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**In Search of a Movement:
The Opportunities and Limits of Romani Political Solidarity**

Most of the speakers at this conference have highlighted aspects of the precarious situation in which many of the Roma in today's Europe find themselves in. They have made the point that throughout the European Union (EU), and particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, this population - however diverse and fragmented it may be - is still tied together by the fact that it suffers from the same disadvantages and exclusions. These difficulties are partly created by the intricacies of the economic transition after the fall of communism in the region, but also by the lack of effective government policies to ensure equal economic opportunities for all citizens and prevent widespread discrimination. An important conclusion emerging from these discussions is that not only the Roma themselves have been the victims of this state of affairs; countries as a whole have been hurt since they have missed an incredible opportunity for progress by not fully realizing equal opportunities for all and failing to create better living conditions for a large group of their citizens.

This paper takes a step back from this discussion in order to focus on a related matter, one which is equally important and equally complex but perhaps less prominent in many debates about the Roma: the position and political activities of the Roma themselves, in particular those Roma who are politically active and strive for a better situation for the larger group of Roma. Often they act in the name of that larger group, seek some kind of political

representation from them, or try to stimulate the formation of some form of political solidarity among

this population. These activists do not form a unified or well-coordinated movement. They may be individual Roma who engage in different forms of social or political action, sometimes they are Romani politicians who try to get an electoral mandate from (a section of) the Romani population, but they may also be Romani or non-Romani activists in non-governmental organizations who try to find ways to influence government policies. Sometimes activists engage in transborder cooperation and want to support the Roma as a transnational ethnic group. At other times, activists seek to represent and improve the situation of a particular section of the Romani population in one particular country. In sum, the world of Romani activism is broad and complex. Romani activism not only differs from country to country, but also within countries different types of activism coexist.

Given the constraints of space in this paper my observations about the Romani movement here cannot be anything else than brief, general and theoretical. My aim is not to go into the details of one particular country but rather to start a broad discussion on some of the issues that practically all Romani activists in Europe are faced with. A more detailed analysis of the attempts of the Roma to form a political movement in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia can be found in the book I published in 2006.¹

In what follows I would like to highlight three topics for discussion. First, I identify a tension within the Romani movement between demands for recognition and demands for equality. Second, I discuss some implications of this tension for the development of movement strategies of and for the Roma. Finally, I highlight some implications for outsiders who want to write about the Roma: funding institutions, observers, journalists, and researchers.

Let me start with the tension between demands for recognition and demands for equality.

Since the beginning of the 1990s (in the wake of earlier attempts in the 1960s and 1970s), activists have promoted the term “Roma” as a way to overcome the negative stereotypes associated with the name “Gypsies”. The name Roma could be portrayed as a cultural endonym and could thus serve well as a basis for demands for the recognition of the group as a cultural, ethnic or national minority group. This way of framing the interests of the group was likely to increase the moral leverage in a geographical area (Central and Eastern Europe) where minority rights protection was increasingly seen as a precondition for democratic stability and peace.

¹ Peter Vermeersch, *The Romani Movement: Minority Politics and Ethnic Mobilization in Contemporary Central Europe* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

What happened was that this framing was picked up and given real currency by a large number of international advocacy groups. Human Rights Watch was one of the first international independent actors in the 1990s to publish reports on the situation of the Roma as a minority group. Others, such as Minority Rights Group and Amnesty International, followed. There were also NGOs that started focusing their attention exclusively on the Roma, see for example the European Roma Rights Center. Especially the latter category of NGOs has all attempted to maintain clear links with local organizations of Roma. They have tried to legitimize the claim that they not only speak *for* the Roma but are also closely linked to this group and even, to some extent, represent this population.

The results of this growing international advocacy have been divergent. Measured in terms of international political response, this type of Romani activism can only be called a success. International governmental organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the World Bank, the Council of Europe and the EU have all begun to use the term Roma to refer to this population, they all have introduced special initiatives targeting this group, and they all have pushed countries into recognizing the Roma as an official ethnic or national minority. The OSCE established a special contact point for this group (Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues), something that was not done for any other minority group in Europe. The EU monitored the situation of the Roma as part of its enlargement towards Central Europe (i.e. in framework of its conditionality policy). For the Council of Europe, the Roma were soon defined as the “real” Europeans – a people not belonging to any particular nation-state but to Europe as a whole.

But that is not the full story. This increasing movement activity may have had its success on the international level, it did not create, as one would perhaps have expected, a large mass movement. Neither did it attract overwhelming support from among the target population. Apparently, not everyone was easily persuaded to feel included in the target group as defined by these activists. There is ethnographic evidence that suggests this, but it is also evidenced by the failing attempts of those who have tried to mobilize the Romani population in electoral politics. I will not go into the details of Romani party politics in Europe, but it is clear that in none of the countries with large Romani populations political parties that profiled themselves as Romani parties were able to persuade target audiences to vote for them.

How should we understand this problem? If one assumes, as many activists have clearly done, that the recognition of the Roma as a unified group is an essential step towards the creation of a more unified ethnic protest movement and towards the formation of a society where equal opportunities can be demanded by such a group and, thus, will have a better chance of being

realized, then the Romani movement should rather be interpreted as a failure. If we look at this from a broader theoretical perspective, one could say that Romani activists and advocates have demanded recognition, starting from the assumption that such recognition would more or less automatically create political solidarity among the Roma and remedy problems of marginalization. It did not do so. To some extent it even failed to persuade the masses of Roma to stand up publicly for such demands.

The problem is that demands for recognition are often plagued by ambiguity. We know this ambiguity from the debate on multiculturalism. Multiculturalism makes cultural or ethnic identity into the focus of a political project. A multiculturalist politics often expects that the success of recognition will lead almost automatically to the emancipation of the marginalized and, hence, increased equality of opportunities. But this connection is far from self-evident. In a multicultural framework activists demand recognition in order to protest against those who see marginalized cultural groups as inherently different, but at the same time, by the very act of demanding recognition for themselves as a special group, they reaffirm the difference between themselves and other groups in society. Although the construction of minorityhood is meant to empower, it might just as well constrain the activism of those involved. In the case of the Roma, those who are considered Roma and live on the margins of society did not always want to be cast in the role of a marginal minority. Often they simply wanted to be seen as equal citizens. Demands for recognition, while in itself a strategy that has resonated well with international institutions and donors, did not lead to the equality that many Roma had hoped for.

What are the implications of this tension for those activists who seek to take up the cause and commit themselves to movement strategies for the Roma?

My argument is not that these activists should entirely ignore cultural or ethnic identity. Certain demands for recognition might be useful. But I do believe that it is desirable that more complex movement strategies are pursued. Such strategies would pay attention to the existing patterns of ethnic differentiation and identification, but at the same time demonstrate that such patterns can be changed, that boundaries between groups may shift, and that new solidarity ties may arise in response to certain new common interests.

How should activists do this in practice?

One way may be to try to get the message across that the Roma are a group of people who live in *diverse* situations and have very *different* needs depending on the context within which

they find themselves, and that it is possible to be Roma in many ways. In other words, I believe that it is important that the act of defending the interests of an oppressed identity group such as the Roma is always accompanied by an interrogation of the categorization schemes that are at the basis of the definition of the very identity group one is defending. Of course, this path of action is not easy and requires a good sense of balance and timing. Activists will always have to make sure that the emancipatory potential of their activism is not overshadowed by a discourse of oppressive essentialism.

A slightly different suggestion might be that activists would make a clearer conceptual difference between identity-based and interest-based advocacy. By engaging in an interest-based advocacy (divided along the lines of thematic issues, such as poverty, housing, education, unemployment, environmental concerns, language recognition etc.) it can perhaps be made clear that group boundaries shift depending on the issues concerned and that individuals will experience that they do not always have to be seen as members of only one particular group. Romani activists and their supporters may in fruitful ways build coalitions with other identity groups and thereby avoid the essentialism that is linked to activism that is purely oriented towards the situation of one identity group only.

I would like to end this paper with a short note on the implications of the argument that I have made so far for those who study the Roma or write about them.

Scholars, journalists as well as other observers have to realize that they, too, are contributors to the formation of identity groups, not in the least when they study the case of the Roma. This has been demonstrated in research on the social and political influence of the ideas of classic “Gypsy experts” such as Heinrich Grellman and George Borrow. In the 19th century, the views of these experts – very often rooted in scientific racism – exerted great influence on popular scientific culture, an influence that is even noticeable today.

It is obvious that contemporary scholars and observers who focus on the Roma have to find a position for themselves in this very complex field of identity construction and movement strategies. One way of dealing with it would be to write about the use of labels, to discuss the meaning of the terms “Gypsies” or “Roma” in the concrete social or political context in which these terms occur. These observers could thus disclose the categorization schemes that are at the basis of certain forms of oppression. By doing so they disclose the essentializing rhetoric of those who discriminate on the basis of identity labels such as “Gypsies” or “Roma.”

It may also be done by movement research that devotes special attention to the instances of political action that are *not* identity-based but still help the same people that are usually seen as the target audience of identity politics. In other words, researchers could pay increased

attention to circumstance-based, issue-based, and interest-based collective action. By focusing on the latter processes one may find more opportunities for investigating solidarity ties, alliances and groups of which the boundaries overlap and shift. It is research that focuses on movement action from which the Roma may benefit *alongside* other groups. Investigations along these lines are more likely to avoid portraying the Roma as an unchanging and unchangeable group who are faced with an intractable and unique problem. Such a perspective may show that the interests of groups like the Roma are not necessarily far removed from or incompatible with those of other groups. There is no reason why we should assume that the demands of the Roma are demands that, when granted, will help only the Roma. They may help others, too.

One thing is clear, while it may be the task of activists to formulate interests in such a way that they avoid portraying and reifying identity groups as unchangeable and isolated from other groups in society, it is the role of scholars to highlight and explicate the importance of this task. That is what I have tried to do in this paper.