

## “ROMA” LABELLING, IDENTITY POLITICS AND EU-INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF MONTENEGRO

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The article makes an overview of the groups labelled as Gypsy/Roma and the minority policies related to Roma in present day Montenegro, and discusses how – in view of the processes in the region and in the course of the state’s EU-integration – the top-down approach of adopting definitions centred on the terms “Roma and Egyptians” and “Roma” have influenced the state politics of identity regarding supporting and promoting new identities, as well as reinforcing the label “Roma” and “Romani” for all communities considered of common (Gypsy/Roma) origin. Further on, the impact of the EU-integration discourse on legislation and setting up Romani and Egyptian organizations is discussed within the public policies sector. Finally, I discuss initiatives and resources for publishing in Romani language in a country where a great part of the groups considered being of Romani origin speak another language as a mother tongue. My main argument is that the minority protection EU-conditionality and the special focus on the rights of the Roma, have led to an “import” of Roma issues for “solving”, along with copy-pasting of activities that supposedly aim to flag Romani identity and language even though neither Romani identity nor Romani language are characteristic for all communities labelled as “Roma”.

*Key words:* Montenegro, Minority policies, RAE population, EU-integration, Western Balkans

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2006 Montenegro became the last republic of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) to declare independence. Its way to sovereignty and new-state building went hand in hand with dynamics of identity of its population among the majority and minority groups (Bieber, 2003; Zahova, 2013a). While for the rest of the former

Yugoslavia republics and the region as a whole the development of the nation-building went through ethnonational homogenization and opposition to the “ethnic other” – minority or majority of a neighbouring country (including opposition in military and ethnic conflicts), Montenegro underwent the way of intra-ethnic division (Malesević & Uzelac, 2007: 696). In the two decades after the fall of SFRY the number of people identifying as Serbs was increasing while those who identify as Montenegrins was decreasing: 61.86 per cent the total population were Montenegrins in 1991, in 2003 that was 43.16 per cent, in 2011 – 44.98 per cent, while those identified as Serbs increased from 9.34 per cent (in 1991) to 31.99 to (in 2003) and were 28.73 per cent (in 2011) (Zahova, 2013a: 9). Note that this dynamic is not related to demographic processes such as population exchange or migrations, but is due to a shift in the self-identification of many individuals.

As for the other communities, according to the 2011 census the Bošnjaks were 8.65 per cent of the population, Albanians 4.91 per cent, Muslims 3.31 per cent, Croats 0.97 per cent, and Roma 1.01 per cent that is 6,251 in numbers (Statistical Office of Montenegro, 2011: 17–18). For comparison, in the previous census of 2003, Bošnjaks were 7.77 per cent, Albanians 5.03 per cent, Muslims 3.97 per cent, Croats 1.10 per cent, and Roma 0.42 per cent that is 2,601 in numbers (MONSTAT, 2003). As we can see the number of individuals declaring Romani identity in census data more than doubled. My argument is that this was impacted to a great extent by the Romani issues discourse in the identity politics of the state after 2006 and the consideration that Romani rights are an important part of the EU-integration strategy of the Montenegrin state.

Despite the country’s small size and low population number (620,145 people), Montenegro today has a diversity of groups commonly referred to as Roma or Gypsy living on its territory. The political processes in both Montenegro and the region before and after the Kosovo war conflict brought lots of changes in the definition, perception and self-perception of the groups labelled as Gypsy/Roma in Montenegro. Similarly to the developments regarding other communities’ identities, the processes at the end of 1990s can be considered as a watershed in the identity developments of the Gypsy groups in Montenegro. The Montenegrin state has paid significant attention to the protection of the status of the so called *populacija Roma, Aškali i Egipćana* (population of the Roma, Aškali and Egyptians<sup>1</sup>), a naming that became popular with its use in official documents after the Kosovo war in 1999 recognizing different identities of communities considered of the same (Gypsy) origin (Marushiakova et al., 2001; Nedeljković, 2005). With the democratization process in the region after the Kosovo war conflict, the state and governmental bodies have been the main protagonists in the processes of recognition the rights of Roma and RAE population.

The general politics in the field of Roma issues in Montenegro can be viewed in the context of transition and democratization process in all states that inherited the territory of former Yugoslavia. The issue of the guaranteeing the basic human rights and minorities protection has become a signifier of a democratic state (European Commission, 2006a; European Commission, 2006b). The protection of Roma minority in accordance with all human rights standards of the CoE and the EU has been presented

1 More details about the genesis and research on the Egyptian identity in historical context in Marushiakova et al., 2001; Trubeta, 2005; and general information on the phenomenon of “preferred ethnic identity” Marushiakova & Popov, 2012.

to the general public and in the political discourse as an important criterion for synchronizing the state legislation with the EU, UN and other international organizations. According to the governmental Strategy for Improvement the Position RAE Population in Montenegro 2008–2012:

In that sense, the protection and promotion of the situation of Roma – RAE population as an extremely vulnerable minority is a result of the obligations laid down in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the [European] Social Charter, the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the numerous conventions on the prohibition of various forms of discrimination – racial, education, women, student, work and labour relations, various regulations of the so-called *soft rights* from the scope of the UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities of 1992, the Copenhagen criteria within the scope of the OSCE, various recommendations of the Council of Europe on this issue.<sup>2</sup> (Ministarstvo za zaštitu ljudskih i manjinskih prava, 2007: 4).

Similar to other countries in the region, chapters and regulations referring to minorities' rights protection were adopted in Montenegro, and the state has joined international initiatives such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015). There are similarities and difference when the circumstances of Western Balkans are compared to those of the other Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. There is, on the one hand, a similar discourse – protection of minority rights as part of the so-called Copenhagen criteria, e.g. individual responsibility of each state as part of its minority rights policies. The lesson that Western Balkans countries learned from the 2004 enlargement was that prioritizing Roma and the human rights in an EU integration strategy brings incentives for governments in both political criteria assessment and financial terms (Ram, 2012). On the other hand, there is a different aspect in the EU Roma conditionality which has affected the way in which Western Balkan states had to develop their Roma strategies in their EU-integration process. According to the EU Roma integration strategy 2020 (*An EU framework for national Roma integration strategies up to 2020*, 2011), Roma integration in the EU has been declared a “join responsibility” and a social-issues centred definition on who the Roma are. The social inclusion approach (Sobotka & Vermeersch, 2012; Friedman, 2014) has thus started to play a key role, underpinning all Roma related policies.

The article makes an overview of the Roma/Gypsy groups and the minority policies related to Roma in present day Montenegro, and discusses how – in view of the

2 Montenegrin language original: U tom smislu, zaštita i unaprijeđenje položaja Roma – RAE populacije kao izuzetno ugrožene manjine, priizilazi iz obaveza koje propisuju Međunarodni pakt o građanskim i političkim pravima, Međunarodni pakt o ekonomskim, socijalnim i kulturnim pravima, Evropska konvencija o ljudskim pravima i osnovnim slobodama, Evropska socijalna povelja, Okvirna konvencija Savjeta Evrope za zaštitu nacionalnih manjina, mnogobrojne konvencije o zabrani različitih oblika diskriminacije – rasne, u obrazovanju, prema ženama, deci, na radu i u vezi radnih odnosa, različita pravila tzv. *mekog prava* iz djelokruga UN, OEBS-a, Savjeta Evrope, poput Deklaracije UN o pravima pripadnika nacionalnih, etničkih, vjerskih ili jezičkih manjina iz 1992 godine, Kopenhaških principa iz djelokruga OEBS-a, raličitih preporuka Savjeta Evrope iz ove problematike.

processes in the region and in the course of the state's EU-integration – the top-down approach of adopting definitions centred on the terms “Roma and Egyptians” and “Roma” have influenced the state politics of identity regarding supporting and promoting new identities, as well as reinforcing the label “Roma” and “Romani” for all communities considered being of common (Gypsy/Roma) origin. Further on, the impact of this discourse on legislation and setting up Romani and Egyptian organizations is discussed within the public policies sector. Finally, I discuss initiatives and resources for publishing in Romani language in a country where a great part of the groups speak another language as a mother tongue. My main argument is that the minority protection EU-conditionality and the special focus on the rights of the Roma, have led to an “import” of Roma issues for “solving”, along with copy-pasting of activities that supposedly aim to flag Romani identity and language even though neither Romani identity nor Romani language are characteristic for all communities labelled as “Roma”.

I will use the term Roma/Gypsy as a common denominator and umbrella name when referring to the ethnic groups discussed below. By using this terminology, I do not imply that it is a correct ethnonym for the group; neither do I ascribe any other value or ethnographic meaning to these terms. This is a very pragmatic decision in order to technically refer to those groups that are subject of labelling, which I deal with in this study. Without technical, value neutral reference to those groups, it would be impossible to explore the situation I am analysing.

## THE GROUPS IN MONTENEGRO

The Kosovo war conflict brought lots of changes in the definition, perception and self-perception of the groups considered being of Roma/Gypsy origin in Montenegro, but prior to the 1990s diverse identities were also recorded. According to criteria such as time of settlement, ethno-cultural characteristics and group identity, there are three main groups observed and recorded in the scientific research in ethnology (Barjaktarević, 1962; Barjaktarović, 1970; Vukanović, 1983; Lutovac, 1987). First is the group of *Kovači* (black-smiths, called *Arlija* by the Romani speaking group of Montenegrin *Čergarja*), inhabiting the territory of Montenegro since the time of the Ottoman rule on the Adriatic coast or in the cities inside, which prefer to declare another ethnic or national identity. The mother tongue of the group for centuries appears to be the language spoken by the surrounding populations – Serbian (or Serbo-Croatian, Montenegrin depending on the period) or Albanian (in Ulcinj for instance). Second is the group of *Roma-Čergarja*, identified by the surrounding population as *Gabelji*, in earlier periods also as *Gurbeti*, travellers for a couple of centuries in Montenegro, but settled since the 1960s. *Roma-Čergarja* identify as Roma and speak Romani language. Long-term migration to Western Europe has been characteristic for the group since the 1970s. And third group of Roma from different places in Kosovo, migrated to Montenegro between the end of the 1940s and the 1980s and settled in the larger cities that identify nowadays as Roma-Muslims, among them few families identifying as Egyptians, while earlier research in the 1970s and 1980s recorded the exonym *Madžup* as an endonym of the group (Lutovac, 1987). Most of them are Albanian language speakers, but the shift to Albanian was made within the last two generations, so Romani language is still spoken/understood by the older generation. To these groups we should

add the refugees from Kosovo who migrated to Montenegro after 1999: Roma or Roma-Muslims speaking a different dialect of Romani, Egyptians who speak Albanian and a couple of *Aškali* families. Many of the refugees on the territory of Montenegro that had arrived during the war conflicts in the territory of Kosovo are Gypsies, a significant proportion of them permanently settled in the country legally or illegally in the camps in larger towns in Montenegro, the biggest ones in Podgorica (Konik 1 and Konik 2), one in Tivat and one in Berane. The most abundant community, which is defined as *Muslim Roma* (Romi-Muslimani are 3105 people according to census of refugees from 2003), followed by a community known as *Egyptians* (*Egipčani*) (Delić, 2008: 38). Muslim Roma often speak Romani as mother tongue, along with Albanian and Serbian. They have weak contacts with the Muslim Roma who settled during SRFY in Montenegro, although for some of them the reason for the forced migration was the existence of relatives in Montenegro.

*Egyptians* and *Aškali* try to clearly distance themselves from Roma. They argue that they have a different origin but also a different language. Egyptians consider themselves superior to Roma and also point out that they have never declared Roma identity (Trubeta, 2005: 75). Both the Roma and Egyptians see *Aškali* as sub-group or another name for Egyptians, while for the Roma *Aškali* is one of the names for Egyptian and means “right hand of the Albanians” (Zahova, 2012: 91). For the Egyptians themselves, *Aškali* means “true Egyptian” (*has Egipčan*). Roma consider the Egyptian community to be a political invention or new name for an old community earlier known to them as *Madžup*, *Arlija*, or *Aškalija* (depending on the use in different regions of Kosovo). Egyptians are pejoratively defined by Roma as *chibale* (used for Albanian speakers) and “Albanian servants”, they are accused of losing their own (Roma) culture and adopting the foreign (Albanian) culture, thus, becoming without identity (Zahova, 2012: 92).

As Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov have pointed out Roma/Gypsies live in at least two dimensions – as part of their own community and as part of the macro-society with which they constantly interact (Marushiakova & Popov, 2005: 434). Different groups, on the one hand, build their community identity in the process of interactions with other groups from which they separate on the base of certain characteristics that function as cultural markers (Barth, 1969: 13). On the other hand, Montenegrin society is a small one and the groups interact and are influenced both by this interaction and by the macro-society processes. The views, policies and discourses about the groups considered as Roma and Egyptians developed by the country’s institutions and surrounding population, have certain impact on the groups themselves (Zahova, 2013a: 246).

According to the national census from April 2011 the Roma in Montenegro are 6,251 (over 1.01 per cent) and Egyptians number 2,054 (over 0.30) (Statistical Office of Montenegro, 2011), while there are also Roma and Egyptians that have refugee and International Displaced Person (IDP) status and live in camps (i.e. are not included in the official population census). According to experts and NGOs there might be also several thousand refugees with Roma and Egyptian identity, reaching 13,000 – 15,000 (Delić, 2008: 8) or even a very doubtful estimation of 21,000 (Vukadinović, 2001: 521), that constantly migrate to neighbouring countries and Western Europe. An unofficial census implemented jointly by the National Council of Roma and Egyptians of Montenegro and the Statistical Institute of Montenegro showed that the total number of citizens and residents in Montenegro, declaring Roma, Gypsy, *Aškali* or Egyptian

identity is 9,934 (MONSTAT, 2009: 8), but this number does not include those who live in diaspora or declare preferred identity – Albanian, Muslim/Bošnjak, or identify only by their citizenship as Montenegrins.<sup>3</sup> Both the old settled groups and the refugee new comers live in the Montenegrin cities that are municipal centres. According to this data, there are 7,110 Roma, 2,498 Egyptians, 109 Aškali and 48 Muslims. They live in Podgorica (5,748), Nikšić (1,001), Berane (669), Ulcinj (550), Tivat (425), Bjelo Polije (369), Bar (309), Herceg Novi (299), Budva (189), Kotor (123), Rožaje (112), Cetinje (86), Pljevlja (42), Danilovgrad (12) (MONSTAT, 2009).

The term Roma was not something unheard of in Montenegro. There was a wide Romani movement in Yugoslavia from the end of the 1960s through to the 1980s with the active involvement of Slobodan Berberski, member of the Central Committee of the Union of the Communists in Yugoslavia. The state stimulated this country-wide movement, as well as the participation of the Yugoslav Roma in the international Roma movement (Acković, 2001; Marushiakova & Popov, 2005). In that period Roma were classified as an ethnic group, the lowest level in the SFRY hierarchical structure of nations, nationalities and ethnic groups (Bertsch, 1977: 90; Acković, 1992: 19). In 1971 only 234 people declared Roma identity in Montenegro, but the data of the police records and the research of Momčilo Lutovac (Lutovac, 1987) estimated their number at 4197 in the 1970s. The Yugoslav Romani movement from this period, the foundation of Roma organizations on the territory of the SFRY and the realization of cultural events with the support of the state, did not have significant impact on the communities on the territory of Montenegro. There was, however, certain impact of these policies, for instance stimulation of academic and research interests towards the Gypsy/Roma communities (Barjaktarević, 1962; Barjaktarović, 1970; Vukanović, 1983; Lutovac, 1987), official usage of the term “Roma”, and a poetry collection published in Romani by a Montenegrin Romani author (Sejdović, 1988).

Although *Madžupi*, *Gjupci*, *Jevgits* was used for centuries as an endonym of some group (Lutovac, 1987), the movement for official recognition of Egyptians as an ethnic category started in the 1980s in Macedonia (Zemon, 2001: 25; Nedeljković, 2005: 101). In 1989 Nazmi Arifi and his brother Usni Zemoski, both from Struga in Macedonia officially proposed “Egyptian” as a category in the census of 1991, and soon after, in 1990, the Association of Egyptians in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Udruženje Egipćana u SFR Jugoslaviji) was founded in Ohrid Macedonia, followed by the founding of the Association of Egyptians in Kosovo and Metochia (Shoqata e Egjiptianëve të Kosovës) in Prishtina (Zemon, 2001: 35, 40). Against a background of political and ethnic tensions of the 1990s, these organization as well as other Egyptian associations raised voices in public for the recognition of “Egyptian” identity in official documents and censuses. In the 1990s in Kosovo there were voices for recognition of Aškali identity, claiming that this is a separate ethnic group with an old ethnonym. This was reflected in reports issued by the International community and human rights groups. Afterwards, in order to recognize minorities in Kosovo, the then state that used to be a federation between Serbia and Montenegro ratified a series of documents following the definition Roma, Aškali and Egyptians, as accepted by the Kosovo Transitional Council and formulated in international organizations’ documents when defining the minorities in Kosovo.

<sup>3</sup> According to my estimations based on field research in the period 2007–2010, the number is not less than 3,000.



In the public and policies discourse the Roma issue was raised in Montenegro with refugees' influx during the Kosovo war conflict and with the clearly stated aim of the Montenegrin political elite at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to distance from Milošević politics and join the EU as soon as possible (Caspersen, 2003). The government of Serbia and Montenegro (2003–2006) outlined the legal and policy framework within minority rights protection, refugees and IDPs status, and adopted in all of them the term Roma, Aškali and Egyptians (Vukadinović, 2001: 520). The independent state of Montenegro since 2006 inherited these policies and presented the protection of the rights of the RAE population as part of the state aspiration to join the EU, adopted Strategy for improving the situation of RAE population in Montenegro (2008–2012), joined the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), developed Strategy for Improvement the Position RAE Population in Montenegro 2008-2012 (Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava, 2007) and the 2016–2020 Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptian population (Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava, 2016), along with the respective annual Action plans as per these strategies. With all this, I'd like to underline the fact that the state of Montenegro has been the main protagonist in raising the issue of policies and actions targeted at Roma as part of its EU integration strategy.

## POLITICAL HISTORY AND EU-INTEGRATION PROCESSES

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on its path to independence, the governing elite promoted the formula “Montenegrin nation of all citizens” and the country's identity has not been based any longer “on the historical right of the Montenegrin people to [have their] own country, achieved by centuries of struggle for freedom” as stated in the Constitution of Republic of Montenegro from 1992 (Constitution, 1992). It is now based on the decision of “free and equal citizens belonging to nations and national minorities living in Montenegro: Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosnians, Albanians, Muslims, Croats and others who are supporters of the democratic and civic Montenegro”, according to the Preamble of the Constitution of Montenegro from 2007 (Constitution, 2007). The state-building project “Montenegrin nation of all citizens” encompasses all minorities and is qualitatively different from the model of ethnic nation, that was a norm for Montenegro itself in the recent past. This model seems the most appropriate for the 620,029 inhabitants with over ten national communities, none of which exceeds 50 per cent of the population.

During the same period, after the year 2000, in order to recognize the minorities in Kosovo the state that then used to be a federation between Serbia and Montenegro ratified a series of documents following the definition Roma, Aškali and Egyptians. The federal government (of Serbia and Montenegro) outlined the legal and policy frameworks within minority rights' protection, refugees and IDPs status, and adopted in all of them the term Roma, Aškali and Egyptians. The independent state of Montenegro since 2006 inherited these policies, repeating the definition RAE population, despite the fact that no Aškali population was recorded in the territory of the state.

Montenegro's definitions and concepts of minority, ethnicity and nationality were influenced by the Yugoslav legacy in the field of national issues. The legislation and political discourse inherited the terms *etnička grupa* (ethnic groups), *narodnost* (nationality) and *narod* (nation) from the time of the Yugoslav federation (Bertsch, 1977; Várady, 1997). The term nation was applied to the nations that were “constitutive” for

the federation – Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, Montenegrins, Macedonians and (after 1974) Muslims. During the same period the term *narodnost* defined communities that had their mother land outside the borders of the Yugoslav federation (Albanians, Hungarians, Italians, etc.), while before 1963 these communities had been called *nacionalna manjina* (national minority). The terms *etnička grupa* was used to define communities without a nation-state – Roma and Jews (it remained the same even after 1948). According to the legislation currently in force the Montenegrin nation (*crnogorski narod*) is one of the nations in the civic state and all other communities, regardless if they have a nation state or not, are minority. A minority which has its country of origin or mother land is called minority national community (*manjinska nacionalna zajednica*), while the minorities that do not have a genesis related to a nation-state are called minority people (*manjinski narod*). Montenegro is pursuing a policy of special rights for minority communities, considering all the citizens who do not identify as Montenegrins as minority. Thus, minority national communities are Serbs, Croats, Albanians and Bošnjaks, and minority peoples are Muslims, Roma and Egyptians. There is no definition of the term “ethnic group” in the current legislation. However, the term ethnic minority has been largely used in policy documents, scientific and public discourse to refer to communities that had been considered as ethnic groups in the time of Socialist Yugoslavia; Roma, for instance (Vukadinović, 2001; Delić, 2008; Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava, 2016).

According to Article 1 of the Law on Human Rights and Freedoms its aim is to protect the rights of the autochthonous “minority peoples, national minorities, ethnic minority and those who belong to them” called minority, along with the general human and civil rights and liberties guaranteed to all citizens and protection of specific minority rights and freedoms (Law on Human Rights and Freedoms, 2006). The law sets out areas important for preserving identity and providing equal opportunities for minorities in line with the text of the Framework Convention for Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages: free choice and usage of one’s personal and family name, as well as registering the names on the documents in their own language and alphabet (Arts. 9-10); free and official use of one’s language and alphabet (Article 11); access to information and media, as well as to programme contents about minorities in public services (Article 12); education in one’s own language and alphabet and adequate representation of contents in teaching plans and programmes as well as principles of affirmative action (Article 13); minorities’ political participation within the Parliament of the Republic of Montenegro and local assemblies (Art. 23); proportionate representation in public services of state and local authorities (Arts. 25, 27, 28); articulating requests through the possibility of forming their national councils with special responsibilities (Arts. 33); establishing a fund for national minorities in order to get material support from the state with the aim of preserving national specificities (Art. 36).

Minority peoples (*manjinski narodi*) and other minority national communities (*manjinska nacionalna zajednica*) have rights and freedoms to develop and express their ethnic and national characteristics, which may be exercised either individually or collectively. A major part of them is related with the exercise of linguistic rights. Under Article 67 of the Constitution, the members of national and ethnic groups are guaranteed “protection of the national, ethnic, cultural, language and religious identity” according to the international norms for protection of human and civil rights. Persons belonging to national and ethnic groups “have the right to use their languages and scripts,



the right to education and the right to receive information in their languages” (Article 68) and “usage of their language in procedure before the state institutions” (Article 72). It also provided the right to “found educational, cultural and religious societies, with support of the state” (Article 69) and “to be proportionally represented in public services, state bodies and local self-government administrations” (Article 73).

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages entered into force in Montenegro on 6 June 2006. Montenegrin authorities declared that the Charter would apply to the Albanian and Romani Languages for which Montenegro takes on the obligations of the third part of the Charter. In its Recommendation on the application of the Charter adopted on 20 January 2010, the CoE recommended that the territories with official Albanian and Romani languages are clarified and the necessary steps for the codification and development of the Romani language are taken, so that teaching of the Romani language is introduced in education (Secretary General of the Council of Europe, 2001).

## LABELLING AND ITS EFFECTS

The political and social movements for recognition or demonstration of identity among the Roma and Egyptians in Montenegro are a fact after 2000. Government policies in the field of minority rights, particularly Roma, stimulated and coordinated with programmes by external international organizations, have a number of effects on the identity of Roma/Gypsies and their development as a community. As a result of these processes, both terms – Roma and Egyptians – have been circulated in political document and the public space, a process entangled with the increase of people who identify as Roma and Egyptians. These developments have also been influenced by the activities of neighbouring organizations such as the Union of Balkan Egyptians and the compact migrations of refugees from Kosovo, as well as interactions with Roma and Egyptian activists on the movement from Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Roma and Egyptian non-governmental organizations were set up, mostly by activists among the earlier migrants (settled during the Socialism period) or refugee groups, with the support of the state funding distributed through the Fund for minorities set up according to the Law on Minorities’ Rights and Freedoms from 2007. Soon after, in 2007, NGOs were registered by *Kovači* activists from communities living in the Adriatic coast where the community is still compact. To a lesser degree or almost undeveloped stays the movement among the *Čergarja-Roma* (Zahova, 2013a: 302–303). Following the regulations of the same Law, the state established a Council of Roma and Egyptians in Montenegro in 2008. Since a minority council can be established and state funding can be distributed only to a minority with Montenegrin citizenship numbering a certain per cent of the total population, according to official statistics, only Roma could form a national council (the official number of Egyptians was 225 at that time). However, the state stimulated and advised the Roma invited to form the Council to incorporate representatives of the other communities that fall under the definition RAE. Since the number of Aškali was insufficient, the Roma leaders under the patronage of the state invited representatives of the Egyptian community to join the Council.<sup>4</sup> In the mandates of the Council, 3 out of 17 members are Egyptians and one of them is Vice-president of

4 Information obtained during a series of interviews in August 2008 with Isen Gaši, President of the

the council. Interesting to note is that they are not elected from the community of refugees that in fact “brought” the Egyptian issue in Montenegro. Two were from the so-called *Kovači* old-settlers’ communities in Stari Bar and Ulcinj, the communities from which they come from are experiencing a dynamic change of identity and rather tend to declare another identity; that of the surrounding population identity. The third Egyptian member comes from a family of Kosovo labour migrants from the 1980s. This community only 20 years before declared Roma or *Madžup* identity (Delić, 2008), while now many of them say they shift to Egyptian identity, since this was their real identity which they had had no right to declare before.

The Council of Roma and Egyptian distributes funds annually for projects related to Roma and Egyptian associations. Implementing the state Strategy for social inclusion of Roma and Egyptians (Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava, 2016), it manages activities facilitating the access to education, health services, dwelling to all communities considered as RAE. Particular attention is paid to obtaining of ID cards for refugees and citizenship for those Kosovo born migrants, whose families have lived since the 1940s-1950s in Montenegro. The council for the first time introduced the celebration of 8<sup>th</sup> April (the International Roma day), the Roma flag as well as the establishment of different dance and music groups for Roma and Egyptian folklore and its presentation to audiences all over Montenegro. The members of the Council have met NGO activists from the region during international initiative meetings, and with state funding apply activities that have been developed in the region as part of the Roma movement.

After 2012, the Roma, Aškali and Egyptian (RAE) population definition has been replaced by Roma and Egyptians in the current human rights protection discourse. As a rule, in both internal (reports related to the Decade of Roma Inclusion or Strategy of the Roma Council) and “external” reports and documents concerning Montenegro (by EU for instance) special attention is paid to children’s rights in access to education, discrimination, and the problems at Konik where the two refugees camps are located. All reports stress the issues of the RAE population – obstacles in access to employment, health care and housing. However, we shall be aware of the fact that these problems are not related only to the Roma rights issue, but to the fact that the IDPs and refugees have a particular status and do not have Montenegrin identity cards. The rest of the citizens or residents of Montenegro with Roma/Gypsy origin are well integrated into the Montenegrin society and they do not face the problems valid for the IDPs or refugees from Kosovo. They usually have their own occupations and jobs, many of them took advantage of the labour migrants’ agreements between Yugoslavia and Germany in the 1970s and as *Gastarbeiters* went to work in Western Europe, most of them coming back in Montenegro after retirement. My research and in-depth interviews with this community revealed that the problem that these citizens of Montenegro face today is that they do not have the right of free movement, possibilities to travel, and access to work, something that the community themselves underlines when contrasting the present days to socialist Yugoslavia, when they had all of these possibilities (Zahova, 2013a: 249).

Government policies in the field of minority rights, particularly the institutionalization of the term Roma and Egyptians, stimulated and coordinated with programmes by

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Council and Muhamed Uković, Vice-President of the Council and Egyptian. This was also stated by the other two members of the Council who identified as Egyptians.

external international organizations, have a number of effects on the identity of the communities. As a result of these processes, non-governmental organizations of Roma and Egyptians appear to act also as stimulants to the expression of these identities. The globalized Romani movement, the regional cooperation between Romani activists in the territories of former Yugoslavia, IT technologies and migrations have also impacted the processes referred to as labelling and identification. Montenegrin Roma activists started promoting symbols and activities demonstrating the ideas of the Roma international movement (hymn, flag, folklore, media programmes) that are otherwise historically related to the Yugoslav Roma taking part in the movement (Marushiakova & Popov, 2005). The increase of the Romani population, on the one hand, has been a result of the policies stimulating and developing Roma identities and activities funded by the state budget. On the other hand, this has also been affected by the policies in the field of citizenship of the new state – Kosovo born Roma are now already able to become Montenegrin citizens. The comparison between the last two population censuses shows that the number of those who identify as Roma has increased significantly (2,601 in 2003 and 6,251 in 2011). And the same goes for those who declare speaking Romani language (2,602 in 2003 and 5,169 in 2011).

As result of the institutionalization of Egyptian identity in a number of government documents and the introduction of the Egyptian category of Montenegrin census, communities that declare a different identity in the past are now considered Egyptians. Another factor related to external developments of the Egyptian movement that have been influenced by international programmes for minorities' rights is the activities of the Union of Balkan Egyptians in Montenegro. Within a project funded by an EU programme with the aim of raising the issue of vulnerable communities in the region, the Union of Balkan Egyptians in fact implemented a campaign with a series of conferences and press-conferences in Western Balkans, Montenegro included, advocating for recognition of the Egyptian community. Particularly in Montenegro the Union of Balkan Egyptians raised the issue of total separation of the Roma from the Egyptians in both governmental strategies and documents and institutions, due to historically inherited wrong perception and treatment as one community, as stated by the Unions leaders (Alković, 2010: 46). The Union of Balkan Egyptians criticized the government for uniting Roma and Egyptians in strategic documents and institutions.<sup>5</sup> It raised the issue of establishing of a separate Council of Egyptians funded by the state with the arguments that such a council had already been established in Serbia. In the context of the new state development and unresolved dilemmas among Egyptian leaders, there are still open questions – whether the old community of *Kovači* in the places where they live compactly and whose leaders declare Egyptian identity will continue to express preferential ethnic identity (Serbian, Bošnjak, Montenegrin, Muslim, etc.) or will take on the path of the new (Egyptian) identity.

Interestingly enough, the development of macro-community processes, namely the issue of the new Montenegrin (civil) identity, also had a certain impact on the development of the Roma groups and the social movement among their leaders. The process of building the identity of the new state has led to a competition among the Roma/Gypsy group over claims who are the Montenegrin Roma, on the base of different arguments. *Kovači* point to their origins in Montenegro as old settlers, as opposed to

5 Rubin Zemon, President of Union of Balkan Egyptians, on 2010 OSCE Review Conference, Warsaw 06 October, 2010. Working Session 7: Tolerance and non-discrimination I.

*Čergarja* who reside outside of the country. *Čergarja*, on their side, as effect of contacts with Roma outside of Montenegro, also identified as Montenegrin Roma on the base of their citizenship. Finally, Kosovo Muslim Roma also attempt to demonstrate a high degree of integration in Montenegrin society by stressing on the fact that they have supported (i.e. voted for) independence, giving a decisive contribution to the 55 per cent in favour of independent Montenegro. On the other hand, the processes of guaranteeing minority rights for communities that do not qualify as Montenegrins (such as political participation, national minority councils, quotas in state institutions at national and local level) affect and influence leadership demands of Roma and Egyptians. Following the introduction of lower electoral thresholds for minority parties in electoral legislation in 2011, the idea of political participation in parliament was formed among the members of the Council of Roma and Egyptians.

## PARADOXES OF THE ROMA-DOMINATED DISCOURSE

The Romani issues discourse in the Western Balkans, and in Montenegro in particular, resemble the development of Roma policies in the East European countries – there are international and structural funds supporting projects of governments and NGOs; governmental strategies have been developed for projects for Roma inclusion in housing, education, employment, health care; the Romani issues have always been addressed in Montenegro's progress reports (the European Commission, the Council of Europe's progress reports on the European Charter for Regional and Minority Rights languages) with regard to the Roma. Some important symbols related to Romani (national) identity in the discourse of the international movement (hymn, flag, folklore, media programmes) have also been circulated.

The Romani language has played a key role in the processes of expressing and flagging Romani identity (Matras, 2013). The tendencies of entanglement of the Romani political movement and Romani literature production both nationally and internationally (Zahova, 2014: 58–60; Toninato, 2014: 74–76), have developed in Montenegro too. The widely shared concept in the region that the language is a flag of ethnic and national identity (Friedman, 1999; Zahova, 2013b: 699) has also been exemplified by the fact that while Romani language is not spoken by all groups declaring Romani identity in Montenegro, it is an important (Romani) identity marker for both Roma (regardless of the language they speak as a mother tongue) and non-Roma (Gypsy groups with another identity or non-Romani majority population) (Zahova, 2012: 95). Romani language publishing initiatives in Montenegro today have to be viewed and interpreted exactly in this context.

Although Romani language is not a mother tongue of most of those who are perceived according to the “umbrella” definition as Roma (e.g. all groups considered Gypsy) and is spoken by 5,169 people according to the 2011 census, many resources and efforts were invested in Romani language publishing. Straight after setting up the Council of Roma and Egyptians, the government distributed funds for Romani language production. In some years (for example 2008 when 6 illustrated booklets in four languages, including Romani, were published by the National Board for Textbooks and Educational Materials) the copies of Romani language books exceeded the number of Romani language speakers.

Creating and publishing in Romani language is not completely unknown in

Montenegro. During Yugoslav Socialism (1946–1992) – as part of the Yugoslav ethnic policies supporting Romani identity revealing through various forms of Romani production – Ruždija Ruso Sejdović published the bilingual poetry collection *Fires in the Night* (1988). In the two decades after 1992, there was only one book that could be classified as publication in Romani. Curiously enough, the book is a collection of Romani folklore that had been recorded in Albanian among Albanian speaking Roma, and published along with Serbian and Romani version of the text, the latter done by the Romani translator Sejdo Jašarov from Macedonia due to the lack of qualified translators in the country (Vuksanović-Vukoslavović & Beganaj, 2005). Otherwise distribution of Romani publications produced in the neighbouring countries as Serbia, Croatia and Kosovo was done as well.

Since 2008, when the Council of Roma and Egyptians was set up, at least a couple of Romani language editions have been published in the genres of children's literature, folklore, tales and poetry. This has been done with the support of grants distributed annually through the Council. The main authors of original (fiction) works are three – Ruždija Ruso Sejdović (2012a; 2012b), a Rom from the *Čergarja* group who has been living in Germany since 1990s, Ivan Toskić, a Serbian born *Gurbet* Rom and journalist living in Podgorica (Toskić, 2014; Toskić, 2016; Toskić & Popadić, 2017) and Sokolj Beganaj, a Kosovo born Rom whose poetry was translated by the acclaimed Romani writer Alija Krasnići (Beganaj, 2012). Romani translations with government support have also appeared – among them educational materials, laws and government documents' translations (Hasani, 2013), as well as Romani translations of articles published in the journal of the National Minority Centre of Montenegro.

After Montenegro ratified the ECRML a couple of progress reports as per the charter mentioned that Romani did not have official status and was still in an unfavourable situation, along with lack of qualified teachers and teaching materials that hampers the introduction of Romani into education. Special efforts on behalf of the government were thus invested in issuing educational materials. This was largely done with external expertise of Romani activists and researchers from neighbouring countries because of the lack of local specialists in Romani language and education, with appropriate qualifications and experience. In 2015 the National Board for Textbooks and Educational Materials issued Montenegrin-Romani and Romani-Montenegrin dictionary prepared by a team led by the Macedonian Romani linguist and pedagogical expert Ljatif Demir (Demir, Durnić, Demir, 2015) and Romani language textbook by team led by the Romani ethnologist Trajko Petrovski (et al. 2014), also from Macedonia. The Ministry of Minority and Human Rights organized a conference and both editions were greatly promoted in the media. On the occasion of their presentation, the National Council of Roma published the following statement (Uković, 2015) in the Montenegrin language:

The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights in cooperation with the Roma Council has published a textbook in Romani. Throughout all these years, the Romani Council works to affirm and preserve the cultural and national identity of the Roma community in Montenegro. The creation of a systematic solution for Roma education in the mother tongue is the basis for preserving the national identity of the Roma community in Montenegro.

Through all these years, the Roma Council has been trying to build mutual trust with the state institutions in Montenegro since its establishment. "With the Ministry of

Human and Minority Rights, we have always had a good cooperation”, said the Roma Council’s President Isen Gaši. He thanked the Deputy Minister of Human and Minority Rights, Leon Đokaj for the very successful cooperation with the respected ministry.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the decades following the fall of SFRY, processes of dynamic identity shift and appearance of new ethnic categories, among the groups labelled as Roma/Gypsies are observed in Montenegro. There are number of groups who have been living in Montenegro for centuries (*Kovači, Čergarja*), or who came as labour migrants during the period of SFRY (*Roma-Muslims, Madžupi*). After the 1999 Kosovo conflict new groups came as refugees including such groups with Romani identity (*Roma-Muslims, Arli, Gurbeti*), with *Egyptian* identity and a few *Aškali* families.

With the democratization process in the region after the Kosovo war conflict, the state and governmental bodies were the main protagonists in the processes for affirming the terms of Roma/Roma and Egyptians/RAE population, and developing policies for improvement of the situation of the Roma. Although since the 1970s there were Roma related policies in Yugoslavia and a federation-wide Rom umbrella organization existed in the Yugoslav territories, these policies did not have any effect on the identification of the groups or on their inclusion in cultural Roma related activities and programmes. It was only in the 1990s and especially after Montenegrin independence in 2006 when the term Roma was affirmed in the public discourse.

The EU Roma conditionality influenced the way in which Western Balkan states like Montenegro developed minority rights strategies in their EU-integration process. The development of the Roma-related policies was considered a requirement on the state’s way to the EU and UN. State funding for cultural activities related to Romani identity and language was ensured. The funding had led to certain effects just few years after independence. The perception that Romani language is one of the pillars of a common Romani identity have also been embedded in the identity politics of the Montenegrin government through supported activities for Romani language publishing. In addition, the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages was ratified in Montenegro and authorities declared that the Charter would apply to the Romani. Development of Romani language in publications, media and education was, thus, a task of the state.

After the new millennium, the number of those who identify as Roma and declare speaking of Romani language doubled. Romani organizations and the Council of Roma and Egyptians have been exchanging expertise with neighbouring Western Balkan countries, and organize cultural activities representing Romani culture – such as the celebration of 8 April, the International Roma day, dance and music festivals for Romani

<sup>6</sup> Montenegrin original: Ministarstvo za ljudska i manjinska prava u saradnji sa romskim savjetom, izdalo je bukvar na romskom jeziku. Romski savjet svih ovih godina radi na afirmaciji i ocuvanju kulturnog i nacionalnog identiteta romske zajednice u Crnoj Gori. Stvaranje sistemskog rjesenja za obrazovanje Roma na maternjem jeziku je osnov za ocuvanje nacionalnog identiteta romske zajednice u Crnoj Gori. Romski savjet se svih ovih godina od njenog kontituisanja trudio da izgradi međusobno povjerenje sa državnim institucijama u Crnoj Gori. “Sa Ministarstvom za ljudska i manjinska prava uvijek smo imali korektnu saradnju” kazao je predsjednik romskog savjeta Isen gaši. On se zahvalio pomoćniku Ministra u Ministarstvu za ljudska i manjinska prava Leonu Đokaju, na veoma uspješnoj saradnji sa navedenim ministarstvom.



youth, Miss Roma competition among others. These Roma culture activities replicate a pattern that usually takes place during Eastern European countries' accession process.

The introduction of the Egyptian identity also took place in Montenegro and communities that used to declare different identity in the past now consider themselves as Egyptians. The growth of the Egyptian community has been closely interlinked to related developments in the Western Balkan region, the heritage of the Yugoslav policies in the field of ethnic and national identity, migrations of refugees, and the coining of term RAE population after the Kosovo war conflict.

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