Why Roma do not Declare their Identity – Careful Decision or Unpremeditated Refusal?

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Abstract: One of the main problems one is faced while dealing with Roma issues is to find reliable statistics. The Roma refuse to declare themselves as Roma, if they participate at all in the research. Whether it is a problem related to their Roma identity, if their refusal is a well thought action we will try to find out in this paper. We will discuss the issue of Roma identity, we will present data showing the discrepancy between the official number of Roma living in different countries and approximations made by competent organizations, as well as reasons one can consider for Roma's refusal do declare their identity. Theoretical aspects related to decision making will also be reviewed in the final attempt to establish whether the attitude Roma have towards declaring their identity is a result of a difficult decision making process, or just an instant rejection reaction.

MOTTO: "*In dealing with issues of discrimination and trying to document violations, one frequently encounters vexing issues relating to the collection and use of ethnic data. Ethnic data evoke memories of registration of "undesirables," and also raise many ethical and legal issues. But without statistical data, it is very hard to have a clear picture of patterns of discrimination, to design programs of assistance for the Roma, or to evaluate those programs" ("Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area", OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, The Hague, 2000, p.3)1*

Introduction

It is a common occurrence in research about Roma issues to find notes commenting on the statistics. To the official number there are always added one or more approximations, official or unofficial. Why is it such a

KEY WORDS:

Roma, ethnic or national identity, social research, social psychology

problem to gather accurate data about the Roma population? Why don't they declare their identity? Is it a problem related to the identity itself, or is it an intended refusal? Is this fact a result of a complex decision making process, or does it just occur naturally, without any reason behind?

These are a few of the questions we will try to answer in this paper. We will discuss the issue of Roma identity, we will present data showing the discrepancy between the official number of Roma living in different countries and approximations made by competent organizations, and we will consider possible reasons for the

COUNTRY	OFFICIAL NUMBER[1]	OFFICIAL ESTIMATIONS	OTHER ESTIMATIONS
Albania	-	-	100,000 (2.9%)
Bosnia-Herzegovina	-	-	100,000[2]
Bulgaria	312,000 (3.7%)[3]	-	-
Cyprus	500-1,000 (0.7-1.3%)	-	-
Croatia	-	-	18,000 (0.37%)
Czech Republic	33,500 (0.3%)	-	300,000 (2.9%)
Greece	-	160,000-200,000 (1.5-1.9%)	350,000[4]
Hungary	143,000 (1.3%)[5]	-	250,000-800,000 (2.4-7.8%)
Macedonia	-	-	200,000 (10.3%)
Moldova	20,000-25,000	-	-
Poland	15,000 (0.03%)	-	-
Romania	409,723[6]	1.8 million (7.9%)	2.5 million[7]
Slovakia	80,600 (1.5%)	-	350,000 (6.6%)
Slovenia	2,293 (0.11%)	-	7,000 (0.35%)
Turkey	50,000 (0.08%)	-	-
Yugoslavia	137,265 (1.3%)	-	500,000 (4.8%)

[1] As available in 2000. The results of 2000 census, to take place in the majority of the cases, are not available.
[2] Before 1992
[3] 1992 census
[4] MRG-G estimation
[5] 1990 census
[6] 1992 census
[7] Minority Rights Group, 1997

Roma's refusal do declare their identity. Theoretical aspects related to decision making will also be reviewed in the final attempt to establish whether the attitude Roma have towards declaring their identity is a result of a complex decision making process, or just an instant rejection reaction.

How does the data about Roma look?

Roma is a population group2 inhabiting many countries around the world, but the majority is settled in Europe, and more exactly, Central and South Eastern Europe. In a report on the Roma living in Romania (it is believed that it is the largest group living in one country), data was also available concerning the number of Roma living in 15 other countries in the region. It looks as follows:

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(Source: *** - "The minorities in South-Eastern Europe. The Roma from Romania", the Center for Documentation and Information about the Minorities in Europe (CEDIME-SE), 2000)

As one can see, in almost all cases there is at least one alternative estimate of the number of Roma living in any particular country. Additionally, according to research done in Slovakia in 2000, "in the 1991 census, when Roma had a chance to claim their ethnicity for the first time, only 75,802 citizens declared Roma nationality. The number of Roma is under-reported mostly because of the self-reporting method of the census. According to a 1989 survey by city and local council of the state administration, 253,943 Roma (4.8%) lived in Slovakia. These statistics, however, registered only socially handicapped citizens. Therefore all experts assume that the number of Roma living in Slovakia is higher; at present the official estimates range between 480,000 to 520,000 (more than 9% of the country's inhabitants)" (Vasecka, 2000, par. 16)

In other words, even if sometimes quoting the same sources for data on Roma, for the same country and the same year, the numbers can differ. At a micro level, it is common practice to have the evidence on the Roma population differ according to the purpose for which the data was gathered (the number of self-declared Roma was significantly higher when the evidence was used for the payment of state support).

This is the situation when individuals refuse to declare their identity. However, it is also the case that the individuals do not exist according to state. In other words, there is a large number of Roma who do not have any identity proving documents. In research done by the Research Center for the Quality of Life (RCQL) in 2000, in which I took part as a field researcher, in an area allegedly inhabited by around 30 Roma, we found more than 1000, most of which did not have even a birth certificate.

How is it possible that such a situation is common in numerous places in Europe? The problem is widely known among scholars dealing with Roma issues, politicians, and Roma advocates. As considered during a

meeting on the issue, organized by the PER (Project on Ethnic Relations) in Strasbourg, France, May 2000, "during the past few years, the issue of the collection and use of data on Romani3 communities has been a 'hot topic' in debates throughout Europe" (ibid, pp. 3). What is to be done? We can start with assessing how much of the problem is due to the fact that Roma refuse to declare their identity, and how much of this refusal is rationally based.

Why is data about the Roma so difficult to gather?

Why are there so many versions of Roma population estimates? The refusal to accept the collection of data about the Roma has lead to several indignant positions. As one person states, "one cannot claim that the Roma are equal to other groups and at the same time deny the right to collect data on them for social policy or scientific purposes" (PER, 2000, pp. 11). The Roma are resistant to being part of statistics for many reasons. Roma scholars, Roma leaders, and Roma advocates give an entire list of possible explanations. These can be classified into a few main categories relating to their underlying arguments. However, one cannot tell how much they actually apply in the real situation and how much they are merely a way for those interested in the issue to justify the difficulty of putting together reliable data on Roma. We have grouped the reasons related to past experience, present experience, attitude towards the state, identity, and others, as following:

*A. **past experience*** related explanation: "The Roma have been especially sensitive about data collection of any kind since it was used against them by the Nazis during World War II" (PER, 2000, pp. 1)

*B. **present experience*** related explanations: here are several reasons to be mentioned:

· *fear of discrimination*: "the Roma do not trust the state's census because of their experiences with discrimination, segregation, and violence. Many Roma hide their identity out of fear of discrimination" (PER, 2000, p. 22)

· *fear of data being misused*: "more recently, figures purporting to show Roma misbehavior have been used by some governments as a basis for declaring the Roma unfit for citizenship" (PER, 2000, p. 1)

· *fear of data being used for limiting their freedom of movement right:* "the request for more data on Roma by Central and Eastern European governments is connected with these governments' efforts to control the migration of Roma, which they perceive as dangerous" (PER, 2000, pp. 10)

· *fear of data being used against them:* "for the Roma, even official statistics are perceived as an instrument of power that can be used against them" (PER, 2000, pp.16). Here one can discuss about crime or unemployment data related to Roma: "The data on unemployment, for example, are used by the police as an indicator of the potential criminality level in the Romani settlements." (PER, 2000, pp. 11)

C. attitude towards the state related explanation: "they do not trust the state and its agencies" (PER, 2000, pp.6)

D. identity related explanation: "many Roma do not identify themselves as being Roma" (PER, 2000, pp.22).

E. other explanations:

· "The Roma are reluctant to be counted, and they criticize census data for not being reliable" (PER, 2000, pp. 22)

· "they are unclear about the legal standards for the protection of personal data" (PER, 2000, pp. 6)

· "it is a new experience [to declare one's identity in censuses]" (PER, 2000, pp. 21)

· they do not see the benefits of being counted (PER, 2000, pp.22)

As one can see, there is an entire range of possible explanations given by informed individuals for the refusal of Roma to declare their Roma identity. All of them, with the exception of the one relating to identity itself, can be considered as "external." Roma refuse to declare themselves as such out of distrust in the agencies related to the census, fear of different types of discrimination and misusage of the data, or just because they do not have sufficient information about the process. All of these are results of bad experiences, bad communication with the authorities, and most of all, lack of information. The Roma have seen themselves denied jobs because of their nationality/ethnicity/race. This is the example according to which they have to judge. They do not know what benefits they can get from being counted. During the research mentioned earlier (conducted in 2000 by RCQL), we were telling the people that the data was being gathered in order to asses the amount of help they need. This explains why so many of them were willing this time to declare their identity, and why, accordingly, we found 30 times the individuals than expected.

However, there is still the issue of identity. What does the fact that they do not consider themselves as Roma mean? Is their identity that weak, or is it just a way to avoid the previously mentioned problems? Or is there some other reason behind it?

Roma identity

In a study from 1994 conducted in Slovakia, the "main conclusion was that the Romani identity issue had become an internal matter for the Roma and externally the Roma had attempted to adjust to the majority population culture" (Vaceska, 2000, par # 162). What does this indicate? That the Roma know that they are Roma, but declare themselves to be someone else? As Vaceska (2000) discusses, "many Roma in Slovakia do consider themselves to be Slovaks or Hungarians and identification with the majority is more significant than their "Rominpen" – Roma identity" (ibid, par # 162). The situation is not unique. In Romania, "the exact numbering of the population is an extremely difficult

process, given the fact that lots of the Roma declare themselves as Romanians or Hungarians; this phenomena takes places, according to Florin Moisa (2000) because of the negative connotations associated to the Roma identity" (CEDIME-SE Report on Roma, 2000, par # 43).

Why do Roma declare themselves to be Hungarians, Romanians, or Slovaks? How can one tell at all that they are not what they declare themselves to be? According to the regulations of data gathering, each individual has the right to declare his or her own identity as he or she feels. Still, in the case of the Roma an alternative method is always used, called "hetero-identification," meaning that the individual is identified as Roma by people in the proximity, on the basis of certain criteria. Most commonly, these criteria relate to "traditional way of life" or "physical traits" (PER, 2000, pp. 14-15). Even though there is a number of objections against this procedure, it is used almost exclusively, since scholars consider "self-identification [to be] the most unreliable among classification systems" (PER, 2000, pp.15). As a Bulgarian researcher says, "the trouble is that in most cases the surrounding population refuses to accept this declared non-Gypsy identity, and stubbornly continue [sic] to relate to them as gypsies" (PER, 2000, pp.15).

> The question is: who is right? The individual who says that he or she is not Roma, or the others who agree on the fact that he or she is? The Roma scholar, Nicolae Gheorghe argues that, "the Roma populations go through an 'ethno genesis' process, building a new 'Roma' identity ... trying a 'symbolic' change, from the 'slave' status, to one equal to that of a citizen in a constitutional state, with the right of self identifying as belonging to the Roma minority" (CEDIME-SE Report on Roma, 2000, par # 66).

This is an issue than can be discussed. In several cases, the "Roma" denomination was refused by Roma themselves (this is mostly the case with those declaring their identity and living the traditional way of life). Another explanation, given by Vaceska (2000), is that the Roma sometimes "forget" their roots and try their best to become assimilated into the majority of the population. Why? One can say that besides all the reasons already mentioned there is one more: they are ashamed. Being Roma, or Tsigan (as they are most often called) is not often something to be proud of. Many of those who want to ascend the social and economic ladder might want to leave the name and its negative associations behind. Being rid of the Roma identity might also mean being rid of the bad resonance it has.

In an attempt to create a typology of Roma, 5 categories of Roma identity were found, relating to self-identification, hetero-identification, the way of life, and context (official and unofficial):

F. Roma that have all the traditional characteristics and who identify themselves as Roma in all situations and researches, both official or unofficial

G. Roma that have all the traditional characteristics that others identify as Roma. They declare themselves as Roma only in unofficial contexts

H. "modernized Roma": they have lost all the traditional characteristics, changed the life style, but declare themselves as Roma in all situations

I. "modernized" Roma, who only sometimes declare themselves as Roma and who are only sometimes identified by others as Roma

J. "former Roma" that lost all the traditional traits and who never declare themselves as Roma (CEDIME-SE Report on Roma, 2000, par # 65)

In order to make the situation clearer according to the main elements we have identified (self-identification, hetero-identification, the way of life, and context - official and unofficial), we will create the following table:

Out of these 5 categories, 2 of them describe Roma that declare themselves as such in all circumstances (type A and C). There are 3 remaining categories, in which the self-declaration as Roma happens sometimes (B and D), or never (E). In the last case it is questionable that the person is Roma at all and whether others would identify him or her as such. Cases B and D are the biggest problems. In these cases the self declaration as Roma depends on the situation. This is the situation of the majority of Roma.

An interesting and perhaps important question is, what makes these people decide on when to declare themselves as Roma and when not to? In both cases we have to deal with consciously adopted attitudes. In both cases the Roma know that they are Roma (in case B,

Element[1] Type	Self-identification	Contexts for self-declaration as Roma	Hetero-identification	Way of life
A	Yes	all	-	yes
B	Yes	unofficial	Yes	yes
C	Yes	all	-	no
D	Yes	sometimes	Yes	no
E	No	-	-	no

[1] all the elements except for "context" refer to the Roma identity and way of life

they identify themselves as such in unofficial situations, and in D they sometimes declare themselves as such). What lies behind their decisions?

The decision making process.

According to R.W.Scholl (2002), there are four ways of thinking about the choice process: cognitive, affective, evaluative, and mixed. While in the first case the decision is taken after evaluating a set of characteristics of the subject it is decided about, the basis for decision making in the affective approach is the feelings that the subject produces in the one who is making the decision. The evaluation model can be described in the following terms: "attitudes are often stored in the form of evaluations without the cognitive and affective information that acted to form the evaluation. Using this approach, candidates would be rank ordered on the basis of evaluation, that is, the overall evaluation of goodness or favorability" (Scholl, 2002, par # 4). Finally, under the denomination of "mixed models," the author mentions that the previously described cases are ideal types, and that in reality the approaches range on an axis having cognition and conflict as ends, and affection as a passing element (ibid, par # 5).

Considering this classification, one can easily agree that in our case we have to deal with a rather cognitive approach. Anna Song (2004), in her material "Psychological factors in Decision-Making," also considers the "cognitive" choice, this time as the opposite of the rational choice (as understood in rational choice theory, according to which individuals are rational beings that always make rational decisions in a way that would minimize the effort while maximizing their benefit).

According to Song, there are several factors that influence the decision making process. The first two are determined by the **social environment**. They are "risk shift" and "group think," and refer to the influence the group can have on a subject while making decisions. The first case refers to the tendency of the group to take a risk when an individual would not. The second refers to the submission of the individual to the group's decision, even when not in agreement (Song, 2004, par # 16). Is this the case in this situation? Perhaps it sometimes is. The process of collecting data is a rather individual one. Still, sometimes the Roma declare their identity even if they do not want to, if there are people around pressing them to do so (either other Roma who have already declared themselves as such, or neighbors or friends who are familiar enough with the respondent to allow themselves to influence the decision).

Thirdly, one can mention certain **biases**: "at the first interception of information, humans apply what they want and expect to see" (Song, 2004, par # 7). Furthermore, Plous distinguishes between motivated and unmotivated biases (ibid.). One can discuss this factor, as far as it is understood, in terms of "social desirability." In other words, if the respondent considers it to be beneficial for him/her to declare the Roma identity, he/she will do it. This is the case of motivated bias.

Fourthly, there is effort justification: "the more effort and resource an actor has spent on a situation, the more likely that actor will continue to its spending, despite obvious losses or harm" (Song, 2004, par # 9). In the same category as the previous 2 (**judgment altering**) factors, there are also heuristics: "short cuts in the way of processing information" (ibid, par # 11). There are two types of these: representative and availability. These describe decisions based on similarity with a previous situation, or on the ease with which we can find one while making the decision (ibid, par # 13-14). This is the case of refusal to declare one's identity as Roma. If the individual has in the past had negative experiences because of his/her identity, it is probable that this time the individual will declare another identity rather than Roma, or may refuse to declare any identity at all.

Sixthly, there is the search/persuasion process: "information about the challenger/defenders must be gathered in order to persuade and make the opponent perceive that the desired choice is the best one for the opponent" (ibid, par # 18). Lastly, there is the strategy factor: "there is a manipulation of predictability of one's own actions so that an adversary's chooses in one's favor" (ibid.). These last two can be considered as the **manipulation4** factors, and deal with sophisticated procedures meant to convince the "opponent" to make the right decision for. This last situation does not apply in our case.

As a partial conclusion, if we consider the possible strategies of the decision making process, we find that several of them are employed by the Roma while deciding whether or not to declare their identity as Roma. Whether or not they are aware of the employment of these strategies is questionable and rather improbable.

Conclusion, or how much is not declaring one's Roma identity a cognitive choice?

It is the time to decide whether not declaring their identity as Roma is for Roma individuals the result of an intentional, carefully considered process of decision making or just a fact that has no sophisticated rational support. (By the we mean that the person does not spend time creating a strategy, and makes the decision on the spot, according to feelings and/or what he or she immediately perceives as most profitable.) We will consider each of the factors described above, and asses how much they apply to our population, formed of the Roma who do not declare themselves as such, even if they consider themselves as Roma. As grounds for the evaluation we will have the 10 reasons considered in the beginning of this paper, those related to present and past experiences, attitude towards the state, and to those described as "others." In a comprehensive table, the situation looks as follows:

Reasons for not declaring one's Roma identity	Song's respective factor
Past experience	Heuristics
Fear of discrimination	Heuristics
Fear of data being used against them	Heuristics
Fear of data being misused	Heuristics
Fear of data being used to limit their free movement rights	Heuristics
Distrust towards the state	Heuristics
Reluctance to data gathering	Non-applicable
Unawareness about legislation concerning data manipulation	Non-applicable
Census as a new experience	Non-applicable
Not aware of the benefits	Non-applicable

As one can see in this table, there is only one factor from Song's typology that applies in our case. In most of the cases, the decision not to declare one's Roma identity is based on the fact that one wants to avoid similar (unpleasant) experiences to those they have previously had when declaring the fact that they are Roma. The last four reasons are of a specific nature, and tend toward the rational choice theory: individuals are put in the situation in which they do not know what result would occur upon declaring their identity as Roma, therefore they decide not to take risks. They refuse to declare the fact that they are Roma. In other words, there is always a fairly good reason behind Roma's refusal to declare their identity.

Still, there are possible situations which are covered by Song's typology, but do not appear here. One such is the case when an individual refuses to declare his or her Roma identity because he/she has the feeling that it might not be in his/her benefit. This is a trap into which all people can fall, not only Roma. Social desirability also plays quite an important role in the process of gathering data about the Roma.

What can be done in such situations? The statistics concerning the Roma seem to be of vital relevance for those trying to help the communities in their integration process, as well as economically. As the PER meeting' conclusions state, it is necessary not only to re-evaluate the data collection process, but also to inform and educate the Roma, as well as to find ways to make them trust the data gathering process and its executors. While some of the issues cannot be controlled, as is the case with social desirability, others can be directed towards everyone's benefit.

Taking into account the main reasons given by the Roma for hiding their identity, one can agree that the biggest step that can be taken is a sustained effort to di-

minish the discrimination that Roma face. Still, this is very difficult to achieve. Those who are dealing with the statistics can make the first changes. As is mentioned in the conclusions of the PER meeting, the main recommendations are the "elimination of unlawful data collection," and "the protection of data" (ibid, pp. 28).

Other important steps that can be taken are training and educating individuals concerning the importance of having data on them. If people are aware of the benefits of "being counted," they might be more open to participate.

Finally, and not least, the involvement of Roma organizations and representatives is a significant factor. This does not refer only to educating Roma about what is going on and convincing them to participate, but even more importantly, having Roma involved in going into the field to collect data. Seeing a Roma proud to declare him/herself as Roma might considerably help other Roma to be open and declare their identity as well.

Notes:

1 In Roma and Statistics, 2000, p. 3

2 The issue of Roma as a group can be the subject of discussion. Roma are classified as ethnic minority, national minority, social minority, racial minority, ethnic group, and other classifications according to the source. However, this is not the point of this paper. We will consider them here simply as a group, which has a (problematic) identity, and with members who refuse in most situations to declare themselves as Roma

3 Romani is an alternative designation for Roma

4 my term

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