Hungarian Roma Attitudes on Minority Rights: The Symbolic Violence of Ethnic Identification

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Since 1989 Hungary has undergone profound political and economic changes. The political changes are referred to as ‘democratisation’, a term describing a general shift from an authoritarian to a pluralistic political system and a rights-based legal system. The economic changes are referred to as the market transition, a shift from socialist redistribution to an economy based on capitalist markets (Feliciano, Cook & Emigh, 2004). The social consequences of these transitions have been similarly profound, affecting the entire population, but especially its largest minority, the Roma (Ladangi, 2000). By almost all accounts, poverty and concerns about ethnic identity have increased in Hungary. In addition, discrimination against minorities has risen dramatically since 1990, as documented by governmental and non-governmental reports. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of Roma currently living in Hungary, it is generally agreed that they comprise Hungary’s largest minority group, from 500,000 to 800,000 people, or between 3% and 8% of the population.1

This article examines Roma ethnicity in post-transition Hungary, where market and political liberalisation create a context for examining ethnic group identification. While ethnic group identification is strongly encouraged by post-transition legal reforms, severe economic and social conditions make life extremely difficult for self-identified members of the Roma minority population. This struggle for self-identification is a focus of this article as it examines Roma responses to questions about minority rights in the context of severe economic and social constraints. Rather than facilitating Roma ethnic self-identification, minority rights and minority self-government create additional hazards for the Roma.

This survey is part of a larger project called ‘What Roma Want’, which I initiated during the summer of 2000 for the purpose of examining the relationship between Roma and such legal systems as minority rights (Koulish, 2001, 2002, 2003). The question that frames this study is whether minority rights, a form of affirmative action, help, harm, or have no impact on the Roma. I created this survey for the purpose of answering this question. Along the way, I have focused on ethnic self-identification as an important marker of the success or failure of minority rights.
Ethnicity

Two basic approaches are found in the literature on ethnicity. One is the essentialist or primordial approach that understands ethnicity as a natural and static phenomenon defined by language, descent and territorial factors (Shils, 1957). The other is the social constructivist approach that sees ethnicity as a cultural tool constructed for the purpose of economic and social control. Constructivist studies focus on how ethnic identity is shaped by symbolism, discourse, group psychology and social boundaries etc. In all, there are three overlapping social constructivist approaches to ethnicity:

- top-down imposition of categories, discourses, policies, institutions, laws etc;
- interpersonal, phenomenological negotiation of social categories; and
- bottom-up processes of identification, by which individuals and groups embrace or reject certain identities.

Barth (1969), who introduced a social constructivist view of ethnicity to mainstream social science, argues that participants identify with groups and their perception of boundaries of groups (rather than boundaries as the sum of objective, measurable differences). Bernal & Knight (1993) define ethnicity as self-perceived inclusion of people who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others. This act of self-identity provides a marker of common origin, common values and beliefs, as well as a shared feeling of survival. Yinger’s (1985) definition of ethnicity incorporates objective cultural characteristics and subjective self-identification, where common origin and culture function as the basis for social mobilisation. According to Yinger, ethnicity is ‘a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves and/or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients’ (1985, p. 159). Similarly, Tienda & Ortiz (1986) argue that meanings of ethnicity are informed by socioeconomic status; in studies of Latinos, ethnicity serves an instrumental function to members of impoverished groups (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans) and a symbolic role for minorities of a higher socio-economic status (successful Cubans).

Following the constructivist approach, this article examines ethnicity as a contested social construction where individual Roma struggle within and between socially imposed categories: social conditions (top-down approaches marked by history, labels and market transition) and minority rights.

Background to Roma ethnicity

A common example of imposing social categories is ‘labeling’, which Gans (1979) defines as ‘the resort to imagined knowledge and descriptions of people based on it... used primarily to designate people as “deviant”, different in a negative or pejorative sense’ (p. 12). For example, the word gypsy remains a prevailing albeit pejorative descriptive term. The etymology of ‘Gypsy’ reveals the subordination of this ethnic group. The term is a contraction of ‘Tsigan’. The name for this group comprises a cognate from one language to another: Gitano in Spanish, Gypsy in Greek, Gjupci in...
Macedonian, Zigeuner in German, Tsigany in Russian, Zingari in Italian and Tigani in Romanian (Stewart, 1997, p. 5). Hungarians use the term Cigany, which was in the Hungarian language (Magyar) before 1400 (Forray & Mohacsi, 2002). Like the English ‘Gypsy’, all are etymologically derived from Greek ‘egyptos,’ or ‘Egypt,’ which led many to think the people originated in Egypt and is the origin of the slang term, ‘to gyp,’ meaning to swindle (Hancock, 1987). In recent years the name ‘Gypsy’ has been replaced by the more politically correct word Roma. In Romany languages the word ‘rom’ means both ‘Roma’ and ‘man’. Etymologically, the word ‘roma’ may come from the Sanscrit word domba, which refers to a very low caste, or the word dom in Hindi which means musician, roper maker, basket-weaver (Forray & Mohacsi, 2002).

The etymology of ‘Gypsy’ and subsequent categorisations of the Roma as a subordinated ‘other’ correspond to socio-historical accounts of the Roma in the Carpathian Basin that document centuries of forced assimilation, marginalisation and social exclusion. Since the Turks occupied Buda in the sixteenth century, many members of the Roma minority adopted the language of their hosts, in this instance becoming Muslim and speaking Turkish. During the eighteenth century Austria’s ruler, Maria Theresa, banished Roma from the Habsburg Empire, then reversed course, banned their transient lifestyle, declared them ‘new citizens’ and subjected them to ‘magyarisation’, or forced assimilation. Joseph II, Maria Theresa’s son, broadened ‘magyarisation’ policies and ordered local deputies to place the Roma under surveillance. By the late eighteenth century, by virtue of social control and coerced consent, very few Roma were identified as Roma; and by the late nineteenth century, very few Roma admitted who they were (Crow, 1996).

Conditions for Roma worsened during the first half of the twentieth century, beginning with social Darwinist declarations of Roma genetic inferiority in academic conferences during the first decade and culminating in the Holocaust. During the second half of the twentieth century the state socialist regime of Hungary again discounted ethnic Roma identity and subjected them to forced assimilation (Crow, 1996; Hancock, 1998). While material needs were covered, ethnic identity was denied. Indeed, for 500 years or more, Roma have never had a day when autonomy was allowed, when they had trust, were not suspects or had some say about their future.

**Market transition**

Social and economic policies associated with the market transition in Hungary have had a disproportionately harsh effect on Roma. Under state socialism, social programmes covered the entire population. In addition, the Roma had a place in the economy. Since the transition, drastic cuts in state spending on social benefits and services, and devolution in welfare reforms, have led to the decline in such important social benefit schemes as pensions and family allowances (Szalai, 2000). The restructuring of Hungary’s labour market has had the effect of excluding Roma from jobs. During the latter days of state socialism Roma were overwhelmingly employed in unskilled and semi-skilled labour sectors and in industries that were heavily subsidised by the state. It should be noted that under state socialism the Roma and non-Roma unemployment rates were roughly the same (Ringold, 2000). This balance disappeared as socialism faded and the market economy asserted itself. The problem for Roma was
their concentration in industrial sectors (heavy metal mining, for example) that were the first to be swept away after the market transition. As thousands of industrial jobs disappeared during the 1990s, the Roma were overrepresented in the ranks of the post-transition unemployed (Kertesi, 2000). According to government estimates, about 72% of the Roma population previously employed and capable of working lost their jobs (Doncsev, 2000). Since the transition, anti-Roma prejudice has also been a factor in employment decisions. Both Kertesi (2000) and Milanovic (1998) suggest Roma ethnicity functions as a marker for excluding Roma from the employment force (see Stewart, 2002). Prejudice is also a factor in the exclusion of Roma from schools. According to government studies, while around 91.4% of non-Roma students are getting a secondary education, only about 33.6% of Roma continue in school after the eighth grade (Doncsev, 2000).

While the Roma community is diverse, with some in the middle classes and a few who are wealthy and educated, the vast majority of Hungary’s Roma live in extreme poverty in appalling socioeconomic conditions with no regular income besides welfare payments (Ram, 2000). Roma must also contend with the negative stereotypes that accompany the label Roma.

Political and legal transition: multiculturalism

Since the transition, dramatic legal reforms have had the consequence of producing self-identified Roma. In 1992 Hungary enacted data protection legislation to help codify the principle of individual consent. The law adopted in November 1992 gives citizens the right to protection of personal data and access to data of public interest. Given Hungary’s socialist past, the logic of data protection is understandable. It states that individual autonomy and dignity require that the individual have exclusive control of the sensitive data of his/her private life. According to the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, ‘Without such control, as evidenced in Hungary’s fascist and communist recent past, the individual could be made a means of others capable of collecting any information on him/her and to manipulate him/her with the help of this knowledge’.

During the later 1990s, after the economic recession had ebbed, the Hungarian government introduced social policies aimed ostensibly at helping the Roma in education, housing and health, but this aid was made dependent on basic demographic information. Without it, the government has had no way of tailoring resources to the Roma in need or assessing whether funds authorised for the Roma are actually allocated. In other words, if the people who need assistance do not identify themselves, the government cannot help them.

The mechanism detailing the self-identification of Roma was described in a second law, Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities (the Act), which was approved by 96.5% of the National Assembly and granted minority rights to minorities including the Roma.² The Act says:

This Act applies to all persons of Hungarian citizenship living in the Republic of Hungary who consider themselves members of any national or ethnic minority and to the communities of these people.
The Act codifies ethnic identity by self-identification; thus it gives every citizen the right of free choice. Anyone who wants to become a member of an ethnic or national minority is a member if they say they are, albeit with some restrictions. According to the law:

For the purposes of the present Act a national or ethnic minority (hereinafter ‘minority’) is any ethnic group with a history of at least one century of living in the Republic of Hungary, which represents a numerical minority among the citizens of the state, the members of which are Hungarian citizens, and are distinguished from the rest of the citizens by their own language, culture and traditions, and at the same time demonstrate a sense of belonging together, which is aimed at the preservation of all these, and the expression and protection of the interests of their communities, which have been formed in the course of history (Art.1 Sec.2).

For instance, the Act makes self-identified Roma eligible for special rights to speak ‘indigenous’ languages in public places and adhere to other cultural customs, to vote in and run for office in self-governments, to receive special Roma classes for their children, and benefit from special social programmes. Roma are permitted, if they choose, to use their ‘mother tongue in the parliament, in government agencies and in the courts’ (Hungarian National Assembly, 1993). In areas of Hungary with significant ethnic concentrations, officials have to speak ‘the language of those minorities’ and permit ‘bilingual street signs’ when so requested. Roma also have the right to set up and manage their own education and training establishments; to use their mother tongue freely and be given adequate opportunities to receive instruction in this language; and to practise cultural activities (Hungarian National Assembly, 1993). In all, this means Roma have the right to their own language, cultural assets and elected leaders.

Following the constructivist approach, this study is predicated upon an understanding of ethnicity where individuals negotiate subjective categories within objective conditions. Self-identification is an individual choice, albeit informed by socio-economic conditions. For example, among the most disadvantaged, ethnicity serves concrete functions related to survival; it creates interdependency among similarly situated members who then rely upon the other for the satisfaction of basic needs. Of Roma who have access to social capital, self-identification brings opportunities for social and political mobilisation and offers concrete opportunities for political leadership. As socio-economic status increases, ethnicity assumes a less immediate function and thus Roma may be seen as having greater incentive to assimilate.

**Methodology**

I use data from a 2000 survey in Central and Eastern Europe. The survey, conducted by Szonda Ipsos, a Hungarian polling organisation, consisted of an over-sample of Roma. Local households were contacted and the most knowledgeable person there interviewed. An over-sample of Roma was collected beginning in May 2000 and is based on inserting a screening question into omnibus surveys. In all, 326 people (weighted 436) were selected for this Roma minority self-government (MSG) survey. Of these, 150 were used for the main addresses sample and 176 were from substitute
addresses. If somebody from a main address refused the whole interview, another respondent from the same region was contacted. Finally, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 150 respondents.

People identified by the interviewer as Roma were selected to be respondents. Among the respondents, interviewers were instructed to distinguish between self-identified Roma and non-self-identified Roma. Self-identification questions asked about language and ethnic identity. Non-self-identified Roma are people who say they are not Roma but who were judged to be Roma by the interviewer. An assessment of Roma ethnicity was made on the basis of the interviewee’s colour, language, dress, way of life and family name. Interviewers were instructed to provide a reason for such an assessment.

In addition, formal and informal open-ended interviews were conducted with Roma and non-Roma persons from June 2000 to January 2001. These interviews were structured to garner information about how Roma live in post-transition Hungary. The interviewees included members of several local minority self-governments, leaders of local minority rights organisations and residents of the five cities Budapest, Szeged, Nagykaniszsa, Tiszavasvari and Batonyterenye. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings: MSG offices, restaurants, homes and outside. Each interview was interpreted by a non-Roma Hungarian translator, taped and transcribed. The five cities were chosen for geographical diversity and population and because each has a local Roma MSG.

Who are the Roma?

According to the survey, a typical Roma is female, under 40, lives rurally, speaks Magyar and is a Roman Catholic. Further, she is undereducated and was economically worse off in 2000 than in 1988.

Specifically, among the Roma surveyed, 56.7% were female and 43.3% male. A majority of Roma (54%) were under 40 years of age. A plurality of Roma lived in villages (42%), towns (32%) and cities (26%). The vast majority, 80%, spoke Magyar as their first language. In terms of religion, 66% considered themselves Catholic and 11.3% considered themselves Protestant. Most Roma were undereducated: 78.7% had elementary (grades 1–8) education or less, 16% attended vocational school, 3.3% secondary school and 2% college or university. While 10.2% said their standard of living was better in 2000 than in 1988, 48.7% said they were worse off or much worse off in 2000.

Among the Roma interviewed, 48.0% called themselves Roma and 37.3% said they were not Roma but were identified as Roma by the interviewer because of a series of characteristics: surname, where they lived, appearance etc. A total of 14.7% refused to identify themselves. Of the 48% who called themselves Roma, 56.9% were male and 43.1% female. Persons identified as Roma by the interviewer were 40% male and 60% female.

The survey found that self-identification decreased with educational and economic achievement. Those with less than elementary or secondary education were four times as likely as Roma with secondary school, university or college to self-identify as Roma. About 4% of non-self-identified Roma had attended college or university,
compared with 1.4% for self-identified Roma. Further, self-identification decreased
with income. The average monthly income for self-identified Roma was 4,748.11
forints (about $10) while the average for non-self-identified Roma was 8,261.14 forints
(about $20). Finally, self-identified Roma were more likely to be unemployed.

The average age for self-identified Roma was 38.24, but those identified as Roma by
the interviewer were older, 40.72. Self-identified Roma were more likely than non-self-
identified Roma to live in Budapest, and those identified as Roma by the interviewer
were more likely to live in a village. The average number of years in a settlement for
those identifying themselves as Roma was 17.53, while for those identified as Roma by
the interviewer it was 20.88 (this could be due to the slightly older mean age of the
respondents). In sum, self-identified Roma were more impoverished, less likely to hold
jobs, more urban, less educated, had less income and were slightly more transient than
non self-identified Roma.

Minority self-government

The minority self-government (MSG) system is the primary mechanism through which
Roma, and Hungary’s other national and ethnic minorities, are able to voice their
consent in areas of importance to the minority. The MSG has two main functions: to
represent Roma interests and to establish Roma cultural autonomy (Kovats, 1999). It
has the authority to maintain institutions in the areas of education and promotion of
traditions and culture, as well as to establish minority media. And any decision of
the local government concerning education, media, language and promotion of culture
may be taken only after the approval of the minority self-government. It is with this
mission in mind that the following survey assesses MSG performance.

The majority of Roma felt the MSG failed to enhance the quality of life for
Roma. Of those surveyed, 28.2% ranked the MSG as bad, followed by 18.3%
ranking it ‘rather bad’, 19.7% ranking it as ‘rather good’, and 16.9% ranking it as
‘good’ (16.9% refused to answer). On the quality of life scale, 7.4% agreed the
MSG was a contributor, 59.3% said it had ‘no influence’ and according to 18.6%
the existence of an MSG made life more difficult (14.8% did not answer). According to the survey, 8.6% said the MSG gave Roma a political voice, 49.4%
said it gave no voice to the Roma, and 23.5% said a negative voice (18.5% did not
answer). The MSG drew more support, 18.5%, for having some role to play in
terms of alleviating ethnic tensions, but 46.9% thought the MSG had no influence
and 16.0% felt that the MSG actually exacerbated ethnic tensions (18.6% did not
answer).

Education

Next we look at the relationship between educational achievement and the
performance of the local Roma MSG. Owing to the small number of respondents, I
examine descriptive statistics that show there is a negative relationship between
educational achievement and performance rating. The more educated a person, the
worse he or she rated the MSG performance. A negative rating for the MSG (bad or
rather bad) was less likely for people with elementary or less than elementary
education than for people with a higher education (vocational, university or college).\textsuperscript{15} A positive rating (rather good or good) was more likely from the group with less than elementary or elementary education than from the group with a higher education.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, a negative performance rating was more likely to come from Roma with more education than from Roma with less education.\textsuperscript{17} Once again, how MSG performance was judged diminished with educational achievement.

\textit{Income}

Next I examine the relationship between income and MSG performance rating.\textsuperscript{18} The findings suggest a positive relationship between respondents’ income and how they judge performance.\textsuperscript{19} Roma with income far below average and Roma with income above average were less likely to support the MSG than Roma with simply below average income.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Performance rating vs. education and income}

Next I analyse the relationship between the performance rating of the local Roma MSG and education and income together.\textsuperscript{21} For Roma with more than an eighth grade education (vocational, secondary or university education), the variables income and performance rating are negatively related,\textsuperscript{22} which means the higher the income for Roma who graduated from elementary school, the more likely is a negative performance rating. For people with more than an eighth grade education, the odds of a negative rating are four times higher for people with an average or above average income than for people with an income below average. A positive rating is twice as likely from people with an income below average as from people with an average or above average income.\textsuperscript{23} In sum, as income increases for Roma who have an elementary school degree, MSG performance rating declines.

\textit{Rating vs. ethnicity and income}

There is a negative relationship between ethnicity and income, which means that, among people who identify as Roma, the higher the income, the more likely they are to give the local MSG a negative performance rating.\textsuperscript{24} For non-self-identifying Roma there is a positive relationship between income and MSG performance rating.\textsuperscript{25} Non-self-identified Roma with an average or above average income were more likely to give a positive rating than people with an income below average.\textsuperscript{26}

A person receiving unemployment benefits is as likely as one not receiving unemployment benefits to rate the local Roma MSG positively.\textsuperscript{27} Since unemployment benefits are not related to local administration but to central government, the relevance of this finding rests on two assumptions: 1) the Roma confuse local government with the local minority self-government, and 2) the Roma have knowledge of the source of the government benefits they receive. Similarly, because Roma are eligible for financial help from local government depending on the number of children, it was important to inquire about the relationship between having children and support for the MSG. The results show that Roma with
children are more likely than Roma with no children to support the minority self-government. 28

Roma, like other citizens, are given poverty assistance payments from their local government. A person who does not receive poverty assistance is more likely to rate the local Roma MSG negatively than a recipient of poverty assistance, and a recipient of poverty assistance is more likely to give a positive rating to the local Roma MSG than a non-recipient.29 A Roma who does not get poverty assistance is more likely than a welfare dependent to oppose the MSG.30

Rating vs. ethnicity and education

Upon closer examination of the survey, education and income responses exacerbate already established negative ratings the self-identified Roma gave the MSG.31 Self-identified Roma with higher education were more likely to downgrade MSG performance.32 Among people who identified themselves as Roma, the odds of a negative rating were 2.21 times higher for people with a higher education than for people with a lower education.33 For people who did not identify themselves as Roma there was no relationship between education and performance, so the level of education was irrelevant.3

There was a difference between the ways educated and uneducated self-identified Roma viewed the MSG and between the ways self-identified and assimilated Roma viewed it. For assimilated Roma there was a positive relationship between education and performance, and a positive relationship between income and performance. As assimilated Roma get more education, their approval of the MSG increases. As self-identified Roma get more education, their approval of the MSG decreases. The surprise here is that MSG performance is rated higher by a constituency that does not rely on it.3

One way of ascertaining the salience of minority rights for self-identified Roma is whether they would like to see their children involved in ethnic education classes. Of the respondents, 2% would enroll their child in a Roma only class, 61% in an integrated class and 13% in Hungarian only classes; 24% did not know or refused to answer. Given the unambiguous rejection of this important part of the minority rights mandate, it stands to reason that the priorities Roma have for their children are not a good match for the priorities offered by minority rights policy.3

In response to a follow-up question, Roma, by more than 2 to 1, would not enroll their children in classes to learn Roma languages, history and traditions. Some 22.7% of the respondents would enroll children in classes with Roma cultural content, 50% would not and 27.3% did not know or refused to answer. This surprising response that Roma do not want classes dealing with Roma issues warrants additional investigation.3

Overall, people with lower education were more likely to enroll their children in a school to study Roma history than people with higher education. The higher the income the more likely they would not enroll their children to study Roma language, history and traditions. Finally, there is a positive relationship between the two variables: the more educated a person, the more likely he/she would not want his/her child enrolled in a class for Roma only.
Within the Roma community, support for minority rights comes from a somewhat surprising source: those with higher income who have assimilated into the larger Hungarian society and refuse to identify themselves as Roma. Self-identified Roma and assimilated Roma with the same education have different views about minority self-government. Further, self-identified Roma, regardless of levels of educational achievement, do not approve of minority rights and the MSG system. Little do the higher income assimilated Roma know that they, even more than less educated self-identified Roma, are the quintessential victims of minority rights.

This set of contradictory findings—that minority rights are favoured more by assimilated Roma than self-identified Roma, their intended beneficiaries—is an example of symbolic violence, a term coined by Bourdieu, who defines ‘symbolic violence’ as that ‘gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192). It is a subtle form of violence that brings coercion through the power exercised in hierarchical relationships.

The following background of minority rights legislation in Hungary offers a brief comparison between Roma and Jewish responses to the Minority Roundtable discussions that led to the enactment of minority rights legislation. This discussion will illustrate the symbolic violence of minority rights.

In post-socialist Hungary one of the first policy items on the Minority Roundtable agenda in 1990 was minority rights. The MSG would institutionalise minority rights for Hungary’s 12 recognised nationality groups, promoting an ethnic Hungarian agenda but in a fairly innocuous way. It would not offend anti-nationalists because nationality groups consisted of less than 10% of the population and were relatively assimilated and geographically dispersed, thus mitigating fears that a strong nationalist political enclave might develop. Besides, minority rights would be difficult to claim and the MSG would be delegated few if any real powers of governance. And with minority rights in place, Hungarians could make claims on their neighbours and they did. They have challenged Romania and Slovakia to adopt similar measures and afford ‘quasi-sovereignty’ to the Hungarian minority there that was larger in size, less assimilated and more clustered.

This initial dialogue culminated in the enactment of the Minorities Act by 96.5% of the Hungarian National Assembly. Fourteen minority groups who were considered non-ethnic Hungarians were invited to engage in the dialogue. Roma and Jews constituted the only non-national minorities at this initial stage, and thus it is important to differentiate briefly among these two groups. The Jews had what amounted to free choice; the choice for Roma was more coercive.

The only groups that voiced objections to minority rights were Roma leaders, like Aladar Horvath and Hungary’s Jews. These groups share a common diasporic history and each was targeted for extinction during the Holocaust in World War II. Unlike the Roma, however, Hungarian Jews had a tradition of adapting and assimilating. Although they were targets of anti-semitism during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they also benefited from one of Europe’s most liberal laws respecting freedom of religion. A double identity emerged where Hungarian Jews
could and did say: ‘I am Jewish and I am Hungarian. During this same period, the Roma endured assimilation campaigns and faced the Hobson’s choice of assimilating as Hungarian or remaining Gypsy.

So when the Minority Roundtable discussions started, and offered minority status to the Jewish community as a distinct ethnic group, the community balked and eventually rejected the proposal. Unlike the Jews and Hungary’s 12 national minorities, the Roma stood to gain a civic foothold by consenting to join the ranks of Hungary’s formally recognised national and ethnic minorities. But like the Jews, the Roma recognised that cultural issues were always diversity issues—that is, diversity within a culture; the Roma are every bit as divided a community as the Jews, albeit with access to fewer resources and less autonomy. Moreover, unlike Jews, for Roma, assimilation was not a matter of choice. In the past, assimilation had been forced upon the Roma, to no positive effect, and there was no promise that assimilation now would not have similarly negative consequences. By joining the ranks of a formally recognised ethnic minority, they stood to benefit in terms of power and prestige and visibility by self-identifying as Roma. At the same time, however, the Roma realised they risked having all the diversity that defines ‘gypsiness’ obliterated under state regulation, this time under the guise of special rights and positive discrimination.

And in subtle ways this fear came to pass. As the transition advanced, it became clear to Roma leaders that the Roma would be excluded from virtually all aspects of political life but for the MSG. As Minority Roundtable discussions began, Roma leaders were told that the MSG was a vehicle to real political power and representation in the parliament not only on a Free Democrat ticket but also with the Hungarian Democratic Forum and even the Socialists. But as the discussions progressed, and Roma leaders lost important strategic battles, it became clear the Roma were being ghettoised. Excluded from political party tickets, they saw the MSG would not be a means to advance the political integration of Roma but, if nothing else, they convinced themselves the MSG would provide a platform from which to be heard and seen.

Even with the enactment of minority rights, Roma were not in the position of choosing to belong to an ethnic minority. Although the language describing the choice is somewhat modified, the Hobson’s choice remains for Roma, who are alone in this predicament: assimilating as Hungarian or remaining Roma by self-identification. Of 13 national minorities in Hungary who consented to minority status, the Roma constitute the only non-national and non-white (ethnic) nationality group. The other 12 nationality groups recognised in the 1993 Act have connections to and receive support from neighbouring nation-states, and are considered white. Like the situation for Jews, who opted out of the minority rights schema, assimilation for national minorities is a matter of choice. Also like the Jews, and unlike the Roma, national minorities have a tradition of adapting and assimilating, and have a solid social and political footing—well represented in political parties and civic organisations in Hungary and in the countries of origin.

As this brief background suggests, the minority rights legislation contains subtle and hidden offences against the dignity of Roma. Its narrative of equality and freedom of choice conceals the absence of mechanisms that would integrate these rights into the Roma’s everyday experience. As a result, subtle offences against the human dignity of Roma occur in many ways, as for example in Roma attempts to gain services from
municipal offices that are re-directed to minority self-government that offers no such services, or when Roma are encouraged to speak Roma languages in public spaces while Magyar remains the language of the market, or when Roma who speak only Magyar and are Catholic are excluded from indigenous holidays and festivals.

The symbolic violence of Roma minority politics similarly excludes and marginalises Roma as elections and self-government simulate democratic governance but withhold real power from MSG office holders. Roma and non-Roma alike can vote in Roma MSG elections. This means that Roma MSG officials may owe their office to non-Roma voters. It also means that non-Roma may be elected to Roma MSGs. In terms of actual governing, the MSG is impotent; it cannot enact legislation, raise taxes or assume the responsibilities of other institutions of government (Kovats, 1999; Kattenback, 1999). In sum, it holds none of the decision-making powers of government and thus the name self-government is misleading.

The Roma who experience the degradation of being cast aside by government, or who rely upon a government entity for services it has no power of delivering, are expectedly dismissive of the MSG. This includes educated, self-identified Roma who have the competences to deconstruct the self-governance myth as well as uneducated self-identified Roma who endure its impotence. The assimilated Roma have high levels of educational achievement, compared with other Roma, and possess basic dispositions towards symbolic mastery. Given that support for the abstract promises of the MSG increases with assimilated Roma’s income and education, it is quite plausible that this support is derived from the luxury of being comfortable with such ‘modern’, ‘rational’ or ‘specialised’ discourses as minority rights. The assimilated Roma’s support for minority rights also ingratiates them with non-Roma who also support the MSG and minority rights (Koulish, 2003). Were it not for minority rights, it is possible that Hungary would not have become a member of the EU. Unlike non-Roma, however, the Roma’s support for minority rights is imbued with violence, because they internalise an ethnic Hungarian doxa that is imbued with messages of their own inferiority.

To make this point that assimilated Roma are the quintessential victim of minority rights, I shall refer back briefly to the methodology section. Given that the interviewers who conducted this survey—unbiased outsiders—perceived a respondent as Roma based on selected characteristics, it is equally likely that others, most notably government officials, potential employers, housing authorities etc., would make similar assessments (Feliciano, Cook & Emigh, 2004). Regardless of individual identity choices, assimilated Roma are counted as Roma. The following interview conducted with a local municipal leader in Tiszavasvari reveals more about this aspect of the symbolic violence of assimilation:

Q: How do you know . . . (who) is Roma?
A: That is quite a funny legal problem . . . but I wouldn’t like to go into details because this whole issue is dangerous because of data protection. According to the law in Hungary, you are a member of the ethnicity you want to be declared to be. It would be very difficult even for an outsider to say who is Roma and who is not. I cannot tell you who is a Roma. It is very important that Roma should not be singled out. As far as we know the situation in Hungary, Roma, in comparison with other minorities, still face stronger discrimination.
Q. How do you decide in practice, not in terms of the written law?
A. It is quite easy in practice. The mayor instructs the directors of the schools to declare how many individuals would like to declare normative support; teachers have a look at students, count them and provide a number to the mayor. End of story.

This local government official suggests that in reality, the Roma have no say over how others view their ethnic identity. It is certainly inferred that data protection as a device for protecting an individual’s ethnic identity is a sham. In addition, Aladar Horvath challenges the notion that tracking Roma may bring additional monies for Roma instruction. According to Horvath:

When it is about discrimination against the Roma, or about the local government taking monies away from the Roma, everybody knows who the Roma are. When it comes to acknowledging rights and committing resources, the authorities refer to data protection laws saying the state cannot know who the Roma are.39

The more common scenario has local administrations depositing monies intended for Roma instruction into general municipal expense accounts, while Roma children remain in segregated classrooms and in classes for the mentally retarded. This scenario occurs across class boundaries, among educated and uneducated Roma. It is less likely to occur with assimilated Roma. During the late 1990s, for example, the nine year-old daughter of a self-identified Roma journalist was mistaken for being mentally retarded, because she was Roma, and placed in a segregated class against the insistence of her college-educated parents. After years of segregation and eventually being placed back in an integrated fourth-year class, the little girl earned the highest grades in her class, disproving the state’s assumptions regarding her academic competence.

The more common scenario has Roma children stuck in dead-end segregated classes and withdrawing early from school. Consider the chronically impoverished children of Szeles Street, a segregated Olah Roma settlement in Tiszavasvari, who attend the Pethe Ferenc School, a Roma-only primary school that has few supplies and fewer graduates. When asked about this school, local women said: ‘It is not that we ask for our children to be put in separate classes; they are put there so as to be humiliated’. ‘Teachers scream obscenities all day at the Roma’. ‘There is no special curriculum, they just sit there all day like they are punished.’ These women dismissed as insulting subsequent questions about minority rights to have separate classes and schools. For such undereducated and impoverished Roma, affirmative action policies like minority rights offer indignities and humiliations, promises of separate classes rather than textbooks, pencils and quality instruction. Such Roma enclaves as Szeles Street provide a rare instance of Jim Crowe-like segregation occurring concurrently with affirmative action. Obviously the two policies cannot co-exist without creating a great deal of frustration, which this survey directs at minority rights.

Conclusion

Hungary’s post-transition commitment to equality and choice serves to reinforce the Hobson’s choice of Roma self-identity. For assimilated Roma, the choice is between a
higher standard of living and internalising oppression. For self-identified Roma, the choice is between a set of symbolic institutions—minority rights—and outright exclusion. Clearly these choices have no real alternatives. In post-transition Hungary, as in the days of forced assimilation under state socialism, the choice of assimilating into the majority culture is ultimately a decision made by the state, not individual Roma. The veneer of minority rights barely conceals the centuries of anti-Roma oppression in Hungary and cannot hide the continuation of Roma social exclusion.

Goucher College

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1 Officially, less than 2% are Roma—in the 1990 census 142,683 persons stated that they were Gypsies—although their numbers are not readily apparent to authorities because of official policies and Roma desires to avoid government authorities. According to Havas & Kemeny (2001), ‘the proportion of Roma inhabitants compared to the total population of Hungary is 4.69%’ (p. 3). Ladanyi (1996) reports that 3.9% of the population could be classified as Roma (p. 32), see also Kemeny (1994).

2 It must be noted that the right to self-identification is in the Hungarian Constitution. The Act provides mechanisms for implementing this right.

3 The Act, Chapter 3, Article 18(3)(a)(b).

4 The Act, Chapter 2, Article 13(a)

5 The Act, Chapter 2, Article 11, Article 12, Article 13.

6 See Ladanyi & Szelenyi (2000). Their study is based on a representative sample of people who lived in six post-communist countries in 2000, and it included three waves of interviews. At my request, Ladanyi added a fourth wave to the Hungary survey that added my questions for the WRW Project. The results of that fourth wave comprise the data for this study.

7 Because the act of self-identification is a featured variable in the Act, I examine the relationship between education and ethnicity (self-identification). For education, 1 = less than elementary, 2 = elementary, 3 = vocational, 4 = secondary school, 5 = university or college; for ethnicity, 1 = yes, 2 = no. The odds of a person with an education less than elementary or elementary to identify him (her)self as Roma are 1.112 times higher than a person with a vocational, secondary or college or university education. Gamma is 0.3025 > 0, with a 95% confidence interval [0.0342,0.5709], which does not contain 0, so is significant at a 95% confidence level.

8 The Odds Ratio is 4.

9 For income, 1 = far below average, 2 = below average, 3 = average, 4 = above average. According to descriptive statistical tests, the higher the income the more likely they will not identify themselves as Roma. Gamma is 0.1 > 0, so there is a positive relationship between the two variables self-identity and income.

10 The Odds Ratio is 1.4727, which means that the odds of being unemployed for a self-identified Roma are 1.4727 times higher than for someone non-identified as Roma.

11 The Act, Article 27.

12 The Act, Article 29(1).

13 For education, 1 = less than elementary, 2 = elementary, 3 = vocational, 4 = university or college and for rate, 1 = bad, 2 = rather bad, 3 = rather good, 4 = good. I perform several tests for independence between the two variables. Gamma, Kendall’s Tau-b, Kendall’s Tau-c and Pearson Correlation (Rank Scores).

14 According to Gamma, Kendall’s Tau-b, Kendall’s Tau-c and Pearson Correlation (Rank Scores), the contingency table is collapsed as follows: 1 = less then elementary or elementary, 2 = vocational or university or college; rate: 1 = bad and rather bad, 2 = rather good and good.

15 The Odds Ratio is 0.6135 < 1.

16 The Relative Risk for a positive rating is 1.3469.
The Relative Risk for a negative rating is 0.8265, so a negative rating is \(\frac{1}{0.8265} = 1.2099\) times more likely to come from the group with a higher education than from the other group.

Income: 1 = far below average, 2 = below average, 3 = average, 4 = above average.

Gamma is 0.1858. A 95% confidence interval for Gamma is \((-0.0907, 0.4623)\) which contains both positive and negative values, so the relationship is very weak.

The analysis shows Roma with income far below average have 3.169 times higher odds of giving a negative rating than people with income below average, and people with income above average have 5.032 times higher odds of giving a negative rating than people with income below average.

For education I consider 1 = less than elementary or elementary, 2 = vocational, secondary school or university. For income 1 = far below average or below average, 2 = average or above average; for rating 1 = bad or rather bad, 2 = good or rather good. For Roma with an elementary education or less, since Gamma is approximately 0 and the odds ratio is approximately 1, income is irrelevant in explaining the rating for the performance of the local Roma MSG.

The analysis shows Roma with income far below average have 3.169 times higher odds of giving a negative rating than people with income below average, and people with income above average have 5.032 times higher odds of giving a negative rating than people with income below average.

For income, 1 = far below average or below average, 2 = average or above average for Roma. The odds of a negative rating are 1.9 times higher for people with an income that is average or above than for people with an income below average.

Gamma is 0.2558, so among people who do not identify themselves as Roma.

Among people who do not identify themselves as Roma, the odds of a negative rating are 1.6875 times higher for people with an income below average than for people with an income average or above average.

These two variables are independent; Gamma is 0.0307 \(\approx 0\) with an standard error of 0.2227 > \(> 0.0307\).

The Odds Ratio of ‘no children’ versus ‘four or more children’ is 2.4, which means that the odds of people with no children having a negative opinion are 2.4 times those of people with four or more children. The odds of ‘one child’ versus ‘four or more children’ are 1.556, ‘two children’ versus ‘four or more children’ is 1.714 and ‘three children’ versus ‘four or more’ 1.667, with the same interpretation. Gamma is 0.1420 \(> 0\), which confirms that the two variables are positively related.

The same conclusion can be drawn using other descriptive tests: Kendall’s Tau – b and Stuart’s Tau – c, also negative.

The odds that a person who does not receive poverty assistance would give a negative rating to the local Roma MSG are 1.762 higher than for a poverty assistance recipient (the Odds Ratio is 1.762).

Ethnicity 1 = yes, 2 = no: education: 1 = elementary or less than elementary, 2 = vocational, secondary school or college, rating 1 = bad or rather bad, 2 = rather good or good.

Gamma is \(-0.3770\). The same argument using Bourdieu’s term ‘doxa’, in Koulish (2003).

The author would like to acknowledge the insights of Janos Ladanyi about the Roma-Jewish relationship with minority rights. These conversations occurred from 2000 to 2001.


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Interview with Aladar Horvath, June 2000.

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