Identifying “Roma” or Constructing “the Other”?
Slovak Romani Men and Women in Processes of Identification

I. Introduction

“[…] Roma is defined as a citizen, co-citizen who is considered as Roma by the majority population […]”

With this straightforward explanation, Romani men and women are defined in the governmental paper “Medium-term Concept of the Development of the Roma National Minority in the Slovak Republic. SOLIDARITY—INTEGRITY—INCLUSION 2008-2013”. The description “co-citizen” implies already that there is a definition of the ‘normal’ and ‘universal’ citizen as represented by the Slovak versus the ‘different’ co-citizen represented by a Rom or Romni. Furthermore, according to this explanation, the non-Roma, who represent the majority popula-

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2 The term “Roma” derives from Romani language in which it means Romani (married) men (Plural); the female plural equivalent is “Romnija” (Romani married women). Singular: “Romni” for Romani (married) woman and “Rom” for Romani (married) man. It is difficult in English to find a gender neutral term without interrupting the readability; therefore, I decided to use only the term “Roma” for subsuming both Romani men and women.

In the last two decades, the need for data about the Romani communities in Slovakia (and beyond) was expressed partly by the government but especially by NGOs. According to them, data is needed to fight discrimination and racism. Along with the support for data collection on Roma is a debate about the issue in general because there is, on the one hand, a problematic legal status and, on the other hand, a methodological question regarding which method allows for the attainment of the ‘best’ data to carry out political action on Romani-related issues. Several European organisations dealing with social inclusion or human rights published reports and papers on the issue of data collection on Roma that confirm international awareness about this sensitive topic. However, questions concerning the definition of those people who are named ‘Roma’ are only marginally addressed in these discussions. Following this deficiency in the debate, I will focus on the ‘construction’ of Romani identity in Slovakia and on the processes that produce a differentiation between Roma and non-Roma in this contribution. In these processes, diverse markers are involved to ascribe Romani identity to someone. In doing so, I will first examine the term Romipen, Romani identity, and general considerations on ethnicity and ethnicizations. Subsequently, diverse markers that create Romipen, such as language, place, ‘physical appearance’ and ‘common knowledge’ will be discussed, after which I will focus on the definition or construction of the category Romipen in selected inter/national, non/governmental reports. By doing so, attention will be paid to the approach during communism. While analysing the applied methods questions of power and agency must also be raised, and the consequences of being ‘identified’ as a Romani man or woman must be taken into consideration.


5 Ibid.


7 There is no unified Romani language but instead different varieties; I use the term Romipen coming from East Slovak Romani because I am familiar with it. In other contexts, versions from other varieties are used, such as Romanipen, Romanipe.