

Social Mobility and Political Engagement of the Roma Across Europe. Introduction to the Special Issue

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Roma in Europe regularly appear amongst the groups most at risk of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, according to research findings. There are several disadvantages for this ethnic group: poverty linked to demographic conditions, poverty caused by unemployment, poverty caused by exclusion from the labour market or discrimination and lack of education. The worst is the situation of the part of the Roma population living in segregated settlements. The widely discussed so-called Roma question and its conceptualization are an immanent part of the academic or applied research as well as design and implementation of public policies.

In the last decades, the interest of researchers has been focused mainly on the analysis of various structural problems related to Roma living conditions, but relatively little interest focused on the phenomenon of the vertical upward social mobility of the Roma. Recently, several works and studies, however, have emerged that have been focused on the social mobility of the Roma (e.g. Šotola, Rodríguez Polo, 2017; Grill, 2015). Some authors have highlighted interesting correlations regarding the social mobility of the Roma, for example, with the migration from Central Europe to the UK (Grill, 2017) or with the influence of religious movements and the secondary social networks of Roma (Podolinská, Hrustič, 2010), respectively with the acquisition of the economic and social and symbolic capital of loan sharks in their attempts at social mobility (Hrustič, 2015). 'Hard' data on Roma of a sociological and anthropological nature were primarily obtained by monitoring probes of various pan-European institutions and qualitative research in the socially and geographically excluded localities. These research projects focused on individual aspects of the living conditions of Roma, or on particular thematic topics such as education, the labour market, and so on. This research was often commissioned and implemented by academic institutions, international NGOs (OSI, Amnesty International) as well as organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and so on. Many synthesizing reports have emerged (European Roma Rights Center, World Bank, Open Society Institute; Ringold, Orenstein, Wilkens, 2005) that provided data on specific areas of Roma life. At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a significant shift in research practice by the application of a method of territorial mapping of Roma settlements in Slovakia and elsewhere, which was based on the assumption that the Roma population lives in certain spatial entities, enclaves (either within villages, on their borders or in segregated settlements). Based on this territorial approach, the selection of primary sampling units (PSU) for surveys (e.g. Filadelfiová,

Gerbery, Škobla, 2006; Filadelfiová, Gerbery, 2012) on living conditions and intergenerational reproduction of Roma poverty was also established. Nevertheless, Roma social mobility research has been underdeveloped and as such has so far not been at the focus of a major long-term anthropological research.

Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences played an important role in the synthesis of ethnological and anthropological knowledge of Roma communities in Slovakia, which resulted in a summary publication of *The Black and White Worlds: Roma in the Majority Society of Slovakia* (Podolinská, Hrustič, 2015) or in many other research studies funded by the Scientific Grant Agency VEGA scheme. Because, as has been pointed out, although the different structural factors related to the living conditions of the Roma are proportionately mapped out, a further necessary step in this context is enquiry into social mobility and the possibility of marginalised Roma to escape from the vicious circle of poverty and exclusion. In this context, it is necessary that research and data collection practices on the living conditions of marginalised Roma, despite providing a broad picture of the phenomenon of social exclusion, should provide comprehensive information in order to understand the relationship between social structure and ethnicity. In this context, a complex nexus between structure and ethnicity needs to be examined in the context of the development of social inequalities and social mobility across society and not only within Roma communities.

This special issue focused on ethnic dimensions in social relations has emerged as part of the project VEGA nr. 2/0066/19: “Patterns of social mobility of the Roma in the light of empirical research. Critical reflection of existing practices and collection of new data”. As part of this broader project, this issue aims to understand what were conceptions and real possibilities of Roma social mobility both in diachronic and geographic perspectives. The phenomenon is analysed here from various angles and it includes articles exploring ideas and real possibilities for Roma social advance from a pan-European perspective but also within countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania. Moreover, with this collection of articles we attempt to explore the multitude of ways in which Roma are experienced in everyday life in diverse European contexts. We connect and place into this volume social science research in an interdisciplinary perspective. As a result, this collection of papers explores the differentiated regionally and diachronically, distinctive experiences.

The collection opens with Will Guy’s article (Guy, 2020), which draws on the author’s experience as an ethnological researcher and as an investigator evaluating Roma inclusion programmes since 1969. The author critically compares Roma experience of the key role of employment in the period of socialism with the experience during the post socialist era. It comes to the conclusion that in the last two or three decades, the majority of Roma remain largely excluded from mainstream society in spite of many pan-European initiatives by EC or international NGOs and Romas’ own considerable efforts to improve their economic and social standing. According to Guy, this situation poses a threat not only to Roma themselves but to the social and political stability of the countries in which they live.

Exploring the relationship between social structure and ethnicity, Václav Walach critically analyses the phenomenon of antigypsyism¹. The author asserts (Walach, 2020)

1 There are various forms of referring to negative sentiments and expressions of hatred and violence against the Roma in the academic literature, such as antigypsyism, anti-Gypsyism, anti-gypsyism, anti-Roma racism, etc. To use uniform terminology in this volume we will use antigypsyism, and we are aware that these terms are subjected to a broad discussion, see for example McGarry, 2017. Václav Walach, in his paper in this volume (Walach, 2020: 324) refers to more sources on this discussion.

that there is a lack of studies specifying how ideology can enhance the understanding of antigypsyism both as a concept and empirical phenomenon. In the paper he explores the potential of the Lacanian theory of ideology as exemplified by Slavoj Žižek for developing antigypsyism research. In doing so, Walach presents a Žižekian analysis of issues that correspond to different aspects of the antigypsyist phenomenon identified via ethnographic research among the non-Roma inhabitants of a declining neighbourhood with a significant Roma presence in the Czech lands.

Markéta Hajscká's historical excursion into the 1950s represents a case study of a family of Vlach Roms from Slovakia, who were one of the few Romani groups still on the move in the mid-1950s, and who were later forced to settle in the towns of Louny and Žatec in north-western Bohemia (Hajscká, 2020). Against this background the author focuses on some aspects of the Czechoslovak assimilation policy of the 1950s on 'itinerant gypsies', designed to limit their mobility, which is represented mainly by the implementation of the Law on the Permanent Settlement of Itinerant Persons. Using a combination of oral history methods among Vlach Romani eye-witnesses, and of archival research, the author describes some aspects of local process of the implementation of the Law and on selected impacts of the registration of itinerant and semi-itinerant people.

Ana Ivasiuc in her contribution (Ivasiuc, 2020) focuses on Roma-related development discourses, which according to her, often represent the Roma development 'subjects' as disempowered victims. The author focuses on the implementation of a World Bank development project within Roma communities in Romania. In the author's opinion, a group of Roma engaged in the project, made up of Roma civil servants, 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, 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 author 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.

Not only ethnographic research, but also cinematographic works can uncover how ideas about the social order and social advancement of ethnic minorities are conceptualised in society. In this assumption, Daniel Škobla focuses his analysis on two Czech and Slovak films, which emerged in the early 1950s, and in the 2010s, respectively (Škobla, 2020). Theoretically his study offers a mix of approaches from film studies, social anthropology, post-colonial studies and archival research. The film *My Friend Fabián* (1953) is full of colonial tropes of uninhibited dancing, singing and exotica stereotypes and depicts imaginary Roma as incompetent individuals. At the same time this film presents a viable model for Roma integration and social advancement via education and full-fledged integration into the working class. In contrast, the film *Gypsy* (2010), while much more respectful towards Roma, portrays the young Roma protagonist who has no prospects and opportunities for social advance whatsoever.

Tomáš Hrustič's paper discusses the outcomes of power asymmetries in Slovak municipalities with Roma population and presents examples how local Roma leaders resist the non-Roma dominance by active participation in local elections (Hrustič, 2020). Presenting data from field research and long-term repeated observations, the paper shows successful strategies of elected Roma mayors who disrupt the usual perception of the Roma as objects of decision-making process and passive recipients of various policies. In these paternalistic beliefs Roma have never been seen as actors who can control resources, who could hold the political power and who could decide how to use the resources. Although the Roma have

penetrated the power structures of many municipalities, they are not able to wipe out invisible ethnic boundaries, or, at least, to soften and disrupt them. However, as the text illustrates, it seems that the political power asymmetries in a significant number of municipalities are being balanced, nevertheless, the symbolic dominance and symbolic power of non-Roma still persists.

Finally, Jan Grill explores (Grill, 2020) Roma social mobilities and trajectories in relation to particular mechanisms of sub-contracting and of unequal distribution of capital in the field of EU funded projects for socially excluded populations in Europe. He discusses some of the struggles for possible mobilities and its structural limits amidst continuing production and reproduction of privileges and structural constraints. When examining some aspects of the Roma development project 'industry', he is interested in the mechanisms and hierarchies and who counts as 'Roma experts'. Grill's paper illustrates particular mechanisms of power and knowledge reproduction that facilitates some kinds of mobility while also reproducing certain constraints and limits on these possibilities. It develops an ethnographic critique of hierarchies of management and brokerage leading to reproduction of particular set ups, racialised privileges, and unequal economic distribution.

We hope that the collection of these papers are a rigorous contribution to the scientific knowledge about the multifarious dynamic relations that arise between Roma and majority society and also within Roma groups in the context of their economic, social, political, and cultural activities. Contributions in this issue also show the importance of the dynamics of social mobility and the related issues, such as inequality, disadvantage, power asymmetries, discrimination and antigypsyism. Moreover, we also believe that this collection may be an eye-opening experience for the policy makers which enlighten them about the social mobility patterns and constraints of social mobility for the Roma in European societies. In this context, one of the significant messages that we offer is that it is inevitable to focus research and policy making also on the groups who do not live in segregated locations and thus experience specific facets of relationship with the majority society.

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