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## A Separate Diagnosis? Improving Civic Health for Hungarian Roma

Hungarian civic health currently suffers from the general exclusion of Roma in processes of reciprocity, trust, networking and voluntary association according to a recent study conducted by Robert E. Koulish.<sup>1</sup> This study focuses on participation of Hungarian Roma in civil society via Minority Self-Governments (MSGs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It concludes that while Roma are aware of their individual and group interests, and desire greater involvement in civic issues (at least in cities), they have little impact through the channels available to them (MSGs and NGOs).

In this article I explore the validity of suggesting that participation in modern civil society for a minority group like the Roma depends upon special rights and channels rather than inclusion in the wider “social imaginary”<sup>2</sup>, and thus, the notion that a separate civil society exists for Roma within Hungary. Furthermore, taking into consideration the results of Koulish’s survey, I question the possibility of social change<sup>3</sup> in general, and hence, the ability to adapt a western model of civil society to the present Hungarian “imaginary”.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Koulish: What Roma Want Survey: Roma Civic Attitudes in Hungary. In *Partners Hungary Foundation* (ed.), *Partners Studies*, vol. 4. Budapest: Cicero Press, 2001. Also available on the web at: [http://www.romacentrum.hu/aktualis/tudkut/attitud\\_a.htm](http://www.romacentrum.hu/aktualis/tudkut/attitud_a.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor: Modern Social Imaginaries. *Public Culture*, Winter 2002 14 (1) 91–123.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Tajfel defines social change as “change in the nature of the relations between large-scale social groups, such as socio-economic, national, religious, racial or ethnic categories...” In Henri Tajfel: *Human Groups and Social Categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. 244.

### *Social Imaginary and Social Change*

Charles Taylor uses the term “social imaginary” to refer to “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”.<sup>4</sup> According to Taylor, the modern “social imaginary” developed along with the evolution of human relations/knowledge concerning ideas of natural rights of individuals and moral obligation in which mutual contributions lead to mutual benefit (security of rights and means to live). He cites the Protestant Reformation as a major milestone influencing modern social imaginaries through an emphasis on economic reciprocity and the “notion that economic activity is the path to peace and orderly existence”.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this development of shared meanings has led to a variety of common practices and actions (economic and otherwise) which in turn feed into the public sphere, which also helps to keep political power in check. Fundamentally, however, these shared meanings and common actions for mutual benefit remain based upon an underlying acceptance of a moral order developed in the evolution of modern, western imaginings via human rights.

The model which modern, western “social imaginings” projects, revolves around three interlocking social forms: a self-governing people, the development of a public sphere, and market economy. In Taylor’s scheme the public sphere, the “common space in which the members of society meet through a variety of media... wherein they discuss matters of common interest and thus are able to form a common mind about these”, seems to most closely reflect present uses of the term civil society.<sup>6</sup> The public sphere, as civil society, ideally acts as a self-corrective mechanism, or restraint in the relationship between citizens, the state, and the market by creating a common consensus and means of expressing the needs of the people, and holding both the government and market in some ways accountable to fulfilling these aims. Thus, public sphere as civil society remains separate from, but interconnected with both the state and market.

Yet, as Éva Kuti noted, civil society also bears the tasks to “...motivate and help individuals to act as citizens in all aspects of society rather than bowing to or depending on state power and beneficence, [and] promote plural-

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 100.

ism and diversity in society, such as protecting and strengthening cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic (and other) identities”.<sup>7</sup> In this case we find a divergence between Taylor’s conception of the public sphere as “coming to a common mind, where possible, through the exchange of ideas” and organization based on a philosophy of mutual efforts/benefits coupled with the protection of certain rights, albeit, the latter certainly reflects the underlying moral order of the former.

This aspect of Taylor’s public sphere shares some overlap with Gregory Bateson’s<sup>8</sup> concept of mind: “...a mental system... with a capacity to process and respond to information in self-corrective ways, a characteristic of [all] living systems ... a mind is composed of multiple material parts, the arrangements of which allow for process and pattern... [thus] the unit of survival is always organism *and* environment”.<sup>9</sup> One can thus easily apply the concept of “mind”, “aggregate of ideas”<sup>10</sup>, or “social imaginary” to the ecology of individual, group, state, regional and international relations. For example, the international environment provided Bateson with a prime illustration of the vulnerability of such systems to schismogenesis as in the case of the Cold War armaments race. Yet, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the schismogenic mechanisms of Cold War politics, one can note the evolution of this mental system, or new equilibrium (dissemination of western social imagining and widening public sphere), developing throughout Europe. The mechanisms of this equilibrium rest normatively in the agreements between states to apply certain models in political, economical and social settings based primarily upon the notion of universal human rights. Hence, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the formerly socialist states of East and Central Europe officially joined the “mind” of the West and began a transition process towards becoming part of the West’s social imagining.

Yet, again we can note a difference in applying Bateson’s concept of the mind to the public sphere wherein ideas develop into metatopics and action takes place on the collective and as part of the collective, and “mind” encompassing the whole of the political, economical, and secular system which “re-informs” the public sphere.

<sup>7</sup> Éva Kuti: *The Non Profit Sector in Hungary*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Bateson (1904–1980), anthropologist perhaps most widely known as Margret Mead’s husband, whose scope of interest and research spanned the fields of biology, psychology, communications theory and aesthetics.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Bateson: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. x.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Bateson uses the phrase “aggregates of ideas” as a synonym for “minds” in his introductory essay “The Science of Mind and Order”, xxiii.

Furthermore, being of the “same mind” in Taylor’s sense does not necessarily involve functions of civil society such as “motivat [ing] and help [ing] individuals to act as citizens in all aspects of society.”<sup>11</sup> These activities must be linked to the notion of popular sovereignty for “the people”. Herein lies Taylor’s conception of civil society; belonging to an invented people who “are linked in an economy, can seek access to a public sphere, and move in a world of independent associations”.<sup>12</sup>

Taking the example of post-1989 Hungary as a means to examine how new orders and social imaginings can come to transform older systems of “the ways in which people imagine their social existence”, one must take into consideration not only the relationships between “the people” and the political body and/or the economic system, but the very definition of “the people” themselves. In Hungary one can describe at least two general tracts for this definition. On the one hand, Hungary began to define itself politically as a nation, “a people” in a new supranational structure via debates on the Hungarian Status Law and subsequently through the 1993 Law on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities. On the other hand, sociological research into the “winners” and “losers” of the transition revealed that “along with the rise of consciousness of citizens’ rights and democratic norms”, xenophobia and social distance have increased between “Hungarians” and the Roma.<sup>13</sup> Hence, new relationships among “the people” developed in which ethnic/cultural differences gained importance with political/economic change. Furthermore, the recommendations of these researchers, that social change and inclusion of Roma can only take place through human rights discourse, self-organization, and better media representation, suggest foremost that Hungarians have not successfully adopted the western social imaginary, and that doing so requires self-organization beyond that offered by the state on the part of Roma (Minority Self-Governments- MSGs).<sup>14</sup> One can also gather from these conclusions that in general non-Roma distrust Roma, viewing them as beneficiaries, rather than contributors to the Citizen State and blaming Roma for the inadequacies of MSGs.

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<sup>11</sup> Kuti, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Tamás Kolosi, István György Tóth, György Vukovich (eds.): *Social Report – 1998., Budapest: TÁRKI, 1999. 456.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 473–4.

Returning to Koulish's investigation of Roma civic health in light of Taylor's notions of civil society, one must focus on the manner in which Hungarian social imaginings (how people conceive of their reciprocal relationship with others) and notions of "the people" coincide. Does this perspective exclude Hungarian Roma who, for more than 500 years, engaged in interactions with Hungarians to define "the people" (if only in whom the people contrasted themselves with), from the Hungarian "social imagining"? Do not the interests and expectations of Roma who share the title "citizen" equate into the common interests and expectations within the Citizen State? And, if indeed a separate imagining or moral order exists within Roma communities, does this persist due to external exclusion, or internal means of perpetuating a separate Roma identity?

In order to answer these questions and suggest where and how social change can take place, one must look at the past 500 years of interactions between Roma and non-Roma in Hungary as it impacts the three outlined aspects of Taylor's civil society: public sphere, market economy and popular sovereignty/Citizen state.

#### *Assimilation, Market Economy, and the Public Sphere*

The public sphere developed in Hungary, as in much of Europe, primarily as a result of print capitalism, and thus excluded Roma who did not speak or read Hungarian. These numbers, however, decreased as a result of increased interaction with Hungarians, and early and persistent assimilation tactics such as those introduced by Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Such early efforts included settling nomadic Gypsies in part to create a peasant labor force, removing children from their homes for re-education (many of whom ran away and returned home), and the prohibition of travel, speaking Romani, using Romani names (which led to adopting a second, non-Roma name) and wearing traditional clothing.

A number of reasons may be cited for the instigation of assimilation policies towards the Roma such as the need for a new labor force and the moral imperative of the Protestant work ethic. At the introduction of Maria Theresa's policies regarding the "Gypsy problem" Roma were actively engaged in the economic sphere by offering specialized crafts and services. The new notion of labor and acceptable economic activity, however, fed into conceptions of progress that no longer tolerated nomadic lifestyles in relation to labor, state education (socialization) and perceived mutual obligations towards the governing polity in order to receive mutual benefits. Furthermore,

as Taylor notes, labor and organized economic activity became the key to an ordered political, military, and secular life in which “money making serves our ‘interest’ and interest can check and control passion”.<sup>15</sup> Hence, any person or group carrying out economic activity outside the accepted notion of labor and reciprocity could be considered of uncontrolled passion (a common stereotype of Gypsies) and thus, a threat to the social order.

Perhaps for this reason, the seeming dissonance with non-Roma economic models and hence, dissonance with a key structural element in modern social imaginings, a number of studies among Roma communities have centered on issues of wealth, production, labor and work. In Hungary, one of the most extensive studies comes from anthropologist Michael Stewart who worked with Roma men in factories and among Roma at open markets. According to Stewart, Rom social imagining involves living in the present in which attaining wealth should require as little labor as possible (e.g. trading and scavenging), and should be shared and consumed immediately among Rom brothers.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, this ideal (as it should be considered as many Hungarian Rom must engage in at least part-time employment in order to meet their basic needs) seems predominant in many Rom communities across the globe.

According to Anne Sutherland who worked among Rom in California in the 1970s, the basis of Rom economic activity involves extraction from non-Roma who should otherwise be avoided for all intents and purposes. Furthermore, she found that Rom who engaged in full-time employment became ostracized by the community as “Americanized” and polluted.<sup>17</sup> In Hungary, however, Stewart claims that, “The symbolic potential of declaring that permanent wage work was ‘polluting’ and un-Gypsy was not taken up by these Rom”<sup>18</sup>, and that, “. . . in some contexts the Rom were aware that receiving regular wages had changed their whole way of life for the better”.<sup>19</sup> Stewart goes on to suggest that aside from the additional benefits of working for a wage (loans, etc.), wage labor offered Rom the opportunity to engage in, if not dominate, the second or informal economy, a practice which united nearly all Hungarians.

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor, 104

<sup>16</sup> See for example Sophie Day, P. Evthymios and Michael Stewart: *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People who Live for the Moment*. Boulder: Westview, 1998. 1–24; and, Michael Stewart: *In the Time of the Gypsies*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Sutherland: *Gypsies – The Hidden Americans*. London: Tavistock, 1975.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Stewart, *In the Time of the Gypsies*, 241.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

Yet, despite the common acceptance of and participation in the informal market, and the fact that by 1971, 85.2% of Romani men were employed primarily in industry as unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers, Roma remained discriminated against and excluded from full participation in Hungarian society.<sup>20</sup> As Péter Szuhay noted, Roma, “particularly those working in industry, wanted to define themselves as Hungarians, not just with respect to citizenship, but also in terms of ethnic self-identification. And day after day they had to face the fact that the rest of society jeered “Gypsy” at them”.<sup>21</sup> This trend seemingly continues today as evidenced by recent billboards suggesting that one out of three Rom prefer to “hide” their identity.

As previously mentioned, Roma clearly came out the “losers” in the 1989 political transformation. According to a report entitled “Labour Market Programmes for the Roma in Hungary”, 50% of Roma were unemployed by 1993.<sup>22</sup> The report lists the reasons for the substantial loss of employment among Roma as: educational disadvantages (educational gains of the past fifty years made valueless in a matter of a few years), territorial disadvantage (more than half of Roma live in villages and areas of economic depression), vocational disadvantage (the disappearance of industry related jobs), and ethnic discrimination. As a result, poverty, which had become increasingly apparent in the 1970s, and which had led to the development and recognition of a number of cultural associations in part sponsored by the state in order to pass the burden of providing resources to Roma, continued to escalate creating a greater gorge in social distance.

One measure of social distance, and indirectly of Hungary’s distance from the social imagining of the west, can be found in the results of surveys conducted in the 1990s on non-Roma Hungarians’ view of Roma unemployment. According to a 1994 survey, 90% of adults concurred that “the problems of the Gypsies would be solved if they finally started to work”.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, this statement overlooks the high employment rates among Romani men in the previous decades, not to mention its assumptions concerning “work” as opposed to labor. The 1997 survey showed that 83% of Hungarians believed that “Roma don’t work because they live on social assistance,” while only

<sup>20</sup> István Kemény (ed.) *A Romák/Cigányok és a láthatlan gazdaság*. Budapest: Osiris-MTA Kisebbségkutató Műhely, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Szuhay: *Constructing a Gypsy National Culture*. *Budapest Review of Books*, Vol. 2, Nr. 3, 1995. 113.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Csongor, György Róbert Lukács, and Niall O’Higgins: *Labour Market Programmes for the Roma in Hungary*. Budapest: ILO, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> *Social Report – 1998*, 460–1.

39% stated that “Roma do not work because they cannot get a job”.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, these researchers found that in post-socialist countries poverty is attributed to personal factors, as are negative attributes in out-groups in general, while in western societies, poverty is linked to discrimination and inequality. While slowly a shift is taking place within Hungary, many still view poverty and hence exclusion from the market as the personal fault of an en masse out-group, and thus, not a matter of structural inequalities among “the people”. Likewise, the view that Roma prefer to live on social assistance rather than contribute to the market lends itself to further justifications for exclusion from a social imagining based on the idea of mutual obligations and benefits. Clearly, the task set in order to allow Roma full participation within civil society involves changing the perception of Roma as work-shy hoarders of social assistance, and secondly, changing the perception that Roma comprise an “out-group” in relation to “the people”.

As previously mentioned, these researchers have suggested that increased discourse on human rights, self organization and honest media representation may lead to such social change. Perhaps among these, media (newspaper, TV, radio, Internet, etc.) plays the greatest role in shaping the public sphere “wherein [members of society] discuss matters of common interest and thus are able to form a common mind about these”.<sup>25</sup> It also plays a vital role in molding non-Roma beliefs, stereotypes and prejudice among those who rarely, if ever, knowingly encounter Roma in their every day life. Hence, while Hungarian media no longer uses derogatory phrases like “browns” to describe Roma, it still feeds into negative stereotypes and distrust among non-Roma by portraying them primarily in conflictual settings and as people lacking any social role aside from ethnicity.<sup>26</sup>

Some have questioned the role of oral tradition and “living in the present” as means of separating Roma from the time/space development of the public sphere. Yet, two arguments would refute this suggestion. First, Koulisch’s findings claim that Roma have knowledge about local matters and would like to contribute to civic issues, yet lack a proper channel to do so. Hence, in whatever capacity, Roma receive news that directly or indirectly affects their lives as citizens and desire greater participation or “say” in the outcome of these matters. Thus, the act of receiving and responding to public in-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, 100.

<sup>26</sup> For more on this see: “Nationalist Message in Mass Media,” report prepared by Media Monitoring Agency, Media Works, MEMO ’98, and Roma Press Center, 2001. 2–15.



formation does not necessarily depend on written or duration perspectives, and hence, neither should its contributions.

Second, based on his study of the Rom of Hungaros, Michael Stewart suggests that through relations with non-Roma, Hungarian Roma are “re-remind[ed] of ‘who they are’ and who they have been, and thus to help them recognize the durational world in which, despite their best efforts, they are condemned to live”.<sup>27</sup> Here we can see the direct way in which reciprocal relations with fellow citizens take shape in daily interaction, developing notions of “who they were” have been, and will be in relation to “the people” and as “the people” developing a sense of shared time/space. Furthermore, the notion of “who they were/are”, as influenced by media accounts is changing through media monitoring, media discrimination laws, and hence, moves towards better media representation of Roma, i.e. as individuals making positive contributions to society. In addition, a greater number of Roma supported by NGOs (e.g. Roma Press Center and Radio C) and grassroots initiatives (some utilizing community house/MSG Internet facilities) can contest or contribute to their representation as broadcasters and journalists.

### *Non-Governmental Organizations and Minority Self-Governments*

In the early 1990s, re-defining “the people” and the rights thereof quickly became of the utmost importance in Hungary as seen through the number of laws and acts regarding citizenship and minority rights. Hence, the relations between Hungarian Roma and non-Roma, and Roma and the government underwent great changes, at least on paper. Most notable and/or visible were the institutional changes in the form of non-governmental organizations and Minority Self-Governments, both of which have been criticized for failing to include, or for side tracking Roma from full political participation and likewise, participation in Hungarian civil society.

As early as 1990, thanks in part to the opening of borders, dissemination of information, and certain tax breaks, a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) arose and latched onto “the Gypsy question”<sup>28</sup> as a matter of human rights. Many critics, with the benefit of hindsight, have stated that this massive influx of NGOs and their collaboration with international organizations interested in both human rights conditions and western security

<sup>27</sup> Michael Stewart: Remembering without Commemoration: the devices and the politics of memory among east-European Roma. *JRAI*, Nr. 10, 2004. 575.

<sup>28</sup> Overtime, “the Gypsy question” became known as “Roma issues”, and in some circles, “Roma Rights” or the “Romani movement”.

concerns regarding migrants, led to two serious outcomes: the homogenous ethnicization of Roma, and pigeonholing the Gypsy/Roma question into an issue of ethnic rather than social discrimination.<sup>29</sup> As concerns the former, this allows NGOs to sacrifice accuracy and accountability in order to deal with a number of social issues and circumstances facing Roma, and continually restate the obvious (even within reports informing policy development at the EU level) without addressing the importance of specific economic factors. Furthermore, while ethnic discrimination clearly exists and should be addressed in relation to human rights, linking every social issue to ethnicity creates an “ethnic ghetto” and a dangerous scapegoat for politicians and non-Roma to pawn off the burden of ensuring mutual benefits.

In some respects this “ethno-business” or ethnicization of the “Gypsy Question” has led to some confusion concerning the development of a separate civil society operating for the Roma (as of yet, it cannot be said by the Roma). Yet, bearing in mind Taylor’s conception of civil society; an invented people “linked in an economy, [who] can seek access to a public sphere, and move in a world of independent associations”, one must really stretch the imagination and the limits of this definition to suggest a separate civil society exists for Hungarian Roma. If such is the case, the Hungarian Roma become the invented ethnic mass who share an economy of international and domestic donors, who can access the public sphere through human rights reports, training and conferences, and who move about in a world of think-tanks, political parties, academic, umbrella and satellite institutions. Such an interpretation can, on the one hand, be viewed as either overly optimistic (in regards to the actual participation of Roma in NGO activities) or jaded (in underestimating the aims, achievements and abilities of some NGOs). And, on the other hand, such a view turns a blind eye to the present situation of civil society as situated within domestic spheres of the nation-state, or rather, as the intermediary between citizens, the economy and the State.

As Koulisch’s findings show, very few Roma know about or can take part in the activities of NGOs, the majority of which base themselves in Budapest or other large cities. Hence, proposing that NGOs offer one of the few channels for civic engagement of Roma seems preposterous. Some groups, such

<sup>29</sup> See for example, Martin Kovats: *The Emergence of European Roma Policy*. In Will Guy (ed.): *Between Past and Future: the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*. Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001. 93–115; D. Petrova: *The Roma: Between a Myth and the Future*. *Social Research*, Nr. 70, Spring, 2003. 111–161; and Peter Vermeersch: *Advocacy Networks and Romani Politics in Central and Eastern Europe*. *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Autumn, 2001.

as the Hungarian Foundation for Self-Reliance, which aims to support poverty alleviation through local civil society, have positioned themselves in smaller settlements, supporting employment and income generating programs developed by local, Roma organizations. These groups readily admit the limitations of their own efforts as based on available funding from donors, the impetus of fulfilling daily needs among long-term unemployed over the aims of long-term projects, and likewise, the entrepreneurial aims of mediating, local organizations. Yet, a number of copy-cat organizations (public foundations) sponsored by the state which mimic NGO activity have risen with at least the promise of government accountability and semi-secure funding.

Regardless of misdirected or failed efforts, NGOs have contributed to the public discourse on human rights and raised the public's attention to issues facing the Roma which may otherwise been swept under the carpet. While NGOs have a limited amount of power in lobbying and the development of policies concerning Roma, they do offer the opportunity for some, mostly young and educated, Roma to enter into bureaucratic and technocratic networks of civil society. NGOs also have the capability to engage in social change by, as previously mentioned, serving as human rights and media monitors, by encouraging local self-organization, and by developing programs aimed at specific social problems faced by Roma and non-Roma (e.g. unemployment) which would require mutual contributions for mutual benefit.

Minority Self-Governments (MSGs) as institutions primarily established to ensure and protect cultural autonomy, despite the demands of those whom they represent, also exhibit limited impact on the immediate social needs, which exclude Roma from the market, and the social networks needed to gain power in the public sphere. Although, as a positive outcome, MSGs have created at least part-time employment opportunities for more than 3000 Roma, as well as experience with local political networks and organizations.

Martin Kovats has stated, however, that "The most interesting aspect of the Minorities Law...is its recognition that rights, in themselves, are of little value and that a mechanism is needed to transform them from paper into practice. The mechanism created by the Minorities Law is the system of mi-

nority self-governments”.<sup>30</sup> If minority rights are of such little value that a mechanism requires their fulfillment, we must evaluate the effective nature of that mechanism. In this case we have to evaluate the government’s ability to ensure the fulfillment of legal guarantees made to Roma.

First and foremost, the Roma minority self-governments, like all forms of government in Hungary, *elect* leaders. One of the major flaws of this system is that in no way does it monitor or restrict who can elect the members of the minority *self-government*. This criticism comes even from the 1997 representative of the Hungarian Parliamentary Commission for National and Ethnic Minority Rights, Jenő Kaltenbach, who also counted among the positive aspects of the GMSG that it “resolves the problem of legitimacy within minority groups in a democratic way”.<sup>31</sup> In the past this “loophole” led to the election of non-Romani citizens to local GMSGs.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, no elections were organized for the constitutionally guaranteed seat in parliament.

Second, the Minority Law sets out an agenda for “cultural autonomy”, yet Kovats points out that “the emphasis on ‘cultural autonomy’ exposes a tension in certain areas between the respect for ‘difference’ and the right to be treated equally”.<sup>33</sup> Although lacking a clear definition of “cultural autonomy” the law makes mention of the preservation of the mother tongue, traditions and customs, the establishment of institutions such as schools, museums, etc., and the right to develop and nourish relationships with the home country. All of these elements of “cultural autonomy” prove especially problematic for Roma who can not claim in the same sense as the Croatian or German minorities a home country from whom to draw financial and other forms of support. In fact, the financial aspect of “cultural autonomy” proves a triple edged sword for GMSG leaders who can not rely on external funding from a home country, who must rely on the municipal government for their budget, and who face the intertwining of political participation and social issues through the “ethnicization of poverty”. This proves especially complicated when even Florián Farkas, a leading figure in Lungo Drom and a long

<sup>30</sup> Martin Kovats: *Minority Rights and Roma Politics in Hungary*. In Karl Cordell (ed.): *Ethnicity and Democratisation in the New Europe*, London: Routledge, 1999. 147.

<sup>31</sup> Kaltenbach is quoted in the report of the PER workshop *Self-Government in Hungary: The Romani/Gypsy Experience and Prospects for the Future* which took place May 9–11, 1997 in Budapest. A full report from the workshop is available at [http://www.per-usa.org/self\\_gov.htm](http://www.per-usa.org/self_gov.htm).

<sup>32</sup> See the article “Controversial Segregated Private School Approved after Election of Non-Romani Minority Representatives in Hungary,” *Roma Rights*, Nr. 1–2, 2003, available at [http://lists.errc.org/rr\\_nr1-2\\_2003/snap23.shtml](http://lists.errc.org/rr_nr1-2_2003/snap23.shtml).

<sup>33</sup> Kovats, 150.

time representative of the National Gypsy Self-Government, claims that the NGSG “[is] not based on ethnicity, but thinks in terms of creating a grouping that organizes itself to fight poverty”.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Farkas’ claims, and the findings of Molnar and Schafft that the majority of GMSG activity involve welfare issues gladly, but illegally, handed over or often dumped on them by municipal governments, minority self-governments do not possess the political power to address social issues such as poverty. GMSGs can merely make recommendations to municipal and national governments in the interest of their minority group. On the other hand, municipal governments are free to disregard such recommendations as they please with little or no recourse. Furthermore, even on issues concerning media, culture and language, and education where GMSGs hold veto power and where the municipal government must gain their agreement, Claude Chan notes, that “there is no effective legal recourse where a local government” fails to do so.<sup>35</sup>

Without the political or financial backing to address those issues most pressing for their constituents, the Gypsy Minority Self-Government has been called “a farce” by groups such as MROP (Magyarországi Roma Összefogás Párt) who call instead for mobilization to elect Roma leaders for the Hungarian Parliament. Their efforts have yet to prove fruitful. Their claim and their intention, however, reflect the response of many Roma/Gypsies in Hungary to yet another Government program dictating the frame and the content of their ability to participate in matters which direct their lives in Hungary.

### *Conclusions*

I would like to conclude by addressing the series of questions that began this investigation.

Does Roma participation in civil society depend on special rights and channels (i.e. NGOs and MSGs)? It seems that as of yet, Roma participation in civil society does not depend on NGOs and MSGs as their impact remains quite small and limited to predominantly ethnic issues. Furthermore, the “special rights” in question, are actually those human rights guaranteed to all citizens, as presently, no affirmative action measures have been taken (including the alleged positions for Roma in parliament which remain unfilled as

<sup>34</sup> Florián Farkas quoted in *Népszabadság*, August 26, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Claude Chan: *Smoke and Mirrors: Roma and minority policy in Hungary. Roma Rights*, Nr. 4, 2001. 35–40.

the government has yet to find a manner of voting which would not reveal the voters ethnic identity).

Does a separate civil society exist for Roma? No. As previously argued, taking into consideration Taylor's definition, we can not suggest that a separate notion of the people, economy, public sphere and world of independent associations exist for Roma.

Do the interests and expectations of Roma reflect a separate "social imagining"? No. The interests of the Roma reflect the same desire for security of rights, and means to live which motivate other Hungarians to participate in civil society. Furthermore, Roma have shown their desire to engage in the market economy and public sphere and have met with limited success not as a matter of personal fault, but as structural failures coupled with discrimination. Additionally, Koulisch has shown that Hungarian Roma, while seeking improvements in the capabilities of their MSGs, do not desire self-determination.

Yet, changing the "mainstream" perspective on groups who live in the present- as a means of promoting plurality and protecting ethnic groups, challenges the values and ideology upon which the state (especially post-communist states) rests, or at the very least, the way in which concepts such as freedom and autonomy are used in political rhetoric. Acknowledging that such values exist to a certain degree throughout society, and the economic role they play, may prove important for deconstructing the myths of inherent deviance among socially disadvantaged groups and grant them recognition of their personal autonomy/relationship within the state.

How does the current Hungarian social imagining (how Hungarians imagine their social existence) coincide with the notion of "the people"? Clearly this remains in flux. Yet civil society exists as a tool for having a "say", for all citizens- "the people", to whom the government (citizen state) and market must be held accountable. Hence, diagnosing civic health in Hungary determines the overall distance from the imagining, as a product of human rights discourse, and the reality.

184 VAKAT