Roma as ethnic group, nation, or others' construct: The relevance of Fredrik Barth

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Abstract

My article emphasises the significant impact of the publication in 1969 of Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* for those researching Roma. At the time, much of the literature – and policymakers too – viewed these complex and varied communities in an essentialist way in spite of their multiple differences and historical adaptation to their specific political and social environments. In particular, it was often assumed that all "genuine" Roma shared a common culture in which nomadism was a defining feature. This was to generalise from prevalent patterns in Western Europe, ignoring the fact that the vast majority of these people lived in Eastern Europe and had long been sedentary. Such misunderstandings had important policy implications, particularly after the collapse of Communist rule prompted many Roma to migrate westwards. Writers on nationalism had earlier recognised that nations were often a construct from disparate groups rather than homogeneous entities – a highly relevant factor in discussing contemporary attempts at forging Roma nationalism. Whether Roma can be regarded as having a common ethnic identity, in spite of acknowledged cultural differences, remains a highly contentious issue.

KEYWORDS: Roma, ethnicity, culture, boundaries, nomadism, nationalism, defining criteria, identity

Beginning research on Roma in Czechoslovakia

In 1969, when I decided to give up my job as a computer systems analyst in order to study for a doctoral degree, it was a good time to start researching the situation of Roma. I had lived for three and a half years in Communist Czechoslovakia, where I had experienced the tumultuous years of the replacement of the hard-line Novotny regime by the liberalising Prague Spring, followed in August 1968 by the Warsaw Pact invasion to restore Soviet control. I had intended to draw on my two years' experience working in the North Moravian coal-mining and steel-making city of Ostrava. The original plan was to compare the political perceptions of staunchly Communist miners in the Scottish region of Fife, for whom I had acted as an interpreter on a visit to what they saw as a "socialist promised land", with those of their disillusioned Czech counterparts in Ostrava.

Then, by chance, I came across Jean-Paul Clébert's study, *The Gypsies*, where I read: 'Czechoslovakia seems in fact to be the first country to solve this delicate problem of [Gypsy] integration in accordance with humane standards' (1967: 255). Recalling a Czech workmate's sarcastic comment about the dark-skinned labourers I had seen working in the city – *uzení Slováci* ("smoked Slovaks") – I decided to switch my research topic and registered as a postgraduate student at the University of Bristol.

Around this time, there was a surge of interest in researching Roma, Gypsies, and Travellers in various European countries and beyond. In March 1971, Thomas Acton, who had been working with the (English) Gypsy Council since 1967 (see Acton 1974), convened a conference of international scholars at Oxford University. The various names in use reflected the diversity of the groups under discussion and indeed raised the question about what, if anything, they had in common. Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* offered a potential solution to this conundrum (1969a).

Apart from striking differences in appearance, occupations, and customs, there was a fundamental divergence between Western Europe, where the predominant pattern of these groupings was to pursue a nomadic way of life – at least ideally, if not in practice – and Eastern Europe, where the vast majority had long been settled. Yet for Clébert, a Frenchman, the western pattern was archetypal as his opening sentences made clear.

> There are today some five or six million Gypsies wandering about the world. But we do not see them; or, rather, we do not see them except in small numbers, caravan after caravan, family after family. It is only exceptionally, and in the course of pilgrimages open to the public, that one may suddenly come across several hundreds of them (Clébert 1967: 15).

Ethnicity, cultural diversity and "nomadism"

Although Clébert acknowledged the multiple differences between groups, he nevertheless insisted on the primacy of nomadism for Gypsy identity, while dismissing settled Gypsies as inauthentic. He argued that:

> … the Gypsy is primarily and above else a nomad … The sedentary Gypsies are generally "excluded" people … who have been banned from the clans or made *marime*, that is, "unclean", because of serious violations of the Tradition … (Clébert 1967: 246).

He repeated this point, insisting that 'the great majority of authentic Gypsies are still uncompromising nomads' (ibid.). This claim seemed implausible since Clébert's definitive criterion excluded most of these much larger populations in Eastern Europe, the Iberian Peninsula and Turkey from claiming "authenticity".

Clébert's translator, Charles Duff, racialised Clébert's position in relation to the British Isles, distinguishing between *Romanies* ("true Roms"), *Posh-rats* ("half-bloods"), *Didakais* ("mixed, less than half-blood") and *Travellers* ("no Gypsy blood"). In addition, he drew a sharp social distinction between other groups and "true *Roms*", who 'are, on the whole, peaceable people who seldom make nuisances of themselves and almost in-

variably follow law-abiding occupations of their own choice'. In contrast, the others 'are mostly caravan-dwellers who go from place to place and make some sort of living as they move about [and] often make nuisances of themselves to farmers and townsfolk …. unlike the *Roms*, they have no real traditions of their own …' (Duff 1963: 260–1).

Three years after the publication of the English translation of Clébert's book, another study challenged his assumption that ethnic groups, such as Roma, have objective cultural characteristics that uniquely define and differentiate them from other communities. In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth argued:

> Practically all anthropological reasoning rests on the premise that cultural variation is discontinuous: that there are aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture, and interconnected differences that distinguish each such discrete culture from all others. Since culture is nothing but a way to describe human behaviour, it would follow that there are discrete groups of people, i.e. ethnic units, to correspond to each culture (Barth 1969b: 9).

Barth attacked this view for begging questions about ethnic groups by assuming in the model those aspects most in need of critical explanation. He also pointed out that this approach is difficult to apply where ethnic communities undergo radical cultural change whilst maintaining a continuous identity throughout and where there is considerable cultural variation within a given community at the same period. These difficulties could be avoided if 'the critical focus of investigation … becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines a group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries … are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts' (Barth 1969b: 15, emphasis in original).

Instead of seeking an objective set of defining characteristics, Barth's perspective involved adopting a subjective approach according to which the critical feature of an ethnic community is that it possesses 'a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.' (Barth 1969b: 11). The role of cultural features is thereby transformed from passive to active, whereby they become symbols capable of manipulation. In Barth's words:

> The features that are taken into account are not the sum of 'objective' differences but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant.… Some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied (Barth 1969b: 14).

In more general terms, 'the sharing of a common culture is … an implication or result, rather than a primary and definitional characteristic of ethnic group organisation' (Barth 1969b: 11).

Barth concluded, therefore, that to pursue the search for a set of objective characteristics is not only to seek what is not there but, more importantly, it is to misunderstand the nature of ethnic groups and the dynamic function of stressed cultural characteristics. The community is logically prior to these characteristics, not vice-versa.

In spite of Barth's publication, some writers on Roma have been reluctant to abandon the search for defining characteristics. For example, although András Bíró recognised that many Roma were not nomadic, he nevertheless put forward a variant of nomadism as crucial, holding that the:

> … most salient distinctive factors and basic characteristics of the Roma are associated … with their relationship to *territoriality.… nowhere have significant numbers of Roma turned into peasants or farmers, so that their roots and livelihood have become based on the land.…* [Even where non-nomadic] their *livelihood* is based is based on services offered to settled, recipient communities, on which they depend (Bíró 2013: 14–5, emphasis in original).

Nicolae Gheorghe rejected this argument, insisting that 'Roma *are* connected to territory – and not only in the Romanian case – so the concept of nomadism is not the key to their specificity' (2013: 53). In his view 'large segments of the Roma population can be regarded as settled, without them having been farmers or landowners'. This situation had been long established, particularly in 'the two Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires' (ibid.). To support his position he referred to his own family history, where he 'grew up as a descendent of *ţigani vatraşi* (settled Gypsies) in Romania' (ibid.: 55).

> In contrast to the way in which Romanian peasant serfs were bound to the land, *ţigani robi* [Gypsy slaves] were tied to the owners as their property or chattels.… Therefore, if we characterise Roma solely by the image of a nomadic life, the experience of *robia* [slavery] was quite the opposite. For generations [many of] these people worked as agricultural labourers, just like ordinary peasants (Gheorghe 2013: 57).

Gheorghe developed his point that, rather than being intrinsically different from other people, it is the similarities that are more significant. In particular, like others, they necessarily adapt to external conditions:

> Their history demonstrates that Roma can be productive in economic terms. However, their fate depends largely on the state of [the] economy and contemporary social structures, as well as their ability to integrate as citizens. Instead of labelling Roma as 'eternal nomads', it is more accurate to say they have the capacity to be flexible workers. Whether their way of life is nomadic or settled largely depends on economic, social and historical circumstances (Gheorghe 2013: 58).

This perspective was often not shared by politicians and policymakers, who dealt with the complexities of Roma cultural variation by turning to stereotypes and what Eric Hobsbawm termed the "primordialist" theory of ethnicity (1992). For example, the migration of Roma in the 1990s from Eastern European countries to Western Europe and Canada was frequently misinterpreted as a reversion to their "inherent nomadism".

In 1995 Geraldine Verspaget, Chair of the Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies at the Council of Europe, declared this migration to be 'merely a return to the normal mobil-

ity of Gypsies' (1995: 13). In a similar vein, a 1997 report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees started its analysis of Roma migration and asylum seeking by asserting: 'A common characteristic of almost all Roma communities across Europe is their nomadic lifestyle' (UNHCR 1997: 2). This erroneous claim was repeated by the European Commission, explaining why Roma had problems in defending their basic human rights as 'due to their nomadic way of life' (European Commission 1999: 2).

At least these uses of the concept of *nomad* were genuine if misinformed mistakes, unlike its widespread use in Italy. There, politicians, and especially the media, use the term indiscriminately to refer abusively to all groups, whether they are settled Roma who have fled the violent disintegration of former Yugoslavia or indigenous communities. 'Italian Roma and Sinti almost do not exist in the public debate and the label nomads tends to capture all those living in camps whatever their origin and legal status' (Sigona 2009: 288).

The incorrect view that Roma are essentially nomads was flatly dismissed by Yaron Matras who pointed out that 'the extraordinary feature of Roma migration [from Eastern Europe in the 1990s] is that so many Roma are prepared to take the risks of migrating *despite their lack of nomadic traditions*' (Matras 2000: 32, emphasis in original). During the same period, many non-Roma citizens of these ex-Communist countries were also migrating westwards for work. While Roma shared some of the motivations of these other migrants, 'such as to improve their economic status,… [reports] 'repeated[ly] mention "insecurity due to community tensions and occasional violent incidents", a motivation that is peculiar to the Roma' (Matras 2000: 36).

Matras' findings were mainly based on NGO reports, but further corroboration of his conclusions was provided by sociological research carried out among Roma asylum seekers. A study for the Czech International Organisation for Migration (IOM) found that migration of Roma from the Czech Republic was partly prompted by the economic recession in the late 1990s, which severely affected the deindustrialised and poorest areas where most Roma lived. Respondents' reasons for migrating, in decreasing order of importance, were high unemployment, unavailability of housing, insecurity – such as fear of racially motivated attacks – and the rising cost of living (Gabal 2000: 25). A companion report for the Slovak IOM told a similar story that members of the Roma "middle class" (i.e., former relatively well-paid, manual labourers) had lost their earlier, hard-won socioeconomic status. Now, in the new neoliberal world, they suffered not only unemployment but also blanket discrimination as allegedly work-shy Roma (Vašečka et al. 2000: 185):

> Our findings indicate that the main reason for Roma migrating into EU member states is their endeavour to maintain the level of emancipation they have achieved. Every single Roma who we have spoken with claimed that for Roma it was easier to live in this country before 1990. As one of them put it: 'It is necessary to return the Roma where he was ten years ago' (Vašečka et al. 2000: 172).

Ethnicity and nationalism

For anthropology, Barth's book was ground-breaking, but writers on nationalism had come to similar conclusions long before. As early as 1887, Ernest Renan had drawn attention

to the mixed ancestry and diversity of established nations and stressed that less important than any formal characteristics that members of a nation might have in common was the members' sense of belonging together and sharing a common destiny (Renan 1882). He expressed this fundamental, on-going aspect by calling the nation "a tacit daily plebiscite" (Anderson 1991 took a similar view). Renan also identified the frequently fictitious nature of most nationalist claims: 'Forgetting history, or even getting history wrong are an essential factor in the formation of a nation, which is why the progress of historical studies is often dangerous to a nationality' (Renan quoted Hobsbawm 1992: 3).

Alfred Cobban regarded the search for objective defining criteria as futile and also saw the subjective aspect as crucial:

> A definition is something that no theoretician of nationality has been able to provide in objective terms … for extensive exceptions can be found to every proposed test, except the subjective one. The best we can say is that any territorial community, the members of which are conscious of themselves as members of a community, and wish to maintain the identity of their community, is a nation (Cobban 1969: 107).

Cobban implied that the search for a watertight definition should be abandoned on empirical grounds, yet to assume that the concept of "nation" would be meaningless without strict criteria is an unconscious acceptance of the discredited philosophical doctrine of "real definition" – that words only have meaning if they can be defined precisely. Wittgenstein's example of the word "games", which we use satisfactorily without the need for a single set of defining characteristics, is apt in this context:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships …. I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than 'family resemblances' …. And I shall say: "'games' form a family" (Wittgenstein 1958: 31e, 32e).

If the search for a universally valid definition of *nation* is unrewarding, an alternative approach is to concentrate on those characteristics emphasised by ethnic communities in their attempts at nation-building. However, here again, no common objective features can be found in nationalist movements. Indeed, as Kautsky remarked of Third World nationalism: 'there would seem to be no positive factor in nationalism at all, but rather the dislike of a common enemy, the colonial power' (Kautsky 1962, quoted in Davis 1967: 164–5). Moreover, although the characteristics that have proved historically successful in stimulating nationalist movements are relatively few, there is no *a priori* limitation on possibilities. Remembering H. G. Wells' story, there is no reason, in principle, why blindness could not be the focal point of a nation (Wells 1904).

To rally support, a nationalist movement must, among other things, find causes or features around which durable and deep-rooted unity can be created. However, such ele-

ments will vary according to the situation for 'ethnicity is rarely a given or a constant, but is contextual and contingent. Specific historical and structural features will determine whether or not ethnic identity is mobilised in politics, by whom, and for what' (Loïzos 1971: 1084). The arguments of a nationalist movement are not to be judged so much by their logic and truth, but by their effectiveness in arousing nationalist sentiment. For this purpose, a fictitious characteristic may serve quite adequately, as was demonstrated by Romanian nationalists who claimed their nation was Latin by ethnicity as well as by language:

> They based their "nationality" not on their own heroes but on the foreign conqueror of their country, the Roman Emperor Trajan [by claiming descent from his legions. But] … even if every Roman legionary in Dacia had performed prodigies of reproduction, it is difficult to see how the miscellaneous riff-raff of Spaniards, Berbers, Englishmen, Syrians or Thracians could have produced a pure Latin progeny from the conquered Dacians of Romania (Seton Watson 1962: 8).

Eric Hobsbawm distinguished between nationalism and ethnicity (Hobsbawm 1992: 4). Nationalism is a political programme claiming that groups defined as "nations" have the right to form states, which ideally include all of their citizens, or, in Mazzini's words: 'Every nation a state and only one state for the entire nation.' In contrast, ethnicity 'provides the historical pedigree "the nation" in the great majority of cases so obviously lacks.… Ethnicity, whatever its basis, is a readily definable way of expressing a *real* sense of group identity which links the members of "we" because it emphasises their differences from "them"' (Hobsbawm 1992: 4).

However, Hobsbawm, following Renan, remained deeply sceptical of the spurious claims made by nationalists, declaring that 'no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist.… Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so' (Hobsbawm 1990: 12). For him, the nation was often a construct from disparate groups, as exemplified by Massimo d'Azeglio's 1861 comment following Italian unification: 'We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians.' In a similar vein, Marshal Piłsudski, the inter-war leader of Poland – which was eventually reunited after 123 years under foreign rule – asserted: 'It is the state which makes the nation and not the nation the state' (quoted in Hobsbawm 1990: 44–5).

Attempts at forging Roma unity

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist movements of ethnic groups in Central and Eastern Europe prompted similar mobilisation among the Roma of these regions. Roma congresses were reported in Germany (1872), Hungary (1879), Bulgaria (1906), and Romania (1934). One motivation inspiring such gatherings was an appeal for anti-discrimination, as in the 1906 petition sent to the Bulgarian parliament demanding equal rights for Roma (Acton 1974: 139–140; Hancock 1992: 139–140). The only Roma movements with territorial ambitions were those led by members of the Kwiek family in Poland. These self-proclaimed "Gypsy kings" variously sought to establish a "Romani homeland" (*Romanestan*) in India, South Africa, or Abyssinia (Hancock 1992: 142).

After the Second World War, there was a resurgence of Roma political mobilisation when the impetus in establishing Roma organisations passed to Western Europe. The lead was taken by Roma activists who had moved to France from Romania, Poland, and Hungary and then helped form the *Comité International Tzigane* (CIT) in Paris. This initiative inspired Roma in other countries to follow suit, including the Gypsy Council in England and the Nordic Rom Council in Sweden, and eventually led to a landmark conference, coordinated by the CIT. At the First World Romani Congress (WRC), held near London in 1971, Roma delegates from fourteen different countries from both Eastern and Western Europe, as well as from Scandinavia, declared their unity. Instead of terms used by others with pejorative connotations, such as Gypsies, *Zigeuner* or *Tattare*, it was agreed to use these people's most common own name for themselves – Roma.

This historic meeting adopted a flag, an anthem and a slogan – *Upre Roma*! (Roma Arise). It also established a series of commissions to deal with education, social problems, war crimes reparation, culture, and language. A permanent secretariat was elected 'to coordinate the work of the five commissions, prepare reports for the UN, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe, and make contact with the UN Commission on Human Rights' (Puxon 1971a: 192–4; Kenrick & Puxon 1972: 210–4). The opening day of the congress, the 8th of April, was proclaimed as National Roma Day to be celebrated each year.

The aim of the WRC was not simply to respond to the 1969 Council of Europe resolution that member states 'take all necessary steps to stop discrimination, be it in legislation or in administrative practice, against Gypsies' (Kenrick & Puxon 1972: 213) but also to argue that, despite cultural divergence and various names, these communities were 'one Roma people' (Puxon 1971a: 192). In stronger terms Gratton Puxon, then Secretary of the [English] Gypsy Council, claimed Roma were 'an awakening nation'. Nevertheless, he added that Roma 'were not about to stake out the frontiers of a Gypsy state – *Romanestan* – but rather … to demand a measure of self-determination' (Puxon 1971b: 195).

Likewise, Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe recognised that any project of establishing a Romani "homeland" was unrealistic due to the geographical fragmentation of Roma – resembling an "archipelago" of communities characterised by "multiculturality and multi-territoriality". Instead, following Liégeois' 1976 suggestion, they proposed that Roma might be legally acknowledged '… as a transnational or non-territorial minority,' a concept without '… secessionist implications' (Mirga & Gheorghe 1997: 16).

Meanwhile the International Romani Union (IRU) – a working committee founded in 1978 at the Second World Romani Congress to pursue agreed policies – attained increased recognition. Eventually, in 1993, it was granted an upgraded UN consultative status. In the same year, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation that 'as one of the very few non-territorial minorities Gypsies need special protection' (Guy 2001: 22).

While Roma mobilisation had similarities with earlier regional nationalist movements, Mirga and Gheorghe pointed out that Roma were 'among the last groups in Europe to discover the potential and power of ethnonationalism and to struggle for a political space of their own' (Mirga & Gheorghe 1997: 3). Gheorghe explained that this eventually came about mainly in Eastern European countries where post-Second World War social-

ist or Communist regimes had created opportunities which allowed a small proportion of Roma to become part of wider society, while nevertheless retaining a sense of Romani identity. However, due to their non-conformity to expected lifestyle patterns, activists from such backgrounds faced legitimacy challenges from non-Roma and Roma alike:

> There exists a stratum of Romani people integrated into society who are able to maintain a dialogue with the different establishments – political, administrative and academic – who nonetheless suspect we are not "true Gypsies" because we no longer live in the traditional conditions which are documented by ethnographers and anthropologists (Gheorghe 1997: 157).

While non-Roma officials were puzzled about whether they were negotiating with authentic Roma, ordinary Roma suspected their new "representatives" of merely serving their own interests by 'building careers in Gypsy politics' (Gheorghe 1997: 158).

Following the collapse of Communist regimes after 1989, Roma were often granted national minority status by successor Eastern European governments. This apparent liberality was viewed with deep scepticism by Gheorghe, who saw this as a stratagem for gaining EU membership:

> The fact that the nation-states are so generous now with these "minorities" is just one device to reinforce the legitimacy of these states as ethnic states, states which actually belong to an ethnic "majority". So ethnic minority policies are exhibited as if in a display cabinet, like a showcase in international politics to make sure the Council of Europe and the western democracies think that things are good in eastern Europe (Gheorghe 1997: 160).

The Roma poet, Attila Balogh, was even more scathing – both about manipulative Hungarian politicians and self-seeking Roma leaders:

> Our modern-day little kings [i.e., non-Roma political leaders] are now obliged, before entering NATO or the European Union, to fall in love with the Gypsies for at least fifteen minutes and to demonstrate their enthusiasm for democracy before the various committees considering these applications. Therefore [in 1995] they created the National Gypsy Minority Self-Government to give apparent legitimacy to the Gypsies' constitutional rights.… Well-organised apparatchiks carefully oversaw the fraud of electing Gypsy leaders, exploiting differences within the Gypsy intelligentsia to ensure the victory of easily programmed vassals. With foreign policy interests at stake, the Constitutional Court turned a blind eye to this electoral fraud.... Now the rebellious Gypsy intellectuals are lying low and, amidst the strains of authentic folk music, wait for a seat in Parliament or job in the Ministry to become available (Balogh 1998).

Martin Kovats expressed similar views but traced the origins of this state policy of containment in Hungary to the final faltering years of Communist rule when the regime recognised that there were insufficient resources to achieve socio-economic equality for Roma. Instead, the promotion of Romani 'difference' was adopted with the founding of national and county-level Gypsy Councils in 1985, followed in 1986 by the establish-

ment of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarian Gypsies, which encouraged Romani cultural organisations and events. Kovats made the point forcefully that:

> … the formal expression of Roma interest representation was created in 1985 precisely to *reduce* the obligations owed by the state towards its Roma citizens. This role for Roma politics was merely extended in the 1990s as the inherent weakness of the Roma as a political community meant that it was relatively easy for the state to manage its development (Kovats 2001: 343; emphasis in original).

This policy shift was continued and taken further after the 1989 collapse of Communist rule by the inclusion of Roma in the 1993 Minorities Law. With this legislation, the state committed itself 'to halt the process of assimilation' and promote the cultural and educational autonomy of minorities (Kovats 2001: 341). This step was followed in 1995 by the establishment of the National Gypsy Minority Self-Government (Kovats 2000).

Nevertheless, despite these fine principles, the harsh reality was otherwise. Roma unemployment soared as their semi-skilled and unskilled labour was no longer needed by the Hungarian economy, since 'by 1990, around 40 per cent of Roma workers had lost their jobs' (Kovats 2001: 341). And by 'the mid-1990s "official" Roma unemployment was five times the national average and over 70 per cent of Roma lived below the poverty line compared with only 15 per cent of the total Hungarian population' (*Népszabadság*, 13 May 1995, cited in Kovats 2001: 343).

In Czechoslovakia, Roma suffered much the same fate following a regime change. Recognition as a national minority and the state-sponsored promotion of Romani culture was accompanied by Roma mass unemployment. Such an outcome had been predicted much earlier in a 1979 report by the dissident organisation Charta 77 (1979). This document condemned the repeated use of a 1958 law, purportedly to bring an end to the travels of the small proportion of nomadic *Vlach* Roma but really to manage the controlled dispersal of the far more numerous settled *Rumungre* Roma in a forced assimilation campaign.

This policy goal of dispersing Roma among the wider population had been adopted to counter the 'separation and isolation' of Roma, which helps 'conserve the old, primitive gipsy way of life with all its bad habits' (Czechoslovak Socialist Government 1959: 28). In a government handbook, to guide the practice of local authorities, this strategy was justified on the grounds that nowhere 'in the world do gypsies form a nation – they live considerably dispersed and, for the most part, they have adapted themselves linguistically and culturally to the nation in whose land they live' (Czechoslovak Socialist Government 1959: 22). Other officials had less patience for such theoretical explanations: 'The question is not whether the gypsies are a nation but how to assimilate them' (Ulč 1969: 440).

The assimilation campaign was prompted by the situation in which, after the Second World War, large numbers of settled Roma had migrated with their families from underdeveloped Slovakia to the industrial areas of North Bohemia and North Moravia and to Czech cities in search of jobs as labourers and service workers. The newcomers, frequently arriving as large families, were housed by Czech local authorities mostly in dilapidated

urban cores in older flats unwanted by non-Roma inhabitants. By the early 1950s, these highly visible and growing Roma concentrations were becoming virtual ghettos (Jamnická-Šmerglová 1955). Meanwhile, despite continuing outmigration, the generally segregated Roma settlements in Slovakia were becoming overcrowded and increasingly unsanitary.

In the words of Charta 77, these Roma arrivals 'while not nomads, are forced to migrate on account of living conditions not of their own making.' Unlike their Slovak fellow-countrymen, many of whom had made the same journey for similar reasons, they were denied their constitutional rights by Czech local authorities, which followed government guidelines in refusing to register them as residents – even if they had found regular employment:

> As a result, newcomers were excluded from the housing list and forced either to crowd in with relatives or squat in near-derelict buildings. A bleak alternative was to live in basic barracks near their workplace, commuting home to their families [in Slovakia] only at weekends. In many ways their situation was akin to that of illegal migrant workers in the West, needed for their labour power but undesired as citizens – with the crucial difference that this was their own country (Guy 1975).

The Charta 77 report further accused the Communist government of deliberately tolerating this illegal situation in order to exploit Roma as a flexible and vulnerable pool of reserve labour. Yet, as well as condemning the treatment of Roma migrants, it also made a grim prediction that if life as unskilled migrant workers was tough, things would get even worse should the inefficient command economy modernise.

> The demand for unskilled labour will then fall, threatening the Roma with massive unemployment which will expose this ruthlessly urbanised minority to extreme pressures, and fuse their social ostracism and material oppression with a new ethnic consciousness, all the stronger the more cruelly it is … suppressed (Charta 77, *op.cit.*, Part 2, *Labour Focus*: 7).

As in Hungary, the first part of this prophecy was fulfilled a decade later as the collapse of Communist rule led to the introduction of a restructured and deregulated market economy. However, the consequent effect of widespread popular resentment of unemployed Roma, forced to subsist on welfare benefits and to suffer sporadic racist attacks on them, has not yet prompted heightened ethnic consciousness among former Roma labourers and their families. Instead, it led many of them to emigrate to the West, especially during the 1990s.

Another factor driving Roma to emigrate from Czechoslovakia was its negoti-ated division on 1 January 1993 in what was termed the "Velvet Divorce". Although Slovakia – an independent state for the first time in its history – granted citizenship to any former Czechoslovak citizen who wanted it, the new Czech Republic deliberately used this occasion to try to reduce its Roma population by imposing stringent conditions for Czech citizenship. On these grounds, many Roma born in the Czech lands were denied citizenship, while Roma migrants born in Slovakia were automatically deemed to be Slo-vak citizens, even if long-term residents of Bohemia and Moravia (Gross 1993, 1994).

This drastic policy was eventually abandoned in 1999, following the 1998 re-scinding of the 1958 nomadism law, in connection with the application by the Czech

government to join the European Union. EU concern had been heightened by the arrival of Roma asylum seekers, particularly from the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1997 and 1998. Yet the 1993 imposition of citizenship conditions, targeted specifically at Roma, was simply a repetition of a much earlier Czech attempt to take advantage of administrative change. In that case, the 1968 federalisation of the previously unitary republic allowed the Czech government to distance itself from a whole-state solution of the "gypsy question" to the dismay of its Slovak counterpart:

> [These changes] perhaps suit the Czech regions where there are about 40,000 gypsies. In Slovakia, where today we have 170,000 (of which perhaps 100,000 live in quite inhuman conditions), the latest administrative structure for solving the gypsy question is utterly unsuitable (Slovak Socialist Government 1968).

The desire for EU membership prompted post-Communist Eastern European governments to acknowledge their Roma populations as national minorities, but up until the turn of the twenty-first century the strongest claim made by Roma activists had been for recognition as a "non-territorial minority". However, following the Fifth World Romani Congress, held in Prague in 2000 with the full support of the Czech government, the IRU president Emil Ščuka went further in issuing his *Declaration of Nation*. This demanded that Roma should be recognised as a 'transnational Nation' since 'We are a Nation, we share the same tradition, the same culture, the same language; we are a Nation. We have never looked for creating a Roma State. And we do not want a State today …' (Acton & Klímová 2001: 216–7).

Although Roma have been increasingly acknowledged by states, international bodies and organisations, as well as by the EU, the goal of achieving a coherent and unified "nation", as envisaged by the IRU, is far from being realised. A few years before the *Declaration of Nation* Rudko Kawczynski, the leader of the rival Roma National Congress (RNC), fiercely attacked the IRU as undemocratic, under-funded, organisationally weak and ineffectual, amounting to little more than a "paper tiger". His main criticism was that the IRU was remote from ordinary Roma and consequently lacked credibility and legitimacy with them:

> The IRU has never played any significant role in the Romani community. It is a *gadje*-oriented organization, and its officials have always attached more value to it being recognized by *gadje* [non-Roma] institutions than by Roma. It is, therefore, not surprising that it has never been taken seriously by Roma, let alone been considered their true representative (Kawczynski 1997: 27).

Can Roma be regarded as a potential nation – or even an ethnic group?

If disputes between Roma organisations revealed deep schisms within the claimed Roma nation, doubts about the possibility of building Roma unity were also raised by academic writers. Michael Stewart stressed the gulf between Roma would-be leaders and ordinary Roma, arguing that:

> … with the exceptions of the educated Gypsy intellectuals who run the Rom political parties, the Roma do not have an ethnic identity. For them, identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relations with significant others, not something inherited from the past (Stewart 1997: 28).

Wim Willems challenged the idea that it made sense to talk of Roma as a single people. In his view, Gypsies were a motley collection of differing groups, many indigenous, who were identified as Gypsies mostly on the basis that they have been labelled as such by host communities (Willems 1997). Based on his anthropological field research in Slovakia, Marek Jakoubek found that Roma did not see themselves as part of a wider ethnic group but only identified with their kin groupings (Jakoubek 2005; Jakoubek & Budilová 2006, 2019). Meanwhile, in undermining the basis of Roma nationalism, Martin Kovats suggested that that 'it is necessary to see if there is any unique distinctive characteristic shared by those who are covered by the Roma discourse' (Kovats 2013: 104).

Challenging these views, Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov argued that the cultural variation between the widely dispersed Roma communities of Eastern Europe did not debar them from being seen as a broader ethnic group. Following Barth, they dismissed the idea that this would require them necessarily to have objective characteristics in common, let alone a single one:

> The idea that Roma may be differentiated as a community according to certain social and/or cultural features is totally unacceptable because there are not (and did not exist in the past) such parameters and any characteristics, which are common and must be presented among all Roma communities everywhere. In the same way there are no cultural features and parameters which belong only to Roma and cannot be discovered also among other peoples living in this region (Marushiakova & Popov 2016: 24).

In Eastern Europe, Roma and non-Roma have lived alongside each other for centuries, and both sides have a very clear idea of the difference between "them" and "us". The Roma were constantly reminded by the discrimination they suffered that their enforced and stigmatised group status was inherited not acquired, whatever they themselves thought.

> Thus, it turns out, somewhat paradoxically, that the "underlying unity" … and the boundaries of this community, in [the] sense of Fredrik Barth's terms …, are determined in fact not only by its members, but by the surrounding population, regardless of the self-perception of the Roma and their identity … (ibid. 2016: 19).

Despite the widely divergent views of academic writers, these are not so entirely incompatible as it might appear. Marushiakova and Popov, citing Miroslav Hroch, recognise that '… the Roma community is still at the beginning of its way to possible (but not indispensible) formation as Roma nation … when Roma activists strive … to win over as many of their ethnic group as possible to the project of creating a future nation'. And they concede that 'so far it cannot be said that they have succeed[ed in making] … significant headway in this direction (ibid.: 15).' Nor is there any certainty about the outcome of these efforts:

> When (and if) a united Roma nation will be formed in the near or distant future is still a question without answer. At this stage Roma haven't created a common one nation historical narrative, but the ethnic character of their communities is beyond any doubt (ibid.: 15–6).

Budilová and Jakoubek (2009, 2014) would, however, argue that it is *only* a surrounding population's (researchers and other academics including) view that unites otherwise diverse and ethnically indifferent Roma populations, or kin groups; i.e., that "Roma" is – in Jenkins' (1997) terms – an externally defined *category*, not an internally coherent *group*.

Similarly, Kovats argues 'that the meaning of Roma, in the contemporary political context, is not a reflection of an objective reality (of Roma people), but is an ambiguous and malleable, even tendentious abstraction based on belief rather than fact' (2013: 104). Consequently, he sees Roma nationalism as a blind alley, providing others with 'a means for excluding/marginalizing (traditionally marginalized) people from the mainstream' (ibid.). Instead, he advocates that Roma activists should seek to forge alliances, creating 'solidarity between Roma and non-Roma on the basis of common interests'. He is pessimistic about this possibility since future developments are out of Roma hands.

> Now and in the future, the key factor is how wider society understands and relates to 'Roma' politically. Thus, it is not 'Roma' but the mainstream which determines not only who Roma are, but also who they can be (Kovats 2013: 127).

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Povzetek

Članek poudarja pomemben vpliv objave Barthovih *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* leta 1969 za raziskovalce Romov. Takrat je velik del literature – in tudi oblikovalci politike – te zapletene in raznolike skupnosti gledal na esencialističen način, kljub njihovim večkratnim razlikam in zgodovinskim prilagajanjem specifičnim političnim in družbenim okoljem. Zlasti se je pogosto domnevalo, da si vsi "pristni" Romi delijo skupno kulturo, v kateri je bil nomadizem odločilna značilnost. Takšne posplošitve so izhajale iz prevladujočih vzorcev v zahodni Evropi, pri čemer pa so ignorirali dejstvo, da se velika večina teh ljudi v vzhodni Evropi ni več selila. Takšni nesporazumi so imeli pomembne posledice za politiko, zlasti po propadu komunistične vladavine, zaradi česar so se mnogi Romi preselili na zahod. Pisci o nacionalizmu so že prej spoznali, da so narodi pogosto konstrukt iz ločenih skupin in ne homogenih entitet – zelo pomemben dejavnik pri razpravljanju o sodobnih poskusih kovanja romskega nacionalizma. Ali je Romom kljub priznanim kulturnim razlikam mogoče šteti, da imajo skupno etnično identiteto, ostaja zelo sporno vprašanje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Romi, narodnost, kultura, meje, nomadizem, nacionalizem, določitev meril, identiteta

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