

Romani Communities in Hungary

Abstract

Romani communities form a very structured subculture in Hungarian society. There are groups along the ethnic, economic, local and traditional dimensions. These groups are characterised by different lifestyles, but there exists a kind of common ethnic identity. It revives in connection with economic crisis, the growing radicalism of the political Romani organisation and the evolving anti-Gypsy stance in the society-at-large.

Keywords: Gypsy/Roma/Sinti, identity, culture, communication, languages, education, music, self-esteem, conflicts, discrimination, interculturalism, inclusion, racism

Introduction

The size of the Gypsy/Roma population in Hungary is about 500,000-600,000. The Roma population is divided into different ethnic and/or socio-economic subgroups.

The initial questions of our researches were:

- Are there different lifestyles within the Gypsy/Roma population in Hungary? Do those lifestyles contribute to their social integration?
- Do various lifestyles depend on the different socio-economic backgrounds of the various subgroups (i.e., connections between career patterns and schooling levels)?
- Do “fringers”, as they lose their ethnic traditions and receive new identities, belong to the “underclass” or do they create parts of the “over-class” (dominant groups)?

Methods

After collecting the data and literature about the Gypsy/Roma communities,¹ we took deep-interviews (15 interviews, 10 audio, 10 transcribed and 15 interviews on paper) with different representatives of the Gypsy-Roma community about their life, identity,

1 Materials uploaded into the *Society and Lifestyles* project electronic archive <https://salarchive.vdu.lt>

connection with their own group and other questions. Then 400 questionnaires were administered to the Gypsy/Roma young people (the common questionnaire for the project was used). The fieldwork results (with photos and video recordings) were also included in the discussion of the results. The analysis of four newspapers shows the attitudes of the dominant society around Gypsy/Roma communities.

Research findings

1. The *Romungro* call themselves “Raj-Gypsies” or “Gentleman Gypsies”. They are better educated than the other Gypsy groups and often send their children for higher education. They are proud of their Gypsy origin. They despise the other Gypsy groups. They have lost their language. Their culture connects them with the majority society’s middle class. The most successful families live in Budapest and other city centres in Hungary.

The *Boyash* live in the southern Transdanubian region of Hungary. Originally living in small villages, today they are moving to larger centres and integrating quickly. Music, dances, costumes, dishes and language are the elements remaining of their traditional culture. They view themselves as peaceful, hard-working people contrary to other Gypsy groups. They are despised by the other Gypsy/Roma groups because of their assimilation. There are discrimination and prejudices from the majority because of their dark skin. The poor Boyash communities still live in small villages with high unemployment and alcoholism rates.

The *Olah Gypsies (Roma)* live scattered throughout Hungary; however, they have remained in close contact with each other. The subgroup which saved its cultural tradition consists of those who speak Romani. Traditional dresses are only worn by the elderly, but their music and dances are popular everywhere in Hungary. They proudly consider themselves the real Gypsies. The most successful members are mostly entrepreneurs (e.g., in the construction business) and traders.

The three main ethnic groups think very differently about the conflicts with the dominant society; however, all of them feel their situation is full of problems (see Table 1).

2. The elite of the Roma/Gypsy community can be divided into three groups:
 - *Traditional leaders* of the communities (the “Voivodas” – Chiefs – and their families) who are unknown by the dominant society
 - *Artists* and other educated people holding the dominant society’s respect
 - *Politicians* who live away from the own ethnicity – further research is necessary on this subgroup
3. In Budapest (the capital of Hungary), the Roma/Gypsy people are partly living in “ghettos” and partly scattered. However, the Gypsy/Roma population resides

Table 1: Conflicts between the dominant society and Roma by ethnic group*

		Boyash	Lovari	Romungro	Other Gypsy groups	Sum total
Prejudice	Ps	19	3	1	4	27
	%	25.0%	10.7%	25.0%	28.6%	22.1%
Discrimination	Ps	15	10		1	26
	%	19.7%	35.7%		7.1%	21.3%
Culture/language	Ps	8	3	2	3	16
	%	10.5%	10.7%	50.0%	21.4%	13.1%
Unemployment	Ps	32	11	1	9	50
	%	42.1%	29.3%	25.0%	42.8%	41.0%
Education	Ps	2	1			3
	%	2.6%	3.6%			2.5%
Sum total	Ps	76	28	4	14	122
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

* Only valid answers

mainly in the poorest rural areas of the country. Their lifestyles as a “ghetto” population may cause critical social situations. The “underclass” of the “ghettos” forms a niche for criminality.

According to Gypsy/Roma places of residence, there is a difference between the larger towns and smaller settlements especially regarding the importance of unemployment and discrimination (see Table 2).

Table 2: Conflicts between the dominant society and Roma by place of residence*

		Capital	City	Small town	Village	Sum total
Prejudice	Ps	5	22	37	40	104
	%	11.6%	31.4%	35.9%	30.1%	29.8%
Discrimination	Ps	18	23	11	20	72
	%	41.9%	32.9%	10.7%	15.0%	20.6%
Culture/language	Ps	8	7	23	21	59
	%	18.6%	10.0%	22.3%	15.8%	16.9%
Unemployment	Ps	9	18	22	42	91
	%	20.9%	25.7%	31.4%	31.6%	26.1%
Politics	Ps	1		9	5	15
	%	2.3%		8.7%	3.8%	4.3%
Education	Ps	2		1	5	8
	%	4.7%		1.0%	3.8%	2.3%
Sum total	Ps	43	70	103	133	349
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

* Only valid answers

4. There are strong prejudices against Gypsies generally when considering the Gypsy population as a homogeneous community. In the event of economic and moral crises, prejudices may create social and ethnical tensions.
5. The analysis of mainstream newspapers showed that one theme dominated the public discourse in 2008. It was the crimes committed by Roma gangs as well as the petty larcenies committed by Gypsies from the rural areas. The government is helpless in this respect. Thus it may be expected that the Gypsy/Roma people will be the scapegoats of the present economic and political crisis.

Their self-concept is totally opposite to the concept of the dominant society. This is one of the reasons of the great social distance between the Roma and Gajdo (non-Roma) (see Table 3).

Table 3: People's self concept

Emotional/cohesive	59.8%
Diligent/intelligent	13.5%
Honest	7.0%
Open	4.9%
Vivacious	4.7%
Traditional	1.6%
Multi-coloured	1.4%
Malevolent	1.4%
Tzigane	1.2%
Lazy/not working	0.9%
Religious	0.7%

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Multiculturalism and cultural alternatives are not familiar to the societies of countries in transition. Such societies are intolerant of visible subculture groups. In Hungary the Roma community represents a visible minority, so they must recognise signs of prejudices. The economic regression leads to scapegoat-naming. The Roma community or other subcultural groups are the most adequate for this role. A necessary policy would be a continuous fight against racism and xenophobia from early childhood to old age and from schools to the media.

The Gypsy community has to understand and learn how to take on and express its own identity. A young intellectual has to develop and practice new models of behaviour. It is necessary to involve mediators between the minority and the dominant societies who could include young Roma intellectuals.

Society must learn how to discuss those problems and how to deal with them. Interethnic tensions can only be eased in this way. Studies like our SAL Project

may be useful and necessary to learn how to discuss issues like ethnic identities and subcultural communities. Projects similar to our SAL may contribute to social freedom.

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Romų bendruomenės Vengrijoje

Santrauka

Romų bendruomenės sudaro labai struktūruotą subkultūrą vengrų visuomenėje. Egzistuoja grupės, sukurtos etniniu, ekonominiu, lokaliu ir tradiciniu pagrindu. Šios grupės pasižymi skirtingais gyvenimo būdais, tačiau kuria bendrą etninę tapatumą, kurio raišką veikia ekonominė krizė, augantis romų politinių organizacijų radikalizmas ir gilėjančios neigiamos visuomenės nuostatos prieš čigonus.

Tyrimas grindžiamas esama gausia moksline literatūra, taip pat tyrėjų atliktais interviu, žiniasklaidos ir stebėjimų duomenimis. Autoriai išskiria ir apibūdina skirtingų socialinių sluoksnių ir išsilavinimo romų grupes, gyvenančias Vengrijos miestuose ir kaimuose, pateikia jų gyvenimo būdo, socialinės integracijos, požiūrių, vertybių, elgesio skirtumus. Iškeliama konfliktų su vengrų visuomene priežastys, kurių pagrindas yra nuostatos, diskriminacija, kultūriniai skirtumai, nedarbas, politiniai faktoriai, išsilavinimas.

Autorių pateiktose rekomendacijose atkreipiamas dėmesys į būtinybę ieškoti būdų, kaip keisti rasistines nuostatas ir mažinti ksenofobiją. Grupių tyrimai, atlikti SAL projekte, gali padėti skleisti žinias apie etnines tapatybes ir subkultūrines bendrijas. Tokio pobūdžio projektai gali prisidėti plėtojant socialinę draugystę.

Raktažodžiai: čigonas / romas / *sinti*, tapatybė, kultūra, komunikacija, kalbos, švietimas, muzika, savigarba, konfliktai, diskriminacija, tarpkultūralizmas, priklausomybė, rasizmas.