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ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND ECONOMIC STRATEGIES OF THE GYPSIES IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE FORMER USSR

Diversity of Gypsy communities

Gypsies followed different migratory routes and settled in the Russian Empire in various historical periods. The region discussed in this article was, in fact, part of one country over a relatively long period of time - at first the Russian Empire, and later the Soviet Union. There is a strong bond between the Gypsies living in Russia and the new independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is due to their common destiny, which spans centuries, and to the internal specifics of the Roma community, which is not homogeneous and is characterized by a complex multi-level group structure. Different and, to some extent, related Gypsy communities live in Russia and the European countries of the former Soviet Union. The division of these groups is determined by their historical destiny, i.e. way of life, time and manner of settlement.[1] Their contemporary territorial distribution is a result of their travelling about within the borders of the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union, a process which is still going on today.

The largest Gypsy community is the *Ruska Roma* (Russian Gypsies), who sometimes call themselves the *Xaladitka Roma*. They are the descendants of the first Gypsies who entered Russian Empire in the 16th to the 17th century, coming from Germany through Poland and Lithuania. They speak closely related dialects of the so-called *Baltic* or *Nordic* group of dialects of *Romanes* (the Gypsy Language). The *Ruska Roma* include numerous, more or less, clearly divided groups, which does, however, not mean that they do not intermarry. These divisions are mainly along the lines of the territories they live in (or, as is more often the case, where they lived in the past). Today,

[1] About internal differentiation of the Gypsies in the Soviet Union see: Cherenkov, “Nekotorye problemy”; Demeter / Bessonov / Kutenkov, *Istoriya*, 78-114.

the territories used as subgroup markers are independent states or are separate regions within the borders of Russia and the new independent states. Subgroup divisions like these are, for instance, the *Polska Roma* (also calling themselves in more recent times the *Litovska* or *Beloruska Roma*), who mainly live in Lithuania and Byelorussia; the *Lotfika* (Latvian) Roma, who mainly live in Latvia and the *Laloritke* (Estonian) *Roma* in Estonia, and the *Vešitka* (i.e. Forest) Roma, living in the Archangelsk region and Karelia; the *Piterska Roma* (living in the Saint-Petersburg region), the *Sibirjaki* (Siberian Roma), and so on. Nowadays the *Ruska Roma* have settled in different countries of the former Soviet Union (mainly in Russia, but also in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; some families live in Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan, too) without, however, losing the close bonds between themselves (including matrimonial contacts). Territorially, they are spread out in the form of small extended family groups over huge territories, including Siberia and the Far East (even Kamchatka).

The next group in terms of size are the so-called Ukrainian Gypsies, who call themselves the *Servi/Servurja*.[2] Linguists define their dialect as a "proto-Vlax" dialect of *Romanes*. They settled in the Levoberezhnaya Ukraine (i.e. on the left bank of the river Dnepr), probably during the 16th to the 17th century, migrating from Wallachia and Moldova. Nowadays, besides living in the Ukraine they also live in Russia (Moscow, southern Russia, and Povolzhie – i.e. along the river Volga) and Kazakhstan. The so-called *Vlaxi* also live in the Ukraine. They came from Wallachia and Moldova (probably in the 17th to the 18th century). At first they lived in the Pravoberezhnaya Ukraine (i.e. on the right bank of the river Dnepr), but now they are settled mainly in southern Russia and the Povolzhie (i.e. territories along the river Volga).

Relatively numerous, too, are the Gypsies, who are representatives of the Balkan dialect groups of *Romanes.* They migrated from the Balkan Peninsula during different periods in history. Examples of these Gypsies are the *Kırımıtika/Kırımlitka Roma* (also called the *Krimurja* or *Krimci*).[3] In the past, they lived in the Crimea, and now they have also settled in the Ukraine, southern Russia (the Kuban and North Caucasus regions), Moscow and Povolzhie (along the river Volga). Some of them lived in Transcaucasian republics and Central Asia until recently, but over the last few years they have migrated to Russia and the Ukraine. The *Dajfa/Tajfa* from the Balkans or from Asia Minor**,** at

[2] Barannikov, *Ukrain'ski tsigani...*
[3] Toropov, *Krymskii dialect ...*

some time in the unknown past, also migrated to the Crimea. Nowadays they are the most numerous Gypsy community there, speaking Tatarian. Both groups - the *Kırımıtika/Kırımlitka Roma* and the *Dajfa/Tajfa* - are Moslems by tradition. They are the only two Roma groups with a Muslim faith in the region. Representatives of the Balkan dialect groups of *Romanes* are also the *Ursara* in Moldova and southern Ukraine, who migrated from the Balkan Peninsula in the 18th century. Unlike the two groups, mentioned above, the *Ursara* are traditionally orthodox Christians.

During the so called "Great *Kelderara* Invasion" in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, carriers of the new-Vlax dialects of *Romanes* migrated from the territories of contemporary Romania and settled all over the world. In the former Soviet territories these are the so-called *Kišiniovci*, who mainly live in southern Russia, and in the regions of Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod, and in an isolated subdivision, called *Brizdjaja* (living mainly in Bessarabia, in the south of the Ukraine). Closely related to them are the *Katunarja*, who live in southern Moldova, and the *Čukunarja*, who live in northern Moldova. Probably the last representatives of this wave of migrations to arrive in the Russian Empire from the territories of Austro-Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century were the groups of the *Kelderara* and *Lovara* who, nowadays, have settled in smaller extended family groups in different parts of Russia and the Ukraine.

Romanian-speaking Gypsies (the *Besarabci* i.e. Bessarabians, the *Lingurari* and others) live in Moldova and the south of the Ukraine. They came from the lands of present-day Romania over the centuries, and settled in different parts of Russia.

In the Transcarpathian Ukraine, which was part of Austro-Hungary for a long time (the region became part of the Soviet Union in 1945), live the communities of the *Servika* Roma (speaking Carpathian dialects of *Romanes*) who settled there a long time ago, and the *Ungrika* Roma (the Hungarian Gypsies) who are usually called the *Rumungri*, or simply the *Madjari* (the Hungarians). Most of them speak Hungarian, and prefer to have a Hungarian identity. The group of the *Plaščuni* migrated (it is not exactly clear when) from these regions to the borders of the Russian Empire, too. They are former nomads who now live in southern Russia, and speak probably a dialect of the so-called Carpathian or Central dialectal group of *Romanes*.

Thus far we have only discussed the different internal divisions of the big Roma community. Here it is necessary to mention the Russian Gypsies who belong to other divisions of the Gypsy community.

Several *Sinti* families arrived in Russia from Germany via Poland at the beginning of the 20th century. Their descendants have, to some extent, survived as a separate community.

Relatively small-sized families of the Armenian-speaking Gypsies, the *Boša* (who refer to themselves as *Lomavtik* and originally came from the Transcausian republics),[4] and the Asian Gypsies, the *Karači* (who came from Azerbaijan)[5] live in Russia (mainly in Moscow and Saint Petersburg) today.

Migrations of a very specific community from the Central Asian republics (mainly from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) to the big cities of Russia and the Ukraine (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kiev, Nizhnii Novgorod, and so on) began before the collapse of the Soviet Union. These migrations (temporary or with a tendency to become permanent) have become particularly large over the last few years. The migrant community are the so-called *Ljuli*, (who refer to themselves as *Mug'at*),[6] usually preferring to identify themselves as Tajiks. Scholars usually define them as a Gypsy-like community. Probably they are similar to the Gypsies of Indian origin.

Identity levels of Gypsy communities

As mentioned before, the Gypsy community has a very complex structure, which is not homogeneous and is characterized by a hierarchical group structure on different levels. Their identity emerges on different levels, which can mutually cross and overlap. Depending on the context, one level or another may be predominant.

In contemporary Russia and the new independent states, all Gypsies from the Roma subdivision are aware of belonging to a common community. This community has already partially assimilated the *Sinti*, who, owing to their small numbers, cannot preserve their in-group endogamy. In spite of the high level of inter-marriages with the Roma (mainly from the *Lovara* group), they have not forgotten that they are of *Sinti*

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[4] Papazyan, "Armyanskie bosha …"
[5] Patkanoff, *Tsygany* ...
[5] Nazarov, "Razlichnye gruppy …"

origin. In public life, the Gypsies tend to preserve their common self-appellation *Tsygane* (this is the Russian word, and that is why we chose the English translation, Gypsies, as the most appropriate term of reference), ignoring the term Roma, which is recognized as politically correct in many countries and international organizations.

The surrounding populations perceive all the communities mentioned here simply as Gypsies. According to the Gypsies themselves, however, their larger community excludes the two communities with a decidedly foreign identity, i.e. the Roma from Transcarpathia whom they call the *Madjari* and the Central Asian *Ljuli*. Russian Gypsies do not perceive them as "real Gypsies", and often question their Gypsy origin, which according to them, is perhaps based on an anthropological resemblance only. The reason for this attitude is their non-Romani language, the fact that they identify themselves as Hungarians and Tajiks, and their different way of life. In the last decade, large groups of *Madjari* and *Ljuli* have lived, without being officially registered, in camps in the woods near large Russian and Ukrainian cities (mainly Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and Kiev), earning their living predominantly from begging. The remainder of the Gypsies, however, fail to understand how there can possibly be poor Gypsies and beggars; they do not perceive them as "true Gypsies" and do not want to be associated with them in any way. From a legal point of view, the *Madjari* and *Ljuli* are, indeed, foreign citizens. Their status as illegal residents makes them subject to blackmail and repression by both the local authorities and the police. Gypsy activists, belonging to the international human rights' movement, are therefore inclined to defend their "Roma rights", thus defining them as *Roma* (which in the case of the *Ljuli* is quite ridiculous). This kind of group definition is meant to address foreign donors, whereas the Gypsy community does not really accept them, and avoids any contact with them on a daily basis.

The *Dajfa*/*Tajfa* Gypsies from the Crimea also constitute a very specific case. In spite of their long historical presence in the Crimea, they are almost unknown to other Gypsies in the region. The *Krimurja*, who up until now have been roaming the Crimean peninsula, do not consider them to be Gypsies, because of their centuries' old settled way of life and Tatarian mother-tongue.

Group identity is composed of different subgroup or extended family identities. Sometimes the subgroup or extended family identity may be the most important one and may replace the former group identity. An ongoing process of fission and fusion is to be observed among Gypsy groups. So, for example, a subgroup of the *Kelderara* Gypsies, composed of *Mihaešti* and *Stanesku* extended families, has developed a distinct identity

as the *Kitaicka Rrom* (Chinese Gypsies) or the *Šanxajci*[7] because of its temporary isolation in China. The reverse process of fusion of distinct units can be observed, for example, among separate nomadic communities of the *Katunarja*, who nowadays, in Bessarabia, have became the *Kišiniovci*[8] community, or similarly, among separate groups of the *Čengene* or *Urumčel* (Tatarian-speaking Gypsies)**,** who "melted" - in the region they were deported to - into one single larger community of the *Dajfa*/*Tajfa*. An integral part of the Gypsy identity is the notion of the "true Gypsy" such as "*Rrom Cıganjak*" (*Romanes* "the Rom Gypsies", in the sense of true Gypsies), "*le Rrom le čače*" (*Romanes* "the true Gypsies") or "*Šuže Rrom*" (*Romanes* "the clean, in the sense of true Gypsies"). Only one's own group is considered to be the true one.

The notion of nomadism is also important for group self-awareness and for the general attitude towards other groups. The *Ruska Roma*, *Kelderara*, *Lovara*, *Kišiniovci* and *Krimci* in spite of their way of life consider themselves to be nomads and describe themselves using such words as: "katunarja" (in *Romanes*) or "tabornye" (in Russian). The *Servi* are considered to be a borderline case. Some of them are considered to be nomads "iz pod kolesa" (from Russian: "from under the wheel"), and some are viewed as a settled community "syr gadže" (from *Romanes:* "like non-Gypsies"). Similarly, the *Ursari* are viewed as a half-nomadic, half-settled group. The *Dajfa/Tajfa* and the *Ljuli*, *Madjari* are classified as settled, without taking into account the recently acquired mobile lifestyle of the last two groups.

Inter-group contacts

Group identity (*Ruska Roma*, *Kelderara*, *Lovara*, *Krimci*, etc.), together with the observation of intra-group endogamy comprise the most important components of Gypsy identity. Neither do the new state borders pose an obstacle to maintaining relationships between the members of one and the same group, who now live in different states, nor do religious differences (most of the *Ruska Roma* are Orthodox, but some of their subdivisions, living in the Baltic states are traditionally Catholics or Lutherans). The formation of some endogamous subgroups as internal subdivisions of one common group is rather practical, forced mainly by their territorial distribution and the great distances between them.

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[7] Marušiaková / Popov, "Dve skupiny …"
[8] Ibid.

There are some interesting exceptions to these rules in Moscow and, to a lesser extent, in other big cities (e.g. Kiev, Saint Petersburg) all over the former Soviet territories where there is a higher concentration of Gypsies from different groups. Marriages between the members of different Gypsy groups are more common here. This tendency is most obvious in Moscow where professional musicians come from different Gypsy groups. However, this is not a leading tendency in present-day Russia and the new independent states but rather a deviation from the established norms. Moreover, it does not lead to a change in group identity; the children of such intermarriages, influenced by different factors, choose to be members of one or the other parent group.

Gypsies from different groups often have no contact with each other, which is not surprising considering the size of the former Soviet Union. Even if they live in the same place, their life is limited within the borders of their own group, and their interrelations are restricted to a minimum. The matrimonial market of each group is, in practice, a restricted territory (of course, there are exceptions to all rules). When the community has a problem to solve (usually family or "business" problems), they resort to the traditional forms of internal group self-government - mainly the so-called "Gypsy court" ("sendo/sjondo/syndo" among the *Ruska Roma* and *Servi*, "kris" among the *Kelderara* and *Lovara*, "žudikate" among the *Kišiniovci*, and "davija" among the *Krimci*).

Although Gypsies from different groups have a strong desire to avoid conflicts and competition in their economic aims, in reality this is hard to achieve. The Gypsy lifestyle in the big cities and their high concentration in particular regions inevitably leads to such dubious contacts and sometimes also to economic conflicts between Gypsies from different groups. In this case, the so-called "occasional Gypsy court" (the most commonly used term for this is "sendo", or "syndo") is summoned to solve an argument (usually for economic reasons) among the representatives of different Gypsy groups. This mechanism has proven its efficacy over a long period of time and the conflicts between the individual groups are usually rare, and are mainly due to extraordinary circumstances.

There is no strict internal hierarchy among the groups, each one believing that they are better than the others as a matter of principle. They do not seek contact with the other groups and their mutual influence is limited. Maybe the only exception is folklore and folklore-related professional art. The *Ruska Roma* is the dominating community in this realm. The reasons for this are, firstly, the historical traditions of their music, songs and dances and their high-ranking position in Russian culture and, secondly, the old

socialist influence of the media and the arts (theatre "Romen", numerous films on Gypsy topics). Nowadays, for all Gypsy groups, the most prestigious are the musical patterns of the *Ruska Roma*. Their own traditions are half-forgotten and confined to the functional realm in a narrow family community, especially among members of the older generation.

Civic identity of the Gypsies – the last Soviet people

However, the Gypsies in Russia and in the new independent states, are not entirely a closed community in themselves. They have lived for centuries, more or less fully integrated, at first in Russian, and later in Soviet society. By virtue of their historical destiny they have a certain degree of national civil identity, at first Russian and later Soviet. During socialism this new type of identity was described as the self-consciousness of the "Soviet people". Even though it was considered somewhat artificial in times of socialism, it still left its mark on the Gypsies in the former Soviet Union. As the Gypsies had no historical heritage that could restrict and limit the formation of a new Soviet identity, the Soviet influence is, to a certain extent, stronger among them than among other nationalities. Today the Gypsies in Russia and the new independent states often joke among themselves that they are "the last Soviet people" (just as after the collapse of former Yugoslavia, the Gypsies there often defined themselves as the "last Yugoslavians".)

The civic identity of the Gypsies in the former Soviet Union has been subject to some gradual changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new independent states. Within Russia itself, their "Soviet identity" is being transformed rather quickly into a new Russian identity, while outside the Russian borders this transition is much slower. The emergence of a new citizen identity in the respective independent states, of which the Gypsies are now citizens, is - in reality - a very slow process. Some tendencies of this nature are to be seen in the Baltic republics and the Ukraine, particularly among one section of the *Servi* (especially those, who have lost their Gypsy language and whose mother-tongue is Ukrainian), but this is of little significance.

A specific national identity can be observed among the *Dajfa/Tajfa*. During the Second World War they first shared the same fate as other Gypsies as the Nazis attempted to annihilate them. Later they were deported, together with their Tatarian neighbours, to Central Asian territories of the Soviet Union (mostly Uzbekistan). After

1989, along with the Tatars, they started to return to the Crimea, identifying themselves as an integral part of the Tatar nation, as they were of "čengene" origin.

The last few years have seen the emergence of a new factor influencing the changes which the Gypsy identity has undergone world-wide. This is the development of the modern Roma international movement and the emergence of the idea of the Roma being a nation without a state. The concept of such a nation (suggested and, to a great extent, imposed by factors outside the Gypsy community) has a slight influence on a small part of the European Gypsy community. In Russia and the new independent states its influence on the Gypsies is even weaker. Even the few activists belonging to the international Roma movement from the former Soviet states do not take this concept seriously, let alone the large Gypsy population in these countries, who are not even aware of its existence (or do not feel a need for it).

As we can see from this rather brief overview, the processes involved in the development of the identity (or rather identities) of the Gypsies in Russia and the new independent states are not over yet. The dynamics of these processes, as a whole, are rather weak and they remain mostly confined to the historical dimension and level. Any attempt to predict an acceleration of the Gypsies' development at this stage would be too risky and largely depends on the future development of the former Soviet Union in general and, in particular, on their own economic position.

Economic strategies of the Gypsies

Already in the period immediately after entering the territories of the Russian Empire, over the centuries and now after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of modern Russia and the new independent states, the Gypsies were quickly able to find their own place in society and their own economic niche. This place is not static; on the contrary it is quite dynamic and is rapidly changing. The main factors, influencing the changing social position of the Gypsies and their main economic strategies are, first and foremost, connected to the complete and often fundamental changes affecting the social and economic development of the macro-society in which the Gypsies live.

We do not need to review in detail the role of the Gypsies in the life of the Russian Empire.[9] The 20th century was extremely turbulent and was characterized by significant social and economic changes, which obviously affected the Gypsies.

[9] Demeter / Bessonov / Kutenkov, *Istoriya*, 184-196.

On the eve of the October Revolution the Gypsies already played a specific role in the life of Russian society. The most numerous Gypsy group were the *Ruska Roma*, who mainly lived in the central and northern regions of the European part of the Empire. Some of them had even reached the Ural, Siberia and the Far East. They were mostly nomads or semi-nomads. They either owned houses or rented village homes in the winter, and - in the warmer seasons - travelled all over very specific and vast regions. Some of them went south to the Ukraine and southern Russia. The main occupation of the *Ruska Roma* was trade (mainly horses), and that is why they travelled to village and town markets.

Smaller subgroups of the *Ruska Roma* were, more or less, permanently settled. Some combined agriculture with their previous occupations, as was the case in the Smolensk region. Even more *Ruska Roma* were settled in cities, either as (registered) tradesmen who had modified their previous occupations, or - predominantly - as professional musicians. A Gypsy musical elite even existed, serving the Russian aristocracy, mainly in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Inter-marriages occasionally took place between Gypsy girls and wealthy Russian merchants and aristocrats. Some Gypsies had already gained relatively high financial and social positions (they had big houses, servants, their children studied in lycees, and so on).[10]

The situation was quite different in the Ukraine and southern Russia. While in the north the main occupation of the Gypsies was trade, in the south it was small-scale craftsmen services (mainly blacksmiths on-the-go) and hired seasonal agricultural labour. The main occupation of women in all Gypsy groups in the Russian Empire, both in the north and in the south, was fortune-telling and performing magic. However, this could only bring in some extra income, but did not suffice to feed a whole family.

Some of the *Servi* were already, more or less, settled in the Ukraine (and in some Russian governias [provinces] on the border to the Ukraine). This also applied to most of the *Ursara* in Moldova. They were sedentary blacksmiths who only travelled through relatively small regions to sell their merchandise. The situation of the *Krimci* was similar. They were nomads, rendering small-scale blacksmith services in the relatively small region of the Crimea, whose borders they rarely ventured over.

Many different Gypsy groups living in the vast territories of the Ukraine and southern Russia were nomads and itinerant blacksmiths. This was mainly typical of the

[10] Rom-Lebedev, *Ot tsyganskogo khora*, 15; Demeter-Charskaya, *Sud'ba tsyganky*, 11.

Vlaxi, to a certain extent of the *Plaščuni*, and to a lesser extent, of the *Kišiniovci* and other related groups, who spoke a new-Vlax dialect of Romanes.

The *Kelderara* and *Lovara* arrived from the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century and quickly joined the Gypsies already present in Russia. The *Kelderara* were mostly coppersmiths, while the main occupation of the *Lovara* was horse-trading. Horse-trading was an economic niche already occupied by the *Ruska Roma*. This was why the *Lovara* headed for the big cities of the Empire.

The Soviet reality – towards sedentarisation

The October Revolution and the Soviet period brought about major social and historical changes in the lives of the Gypsies. The social upheaval had an immediate impact on Gypsy life - on their economic strategies and on their place in the structure of the new social order. The state policy towards Gypsies in the former Soviet Union will not be discussed here in detail, as the policy towards Gypsies was superficial, limited in its scope and often merely a delusion of activities. However, the Gypsies were very much influenced by general socio-economic and political developments in the macro-society in which they lived.

The period up until the Second World War was characterized by large-scale Gypsy nomadic travel within the Soviet Union. Although, in theory, the Gypsies did indeed have to change their way of life and their main occupations in accordance with the "new Soviet system", the changes in this historical period were practically insignificant. The "Gypsy musical aristocracy" which existed in Moscow and other big cities before the October Revolution, quickly reclaimed their former positions under a new guise. The state-founded theatre "Romen", as well as other professional Gypsy music and dance groups, Gypsy music schools, etc., provided employment opportunities.[11] Many Gypsies, living in the countryside, were encouraged in their work and got the opportunity to move to the capital or other big cities. Furthermore, this type of work gave Gypsies, belonging to groups other than the *Ruska Roma,* the chance to enter this professional community. Some Gypsy groups, such as the *Kelderara* and *Lovara* introduced their own musical traditions, which were quite different to those of the *Ruska Roma*. After World War II these economic processes expanded and provided

[11] Rom-Lebedev, *Ot tsyganskogo khora ...*

the Gypsies with the opportunity to "conquer" new territories, such as the Soviet republics in Central Asia by establishing local Gypsy music and dance ensembles there.

The new Soviet government set up Gypsy producers' cooperatives, which only functioned for a short time. Nevertheless they enabled some Gypsies (mainly *Kelderara*) to settle in big cities (especially Moscow). The Gypsy co-operative farms (kolkhoz) were based on the idea of providing permanent settlements for Gypsy nomads. They were few in numbers, about a dozen, and only existed for a short time (until the late 1930s). They included a very small percentage of the Gypsy population (2-3%). The creation of producers' co-operatives and co-operative farms, however, provided the opportunity for a number of nomadic Gypsy groups to change the territories they lived in and gradually start to settle. Before World War II, southern Russia and northern Caucasus, which had been sparsely populated by Gypsies so far, were suddenly populated by the *Krimci*, *Vlaxi*, *Plaščuni*, *Kišiniovci*, and even the *Kelderara* and *Lovara*, coming mainly from the famine-stricken Ukraine where the Gypsies could no longer make a living. Later on the Gypsies settled in the north, mainly in the Povolozhie (along the river Volga). This process continued until the 1960s and 1970s.

The Industrial Revolution and the search for a workforce had a considerable influence on Gypsy nomadic way of life. For example, the first *Krimci* to arrive in Moscow in the 30's, were hired to work on the construction of the Moscow subway and eventually settled there. These processes continued even after the Second World War and included different Gypsy groups and new territories (i.e. Kazakhstan, the Ural, Bashkiria, Siberia).

The years after World War II and the universal post-war economic devastation hampered the economic strategies of the Gypsies. Many Gypsies reverted to a nomadic lifestyle and settled in huge camps in the suburbs of Moscow and other big cities (unlike in the past when the Gypsy nomads were small groups mainly living in the country). These were the prerequisites for the 1956 decree enforcing the mandatory sedentarisation of the Gypsies, called "O priobshchenii k trudu tsygan, zanimayushchikhsya brodyazhnichestvom" [On the incorporation into labour force of Gypsies, occupied with vagabondage].[12]

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[12] Khronologicheskoe sobranie zakonov, ukazov Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta i Postanovlenii Pravitel'stva RSFSR. T. 5, 1954-1956 g.g., Moskva, 1959, 616-617.

The measures for enforcing mandatory sedentarisation of the Gypsies (not only in the Soviet Union, but all over Eastern Europe as well) have only been evaluated in ideological terms up until now. In Eastern Europe they have been interpreted in the spirit of the official ideology as "including the Gypsies in the socialist way of life", while in Western Europe in the spirit of the "Cold War" they were seen as a "violation of Gypsy human rights". In fact, the 1956 decree is an official recognition of the failure of state policy with respect to the Gypsies. The decree made them obey laws and norms, mandatory for Soviet citizens since the 1920's.[13]

From a Gypsy perspective and in view of the new social developments, their old nomadic lifestyle, which was closely connected to a natural rural economy, had exhausted its potential in the new economic reality. The Gypsies felt the need for radically new economic strategies. This was where the active participation of the state made a timely appearance. The state did not initiate anything, it only helped the social and economic development of the Gypsy community to a significant extent. In fact, the 1956 decree did not put an end to the Gypsy nomadic way of life, some Gypsies continued to be nomads well into the 1960's, but they were able to discover and enjoy the benefits of the settled way of life and modify their nomadic traditions accordingly.

The shortage, perestroika and the revival of mobility

There is something amazing and slightly paradoxical about the memories of former Soviet Gypsies. All of them remember the Brezhnev era - a time of economic stagnation -as "the golden era for Gypsies". This perception of history is perfectly logical from the Gypsy point of view.

The key term, explaining the economic, strategic and social status of the Gypsies at the time was "shortage". The state was quite stable, the population had already collected some financial resources, while, in the countryside, there was a total shortage of life's bare necessities. This situation provided the highly mobile Gypsies with a great opportunity to expand both their legal and illegal economic activities. It is by no means a pure coincidence that the expression "zakazat' u tsygan" (Russian "to order from the Gypsies") entered the Russian language at this point. The Soviet Union at that time was

[13] On the reaction of the nomadic Gypsies towards this measure see: Marušiaková / Popov, "Dve skupiny ...,"

like one big market for the Gypsies. They had no rivals in some of the markets for goods and services. They conducted trade over vast territories in practically all kinds of goods - clothes, cosmetics, carpets, household items, dry fish, chewing gum, digital watches, gold, foreign currency, etc. They would buy the goods in one place (often the black market) and sell them in another (in big city markets or in private houses in more remote regions).

Trade was not the only sphere where the Gypsies carried out their traditional occupation in a modified form. They also performed various kinds of labour, both legal and illegal or half-legal. Groups of Gypsies would go all over the country, mainly to the co-operative farms to offer their services as blacksmiths, constructors, builders, repairmen, handymen, etc. They were paid immediately in cash, thus ignoring the strong and complex Soviet financial norms. The co-operative farms would occasionally pay the Gypsies in kind with their agricultural produce. Since this produce was not available in the towns, the Gypsies were able to make a profit from selling it there.

Soviet laws defined all such activities as “economic crimes” and “profiteering”, though they would usually ignore them or not pursue them too strictly, because the Gypsies were satisfying some needs of the community, thus reducing possible social tension.

During this period there was a great migration of Gypsies within the Soviet Union. The capital Moscow appeared to be the centre of gravity for many Gypsies from different (practically all) groups. The existing administrative restrictions, i.e. the restrictions on settling in the so-called 101 kilometre radius, were not a serious obstacle to these migrations, and many Gypsies settled in the towns around this area, thus avoiding these restrictions in the capital itself by different means. Similarly, the Gypsies became concentrated in (and around) other big cities, where there were better conditions for developing different activities – Leningrad (today Saint Petersburg), Kiev, Odessa, Rostov-on-Don, Novorosiisk, Novosibirsk, and the cities along the river Volga.

Under the conditions of economic stagnation during Brezhnev’s government, the Gypsies enjoyed a prestigious social position and, in a way, they were part of the social elite (or at least they were connected to it). Their material situation was significantly better than that of the average citizen. The theatre “Romen” in Moscow was one of the main tourist attractions; Gypsy music, songs and dances were prestigious and extremely

popular. They were made even more so by the media and the cinema. Ordinary Soviet citizens perceived the Gypsies as the old romantic stereotypes of Pushkin's Russia, combined with the legends about their cunningly acquired wealth. The image of the Gypsies was also influenced by rumours of close connections with the Soviet party elite. These rumours occasionally appeared to be true, such as the story of Borya Tsygan [Borya the Gypsy], Brezhnev's daughter's lover, who was involved in the diamond trade.

However, there was an entirely different aspect to Gypsy life in the Soviet state. Although we cannot really speak of a strict government policy for the development of the Gypsy community, the existing conditions favoured equality of Gypsy participation in social life, a high level of education for everyone and the establishment of a civic awareness. This is in stark contrast to Gypsies world-wide. Today in Russia and the new independent states there are hundreds - even thousands of Gypsies - with a relatively good education. Quite a few have respectable professions – they are teachers, doctors, lawyers, members of the military, artists and scholars. Thus, a new "Gypsy elite" is being created, with new values which are very different from the values of the "traditional" Gypsy "elite" as both types continue to coexist.

The Gypsies preserved their position during the time of Gorbachov's perestroika. Some Gypsies tried to legalise their economic activities via the system of the state-supported co-operatives, which were widely advertised as being the first step in the restructuring of the Soviet economy. Central Soviet TV often broadcast reports about the first "legal Soviet millionaire"- the Gypsy Mirča Čerari from Moldova (from the *Čokenarja* group), who created a co-operation for manufacturing and trading in ladies' clothing. Many Gypsies from practically all groups became involved in profitable international trade. They traded in household goods and other items (instruments, cloths, fur-coats, etc.) - first with Poland, and later with Turkey.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new reality

The early 1990's witnessed a major social and economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the independent states. The Gypsies were beginning to feel the burden of change in the rapidly transforming social environment. For a while, the legal status of the Gypsies in the Baltic republics was unclear and they were without citizenship. That is why many were able to emigrate to Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries as political refugees. Almost all Gypsies living in the

independent states of the Transcaucasus and Central Asia chose to return to Russia, and some of them to the Ukraine.

The economic changes in the former Soviet Union had a much more serious influence on the Gypsies than did the political ones. The "profiteering" of the past was officially recognized as legal "commerce". This meant that a huge economic area was no longer available to the Gypsies, who were not competitive in the new environment. There was no longer a shortage of goods and services, and - at the same time - people's financial means were becoming depleted.

The new social and economic environment was hard on the Gypsies who were searching for new economic havens. They were used to a high economic standard and preferred to engage in highly profitable activities, in order to maintain their high standard of living and prestigious and comfortable way of life. Very often this was not only a shady economy; they were also linked to various illegal activities, such as drug dealing. More and more Gypsies became involved in criminal activities, until they were the major soft drug dealers in Russia and the Ukraine. It was less often the case that they tried to join the Mafia and get involved in blackmail for, if they did, they were quickly ousted by the existing powerful Mafia groups.

This crisis did not affect all Russian Gypsies.[14] Many were still able to maintain their former semi-legal trade activities over short and long distances. Some got involved in the construction business and real estate. Many Gypsies, living in the countryside, tried to develop modern agricultural and animal breeding methods. Quite often the traditional craft of fortune-telling would become the main source of family income. Although in a modified form (in the restaurants and not at professional stage) the business of professional musicians was still profitable and many Gypsy musicians were able to find work abroad. Thus, many Gypsies were able to maintain a good standard of living, higher than that of the average citizen. Many Gypsies would hire servants from the surrounding population. However, this standard of living and social position was still lower and could not be compared to that of the new political and economic elite in Russia and the new independent states.

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[14] Some of the Gypsies were still able to maintain their previous high position and profitable activities. Among them was the recently (2003) deceased Dufunya Vishnevskii, who was he first Gypsy film producer, director, author and actor of three Gypsy feature films: "Ya vinovat (part 1)", "Ya vinovat (part 2) " and "Angely greshnoi lyubvi".

As a result of the social and economic changes in Russia and the new independent states over the last few years, the way the Gypsies are perceived in society and their role in society as a whole, has changed very rapidly. Some of the independent states have tried to develop new national ideologies, based on different historical traditions, which hardly included the Gypsies. The social tensions and strong nationalistic ideas also contributed to the change in attitude towards the Gypsies. Negative feelings towards the Gypsies grew. They were mostly based on the image of Gypsies as drug dealers, causing many clashes between Gypsies and the local communities or the police.

An additional factor influencing the image of the Gypsy in Russia and the Ukraine is the situation of the *Madjari* and *Ljuli* and some smaller groups of Romanian-speaking Gypsies from Moldova, who make their living mainly from begging on the streets of big cities. Although other Gypsies do not consider them to be “real Gypsies”, they are still perceived as Gypsies by the rest of the population, i.e. the negative attitude towards them is really a reflection of the negative public image of the whole Gypsy community.

Everything that has been said here shows the blatantly contradictory development of the Gypsy community in the former Soviet Union and their way of life. The Gypsies have a very dynamic social and economic position in these countries, which is still developing. It is hard to predict the direction their future development will take, even in the near future, let alone make long-term predictions. It is only possible to say with certainty that this development will be determined by the processes shaping all of the countries of the former Soviet Union.

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