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# Gadjo Nation – Roma Nation?

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**T**HE HISTORIOGRAPHY of nation building, based on 19<sup>th</sup> century experiences, conventionally portrays the struggle of particular communities for geographically defined economic and cultural unity. The paradigm explains how these communities achieved self-determination and established control over their (nation) state, including control over other communities living in the same state. In most cases, this meant control over a defined territory. However, in cases such as that of the Jewish Diaspora, a virtual homeland was constructed first, and was only realised physically later on.

A key component of the paradigm is the desire of the nation to achieve political autonomy. However, with respect to Roma/Gypsies, it is clear that there has never been the aspiration to possess a territory of our own. Our sense of togetherness does not conform to the traditional nation building paradigm. Though we clearly constitute a distinct human community with the common identity of Roma/Gypsy, compared to other nations, we appear to be extra-terrestrial beings in the Romantic narrative of the nation.

But what if we try and avoid the constraints of this conventional paradigm? If the histories of (national) communities were written not by historians, but by anthropologists, our experiences as Roma would not appear so different. There would be no pressure to homogenise our communities into a nation. We would be spared the criticism of the Romantics for our lack of ambition to create a nation and could forget our identity as a non-territorial anomaly.

An anthropological approach focuses on communal cultural and spiritual processes, as well as

on a community's history. Those characteristics make it possible to understand why we should be regarded as a community rather than disparate, heterogeneous groups; a community with a dual identity comprising the identities of members of our own Roma/Gypsy groups as well members of the communities with whom we live together.

All Roma/Gypsies are similar in two ways. According to our inner identity, we exist as a cultural and economic community based on the clan system. Yet, we have another identity derived from the surrounding nations, perceived as an entity distinct from those amongst whom we live. This latter identity does not exist in the identity of other nations! Moreover, this second identity also means that we consider ourselves part of those (majority) nations and we see ourselves with their own eyes, although the latter do not believe that *we* are also *they*.

Ladies and Gentlemen! Before you assume that it would be better to be an extra-terrestrial being (according to the historians' paradigm) than it is to be a schizophrenic community (according to the anthropological paradigm), I must tell you that we do not suffer from either. We are children of Europe. We are also children in the sense that a child can comprehend himself both as part of the world and as a distinct entity within it – we can live with both parts of this dual identity simultaneously. The fact that most adults cannot do this any more is their deficiency and not the child's fault.

If we have given anything to Europe, in terms of the anthropological paradigm, it is this dual identity. Along with our majority nations, we were part of the continent's bloody, romantic history, even if others do not acknowledge our role.

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But with our unarmed inner identity we could remain innocent – until now.

The problem is that the outer part of our dual identity contains many negative components. We identify ourselves according to the image projected by the communities around us, which is full of negative judgements and attempts at our homogenisation. We either accept it and create within ourselves – both communally and individually, a self-image laden with low self-esteem, or we may rebel against it and face a life-long fight with half of our identity. As individuals, we confront these prejudices within our closer communities and overcome them, but in the wider community all we can do is try and protect ourselves against slander. This conflict of identity is common to all nations living in Diaspora, but we are the only European community that is regarded as a nation (in addition to other things) because of the dual identity described above.

If we can overcome this undesired aspect of our identity (and we can overcome it!) – the low self-esteem projected on us by the prejudice of others, and the anxiety of rebellion – if the negativity can be removed from our self-identity, then we can experience ourselves, our creativity, our power of communal adaptability. We can be able to show the whole of Europe that *We are Romani Hungarians, Hungarian Roma*. In this way, **nobody can force us upon the blood-drenched path of historical nationalism because we will have nothing to catch up with.**

Right Honourable History! We have been here all the time. When we made sacrifices in the struggles of the majority nation we were not considered Roma. When it was the majority's turn to help us, we became strangers in the eyes of our own mother nation. Our communities that have the modern Romani identity have to resist the European bureaucrats, the nationalists, governmental and non-governmental organisations that aim to re-colonise, and the various dangerous interest groups of Roma nationalists, with the idea of Roma nation-making.

The Roma/Gypsies also constitute a heterogeneous social group simultaneously within and

outside of mainstream society. Romani society is stratified similarly to majority society, i.e. status depends on one's education, employment, income, access to information, etc. The often quoted cultural, language and lifestyle differences are the least objective criteria for analysing Romani people and Romani identity today.

Social scientists, just like any ordinary person, cannot give a proper answer as to who is a Romani person. Some say a Rom is s/he who claims such an identity. Others say that a Rom is s/he whom the wider social environment considers to be such. There are social or ethnic approaches, the former emphasising cultural differences, the latter lifestyle characteristics. However, these two approaches overlap and neither is able to represent all Roma/Gypsies. Both approaches include or exclude a large number of individuals meaning that the assumptions upon which they are based are unreliable. *In fact, it is the awareness of our dual identity that allows us to understand the essence of Romani identity.*

Most people consider the Roma to be a single and distinct group, although Roma differ a lot in terms of language, behaviour and social status. Romani people themselves use a variety of names for themselves: *cigány, lovári, argyelán, lakatar* etc. Thus, according to the historical paradigm, Romani identity is complex. The inner, archaic Romani community identity, being versatile itself, is supplemented by the non-Roma's stereotypical and standardizing view. Romani people may accept or refuse aspects of their external identity, but they are compelled to live with them (for example, the term "Roma" is not popular among Gypsies, but it is mainly used by Romani intellectuals.)

There are very few people who have a Roma-only identity, mostly those who cannot or do not want to also identify themselves as Hungarian: people living in isolated colonies or slums, Romani musicians and politicians, and those individuals and communities who are seeking a new and positive identity after the change of regime in 1989.

We do not think that the Roma are so very different and possess unique and distinctive

characteristics that would justify them constituting their own, separate political entity – their separate community, institutional and financial structures. The differences between Romani individuals are just as great as they are between Romani and non-Romani people, and between non-Romani people.

At the same time, a common feature of the Roma is the fact that, in the eyes of the majority, Roma belong to the lower layers of society. Of course, this perception is coloured by a new, fake Roma cliché about the wealthy, showy, but at the same time unintelligent and probably criminal, Romani man. At the same time, any non-Romani individual living in the slums of Hungary may be regarded as a Rom. The political, economic and social powers of Romani people, together with their educational and employment opportunities, as well as their ability to force change, are extremely limited and, as always, are connected with and dependent upon their relationships with and the expectations of the social groups next to/above them. Many conflicts arise from the inferior role in which Romani people find themselves.

From the perspective of political and social representation, we consider the following factors to be important: The inferior ethnic group can and does generate an elite, which can resist its low social status. While the Roma, due to the reasons discussed above, can be united only in their inferior role, the elite itself is divided and is obliged to accommodate to the needs of various socially/politically powerful interests. As a result, there will always be servile individuals who are eager to appear as the representative of all Romani people. These “leaders” are not only characterised by ethno-careerism, but by their unquestionable loyalty to their master from whom they derive their position. Their loyalty is only shattered by the outcome of general elections every four years. No wonder, there have been extremely few Romani people in the top political positions until recent times. Now, complying with the latest political fashion, a few uneducated no-brain-men, making fun of responsible community activists, promote the dawn of social equality on the political arena.

Initiatives intended to **create a Romani nation** or, as it is sometimes described, “creating a conceptually and institutionally separate political entity”, only *resemble* programmes for social integration and equality of opportunity because, in articulating their target group, they ethnicise all social and political issues. Ultimately, such initiatives are anachronistic, violent and futile.

The idea of a separate Romani political entity was not developed by Romani people. In the context of a unifying Europe, which was brought into existence due to the failure of the nation-state concept, it appears a noble aspiration to put the motherless-fatherless Romani people in the spotlight and to make a nation of them. The problem is that it will do us no good, but can only do us harm. As long as it is not the Roma who initiate a separate Romani political representation (and they seem to have a problem even with electing and purging their own leaders), the subservient role defined for these so-called Romani organisations is clear.

Nobody should overemphasise the significance of exclusively ethnically-based Romani politics, because it would result in the further isolation of Romani people in an ethno-genetic political ghetto.

Right Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen!  
Right Honourable European History and History-makers!

There is no need for our political and national redemption! We can live and even write our history. With our fathers’ and mothers’ nations we made it to the 21<sup>st</sup> century innocently and we do not want anybody to impose on us a 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic idea of creating a nation. There is nothing to catch up with in history. We have been part of history from the beginning. The only emancipation we want is to have the right to our versatile, communal inner self-identity and, at the same time, to have the right to live with our external identity as members of our home nation, to be equal citizens of the Republic.

### **Gadjo and Roma Republic?**

We do not know the answers valid for everybody and every time, even for the most basic questions.

The republic is a historical institution, which should presuppose that we, eager to recognize ourselves as members of the republic, have a common concept of what we are, not only in the sense of public law but also of state theory. What is more, the republic should presuppose that we have similar experiences of the communities and the associations of the communities within the republic.

Yet, a man of wealth has a different experience of the republic than a man in need. A republic is different for somebody restricted by its boundaries than for another one enjoying the opportunities of it. It is different to be a member of the republic as an admitted one than as a discriminated one. It is very different to be a part of it if you belong there – even belonging there theoretically – than it is for someone whose presence and existence is not appreciated. Furthermore, it is different if the existence of an individual is justified by their mere birth than if someone has to prove he was born into it, too. Our existence should be respected from the moment of our conception, but the outer world admits us only when it can put its hand on us at our birth. Our mothers' wombs, love, or even the lack of love, are not enough to obtain the rights of the republic membership. The world wants to see, touch us and protect its interests. Just like we want to when crying loudly.

From that point on, the process commences: how does our community recognize us and put us into the right place? Will we become white or black sheep? Or maybe mottled? Everybody is mottled... sometimes, somewhere. As for the Romani identity, we clearly know that how the Gadjo, the non-Romani people, imagine the Romani identity is a lot more unambiguous, coherent and descriptive than how the Roma see themselves. Since, depending on language, customs and social status it may vary quite a bit, the Romani self-identity can hardly be regarded as coherent. We may even say that the non-differentiated image of the Roma among the Gadjo population of Hungary determines the status of the Roma in the republic more than the Romani self-identity, though it should be just the other way round, somehow similar to how it is in the case of the members and communities of the Gadjo majority.

Consequently, membership of the republic is an in-born privilege for the Gadjo, a state of law deriving from their identity; what is more, this membership right contributes to their identity. Whereas in the case of the Roma, both the community and individual identity are determined from outside by the coherent and premeditated judgement of the Gadjo majority society, and let us not deny: by the conditions of the majority.

All this has been like that for a long time, yet must not remain like this forever. The self-identifying capability of the Romani identity, and within that, the in-born right of the sense of the republican membership must be experienced by the Roma themselves as part of the Hungarian identity. The Roma ought to be supported so that they can experience possibilities to self-governance, when it is they who are in charge of their own fate, similarly to the rest of the society. Formal equality of chance is not sufficient, since it presumes that the conditions of the reachable equality of chance experiences are available for everyone. Yet, we have just stated that, even belonging to the republic is not necessarily an obvious, in-born status for the Roma, as the sense of belonging to community of the republic is pretty much determined by the standardizing Roma image of the Gadjo and does not derive from the self-identifying experience and power of the Roma.

The Roma can either identify themselves with these outside images or not. Deriving not from a self-identification process, their appearance as part of the Roma identity is spiritually, socially, socio-psychologically anachronistic. How could an experience that does not come from self-identification and self-identity, be part of a Roma identity? As a result, it is ambiguous even for the Roma, the attitude towards the place of these outside; mostly prejudicial identity fragments in their self-image is either eager to accept or, on the other extreme, refuse.

The republic is territorial, national and can be pinpointed politically, emotionally and legally: Republic of Hungary. Members: individuals with Hungarian national identity, or individuals identifying themselves as members of other nations, yet, possessing some sort of identification

belonging to the Hungarian community. Today Roma policy can be determined along the following concepts: identity, republic and democracy, human and civil rights.

We must create our community and individual identity, distinguishing it from the citizen one, and, if you like, making the majority accept our Hungarian identity. Our human and civil rights, on the other hand, being in-born rights, we must secure impatiently.

What sort of republic is this, if we can find our self-identity only being so exploitable, dividable and judgeable? What sort of citizenship is this, where discrimination and segregation based on such an anachronistic Roma identity are daily matters? There can be only one answer: such a republic lacks the completeness we shall be working for. We must create our community autonomies, the autonomy of our common republic, which is based on equal community identities enjoying the same rights within the framework of basic democratic and human rights. Conducting our acts, we must make a distinction between Romani and non-Romani matters. Anything to do with our self-identification capabilities is a Romani matter. Apart from that, everything is a non-Romani matter: citizen-, human right-, mankind-matter, where no ethnic-based discrimination must be tolerated, as it would do

nothing but discriminate and segregate. In that sense, the republican identity and the citizen's identity confront the national identity. In case positive discrimination is necessary, as we have not touched upon this theme yet, it must be according to the social status, because somebody is poor, or according to pedagogical considerations, because somebody has different learning needs, etc. Our behaviour and intentions are also driven by interests. It would be harmful and insufficient if our duties were determined by the generosity of the Gadjó, in addition to the encounter of the ambitious, thriving and politically already active Roma intellectuals.

We may define the most characterizing feature of the republic's autonomy as follows: the best social investment is one that is made into the life-conditions and integration of the least focused social groups. The social cohesion of the republic depends on how much, compared to the most focused groups of the society, social groups with the weakest interest reinforcement abilities can act and behave as an equal identity member in the republic.

We do not know the answers even for basic questions. What we know, is that we have to do our utmost in accordance with our human-, national-, or even identity-honesty, to foster the autonomy of our self-identity and citizenship.