similar class problematics are rarely acknowledged or incorporated into the analysis.

Within a series of focus groups conducted in Chatham with local residents of various ethnic backgrounds the most pressing issues facing the neighbourhood were identified as a lack of social investment, financial problems, few opportunities for young people, the poor quality of housing and a lack of community cohesion (Arches Local, 2014). These issues impacted on local residents not as discrete ethnic communities but due to their common experiences of low pay, debt, living in a deprived and stigmatised neighbourhood, and feeling abandoned by both central and local government. Hajská (2017) notes how the Slovakian Roma in Leicester are moving from informal economic activities into the wage-labour system and from a macro-sociological perspective becoming progressively integrated into the working class. However, working class culture and prosperity has always been overdetermined by the nature of local structures of opportunity, and for many new migrant groups, incorporation into the working class equates to incorporation into declining, high poverty neighbourhoods, that have been discarded by the state and populated by the economically inactive (sick, disabled, retired and lone parents); the economically redundant sections of the local working classes; and a heterogeneous mix of migrant and ethnic groups. In their ardour to further the interests of particular ‘pet’ communities the advocates of identity politics had little to say about the growing inequalities that have led to a decline in the fortunes and life chances of all working class people regardless of ethnicity (James and Smith, 2017).

Although younger Roma in Medway have to a significant extent been freed from the internalised stigma that shape their parents’ conceptions of Roma identity, as the former develop more complex and multi-stranded identities, their possibilities of achieving upward social mobility are framed by the same educational and labour market opportunities available to other youth in the area. One possible outcome of this trend is that the younger generations who are forging ties and identities with other local youth, and facing the same limited opportunities available to the unqualified as do their peers, enter into oppositional subcultures based around ‘alternative’ opportunities. Such alternatives are often characterised by gang activity, engagement in drugs and crime which in turn isolates already disadvantaged communities further by drawing them into a highly localised circuit of capital isolated from the mainstream and local economies (Amin et al., 1998). However despite early animosities with other pupils and difficulties adjusting to the educational culture of the UK, staff at the secondary school noted the improving performances of many of their Roma (and other migrant) pupils. Five Roma pupils were in the sixth form and studying for their A Levels at the time of writing. It is clear that these pupils are forging a path in their adopted country that is likely to differ in many ways from that of their parents, while retaining certain core features. This generational differentiation highlights the need to explore increasing population diversity beyond the ‘standard’ migration and ethnic dimensions that can address the multiple diversities of groups that appear similar on the surface while still accounting for the deeper social processes and changing social environments that shape the structure of opportunities and life chances facing people.

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1. See project website for more details on the project at www.fra.europa.eu/en/project/2015/local-engagement-roma-inclusion-leri-multi-annual-roma-programme.
2. See www.chathamsa.org.uk/2013/02/21/roma-church/.
3. For example, see www.ilivehere.co.uk/luton-chatham-kent-is-the-cesspit-of-medway.html.
4. www.youtube.com/watch?v=erU0G-Y8Bec.
5. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-22734125.
6. These figures mask significant ward level variation from 73% voting to leave in Peninsula ward compared to 54% in Rochester West.
7. Polish is the most spoken language after English in Medway (Medway Council, 2011).
8. The term is taken from Hickman et al. (2008).

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