

“WHY LABELLING MATTERS”  
ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ROMA/GYPSIES  
IN EUROPE

**TATIANA ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ, DANIEL ŠKOBLA**

<https://doi.org/10.26363/SN.2018.4.01>  
©Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of SAS

*How to cite:* Zachar Podolinská, T., Škobla, D. (2018): “Why Labelling Matters”. On Social Construction of Roma/Gypsies in Europe. Slovenský národopis, 66(4), 378–384 <https://doi.org/10.26363/SN.2018.4.01>

Decision makers, governments, national policymakers, European institutions and as well as many scholars, not to speak about the general public, operate with the term “Roma/Gypsies” as if it was a fixed appellation for a monolithic ethnic group. Policies of the Council of Europe, EU strategies for inclusion of Roma, different position papers and other texts and documents label various groups of people with various social positions in society under one roof. Political parties, government and inter-government representatives across Europe often operate with the term “Roma” ignoring the fact that there are various groups of people and identities around the world with different Romani, Sinti, Travellers and various other origins. Moreover, the term “Roma” as it is used in most of these documents and in mainstream political and public discourse is imbued with implications of “socially excluded”, “marginalized”, “vulnerable”, “poverty-stricken”, “dependent on welfare” and many other adjectives which consequently generate resources for strategies, proposals, measures and action plans for example for “integration of Roma” into the mainstream society. The group labelled as “Roma”, are a “convenient” and recurring target of “hard hand” policies, often serving as a populist magnet for generating support in political preference polls of political parties of any kind.

Academic literature on Roma/Gypsies also often shows a preference for portraying Roma/Gypsy as a specific, unique, exclusivist group/groups of people, existing in a form of “cultural and ethnic diaspora” dispersed in Europe. In many times, this discourse, fixing the Roma as static group in a form of a “category” is in fact contributing and reinforcing general essentialist discourse, which understand Roma as a given and “fixed-in-the-world” group of people, disconnected, asocial and intentionally excluded, i.e. marginal in relation to the mainstream population.

No doubt, it is not possible to deny that a great number of persons belonging to various groups and subgroups of Roma, Sinti, Gypsies and Travellers and other, live in segregated conditions in deep economic hardship and are facing marginalisation and discrimination in many spheres of life. But these facts cannot be used as an excuse for

essentialisations leading to approaches and policies often mislead by those who design them. Moreover, the supposed homogeneity of Roma, constructed as poor and unconnected social actors, leads to simplified and erroneous explanation of the causes of poverty, blaming Roma agency itself as the foremost factor bringing about this condition. This perspective is deceiving because it overlooks structural conditions and conceals the agency of the dominant non-Roma majority, which generates and sustains the general environment, in which Roma groups live.

When discourse, both homogenising Roma and muting structural conditions and non-Roma agency, is reflected, mainstreamed and transformed into specific interventions, reconfirmed by many social scientists, it creates new strains and obstructs empowerment, participatory and bottom-up actions. At the same time, it might be reflected by Romani activists, leaders, scholars and representatives who call for ownership and better control over resources, political influence and public discourse, can be viewed by many as emerging Romani nationalism or radicalism. Whatever it may be called, it is a logical and understandable reaction on long lasting political and social hegemony of dominant “whites”, non-Roma groups.

This volume of Slovak Ethnology is intended to explore how the power of ethnic labelling, categorization and conceptualization from the side of dominant non-Roma actors, puts a vulnerable minority into a subordinated position, and is conducive to production and reproduction of inequalities and social marginalization. It suggests that the static categories, representation of Roma/Gypsies, and overall fixed characteristics of an entire group create a falsely homogenous and harmful image of Roma that conforms to negative stereotypes. The volume is also a reminder of the role scientists can play in a struggle to maintain their dominant position in the social hierarchy through accumulation and reinforcing of symbolic capital.

In drafting the call for this special volume we called into play recent broader social theory discourse on social power and impact of ethnic labelling (Eriksen, 1991, 1995), categorization (Brubaker, 2002, 2014), social networks (Putnam, 2000) and forms of symbolical power and capital (Bourdieu, 1991, 1994). According to Brubaker, ethnicity should be studied as a category of practice, observed and described from a dynamic perspective at a concrete level as the agenda of concrete actors (organizations, political parties or leaders, activists, etc.). Brubaker insists that we as scientists cannot uncritically adopt categories of ethno-political practice as our categories of social analysis (2002, 167). In this regard, the volume applies Brubaker’s *non-groupist approach* studying the Roma ethnicity as a category of practice, analysing processes of constructing and working with the label “Roma” in the agenda of concrete actors, institutions and organizations.

As a sort of open discussion, we encouraged authors of the presented volume to make comments on (1) the present-day controversies among Romani Studies’ academics and the general social theory and anthropology and (potential) ethical and practical consequences of adopting the approach of speaking beyond the “ethnicity” and “groups”, (2) to contextualize construction of “Roma” as a group (Barth /Ed./, 1969) and the usage of labels “Gypsies” and “Roma” in ethno-political praxis in various parts Europe, and to reflect potential country and discourse dependant differences.

In political discourse we frequently face forced or intentional “ethnicisation” of the categories “Rom/Roma” and “Roma nation”. Starting from the classical definitions of the nation in terms of enumerating the elements that together constitute the ethnic group or nation (Hroch /Ed./, 2003) in the case of the Roma, we find ourselves in

serious problems in the key points of these definitions. “Roma nation” consists of different heterogeneous ethnic groups without a state, without their own territory, without a common language, without a unified religion, common customs or traditions, without awareness of a unified collective identity and historical memory (Podolinská, 2015: 488). From this point of view, the “traditional type of ethnicity” (based on traditional definitions of the “nation” in terms of common origin, shared language and collective memory etc.), is often intentionally over-communicated, which may “disqualify” those groups/communities, that do not fit into this 19<sup>th</sup> century definition of “nation”. The current European Roma elites speak in this context about a thin layer of “international” or “professional” Roma (Marušiaková, Popov, 2001: 15-17), within the so-called “global Roma nationalism”. Therefore they are attempting to construct a “Roma nation” as a transnational entity, regardless of the link to a specific Roma group, state or country, with a strong emphasis on certain constitutive elements of “Roma” (“Romipen”, “Romanipen”) and insist on the use of umbrella label “Roma”, come up with new insights into Roma history, put a strong emphasis on the Holocaust and the standardization of the Roma language (Op. cit: 17, Marushiakova et al., 2001). Although some researchers are actively involved in this direction, others strongly criticize it as “methodological nationalism” (Cottaar, 1998; Lucassen, Willems, Cottaar Eds., 1998). From the analytical point of view, without taking sides, this is an extremely interesting phenomenon and a unique opportunity to monitor ethnogenesis in conditions of late modernity. At the level of political and civic practice (we are now out of the plane of scientific discourse), this process is absolutely legitimate and all the elements of romanticism, historical idealization and mythmaking (as sometimes is with an irony emphasized) are all the elements of the identity of all the surrounding, already established European nations existing within the nation-state (Podolinská, 2015: 485-491).

On the other hand, “de-ethnization”, speaking on Roma using (merely) social markers (describing Roma as “social group” or segregated, marginalized people with lower social status) may not only foster a reductionist picture of Roma as a “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1966) but represent also a crucial obstacle in the current process of Roma ethnogenesis and the right to construct the idea of “nation” on (trans)ethnic principles and positive constitutive elements.

From this perspective, it is important to highlight, that both ethnicisation (over-communication of ethnicity) as de-ethnicisation (under-communication of ethnicity) may serve as practical (political) tools for an objective fixing of the unfavourable position of the Roma ethnic minority in contemporary Europe, which is still deeply rooted in the idea of a union consisting of “nation states” with historically fixed boundaries, territories, privileges and positions of powers (Podolinská, 2017b). At least we as the scientists should be aware, without explaining, that – for instance – the “group of Slovaks” is the same “social construct” and imagined community (Anderson, 1983) as the “group of Roma”, we would easily foster existing racist public discourse (Podolinská, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Thus, even methodologically correct and neutral “speaking beyond the ethnicity, culture and group” in the case of Roma/Gypsies in Europe may in fact foster their further marginalization and invisibilization. That is why it is extremely important to thematise the impact of labelling in order to improve the sensitivity and reflexivity of our (scientific) language and approach, especially in the case of vulnerable groups and communities.

Last but not least, we want to emphasize that we have concentrated here on the

various forms of the social construction process of the Roma label, in particular, to highlight the need to distinguish analytical and practical categories in the current scientific discourse of Romani studies. However, we also want to emphasize that in employing the critical methodological reflection (of any) abstract or imagined groups/communities we do not automatically “deny the right to their existence”, that is, it does not mean that we are not aware of their social and practical “existence”. On the contrary, these groups/communities work in the realm of practice as real actors with real agendas.

In Romani studies, however, it is necessary to critically reflect on cognitive grasping of social reality as well as our verbalisation of it through categories. People socially construct, create groups of objects and phenomena, categorize, and adopt categorization schemes, and then behave and act on the basis of these schemes. Social construction and its language representations in the form of labels enable us to organize our social practices more efficiently and manage a substantial part of social behaviour (Eriksen, 1995; Brubaker, 2002). We have tried to highlight in the title of the volume (“Why labelling matters”) this “power” of language and social representations, the need for their critical methodological reflection, and finally the ethical “responsibility” for them.

Regarding the above written, this volume of the Slovak Ethnology/Slovenský národopis journal is based on contributions exploring the question how the label “Roma” is conceptualized and used in academia, policies and what is the impact on social construction of collective Roma identities in Europe. This was conceived as a main research objective within the framework of the VEGA project *Label “Roma” – Emic and Ethic Reflections and Social Impact* (VEGA 2/0099/15). This volume of the journal has assembled a group of distinguished authors from various European countries, who are exploring the question of “constructing” “Roma” as a group and attributing them “labels” from different angles and theoretical perspectives.

Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov look at what they call historical and contradictory process in which “labelling” of Roma developed. More specifically, their article explores the question of the relationship between academia on the one hand and the political ideologies on the other. For the authors the most important, but open question is, what is the political responsibility of academia and whether academia is primarily examining the reality and bringing new knowledge, or it is merely presenting the reality according to pre-defined norms.

Sofiya Zahova’s contribution explores the process of ascribing “Roma” labels to various groups in the EU-integration discourse in the Republic of Montenegro. She pointed out the assumption that the definition of the Roma groups was done in the top-down approach. The terminology and ethnonyms implanted from the EU discourse thus, had influenced the state politics of identity regarding supporting and promoting Roma identities. She discusses the impact of this discourse on legislation and agenda of non-governmental organizations, that supposedly aim to flag Romani identity and language, according to the activism models taken from abroad.

Ismael Cortés Gómez, sharing similar research interests, reconstructs the genesis of contemporary debates on Roma in Europe, since the early 1990s. Based on discourse analysis he focuses on official documents and key experts’ opinions in the Europeanization process in the sphere of human and minority rights. The author examines the genesis of EU Roma policies pointing out two core antinomies, which are on the one hand the ethnicity blind liberal conception of individual emancipation and on the other hand the ethno-communitarian conception of collective emancipa-

tion promoted by NGO-networks, which left the power differences in democratic elected bodies and public institutions unaddressed. To overcome such antinomies the author explores different political scenarios, as pathways for Roma equality.

Tomáš Hrustič in his study analysed the opinions of the Framework Convention for Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), which cover the situation of all national minorities in all parties of the Council of Europe who signed and ratified the treaty. While the situation of Roma, Sinti and Travellers is an important issue in most of these documents, the author analysed how the FCNM opinions use the terms Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Gypsies and other appellations in respect to groups and people who are discussed in these texts. According to the author, the FCNM as an instrument which is in existence for 20 years, was authored by various compositions of experts in the Advisory Committee and reflected various trends and socio-political situations in Europe. The author takes advantage of his personal experience as a member of the Advisory Committee between 2014 and 2018 and reflects on the most recent developments in approaches towards labelling the Roma.

Sławomir Kapralski in his paper critically analyses two main approaches to Roma identity, cultural essentialism and social relationism. He argues for a multidimensional concept of identity which would incorporate both the cultural and social perspectives and which would be supplemented by an historical approach. He is building his concept on a volume of empirical data, which he collected in long-term research, in which he intended to show that groups with similar cultural values may have different standpoints regarding some important issues, for example gender constructs, and that culturally different groups may have similar views. The author presents Roma identities as the result of “double encoding” whereby the existential anxieties associated with transgression of the social boundary are transformed into concrete fears related to cultural boundaries, and vice versa. This process is framed in history and he illustrates this impact by the different fate of Polish and Slovak Roma communities during the Holocaust which still influences the way in which these communities encode the boundary between Roma and non-Roma into the boundary between cultural constructs of men and women.

A rather different angle to the construction of Roma identities, and at the same time, a more radical perspective is offered by Jaroslav Šotola, Mario Rodríguez Polo and Daniel Škobla. The authors critically discuss the prevailing construction of Roma in social science of the Slovak and Czech provenience as the “exotic”, problematic and disconnected “others”. For the authors making Roma exotic is a form of analytical escapism, which means that instead of building argumentation on historical, economic and political facts and analysing social and power hierarchies, some social scientists are focusing on phenomena, which are visible on the surface. The authors argue that diverse social positionalities of Roma are often ignored, and Roma are viewed inappropriately as a socially homogeneous group. The authors try to provide inside optics to a different Roma conceptualisation and explore interrelations between the overrepresentation of supposed Roma otherness and the muted existence of dominant non-Roma. Using approaches close to whiteness studies, the authors discuss the role of non-Roma agency and its social power, omnipresent in structures of everyday life, as a key factor in etic constructions of Roma.

Besides these main studies we also decided to include into the volume interesting information from archival research done by Julieta Rotaru on the case of the “Netot” Roma. Her report is an historical and linguistic investigation on this alleged

ethno-professional category, demonstrating that “Netot” was a political construction conceived between 1831–1832 by the Russian administration and the local politicians in order to solve the “problem” of the errant groups, by creating a political reason to dispatch them to the defeated Ottoman Empire. Finally, a reader of this volume will find three reviews of recent publications, all written and edited by scientists from the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

TATIANA ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ,  
*Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, Bratislava*  
DANIEL ŠKOBLA,  
*Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, Bratislava*  
Guest Editors

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Barth, Fr. (Ed.) (1969). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organisation of Cultural Difference*. London: Little, Brown.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). On Symbolic Power. In: J. B. Thompson (Ed.), *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 163–170.
- Bourdieu, P. (1994). Social Space and Symbolic Power. In: L. J. D. Wacquant (Ed.). *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 122–139.
- Brubaker, R. (2002). Ethnicity without groups. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 43(2), 163–189.
- Brubaker, R. (2014). Beyond ethnicity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(5), 804–808.
- Cottaar, A. (1998). The making of a minority: the case of Dutch travellers. In: L. Lucassen, W. Willems, A. Cottaar, (Eds.), *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-Historical Approach*. London: MacMillan, St. Martin, (pp. 114–134).
- Eriksen, Th. H. (1991). Ethnicity versus Nationalism. *Journal of Peace Research*, 28(3), 263–278.
- Eriksen, Th. H. (1995). We and Us: Two Modes of Group Identification. In: *Journal of Peace Research* (32), 427–436.
- Hroch, M. (Ed.) (2003). *Pohledy na národ a nacionalizmus. Čítanka textů*. Praha: SLON.
- Lewis, O. (1966). The Culture of Poverty. In: *Scientific American*, 215(4), 19–25.
- Lucassen, L, Willems, W. Cottaar, A. (Eds.) (1998). *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-Historical Approach*. London: MacMillan, St. Martin.
- Marushiakova, E. et al. (2001). *Identity Formation among Minorities in the Balkans: The cases of Roms, Egyptians and Ashkali in Kosovo*. Sofia: Minority Studies Society “Studii Romani”.
- Marušiaková, J., Popov, V. (2001). Historický osud a súčasné problémy Cigánov/Rómov v strednej a východnej Európe. In: *Etnologické rozpravy*, 8(2), 9–17.
- Podolinská, T. (2015). „Si Róm a môžeš byť kým chceš!”: redefinícia romipen v pentekostálnom pastoračnom diskurze [“You’re a Rom and You Can Be Whoever You Wish to Be!”: Redefinition of Romipen in the Pentecostal Pastoral Discourse]. In T. Podolinská, T. Hrustič (Eds.): *Čierno-biele svety: Rómovia v majoritnej spoločnosti na Slovensku*. Bratislava: IESA SAS, VEDA, Publishing House of SAS, (pp. 480–522).
- Podolinská, T. (2017a). “Roma” Label: The Deconstructed and Reconceptualized Category within the Pentecostal and Charismatic Pastoral Discourse in Contemporary Slovakia. *Journal of Nationalism, Memory*

- & *Language Politics*, 11(2), 146–180. DOI: 10.1515/jnmlp-2017-0007.
- Podolinská, T. (2017b). Roma in Slovakia – Silent and Invisible minority: Social Networking and Pastoral Pentecostal Discourse as a Case of Giving Voice and Positive Visibility. In: *Slovenský národopis*, 65(2), 135–157.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

TATIANA ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ – the Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology (Slovak Academy of Sciences, since 2012). Her career includes having been a visiting professor at the University of Oslo (Norway), *Södertörn* University (Sweden), Masaryk University (Czech Republic), UNAM (Mexico) and Missouri State University (USA). She has participated in several national research projects (Centre of Excellence of SAS Bratislava); European research projects related to Gypsy studies (5FP EU, 6FP EU); and international research projects related to social anthropology (Mexico, Guatemala). As a researcher she is focused on anthropology and sociology of religion (Roma studies, contemporary religiosity and spirituality). In 2012 she was a member of the international project focused on researching Roma Religiosity in Slovakia. In 2010 she was the main coordinator of national project Social inclusion of Romanies in Slovakia via the religious path. In 2014 she was the main national coordinator of international Conference on Romani studies of Gypsy Lore Society held in Bratislava. Currently is the co-editor of a monograph titled *Black and White Worlds – Roma in a majority society in Slovakia*, covering the contributions of 17 experts on Romani Studies. She is one of the founders of the international Network of Academic Institutions on Romani Studies (NAIRS). She is the author of more than 70 articles and scientific studies in peer-reviewed national and international journals.

DANIEL ŠKOBLA – a research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. He obtained a PhD from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. He worked with the United Nations Development Programme and provided technical assistance for the Slovak government regarding the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 and the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies 2020. He has also been involved in Roma advocacy on an international level and cooperated with NGOs such as the European Roma Rights Centre, Amnesty International. He has written academic articles as well as chapters in books on social inclusion and Roma integration. Further information at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daniel\\_Skobla](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daniel_Skobla)