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SŁAWOMIR KAPRALSKI
Warsaw School of Social Psychology

Democratization in the Post-Communist Europe: A View From the Margins

Abstract: The article presents the attitudes of the Roma minority towards the postcommunist transformation in Poland in the broader context of Romani ethnic/political mobilization and transformations of Romani identities. The text outlines main differences between the present situation of the Roma in Poland and the way they were treated in the communist period. Differentiated attitudes of the Roma towards postcommunist transformation have been presented and interpreted in the context of the growing sense of insecurity, growing possibilities of self-organization, and difficulties with securing social integration. The texts presents also various forms of discrimination and marginalization the Roma face, with particular emphasis on decentralized physical violence and centralized semantic violence, which influence Romani strategies of survival and identity-building.

Keywords: Roma, marginalization, inequality, security, violence, identity, postcommunist transformation.

The intention of this essay is to show how democratization in post-Communist Europe is viewed from the perspective of the Roma (Gypsy): the people who—because of the long historical process—have been marginalized in the societies of which they are part. It would be interesting to see how the processes usually analyzed from a "general sociological perspective," which is in most cases the perspective of the dominant majority, look like from the point of view of those who should be very much interested in them as a potential chance for improving their situation, but who unfortunately much more frequently suffer because of their consequences.

In the first two parts of the essay I describe generally the situation of the Roma in Eastern Europe, focusing on the issue of anti-Roma violence. Two subsequent parts present in a more detailed way the consequences of the collapse of Communism for the Roma, and corresponding defensive strategies envisaged by large, international Romani organizations and their leaders. The last part presents the views of the ordinary members of the Roma communities in Poland.

The Roma in the Post-Communist Eastern Europe

The developments which took place after 1989 in East Central Europe (ECE) have clearly illustrated the fact that the achievement of freedom and liberty by the states of the region does not necessarily correspond with an improvement of the situation of

at least some of their citizens. The group which is frequently mentioned as marginalized, victimized and discriminated against in the new ECE, is the Roma population. According to the authors of the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) Report, "since the beginning of 1990, Roma have suffered more than 45 attacks, resulting in the deaths of twenty Roma and the destruction of over four hundred Roma dwellings. The violence has been especially well documented in the… Czech and Slovak lands and in Romania and Hungary, but it has also taken place in Poland, Bulgaria, and former Yugoslavia" (PER Report 1992: 7). Using different statistics (as well as a different definition of a violent attack), the authors of an editorial in Prague's English language weekly *Prognosis* estimated that between 1991 and 1993 in the Czech and Slovak lands Romanies were the target of 94 attacks and victims of all 16 of the racially motivated murders reported in that time (*Prognosis* December. 10, 1993: 9).

Of course, the victimization of the Roma is by no means an invention of post-Communist Europe. In fact, from its very beginning the history of the Roma among the European people can be described as a continuous history of persecution and violent mistreatment which culminated in the period of the Holocaust and which has contained a very important Communist episode: "The Roma have long been the outcasts of Europe and it is sometimes forgotten that they were among the victims of the Holocaust. They were the target of efforts at enforced assimilation by the Communist authorities, whose programs all too often destroyed old patterns of culture and social structures without providing coherent alternatives, and left poorly educated, unemployed populations living in deep poverty, segregated, despised by the majority groups, victimized by the darkest prejudices and hatreds, and lacking the group cohesiveness or leadership required to defend themselves against violence, let alone to compete for a place in the sun" (PER Report 1992: 3).

Violence Against the Roma

Different acts of violence directed against the Roma can be divided into three main groups: acts of physical violence aimed at the destruction of the Roma population and individuals; acts and processes resulting in the destruction of the Romani culture; acts of "semantic violence," denying the Roma any distinct identity.

In the first category one has to mention destructive mob violence against individual Romanies and their property (resembling very much traditional anti-Jewish pogroms) reported from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine and Russia. In addition to these rather spontaneous outbursts of anti-Roma sentiments, there are organized, racially-motivated attacks on the Roma, carried out by right-wing extremists, neo-nazi groups and/or "skinheads" (especially in the Czech Republic). The latter category is even more important for these racially-motivated attacks have often resulted in the Roma men and women being actually killed, while during "pogroms" it is mostly the property which is being destroyed.

Of course, pogroms and lynching occur not only in ECE countries: they are reported from Spain, Germany and, quite recently from Austria. Sometimes they

are even supported by irresponsible public statements by official political figures, statements that can hardly be distinguished from genocidal appeals. For instance, in 1990 the "British Conservative Councilor Tookey states in a public address that she wants to see 'the filthy, dirty Gypsies recycled and dumped in the sea', following a similar public statement by the Mayor of Dartford in Kent that Gypsies should be 'pushed over the White Cliffs of Dover' " (Hancock 1991a: 24).

However, in the established democracies statements like those quoted above are easily to be criticized and counteracted not only by human rights activists but also by government's officials, whereas in ECE countries one can see, as Nicolae Gheorghe rightly observes, a widespread "governmental reluctance in condemning publicly, in a clear and unequivocal way, the overt violence and the expressed hostility conducive to violence against Roma persons and against the Roma population as a whole" (Gheorghe 1994a: 23) One has to add to this picture an anti-Roma prejudice and hostility expressed in the media throughout the countries of ECE which often denies the Roma the usual ally in the democratic countries: the independent voice of journalists.

Another outrageous example of the physical violence against the Roma population is the program of forcible sterilization of the Romani women in the former Czechoslovakia. "The communist authorities," Aviezer Tucker summarizes, "in a racist policy similar to the eugenics experiments in the American South, attempted to break what they considered a vicious circle of unemployment, welfare dependency, poverty, high demographic growth and crime through the sterilization of Romany women. Some were sterilized without their knowledge while being hospitalized. Others were pressured to agree, or offered considerable financial incentives by social and health workers, to undergo the operation. Post-communist government officials halted the practice of sterilization without explicit and informed consent. Still, there are reports of continued sterilization of Romany women in Slovakia" (Tucker 1994: 210).

This practice has quite early been documented by human right activists and the International Romani Union has protested against it to the United Nations Organization (Puxon 1986: 11), without, however, any significant result. Only in 1987, 1111 Czech and Slovak Romani women have been sterilized, with an open support of the medical authorities. For instance, Jiri Biocek, a senior pediatrician, was reported to say: "A gynecologist has the right to do this [sterilization] without consent. On the one hand there are human rights, but on the other when you see how these Gypsies multiply you can see that it is a population of inferior quality" (Powell 1994: 111). Opinions like this found backing on the highest governmental level when in 1993 Vladimir Meciar, then the Slovak Prime Minister called the Roma "socially unadaptable and mentally backward" (Powell 1994: 111).

The culture of the Roma has been gradually destroyed in both spontaneous and planned way. The modernization of the ECE countries during last 50 years put an end to many activities of the Roma, related to the pre-modern type of social life, whereas

the Communist regime put an end to the capitalist enterprise of horse-trading, while orchestras and smithing were forbidden as private businesses. With their old trades gone, the Roma were relegated to the ranks of unskilled labor. In one sense, they retained their nomadic life-style, moving from place to place

and town to town, but it was not out of choice. Instead, they moved under societal pressures and were kept at the lowest level of social stratification, gradually losing the defining characteristics of an ethnic group and coming to resemble an urban proletariat. In this sense, whole settlements of Roma became 'rootless' (PER Report 1992: 14).

Even this forced nomadic life-style ended up with the ban put on Roma traveling, issued in the Communist countries at the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of 1970s which lead to the compulsory settlement of the Roma, mostly in the very poor housing conditions. The old culture was thus destroyed without offering conditions for developing a new one. The official program of assimilation failed therefore from the very beginning: without offering the proper conditions any attempts towards assimilating the Roma could result only in marginalizing them. On the other hand the very program of assimilation neither did take into account the existence of the genuine Romani culture, nor did it offer any alternative way of integration or co-habitation of the Roma within the society.

Inequality can be seen as the most important consequence of the marginalization of the Roma. Among its most gruesome aspects one can list the inequality in life expectation, in housing, in employment and in education (Powell 1994: 106–108). Another result of marginalization is the process of criminalization of the Roma: being left on the margins of a society, without a sufficient maintenance, they become very much vulnerable to the activities considered as being against the existing law. On the other hand, the Roma have been stigmatized as criminals, prior to any evidence, and treated by the police as potential suspects even in cases in which they were in fact the victims. That explains why Romanies often do not report attacks against them: "The police take their testimony," says Bela Edginton, "and then charge the Romanies themselves with a crime" (Lyman 1994: 5).

In this situation, counteracting the marginalization, inequality, and criminalization, together with the defensive measures against physical violence and destruction of the culture are the most important problems the Romani organizations have to cope with. The most important objectives of their struggle for improvement of the situation of the Roma are equal civil rights, minority rights, political representation, community development, and security. However, in the case of these latter issues, the question can be asked, for whom are these basic human rights to be granted? In other words, Romani elites seem to realize that the most important right for which they should strive is the right to have a commonly accepted and externally recognized self-definition as a group which should be granted consequent rights.

Here we are touching upon the third group of the anti-Roma actions which I proposed to call "semantic violence."

I would like to define this term by referring to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" which means "the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate" (Jenkins 1992: 104; Bourdieu, Passeron 1977: xiii). By "semantic violence" I understand persisting attempts to define Romanies externally, in ways which would deny the Roma an ethnic or cultural identity. In other words, the labeling process becomes here an aspect of a discourse of power in which the authorities conceptualize

the Roma people in a way which facilitates and "legitimizes" the acts of oppression and physical violation.

The evolution of external definitions of the Roma can be presented as a conceptual development from a "social caste," through an "inferior race," to a "social problem." As a caste, the Roma were defined in social terms and placed in the framework of relations with other groups as "a separate collectivity that inherited an imposed position of inferiority" (PER Report: 1992: 12). Later on, this caste-like status was re-defined in terms of racist theories to justify the actual slavery to which Romanies were subjected in many countries because of their allegedly inferior racial characteristics. However, the racial definition was semantically compounded with the social one: first, because it "legitimized" the Romanies' social status; second, because the racial attributes merged with the social ones in a way which resulted in a social rather than a racist/ethnic external identification. Finally, in the post-war realities of Communist Eastern/Central Europe, Romanies were officially defined as a social population, and not as an ethnic group, a definition which corresponded with the assimilationist policies of different governments in the region. In Czechoslovakia for instance, "the Roma were labeled a social group with a dying ethnic identity, [with] no culture of their own and…language bordering on slang; therefore, they had no right to a distinct ethnic existence" (PER Report 1992: 12). In Poland, the situation differed only slightly: according to Andrzej Mirga, until 1989 "the Roma were recognized as people of Gypsy origin, but the Gypsies were considered an 'ethnographic category' rather than an ethnic group" (PER Report 1992: 12).

One may list two main groups of forces promoting the "social" definition of Romanies. First, such a definition provided governments with a convenient excuse for not granting the Roma those rights that are usually attributed to ethnic groups and for refusing to assume the responsibilities of "host" societies (PER Report 1992: 13).[1] Second, the definition in social terms served as a legitimization of anti-Romani state policies. The Roma were defined as a social group not because governmental experts believed them to have any special kind of "social identity," but because they were targeted as a "social problem," a "pathology" with which state institutions had to deal. Such an approach implied that, in the best scenario, any existing ethnic and cultural differences of a targeted group were merely neglected, and in the worst case, transformed into social deviance which should be eliminated (PER Report 1992: 13).

The Breakdown of Communism and Its Consequences for the Roma

The collapse of Communism put an end to programmatic governmental efforts to destroy the traditional cultural patterns of Roma, their social structure, ways of life, and economic infrastructure. There is, however, little consolation in this fact for the assimilationist policy employed by Communist governments turned out to be very efficient.

[1] This was, however, by no means an exclusively Communist policy: in 1992 the German government refused to recognize the Roma as an ethnic minority in Germany.

To some extent, the collapse of Communism has had a positive outcome in allowing Romanies to organize themselves and to find ways of expressing their interests. It has also increased the possibilities for self-definition: in Poland for instance, according to Andrzej Mirga, the Roma have been recognized after 1989 as an ethnic group (although not as a nationality group), while before that date they were generally perceived as a merely "ethnographic category" (PER Report 1992: 12).

In general, however, the transition towards democracy has influenced Romanies in a rather negative way. First, the transition period, with all the insecurities and difficulties connected with it, has resulted in a well-known scapegoat effect, with the Roma as an easy target to blame. Consequently, at the beginning of the transition process, Romanies were portrayed as black marketeers, becoming rich in an illegal way, and blamed for shortages of goods. Later on, in a "logic" typical of scapegoating, the Roma have become despised as an extremely poor group, spoiling the rosy picture of booming economies that East European governments have tried to present to the West (Gheorghe 1991: 836–840).

Secondly, the manifestations, often violent, of popular anti-Roma sentiments can now be expressed freely without being counteracted by the state apparatus. One might call this mechanism a decentralization of violence: "Under the Communist regimes," according to the *Project on Ethnic Relations* Report, "violence against the Roma was fairly well restrained unless it occurred at state direction. Since the revolutions, however, both open discrimination and violent racism have been on the rise. Before, the state dictated social norms and behavior, and norms were always defined to enhance the stability of the state. Now, the still weak state leaderships bend before popular opinion and, when popular opinion is racist, the state has done little to counter it" (PER Report 1992: 14–15).[2]

The racist character of the popular opinion has been proved by numerous surveys. One of them, conducted in 1994 in the Czech Republic by the Men, Education, and New Technologies Foundation together with Gabal Analysis and Consulting and sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, indicates for instance that for the Czechs, "when it comes to making a judgment on how a person is viewed, skin color remains the most decisive factor." According to the report, Romanies, the "people with dark skin," are perceived as "an irresponsible and dishonest population inclined to fraud… [who] don't like to work and abuse social benefits" and seventy-eight percent of the interviewed Czechs would favor "strict legislation…explicitly and ethnically directed at the repression of the Romanies" (Lesenarova and Baimbridge 1995: 6).[3] In this situation the following opinion of Andrzej Mirga does not come by surprise: "In the view of ordinary Roma people,"

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[2] A notable exception is the Czech Republic, where the state took an actively anti-Roma policy in its new citizenship law (Zoon 1994; Beck 1994). However, contrary to the Communist regime of Czechoslovakia with its attempt at forcible assimilation, the post-Communists government of the Czech Republic aims rather at excluding the Roma population from the legal construction of the new Republic's citizenship.

[3] The results of a more recent survey, conducted by the IVVM Institute, are slightly more optimistic: according to them the negative opinion about Romanies has been expressed by sixty-nine percent of the Czechs (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 16–17, 1995, p. 17).

Mirga says, "the reality of new democracy gave them nothing but a growing sense of insecurity" (Mirga 1994: 30).

Still another aspect of the situation of the Roma in the post-Communist Europe is connected with the raising nationalism in the region. It is, moreover, a peculiar form of nationalism which draws upon the ancient conception of a nation as a community "of people of the same descent, who are integrated geographically, in the form of settlements or neighborhoods, and culturally by their common language, customs and traditions" (Habermas 1992: 3). In consequence, the Eastern/Central European version of nationalism has particularly emphasized the idea of an ethnically homogeneous state and the concept of nationality as based on "objective" criteria: commonly shared culture, language, ethnicity, religion (Mommsen 1990: 213–214).

The Roma do not share most of these "objective" criteria. Thus, they are often perceived as "strangers" who endanger the ethnic homogeneity and "strength of the nation." Moreover, in the ECE countries a division between national identity and citizenship has never been successfully made and the eighteenth century concept of the nation of citizens, the nation which "does not derive its identity from some common ethnic and cultural properties, but rather from the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights" (Habermas 1992: 3) has never been deeply rooted in the popular thought.

For the Roma it means that they might be excluded from the ranks of co-nationals, which in the case of post-Communist countries often means a kind of second-class citizenship or even no citizenship at all, as in the case of many Roma citizens of the former Czechoslovakia who, after the split of they country into Czech Republic and Slovakia, and because of the new citizenship law ended up practically stateless (Leuprecht 1994: 9).

Roma Defensive Strategies

As Peter Leuprecht, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, rightly observed, all the strategies which may be used by Romanies to improve their situation have to solve a problem of how successfully obtain two kinds of rights which apparently are contradicting each other: the right to be different (to preserve the separate cultural identity of the Roma) and the right to be the same (to obtain full and equal participation in society) (Leuprecht 1994: 9).[4]

The first strategy we may list here does not meet the first criterion: it is simply the strategy of total assimilation that "would imply the abandonment of anything like a strong Roma identity for the sake of being incorporated into the dominant society" (PER Report 1992: 19). Even if possible at all, such an assimilation would perhaps secure "the right to be" but it would definitely not preserve any distinct Roma identity. The tendency not to strive for the right to be different is quite popular among some groups of Roma. The German Sinti, for instance, have been trying to obtain recogni-

[4] One also may add here the very basic right to be at all, directed against physical extermination, and the right to have an independent self-definition, directed against semantic violence.

tion as a German nationality group (*deutsche Volksgruppe*), which would provide them the status of an inherent part of German society, while in Slovakia, only six percent of Roma students would like to be seen as having a different ethnic background than the dominant population (Gheorghe 1991: 840; PER Report 1992: 19).

The second strategy, contrary to the first one, denies any merits of the right to be the same. It advocates to its very limits the right to be different. It is the strategy of total separation which "implies complete withdrawal from the main community, including language, schools, even territory" (PER Report 1992: 19). In its radical form, this strategy may consist of appeal for a territorial autonomy, which can often be found in the history of the Roma nationalism. Even the idea of an independent state has existed in Roma history and continues to be advocated by some radicals although it is not accepted by most of the Roma organizations. One of the first attempts towards obtaining a territorial homeland, "Romanestan," was made before World War II by Janusz Kwiek, the Romani leader in Poland, when he petitioned Mussolini to offer the Romanies a part of what was then Abyssynia. Recently, the most unobstructed exponent of the independent Roma state is Ronald Lee, his aspirations being influenced, among others, by the Quebec Liberation movement (Acton 1974: 233–234). The official standpoint of the World Romani Congress, however, is that "we must create Romanestan–in our hearts," a notion which allows its leaders "to retain the emotional connotations of the idea of 'Romanestan'… without exposing themselves to the cogent arguments against any attempt to set up a second Israel" (Acton 1974: 234).

The separation would also mean the total acceptance of the external definition of the Roma, the acceptance of the label given them by the authorities. In fact, there are many different groups of Roma and differences between them are sometimes of crucial importance. One has to agree with Leo Lucassen who in his study has contested "the view held by the most tsiganologists that people are termed 'gypsies' because they are gypsies, that is, define themselves as such" (Lucassen 1991: 89). The strategy of separation would in fact mean the acceptance of the external label of "gypsiness" and building the group identity around its negative social perception: a phenomenon called by Lucassen "minoritization." "The labeling by authorities of certain categories as different, unwanted or even dangerous, not only influences their position in society in a negative way, the power of definition by authorities can even initiate group formation and minoritization. People who at the outset felt no, or only weak ties with one another can be driven towards each other and in the course of time become a minority or project themselves as one" (Lucassen 1991: 91).

There is however the third possibility which could prove to be viable in avoiding the problems of the two just described and simultaneously able to combine the two types of rights as advocated by Leuprecht. It is a process of political ethnogenesis of the Roma. Following (and slightly changing) the concept of Nicolae Gheorghe, I could say that political ethnogenesis in case of the Roma means a conscious attempt toward achieving the accepted status of a politically organized, non-territorial (transnational), ethnic-national group (Gheorghe 1991: 831).

Nicolae Gheorghe, advocating the political rather than cultural character of Roma ethnogenesis, stresses the fact that Roma ethnicity should not be perceived as an

independent variable. It is, in his opinion, a consequence of political actions taken to secure the existence of the Roma and to provide them with recognition. Of course, this process does not mean an abandonment of ethnic identity. It is rather conceived as an adherence to a different type of nationalism than the ethnic type dominant in Eastern/Central Europe. This new political nationalism means first of all political organization and participation in political life; it strives to create a common arena in which people of different ethnicity could co-operate in solving their problems, without allowing the differences between them to become the predominant issue which would exclude communication. In such a project, "culture moves to politics" (Gheorghe 1991: 842) the most secure place for cultural difference seems to be the sphere of interaction between equal political agents in which political homogenization protects ethnic heterogeneity.

In other words, the Roma could turn out to be more advanced in their understanding of identity than the societies in which they live. They could become "politically organized people," following of what Habermas has described as the modern conception of citizenship where a legal political concept, not ethnic cultural, defines identity in the first place. In this sense, to use Gheorghe's words, the task of the Romani organizations is to build the identity of the Roma people "as a political people in the Greek sense of this term" (Gheorghe 1994a: 5). That means, once again referring to Habermas, people who are the members of a polity, who share political membership, and whose identity is defined in a legal, not ethnic, sense. In this sense the Roma self-definition as politically organized people resembles very much of what Habermas thinks to be the crucial element of a liberal definition of citizenship. And, since in the final instance citizenship is for Habermas defined in terms of civil rights, one may say that the same rights which define Roma identity, define the notion of citizenship in a democratic society.

For Gheorghe, one of the most influential Romani leaders, this conclusion seems to be self-evident: to be "a political people in the Greek sense of the word" means for him "to contribute to the education of our people as responsible citizens of the country where they are living, and to look at how the governments of these countries are respecting the rights of our people as citizens of these states" (Gheorghe 1994a: 5).

However, in an another statement, Gheorghe developed even broader understanding of the Roma identity as a legal-political construct, which expands beyond the borders of a nation state. "In the present time of an emerging pan-European Rule of Law," he said, "Roma, an European people without a kin-state of their own, are choosing the Rule of Law and Democracy as our main civic identifications and as our 'motherland' " (Gheorghe 1994b: 14). This idea, which would definitely earn Habermas' admiration, brings us to the next defining element of the Roma strategy: to transnationality.

In the world in which the importance of the nation-state declines and the importance of transnational actors increases, in the world of the "evolving patterns of interdependence, dependency, and global dominance throughout the world system," ethnicity, too, "may be conceptualized as an evolving transnational force" (Stack 1981: 28). The Roma ethnicity is somehow predestined to be transnational, taking

into account the traditionally nomadic lifestyle of the Romanies. In this respect, the Roma tradition could turn out to be very modern, or even post-modern. As Aviezer Tucker observes, "The Romanies' traditional lifestyle combines the pre-modern with the post-modern. The nomadic, unsettled, uprooted, yet artistic and free way of life is at once pre-modern in its inability to adapt to modern industrial society, and post-modern in its disregard of national borders and modern ideologies and value systems" (Tucker 1994: 209).[5]

The concept of the Roma as transnational people does not mean, however, only freedom of traveling, although this is a very important practical objective of the actions taken by the Roma organizations. It also means a refusal to accept the world of nation-states with their ethnic definitions of identity and citizenship, and, instead adhering to the "motherland of European law." On the other hand, however, one of the basic aims of the Romani elites in the area of human rights is to be recognized precisely as a nation, a fact marked symbolically by the attention being paid to national emblems. The first World Romani Congress, held in 1971 near London, adopted the Romani anthem and the national flag, consisting of two horizontal bars, the lower green, the upper blue, with the red, sixteen-spoked *chakra*-wheel. The next Congress, held in Geneva, addressed a petition to all UNO member states to admit the Romanies "as a distinct nation and to treat them as a national minority possessing equal rights" (Bartosz 1993: 15). The petition, presented to the NGO bureau of the United Nations in New York, has so far resulted in consultative status for the Romani Union with the United Nations, received in 1979 (Hancock 1991b: 146; Puxon 1987: 3).

The Romani View

In this section I attempt at presenting different opinions of the Roma living in Poland in order to see how the problems expressed by international Romani leaders are perceived by regular members of the Roma communities, and—on the other hand—how the transformation process in Poland is viewed by those who for different reasons remain largely on its margins. The interviews which I am using here, have been conducted in the years 1996–1997 with the members of the Roma communities in Tarnow and Cracow, as a part of my research project: Violence and Memory: The Holocaust and the Construction of the Roma National Identity.

When asked a general question about the situation of the Roma in Poland, our respondents usually focused on three main issues: unemployment, discrimination, and human rights.

Unemployment and general worsening of the material conditions of life have been noticed by all respondents although the importance of this situation and its causes the respondents pointed out varied from person to person. For instance, a fifty-five years old musician from Cracow said this:

[5] Tucker's opinion, however, needs to be taken with some reservation, because the Roma tradition has been largely destroyed over the course of the past several decades. One may speak here rather of the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm 1983) in which the traditional elements are being re-created in an entirely new context of transnational, legal-political concept of identity.

Well, not everybody lives well. Some people are very poor and cannot take good care of themselves. I take good care of myself and I'm still working, playing in a band for money and my wife still works in a factory. But some other people are really poor. Sometimes they just don't want to work but in most cases they can't find work. In the past everyone who wanted to work could find a job and now it is very difficult. (P3)

Unemployment, which is generally evaluated in Polish society as the worst outcome of the economic transformation, has in case of the Roma a special dimension. While the economic situation causes unemployment in many sectors of the Polish society, the Roma are more vulnerable, not only because of the generally lower level of education but also because of the discriminatory practices on the job market. According to a sixty-two years old construction worker from Cracow, "When a Gypsy goes to look for a job in a factory, they don't give him a job because he is Gypsy. Even when there are positions available, they don't give them to Gypsies." (P4)

However, according to some other respondents the situation regarding acts of discrimination has considerably improved, partly because of the activities of the Roma organizations. Such an opinion is more frequently expressed by younger respondents, better educated and involved in the Roma organizational activities. For instance, according to a seventeen years old high school student from Tarnow,

the Roma organizations have changed the situation. Maybe the Romany still have a bad reputation but now they are not discriminated against by the government. I can say that the Roma have more rights now. The same rights as all the minorities in Poland. Now they have more rights than Polish people. (P6)

Of course, a bit exaggerated optimism expressed in the last line is rather not shared by the rest of respondents. One should also add that even if the government indeed does not employ any open or secret discriminatory practices against the Roma, the discrimination against does exist on the lower institutional levels, like for instance in case of job offerings, and also generally in Polish–Roma relations.

However, when asked specific question about Polish–Roma relations, our respondents tried to present rather a balanced view. While there was a general agreement that Poles treat Roma as inferior people, there were also attempts to assign this attitude only to a particular sectors of the Polish society. The already quoted construction worker from Cracow pointed for instance out that anti-Roma stereotypes are stronger and more persistent in villages, among peasants, rather than in bigger towns and cities: "For village people we are still Gypsies, we steal and we don't work. In the cities I see a big difference." (P4) Explaining this situation he made an interesting observation referring to a different experience people have of the Roma in cities and in villages. Actually it is the experience of two different ways of life: that of the settled Roma and that of the Roma maintaining their traditional life:

For example my grandfather, father, and I worked and we were treated well. But mostly Gypsies traveled and that's why people treated them badly: because they were different. In the past the Roma had big families, they traveled and when they arrived somewhere in a village, there was no job for them and they had to steal food. (P4)

According to the respondent, although the Roma do not travel any more, the negative stereotype developed among peasants in the past still accounts for the hostility the Roma experience.

The already mentioned concept of inferiority of the Roma can possibly explain the persistence of negative stereotype. For those who believe the Roma are inferior, any attempt of the Roma people to change their situation, lifestyle, or social position will be treated with suspicion. As a twenty-three years old unemployed woman from Tarnow observed, "if there are rich Romany in a city, people think they are criminals. I think this is because they envy them." (P2) (By the way, this expression suggests that the difference between city and village regarding perception of the Roma is not as big as the formerly quoted responded would claim.)

Generally, there is a tendency among our respondents to focus rather on good aspects of Polish–Roma relations and to emphasize that they do not have problems where they live, although sometimes they become objects of verbal assaults by those who do not know them. Previously quoted woman says for instance that

> In our city everything is all right for me. For example the Polish people respect my parents, and we have many Polish friends… Once some young boys screamed out to me and my sister 'Gypsies to gas.' This is stupidity because they act like children and don't know what they talk about. I don't care about these types of situations. (P2)

The tendency to minimize the importance of personal experiences of this kind while admitting that violence and discrimination against the Rome do exist "in general," is quite understandable psychological reaction helping to counteract fear in everyday interpersonal relations. It is, however, important that being asked of the most important task for the Roma, our respondents did not focus on challenging anti-Roma stereotypes or violent assaults which would perhaps prove that—comparing to some other countries in the region—they are relatively unimportant on a mass scale, however painful they may be for those directly affected.

As the most important task for the Roma our respondents list the efforts to preserve the Romani culture and to maintain distinct identity. "The most important thing," says a sixty-nine years old woman from Tarnow, "is our culture, that what keeps us together." (P1) The reason for such a great importance of culture is that there is a general feeling of a radical change of traditional way of life and an awareness of the processes of assimilation which may result in disappearance of Romani identity. According to the respondent this may happen not because of the hostile environment but rather because of general moral decline and changes of family life which is the main place in which patterns of identity are reproduced. If we may speak of a hostile environment, it is not hostility caused by anti-Roma sentiments, but a general atmosphere of violence and lack of security, increased by mass media:

> Look what is going on now. There are so many criminals. I know why children are aggressive nowadays. They can watch this on TV… Nowadays the Roma and the Poles are the same: they both steal. I'm now scared to go out on the street at night because of gold earrings and I know that these earrings have no value but somebody can cut my ear off for them. (P1)

Other respondents emphasized preservation of identity in addition to education as the equally important tasks of the Roma.

> The most important thing for the Roma,—says forty-two years old musician involved in the activities of a Roma organization,—is not to lose their identity at a time where all other nationalities are assimilated. It is very important that we have more educated people because it is necessary to live in society. (P5)

There is, however, a serious problem connected with the attempted synthesis of tradition and modern education since the latter too often leads to assimilation and loosing ties with the Roma communities. Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe emphasized this, pointing out that one of the most necessary and in the same time most difficult tasks is to create an educated Roma elite which would function well in modern society and in the same time would feel rooted in the Romani tradition (Mirga and Gheorghe 1997: 30–31).

Respondents were sometimes not fully aware of problems connected with the issue of education. For one of them there is no problem at all with a successful combination of the efforts to preserve tradition with modern and open attitude towards education which would help the young Roma to have better life:

I think that the most important thing is to preserve our tradition. I can observe that traditions are disappearing very quickly. I for example want my children to go to school and cannot understand that in other cities Gypsies don't let their children attend school. In other cities, when Gypsy women tell the fortune or trade in the markets, they are always accompanied by their children. In my opinion this is not an education for children. I have children and I want to send them to school very soon. I would never want my children to hide their nationality but at the same time I would not want to deprive them of education. (P2)

Some of the opinions refer, however, to the context of Polish-Roma relations, when they call for instance for better understanding between the Roma and the Poles and the acceptance of the latter that Roma are Polish citizens as well, equal to the ethnic Poles:

The most important thing for all people, not only for the Roma, is understanding. Polish people should understand that the Roma are human beings too, and they are not as bad the Poles think. Actually they are very good people who don't steal and are very open. The Poles should treat the Roma like the Roma treat the Poles. We live together and we should have respect for each other. The Roma are born in Poland and they are Polish. They do everything the Poles do, they participate in elections. The law is the same for the Roma and for the Poles. (P4)

The issue of equal citizenship is important also for the previously quoted woman who recalled a situation when "a man in the street told me to go back to my country and I told him that if he was smarter he would know that this was my country as well and that I am Polish as well. Where should I go if I was born here." (P2) Therefore the issue of identity, we may say, confronts serious problems on two levels: firstly, when the attempts to maintain tradition are accompanied by an understanding of the role of education and other necessities of functioning in a modern society; secondly when Romani ethnic identity coexists with Polish citizenship and needs to win the opinion of ethnic Poles for such a combination.

Being directly asked to assess transformations in Poland from the Romani point of view, our respondents focused mostly on two issues: material situation and opportunities the new situation offers. The following excerpt from an interview capsules well the topics mentioned by most of the respondents:

Q: Is the life now better for the Roma or was it better before?
A: I can't compare my life when I was young and the life of my children because it is better for them now. They have more possibilities now. My father was a metal worker but I remember he could not earn enough to feed and put clothes on the whole family. I can say that life is better now.

Q: How was it during the Communist era?
A: People had different thoughts about that time.
Q: What do you think about that period?
A: It was much better to obtain jobs and flats. If you wanted job during that time, it was easy to find it. Everybody had to work during that time. It was much more easier to obtain a flat.
Q: And in what way it was worse than now?
A: It was harder in shops and there was not as much freedom as now. Nobody had freedom of expression like now. If someone said something against the government, they would put him in jail. (P4)

Some respondents emphasise only the social benefits they can get in Communist Poland, some other tend to combine better (in their opinion) economic situation of the Roma under Communism with an idealized memory of the past as an unspoiled domain of pure Romani tradition. It is interesting that the latter approach to the past can be found not only in the opinions of the older respondents (what would be pretty much understandable) but also among the youngest. For instance, twenty-three years old woman from Tarnow expresses very similar views to those of sixty-two man from Cracow, emphasizing the past as the time of an unspoiled, traditional Romani life, based on commonly shared values and supported by rich communal and family life, as opposing the apparently solitary, atomized life of contemporary Roma. It is interesting that such opinions have been expressed by a person who did not have much chance to fully experience the past in a conscious way and, as the following excerpt clearly indicates, they have been based rather on the views of the older members of her family:

Q: Is the life now better for the Roma or was it better before?
A: Before.
Q: When was this?
A: After the war, when the Roma started to settle down, but I only know this from what people have told me. This was in the 1960's. It was better at this time. I had a good childhood and things were good in the past. For example my mother did not work only my father worked… I don't remember any problems.
Q: Do other Roma think like that?
A: Yes, and my mother thinks the same.
Q: How do they talk about the Communist times?
A: They say it was better.
Q: Was it better materially only?
A: The Roma had more traditional life. This life was more exciting. We met together every evening. This was real traditional Romani life, a different life. Now the Roma are more solitary, before they spent more time together. (P2)

A quite different opinion has been expressed in the interview with the person deeply involved in the Roma organizational activities. According to him,

sometimes the Roma people talk positive about the Communist era because they had better jobs and more money. [But] the police in Communist times treated the Roma like the Germans did during the war… The police… acted like Gestapo. I remember every policeman from those times in my city and I'm not scared to speak about their actions. (P5)

According to this person, in the Communist Poland the situation with jobs was better than now, "but the correctional system discriminated the Roma. Even if a Roma was proven not guilty of an offense, they would keep him in jail anyway." (P5) At present the legal system has considerably changed and the Roma are not discriminated

against and have more possibilities to defend themselves, with an important support from the international minority rights organizations.

Another positive outcome of the transformation process, according to this respondent, was freedom of traveling which helps the Roma to feel more free than in the past when they were as a rule refused passports and visas. Traveling has been presented by this respondent as an important and still vital part of the Roma culture, although some other respondents are rather skeptical about it, connecting the increased mobility of the Roma from Poland after the collapse of Communism rather with material reasons and with a need to emigrate in search for better conditions of life. According to one of them, the Roma escape from Poland because "life is like a slow death here." (P1) On the other hand, the young student from Tarnow is rather positive that life for the Roma in Poland is considerably better now than in the past. (P6)

For a forty-two years old kettle maker the assessment of the past was far more complicated matter. Although he

> would not say anything good about communist times—in general, he is convinced that—it was easier to obtain what you wanted because all you had to do was to ask the Communist Party. If I felt discriminated against by someone, all I had to do was to tell them him that I would tell the Party about it and this would scare him… What was good in that time, was that one knew where to ask for something, because now you don't know where to go to obtain what you want. (P7)

It does not come by surprise that this person has rather critical attitude towards Romani organizations: "I don't want to say something bad about our organization here…but I think that this organization was better before. Before the people in the organization wanted to help us more than now. The relations between Roma were stronger before. Today you are more alone and have to take care about yourself." (P7) Generally speaking, the Roma—and not only in Poland but in other countries of Eastern Europe as well—appreciate very much the very existence of different Roma organizations as well as the democratic transformations which made it possible to create the representation of the Roma on political level, but are very critical when it comes to the assessment of the practical activities of a concrete organization.

Moreover, the internal conflicts which divide the Roma communities influence strongly the perceptions and attitudes towards particular organizations and their leaders what makes the whole picture even more complicated. The general pattern is, however, that younger and better educated persons have much more confidence in the activities of the Romani organizations and welcome the democratization process as an opportunity for the Roma to speak their own voice and to influence their situation. They also have more developed sense of ethnic/national pride while the older generation as well as those who suffer from the negative outcomes of the economic transformation are much more critical or reserved and tend to idealize the past. On the other hand it is precisely the young generation which seriously thinks of assimilation and giving up the Romani identification or at least its external manifestation. If this is going to happen, we would be dealing with an interesting historical paradox: the assimilationist attempts of the Communist regime would posthumously proved successful thanks to the collapse of Communism, followed democratization and market economy. On the other hand we may hope that those precisely factors: the collapse of

Communism, democratization and market economy, may create a social context for integration of the Roma into Polish society and simultaneously for maintaining and preservation of their distinct identity.

Conclusions

The main aim of this essay was to show the democratic transformations in the formerly Communist countries from the point of view of Roma: the minority which has permanently been discriminated against and marginalized in Central and Eastern Europe. Since communism added its own peculiar flavor to the persecutions of the Roma, one could expect that since its collapse the situation of the Roma has improved. It is, however, much more complicated. The Roma definitely have obtained the right of self-organization and articulation of their interest. "Market economy" has allowed them to legalize the businesses and trades which were to a large degree illegal under the Communism as "private enterprises." On the other hand, the collapse of the "planned economy" made the economic situation of the large part of the Roma worse. This is the case of those who were absorbed by the process of "communist industrialization" and found their chance in moving into cities where they become workers in mines or steel factories, obtained an apartment in a block of flats and other social benefits. This is also the case of those who preserved more independent life style but lived in the symbiosis with the communist economy, providing goods and services which were not offered by the communist industry. The first group, consisting mostly of the low-skilled workers, was first to be fired when the big communist plants collapsed or started a difficult process of reforms. The second group lost its economic niche.

The second aspect of the situation of the Roma is connected with the process of constructing or regaining identities by the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. The collapse of communism was followed by the growing nationalist tendencies and development of the extreme nationalist groups which understand national identity rather in ethnic than in civic-political terms. The ideal picture envisioned by those groups is a homogeneous nation-state, a community united by the same ethnic origins. In such a vision there is no place for multiculturality, for people of clearly different descent who would accept the collective identity as fellow citizens but either would not like or would not be granted the status of fellow nationals. In many countries the collapse of Communism meant for the Roma the loss of state protection and the danger of being exposed to the attacks—sometimes having clearly racist motivation—of extreme nationalists. On the other hand, democratization in the post-Communist countries means also the development of the human rights sector, establishing institutions supervising the situation of minorities and an international control of the standards regulating the majority-minority relations. The Roma do not have a single strategy either. Some of them tend to assimilate since they do not see a chance of "being Rom" in a society which does not accept difference, some tend to improve

their situation using the concept of human rights, some attempt at achieving the status of national minority and fight for political representation.

Finally, one should notice an interesting paradox: the nostalgic way in which the Communist past has been presented by a significant sector of the Roma community in Poland is very similar to the view of the past which is widespread among the marginalized groups of ethnic Poles and populist political groupings which, like for instance Lepper's "Samoobrona," attempt at representing social discontent. If we take into account that Polish marginalized groups are, as a rule, xenophobic and that anti-Roma feelings are quite widespread among their members, we would have to say that similar conditions of existence as well as similar views on the past and present situation do not necessarily result in sort of a "solidarity of the marginalized." Instead, it is rather "marginalization of solidarity" we face, with one group of marginalized people (the Roma) serving as a scapegoat for other, equally marginalized groups.

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Biographical Note: Sławomir Kapralski, Ph.D. Sociologist, Lecturer at the Warsaw School of Social Psychology and the Centre for Social Studies/Graduate School for Social Research, Polish Academy of Sciences. Warsaw, Poland. His field of research include theory of culture and identity, ethnicity and nationalism, Polish-Jewish relations, and the Roma of East/Central Europe. Member of the Gypsy Lore Society.

Address: e-mail: kapral@css.edu.pl