

# Introduction

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The collapse of communism and the process of state building that ensued in the 1990s have highlighted the existence of significant minorities in many European states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, the growing plight of the biggest minority in the region, the Roma (Gypsies), has been particularly salient. Like no other ethnic label in Central and Eastern Europe today, the name “Roma” brings to mind dramatic images of mass unemployment, poverty, ill health, discrimination, and social exclusion. This is true even in parts of the region that are now generally considered to have successfully transformed themselves after the collapse of communism. In countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, new opportunities and freedoms have emerged, but large parts of the population have lacked or have been denied the means of participating in the advancement. There have been few signs of hope for the Roma. Transition to democracy and the free market even appears to have heightened their plight, or at least made it more visible.

The question that lies at the heart of this book is: How have the Roma themselves responded to this state of affairs? Have there been attempts by Romani activists to redress the grievances of the Roma and make their presence felt on a political level? Have the Roma raised a political voice? In other words, have there been any attempts to establish a Romani movement? And if so, what has determined its successes and failures?

Rather surprisingly, few social scientists and other external observers have highlighted the role of Romani activists or have concentrated attention specifically on issues that concern the Roma as a political movement, such as the role of ethnopolitical organizations; the development of group interests; or the impact of ideas on political strategies and identity formation.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that the predicament of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has gone unnoticed. Rather to the contrary: since the beginning of the 1990s, it has elicited discussion far beyond the borders of the region. International human rights organizations and journalists, for example, have published a torrent of articles and reports documenting the desperate conditions in which many Roma live. At times the Roma even reached international newspaper headlines, like for example in February 2004, when the bleak outskirts of Trebišov, and other towns in Slovakia, suddenly became the scene of Roma rioting and protesting against government measures aimed at reducing long-term unemployment benefits. Many observers have also been disquieted by the general public attitude toward this population and the way some politicians have used them as an exploitable topic to appeal to resentful, xenophobic sentiments in the electorate. The high

levels of discrimination and segregation prompted academic scholars, independent organizations, and international institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to find reliable ways to assess the precarious economic and social situation of this population.

This burgeoning literature is undoubtedly interesting and important, but it largely neglects an equally interesting and important topic: the role of the Roma and their supporters as political actors. This is a topic that for a number of reasons merits increased attention from students of ethnic politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

First of all, the Romani movement represents a remarkable mixture of successes and failures. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a considerable number of Romani activists and organizations have been actively engaged in one or other form of ethnic politics. They have been able to attract the attention of international organizations and have found access to domestic governmental institutions. They also have successfully constructed and disseminated the term “Roma,” which now—as the director of one advocacy group described it—“has come to dominate the official political discourse, at least in Europe, and has acquired the legitimacy of political correctness” (Petrova 2003: 111). At the same time, however, they have manifestly failed to mobilize the Roma into a political mass movement. This is an intriguing puzzle. Why has mass mobilization failed? And what explains the fact that, despite this failure, the issue of Romani treatment has found its way to international and domestic policy agendas?

Secondly, the Romani movement in Central and Eastern Europe represents a form of ethnic mobilization that does not seem to fit the patterns of ethnic mobilization that are considered typical for the region. Unlike many other instances of minority activism in Central and Eastern Europe, Romani activism has never been seen as a threat to the stability and the territorial integrity of an existing state. Few, if any, Romani activists ever demanded territorial autonomy, there have been no irredentist claims, and there have been no instances of large-scale violent conflict about a territory between camps of Roma and other groups. This latter fact presumably explains why the Romani movement has largely fallen outside the scope of most scholars in Central and East European affairs. One does not have to be cynical to realize that violence usually attracts increased attention from the media as well as from scholars. The large body of literature on the Balkans is a case in point. Given the devastating impact of violent conflict on entire populations and the moral confusion that besets observers when they see images of what Susan Sontag has called the “pain of others,” the eagerness to describe and comprehend bloodshed is quite understandable. However, from an academic perspective, the study of nonviolent ethnic relations is itself as important as the study of violent conflict, because it is only by

examining different forms of ethnic politics that we can approach a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. In this way Rogers Brubaker has rightly argued that we should be analytically attuned to “negative” instances of ethnopolitical group formation, because this not only enlarges the domain of relevant cases but “helps to correct for the bias in the literature toward the study of striking instances of high groupness, successful mobilization, or conspicuous violence” (Brubaker 2002: 168). For this reason, there is also much to learn from developments in the study of ethnic relations in Western European countries, where there has been an increasing awareness of the new political assertiveness among immigrant populations and of ethnic relations as a specific field of political contention within the contours of stable, democratic states (Koopmans and Statham 2000).

Another reason for studying the Romani movement is that it allows one to draw attention to the role of political factors in the process of Romani identity formation. This is an important task. Much of the existing literature has cast the Roma exclusively in primordialist terms. The Roma are very often depicted as an immutable, archaic, traditional, arcane, secluded and “unconstructed” ethnic group. They are portrayed as a group that is marked by a set of particular, distinctive, and usually negative characteristics. But defining the Roma in terms of “typical properties” is tantamount to neglecting the contemporary insights of social anthropology and social psychology about the relational nature of ethnicity. And what is worse, it easily perpetuates misleading stereotypical images of them as eternal nomads, criminals, outsiders by choice, or a people with a preference for living in poverty on the margins of society.

My approach starts from the premise that, as any other ethnic identity, Romani identity is the result of a complex process of labeling, categorization, and self-categorization. To study the Romani movement means to study that process of labeling, categorization, and self-categorization in political action. A serious analysis should not simply focus on specific forms of lifestyle, traditions, descent, language usage, and so forth; it should ask why and in what social and political circumstances such phenomena become generally accepted as markers of Romani identity.

Such an approach builds on a tradition in social anthropology that understands ethnicity, not in terms of group characteristics, but as a form of social organization (Barth 1969; Eriksen 2002; Jenkins 1997; Roosens 1998). Like all forms of identity, ethnic identities are not given; they belong to—as Charles Tilly has formulated it—that “potent set of social arrangements in which people construct shared stories about who they are, how they are connected, and what has happened to them” (Tilly 2003: 608). Ethnic groups should not be understood as natural units that have always been there and therefore automatically constitute the

basis for political action; on the contrary, conceptually and empirically, it makes more sense to understand them as the result of social and political processes of categorization.

Although this view may seem obvious enough, it is worthwhile highlighting its importance briefly because it is not the usual perspective in many popular narratives of recent events in Central and Eastern Europe. The popular tropes that are used to describe the ethnic heterogeneity of the region often convey the image of a natural world resembling a mosaic of neatly segmented and ethnically bounded population groups. To give just one example, *National Geographic* once described the Caucasus as a volatile area “because it is dauntingly complex, with 50 ethnic groups and nationalities spread like a crazy quilt across a California-size territory” (Edwards 1996: 126). In this oversimplification, ethnic groups appear as static, natural, quantifiable, quasi-territorial entities. They seem independent of political and social factors and removed from inclusion in that other often oversimplified category, “the state.” *National Geographic* even suggests that these entities are responsible for bringing about certain political and social developments; the Caucasus is volatile, it is contended, *because* there is ethnic heterogeneity. The mere existence of ethnic differentiation is viewed as a cause of political mobilization along ethnic lines; and as a consequence ethnic groups are easily portrayed as the “protagonists” (Brubaker 2002: 164) of mobilization, not as the “products.” Such an approach toward reality is (to say the least) problematic because it precludes large areas of research into the role of political actors—state institutions, ethnic activists, organizations, politicians, and so forth—in articulating particular identities and creating ethnic groups.

In sum, I argue that it is important to look at the *political* dimensions of Romani identity and to examine the political factors that have contributed to the emergence of Romani identity as an ethnic label and a frame of reference for political group formation and policy making in Central and Eastern Europe.

Two additional remarks need to be made about this task at the outset. First, by arguing for the inclusion of political factors in the study of ethnic identities, I do not mean of course that ethnic identity formation is influenced by political factors alone. There are various studies in social anthropology, cognitive sociology, and social psychology, all of which have fruitfully demonstrated the range of circumstances that may produce collective identifications as well as internal images of the ethnic self. What I do argue is that focusing on political factors is of crucial importance if one wants to understand how ethnicity works in current societies. Political factors are likely to be essential in the construction of ethnic groups because such factors are directly related to the power structure of a society (Bulmer and Solomos 1998: 823), which in turn

determines access to resources and the representation of interests, all central to those excluded from the mainstream.

Second, by conceptualizing ethnic identity as a “frame” and a “social arrangement,” I do not mean to argue that Romani identity is not “real.” Neither do I mean to deny the reality of the experiences that people have lived through as a result of their identification as Romani. On the contrary, what makes people understand certain identities as “ethnic” is precisely the general agreement among them that such identities depend on immediate descent, and are thus given, natural, and inescapable. Many of the people who are discussed in this book take the existence of ethnic groups simply for granted. Participants of ethnic politics usually sincerely believe that their ethnic identity is an immutable bundle of innate characteristics, even though that identity is clearly dependent on social and political negotiation. The environment in which they find themselves further solidifies this tendency to think in “ethnic totalities.” This is what has been called “participant primordialism” (Smith 1998: 158), a phenomenon that is certainly present in and around the Romani movement. For many people Romani identity is not a matter of much choice.

As David Laitin has noted, people are limited in their senses of self by “the prevalent typologies of identity that surround them” (Laitin 1998: 20). In analyzing an ethnic movement, however, one should not simply take the perspective of the participants; one should try to explain why and how participants have come to experience certain labels as predominant and inescapable sources of identification. It is again Rogers Brubaker who has provided useful vocabulary to deal with this problem. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s writings on language and symbolic power, he argues that “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” invoke ethnic groups in order to call these groups into being. Analysts should not replicate such primordialism. They should “try to account for the ways in which—and conditions under which—this practice of reification, this powerful crystallization of group feeling, can work” (Brubaker 2002: 167). In order to accomplish this, Brubaker has suggested a “non-groupist” approach: a research strategy that seeks to “specify how—and when—people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world and interpret their predicaments in racial, ethnic or national rather than other terms” (Brubaker 2002: 175). This is precisely what I aim to do: offer an analysis that does not presume the existence of ethnic divisions as a natural, cultural, or historical fact, but instead focuses on how ethnic divisions are invoked by contemporary social and political actors in the present circumstances, and investigate whether and how historical, cultural, or other justifications are utilized in this process.

## Overview of the Book

This book consists of an introduction and six chapters. After this overview of the various chapters of the book, the remainder of this introduction will provide a brief outline of some of the basic choices that underpin the empirical research presented in the main part of the book.

Chapter 1, then, sets the general empirical and theoretical context. It starts with a discussion of how outsiders, mainly academics, have defined Romani identity and interests. The purpose of this discussion is to provide some background for the debates on identity and interests that have taken place *within* the Romani movement and that will be the focus of the following chapters. The latter part of chapter 1 discusses the theoretical framework. It considers various theoretical models for explaining ethnic mobilization. Is ethnic minority mobilization mostly dependent on the solidarity ties springing from a common culture? Should importance be attached to the calculations group leaders make on the basis of their assessments of economic and political competition? Or, are developments primarily influenced by government policy, state institutions, and the dominant political discourse? These questions roughly coincide with the different theoretical perspectives on ethnic mobilization that can be found in social movement literature.

Chapter 2 provides a synthesis of policies aimed at Gypsies and (later) Roma in the countries covered by this study. It deals with both pre-1989 and post-1989 policies, with the examination of the older policies undertaken in order to provide a context for understanding more recent policies.

Chapter 3 is devoted to exploring and charting the actions of Central European Romani activists, their opinions and their interpretations of events. It will attempt to offer insight into the heart of contemporary Romani activism in Central Europe by describing the positions that some of the important movement leaders or putative leaders have found themselves in and the dilemmas they have been faced with.

In Chapter 4 I focus on the interaction between activists and policy makers. More, in particular, I explore the divergent ways in which Romani movement leaders have understood and framed their cause, and I investigate how government policy documents have interpreted the matter.

This discussion is complemented, in Chapter 5, by research into the international political context. The chapter deals with the impact of international organizations, in particular the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), on the development of domestic Romani movement action in Central Europe.

Finally, the concluding Chapter 6 brings together the empirics with the theories dissected in earlier chapters. It asks which of the various

theoretical models presented in the beginning of the book offers an apt and sufficiently comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and explaining the developments of the Romani movement in Central Europe.

## Some Notes on the Empirical Research

### *Geographical Limits*

With so vast a geographical area encompassing the Roma, certain regions are better represented here than others. I have chosen to conduct a comparative study of three countries in Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. From the beginning of the 1990s until 2004—the decade that covers more or less the chronological range of this study—these three countries shared a number of striking similarities. Not only were they closely related to one another because of their communist past and their recent histories (most clearly in the case of the Czech and Slovak Republics, which formed one country before 1993); they also harbored quite comparable expectations for their political future. Visions of a common political fate were embodied in the name “Central Europe.” Together with Poland, these three countries encouraged the public acceptance of that name in order to dissociate themselves from terms with a less profitable political overtone such as “Eastern Europe” and the “Balkans” (Ash 1999; Kürti 1997; Zeigler 2002). More importantly, with the introduction of the freedom of association in the late 1980s and early 1990s all three countries saw the rise of organizations and activists seeking to defend the interests of ethnic minority citizens. After 1993, at the time when the international community had become aware of the renewed saliency of ethnic issues in Europe, the policy responses toward these minority claims were closely monitored by Western institutions, not least by the EU, which all three aspired to join. In particular the treatment of the Roma in Central Europe became subject to international scrutiny as waves of refugees began to migrate to wealthier countries.

But there were not only similarities. There was also significant variation with regard to the way in which the three countries responded to ethnic minority demands. For instance, while Hungarian policy makers chose to adopt special policies to protect and promote the cultural autonomy of national minorities, in Slovakia and the Czech Republic policies granting cultural autonomy to minorities did not immediately find political support. In contrast, Slovak and Czech traditions generally emphasized the principle of the equal treatment of all citizens, including those belonging to minorities. There was also a considerable variation in the development of the Romani movement in the three countries under

consideration. Whilst there were periods during which Romani activists sought a kind of political unification through the participation of ethnic parties in national elections, there were also times when they reverted to more direct methods of protest. Moreover, the effects of Romani mobilization in the 1990s were very diverse. Virtually all Romani parties failed to attract voters, yet some Romani activists were able to find access to domestic governmental organs. At times when Romani protest against domestic policies was weak, certain Romani activists, usually in coalition with advocacy organizations, were still able to draw international attention from such organizations as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the EU, and—to a lesser extent—the United Nations.

### *Sources*

The empirical investigations of the Romani movement presented in this book rest in part on data derived from secondary literature, existing surveys, and independent expert reports. The bulk of it, however, is based on interviews and conversations with more than sixty representatives or members of organizations that aim to represent or protect the Roma. Through these interviews, I sought to acquire information about various subjects such as the current perceptions of the movement, the present opinions about Romani identity, the present opinions about the problems facing the Roma, the dominant ideas about what could be done about them, and the motivations of (putative) group leaders to start organizing. Furthermore, I asked about topics that related to the daily practice of ethnic mobilization, the extent of networking between organizations (and the obstacles to it), the perceived divisions within the movement, and the attempts made at influencing the policy-making process.

My analysis of government policies is mainly based on official documents collected through state institutions on the national and international level. On domestic levels, the most relevant organs contacted were the Government Council for Romani Community Affairs (Rady vlády České republiky pro záležitosti romské komunity) in the Czech Republic (formerly the Interdepartmental Commission for Romani Community Affairs), the Government Commissioner for the Solution of the Problems of the Romani Minority in Slovakia (Splnomocnenec na riešenie problémov rómskej menšiny), and the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary (Nemzeti és Etnikai Kisebbségi Hivatal). On the international level, documents were collected through the Secretariat of the OSCE in Prague, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw, the Council of Europe's Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies/Travelers (MG-S-ROM), and the Directorate General for Enlargement of the European Commission.

It is important to note that both the information obtained from the activists and the official documents are not to be understood as unproblematic representations of reality. Just as reports published by activists are likely to contain some bias, government reports and policy documents offer little information as to what policies actually look like when they are implemented. One may assume that there exists a certain discrepancy between the content of the policy programs and their practical implementation. It is even one of the frequent complaints made by Romani activists that official plans look acceptable on paper but are not properly executed. Good intentions do not suffice, they contend. Policy makers, on the other hand, have often deflected criticism by arguing that activists unfairly trivialize every attempt made by the government. The discussions illustrate that both policy programs and activist accounts are not fully to be trusted as descriptions of reality. They are, however, more reliable sources when it comes to examining the views, understandings, and positions they represent. In other words, they are political documents. As such they offer an insight into the perceptions of the actors involved in the political game of policy making, ethnic interest representation, and identity formation.

### *Conceptualizing the Movement*

Like many ethnic movements, the Romani movement in Central Europe is complex and diffuse. It consists of both officially recognized and informal groupings, and it encloses organized as well as less organized associations. For this reason, the word “movement” has to be nuanced; it must not be understood as a clearly defined and bounded collection of officially recognized organizations, but as a conceptual term denoting the totality of activities carried out in the context of defending and cultivating a shared Romani identity. Moreover, the Romani movement is not monolithic but rather fragmented, and it is in constant flux. It would be virtually impossible to paint a picture of the Romani movement in its entirety. Informal structures, such as friendship ties, may have had their particular significance for bringing about movement activities, but they are difficult to investigate and trace in a systematic way. For this reason, I decided to focus primarily on those activists who form what can be called the *formal* side of the movement—they are important members of organizations that in one way or another attempt to represent Romani interests or are supportive organizations that aim to assist, protect, or to mobilize the Roma. Information about informal networks will occasionally appear in this book when their importance is particularly clear, but on the whole the following chapters are mainly concerned with organizations that formally exist, in the sense that they are registered, or at least recognized by a considerable number of people, and that their activities are to some extent documented. They include “classical”

ethnic movement organizations as well as ethnic political parties and supportive organizations (organizations that share the goals of the movement, but do not identify themselves as Romani).

With Romani activists connected to both formal and informal organizational structures and finding themselves both inside and outside the official public institutions, it comes perhaps as no surprise that mapping out the various key players of the movement turned out to be a time-consuming exercise. Matters were made even more difficult by the fact that in the course of the 1990s and the early 2000s many new organizations arose while others disappeared or changed their names, alliances, and leaders. On the other hand, having to devote much time to observation and multiple fieldwork trips was not a disadvantage. It allowed me to gain a better idea of what sources of Romani activism were the most stable and influential ones. During extended periods of stay in the three countries I could also observe directly how particular conflicts and cleavages within the movement developed over time.

### *Terminology and Spelling*

Finally, before turning to the main part of the book, it is worth adding a few words on the basic decisions I had to take with regard to terminology and spelling. This book discusses the “Roma” and the “Romani” movement; I use these names deliberately because they are closely linked to the process of political mobilization. The word “Roma” (plural) is based on the meaning of the word in the Romani language for “man” or “husband” (“Rom”) (Gheorghe 1991). The word “Roma” is a noun and “Romani” is an adjective. Although there is some disagreement whether this is linguistically correct (some authors prefer the word “Roms”), it corresponds to current standard usage in international literature.

In Slovak, Czech, and Hungarian one will often hear or read the words *cigán*, *cikán*, and *cigány* to refer to the same population. When quoting an original text or speech that contains one of these designations, I use the English term “Gypsy” to differentiate from the terms used for self-designation. However, some considerations must be kept in mind with regard to this translation. Although I capitalize the word “Gypsy,” in Hungarian the word *cigány* is not as a rule capitalized, just as other nouns referring to members of national or ethnic groups are not capitalized. Although the word sometimes has derogatory overtones, it is also very often applied as a neutral term. In Czech and Slovak, nouns that refer to ethnic and national groups are normally capitalized; nevertheless, there is a tendency not to do this with the words *cigán* and *cikán*. The authoritative Czech language dictionary published in 1952 did not capitalize the word *cikán* and defined it as “a member of a nomadic nation, symbol for mendacity, thievery, vagabondage” (Ulč 1995: 2). This no doubt reflects the popular usage of the word as an insult, as is the

case in Slovak. Nevertheless, I also translate these terms as “Gypsy” in English. The reader is, however, asked to bear in mind the possible negative connotations of the word in the original Czech or Slovak text. There is also the fact that Czechs and Slovaks increasingly use the words *Romové* and *Rómovia*, which easily translate as “Roma.” While adjectives in Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak are generally not capitalized, I nevertheless consistently capitalize the adjectives “Romani” and “Gypsy” in English.

That terminology and spelling is usually considered very important in the study of Romani affairs reflects the importance that is attached by both Roma and external observers to the nature of Romani identity. In fact, together with the claims that activists make, identity formation is a crucial component of the movement they try to form. That Romani activists, supportive organizations, and governmental actors have framed Romani identity and interests in different ways will become clear in Chapters 2 to 5. Chapter 1 starts from the question of how external observers have viewed Romani identity and interests.