"ROMA POLITICAL REPRESENTATION STRUGGLES. EDUCATION AS EXAMPLE OF FAILED OFFICIAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE"

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Abstract
This article will discuss Roma social political integration in the context of rapid political transformation after the collapse of Soviet Union in the Eastern and Central Europe. The reasons of failed Roma political mobilization will be discussed referring the concept “framing” (R. D. Benford, D.A.Snow, 2000). Both internal and external frame constructions will be discussed in detail in order to understand the underlying factors that had influenced the failure of Roma political mobilization, paying special attention to education as an example of failed official political discourse.
KEYWORDS: Roma, Ethnic identity ‘frames’, Political mobilization, Education.

Introduction
Roma today constitute the largest (about 10 million) and most marginalized ethnic minority of the European Union, settled mostly in Central and Eastern Europe. Although they have lived in the region for more than 500 years, the Roma’s history in Europe for most of the time has been characterized by alienation, persecution and exclusion of political, social, economical aspects of mainstream life. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union the “age of opportunities and possibilities” of genuine improvement in the condition of the Roma emerged. The rapid pace of political change brought an increase in attention and ongoing expansion in the Roma-related activities of European institutions starting with an open concern with potentially destabilizing effects of westward Roma migration to evolved Maastricht requirement for candidate countries on discrimination and positive minority rights. The regime change also afforded the Roma the opportunity to alleviate their political marginality and freely organize themselves, as the post-communist states no longer restrained Roma political mobilization.

Yet, during the last couple decades the experience of Roma people presents a paradox. Despite almost universally perceived progressive development of Roma issues, there is little actual change in the living conditions and life chances of most Roma people in the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Apparently, the arrival of Roma issues on political stage did not mark parallel enlightenment of Roma political mobilization, what is considered to hold the most promise of effecting change in their conditions. Consequently, these questions arise: why in the “age of opportunities” Roma failed to empower themselves “from bellow”? Why European and nation state policies towards Roma turned to be not that effective and even discouraging political Roma mobilization? What are the future political mobilization and representation perspectives for Roma as one of the largest European minority group? Though it is popular to blame the absence of a strong ethnic identity as one of the key reasons for failed Roma political mobilization, this article will argue, that it has rather been hindered by organizational disputes between movement elites about how to conceptualize, promote and organize around Roma identity. Furthermore, official political discourses still perceive Roma identity and Roma culture as integral part of Roma problem, what to some extend prohibits the creation of Roma political mobilization.

These two factors combined together conclude in an ongoing decline of Roma conditions and failure of Roma political mobilization.

The first part of the article will discuss the reasons of failed Roma political mobilization and refer to the concept of ‘framing’ used by social movement organizers in their attempts to construct and promote a particular understanding and interpretation of social reality as a guide for collective action (R. D. Benford, D.A.Snow, 2000). The idea that ethnic identity ‘frames’ is shaped not only by internal group strategic identity frame constructions, but also by external institutional context and formulations of minority policies will be discussed in detail in the second part of the article.

Roma political mobilization
Ethnic political activity tends to increase during political upheavals due to created favorable institutional and political circumstances for political activism (Z.Barang, 2002). After the changes of 1989 unprecedented opportunities for political organization opened the door for all marginal groups in Eastern and Central Europe, including Roma. The large number of Roma organizations have been formed
during this period, however the quantitative expansion does not reflect a qualitative growth. The majority of organizations remain ineffective due to little response from Roma constituencies; the other organizations fade in oblivion shortly after creation. The low Roma political efficacy rates surprise, because they unlike other minorities, receive great financial and organizational assistance from European Union, The Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Western NGO’s. Moreover, increased political attention on Roma rights brought intense political pressure to Central and Eastern European states to improve their treatment of Roma minorities and stimulate their political activism. The most common explanations found in academic literature name low ethnic awareness, high diversity of Roma communities, and absence of origin state, common language, religion and culture as the main obstacles of ethnic Roma political mobilization (Z.Barany, 2001). Zoltan Barany (2001) states, that a strong and widely shared sense of ethnic identity is one of the essential components of successful ethnic political mobilization defined as a populace of “those who conceive themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry <..<> or who are so regarded by others” (Z.Barany, 2002-P310). In contrary to his statement, it could be stated that homogeneous ethnic identity does not, by definition, guarantee successful political mobilization around this identity. It must be a well-developed or ‘empowered’ identity in order to attract and guide constituencies into collective action. Roma failed political mobilization due to chosen different weak ‘identity frames’ for mobilization, which simply did not resonate with the ‘needs’ of potential constituencies. For the second reason, Roma identity receives continuing negative valuations in the official political discourse, what consequently creates additional obstacles in political activists attempts of turning ‘stigmatized identity’ into ‘mobilizing identity’. Great part of Roma minority is reluctant to officially admit their ethnic belonging because of this particular negative society perception of their identity.

The concept of framing provides a useful contribution to the study of ethnic minority mobilization since it directs attention to cognition and persuasion (P.Vermeersch, 2003). ‘Framing’ in social movement literature refers to strategic ‘conceptual structure’ or ‘mental structure’ through which people assign meaning to social reality, promote a certain understanding of reality and intentionally choose a frame for mobilization (P.Vermeersch, 2003). In other words, ‘frames’ function as an interpretative, interactive scheme, which enables individuals to locate, perceive and identify themselves within their life space and world at large, that in accordance legitimate and motivate collective action (R.D. Benford & D.A. Snow, 2000). According to Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow (2000) ‘framing’ is not a static process, it is being continuously constituted, contested and negotiated during the course of movement activity. Accordingly meaning, that the boundaries of ethnic minority identity are dynamic and continuously reproduced in the light of changing circumstances. Furthermore, to a certain degree identity ‘framing’ process is being shaped by local, regional or state socio-cultural context in which it takes place (R.D. Benford & D.A. Snow, 2000). Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow (2000) point to political opportunity structure, cultural opportunities and limitations as important factors affecting ‘framing’ process. According to the ‘framing’ approach, ethnic minority identity is perceived not simply as a differentiation from the rest of society in terms of language, tradition and so forth, but rather as the result of a process in which such differences are deemed socially and politically meaningful and are acted upon (P.Vermeersch, 2003). Identity ‘framing’ process does not aim to ‘invent’ an identity, but rather to give a certain identity frame, which would mobilize, solidify and empower ethnic minority. In other words, the mobilization process would itself contribute to the formation of the ethnic group’s political identity. By employing ‘framing’ approach the identity frames adopted in Roma activist discourse will be discussed.

Roma as a non-territorial nation frame

In 1977 International Roma Union (IRU) was founded after the first London World Roma Congress. IRU is a non-governmental organization that has aimed to become a dominant forum for international Roma community activism. In over thirty years its attempts to attract larger international Roma audience were unsuccessful; it has rather operated as the forum of a few dozen international elite driven organizations (consisting of Roma and non Roma) sustained by patronage of established political interests (M. Kovats, 2002). However in 2000 attempts to revive IRU through a new mobilizing ‘frame’ were held in World Roma Congress in Prague. The initiatives have been expressed in the international Roma Union’s Declaration of a Nation, which conceptualized Roma as a ‘nation’ claiming that all Roma constitute a single and distinct political community, which requires its own, separate political representation, without the will to become a State (T. Acton, I. Klimova, 2001). The IRU defines Roma as a non-territorial trans-national ethnic group and argues that all Roma communities are deeply
interconnected through common history, origin, language, culture and therefore Roma should be granted a special legal position in Europe. For these proponents the nation ‘frame’ presented a useful tool for activism towards international organizations, which were particularly interested in unified international Roma actor as a negotiating partner. On an international level, the Roma nation ‘frame’ was received effectively, however, it has had little actual impact in creating greater domestic Roma mobilization. Though, one could argue that fundamentally all Roma share the same origins, culture and common persecution experience in Europe, the problem is that Roma do not identify themselves as a cohesive ethnic group. Even within single countries Roma are diffused and diverse: “from the gypsy point of view there is no such group as the gypsies” (M. Kovats, 2002-P.4). At least for now Roma do not share an ‘imagined community’ or a feeling of belonging to a unified nation. The frame emphasis on common origin and transnational community proved to be too weak a tool for bolstering mass mobilization. The ‘heights-reaching’ transnational proposals did not match up with local and real needs of Roma communities. Therefore it is not surprising that ordinary, poorly educated members of Roma community that presently live under harsh economical conditions were not attracted to the intentions of Roma “nationalists”.

Further on, Martin Kovats (2002) argues that the promotion of Roma nationalism has been the logical extension of the right-wing agenda to segregate Roma people. Framing Roma mobilization on the grounds of Common Roma identity, which traditionally has been used to marginalize the status of these communities, is legitimating the ideology of segregation. Moreover, Roma nationalist frame does not represent Roma grassroots politics, but instead promotes: “authoritarian nationalist tradition in which a political community is constructed through the manipulation of vulnerable people, to secure the interests of an unaccountable elite.” (M. Kovats, 2002-P4). Since there is a great gap between miniscule Roma intelligentsia and the rest of the diverse community there is little chance that Roma nationalism would be sustained with democratic control by Roma people as a whole.

Also importantly, Roma nation frame has been criticized for promoting primarily the interests of individual states that are eager to free their governments from Roma issues and costly responsibilities; and overall it has been argued that it undermines the Roma position as a national minority in the domestic context (P. Vermeersch, 2003).

Roma as a social class identity frame

In contrast to the above-discussed national frame based on ‘imagined’ unified Roma community, strategic social class identity frame proponents aim to avoid close association with Roma identity. They argue that national minority status does not help Roma to diminish popular public stereotypes or fundamentally change the social situation of Roma - the emphasis on publicly ‘stigmatized’ identity turned to be not beneficial. Instead, they attempt to mobilize Roma on the grounds of social security issues emphasizing their poor, disadvantaged conditions (P. Vermeersch, 2003). In this strategic frame, Roma identity is conceptualized as representative of the lowest class in economic and social hierarchy structure. The focus is laid on urgent educational, housing and employment needs. Therefore, belonging to the ethnic community is seen as less important and is considered as a purely individual choice.

The origins of this identity frame can be traced back to the Soviet times. The Communist period was characterized of increased Roma proletarianisation, where they were treated as a social group. All aspects of their culture, without exception, were regarded negatively as the obstacles to Roma successful integration into society. The rationale of this particular strategy was to increase Roma social integration by simultaneously exercising the destruction of their ethnic identity. Though Roma received some sort of legitimacy within socialist state, the official policies were targeting harsh assimilation of the group (W. Guy, 2001). This less attractive side of social group identity frame, adopted during the Communist period reinforced negative Roma perception in present attempts of reviving this concept of identity. Its advocates also hoped to strengthen the Roma movement by creating solidarity links with other socially excluded non-Roma movements on the basis of general economic support for poor communities, however attempts were not successful. Defining Roma primarily as a social group and moving away from focusing on ‘stigmatized’ Roma ethnic identity could have been a good strategic frame for political Roma mobilization, because up to now many Roma are primarily concerned with their worsening socioeconomic conditions. The failure of this strategic frame to attract wider support leads to the conclusion that as much as political activists lack effective organizational powers, ordinary Roma lack simple political awareness and motivation to act. It is clear, that establishment of a degree of grassroots
political awareness among Roma people is very much needed in order to mobilize them on the basis of conceptualized political identity.

Grassroots Roma politics is very weak and immature and so is easily manipulated by the top down established interests. An unprecedented growth of Roma organizations does not signify growth in the power of Roma people, but the growth of availability of resources provided by EU and the member states through non-governmental organization system. A top-down Roma representation is being built on ‘artificial’ strategic identity frames that don’t reflect the actual needs and demands of Roma people, but instead provide a useful tool for public institutions to communicate their interests and political agenda to Roma people. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of them to keep Roma organizations politically impotent, having no actual political force in compelling authorities to take any particular course of action. Therefore, we end up with a situation where top-down attempts of creating Roma political mobilization proceed at the price of the development of a democratic Roma politics. And democracy is a pre-condition in effective political mobilization. Only if people feel that they are a part of the process and if they feel that political engagement will conclude in tangible outcomes, will they maintain solidarity within the movement and take responsibility rather than remain politically apathetic. This is the core of successful framing strategy in mass political mobilization.

Conclusively then, framing approach is necessary yet inadequate in attempts to mobilize Roma politically. Framing if used together with grassroots initiative creates the possibility to transcend shortcomings of Roma highly diverse ethnic identity. In order to enable political mobilization there is a necessity for not only a well and strategically developed political identity, but also for a degree of political awareness among ordinary Roma people. Not to forget, if framing itself is approached as a process of identity discovery at a grass roots level, ordinary Roma people become politically engaged, creating a feedback loop of growth in political awareness and mobility. As presented examples show these important pre-conditions that could create sufficient basis for Roma political action at the present moment are absent.

It should be taken into account, that political Roma mobilization does not occur in vacuum and is largely dependent on external institutional environment and created political opportunities. It is vitally important to attract grass roots Roma support, but equally important is to receive political support from wider society. The historical opportunity to overcome Roma inequality and past prejudices will fade in vain if there will be no political cohesion between Roma and non-Roma citizens. Extensive and durable external support from non-Roma on the grounds of shared awareness of common good and interests is needed in order to turn Grassroots Roma politics into progressive political phenomenon. However, official political discourse continues the promotion of Roma people, their politics and conditions as essentially different from those of the rest of society. Official policy framing Roma as “substantially different” reinforces their negative images in media and public opinion. Consequently it hinders the prospects of Roma political mobilization.

**Official political discourse towards Roma**

The official political attention towards Roma issues started to gain ground after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Primarily it was a pure security concern from European Unions side to prevent mass Roma migration westwards – “to keep the Roma where they are”. In tact with European integration EU rhetoric added an emphasis on discrimination and positive minority rights, which became one of obligatory criteria of EU accession. However it’s been clear that EU primal concern remained prevention of Roma migration (R.Gugilielmo, T.W.Waters, 2005). This concern is clearly expressed in the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) 1993 report. Discrimination and violence problems against Roma were presented in the context of Committee’s implicit concern: “<…> reduction in pressures of international migration.” (R.Gugilielmo, T.W.Waters, 2005-P.768). The underlying message was clear - to prevent mass invasion of ‘unwelcome economic burden’. In 2000 HCNM report rhetoric emphasis has been moved on minority rights protection (R.Gugilielmo, T.W.Waters, 2005). Yet, to extend that Roma continued migration or were thought in doing that, they were still regarded as a ‘problem’. It’s not surprising that recent Romanian and Bulgarian Roma migration to Finland and Italy (Naples) were welcomed by highly negative society reaction reinforced by officially promoted fear of uncontrolled ‘Roma invasion’.

Overall EU official policy towards Roma has been characterized as reflecting more the interests of mainstream institutions than those of Roma people and communities. EU policies lacked sensitivity and
clarity in vision for Roma social integration and their political empowerment. The financial support served to ‘assist’ rather than ‘solve’ long-term Roma problems.

In accordance with EU negotiation requirements on minority rights East and Central EU candidate states started to pay more attention to Roma issues. It has been criticized that official state policies have not been driven by real concern for the position of Roma, but rather for the bare will to fulfill the accession requirements. The implementation of required regulations and declarations however did not mean their effective enforcement. Moreover, for example official Czech state policy in resolutions towards Roma issues unintentionally stimulated negative views on Roma identity. The resolutions of 1999 and 2000 named negative aspects of Roma identity as the core element of the policy problem that these resolutions were to address. Roma integration was defined as: “Romani community’s full-scale incorporation into society while preserving most of the cultural specificities and different features <…> so long as these distinctive features are not in variance with the laws of Czech Republic.” (P. Vermeerschr, 2003-P.893). This definition indicates that some features of Roma identity are linked with condemnable social behavior. Slovak Republic 1999 resolution on Roma vaguely suggested that Roma lifestyle and culture are problematic by stating that: “Some aspects of life of a certain part of this minority cause social distance in majority society”, or that problems are caused by the specific way of life of a part of the Romani national minority” (P. Vermeerschr, 2003-P.896). The presented examples suggest that official these state political discourse still perceive Roma identity and Roma culture as integral part of Roma problem. The official identification of social behavior with ethnic Roma identity can easily resonate with public discourse and can lead to support a discourse of “otherness” treating Roma as “substantially different”. It is not surprising that it becomes difficult for Roma political activists to promote alternative understanding of themselves and engage Roma in political mobilization. Many Roma fear that official identification with Roma ethnic identity may allow others to discredit them even more.

Education - an example of failed official political discourse

Education has often been referred to as a main source of Roma social inclusion, political awareness building and mobilization also as a key factor for Roma to access labor market. In EU adopted platform for Roma inclusion in 2011 education is addressed as one of the four main areas for improving social and economic integration for Roma. However despite all the official attention and funds devoted there is a little change in this area. In most Central and Eastern European countries only about 20 %. of Roma children ever enroll in primary school. And those that do enroll are likely to drop out before the end of basic schooling and less than 1 % of Roma attends the University (http://www.unicef.org). According to a survey by the Open Society Institute in six EU countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia) only 42% of Roma children complete primary school, compared to an average of 97.5% for the general population across the EU as a whole (http://europa.eu). UNICEF report “On the rights of Roma children to education” provides several explanations of poor education outcomes. The lack of quality in early childhood education services contributes to a lack for readiness to school. Mainstream institutions are conventionally insensitive to the cultural and linguistic background of Roma communities. Most often Roma rights and needs are overlooked because Central and Eastern European countries are still coping with social and economic transition issues. Nonetheless the fact that most of Roma children parents received inadequate education makes them less empowered to claim education for their children. Poverty and social exclusion also create barriers to access education. The inflexibility of school systems to address these issues only accelerates Roma children exclusion. Segregation of Roma Children between schools, within schools and into special school prevails. On one hand most regular schools are not prepared to integrate children with special needs, but there is also lack of willingness among Roma parents to enroll their children in regular schools. Most of them prefer the opportunity for their children to study in segregated schools with their Roma peers. Other issues as lack of teaching quality and methods, language barrier, prejudice and hostility also contribute to unsuccessful Roma engagement in education.

Although in 2005 declaration of the Decade of Roma inclusion was signed by as many as 12 countries and brought together on the political level different intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations as well as Roma civil society, the aims and commitments regarding Roma education tend to be poorly implemented. Governments across the region overwhelmingly fail to prioritize and consider the specific needs of Roma for inclusion into the educational system, and appropriate platforms and mechanisms for Roma communities to voice their concerns and influence decisions are still largely missing (UNICEF, 2011). The problem is that most governments think of Roma inclusion in terms of sporadic actions but not in terms of integrated policies that would address systematic issues. There is a
lack of political will to set agendas and push for the implementation of policies. Regular monitoring of national state policy implementation is also poor. Critics point out that Roma integration decade excluded Roma: “Local Roma communities are not aware of the decade efforts and often do not feel the results on the ground. Many believe that the Decade Action Plans are mainly focused to reach already involved and already aware citizens.” (http://www.eurasiareview.com).

The 2011 EU Platform for Roma inclusion also ambitiously aims to help member states not only prepare national strategies for Roma integration under EU framework process but also to ensure member state monitoring on the achievement of Roma integration goals. However criticism continues on EU aims being too vague. Also it remains unclear how EU and national authorities will integrate Roma people and ensure effective monitoring of national states. Success can only be achieved if governments work on changing their institutions and if Roma become full participants in the system.

When seeking to improve Roma inclusion in education, it is essential that the actions at the local level be aligned with appropriate national and EU policies. It is also essential to ensure adequate institutional and financial means so that national policies can actually be implemented.

As we have seen up to now national and EU strategies for Roma inclusion were too vague and often lack consistency. This does not necessarily mean that official policy makers have intentionally aimed to fail the inclusion. However it does reveal the inadequacies and gaps in official political discourse towards Roma and most importantly failure to include Roma community in policy decision-making.

Conclusions

Widely accepted suggestions that Roma political mobilization failed mainly due to absence of clearly defined culture, language, religion and homogeneous identity. By adopting identity framing approach, it could be stated that a well-developed identity frame which enables individuals to identify, locate and construct a particular understanding of social reality, motivates them in collective action. Arguing that framing approach is necessary, yet, inadequate in attempts to mobilize Roma politically, if not used together with grassroots initiatives. Only if people feel that they are a part of the political process and if they feel that political engagement will conclude in tangible outcomes, will Roma political mobilization be successful and transcend the shortcomings of highly diverse ethnic identity. However up to date political Roma mobilization has been preceded at the price of democratic Roma politics. The increased number of Roma organizations does not represent the growth in power of Roma people, but rather the growth in availability of external resources. The present Roma political representation is built on top-down, ‘artificial’ strategic identity frames which barely resonate with ordinary Roma needs and demands. Moreover, external environment for Roma political mobilization was not particularly encouraging. Beyond widely escalated Roma issue importance, Roma are still perceived in official political discourse as ‘problematic’ within their culture and identity. Discussed example of failed Roma inclusion in education confirms official political discourse towards Roma being mainly “top down” political strategy, lacking clear aims and implementation control tools. Roma participation here is essential in order to improve communication channels, commitment and motivation between different project stakeholders. Unless Roma become a force that counts in the democratic power game, Roma’s achievements in influencing policy making will be very limited. Providing a voice and visibility to the minority’s elite is therefore essential, both because this elite is still small and requires support to be heard and because successful participation can stimulate Roma interest in getting involved in public life.

Roma circumstances won’t change unless there will be no political cohesion between Roma and non-Roma citizens. Extensive external support from non-Roma on the grounds of shared awareness of common good and interests is needed in order to turn grassroots Roma mobilization into progressive political phenomenon.

Litterature:

ROMŲ POLITINIO ATSTOVAVIMO PROBLEMOS. ŠVIETIMAS – KAIP ŽLUGUSIO OFICIALIAUS POLITINIO DISKURSO PAVYZDYS

Santrauka