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Roma movement in the challenge of building modern and post-modern Roma identity

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Identity is always an issue of construction. It is constructed on the basis of certain / different phenomena with regard to certain / different trans-human realities. And it is constructed by diverse players not only within the groups to which the identity refers to but also within surrounding groups.

Pre-modern identity is constructed on the basis of cultural practices and religions that are common for certain groups of people and are practiced with regard to their relations with Nature and Super-natural. The modern times brought History and Territory into the game; that is why modern identity is usually constructed by certain territorial and historical (including social) myths with regard to the State. It does not abolish the previous cultural practices and religion (or at least this is not the frequent scenario) but usually uniforms, simplifies and transforms

them to serve the territorial and historical myths. It is too early to say what the post-modern identity will add. Most probably it will be constructed with regard to the relations to certain segments of trans-national power.

At present, Roma community passes crucial period of its development: transition from pre-modern to modern society. This transition is always painful and difficult but at the same time it provides unique opportunities for either moving the groups at a higher stage and position, or dissolving / assimilating it. In Europe this transition was called Enlightenment, Renaissance, Modernization; for Roma it is called Integration. An important factor that makes it even more painful and difficult is the fact that it happens in countries and societies that are on the borders of post-modernism.

The pre-modern, traditional Roma identity does exist although it is mainly at the level of Roma groups and clans, i.e. it is more “identities” than “identity”. Certain Roma cultural practices are common for certain Roma / Gipsy groups, some of them – to many Roma / Gipsy groups. For example, the celebration of St. Basil’s Day as the beginning of New Year is common for almost all Balkan groups. The legend for the Egypt origin is another example.

The biggest challenge before Roma today is the construction of modern identity. Certain questions should be answered. For example, whether a Roma identity or different (Roma, Millet, Rudari) identities will be built? Will this identity abandon the previous cultural practices or will unify, simplify and transform them? On the basis of which territorial or historical myths the modern Roma identity will be constructed?

I argue that Roma integration could not happen without answering all these questions, i.e. without building modern Roma identity. I also argue certain answers to the questions raised:

1. *It will be a deep mistake if the modern Roma identity abandons the pre-modern Roma cultural practices and traditions:* this will make the new “Roma” just a “social group” and finally will lead to acculturation and assimilation as well as to marginalization. Many national and European agencies as well as some Roma activists implicitly apply this approach hiding it under the concept of “social inclusion” and other similar concepts.

The binary opposing scenario – making a cultural practice of one Roma group universal for the modern identity – will be also a big mistake: it will provoke an exclusive identity that will lead to forming several identities. Many Roma activists use this approach: for example, arguing that Romani language should be the cornerstone of the modern Roma identity although large groups have not spoken it for generations (Millet, Rudari/Beashi, Egyptians, etc.)

Contrary to the approaches discussed above I argue that the modern Roma identity should be built on transforming certain common traditional values that are common for most (or even all) Roma groups: for example, respect for family and elders, respect for nature and supernatural, etc. The modern societies (not only Roma but also *gaje*) need these values and actively search for them. Roma should not abandon but transform them. In this way the example of building contemporary Native American identity (in the USA, Canada and Latin America) could be used as an inspiring model.

2. The modern Roma identity should construct certain historical (in stead of territorial or social) myths. The Indian origin, Roma Holocaust *Porrajmos*, 8th of April, *Djelem*, *djelem*, and others are good starting points. From one side they could

unite the diverse Roma groups. From the other side they could build respect towards Roma among the surrounding population.

3. Building identity usually depends not only on the groups concerned but also on the surrounding populations and/or mainstream societies. In this way Roma integration is a mutual responsibility of the states Roma live in, the EU and the Roma community itself, including Roma activists. The role of Roma community and Roma activists should be crucial in the process. I could partly agree with M. Kovats that at present “identity is fundamentally a construct not of “Roma”, but of the mainstream...” but I would disagree (also partly) that “Roma activism itself is part of the process of exclusion...”. Namely the Roma activism (no matter whether it has been fostered from inside or outside) during the last 20 years has contributed to the constructing of a new Roma elite. And exactly this accumulation of a critical number of Roma intellectuals could foster the shaping of the modern Roma identity. Roma activists should take active role – together with pro-Roma ones – in building the modern Roma identity and later in transforming it into post-modern (by the way, this could happen not “later” but simultaneously). Nevertheless the chaotic situation of the contemporary Roma movement, the latter has important role to play! Its ability or inability to foster the construction of an inclusive modern identity built on modern Roma values and modern myths will be crucial for the future of Roma integration.