Roma Identity and Ethnic Mobilisation in Central European Politics

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Introduction

To what extent does the process of political mobilisation have an impact upon a minority’s conceptions of ethnic identity? In many descriptions of ethnic politics and ethnic conflict authors tend to apply the term ‘ethnic identity’ as a stable and ‘natural’ source of political identification. They tend to treat the ethnic group as an unchanging entity and perceive ethnic identity as a group characteristic that pre-exists political action. In particular with regard to the developments in central and eastern Europe since the end of the 1980s ‘ethnicity’ has increasingly come to serve as a way of explaining political conflict (Taylor 1996: 889). But the question of how conceptions of ethnic identity are actually produced and contested within an ethnic movement and to what extent they are subject to constraint and facilitation rarely reaches the research agenda.

This seems somewhat at odds with social constructivist approaches to identity in contemporary social movement research (e.g. Calhoun 1991). There it has been emphasised that identity should be regarded as the changing product of a social process through which membership criteria are constantly re-elaborated. Group identity, it is argued there, is produced and continuously re-defined by the process of collective action itself (della Porta and Diani 1999: 87). Likewise, in social anthropology the notion of ethnic identity has been problematised. A widely discussed text by Barth (1969), for example, defined ethnic identity in terms of social boundary: the ethnic group is produced through social interaction by a practice of self and hetero-ascription and is not an entity with permanent cultural characteristics (see also Roosens 1998; Jenkins 1997). Moreover, in a more recent article Barth (1994) has suggested that the creation of ethnicity not only takes place on the interpersonal level, but is also deeply influenced by collective action (median level) and state policies (macro level).

In this paper I intend to examine the construction of a specific ethnic identity (‘Roma’ identity) within the context of political mobilisation in central Europe (CE). In order to do this I will focus on discourses of Roma identity, i.e. on the way in which various political actors have attributed meaning to the idea of Roma identity. By centring on the formulations of ethnic identity, this research avoids the question ‘what is ethnic (Roma) identity’ but rather focuses on the process of how this ethnic identity functions as a cognitive frame for political mobilisation in a given political context.

For a number of reasons the Roma minority in CE provides an interesting case. First of all, through the activities of ethnically-based interest organisations the Roma have since 1989 engaged in a process of political mobilisation against oppression and marginalisation. This has been a remarkable development, because it is now for the first time that on such a wide geographical scale a variety of stigmatised communities apply the concept of ‘Roma identity’, seeking to capture the attention of both domestic and international politicians and media. Their case offers thus the opportunity to look at a recently emerged ethnic movement in a specific political situation (post-communism). Furthermore, among Roma activists and in scholarly literature about Roma and comparable groups, the definition or even the idea of Roma identity is intensely debated (e.g. Fraser 2000; Gheorghe 1997; Lucassen et al 1998). These discussions may theoretically offer movement actors various possibilities to perceive or shape their ‘project identities’. Moreover, the Roma offer an interesting perspective into the way in which international context has affected domestic identity formation in CE. Specifically in the framework of the EU enlargement process, this case provides us with the opportunity to compare the impact of international attention across different countries.
This paper consists of three parts. The first part describes the historical background of the emergence of Roma political activism in the 1990s in post-communist CE, concretely in the Czech and Slovak Republics. The overview also includes a brief explanation of why exactly these two countries were selected for my field research. In the second part of the paper the concept of ‘framing processes’ (e.g. Benford and Snow 2000) is introduced as an analytical tool to interpret the various descriptions of Roma identity in the sources. The data which form the basis of the research consist mainly of summaries and transcripts of interviews with representatives of the Czech and Slovak ‘Roma elite’ (31) conducted during three months of field research in 2000. The data also include policy documents about the Roma produced by governmental bodies and a collection of statements and speeches by politicians in power. Third, the paper explores similarities and differences in the various actors’ descriptions of Roma identity as a mobilising or countermobilising frame. It will specifically focus on whether competing formulations of Roma identity by Roma actors can be linked to the political opportunities that are presented by the political environment. To conclude, the paper shortly dwells on the question of which consequences crucial framing disputes within the movement and counterframings by agencies in power may have for the resonance of Roma identity as a successful basis for collective action.

The Roma Movement in the Czech and Slovak republics

Although far from being exclusively a post-1989 phenomenon, the Roma movement has known a rapid and spectacular development after the fall of communism in CE. Since the beginning of the 1990s the number of Roma associations and Roma political parties continuously increased. But not only the impressive organisational growth is indicative. During the last decade Roma activists and emerging Roma political elites across several European countries more clearly than ever before attempted to promote new ideas about Roma ethnicity. They also tried to enhance the political participation of their constituencies and aspired to influence national policy making on minorities. Gheorghe and Mirga (1998) call it an ‘ethnic awakening’ and a rise of ‘Roma ethnonationalism’, which they describe as a ‘transition [of a social group] toward an ethnically mobilised group, having a common stance and interest’.

Puxon (2000: 94) argues that with the end of communism ‘[the] shocking increase in anti-Gypsy violence and racial intolerance, evident throughout Europe, has begun to politicise and unite a new generation to a degree not seen before.’ It is no doubt true that deteriorating social conditions and the increase of anti-Roma behaviour in post-communist societies have coincided with the increase of Roma movement activities. But reality is perhaps too much reduced when anti-Roma violence is perceived as the only factor leading to the emergence of the Roma movement.

Another part of the explanation presumably lies in the circumstances of the post-1989 period which offered Roma individuals unprecedented opportunities to establish interest organisations. First of all, being able to build alliances with dissident organisations they gained

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1 This was, for example, very visible in the Czech and Slovak Republics. As a result of law 83/1990 on civic associations Roma in Czechoslovakia were aloud to organise on an ethnic basis. In December 1998 the Czech Ministry of the Interior reported that 122 Roma civic organisations and 5 Roma political parties were registered (Úřad Vlády ČR 1999). The Slovak Ministry of the Interior reported in 1999 that 59 Roma associations and 14 Roma political parties were officially registered (Slovak Government 1999). However, these numbers say little about their success. None of the separate Roma parties ever managed to overcome the thresholds for representation in parliament. The most ‘successful’ Roma political party (Roma Civic Initiative, ROI) never polled more than 0.67 per cent of the vote for the Slovak National Council (1994 elections) and 0.26 per cent for the Czech National Council (1992 elections).
support from the new elite. In Czechoslovakia, for example, Roma played an active part in the anticommunist movement and joined the coalition parties that overwhelmingly won the first democratic elections. Later, their ethnic claims received symbolic support from international and domestic human rights organisations. Central European states were particularly sensitive to the discourse of human rights norms because they realised this was becoming a key issue pertaining to their standing in the international community (especially vis-à-vis the EU). Furthermore, the new political environment of post-communism, which saw the emergence of ethnically more homogeneous states, apparently functioned as a breeding ground for ethnopolitical mobilisation in general. Ethnic cleavages gave rise to political party formation and mainstream political parties started in some cases to voice certain claims in ethnic-particularistic terms to buttress a general process of nation-building. Consequently, it is not surprising that ethnic minorities such as the Roma, many of them being losers of the political and economic transition, began to emphasise a sense of collective political identity. They started to lodge complaints explicitly in the name of the ethnic group and urged upon their governments the need for new policy initiatives to tackle the socio-economic marginalisation of their communities and to eradicate anti-Roma racism.

One of the striking aspects, however, is that the term ‘Roma’ has been constructed and promoted to encompass a variety of communal based identities across different countries. In the Czech and Slovak Republics, for example, descriptions suggest that there are various self-designations in use (e.g. Servika, Romungro, Vlach, Sinti) on the basis of markers like language or traditions. The semantic relationship between such labels is complex (Hübschmannová 1999). In sum, the word ‘Roma’ (meaning ‘human being’ in Romanes) is certainly not a generalising self-appellation (as the word ‘gypsy’ is a generalising external appellation – a so-called exonym).

The usage of the word ‘Roma’ as a political overarching name was first advocated by interest organisations in Western Europe at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Activists from different countries started to adjust their claims to each other and agreed in 1971 on a common platform called the World Roma Congress (WRC) that was aimed inter alia at changing dominant thinking about the people these activists wanted to represent. The first WRC later served as a direct inspiration for the goal orientation of international mobilising structures like the International Roma Union (IRU) and the Roma National Congress (RNC). One of the ideas which was kept from the 1970s was the replacement of negative sounding terms like ‘gypsies’ or ‘tsiganes’ with ‘Roma’. The dissemination of the ‘new’ ethnic label (and the eradication of ‘old’ social designations) was considered especially necessary with regard to the pragmatics of the words for ‘gypsy’ in the central European languages (e.g. ‘cikán’ in Czech, ‘cygan’ in Slovak and ‘cigány’ in Hungarian): unlike the English word ‘gypsy’ or the Dutch word ‘zigeuner’ these names were invariably used in a derogatory way (Leudar and

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2 In the elections of June 1990 5 Roma candidates (Dezider Balog, Ondřej Giňa, Karel Holomek, Zdeněk Guži, Milan Tatár) who ran on the list of the anti-communist Civic Forum (OF) were elected to the Czech National Council. Roma candidate Ladislav Body was elected to the same body for the The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). Anna Koptová was a Roma candidate on the list of Public Against Violence (VPN), the Slovak counterpart of OF, and got elected to the Slovak National Council.

3 International non-governmental organisations (e.g. Human Rights Watch, the European Roma Rights Center) and private foundations (e.g. the Soros Foundations, the Ford foundation) have since the early 1990s scrutinised the central European states’ records of Roma protection. These actors not only triggered a process of ‘shaming’, but also offered the bulk of the financial resources available to Roma-related NGOs in the whole central European region.
Nekvapil 2000: 489; Stewart 1997: 113). Focusing on this aspect, one could say that as of the 1970s Roma movement organisations have been actively engaged in triggering a process of ‘ethnogenesis’ – a process which has gained momentum after the fall of communism.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia serve as two very instructive cases. Both countries witnessed the rapid emergence of a Roma movement within a post-communist setting. The movement consisted of informal elements, like communal-based protests or personal networks among activists. But from the early 1990s onwards there was also an upsurge of various sorts of formal movement elements. These included not only organisations that directly mobilised their constituency for collective action, but also a broad assortment of supportive organisations (like human rights organisations), ‘self-help’ organisations that addressed certain direct needs of the constituency, and even Roma political parties. A number of Roma politicians also tried to achieve political representation through their involvement in mainstream political parties.

However, throughout the 1990s the Roma movement has continuously struggled with obstacles hindering mass mobilisation. Especially in the isolated settlements in Eastern Slovakia, but also in other areas it proved difficult to find movement supporters and ethnic voters. After the elections of 1992, when the anticommunist alliance had splintered, Roma political representation on national level disappeared almost completely. Roma elites became increasingly articulate, but the gap between them and their constituencies in many cases proved to be unbridgeable. The elites were simply not known among local communities or their legitimacy as representatives was severely contested.

The Czech and Slovak Roma elites have also grappled with the reluctance of many Roma to identify themselves as Roma in the public sphere. This is well illustrated by the discussion surrounding the 1991 census. The official 1991 census figure for the Roma population was 80,627 (1.5 per cent) in the Slovak and 32,903 (0.3 per cent) in the Czech part – this being the result of the first census in which the Roma of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic (ČSFR) obtained the right to proclaim themselves as a distinct national minority. However, both the Czech and Slovak government have admitted that the actual rate of people who identify themselves as Roma in daily life must be substantially higher (Vláda ČR 1999a; Slovak Government 1999). Independent researchers and Roma organisations claim that the Roma in fact account for around 7 to 8 per cent (up to 500,000) of the Slovak citizens and around 3 per cent (up to 250,000) of the Czech citizens (Liégeois 1994: 34; Druker 1997: 22-23; Kenrick 1998: 187).

Low official rates of Roma identification do not necessarily indicate, as some authors have suggested, a ‘low level of ethnic awareness’ among Roma (Plichtová 1993:17). Other authors for example, have explained this by referring to bureaucratic irregularities during the official registration (Druker 1998) or the lack of will on the part of the Roma to register as ‘Roma’ in fear of some kind of reprisal (Clarck 1998). Guy (1998: 35) has also pointed out the possible impact of historical experience. Administrators in communist times were prone to describe the Roma as a social rather than an ethnic group as this gave them a freer hand with

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4 Within Roma communities one hears often used both ‘Roma’ and ‘gypsy’ as self-designations. Strikingly, there they are often treated as synonymous. There is, however, some anecdotal evidence to support the assertion that the word ‘gypsy’ is also sometimes used among Roma to refer to someone who maintains a condemnable life style. Stewart (1997: 114), for example, noticed during field work in a Hungarian Roma ghetto that someone could assert that he would like to stop being ‘cigány’, while having no intentions of ceasing to be Roma.

5 One Roma deputy, Ladislav Body from the Left Bloc (LB), remained in the Czech National Council until the 1996 elections. Since the 1998 elections a Roma candidate of the Union of Freedom (US) has a seat in the Council (Monika Horáková).
implementing policies of assimilation. As a consequence of the historical tendency of the authorities to avoid the word ‘gypsy’ and to deny Roma nationality, it is plausible that administrators during the first census implicitly discouraged people to identify themselves officially as Roma. Although it is difficult to establish the definitive influence of all these factors, the discussion at least points to a potential problem surrounding the public ‘image’ of Roma identity.

In the context of these phenomena, both countries provide interesting cases for studying the formation of Roma identity in relation to the political environment. One wonders, for instance, how the Roma elite has reacted to the problem of public identification and what effects their reaction has had for the formation of Roma identity. Furthermore, a comparison of the two countries will allow to explore differences of political context that could account for identity differentiation within the group.

**Ethnic identity and collective mobilisation: a conceptual bridge**

Before embarking on a more detailed exploration of Roma identity politics in the Czech and Slovak Republics, it is no doubt necessary to consider some conceptual underpinnings of this study. When examining Roma identity formation from a constructivist angle, one may assume a correspondence between the production of Roma ethnic identity and the current political mobilisation of the Roma. How can this correspondence be described?

In general, the close relationship between identity and collective mobilisation has been discussed by many scholars engaged in social movement research. Della Porta and Diani, for example, state that ‘[c]ollective action cannot occur in the absence of a ‘we’ characterized by common traits and a specific solidarity’ (della Porta and Diani 1999: 87). Many scholars agree that there is a two-way relationship between social identification and collective action. Identity construction not simply precedes collective action. The formation of identity is a process that is shaped through collective action. Della Porta and Diani (1999: 87-91) describe three important mechanisms through which this happens: collective action defines and redefines the boundaries between actors in a conflict, it engenders networks of relationships of trust, and it offers a continuing sense of belonging. Similar considerations can easily apply to the production of ethnic identity. Even in the case where there are seemingly ‘objective’ historical and cultural foundations of identity, as is the case with ethnic identity, the boundaries of this identity are continuously reconstituted in the light of the present circumstances. An ethnic minority is thus not simply a group of people differing from the rest of society in terms of language and tradition, but rather the result of a process in which such differences are perceived as socially and politically meaningful.

When studying the mutual relationship between ethnic identity formation and collective mobilisation, it will be useful to concentrate on the following three aspects of this relationship. First, it is useful to see ethnic mobilisation as a form of cognitive praxis. The latter term has been used by Eyerman and Jamison (1991) to describe the creative process of knowledge production in which any social movement is engaged. The authors contend that precisely the cognitive aspect of collective action defines the identity of a social movement. This also applies to ethnic movements: they produce and promote new understandings and interpretations of perceived reality (in casu markers of ethnic difference). In other words: ethnic movement actors are ‘signifying agents’ (Benford and Snow 2000: 613) who attempt to promote new understandings and interpretations of their ethnic identity. Precisely these understandings and interpretations are crucial to the study of ethnic identity formation.
Second, ethnic identity can be seen as a semantic category that is realised through articulation. Thus, not the ethnic group as an entity is central to my understanding of the phenomenon of ethnic politics, but the way ethnic identity is constructed in language. This discourse approach is based on the view that ‘language events’ are in fact the symbolic constructs that we use to understand and actualise reality (Donati 1992: 138). This means that in this research I will concentrate on the discursive aspect of ethnic mobilisation: the way movement actors describe Roma identity in their public discourse. Ethnic identity, in this sense, serves as a semantic category that is constantly subjected to the manoeuvres of actors who are trying to persuade others to see their identity as they understand it is.

Third, the construction of identity is not merely the result of a ‘rhetoric’ promulgated by ethnic movement actors. It is also a process that is conditioned by factors belonging to the historical and political environment. In other words, one can assume that the presence, salience and meaning of ethnic identity is affected by a number of factors that are not deliberately crafted by movement actors in their strategic action. These are less controllable factors resulting from the context, such as the way ‘common knowledge’ or ‘traditional knowledge’ about ethnic identity is treated and reproduced in media and politics. In the this paper the area of political discourse is considered of great interest. This can be seen as an expression of the structure of power relations surrounding the movement.

A concept suited to examine the production of ethnic identity which pays attention to cognitive, strategic and contextual aspects, is offered in contemporary social movement research in the notion of ‘framing’. Framing has been described by Benford and Snow (2000: 626) as the generation and diffusion by movement actors of mobilising and countermobilising ideas and meanings. The concept of framing, however, also recognises that this process is not taking place in a vacuum. It is sensitive to the fact that it is to a certain degree shaped by the complex, multi-organisational, multi-institutional arenas in which it takes place. It is acknowledged that the resonance of framing is affected by the cultural and political environment, ‘including the framing/counterframings of the institutional elites’.

One way of researching the signifying struggle in which Roma actors are involved would be to look at the media (as a mirror of public opinion). Media has no doubt a profound influence on the resonance of the collective action frames of the Roma movement. But the study of media framing does not offer us a view on how Roma activists themselves attempt to conceptualise their movement identity. For this reason, this research will concentrate on framing processes triggered by the elite. I will prefer to concentrate on formulations of Roma ethnic identity by the actors themselves and how they are developing in relation to conceptions of Roma identity constructed by agencies in power. These aspects are interesting because they have not been frequently studied. Such an approach may also offer us a better understanding of how factors of power and domination have influenced this process.

I concentrate on the political elite because I assume that it has an important role to play in shaping the categorisation of ethnic groups. Conover and Hicks (1998: 25) have argued that political elites can produce either a more destructive and a more constructive social and political environment by ‘substantially altering the understanding and saliency of these groups’. The process of social construction of ethnicity takes place in various informal and formal contexts of which that of politics is no doubt a very important one. Politics provides a platform for the mass mobilisation of ethnicity and can directly influence public rhetoric, legislative and administrative acts or the distribution of resources. For this reason, this research focuses on the
framing of Roma identity by the Roma elite and on the framing of Roma identity by the policy makers.

**Roma identity and frame alignment in Roma activist discourse**

Scholarship about itinerant populations, gypsies, Roma and other comparable groups has produced a dubious legacy. In many cases both academic and non-academic attempts to define these groups have produced and stimulated popular stereotypical thinking about them as deviants, outcasts or romantic outsiders. These studies more than once contributed to the categorisation and subsequently the stigmatisation of ‘gypsies’ as a stable and inherently inferior group. Lucassen, Willems and Cottaar (1998) recognise two dominant paradigms in the literature – one which defines these groups in terms of social status (criminality, marginality and poverty), and one which views them as a group with a common exotic, non-European origin. The latter categorisation seems to be in many ways the result of an ethnographic tradition of examining ‘gypsies’ (while at the same time defining and constructing the very category of ‘gypsies’). Willems (1995; 1998) argues that authoritative popular scientific texts in various time periods have created the dominant essentialist understanding of the ‘gypsies’ as a stable entity that is foreign to European culture and societies.

Since 1989 a growing body of descriptions of the way Roma were treated in the new democracies of CE became available to the regional specialist. The question of the production of Roma identity itself was rarely addressed. However, these descriptions contained different assumptions about what constitutes Roma identity. Often the Roma in CE were conceptualised as somewhere between an ‘immigrant minority’ and a ‘national minority’, but neither of the two types exactly, because it was observed that only a limited number of them had migrated in recent times and that they did not have a connection to an external homeland. In the large majority of the descriptions the alleged Indian origin served as a main source for identifying them.

Given the wide range of conceptualisations of the ‘Roma’ that scholars have come up with, it is perhaps not at all surprising that activists too have different ways in which they think about the group they aspire to represent. Exploration of the interviews with Roma activists in the Czech and Slovak republics and texts produced by Roma interest organisations led to the observation that in both countries mainly three types of Roma identity frames are used to describe and warrant Roma collective action and Roma-based claims-making. These frames can be regarded as the conscious efforts of people who regard themselves as ‘leaders’ or ‘representatives’ to enhance a certain view on Roma identity in order to mobilise protest against unequal treatment or to buttress their demands on the government for protection of their own culture. They can be described as more or less bounded sets of arguments that represent a certain perspective on the position of the Roma and the meaning of Roma-based political action.

**A non-territorial European nation**

6 He demonstrates, for example, that the writings of German historian Heinrich Grellmann at the end of the 18th century were to a large extent responsible for the fact that ‘gypsies’ were increasingly regarded as a ‘racial group’ with a static set of innate characteristics (in casu a group originating in India and characterised by a culture of nomadism and an own language). Grellman’s view was very much in keeping with the idea of the Volksgeist formulated at that time by Johann Gottfried von Herder. Grellman’s work served to underpin a policy of repressive assimilation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and heavily impacted upon all writing and thinking about ‘gypsies’ in Western Europe even until today.
A first frame which was encountered in activists’ accounts describes the Roma as a *non-territorial European nation*. The Roma activists who applied this perspective to talk about their collective identity emphasised that the Roma all over Europe posses a common history and, especially, a common origin. They argued that all Roma communities are somehow connected, not through territory but through blood ties. The apparent fragmentation in terms of language or culture is in their view related to time periods of aggressive assimilation and repressive policies implemented by non-Roma authorities. The argument is very much in keeping with the ideas formulated by Roma linguist and representative of the International Roma Union (IRU) Ian Hancock:

> I have been among the most vocal in insisting that Roma are a people who originated in Asia. I take the position of the sociolinguist, who sees language as the vehicle of culture. And we indeed speak a language and maintain a culture whose core of direct retention is directly traceable to India. The acknowledgement of that position is essential, because the alternative is to create a fictitious history and to have, again, our identity in the hands of non-Romani policy-makers and scholars. (Hancock 1997)

Roma activists in the Czech and Slovak Republic who advocated this view also firmly contended that the position of the Roma should be perceived not simply as that of an Indian diaspora, but as that of a nation that is deeply rooted in Europe. The problems facing the Roma were in this perspective attributed mainly to a lack of serious Roma representation in public bodies on domestic and international levels. In other words, they lobby for special forms of Roma representation. This frame is dissimilar from many other national liberation movements because it explicitly excludes *territorial* ‘liberation’ as a goal. In a radical version of this argument, Hancock explains that support for their claims can be found in the existence of a symbolic external homeland:

> The arguments for stressing the “Indian connection” seem clear. In these times, when Europe is divided into nation-states, being identified with an actual homeland brings legitimacy and a measure of security. Furthermore, it is the Indian factors-linguistic, genetic, and cultural-that different Romani populations share; it is the more recently acquired non-Indian factors that divide us. If I want to speak in Romani to a speaker of a dialect different from my own, it is the European words we must each avoid, not the Indian ones. (Hancock 1997)

The Roma activists who relied on argumentation within this frame emphasised the importance of transnational networks as mobilising structures. Not unsurprisingly, the Roma activists who use this frame usually maintained connections to the International Roma Union (IRU) or the Roma National Congress (RNC). It is also comes as no surprise that this frame represents a useful bridge between activists in the domestic arena and the international political environment. Direct lobbying toward international organisations like the Council of Europe and the OSCE has proven its worth: both organisations have established special institutions to raise the level of awareness concerning the problems facing the Roma within the respective member states. Indirectly this strategy has contributed to higher levels of external pressure and scrutiny on both the Czech and Slovak Republic. For this reason Roma activists have formulated their criticism often in a language referring to international moral standards like human rights. One could perhaps argue that this strategy to some extent reflects the experience of what Soysal (1996) has called ‘postnational citizenship’, a practice of citizenship that is increasingly defined

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7 Leader of the Czech Roma political party Roma Civic Initiative (ROI) and president of the International Roma Union (IRU) Emil Ščuka recently stated for both Czech and Slovak journalists that the Roma were not to be regarded as a *minority* but as a *nation* (Borovičková 2000).
according to entitlements emerging from the transnational discourse and the practice of international human rights protection. Arguably, the growing attention during the last decade of human rights organisations for the position of the Roma in both countries has stimulated the development of this strategy. Dimitrina Petrova, director of one of the most articulate human rights organisations focusing on Roma, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), wrote recently in one of the organisations newsletters:

(...) for the Roma of Europe, Human Rights seems to be a uniting principle, a universally acknowledged tool for positive change. Contrary to this, in our day-to-day work, we are often confronted by Roma who are not happy about ERRC having chosen to work with certain other Roma, on the vague but bitter grounds that they are not legitimate as Roma. I personally believe that the Roma struggle is often weakened by the abysmal question, ‘Who is real Rom?’ The struggle over identity at this stage does not unite the Roma in Europe. (Petrova 1999)

This immediately demonstrates that the frame ‘Roma as a non-territorial European nation’ brings a number of problems with it and was consequently criticised by many of the interviewed activists. The essence of their criticism was that Indian origin and transborder co-operation are very academic notions and thus poor tools for effective mobilisation in both the Czech and Slovak context. The frame was in many cases seen as purely symbolic. As one Czech Roma activist stated:

We are a national minority. If you want to call it a nation… okay… but that doesn’t change much. The fact that the Roma are a world-wide and a European nation is only important to stress towards other countries where the Roma are not yet acknowledged as a national minority.

Furthermore, the idea of being a ‘transborder nation’ only seems to become concrete when activists have the opportunity to take part in international Roma conferences. International organisations, however, have become increasingly interested in these meetings. Thus they appear regularly, attract more participants and have opened up new opportunities for finding financial support.

The discourse of minority rights

A second frame is that of the Roma as a national minority. Here the emphasis is placed on the protection of minority rights in the framework of the national state. No direct reference is made to common origin or to transborder co-operation; conversely, the Czech and Slovak Republics themselves are perceived as the ‘homelands’ of the Roma. Within this frame it is argued that the determinants of Roma treatment are dependent solely upon the national state. Activists who reason within this frame mostly pressure for stronger anti-discrimination policy in a multi-cultural context. The strategic motivation seems to lie in the opportunity it offers to form a bridge between the movement’s main internal constituency and the non-Roma supporters of minority rights in both countries. These can be other minorities or people that recognise the need for equal opportunities in a new democracy. Especially for the Roma in the Slovak Republic this has been an important aspect. The political success of the Hungarian minority, for example, has been referred to as an example.

However, some Roma activists have found this frame of Roma identity problematic for a number of reasons. First, the experiences of the Roma have often been very different from those of other national minorities. In contrast to other national minorities, for example, the Roma have never voiced demands for political autonomy or territorial self-determination. Second, parties and interest groups of other national minorities have often distanced themselves
from the Roma perspective. Slovak Roma activists, for example, have estimated that just a small portion of their constituencies fully identifies itself with the plight of the Hungarian minority. There are, of course, Hungarian-speaking Roma in the Slovak Republic, but they are not represented in the ethnic Hungarian parties. In many ways the Hungarian-speaking Roma seem to be forming a minority within a minority. In the Czech Republic there is even less opportunity to ally with other national minorities. The Roma do not feel any affiliation with the demands for self-government rights sometimes voiced by Moravian and Silesian civic organisations or political parties.

There is also a third reason. Conceptualising the Roma as a national minority makes a clear connection possible with minority rights. However, Roma activists have been concerned about bringing Roma under the discourse of national minority rights. They fear that minority rights do not primarily reflect Roma interests, but rather the interests of the authorities. According to their argument the issue of national minority rights plays a fundamental role in the negotiation of the relationship between the EU states and the post-communist candidate countries and is therefore not driven by a real concern for the position of the Roma. In 1997 Nicolae Gheorghe, a Romanian Roma activist and currently head of the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti of the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, formulated this criticism as follows:

I personally am critical towards this trend in the Romani movement which seeks to fashion Romanies as a national minority because I consider that in reality, the true concept of national minority is only a by-product of nation-state building. [...] ethnic minority policy are exhibited as if in a display cabinet, like a showcase in international politics to make sure that the Council of Europe and the western democracies think that things are good in eastern Europe. (Gheorghe 1997: 160)

The Roma as an ethnoclass

A third frame is one that conceptualises the Roma as an *ethnoclass*. Within this frame Roma activists emphasised the detrimental social circumstances of Roma life and the general lack of social equality in society. Arguments centre on topics in the sphere of social rights, such as the need for education, better housing or employment. The protection of ethnic or cultural aspects of Roma identity plays a less prominent role; these matters are mostly regarded as strictly private. In general, it advocates a certain degree of ethnic anonymity, while retaining the idea of the historical roots of the social disadvantage of the Roma as an ethnic group.

This frame has a certain appeal to people within the constituency of the movement because many Roma seem to experience on a daily basis that getting attention as an ethnic group has not diminished dominant associations of their group with uncleanliness, vagrancy and petty crime. Roma activists who emphasised the ethnoclass identity were well aware of this and wanted to avoid presenting themselves too closely associated with Roma identity. It appeared to them not beneficial to stress a form of identity that is generally perceived as pathologically unfit for citizenship. Instead they tried to mobilise on the basis of their social situation, as poor or disadvantaged citizens. Many Roma advocating this frame have positive memories about the communist period. For them post-communism only meant a substantive decline in living standards and exclusion from economic opportunity.

The problem, however, seems to be that this framing has not visibly created links of solidarity between Roma and poor non-Roma population. Moreover, the poor in general seem to experience a lack of effective pressure group representation. Furthermore, stressing social
identity has reminded many Roma activists also of the less attractive sides of communist times. The overall approach of the communist authorities in Czechoslovakia was ambiguous on the status of ‘gypsy’ identity. The designation ‘gypsy’ was officially approached as a social group identification, a remnant of a previous social order, and was simply meant to disappear by a transformation of the social and economic status of the group. This inspired an assimilation campaign at the end of the 1950s and a ‘dispersal and transfer’ scheme from 1965 to 1968 (Guy 1998; Crowe 1995: 56-58). In the official documents the word ‘gypsy’ was carefully avoided and replaced by ‘citizens of gypsy origin’. Law 144 of 1968 about the status of nationalities in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic contained a list of four ‘nationalities’ – the Roma were not mentioned. However, in the framework of the measures directed at them, their identity was carefully registered. The communist administration also in many ways perpetuated their segregated position by applying them as a flexible reserve pool of unskilled labour (Guy 1998: 58).

**Counterframing and the construction of ‘Roma policies’**

Ethnic mobilisation proceeds in two directions: in one direction it aims at increasing control over the internal developments and organisational structure of the ethnic movement – this is what I have discussed so far in relation to identity construction; in another direction ethnic mobilisation aims at increasing influence on public political decision-making bodies. Framing attempts by the Roma elite are thus not only shaped by the internal circumstances of the Roma community or by strategic considerations, but also by external circumstances like institutional context and cultural meanings. This relates to what many social movement scholars have called political opportunity structure (e.g. Gamson and Meyer 1996). In the remainder of this paper I specifically focus on the discursive aspect of the political opportunity structure as a determinant of the Roma movement in the Czech and Slovak Republics. To this purpose I concentrate on the hetero-definitions of Roma identity that are generated through the body of government decrees and reports that form the basis of current ‘Roma policies’ in both countries.

**Czech Republic**

Before 1997 the Czech government did not issue any important documents representing a specific attention for the problems facing the Roma. In that year, however, a report commissioned by Pavel Bratinka, at that time the Minister without Portfolio of the Klaus-led centre-right government, proposed the introduction of a new body within the government administration to prepare policy initiatives specifically aimed at ameliorating the situation of the Czech Roma (Government of the Czech Republic 1997, further referred to as the ‘Bratinka report’). It has been acknowledged by the writers of this report that Bratinka’s initiative was a response to new demands on the government by Roma members of the Council of Nationalities and to the increasing pressure on the Czech Republic exerted by countries that were receiving a growing number of Czech asylum seekers (for example the UK). On the basis of the Bratinka report the Interresort Commission of Roma Community Affairs (Meziresortní komise pro záležitosti romské komunity, further referred to as MRK) was established – an advisory body that brings selected members of the Roma elite (first six, from 1998 onwards twelve) together with an equal number of representatives from various ministries. In 1999 the MRK finished a document presenting the concept of ‘Roma integration’. In April 2000 this concept was adopted

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8 Interestingly, during a brief period from 1968 to 1973 the official policy towards Roma was reconsidered and they were admitted to organise on an ethnic basis. The Federation of Gypsies-Roma (Svaz Cikánů-Romů) was the most important Roma organisation at the time and marks the first attempt at creating a Roma movement organisation in Czechoslovakia.
by the government as the principle component of a new strategic ‘Roma policy’ (Resolutions 279/1999 and 599/2000).

The Bratinka report was positively received by many Roma because it represented a first attempt to describe the problems that Roma are confronted with and it officially admitted the existence of anti-Roma discrimination. However, many activists were ambivalent on the institutions which were set up in response to the report and were meant to ensure a Roma voice in the policy-making process. Especially the real influence of the body and the selection process of Roma representatives into the body was questioned. Overall, however, the ‘Roma policy’ which was gradually developing had a strong regulating impact on the way the government started to dialogue with the Roma.

A first observation is that the resolutions shaped by the MRK do not contain any direct definitions of Roma identity. These texts depart from the assumption that Roma should be regarded as a national minority, which in itself is seen as a good enough motivation to devote attention to the group. However, the texts make clear that there are some crucial differences between the Roma and other national minorities. These differences are presented as motivations for the construction of a special policy for this group. In essence thus, the description of these differences can be seen as basic assumptions underlying an implicit top-down conception of Roma identity.

When screening the resolutions 279/1999 and 599/2000 together with their explanatory reports on their imaging of Roma identity, one comes to the overall conclusion that they implicitly portray negative social behaviour or an inferior social position as core features of Roma identity. This implicit connection is for example visible when the government describes the problematic situation of the Roma, particularly the passages in the texts describing the need for better motivations to work9 or the need for an active prevention of illegal behaviour. For instance, the Czech authorities define Roma integration in the following way:

Integration then is understood to mean the Roma community’s full-scale incorporation into society while preserving most of the cultural specificities and different features which characterize this community and which it wishes to adhere to so long as these distinctive features are not at variance with the laws of the Czech Republic. (Vláda České Republiky 1999b, emphasis added)

By referring to illegal behaviour this definition strongly suggests that some features of Roma identity are indeed at variance with the laws of the Czech Republic. With the exception of some brief considerations on Roma language, the documents do not provide any further descriptions of Roma traditions or ‘cultural specificities’.

**Slovak Republic**

In 1996 – before the refugee waves of 1997 and 1998 – the Slovak coalition government under Vladimír Mečiar adopted a resolution pertaining to the situation of the Roma. Slovakia was earlier to introduce new policy initiatives on this subject than the Czech Republic plausibly because of the attitude of Mečiar’s right-wing populist party HZDS (Movement for a

9 Paragraph 12 of the Draft Conception of Government Policy 279/1999 (Vláda ČR 1999b) reads: ‘The government will make changes in its social policy with more emphasis is laid on people’s positive motivation to work.’ The MRK must, however, have realised that this could be read as stigmatising and has added this sentence in the explanatory report: ‘the motivation of parents of large families (not only Roma ones) to take up unskilled jobs is now practically nil as accepting one can hardly improve the family’s financial situation (…)’ (emphasis added)
Democratic Slovakia) towards the Roma. Unlike in the Czech Republic the Roma in Slovakia form an substantial part of the electorate. By emphasising preference for a strong social policy the HZDS has more than once tried to attract Roma voters. Not surprisingly, the 1996 resolution on Roma entitled ‘Activities and Measures in Order to Solve the Problems of Citizens in Need of Special Care’ (Vláda SR 1996) was very much in keeping with a social view on Roma: it treated the name ‘Roma’ and the phrase ‘citizens in need of special care’ as synonymous concepts.

On the one hand, this resolution was welcomed by a part of the Roma activists as it made funds available for initiatives in fields of education, employment, housing and health. At the same time, much to the frustration of Roma activists it did not refer to discrimination as one of the problems to be addressed. On the contrary, it explicitly linked Roma ethnic or cultural identity and social inferiority by attributing the roots of the ‘Roma problem’ to their ‘socially retarding environments’ (paragraph E) or their ‘negative social behaviour’ (paragraph F). Roma activists also perceived the whole government’s approach as paternalistic, because it did not acknowledge the responsibility of the majority and neither did it plan to address the under-representation of the Roma in the policy-making process. For this reason it was also heavily criticised by international human rights organisations.

The coalition government of premier Mikuláš Dzurinda (SDK), which came to power after its close victory over the HZDS in the 1998 elections, tried to enhance Slovakia’s standing in the international community and one of the strategies to achieve this was to prioritise Roma issues. When, at the end of 1998, the government announced that it would show more ‘empathy’ with regard to the situation of the Roma, many Roma activists were expecting a clear initiative in the direction of a policy specifically for Roma. The newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development, the Hungarian Pál Csáky (SMK), established the position of Government Commissioner for the Solution of the Problems of the Roma Minority, a position filled by Roma activist Vincent Danihel. Danihel’s office, responsible for bringing Roma concerns to the governmental level, completed a policy paper in June 1999 entitled ‘Strategy of the Government for the Solution of the Problems of the Roma’, which was later adopted by the government (Vláda SR 1999).

The idea that underpins this new resolution is that Roma organisations should be encouraged to participate in the implementation of plans that address Roma issues. Most instrumental in this process is the Government Commissioner himself. His office drafts concrete projects, proposes measures, reports to the government and is, to a large extent, responsible for the distribution of available funds. It is therefore not surprising that again most of the Roma activists were supportive of this new institution and of the content of the resolution – at least initially. However, soon fierce criticism arose regarding the selection of Danihel and his alleged opportunistic stance.

The view on Roma identity concealed in the 1999 resolution is very similar to the one upheld by the Czech documents. On the one hand, the accompanying explanatory report is careful not to generalise too much while describing the difficulties that many Roma face; it states for example:

Some aspects of life of a certain part of this minority cause social distance in the majority society, which is then unjustly applied to the whole minority. (Vláda SR, emphasis added)
But on the other hand, the document as a whole suggests a strong linkage between social problems and Roma identity. It is not a document about how to address the difficulties of disadvantaged groups in society, nor is it a document about the protection of ethnic minorities; it is a document which specifically targets the Roma, conceptualising them as an ethnic and socially disadvantaged group.

**Contextual understandings of Roma identity: implications**

So far, the investigation of government documents has led to two general conclusions: (1) there is an increasing tendency to recognise the Roma as an ethnic minority, (2) the meaning of Roma ethnic identity is largely left unformulated and open, but policy reports carry the strong suggestion that deplorable social circumstances are a crucial defining element of Roma identity. The plausible implication of this top-down construction of Roma identity for the Roma movement is that this creates a double bind for activists willing to engage in ethnic mobilisation.

On the one hand, one could state that the tendency of both governments to recognise the specific character of the problems that face the Roma represents a positive response to the demands of the Roma movement. In both the Czech and Slovak case the recent resolutions have been drafted through a process which involved the consultation of selected Roma ‘representatives’. Arguably, with the assistance of external pressure Roma activists have been able to gain some control over the production of documents on Roma policy. As a result, the conception of the Roma as one ethnic group has been supported by the state. To give just one example, all Roma policy documents apply to both Vlach and Romungro communities (both groups have become subject to one Roma policy). The cursory acknowledgement of in-group ethnic boundaries has not led to differentiated approaches. Consequently, members of the Vlach elite were equally selected as members for the existing Roma advisory bodies together with other Roma representatives. Within these bodies both Vlachs and Roma are thus obliged to formulate a common stance concerning Roma policy.

On the other hand, the top-down conception of Roma identity is to a large extent based on observations of a class situation. It is especially this latter linkage which potentially creates a difficulty for the Roma movement. The identification between class situation and ethnic identity can easily be maximised in public discourse and can lead to support a ‘discourse of otherness’. For example, when talking about Roma policy, certain politicians in power have attributed problems of social disadvantage to a reified notion of the ‘Roma way of life’.

A number of Roma activists have signalled this problem. Especially in Slovakia, various politicians in power have sometimes referred to ‘Roma culture’ as a source of social circumstances. This has been especially visible in the response of Slovak politicians to waves of Roma asylum seekers leaving the country since 1997. For example, Slovakia’s Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional development Pál Csáky recently made this statement:

> To avoid any misunderstanding, I wish to state that the right for asylum is considered inviolable not only by myself but also by all members of the Slovak government. However, we are not happy with the abuse of that right by certain members of our population groundlessly seeking asylum in order to obtain economic advantages. We are also deeply unhappy that the response to such activities has been in the form of the introduction of visa requirements for our citizens. The Slovak Republic is a free country, guaranteeing free movement for each Slovak citizen. The problem of Romany migration, a phenomenon lasting for several centuries, cannot be unilaterally
resolved; its successful resolution is only possible by consistent international co-ordination. (Csáky 2000, emphasis added)

Roma activists have largely attempted to explain the Roma refugee wave as the symptom of a larger problem in society, namely that of discrimination and distrust, which they claim the government is deliberately not addressing. Csáky instead has explained the refugee wave by associating it with the Roma’s alleged cultural characteristics, in casu nomadism (‘a phenomenon lasting for several centuries’). Through his cursory reference to nomadism as a sort of incorrigible cultural trait of the Roma Csáky creates the suggestion that the phenomenon of Roma emigration is inexplicable in terms of political context. Roma emigration is then seen as the continuation of a vague notion of what constitutes Roma cultural behaviour (illegally seeking economic advantage, abusing asylum procedures, nomadism). Those Roma activists who have referred to the growth of Roma migration to buttress their demands on the state have been confronted with a very clear counterframing. Within this counterframe it is not the state who is responsible for causing a Roma refugee wave, but on the contrary in this reasoning the Roma themselves are seen as responsible – responsible for the social circumstances in which they live and for damaging the country’s relationship with the West.

It goes without saying that it has become extremely difficult for Roma representatives to promote alternative understandings of themselves and to capture the problematics of the situation in an alternative way. This applies not only to the issue of the refugee wave. Also problems in the field of housing, education or unemployment are often framed in a culturalist argumentation. Not surprisingly Csáky has called the ‘Roma problem’ a ‘complicated problem [which] presents a quest for a comprehensive model of coexistence of two substantially different cultures, rather than a classic minority issue’ (Csáky 2000).

These and other examples may indicate that the Roma movement is confronted with a double bind. The Czech and Slovak governments’ ways of framing Roma culture as ‘substantially different’ neatly fits images of them in mass media and public opinion. Thus, when Roma want to mobilise protest ‘in the name of their ethnicity’, they are confronted with narrations that question a positive framing of this very same ethnicity. The more they stress identity the more they appear to be held responsible for the ‘Roma problem’.

The double bind that Roma are confronted with may have strong implications for the potential resonance among Roma of new frames of Roma identity proffered by the Roma elite. This is for example the case for the frame I described above as ‘the Roma as a non-territorial European nation’. This frame has been used to explain the alleged universal character of ‘Roma problems’. If one agrees that a certain class situation is ‘typical’ for Roma culture wherever it occurs, then it becomes easy to assert that individual states cannot be held responsible for the creation of that situation. For central European states this has been an important argument to enhance their reputation vis-à-vis the EU. Hence, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been very supportive of international Roma conferences – in 2000 both the IRU meeting and the OSCE-sponsored meeting on Roma political participation were organised with the support of the Czech government.

Because of very salient counterframings, some Roma have already become ambivalent towards the available Roma ‘project identities’. Roma who have clear ideas about their ethnic identity in the private sphere, may be reluctant to emphasise their ethnicity in public because they fear that precisely this identification will allow others to discredit them even more.
Dominant rhetoric associating Roma identity with social marginality can lead them to reject Roma political mobilisation all together.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that political mobilisation is a crucial aspect of ethnicity since it deeply affects the self-definition of the group and its boundaries. In this view it is likely that ethnic identity will be the result of the institutional environment shaping mobilisation and the internal strategic choices of the movement elite which underpin this mobilisation.

This seems to be the case for the construction of Roma ethnic identity. The Roma movement in the Czech and Slovak Republics have used mainly three ways of capturing their problems and defining their identity as a minority. These three ways vary according to the degree in which they emphasise ethnic unity and represent competing positions vis-à-vis the state. However, the three modes of Roma identity are dependent on the dominant traditional ways of how Roma identity has been understood in society at large and the way the 'Roma problem' is constructed in current political discourse. Comparison between the Slovak and the Czech Republic seems to indicate that the international political environment also plays an important role in this process. The Slovak Republic, which has received much stronger criticism from EU member states than the Czech Republic, has recently more strongly emphasised a culturalist explanation of the ‘Roma situation’ as a defensive response.

In sum, the complex discursive struggles surrounding the 'Roma problem' seem mostly to have rendered a powerful negative valuation of the concept of Roma identity. By treating the Roma as isomorphic with socially disadvantaged people, policy documents have offered a further basis for such negative understandings. Consequently, many Roma activists are today confronted with a crucial question: how to build a movement on this 'spoiled' identity?

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