

# Charting New Frontiers in Democracy: A Romani Voice in Parliament

Interview with Ismael Cortés Gómez by Carmen Cañete Quesada

## Ismael Cortés Gómez

Ismaelcortes\_@hotmail.com

Research Centre on Antigypsyism, University of Heidelberg

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1541-7306>

*Ismael Cortés* is a scholar and policy analyst whose work links academic research with policymaking to address structural discrimination. He is a member of the Pakiv Board of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERAC). He has advanced degrees in Philosophy and Peace, Conflict, and Development Studies, earning his PhD with honours from Universitat Jaume I, Castelló de la Plana – UNESCO Chair of Philosophy. His research focuses on culture, ethics, and politics as tools for social change and has included appointments at institutions such as the University of Nottingham and Central European University. From 2019 to 2023, he was a Member of Spain's Congress of Deputies, and from 2023 to 2024, a Senior Policy Advisor in the European Parliament, where he influenced fundamental rights policies. Currently, he is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Heidelberg University and an Associate Professor at Universitat Jaume I, mentoring future leaders in peace building and development.

## Carmen Cañete Quesada

ccaneteq@fau.edu

Professor of Hispanic Studies at Florida Atlantic University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1692-0023>

*Cañete Quesada* is a Professor of Hispanic Studies at Florida Atlantic University, where she has taught for fifteen years. She holds a master's from the University of Florida and a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. Her research interests include aspects of race, exile, and (post)coloniality in the Hispanic Caribbean and Spain since the Spanish-American War (1895–98). As a specialist in Caribbean studies, she received a 2013–2014 Fulbright Scholar Award to teach and conduct research in the Dominican Republic. Her essay “Salaria Kea and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): Memoirs of A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain” (Routledge 2019) was sponsored by the Schomburg Center Scholars-in-Residence Program. She was funded by the American Philosophical Society's Franklin Research Grant to study the historical memory of Spanish Gypsies. Dr. Cañete Quesada is the director of the Wilkes Honors College Summer Abroad Program (SAP) in Universidad Complutense de Madrid, where she teaches an interdisciplinary course entitled: The Spanish Civil War in Retrospect: Loss, Memory and the Past.

This interview features insights from Ismael Cortés, a scholar who spoke during the Florida Atlantic University (FAU) Summer Abroad Program in Spain, which Carmen Cañete has directed for a decade. In Madrid on 7 July 2022, Cortés delivered a lecture on the portrayal of criminalised Spanish Roma (*Gitanos*) in the “New Spanish Cinema” of the 1960s, focusing on Mario Camus’ *Con el viento solano* (1965).<sup>[1]</sup> The talk sparked discussions on ethnicity, identity, and marginalisation, and the original Spanish version of this exchange was published in *O Tchatchipen*, a journal from the Romani Institute for Social and Cultural Affairs (IRASC). IRASC, founded by Romani activist Juan de Dios Ramírez Heredia,<sup>[2]</sup> has long worked for Romani rights in Spain. Cortés returned on 22 July 2024, to discuss the Gitano subaltern figure in *Cine Quinqui*<sup>[3]</sup> and further addressed the CEU Romani Studies Program, EU elections, and his ongoing projects, culminating in this bilingual interview.

## Cañete

What do Granada and Andalusia mean to you? You also studied in Castelló and later abroad – why not in southern Spain? Was it due to a lack of opportunities, or did you feel the need to leave? Perhaps the influence of your paternal family played a role in your desire to travel?

## Cortés

Granada holds a special place in my heart, as it’s where my family roots lie. It’s a true cultural melting pot, with the rich legacy of Al-Andalus and the vibrant Romani communities in Sacromonte and Albaicín, places where I have many cherished friends. Granada is my Lorquian paradise, where I was fortunate to live for twenty-five years. So why did I leave? Driven by intellectual curiosity, I was drawn to the application of philosophy to social and political conflicts. A master’s at Jaume I University, with its UNESCO Chair on Philosophy, Peace, and Conflicts in the Contemporary World, caught my eye.

## Cañete

Paradoxically, despite a deep-rooted presence in Andalusia, the Romani community’s culture and history are often overshadowed by simplistic representations.

## Cortés

Certainly, in Andalusia the images of Romani men and women are often reduced to a folkloric stereotype, stripping away the resilient, resistant, and dynamic aspects of Romani identity. Ironically, despite the

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1 Cortés’ “Con el viento solano: The Figure of the Criminal ‘Gitano’ in the New Spanish Cinema,” was part of the research project Chachipen, “Paving the Way for Truth and Reconciliation Process to Address Antigypsyism in Europe: Remembrance, Recognition, Justice and Trust-Building”. Cortés’ essay was published in Radmila Mladenova et al., eds., *Antigypsyism and Film / Antiziganismus und Film*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2020, pp. 195–202. <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.650>.

2 Cañete Quesada, “Juan de Dios Ramírez Heredia: Una vida de trabajo social para el pueblo gitano en España.” *O Tchatchipen* 111, 2020, pp. 43–59.

3 “Cortés, Gitanos and Subalternity in Cine Quinqui: The (Un)Archived Spanish Transition.” In Radmila Mladenova, ed., *Counterstrategies to the Antigypsy Gaze*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2024, pp. 317–337. <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1039.c19482>.

Romani community being more prominent in Andalusia than anywhere else in Europe or the world, their rich history and identity remain largely unknown. Every town and village in Andalusia, no matter how small, usually has a significant Romani presence. It's time for Andalusia to recognise and appreciate the true essence of Romani identity beyond the stereotypes.

## Cañete

Indeed, beyond exoticism. You mentioned the master's you completed, and I'd like to know how your Romani background influenced you in pursuing a path that differs from that of other Spaniards with similar aspirations. What impact do you think your ethnicity has had on your journey, and what were the biggest obstacles you had to overcome?

## Cortés

I approach my political trajectory with the clear understanding that Roma should be seen as equal citizens, rather than as victims. I believe that we should be proactive in shaping our own destiny, and to do that it is important to understand the underlying power dynamics and how they affect our lives. Furthermore, for me, being Roma has been intellectually enriching because no other identity is as multifaceted. We are a diaspora living across Europe, from Portugal to Turkey, through Scandinavia, Russia, and the Balkans. In these times of profound shifts in the humanities, where subjectivity is paramount, this has been a powerful catalyst for reflection. It has allowed me to understand the diverse situations of other Roma and study a collective identity from various angles. Our historical Romani memory is a rich mosaic of diverse socio-political contexts and legacies. It forms a peripheral narrative that, in its own way, reconstructs a European history yet to be fully written.

## Cañete

What conditions are necessary for the emergence of a Romani elite?

## Cortés

This is a project that was outlined by A. Mirga and N. Gheorghe in their 1997 policy paper, *The Roma in the Twenty-first Century*, emphasising the importance of building a political elite capable of navigating both internal community dynamics and external societal structures. To me, the development of a robust Romani elite necessitates access to high-quality education, as well as fair mechanisms for political representation, economic opportunities, and media and cultural visibility. Effective support systems should encompass mentorship, institutional-driven initiatives, and public policies to dismantle systemic obstacles. The project of building a Romani elite represents a significant challenge in terms of shifting social and power dynamics. While efforts to cultivate this elite have emerged over the past 30 years, they have yet to match the influence of national elites in countries such as Spain, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, or the United States. Despite advancements, Romani professionals frequently encounter exclusion from key power structures, particularly within politics, media, and academia, which limits their impact and visibility.

## Cañete

Tell me, the first time I reached out to you, we had to delay the conversation because your voice was hoarse after speaking in Congress. What policies were you proposing or defending?

## Cortés

Back in May 2022, the Penal Code had just been amended to include antigypsyism as a specific hate crime category in Article 510 and an aggravating factor in Article 22.4. Changing the penal code in Spain is a complex process, requiring an overwhelming majority – 3 out of 5 votes in the Congress of Deputies. This significant change came after years of diligent work, involving extensive dialogue and working sessions with both civil society and political parties to explain what antigypsyism is all about, and why it needs combatting with such a powerful legal tool.

## Cañete

Why do this through Podemos/En Comú Podem rather than another political party?

## Cortés

Because Podemos/En Comú Podem began as a movement rather than a traditional political party, and it brought a fresh openness to the political arena. This lack of an initial rigid plan allowed for the emergence of Romani issues in political discussions, alongside other previously excluded topics. Today, in Spain many Roma discuss matters they wouldn't have broached five years ago. Conversations now include full political participation, encompassing both the right of Romani communities to elect their representatives and the right of every Roma to be elected democratically. Other significant achievements include the right to the historical memory of the Romani people, now part of the new national law on democratic memory, and the inclusion of Romani history in the compulsory school curriculum, as mandated by the new national education law. These democratic milestones, once unthinkable, have now become reality.

## Cañete

In the United States, census data allows us to track the percentage of African-Americans and other minorities who vote Republican or Democrat. But how do we know which party the majority of *Gitanos* in our country support? For reference, I have an estimated figure for the Romani population in Spain: around seven hundred and fifty thousand. Is that roughly accurate?

## Cortés

The 750,000 figure dates back to the late 1970s and is still incorrectly referenced by some. However, in 2000, the Council of Europe estimated the Romani population in Spain to be around one and a half million. Despite this, we still lack a legal framework for a comprehensive census. The legacy of the Holocaust and ongoing pogroms across Europe mean proposing a rigorous ethnic census is a highly contentious issue, even today.

## Cañete

Why not implement a system similar to that of the United States, allowing voters during elections or on applications to identify their ethnic group or race?

## Cortés

The straightforward answer is that the United States didn't experience the Holocaust. If it had, the census mechanism would likely be much more carefully designed and applied today. However, the

United States still faces racial issues linked to visibly diverse groups, driven by a system of racialization based on skin colour. Europe's complexity stems from its history of blatant discrimination against seemingly invisible identities: Jews, Sinti, Roma, religious minorities, homosexuals, and more. This makes it particularly challenging to conduct a census of these vulnerable and victimised groups, which, despite their invisibility, have been once again politically targeted and brutally repressed by both paramilitary groups and state forces.

## Cañete

It's complex, as we are dealing with subjectivities and each individual's perception of their own identity. Someone who is ethnically Roma may not wish to identify as such, and vice versa. I think of Helios Gómez, whose Romani origins have never been confirmed, yet he identified himself as a *Gitano*. Still, having demographic data on minorities would facilitate integration and equity policies for the most disadvantaged. For example, if two percent of Spaniards are of Romani ethnicity and the majority are underserved in education, a census could help identify the groups and regions needing focused support.

## Cortés

In cities like Madrid, Barcelona, and Sevilla, public administrations are well aware of the high concentration of Romani students in ethnically segregated areas. Despite this, there's a glaring lack of economic investment to ensure Romani children and teenagers have equal opportunities. Existing data on the Romani population could be a powerful tool for crafting and assessing positive public policies. However, the real issue isn't the absence of data but the lack of political will to invest in Romani communities across various policy fields, from education to housing.

## Cañete

Returning to the topic of classification and identification, there are Romani Spaniards who could physically pass for *gadje* ("payos"), or non-Gypsies, and there are *gadje* who possess Romani features. What I mean is that we are all mixed. Beyond the ethnic aspect, it's a matter of seeking and embracing one's own identity. Now that we're discussing identities, what is your opinion on the influence of the Philadelphia Church within the Romani community?

## Cortés

Beyond my perspective, this is a reality experienced by around 80 percent of the Romani community in Spain, including Catalonia. Evangelism, a dominant Protestant movement within the Romani community, is woven into the daily lives of millions of Roma in Spain and across Europe. From waking up to going to sleep, their days are framed by prayers to God.

## Cañete

Perhaps this trend is linked to breaking the hegemony of Catholicism as an institution of power, along with the sense of independence that *Gitanos* gain by being part of a religious community where they are essentially the protagonists. This involvement is not only through dancing and singing but also because the majority of pastors in these churches are Romani as well. Am I correct in this?

## Cortés

Exploring the practices within the Roma Evangelist movement reveals a notable area of study still ongoing. Religion serves as a source of spiritual support. In Madrid's neighbourhoods – Orcasitas, Pan Bendito, Vallecas, Carabanchel – the Romani community demonstrates significant engagement in religious activities. They often express the belief that “God restores what society strips away.” For many, faith is both a personal and communal experience that strengthens their cultural identity and provides a foundation for future generations. The Roma Evangelist movement illustrates the role of faith in providing hope and dignity to the community. The religious practices of the Roma Evangelists incorporate traditions and customs that reflect their cultural heritage. Music and dance are integral to their worship, creating an atmosphere of joy and celebration that may help alleviate daily hardships. The sense of belonging and identity within the faith community supports many Romani individuals and families as they navigate harsh social and economic problems.

## Cañete

How is it possible to reconcile traditional Roma values – which can be quite conservative regarding gender and sexual issues – with a feminist, radical leftist political platform like that of Podemos/En Comú Podem?

## Cortés

Being Roma doesn't mean being conservative. My personal and political beliefs centre on tolerance and celebrating diversity. Everyone should live by their own feelings and thoughts. While individuals and communities are interconnected, no one, including myself, needs to agree with every and any group opinion. With a secular view on religion, I strongly believe that tolerance is key to living in harmony. I hold deep respect for religious freedom, which I view as a cornerstone of democracy. Throughout my scholarly career, I've observed that religion plays a vital role in shaping personal and community identities. Therefore, tolerance is the only viable path forward. At the same time, I stand against any form of religious persecution or harassment towards those who, exercising their rights as free citizens, dissent from established dogmas. In essence, a society thrives on respecting individual beliefs while fostering a culture of mutual understanding and acceptance.

## Cañete

As a graduate of the CEU Romani Studies Program, I wonder if you might share your thoughts on how this program could contribute to fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for Romani communities.

## Cortés

Critical Romani Studies delve deep into the social, political, and cultural composition of Romani communities. Through the powerful lens of critical theory, as an emergent epistemic community, we aim to dismantle harmful stereotypes and nurture a profound understanding of Romani identity. By scrutinising policies and intellectual discourses, Critical Romani Studies are pivotal in tackling systemic inequalities. The main goal is to amplify Romani voices and ensure our presence is felt in both academic circles and the wider public sphere.

## Cañete

What is your assessment of the last EU elections in June 2024?

## Cortés

This unprecedented silencing of a European minority strikes at the heart of European democracy. Since the EU's 2004 enlargement, this is the first time that an estimated six million Roma across the EU are left without a direct voice in the European Parliament. The Roma, Europe's most scapegoated minority, are now more vulnerable than ever. With no parliamentary representation, there's no one to counteract the rising tide of hate speech and defend our rights.

Without Romani voices, critical issues of equality and non-discrimination are at risk of being sidelined in the European Parliament. The largest minority in Europe is being systematically shut out of the democratic process. By excluding Romani voices, the new European Parliament sends a dangerous signal: that diversity is dispensable, and that it's possible and legitimate to shape a space that ostracises Romani people. This undermines the EU's motto of "United in Diversity" and threatens the very foundation of an inclusive Europe.

Now more than ever, we must ensure that the doors of EU democracy remain open for all. We need allies to advocate for Romani representation in the European Parliament and to uphold the true spirit of a united and diverse Europe. Together, we can ensure that every voice is heard, and that the European Parliament truly reflects the diverse fabric of our society. Advocate for inclusion. Stand for unity. Ensure democracy for all.

## Cañete

What position do you hold now, and what projects are you currently working on?

## Cortés

As a professional advocate and academic dedicated to the Romani cause, I recognise two major challenges facing Romani communities across Europe: the push for democratic and economic inclusion, and the reclamation of our own narratives within intellectual and cultural spaces. These challenges are deeply intertwined, each reinforcing the other in ways that can break or perpetuate the cycles of exclusion.

On the democratic front, Romani communities are routinely sidelined in political processes that directly shape their futures. Local and national policies often exclude Romani voices from critical decisions on housing, education, and labour market, deepening ethnic marginalisation. Without genuine representation, Romani communities remain vulnerable to policies that either ignore their specific needs or, worse, reinforce systemic antigypsyism. Through my work with networks such as the OSCE-ODIHR, the Council of Europe, and various grassroots organisations, I see the urgency of building pathways for authentic Romani participation in decision-making. Supporting the development of Romani leadership within local councils, national parliaments, and European institutions is essential if Romani voices are to be heard and their needs addressed.

Romani communities are tasked with reclaiming their own narratives and addressing longstanding stereotypes on an intellectual level. Historically, the story of the Roma has often been narrated by outsiders, frequently in ways that are biased, distorted, or reductive, failing to represent the diversity, resilience, and vibrancy of Romani life. Academic collaboration can significantly contribute to this effort. Initiatives such as the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAN), the Central European University's Critical Romani Studies program, and Heidelberg University's Centre for the Study of Antigypsyism are essential in creating platforms for Romani activists, researchers, and scholars. These initiatives enable individuals from within the Romani community to share their experiences and perspectives, thereby providing a more comprehensive and accurate representation of Romani life and counteracting harmful stereotypes.

By working across these channels, from policy to academia, we can begin to dismantle the cycles of exclusion and move toward a future where Romani rights and voices are integral to European democratic values.

I'm particularly motivated by the new possibilities that emerge when we create synergies among diverse actors, from academic institutions to advocacy organisations like the Roma Foundation for Europe. This approach isn't just about pushing for policy changes; it's about empowering Roma communities with resources and networks that let us participate on our own terms. Working across these channels, I envision a future where Romani rights aren't just an afterthought, but a central tenet of European societies.

## Cañete

Thank you for this comprehensive and honest interview. Your insights shed light on the critical challenges and transformative opportunities facing Romani communities across Europe. Your dedication to amplifying Romani voices in academic, cultural, and political spaces is both inspiring and essential. It is clear that through collective effort, inclusive policies, and the reclamation of Romani narratives, there is hope for true democratic inclusion and the dismantling of stereotypes. I appreciate the depth of your reflections and your commitment to fostering real change. It was a privilege to discuss these important issues with you, and I look forward to seeing your impactful work continue.