Romani Political Mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe

I. INTRODUCTION

In its most general sense, 'political mobilization' is about organizing collective efforts in order to attempt to bring about political change in a democracy. Political mobilization covers a broader area of activity than just 'political participation'. The latter term usually refers to such activities as participating in elections, running a political party, attracting voters and representing constituencies in legislatures and governing bodies. Political mobilization in the broad sense, however, also includes non-electoral commitments and non-institutionalized forms of political expression, such as organized protest or advocacy.

In recent years, Central and Eastern Europe have seen a rather spectacular increase in mobilization efforts by individuals and organizations aiming to represent the region's most widespread and arguably most troubled minority – the Roma (Gypsies). One of these efforts has been the promotion of the name 'Roma' itself. Many activists, politicians and academics now speak about 'the Roma' as if they were a uniform group. In reality, however, the name 'Roma' is a rather broad categorization, used to refer to a wide variety of communities that have adopted a plethora of group and sub-group identities over time. Although these communities have been very diverse, they share the fact that throughout history similar negative attributes have been assigned to their identities. The introduction of the term 'Roma' reflects an attempt to break away from social stigma and to produce a more positive image of themselves as a single ethnic group living in different countries. As has recently been noted by Acton and Gheorghe:

Not all those politically defined as Roma call themselves by this name; and

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1 See Will Guy, "Introduction", in Will Guy (ed.), Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe (Hertfordshire, 2001), iii-xvii. Seen as an umbrella term for all those communities that are categorized as Roma by both activists and politicians, the total number of Roma in Europe is estimated to be somewhere between 6 and 8 million. Official figures per country, mostly based on self-identification in censuses, are much lower and amount to a total of approximately 2.5 million. An overview of both estimates and official census figures can be found at http://errc.org/publications/factsheets/numbers.shtml.

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some of those who do not, such as the German Sinte [sic], outraged by what they perceive as claims of superior authenticity by Vlach Roma, even repudiate the appellation Roma. The unity of ethnic struggles is always illusory; but to the participants the task of creating, strengthening and maintaining that unity often seems the prime task.2

During the last decade, Romani political mobilization assumed various forms. Some Romani activists joined a political party or one of the numerous ethnic Romani associations that had come into being in order to support Romani community life. Others united with human rights organizations and development groups. At first sight, these efforts within and surrounding Romani communities may seem an unexpected development. Popular generalizations have often portrayed 'the Roma' as a culture that wilfully excludes itself from mainstream society and politics. Moreover, many Romani communities have known a history of isolation and marginalization, a phenomenon in many cases caused or perpetuated by their economic position and by practices of deliberate stigmatization.3 The recent growth of Romani political mobilization is perhaps less surprising when seen in the context of the general rise of ethnic group competition in the region and the predicament of many Romani communities.

Romani unification has seemed a prime task to many activists because of the rising poverty, the open ethnic discrimination and the disproportionately high unemployment that has commonly plagued Romani groups in the region of Central and Eastern Europe since the early 1990s. Moreover, current Romani mobilization has been able to build on previous efforts. As early as the 1960s and 1970s, there were modest but significant attempts of Roma to defy stigmatization and marginalization. The first World Romani Congress in London in 1971 was one of the primary steps towards the formation of an international social movement around a common Romani identity. From that moment onwards, activists have tried to defend the interests of Roma wherever they lived and have demanded states to recognize the Roma as a national minority.4 It took until the last decade of the twentieth century,


3 A discussion of the possible influence of stigmatization by official bodies in the creation of Romani identity can be found in Leo Lucassen, Wim Willems and Annemarie Cottaar (eds.), Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-Historical Approach (Houndmills/Basingstoke/Hampshire/London/New York, 1998).