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The Roma between the Scylla of marginalization and the Charybdis of exotization

The question of social diversity in Central and Eastern Europe and old and new factors that influence it is particularly interesting as regards the Roma community. It would be possible to describe the specific policies implemented by individual countries, compare and analyze these policies, or discuss the technical and methodological aspects of the ways Roma research should be carried out. However, we choose instead to present a number of issues that are worth considering and ensue from the social and ideological paradigm in which the Roma have been perceived during the past 10-15 years in Central and Eastern Europe.

Of course, the space available to us does not allow for an in-depth discussion of each individual issue in great detail; nevertheless, we will try to outline what we see as the most important. Certainly, all countries in Central and Eastern Europe and their Roma communities are unique and have specific characteristics, but there are enough common features and models (both from the point of view of scientific knowledge and government policies) for us to examine the problem in a general and generalizing way.

The Roma as a marginal community

The Roma are undoubtedly an important section of the population of Central and Eastern Europe (even when compared to other minorities in the individual countries or by their number, uniqueness and social status). Hardly anyone could doubt that the social problems of the Roma have deepened and intensified at the time of social and economic transformation that we live in. All over the region, old and well-known factors that were at play in the past have been intensified by major new factors of varying nature, some of which are "external" (i.e. resulting from various structures external to the region and its countries including international institutions, NGOs, donor organisations, etc.). In the past ten years, the "Roma issue" has become very

fashionable as regards implementation of various projects (both at the level of government policies, NGOs or scientific research). All three areas are mutually interrelated and overlap, which is understandable considering the magnitude of influence of identical social and ideological paradigms in all three areas.

The issue of social differences and diversity as regards the Roma and their problems (and their position in the society) has fast been translated into the concept of social inequality of the Roma community as such. A great number of NGO-managed projects have been implemented to do away with this inequality, later followed by national programs and then also European Union programs. Roma activists from Central and Eastern Europe united in political parties and/or NGOs were not able in the end to control or at least steer the basic tendencies in the development of key concepts and the ensuing projects and programs. This is the reason behind the growing dissatisfaction with results or rather the lack thereof. More and more, Roma activists speak of a “Gypsy industry” that lives off of Roma problems and does not try to solve them, because it would lose its livelihood.

During the second half of the 20th century under socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, there was one principal and identical political line in spite of various differences between the individual countries – effort to integrate the Roma into the society. Such social integration was more or less openly acknowledged by the individual countries to be the first step on the way to ethnic assimilation of the Roma (or, in the parlance of the times, for example in Czechoslovakia, “inhabitants of Gypsy descent”). The fact that many countries carried out and published ethnographic and linguistic studies emphasizing the uniqueness and diversity of the Roma community did not change anything. When analyzing the national Roma programs in the individual, formerly communist countries, one cannot help noticing that they were all essentially identical. Even more striking and more important is the fact that the national Roma programs or strategies or concepts as they are called in some of these countries created in the past few years are also very similar, and that they are also similar to the programs approved and implemented in the communist era. Of course, there is a major difference as regards the ideological reasoning and phraseology, but apart from that, we see specific problems and activities planned to resolve these problems that are to a large extent identical or at least remarkably similar, for example as regards employment, housing, education, etc.

In the new Central and Eastern Europe, recent scientific research for the most part continues to serve the general social and ideological paradigms. In the past 10 to 15 years, dozens or even hundreds of sociological studies have been published (if we take the region as a whole) that focused on the social and economic problems of the Roma. We believe that it is not necessary to detail and interpret the interests of institutions commissioning these studies (World Bank, UNDP, the Open Society Foundations network, individual governments, etc.) that aim at justifying the need for future projects and activities and bring results that are expected, i.e. results that are called for.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, we would like to stress that we are in no way trying to state that there are no major social and economic problems in majority of Roma communities. Such studies often reflect to a certain degree the real and existing problems among Romanies, but there are also studies that are dubious from the methodological point of view (especially as regards selection of respondents, use of official statistics, etc.). However, the key problem lies elsewhere – in the real and present danger that the whole will be confused with its part, i.e. the entire ethnic community will be viewed and identified only with its problematic section and as a result, Romanies will no longer be considered and accepted as a distinct ethnic community with its specific ethnic culture. We would like to quote Ivan Veselý in this respect: “it’s like someone did a research on the bums on Wenceslas Square and based his perception of all Czechs on these people.”

There are many examples of this. One well-known international research focusing on poverty and ethnicity in Central and Eastern Europe conducted under the leadership of representatives of the Hungarian sociological school (both Hungarians and Hungarian re-emigrants from abroad) contains the recurring ideas and conclusions of the school that we have come to know in the 1970s. Romanies are described as a special “underclass” and bearers not of their specific ethnic culture but of the culture of poverty. These conclusions are directly related to a newly formed sociological school in Serbia, which defines Romanies as an “ethno-class”. Similar sociological research has been conducted in other countries of the region including Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Ukraine. It is worth noting that in all cases, results of research more or less follow the controversial and often criticized theory of Western anthropology first proposed by the English anthropologist Judith Okely and developed by her followers. According to this theory, “Gypsies” (a wider group containing

Romanies) are not an ethnic community the ancestors of which migrated from India, but a community whose origin is based on an agglomerate of various marginal sections of the European population (agglomerate of people who were cast out of society during the industrial revolution).

In the end, we have a result that the former communist governments had been trying to achieve through their policies – Romanies are not an ethnic community, but marginalized, poor and ostracized Europeans.

It cannot be said that such social and ideological paradigm is characteristic only for those expert circles that are directly or indirectly connected to the “Gypsy industry.” There are many examples of representatives of Roma organizations who – wittingly or not and perhaps with the best of intentions – essentially serve and comply with the basic postulates of this paradigm. One example of this from last year from Ukraine will suffice. During the debate about the Roma National Program, one Roma activist proposed that Roma women with children should receive the same child support benefits as mothers of handicapped and mentally retarded children. Romanies are therefore no longer perceived as an ethnic community like all others (even with their own specific problems), but fall into totally different categories and subsequently under different social parameters.

People often say that Romanies deny their distinction and do not acknowledge their ethnic affiliation. Considering that the Roma community as a whole is often forced to accept a marginal role in society, it is absolutely understandable that they fear such difference and that there are protests against such approach which may take a severe and dangerous form in the future.

It is naturally impossible to examine all aspects of the given issue in a single paper or propose a solution. But talking about an issue is the first step to resolving it.

The Roma as an exotic community

The second part of our paper will also focus on the Roma community and we will again attempt to formulate questions rather than propose ready answers. No one probably doubts the necessity of policies and strategies of managing social and cultural diversity because they are a part of the foundation of the new and expanding European Union. However, a comparative analysis of national programs covering Romanies that have been recently approved and implemented in Central and Eastern Europe clearly shows that their chief objective and their specific activities do not aim

at preserving diversity, but rather at bridging and removing differences between Romanies and other nationalities in various areas encompassing virtually the entire social life including the legal system, employment, housing, healthcare, education, etc. All such national programs (strategies, concepts, etc.) are approved and implemented with the active support of Roma representatives (the degree of cooperation and success of these programs is a different matter altogether and therefore will not be discussed here).

It is clear that there is somehow discrepancy between preserving diversity (and diversity management) and eliminating it (bridging and eliminating differences). One cannot help noticing that there are serious discrepancy between social integration on one hand and preservation and development of ethnic culture of various communities (in our case, the Roma community) on the other, and that these contradictions constantly come to surface and become apparent in various situations. Below, we include a few examples.

The last major scandal on the European level involved the EU Ambassador to Slovakia Erik van der Linden and his remarks about solving the situation of Romanies in Slovakia. His remarks were publicly condemned, especially by non-Roma human rights organizations, and at the same time embraced by most Roma organizations in Slovakia. This example illustrates the discrepancy we have been discussing.

Another example involves the process of desegregation, which has been running or at least envisaged for some years now in various countries in Central and Eastern Europe (the suitability of the term itself is a different question). As a part of the process, Roma children are taken from – segregated (on territorial or other basis) schools and transferred into “mixed” schools. The idea of desegregation was born among Roma activists and its staunchest opponents are non-Roma people and representatives of international and national institutions and NGOs who usually argue that Roma children will lose their identity and ethnic culture in the mixed schools (in fact, the opponents want the problems to stay because projects implemented in such schools are attractive and lucrative).

In the name of preserving “otherness” from the point of view of diversity and uniqueness of Roma ethnic culture, majority of Roma national programs and many European programs build on the principle of stigmatization, i.e. separation of the Roma community, as well as on the principle of bridging this separation through mediation by “Roma mediators” in various areas of public life such as education,

healthcare, social policy and administration. For the Romanies is assigned the role of “assistants” (teacher assistant, policeman assistant, etc.). We need to emphasize that such an approach is applied exclusively to Romanies and not to other ethnic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. Again, the explanation is usually based on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Roma ethnic culture. According to this approach, the Roma are so specific that the rules that apply to them should be different from the rules that apply to other people. If there are protests against this approach, they come from individual Roma activists in various countries of the region and are unheard.

What are the roots of all these discrepancies? Is it true that the Roma do not understand their interests and need “good white brothers” to decide in their stead about what is good and bad for them as a whole? If we consider this all the way, it is logical that the diversity and ethnic uniqueness of the Roma can be best protected if they will be separated in reservations where non-Roma people will have the opportunity to observe the extraordinary and unique Roma ethnic culture and then go home satisfied and feeling they did everything they could to preserve the Roma culture. We are not exaggerating because we all know similar situations involving other ethnic communities in various places of the world. A similar proposal was put forward in Slovakia (some of us probably remember the failed government policy proposed by ANO, a Slovak political party, which would have been the first step in that direction).

Yet there is one area where all of a sudden, the distinctiveness of the Roma no longer needs to be taken into account, namely cutting-edge gender projects aimed at the Roma (implemented both by governments and NGOs). These projects are extremely diverse and often very impressive, e.g. the public campaign in Macedonia against the Roma custom of the first wedding night. In some cases, Roma gender problems resulted in a Europe-wide scandal. One example is the Roma “children wedding” case in Romania which led many to ask whether Romania is able to become a member of the EU without first dealing with this problem. We need not emphasize that the public opinion in this case was formed above all by non-Roma institutions and organizations, while most Roma organizations stressed the need to preserve ethno-cultural traditions and to approach them in a sensitive way. We are leaving aside the fact that in the specific case of the wedding of king Cioaba’s daughter (that created the above mentioned scandal), it was a clear manipulation because

approximately one month before the scandal erupted, we had visited Florin Cioaba's family and the daughter was certainly not 12 or 14 years old as the mass media would have us believe and we did not qualify the bride-to-be as a "child". It is much more important for us that the case also raised the question whether there can be universal rights outside of a specific community and historical reality that are to be realized in different ways, voluntarily or not. The other question is how to proceed when, as in this specific case, one set of rights contradicts with another set.

The issue of diversity management raises the question whether it is at all possible for us to speak of managing the diversity of the Roma community without taking account of the other side of processes, i.e. the social integration of the Roma, which, however, is impossible without societal modernization. To rephrase the question, is it at all possible for one ethnic community (the Roma in our case) to endure in today's globalized world if they exist only in a form that someone (it is not clear who) designated as traditional, distinctive and typical for them (we will not venture to discuss the fact that all traditions were essentially born as a modernization of things past)? In this sense, the subject of diversity management and preservation of ethnic identity and ethno-cultural traditions of the Roma community is meaningful only when put into a wider context of general social and cultural processes taking place not only on national, but also on global level.

A global problem

We have discussed a global problem and its two sides. In the broadest terms, this global problem can be defined as follows – what are the perspectives of development of the Roma community? We believe that the two greatest dangers that may jeopardize such development lie in the extremes, i.e. in approaching the Roma as a marginal group and in their exotization. And although it may seem absurd at first, these two fundamentally different approaches to the Roma are often mixed together and supplement each other, especially as regards specific policies at different levels.

We see the basic problem in that the current Roma policies in Central and Eastern Europe are characterized by misunderstanding their distinctiveness as an ethnic community. The Roma case is an excellent example of how one nation can exist in two dimensions – as a distinct ethnic community and also as a section of the society as a whole. Whenever the two dimensions come together or one replaces the other, we arrive at what we have been discussing so far – approach to one entire

ethnic community as a marginal group (if we replace the dimension of the community itself) or as a completely exotic group (if we do not consider the dimension of their belonging to the society as a whole). Mixing of the two dimensions is basically the reason for the double approach to the Roma implemented in various policies.

It may seem as a paradox, but we see the future of the Roma as less jeopardized by racism, negative stereotypes or anti-Roma attitudes than by active interventions and constant patronizing by people who like them (or at least say so) and who try “really hard” to help the Roma, enforcing upon them a model of development that they consider best. Such an approach taking the form of social patronizing is – regardless of the original intentions (idealistic or gainful) – essentially damaging to the natural mechanisms of community preservation, transforms the community into a permanent social patient, a client of professional well-wishers and in the end eradicates all hopes for natural development. In spite of the above, we strongly believe that the Roma will successfully pass the Scylla of marginalization (and de-socialization) as well as the Charybdis of exoticization (and social segregation) and will find the right path of their normal development, relying above all on their own strengths and the internal resources of their own community.