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'We'll Help Ourselves, but What's in It for Us?' Conflict, Development and Social Mobility among Roma in Romania

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Roma-related development and policy discourse often represents the Roma development 'subjects' as disempowered victims. Against the pervasiveness of such narratives, a close look at the local level conflicts arising during the implementation of a World Bank development project in destitute Roma communities from Romania lays bare the strategies of unassisted social mobility in which a group of Roma engage. Not large or well-defined enough to be constituted into a real 'class' in sociological terms, this strategic group is made up of Roma civil servants (mediators, local experts, Romani language teachers) who negotiate their engagement in development projects on their own terms and use the material and immaterial resources that projects offer to enact their own upward social mobility. Often, though, this comes at the cost of a growing socio-economic gap between themselves and the most destitute parts of Roma communities, which complicates their involvement in development projects. The article underlines the necessity of taking into account both the strategies of unassisted social mobility of Roma development brokers, and the internal power imbalances that the development apparatus inevitably ends up producing in Roma communities.

Key words: Roma communities, social mobility, inclusion, community leaders, strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the literature addressing social mobility among the Roma from Central and Eastern Europe does so in the context of transnational migration following the fall of the Berlin Wall (Grill, 2015; Matras and Leggio, 2017; Durst, 2018; Ivasiuc, 2018a; Pontrandolfo, 2018; Racleș, 2018). Such studies explore the agency of migrant Roma and how they build and

utilize various forms of capital for their social mobility. In contrast, the field of development and policy interventions is still very sparsely explored in connection with the social mobility of Roma (but see van Baar, 2011, 2012; on the migration-development nexus, see Durst and Nyírő, 2018). This blind spot is due to two interrelated issues. The first is what I noted elsewhere (Ivasiuc, 2018b) as the prevalence of an approach in which the Roma figure rather as mere passive subjects of policies and projects, which, in turn, are framed in terms of 'social inclusion' or 'integration'. The second is the continuous interest in explaining why projects and policies 'fail' (Rostas, 2019), or, in other words, why there is a discrepancy between interventions and their implementation (van Baar, 2012). This approach prioritizes a policy analysis frame which often overlooks the agency of the Roma themselves. This article aims at filling this gap in scholarship on social mobility among the Roma in Romania by drawing upon the anthropology of development literature that emphasizes the creative and resisting agency of development 'subjects', and the ways in which they enact their own strategies of upward social mobility by using the resources – both material and immaterial – that development projects make available to them.

This article focuses on a World Bank development project implemented in over one hundred destitute Roma communities in Romania between 2008 and 2010, and analyses how strategies of social mobility become visible through the conflicts played out in the development encounter. This approach aims at emphasizing the agency of various Roma groups in devising their own strategies of social mobility within the existing policy and development frameworks. After a short description of the project logic and methodology, I map the social context of its implementation against the background of the emergence of a strategic group of Roma civil servants and development brokers. Then, I analyse various instances of conflict during the project implementation and discuss how they exemplify a strategy of social mobility that is often overlooked as such when the prevalent framing of analysis is that of project 'failure', or of a mismatch between project design and implementation. Besides contributing to understanding the agency of Roma groups in undertaking social mobility trajectories within the context of development and policy interventions, the article also underscores the intra-ethnic power asymmetries at local level that the development and policy machineries inevitably end up perpetuating or producing.

EMPOWERING THE ROMA?

Between 2008 and 2010, the World Bank funded a large scale community development project aimed at empowering Roma communities in Romania, intervening at a grassroots level in approximately one hundred of the most destitute Roma settlements. The aim of the project was the empowerment of the Roma to become equal partners in the local decision-making process. The project was implemented by a Roma organization from Bucharest, and I joined the project in its second year of implementation. I served as the monitoring and evaluation expert of the project, following its deployment over the course of the two years, and drafting the project's intermediary and final reports. While conducting my monthly assessments, I read hundreds of reports from the field, carried out field visits in some of the project's locations, and held discussions with the various staff intervening in the communities. From the onset, the great diversity of the Roma communities involved in the project needs to be emphasized. While they had in common the overrepresentation among the poorer segments of Romanian society, the communities and groups that were involved in the project spanned various Roma denominations (such as Ursari, Kalderash,

Lingurari, Rudari, Lăutari, Khorakhané, and 'Romanianized Roma'), various degrees of observance of 'traditional' cultural rituals, Orthodox, Neo-Protestant, and Muslim groups, as well as both Romani and non-Romani-speaking communities. Reflecting the diversity of the communities involved, this article does not suggest that all the Roma groups deploy the same resistance strategies and the same forms of agency and my conclusions should not be read as an attempt to essentialize the agency of Roma groups.

The project followed the well-known method of community development, whose methodology consists of a progressive transfer of knowledge and skills from the community facilitators employed within the project to local initiative groups. The transfer aimed at building the necessary skills in identifying local needs and resources and advocating for concrete improvements. Such a learning process is grounded in the capacity of palpable results to foster confidence so that communities constitute themselves as equal partners of dialogue in matters related to local development. In a nutshell, what is often framed as a disempowered community largely ignorant both of its own needs, and of its own resources, is supposed to learn how to solve its own problems and, in the process, gain confidence. The methodology of community development is framed as participatory, and the role of the project staff is to guide the community towards its own empowerment.

There are, of course, many issues with this approach, in particular for large-scale, short-term projects such as the one studied here, in which the difficulty to reach substantial social change in two years with resources spread thinly over a hundred communities – moreover, very diverse in themselves – should be evident from the start. The literature on development critiques the approach of community development as a neoliberal self-help technology ignoring the structural conditions of the production of inequalities (Berner and Phillips, 2005; Gómez, Corradi, Goulart, Namara, 2010). Cerasela Voiculescu (2017), for instance, uses the lens of neoliberal governmentality to analyse such policy technologies and their workings in Roma communities in Romania. The 'will to empower' (Cruikshank, 1999), or, alternatively, to 'improve' (Li, 2007) is critically deconstructed as a narrative that mystifies power relations within the development paradigm. The philosophy of community development betrays a paternalistic view of communities as essentially disempowered and largely ignorant of their own needs and resources, and constructs the development staff as saviours (Stenroos, 2020). 'Community' is taken for granted and internal power relations are often silenced. Also, there is little concern for a critical assessment of the power positions that both the 'community' and the staff inhabit in relation to each other. Importantly, rather than tackling structural problems of inequality and racism, the rationale of community development places the onus for social change on the subaltern communities themselves, implicitly strengthening the neoliberal narrative of self-help, as well as the idea that the subaltern are somehow responsible for their own predicament through what is perceived, in essentializing and racializing ways, as 'lack of agency' (see also Matache, 2017). By taking communities to be disempowered and ignorant, this approach not only ignores forms of local knowledge on power relations between the community and the more powerful groups at local level, but also power differentials within the 'community' itself. Finally, project staff that operates within the framework of employment is also necessarily embedded in unequal power relations with the organization implementing the project – not to mention the complexities of the relationship between donors that fund such projects and the implementing organizations themselves. Many of the contradictions of Romani civil society, which simultaneously – and ambivalently – inhabits various forms of activism and development roles, have been outlined in scholarly literature (Fosztó and Anăstăsoaie, 2001; Vermeersch, 2005; Kóczé and Trehan, 2009; van Baar, 2011; Kóczé and Rövid, 2012; Acton, Rostas, Ryder, 2014; Voiculescu 2017; Ivasiuc, 2018b; Law and Kovats,

2018; van Baar and Kóczé, 2020). The space within which development and policy implementation takes place, then, is no doubt very complex – a complexity which is lost in representations of Roma as homogeneous development 'subjects' (for an outstanding ethnography of Roma policy implementation in Finland that discusses these issues, see Stenroos, 2020).

Following Thomas Bierschenk (1988) and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2005), we can conceptualize the field of deployment of the development project as an arena, defined as a social space in which the development intervention brings together various actors who develop strategies harnessed to different goals, and diverging logics and rationalities dictated by different positions within existing power relations, coming into conflict with each other. Instances of conflict during the project implementation revealed the strategies, as well as the boundary-making work, of a particular group of Roma who, over the last three decades roughly, has been engaged in a protracted process of social mobility closely linked to Roma-related development and policy interventions. Within this frame, they act as local level intermediaries or 'development brokers' (Neubert, 1996; Lewis and Mosse, 2006), often securing temporary employment in projects run by larger organizations. They are an essential link in the development chain and, in a paradigm that requires 'active participation' and 'grassroots involvement', they use their privileged local-level position to negotiate their access to various kinds of resources. Because of the relative intensity of Roma-related projects and policy interventions in Romania since the early nineties, they have been able to capitalize on their position and bring about, for themselves and their extended family networks, a process of social mobility. Not large enough or marked enough to constitute a 'class' in the sociological sense, they are, however, what in the anthropology of development has been called a 'strategic group' (Evers and Schiel, 1988; Bierschenk, 1988).

MEDIATORS, EXPERTS, COUNCILORS: A ROMA STRATEGIC GROUP IN SOCIAL ASCENSION

The concept of 'strategic group', taken to be a fundamentally empirical and methodological notion, stems originally from Evers and Schiel (1988). The notion, applied empirically by Thomas Bierschenk (1988) in the analysis of a development project implemented in Benin, and following Olivier de Sardan (2005: 191), is 'built on the simple supposition that all actors in a given community do not share identical interests or concepts and that, depending on the problem, their interests and concepts produce different combinations, but not haphazardly so'. Strategic groups are, then, 'social aggregates of a more empirical and variable nature, which defend common interests, especially by means of social and political action' (ibidem). The development vocabularies and narratives tend to erase the social stratification of the target communities, representing common interests as prevailing, while downplaying diverging and conflicting interests.

Among the Roma in Romania, the strategic group emerging at local level consists of civil servants appointed within the mechanism of implementation of various policies aimed at Roma 'inclusion': school mediators, health mediators, local Roma experts, Romani language teachers, but also elected councilors within the local councils, whether from the Roma Party or, more rarely, other political parties.[1] They reflect the same diversity in terms of group

1 In practice, it is also possible to accumulate several of these roles.

denomination, religion, use of the Romani language and of rituals as their communities, but tend to have a similar educational capital because the position of mediator or Roma expert presupposes a level of education equivalent to at least ISCED 2 (in Romania, eight classes). Due to their ability to mobilize resources and to network, they often embody the figure of 'community leaders'. Since they tend to be enterprising, rely on well-developed networks of key civil servants at local, regional, and often also national level, and possess the symbolic and cultural resources to engage in development projects, they appear to central development organizations as ideal actors to be involved at local level. Organizations seeking to implement projects at grassroots level invariably involve them in their interventions and in so doing consolidate their power in local communities. Such investments have spurred their relatively rapid social ascension through employment in civil service and development projects, and they have become crucial nodal points of resource accumulation and redistribution that have increased and consolidated their power in relation to Roma communities. Their often problematic relationship with other segments of their Roma communities is either ignored or downplayed during the process of selection for development projects.

Within the project, the local initiative groups were overwhelmingly made up of civil servants belonging to this strategic group. Co-opting them in the project was both easy and strategic, since the responsibility to support the implementation of projects for the benefit of the Roma is part of their official job description, and through their employment they often have direct access to decision-makers at a local level. The project allocated small sums of money for the implementation of initiatives and provided civil servants with the opportunity to use the project resources to carry out activities for which there is, often, limited or no budget from the local administration.

A plethora of projects, measures, and policies focused over the last three decades on training mediators and experts and building their capacity to act as development actors. Among the most well-known and best supported institutionally, it is worth mentioning the Council for Europe ROMED and ROMACT initiatives, aiming at developing the capacities and skills of Roma mediators across Europe to act as 'bridges' between Roma communities and local authorities. Such programs have received scholarly criticism for re-enacting a deeply ambivalent relationship of subordination of the Roma to the interests of local authorities, which, through the institution of the mediator, gained control of communities and reproduced racialized hierarchies (Kyuchukov, 2012; Clark, 2017; Kóczé, 2019).

Training and capacity building programs like ROMED, ROMACT, and many others, facilitated the construction of networks between participants, as well as the exchange of information and practices, which in turn shaped similar strategies with regards to their work, their relationship with the communities they serve, or the local authorities who sometimes employ them. They find themselves in similar positions both in relation to larger Roma organizations that may employ them for short-term projects, and to the communities for which they work in such interventions. Because they often belong to the communities in which they work on development projects, they also act as social actors in their everyday social roles, which further complicates their work and generates many of the conflicts observable within development interventions. The ubiquity of such conflicts, however, is silenced by the need to report a smooth implementation process that would ensure further employment in development projects. Although development organizations are very much aware of the strategies of local staff to embellish their reports, conflicts tend to be side-lined: they are either ignored, or attempts are made to 'solve' them as quickly as possible so that they do not stall or jeopardize project implementation, and, at any rate, so that they do not look problematic in reports to donors. Moreover, the project design itself often includes an

'early warning system' set in place to swiftly solve 'problems' and conflicts liable to stall project implementation.

In many cases, members of the strategic group of civil servants or elected councilors belong to the same kinship networks. Sometimes, they create non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to facilitate their access to development resources channelled through projects that aim at local-level capacity building. Instead of being what development jargon calls Community-Based Organizations, many grassroots Roma NGOs straddle across kinship alliances rather than institutionalized structures of citizens' networks. Critics of the current paradigm of the Romani movement have coined such organizations the 'ethno-business' (Kóczé and Trehan, 2009: 66) or 'Gypsy industry' of development aimed at Roma (Cossée, 2000; Trehan, 2001, 2009; Rorke and Wilkens, 2006; Rostas, 2009). Their organization along kinship networks increases their exposure to social control manifested through gossip and to what is framed as 'envy' from other members of the community.

The theme of envy surfaces frequently in communities. Projected onto opponents, envy participates in a politics of accusation that regulates not only moral behaviour (Hughes, Mehtta, Bresciani, Strange, 2019), but also social mobility, in particular in 'limited goods' societies where 'shared poverty' constitutes a principle of social organization (Foster, 1972: 168). Scholars have noted the tendency towards egalitarianism among many Roma groups (Stewart, 1997; Plainer, 2012), as a propensity towards symmetrical relationships. Social and economic progress as individuals or family networks signifies a breach of moral rules and stirs up conflicts, brushed away as 'envy' by those engaged in upward social mobility who fail to redistribute their gains among the group. The expectation of redistribution figures in expressions such as 'let her / his mouth eat too' (*lasă să mănânce și gura ei / lui*) often heard; however, moral precepts such as this circulate not only among Roma, but also among poorer, typically rural Romanian communities.

The prevalence of the theme of envy shows the extent of ongoing dynamics of social mobility. Inversely, the extent of criticism expressed by deprived community members with regards to the better-offs is equally revealing of mechanisms of social control in regards to upward social mobility. The pressure on the better-offs to let others share in their wealth leads to expectations to accommodate, if not an egalitarian sharing of resources, at least a trickle-down logic through which the benefits bestowed on them are passed onto the poorer segments. In practice, this seldom happens.

Social control dynamics put the strategic group of Roma civil servants in a difficult position: the material benefits of their office – limited as they may be[2] – create tensions through which various segments of the community may reject or resist their participation within development projects that requires the involvement of the community at large. The social organization along kinship lines compounds this effect: more often than not, whenever several positions of civil service for the Roma are available in the same community, they tend to be occupied along kinship lines, thus favouring a single family or kinship group which accumulates positions and material benefits and monopolizes the role of development brokers. For development operators, they are the entry points in the communities and in this position they have the power to shape perceptions, articulate 'needs', use the development jargon and channel aid towards certain groups or goals. In so doing, they acquire the power to decide on the concrete ways of channeling benefits towards the community, which in turn strengthens

2 School and health mediators are paid at the lowest level of the pay scale. At the time of my research this amounted to less than 150 euro monthly for a full-time position.

their position, grants them access to development resources, and supports their upward mobility, while often deepening the gulf between them and the rest of the community.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR US? THE LOGICS OF BARGAINING

Conflicts are a methodological entry point into the analysis of social mobility because they reveal the conflicting social logics at play and the clashing goals that underline them within the development encounter. Various loci from which conflicts arise lead to various strategies, which could emphasize either negotiation, or silent forms of resistance, side-tracking, and appropriation of project resources – symbolic, social, or material. In this section, I will focus on the logic of bargaining, through which civil servants engage in development projects, but do so on their own terms. Conflicts arise, then, from their attempts to shape the space of their engagement in projects on their own terms.

Since the strategic group of Roma civil servants is situated at the confluence between several axes of pressures and interests, they accumulate contradictions: they must ensure that their own interests are defended, but they are also invested in protecting the interests of the institutions of which they are part. Not seldom, being part of a development project implemented by a larger, non-local organization might mean that one of their goals is to put pressure on the local administration, which in practice employs them in their roles as mediators or local experts and in so doing exerts considerable power on their actions. Elected councilors, too, find themselves in political alliances that might hinder their advocacy for particular projects. This sort of ambivalence requires strategic choices when the interests of various institutions come to clash. Often, this amounts to creative ways of implementing projects that are completely disconnected or even at odds with the stated project goals. This, then, is one of the analytic pathways to explore the gap between projects and policies as intended, and their often ambivalent results.

Facilitators and staff from local-level NGOs were involved in the project on a very precarious, short term basis (in two unequal periods that totalled sixteen months between 2008 and 2010),[3] and far from the direct control of the central project team located in Bucharest. Since facilitators often combined civil service at local level with short-time employment in development projects, and moreover inhabited social roles in the settings in which they carried out the project's activities, their strategic choices were largely dictated by their own interests in the local setting, and to a much lesser extent by the project goals. Very understandably, precarious employment, of course, exacerbated this tendency.

The participatory methodology of the project requiring the 'active participation' of local initiative groups generated a requirement that put the facilitators in a position likely to lead to bargaining from the start. The members of communities grasped correctly the pressure exerted on the facilitators to carry out the project's activities with their involvement: regular community meetings, the process of identifying needs and resources, proposing solutions, and implementing the plan accordingly. For all these activities and the time required for them, they were not receiving any immediate material benefits. Instead of naively assuming the good intentions of the facilitator or the organization, many local initiative groups understood that

3 Moreover, the second component of the project (implemented between 2009 and 2010) was subject to the intermediary evaluation and subsequent decision by the World Bank to continue funding the project. In practice, this meant that the facilitators were uncertain whether they were going to continue in the second part of the project and had to remain on standby for a few months.

the participatory methodology granted them bargaining power in relation to the project facilitator, and used the opportunity for advancing their own interests by proposing various transactions in exchange for their participation. Instead of remaining, as designed, a goal in itself aimed at eliciting collaborative behaviour from community members towards a common goal, participation in the project activities became the object of bargaining that the strategic group of Roma civil servants or individuals aspiring to this status used for their own benefit. Rarely did the initiative groups still in place at the end of the project extend past the group of civil servants, aspirants to this status and their close kin. The concrete benefits which they perceived as a likely result of their involvement in project activities dictated their participation, as well as the terms of their engagement. Through this lens, the oft-heard question 'What's in it for us?', which may seem counter-intuitive given the goal of empowerment and the promises of self-help advocated by the project, becomes intelligible from the perspective of the bargaining logic, through which the groups seek concrete and immediate capital building opportunities while instating a relationship of equality with the facilitators.

Bargaining towards the group's goals involved offering access to the various resources needed for the project's implementation. Initiative groups offered facilitators to support them in gathering community members to participate to meetings, but also unpaid time, space (which was sometimes the courtyard of one of the members), their lobby power in relation with the local administration that employed them, or even the simple acceptance to perform the script of the project as set in its methodology. In exchange, they expected the facilitator to strengthen the position of the group on the local scene, either by bringing resources which they could then frame as a personal success and transform into social or electoral capital, or by building symbolic capital through their inclusion in higher status networks or strengthening one's kinship or political network.

Examples of overt bargaining abound in the project. For instance, in one of the most destitute counties from the northern part of the country, the local leader of the Roma Party from one of the communities was appointed leader of the local initiative group. Shortly afterwards, he conditioned his support for community meetings, alongside the participation of the other members of the initiative group, on the facilitator joining the Roma Party. The young, highly educated and respected facilitator was, moreover, particularly well-networked and recognized by many Roma and non-Roma organizations as an exceptional professional, so he was well included in the development apparatus and often employed in a wide range of projects. Seen as an asset and an important link in a chain that would have brought more resources to the Roma Party, the facilitator found himself in a difficult position, since the leader of the Roma Party was himself highly influential at local and regional level. The success of the project depended on his support in lobbying the local administration, and the Roma Party leader used his influence to bargain. Several meetings, a lot of diplomacy, as well as the intervention of the regional supervisor, another well-known Roma activist with great influence at regional level, were necessary to convince the Roma Party leader that the facilitator did not intend to join the party.

In about a quarter of all the communities involved in the project, the local project that the initiative groups pushed for aimed at lobbying so that the local public authorities hire a Roma civil servant in its structures – whether it be a health mediator, a school mediator, a local Roma expert, or a village delegate.[4] This meant that those qualified and hoping for

4 The village delegate, according to law 215/2001 regarding the public administration (article 55), is equivalent to an elected representative. Her/his vote is consultative in matters regarding the village.

such a position within the local administration participated as members – and often leaders – of the initiative groups. In exchange for their participation to community meetings, the facilitators were supposed to conduct lobby activities for their appointment to office. The argument that their appointment to office aimed at attaining long-term benefits for the entire community served to reframe the more pragmatic interests of those aiming for acquiring the position. For the facilitator, the transaction acted in mutually beneficial ways: the person supported the project activities according to the official script in exchange for prospective employment. This, however, also played out as gift-giving: support for access to office implied that the future civil servant will integrate the facilitator's own network of possible clients and partners in future projects and is expected to return the 'gift' from his or her new position as unconditional support. In this way, social capital can again be transformed into economic capital through employment in future development projects. Generally, once a facilitator or an organization start working in a particular community, there is the tendency, if the facilitator manages to expand and strengthen their network at local level and to successfully navigate the various interests, to continue to introduce it as a target in new project proposals. In turn, this facilitates the formation of networks between development brokers and the strategic group of Roma civil servants, through which development resources are accessed and further distributed. Thus, groups which once were on opposed sides at the negotiation table of a given project form collaborative networks in another project. In practice, the relationship between development agents and the strategic group of Roma civil servants acts as a very fluid one, in which positions and roles shift according to their access to the resources of a given project. Very importantly, moreover, mediators may themselves become development agents once they are introduced in a project that remunerates them. Behind the stage on which a development project is supposed to be played out, developers and the strategic group of Roma civil servants form coalitions, alliances, and networks in order to strengthen their position and advance their social mobility interests through access to development resources and networks. The prevailing logic which governs these relationships is the bargaining logic, which forms a sort of hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) behind the public transcript of the development discourse based on concepts of participation, self-help and empowerment which are much more distant in relation to the social logics ruling local relations.

In one of the south-western counties, the local initiative group consisting of the school mediator, the local expert and a Roma councilor attempted to bargain with the facilitator by framing in transactional terms their participation in community meetings. In exchange for their participation and cooperation, they requested that the facilitator bring in the necessary resources for repairing the main road of access to the community. This would have fit snugly the methodology of the project, in which a common need is identified and the group lobbies for its resolution. However, the group did not play the script supposed to be performed within the project: it did not act disempowered and did not wait to be 'taught' problem identification or negotiation skills. Instead, it proved to be already skilled at negotiating its participation in the project on its own terms. This created a conflict between the group and the facilitator, who, at a loss for the relationship not being played out according to the known and expected script, formulated the situation as a 'blackmail attempt'. The conflict escalated to the regional level, and it was suggested that the community be excluded from the project altogether for playing such 'power games'.

Many Roma communities in which projects have been implemented acquired a critical attitude towards the development paradigm, grasping very accurately that the facilitator is, to some degree, self-interested, simply for receiving a salary within the project. Nothing

comes for free, they know. Precisely this is the logic that dictates the oft-heard question 'What's in it for us if we participate in the project?', which often signals the beginning of a more or less overt bargaining process. There is a sense of refusal to participate in the development performance, in which a supposedly altruistic logic brings a higher status entity or individual to bestow benefits on a supposedly helpless, lower status group. The fact that many Roma 'don't buy' the altruistic discourse of development stems from the inherently suspicious relationship with outsiders, be they non-Roma or not, which many communities developed as a result of their subordination.

The project team was not always oblivious to this deeper layer of interaction. While everyone was aware that some of the best and most effective ways of obtaining from the local authorities and the local leaders what could solve the community needs was lobbying behind closed doors and using influence along political lines, much less resistance was expected from the Roma civil servants themselves. The project team tended to take for granted not only their position in relation with the project and the facilitator, but also their unconditional adoption of the project logic and the rules of the game. This was far from being the case. Behind the assumption that the Roma will unconditionally accept to play the game according to the project's script lurks a pervasive image of disempowerment that I explored more in detail elsewhere (Ivasiuc, 2018b), showing how the development apparatus generates and feeds this imaginary of passivity even among the most well-intentioned.

Paradoxically, when those belonging to the strategic group of Roma civil servants refused to play the game by rules other than their own and displayed a degree of empowerment that contradicted the project's logic and its very necessity, their refusal was taken to be yet more proof of inferior subalternity. The Roma – so the interpretation went – were incapable of understanding that it was for their own good to play the game, but – and this remained unspoken – they always had to play it within the boundaries of their own subalternity.

CONCLUSION

The conflicts arising during the project point at strategies of social mobility enacted by the strategic group of Roma civil servants. Their inscription in the project of social mobility often delegitimizes and problematizes their engagement for the benefit of the communities for which they work, since it tends to create a gap between themselves and the more destitute segments of the community. To advance their upward mobility, they tend to combine strategies: in several cases, Roma men and women managed to secure a position as civil servants and after a short period of time they resigned in order to engage in a migratory project that looked more advantageous in financial terms. In their upward mobility, Roma civil servants harness all available resources. In Neo-Protestant communities, for example, they tend to use the opportunity of resources channelled through church organisations to strengthen their position and increase their legitimacy in the community. In villages and towns with a strong migratory tendency, they move between seasonal migration and civil service, often resorting to informal deals with the public authority in order to balance both strategies. Whenever possible, since all these forms of resource acquisition are precarious and uncertain, they engage in a triple strategy moving between migration, community work through church organisations, and civil service.

The project acted indeed as an opportunity for empowerment, but in rather different ways than the project initially charted. For the most part, it ended up strengthening the position of the strategic group of Roma civil servants and local leaders, expanding their

networks through appointment of more civil servants, or opening up new paths of access to resources. Ultimately, instead of functioning as a technology of citizenship aimed at increasing the participation of Roma in local decision making, the project became appropriated as a technology of capital building and engagement towards social mobility of a rather limited group, illustrating what Berner (2010) calls 'exclusive participation'. By strengthening the position of the strategic group of Roma civil servants, the project supported their empowerment, providing them with resources and mechanisms of access to resources that could contribute to combating their subordination to non-Roma within a project of upward social mobility. By providing knowledge, tools and entry into various networks within the development configuration, it fostered their empowerment in terms of capabilities. However, it can hardly be said that prior to the project they were in a state of complete powerlessness: they actively set up strategies to bargain, side-track and appropriate the project to support their social mobility.

The fact that Roma civil servants were members of the initiative groups concealed the gap which tends to emerge between themselves and the more destitute groups of Roma communities as a direct result of their social mobility. In the blind spot were the social distance and tensions between the strategic group of civil servants and poorer segments of the communities, which, in most cases, made a truly bottom-up intervention practically nearly impossible, in a dynamic that has been found elsewhere, too (de Wit and Berner, 2009). But the involvement of the strategic group of civil servants was essential in the project, since they constitute points of entry both into the communities and the local administration. This position makes them in fact very powerful in relation to the development apparatus based on 'active participation' methodologies: if they are excluded from the initiative groups, they have the power to obstruct community work and, to some extent, also lobby efforts towards the local authority. The gap between this strategic group and the poorer segments of the communities, however, may lead to the latter deciding to withdraw and silently sabotage the project if they feel that the immediate gains are not shared equally, and this was the case in several communities.

The article underlines the necessity of gaining deeper insights from Roma communities in terms of power relations and the agency and strategies which various groups harness to reach their social mobility goals. The reactions and refusals of members of the community to partake in a project without negotiating the terms of engagement need to be decoded within a framework that takes into consideration the various logics at play in the community, as well as the interests of each group, including in relation to the development agents or state actors implementing policies from above. Many Roma are engaged in engineering their own, unassisted project of social mobility, which often remains invisible to those purporting to 'empower' or 'develop' them, and may counter such external attempts.

Numerous critical Romani studies scholars and Romani activists have been advocating over the last decade for a policy and development paradigm firmly grounded in the grassroots participation of Roma in the implementation of policies and projects to their benefit. 'Inclusive community development' (Ryder, Cemlyn, Acton, 2014), for example, is posited as a promising intervention paradigm respectful of the wish of Roma rights advocates that the Roma be involved at every step of the process. The motto 'Nothing about Us without Us' (Ryder, Rostas, Taba, 2014) challenges the exclusion of Roma from initiatives aimed at improving their lives, but inadvertently also obfuscates the internal power differentials in any Roma community that complicates the picture of the various interests at stake when resources are involved, maintaining the notion of a unitary grassroots level 'us' that, as my article shows, is as illusory as the supposed passivity of the Roma.

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