The politics of Roma identity: between nationalism and destitution

Martin Kovats
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The arrival of Roma on the political stage is often heralded as a mark of enlightenment and social progress. But the search for Roma nationalism and political representation is better understood as part of the regressive empowerment of ethnic and nationalist cleavages as an organising principle in European politics. Rather than top-down leadership, the Roma need grassroots campaigning for equality with their fellow-citizens.

The recent experience of Roma people presents a paradox. They have attracted increasing political attention in terms of formal governmental and other policy initiatives, leading to historically unprecedented levels of Roma political activity; yet, as Delia Grigore suggests, the living conditions and life chances of most Roma people in the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, (in the CEE) have actually undergone dramatic and ongoing decline.

This contradicts the conventional wisdom that greater political attention and strengthening representation must lead to improvement in your circumstances. As with all other political phenomena, it is possible to understand why the Roma issue has evolved in this way. The question is whether there is the desire to do so.

Roma politics is almost universally perceived as an unambiguously progressive development, representing the belated entry into the public political arena of people and communities long excluded from decision-making and participation in public debate. However, neither Roma politics itself, nor the Roma issue in general, should be considered in isolation from the wider political environment in Europe, which is characterised by growing inequality and societal fragmentation along ethnic lines.

As a product of its times, Roma politics does not contain only a progressive dimension. It also reflects and contributes to the strengthening of racist right-wing politics across Europe.

The complacency of ‘progress’

The novelty of the Roma political phenomenon means that it is poorly understood. The framework for interpretation invariably defaults to the liberal idealism of the post-Soviet era. The Roma issue is viewed as part of the Marshallian linear progression of civic inclusion: society has reached the stage where it can take account of and address the needs of a part of
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the population previously neglected. After centuries of marginalisation, now it is the ‘time of the Gypsies’.

The emergence of Roma politics is duly interpreted in accordance with the traditional, 19th century concept of national ‘awakening’. After centuries in the sub-political recesses of society, ‘Roma’ have finally reached the stage of being able to claim recognition as an ethnic minority, even as a nation of equal standing with those already established. According to this philosophy, the politicisation of Roma identity is a straightforward story of enlightened good intentions versus unreconstructed attitudes mired in a prejudiced past.

Such self-righteous complacency disguises the uncomfortable realities of the unravelling of the ‘communist’ social contract, by which the full employment and social security of the post-war decades have been exchanged for ‘freedom, democracy and the rule of law’. The sanctification of political and economic competition has produced a dramatic increase in inequality, with those disadvantaged by a lack of capital and marketable skills sinking furthest and fastest.

The limitations of the shrunken state (low inflation and taxes, balanced budgets, privatisation) and the ideology of individual responsibility are designed to facilitate capital accumulation, with equal opportunities subordinated to an illusory aspiration for social inclusion. Governments are compelled to give priority to the interests of domestic and international elites. Unable to respond to the needs of the electorate, they pursue a politics based on the evasion of responsibility.

The limits of ethnic discourse

The Roma discourse plays a distinct role within this process. Being ‘last in’ to the industrial labour force, ‘Roma’ people are grossly over represented among the long-term unemployed. Their consequent dependency on shrinking welfare transfers and declining public services are a tangible manifestation of increasing social inequality. The ‘prohibitive’ costs of improving these people’s living conditions and of returning their labour to ‘profitability’ provides a strong incentive for the state to define ‘Roma’ as a distinct community, thereby allowing policy to focus on the far cheaper promotion of ethnic ‘difference’.

The political delineation of ‘Roma’ as a group ensures that the interests of the mass are subsumed within the politics of the more articulate and ambitious emergent ‘middle-class’ of what are, in fact, increasingly fragmented minority populations. More profoundly, the promotion of some essential ‘difference’ between ‘Roma’ people and everyone else in society exploits traditional prejudices and low expectations. ‘Difference’ is used to explain Roma impoverishment, social tension and conflicts, migration, and the failure of ‘integration’ initiatives. It conserves the political isolation of ‘Roma’ people and supports the ideology of segregation.

The character of Roma politics

In the Roma issue, nothing is quite what it seems on the surface. In dealing with both emergent Roma political ideology and current Roma activity, it is necessary to distinguish carefully between progressive and reactionary dimensions.

Roma politics: grassroots and the state

Roma politics operates at the interface between ‘Roma’ people and communities and the public authorities. Its development is determined both by the needs, aspirations and capacity of ‘Roma’ people, as well as the opportunities and limitations presented by the wider political environment.

Roma politics has achieved real significance only since the end of the cold war. However, rather than being a ‘gift’ conferred by a newly-enlightened democratic era, it reflects the historical development of ‘Roma’ populations within their own societies.

During the ‘communist’ period, access to health care and housing, education and employment led to the rapid growth in the absolute and relative size of ‘Roma’ minorities. It also improved their ability to express their needs and perceive themselves as equal citizens through closer contact with society at large in the home, school, and workplace.

Political consciousness was also stimulated by the expansion of the state into the lives of its ‘Roma’
citizens. This produced a deepening recognition of the need to maintain effective relationships with public authorities in order to secure the protection and opportunities required to prosper in the modern world.

Even though post-communist transition has undermined many of the gains from earlier decades, this civic awareness remains. Indeed, impoverishment has made many Roma people even more dependent on extra-communal, public and private institutions; this makes effective social relationships even more urgent, while simultaneously reducing their status within these relationships.

Grassroots Roma politics is only at a very early stage of development, but is an essentially integrative process, driven by the aspiration for equality with one’s fellow citizens. The greatest challenge activists face is to balance the need to create greater communal political cohesion (to enhance the credibility of those who claim to speak in the Roma name), whilst also attracting support from that wider society.

Their linguistic/communal diversity and a lack of common interests, make it unlikely that Roma could ever be politically united in any given state. Even if this were to occur, it would be hard for a poor, diffuse and unpopular minority to escape from political marginality. Only through extensive and durable support from ‘non-Roma’ citizens on the basis of common interests can the mass of Roma people effectively challenge the status quo.

It is this political reality that makes grassroots Roma politics such an important and potentially progressive political phenomenon. It provides an historically unprecedented opportunity to overcome contemporary inequality, but also the prejudices and antagonism of the past, through shared political struggle based on the awareness of a common fate and interests.

Roma politics as the reinforcement of weakness

Unfortunately, grassroots Roma politics is very weak and immature and so is easily manipulated by established interests. The phenomenal quantitative expansion of Roma organisations in the last decade does not reflect a qualitative growth in the power of most Roma people, but the availability of resources provided by states, through the non-governmental organisation (NGO) system, in order to create a ‘Roma civil society’.

Separate, ethnic representation for Roma is integral to the promotion of Roma people, their politics and circumstances as essentially different from those of the rest of society. Top-down Roma representation provides ‘negotiating partners’ for the state and other institutions, whilst ensuring that these ‘Roma representatives’ have no intrinsic political weight that could compel authorities to take any particular course of action. Nevertheless, in domestic and international discussions, endorsement by an ‘official’ Roma leader provides much-coveted legitimacy for a state’s Roma-related initiatives.

While top-down support for Roma organisations makes political activity more accessible, deepening political consciousness amongst Roma people, it is at the price of fatally undermining the development of a democratic Roma politics. As for other non-elite social groups, democracy is not simply a platitude, but a vital pre-condition for effective political mobilisation. Only if people feel they are part of a process will they maintain solidarity under pressure rather than walk away, deny responsibility or seek to blame others when things go wrong.

Almost all Roma organisations, however, survive solely through the ability of the leadership to secure funds from external agencies. Rather than being the means by which the demands of Roma people can be transmitted ‘up’ to those in power, the structure and agenda of Roma politics is determined by external funders, for whom Roma organisations provide the vehicle by which they can communicate their interests to Roma people.

This construction of an ethnic political agenda and institutions not only obscures the common interests of Roma people and their fellow citizens, but places them in competition with each other. Money spent on Roma is quite simply, money not spent on ‘non-Roma’. This occurs within the context not only of intensive competition for scarce public resources, but also the historic political culture of Central and Eastern Europe, characterised — most recently in Yugoslavia — by the often problematic relationship between ethnic/national identity and political power.

The official racialisation of political discourse and institutions ensures Roma people and politics remain isolated and weak, presenting no serious challenge to established interests. Any political expression of frustration can be much more easily suppressed if it takes the form of ethnic rather than class conflict.
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The dangers of Roma nationalism

The promotion of Roma nationalism is the logical extension of the right-wing agenda to segregate Roma people and their politics. As expressed in the International Romani Union’s (IRU) Declaration of a Nation, the basis of Roma nationalism is the claim that all ‘Roma’ constitute a single and distinct political community which requires its own, separate political representation.

Antithetical to the aspiration for civic equality of Roma people in their home societies, it is no surprise that Roma nationalism is not a product of, but predates, the emergence of grassroots Roma politics. In over thirty years, the IRU has failed to attract a base of support among Roma people, but has operated as the forum of a few dozen international activists (Roma and ‘non-Roma’) sustained by the patronage of established political interests.

As a statement of fact, the nationalist claim is the most amazing nonsense. ‘Roma’ is simply the political replacement for the generic identity ‘Gypsy’ which covers a huge number of highly diverse communities with different political needs, aspirations, capabilities and interests, living in a wide variety of economic, political, social and cultural environments.

This imagined community shares no common language (only a small minority speak one of the dozens of often mutually unintelligible dialects of Romani), culture, religion, identity, history or even ethnicity. Even within countries, Roma minorities are diffuse and diverse and do not function as any kind of actual community. As J-P Liegeois puts it, “from the Gypsy point of view there is no such group as the Gypsies”.

Roma nationalism represents the politicisation of the Romantic racial myth of the ‘Gypsy people’; this, though intellectually discredited, has been thrown a lifeline due to its political utility. The application of ‘Gypsy’ identity has traditionally been used to marginalise the status of these communities, and Roma nationalism accords with this tradition by legitimating the ideology of segregation and suppressing democratic political development in order to sustain the marginalisation and isolation of ‘Roma’ people so they become politically dependent on the nation’s elite.

The nationalist agenda can only be realised by ripping Roma people from the societies in which they are citizens. It tells Roma people it is pointless trying to use the established mechanisms for democratic political accountability within their home countries; nor should they seek political support from amongst their ‘non-Roma’ fellow citizens. Indeed, attributing the problems experienced by Roma people to the racism of their neighbours could not be more important to an ideology which deliberately seeks to exacerbate social tensions.

Furthermore, because it is incompatible with the integrative instincts of grassroots Roma politics, Roma nationalism can only be sustained at an elite level, divorced from democratic control by Roma people as a whole. In other words, Roma nationalism does not represent the emancipation of a suppressed people in the tradition of anti-colonial struggles, but the promotion of an authoritarian nationalist tradition in which a political community is constructed through the manipulation of vulnerable people, to secure the interests of an unaccountable elite.

Thus, Roma nationalism is music to the ears of racists who have always believed that the Gypsies are alien to and incompatible with majority society.

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Roma at the European level

The right-wing drift of the Roma issue is reflected in the fact that Roma nationalism may soon become more than a fantasy, if the Council of Europe approves the current proposal to establish a European Roma Forum (ERF). The ERF will be the first official institution of Roma nationalism: in effect, the parliament of the Roma nation, its members elected to ‘represent’ national Roma populations.

The ERF is the quintessential top-down Roma organisation. As the official negotiating partner for European institutions, it will exclude alternative Roma voices from decision-making processes. Yet, in representing no political authority, the ERF will have no real bargaining power.

The initiative will further undermine the development of a democratic, grassroots Roma politics by forcing activists to direct their activities toward Europe and other Roma, rather than on the far more difficult task of establishing more effective relationships within national and local authorities, as well as reliable support from fellow citizens on the basis of common interests.

The ERF proposal does not reflect the strength of international Roma politics. It is the product of the collusion of interests between Eurocrats, establishment nationalists, international NGOs and a handful of self-interested Roma activists.

In Resolution 1203 of the Council of Europe, the ‘Roma’ are described as a ‘true European minority’. They are used as a symbol whose deprivations can be said to expose the failure of the nation-state model, thereby justifying trans-European governance. The Roma issue can furnish European administrators and politicians with plenty of long-term work, with few of the conventional disadvantages of political, even intellectual accountability.

Majority nationalists such as Csaba Tabajdi, the leader of the Hungarian delegation in the parliament of the Council of Europe, see the institutionalisation of a Roma nation as the means to free his own nation from the burden of Roma (while, at the same time, promoting domestic legislation that draws legal and political boundaries around the ‘unitary Magyar nation’). For NGOs, the Roma nation will offer remunerative opportunities to provide services that would otherwise be the responsibility of those states in which Roma people are citizens.

The discourse of (anti-)racism

By now it will be no surprise to learn that in the ‘looking-glass’ world of the Roma issue, even anti-racism has been co-opted to serve the right-wing agenda. The discourse has become central to the justification for defining ‘Roma’ people and their interests as collective and unique, as well as for explaining inequality in terms of culture, requiring low-cost, moralistic (that is, rights-based) ‘solutions’.

Prejudice and discrimination are real and serious problems for many ‘Roma’ people, yet anti-‘Roma’ racism is a complex phenomenon composed of many social, cultural and economic factors. In the brave neo-liberal world, given the costs of reintegrating superfluous labour, post-communist economies provide no basis for equal opportunities.

Instead, racism has become functional again as a way of rationing resources and facilitating social fragmentation through the revival of traditional social divisions. The fashion for attributing objective disadvantages — unemployment, low life expectancy, slum housing — to racism, ensures not only that conditions continue to deteriorate, but enables elites to deny political responsibility by blaming the popular prejudices for their failure to act.

Central and eastern European states have shown themselves unable to mobilise the political and financial resources necessary to prevent the disintegration of most Roma people. European institutions therefore have an important role to play. The extension of EU anti-discrimination provisions to the region provides an opportunity for addressing racist attitudes and behaviour. Yet without a fundamental shift in Europe’s values, even these measures will prove largely ineffective, and may even increase social tensions if crudely implemented.

The illusion of enlightenment

The Roma issue appears to be a straightforward struggle for rights and respect by the members of an oppressed ethnic minority against the ignorance and prejudice of their uncivilised neighbours — with enlightened elites, both national and international, doing their best to help the disadvantaged enjoy the full benefits of the Age of Opportunity.

However, this interpretation prevents recognition of the fact that what is actually happening is the reassignment of most Roma to their traditional social
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position as a reserve of cheap labour maintained at minimal cost to the state, as an integral part of capitalist restoration in eastern Europe.

The ethnic discourse was the basis for apartheid and genocide. Now we are meant to applaud the enlightenment of those who pursue it in the name of people who are just too far away and foreign to know or to understand.

The reality is that a growing number of Roma people are trying to resist the fate being prepared for them, but the progressive instinct of their politics is being suppressed by the imposition from above of the agenda and institutions of segregation. They are being forced into a nationalist framework that guarantees more frequent and violent conflict. This road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

_Martin Kovats is Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Budapest University of Economic Sciences and Public Administration, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, England. A political scientist, he has studied the development of Roma politics and policy for the last decade._

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