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Great Expectations? The Changing Role of “Europe” in Romani Activism in Hungary

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Abstract

Contemporary political action for ethnic and national minorities in Europe appears to be increasingly directed towards supra- and transnational structures. This development seems indicative of the growth of a European space for minority activism – a public space that is less state-centered, that allows claims to be framed in terms of European standards and therefore facilitates the emergence of an active European citizenship. In theory, this “Europeanization” of minority politics may offer minority activists additional avenues for raising demands about cultural recognition and economic equalization. This article seeks to identify the possible implications of the Europeanization of minority politics by exploring the case of the Roma (Gypsies), an economically and socially marginalized minority that is increasingly conceptualized as transnational and “European.” Especially in the context of the enlargement of the European Union the Roma have received a lot of attention from European institutions. We focus our analysis on Hungary, a new EU member state with an active Romani movement. While one would expect the Europeanization of minority politics to have positively affected the ways in which Romani activists in Hungary organize and mobilize, our analysis of documentary sources and interviews reveals a more complex picture. We identify an ambiguous understanding of the Europeanization of minority politics among various actors in Hungary and historically shifting ideas about the significance of “Europe” in Romani mobilization.

Key words: minority activism, ethnic mobilization, Hungary, Roma, European Union, EU enlargement

Introduction

Research on ethnic minority politics in Europe has led a number of scholars to argue that there is a growing link between European integration and minority mobilization. They argue that the “radical, deep-seated alteration of established boundaries between domestic and international politics”¹ brought about by the presence of international organizations in Europe such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and, especially, the European Union (EU), has created a new space for collective action beyond the nation-state. Already more than a decade ago, for example, Yasemin Soysal pointed to European institutions as a potentially powerful source of transnational empowerment for dispersed immigrant groups in Western Europe.² And although her work has often been criticized for overestimating the influence of “post-national” citizenship on immigrant activism, the questions she has asked about the role of the institutional structure that Europe offers to transnational advocacy for immigrants still remains firmly on the research agenda of scholars of migration politics. Moreover, these questions have also become an important focus in research on national and regional minorities. Michael Keating, for example, has argued that Europe has opened up opportunity structures for territorially concentrated national minority movements, offering these movements a chance to enter into a game of multilevel politics that allows them to moderate separatist claims.³ Not only immigrant communities in Western Europe are thus sometimes seen as groups for whom the nation-state is no longer the single most important locus of political action, but also ethnic and national minorities in both in Western and in Central and Eastern Europe are now often interpreted as groups whose

political claims transcend nation-state boundaries, are build on “universal” goals and Europe-wide standards such as human rights and minority rights, and have been shaped by the presence of supranational institutions.

In this article we focus on ethnic minority activism in the new EU member states and ask how minority activists in this region have perceived this matter. Have activists indeed recognized the presence of international institutions as a new space for collective action? And if so, how have these “transnational spaces for discourse and action”⁴ transformed the nature of domestic collective action for minority groups? It seems logical to start from the hypothesis that European institutions have at least had the potential to affect ethnic minority activism in Central Europe. Since the development of political opportunity and political process perspectives in social movement theory, there is a growing consensus that a number of key elements in the development of social movements are connected to the institutional context in which they operate (the “political opportunity structure” or POS).⁵ According to this theory, movements are to a large extent shaped by the political opportunities that surround them, including the “transnational” opportunities.⁶

In this paper we start from the theoretical assumption that the EU offers new opportunities for political action and that minorities who petition against the nation-state are likely to turn to this new space of political action beyond the nation-state. Analyzing a specific case of minority mobilization in Central Europe, however, we find evidence that questions the direct positive influence of Europe-wide institutions on minority mobilization and suggests instead a more complex picture. We take as our case the Romani (Gypsy) movement in Hungary. The Romani movement is an interesting case

because it has in recent years increasingly received attention from international institutions in Europe. Although the Roma in the past were defined in different ways (as a national minority, a caste, an ethnic group, a social underclass, or a transnational group),⁷ there appears to be an emergent hegemonic discourse in which they are represented as a “European minority”. This categorization is adopted by domestic governments and academics alike,⁸ but it is primarily a conceptualization that is implicitly or explicitly advanced by international institutions in Europe, such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU.

We focus on Hungary because this country is the home of one of the most vibrant Romani movements in Europe and the only country in the current EU that has two elected politicians in the European parliament who are Romani activists. This case also offers us the opportunity to compare the situation before the country’s accession to the EU in 2004 with empirical material from more recent years.

Our project needs to be distinguished from two other bodies of literature. First of all, we are not seeking to examine the EU’s influence on Hungary’s minority policies. In the context of the study of EU enlargement there is some important work now on the influence of international norms and incentives on the development of domestic minority policies in Europe.⁹ But there is still little systematic research into the question of how “Europe” as a set of institutional resources and a framing device has affected the action repertoires and self-categorization processes of domestic ethnic minority movements.¹⁰ It is the latter question that we would like to address.

Secondly, we do not seek to go into the question of whether Roma identify with the European project. Of course, it would be interesting to examine what “Europe” means

for those who are perceived as members of the Romani minority. There is little sociological research on this question available, but the ethnographic research projects that have focused on identification processes among the Roma clearly suggest that there is little familiarity among them with the conceptualization of them as a European minority.¹¹ Our question is slightly different. Instead of asking how the people who are seen as Roma see themselves, we seek to examine how they are represented by activists. We focus our attention on the framing strategies of those who want to mobilize the Roma in a political movement.

This paper consists of three main sections. In the first section we show how in the 1990s the Roma in Central European countries became a special focus of the EU in the context of the EU enlargement, and how Romani activists in Central Europe responded to this development. On the basis of interviews with Romani activists in Hungary conducted between 1998 and 2002 this section shows how mixed the responses of the activists towards the “Europeanization” of the Romani issue really were.

The second part of the paper goes deeper into this ambivalence in Hungary by documenting government and Romani activist responses to the problem of Romani migration, a matter that was generally regarded as one of the main issues of contention relating to the Roma in the period before Hungary’s accession to the EU.

In the third section we turn to the analysis of data from the first two years of Hungary’s EU membership. With the election of two Hungarian Romani women to seats in the European Parliament, European institutions are gaining attention in Romani activism and the Hungarian political parties are presenting themselves as champions of Romani human rights at the level of European institutions. Hungary’s MEPs increasingly

present Romani issues as a trans-European problem affecting both Eastern and Western Europe. We explore how Hungarian Romani activists at the national and transnational levels view the possibilities and limitations of belonging to “Europe.”

1. Conditionality policy and the Roma in the EU enlargement process

Throughout the past 50 years, discourses on human rights have been central to the legitimization of new, transnational European institutions.¹² Since the founding treaties of 1949 and 1950, European officials have striven to present European institutions as guarantors of “human rights and fundamental freedoms,” and since the 1990s “respect for and protection of minorities” has become an integral part of the European integration endeavor. At the time when he was the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi used the slogan, “a Europe of minorities,” in several high-profile speeches.

More than any other international organization in Europe in the 1990s, the EU was able to turn policy-making on minority issues in post-communist Central Europe into a matter of international politics. The EU tried to exert a direct influence on minority policies in its candidate member countries by explicitly linking normative pressure with membership “conditionality.” While there has since long been a general and tacit commitment to human rights norms within the EU, in the course of the 1990s the commitment gained a more explicit profile in the organization’s external policy demand for adequate minority protection in the Central European candidate countries.

In 1993 the European Council meeting in Copenhagen decided that respect for and the protection of minorities would serve as one of the political prerequisites for future

membership.¹³ The European Council had hoped that as a consequence of their strong desire to join the EU, the candidate countries would be inclined to acknowledge their accountability with regard to minority treatment and introduce new legal frameworks and policy initiatives. In other words, the introduction of political conditionality was based on the assumption that introducing comprehensive conditions for EU membership on the basis of large principles would incite prospective members to introduce specific policies that could clearly be evaluated against these large principles. Although formulated in terms of broad norms, this policy strategy was clearly not in the first place an exercise in norm-setting. At least part of the EU's policy was explicitly connected to a strategy aimed at preventing the importation of ethnic conflict to EU territory and preventing the emergence of new waves of refugees from candidate countries to the EU. The EU's push towards a greater internationalization of minority rights was thus informed by a mixture of humanitarian, "hard" and "soft" security concerns.¹⁴

In order to accomplish its goal, the EU relied on the norm-setting strategies of other international organizations. In the early 1990s the OSCE had been the first regional organization in Europe to place the issue of minority protection at the center of its activity in Central and Eastern Europe by explicitly linking minority protection to strategies of conflict prevention. In 1997, the European Commission's Agenda 2000 referred to both the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities and the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1201 (1993) on minorities, documents which were strongly based on the notion of cultural recognition. But more than the OSCE and the Council of Europe, the EU had the capacity and the

financial resources to influence minority policies of other states and to empower citizens to challenge their governments.

In the course of the 1990s the topic of the Roma gradually became an important point of reference within the framework the EU's conditionality policy. This was partly induced by the growing media coverage of the appalling treatment of a great number of Roma, and partly the result of work by international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Project on Ethnic Relations, and the European Roma Rights Center. In addition, EU attention was stimulated by a small group of independent Roma activists who had been able to voice their concerns in international forums such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE. This led to a significant criticism directed towards the Central European governments in the European Commission's Agenda 2000 (1997). The European Commission pointed out that the treatment of minorities was in general satisfactory, "except for the situation of the Roma minority in a number of applicants".¹⁵ The message was that the situation of the Roma was to play a certain role in deciding whether a candidate member would be ready to join the EU. This became even more apparent when the Commission started publishing its yearly "regular reports." In these reports the situation of the Roma in the candidate countries was repeatedly mentioned as an area of growing international concern and criticism.

In the literature on conditionality there is considerable debate over the effectiveness of the EU's membership conditionality policy,¹⁶ as well as over the implications of setting specific requirements on minority protection.¹⁷ A question that is not directly addressed in the literature, however, is whether and to what extent the minority activists in Central Europe perceived EU conditionality in the field of minority

treatment as beneficial. The Romani activists interviewed in Central Europe between 1998 and 2002 were rather ambivalent about that.¹⁸ On the one hand, they believed that the international political context surrounding the EU enlargement had indeed a positive impact on their position. On the other hand, in many cases they also pointed to the difficulty of turning the pressure exerted by the EU into an effective tool of Romani mobilization. There are a number of ways in which this ambivalence becomes clear.

In general, the ambivalence among the Roma was a result of the lack of clarity as to whether the EU's policy was really an instrument to set norms on minority recognition. By including the requirement of minority protection, the EU aspired to serve as an anchor of stability for its unstable neighbors to the East. But by relying on documents that symbolized norms of cultural recognition, there was at least the impression that the ultimate goal was to stimulate domestic policies that would focus on cultural recognition. However, at the time when this requirement was set, norm about how exactly minorities should be protected and whether cultural recognition was the ultimate goal were matters that were still unclear in the EU's internal affairs. The debate on the protection of diversity and anti-discrimination was still very much underway. Despite pressure kept up by the European Parliament since the mid 1980s to adopt protective European legislation in the field of anti-discrimination and anti-racism, it had taken more than a decade before an important step in this direction was taken with the ratification of the Treaty of Amsterdam.¹⁹ In sum, Romani activists were rather confused about whether there were indeed EU standards and norms to be implemented, whether the EU would be satisfied if states introduced policies of cultural recognition, or whether minority protection was

simply a very flexible and minor requirement, subordinate to considerations related to pragmatic interests and international security.

But also more specific concerns about the way the EU had highlighted “Central Europe” and “the Roma” as important focal points in its criticism in the regular reports became a worry among many Romani activists. Some activists could sympathize with the argument made by some politicians in Central Europe that the minority protection requirement itself was discriminatory. The provenance of the EU’s concern over minorities seemed to lie, not with conflicts on EU territory that had led to serious political violence, as seen in Corsica or Northern Ireland, but with ethnic conflict in the Balkans and Central Europe. The EU’s specific stance towards post-communist Central and Eastern Europe seemed to be built on the popular assumption that the “ethnic” East is historically more inclined to ethnic conflict than the “civic” West. In Central Europe this assumption was deemed very problematic because it invoked a simplistic stereotype of the region as part of the “backward East”.

Related to these problems was the vagueness of the minority protection criterion when it came to the Roma. The descriptions of the situation in the Commission’s yearly “regular reports” were rather brief and general, and, more importantly, they did not indicate exactly to what extent the situation had to be made better in order to result in a positive evaluation. The regular reports did not list any concrete requirements on the introduction of national legislation prohibiting discrimination in crucial areas such as employment, education, or housing. Consequently, there was a broad margin of interpretation on how to satisfy the minority protection requirement.

Another important problem Romani activists identified in the EU's conditionality policy was the effect such a policy could have on the image of the Roma. With the growing attention to the Roma in the context of EU accession, Romani activists feared that EU involvement would reinforce widespread negative stereotypes in which the Roma would be held responsible for hindering the accession of certain candidate countries. That this fear was not unfounded is illustrated by the way domestic actors responded to the problem of Romani migration and asylum seekers. In the next section we briefly focus our attention on a specific case to illustrate this point.

2. Romani activism in Hungary before 2004: Romani migration in the context of the EU enlargement

In the run-up to the EU enlargement in 2004 the Commission's reports repeatedly complained about the problem of anti-Roma discrimination in Hungary. We found that the response of Romani activists to this criticism was an ambivalent one. Some supported it, argued that it was a logical policy, and saw it as a way towards the final recognition of a place for the Roma in Europe as transnational minority.

Some Hungarian Romani activists, however, became increasingly reluctant to refer to the EU's conditions and the Commission reports because they feared that society would hold them responsible for hindering EU accession. Thus, instead of inadequate minority protection being seen as an obstacle for EU membership, they thought that the Roma themselves would be perceived as the obstacle. For a long time Romani activists had been wondering how they could protest a situation when the situation was framed as

the result of their own behavior. The EU membership standards did not solve this dilemma. In fact, international pressure on Central Europe exerted by individual EU states responding to Romani asylum seekers at some point even seemed to exacerbate this problem.

The migration issue is a domain where one can most clearly identify the development of a divide in the Hungarian Romani movement revolving around the question of whether Europe should be seen as the most appropriate arena for political action.

In 1997, a number of Hungarian citizens applied for political asylum in Canada and EU member states. According to figures of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the total number of Hungarian asylum applicants in 1998 was 1,033. This figure rose to 1,532 new applications in 1999, 2,612 in 2000, and 4,022 in the year 2001. In 2002, this development made Hungary, after Colombia and Mexico, the country with the highest relative increase of asylum seekers.²⁰ The facts were noticeable especially in Canada, where the Hungarians formed the largest group of refugee claimants—most of them identifying themselves as Roma and claiming that they were discriminated against in their home country. 1997 can clearly be identified as the year setting the trend for the spectacular increase. In 1996, the total number of Hungarian applicants for Canada was 64; in 1997 the number rose to 294, in 1998 to 977, in 1999 to 1,581, in 2000 to 2,474, and in 2001 to 3,812.²¹ As will be discussed, Hungarian Romani organizations did not at all agree among themselves on the question of whether the situation in Hungary justified the Roma's claims for asylum. Nevertheless, some pressure groups tried to use the

controversy about the wave of asylum seekers in their much wider protest campaigns against the Hungarian government.

One case that merits attention in this context is that of a group of twelve Romani families from the town of Zámoly who in July 2000 applied for political asylum in France. József Krasznai, president of a local Romani organization (the Fejér County Romani Association), member of the National Gypsy Self-Government and vice-president of the Roma Parliament, acted as a spokesman for these families both before and during their migration to Strasbourg. He immediately attracted the attention of domestic and international politicians and journalists. It seems useful to recount here the details of this case, since it offers a good view of the various sides of the Hungarian Romani movement. It also illustrates quite well how other actors, such as the government, the opposition parties and human rights organizations, have responded such episodes of increased Romani movement activity.

The origins of the case date back to 1997. In that year a storm damaged one of the buildings in which a number of Romani families were living. The local authorities tore down the entire set of houses but failed to provide viable alternative accommodation. In response, the National Gypsy Self-Government²² relocated them and used funds to erect temporary housing. Meanwhile tensions rose within the community. Non-Romani inhabitants of the village began to reproach the Roma for having occupied the local community center for too long a period. This was exacerbated by local and national press reporting which argued that the Roma were “receiving flats from the state as a privilege conferred on them on the basis of ethnic origin, as ‘presents’ which they had in no way deserved.”²³ In 1999, a fight broke out in which one of the non-Roma involved was

severely injured and died. According to József Krasznai, this event polarized the community even further, and the Roma received death threats. Believing that, in case of an attack, they would not be able to count on protection from the police, the Romani families decided to travel to Strasbourg and claim political asylum. In March 2001, 15 of the 46 people who had originally left Hungary were granted political asylum by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees.

Gradually the case assumed a meaning that was larger than that of the concrete realities of the case. Spokesman Krasznai was able to attract domestic and international media attention not only to these specific Roma but also to the situation of the Roma in Hungary in general. He attempted to turn his work on this specific case into a general protest action against the Hungarian government's treatment of the Roma. Several features of the case contributed to this. First, even before the departure of the Romani families to France, Krasznai had argued that the Hungarian government was responsible for finding a solution for them. Before leaving Budapest he had organized a press conference and had warned the government that if it did not take measures, he would leave the country. Secondly, by choosing Strasbourg as a destination, Krasznai placed the whole case in a European context. He told the press that he had written complaints to the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament. Upon arriving in France he also sent a letter to the French President, Jacques Chirac, requesting his support for the asylum application and asking him to use his influence to persuade the Hungarian government to improve the conditions of the Romani communities. By so doing Krasznai managed to touch upon an important foreign policy concern of the Hungarian government: its reputation among the EU countries. The

Hungarian government was brought into a position where it was forced to respond. When in October 2001, Krasznai was asked whether he considered Romani migration an effective method of protesting, he stated the following:

Yes, I think so. Everyone was talking about it. Never before could the Roma attract so much attention to their situation. During the first three months in France, the government didn't take our demands seriously. But after the stay was extended and a couple of them received political asylum, the government began to take the case seriously. (personal interview, 5 October 2001)

Significant, too, is that Krasznai's protest letters received backing from a number of well-known intellectuals in Hungary, most of them close to the opposition party SzDSz. In March 2001, a letter signed by among others the internationally renowned authors Péter Esterházy and György Konrád was sent to the French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, thanking France for granting political asylum to the Roma from Zámoly. The letter compared the decision of the French authorities with the "protection [that] has been given to many Hungarians during various centuries, most recently during the 1956 Hungarian revolution." It also stated that the decision of the French authorities would "serve as a moral lesson for Hungarian society."²⁴

One can summarize Krasznai's framing of the Zámoly case in three general points: (a) the case of the Zámoly Roma is indicative of the situation of the Roma in Hungary in general; (b) the Roma in Hungary are threatened by racist violence, lack protection from the authorities, and suffer from a general climate of discrimination by the

authorities; (c) current policies and minority rights protection systems initiated by the government have failed to change this situation, and this is why so many Roma resort to seeking asylum in what they regard as safer countries. In their discussion of the case, government officials and mainstream politicians emphasized other elements. According to the official government view, the Roma were not leaving for reasons of discrimination, but to escape socioeconomic marginality. The Hungarian government claimed that it had already invested unprecedented amounts of money into programs aimed at alleviating the Roma's socio-economic predicament; therefore, it argued, Romani activists should now help the government to implement these programs. The government also argued that Romani migration was incited by individuals who had no other aim than to discredit Hungary's reputation among the EU countries.

With regard to the first element in the government's counterframing, it has to be noted that the government was not able to avoid talking about the existence of ethnic discrimination in Hungary. During his speeches in the Hungarian Parliament in 2000 and 2001 Csaba Hende of the right-wing party Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), and at the time undersecretary of justice, admitted the existence of discrimination but argued also that it did not constitute a legitimate reason for the Roma to claim asylum, since measures were implemented to remedy such problems. To buttress this reasoning, government officials referred to the fact that in the overwhelming majority of earlier cases Romani asylum claims had been refused on the grounds that the claimants were clearly not persecuted by state authorities and did not lack protection against discriminatory practices. Government representatives such as Hende did not deny the existence of discrimination, but simultaneously argued that it was not a phenomenon

unique to Hungary. Instead he called it an “all-European problem with ramifications effecting Hungary, a problem which cannot, due to its gravity, be solved until Hungary’s accession to the European Union.”²⁵ In this way the government attempted to take the edge off the main argument of those who argued that the government was responsible for causing the Romani migration; at the same time it expressed an opinion that was perfectly acceptable to a large part of the Hungarian Romani movement.

The government’s argument that Romani migration was deliberately organized by individuals to discredit both the Hungarian government and the Hungarian Roma, persuaded many of the Romani activists into criticizing the asylum seekers.²⁶ A large number of Romani activists did not want to see the Roma blamed for blocking Hungary’s entrance in the EU. In response to the government’s point of view, the president of the National Gypsy Self-Government, Flórián Farkas, declared that he was opposed to Roma seeking asylum abroad, since this in his view caused “damage to Hungary’s reputation.”²⁷ For this reason he also tried to dissociate the Zámoly affair from the general situation in Hungary.

The Zámoly affair cannot be lumped together or mixed up with the situation of the Roma in Hungary in general. The Zámoly affair is a quite particular one, a peculiar internal concern, an internal problem, which I am not delighted about. I do not agree with this particular act of emigration even though I identify myself emotionally with the families concerned. Leaving this country is not a viable solution.²⁸

It is interesting—and perhaps telling for the persistence of the division within the Hungarian Romani movement—that the National Gypsy Self-Government, and the Romani activists affiliated to it, stood uncritically by the government’s opinion on the Zámoly case even when government officials on the basis of the case made questionable statements about the Roma *in general*, alleging that the Roma themselves are in part responsible for the fact that the government has been unsuccessful in alleviating the socioeconomic problems that this population is faced with.

3. EU-phoria? Hungarian Romani activism after EU accession

In April 2003, *Amaro Drom*, the widest-circulating Hungarian Roma-themed magazine, printed a cover with a picture of an activist wearing a necktie printed with flags of every EU nation and smiling broadly with the large caption, “EU-foria” (“EU-phoria”). Although the magazine had printed over a dozen articles on Romani issues and EU accession since 2000, the tone of those articles was generally cautious and critical. With the 2004 election of Livia Járóka, a Hungarian MEP who was also the first Romani activist in the European Parliament, the magazine threw caution to the wind. In July 2004, the magazine printed a photo of Járóka in front of the European Parliament Building in Strasbourg with the caption, “Roma woman among the black Mercedes limos.” The rapidly changing patterns of EU-phoria and euroscepticism among Romani activists in Hungary pose an interesting paradox.

Prior to 2004, the relationship between Romani mobilization and Hungary’s EU aspirations was fraught with the uncertainties—whether or not conditionality could be

used as a leverage point in domestic civil rights struggles, and whether or not Roma activists should present themselves as Hungarian citizens facing discrimination or as a transnational ethnic minority. When Hungary entered the EU, however, state officials and members of every political party made efforts to present the country as committed to addressing discrimination against the Romani minority. Within six months of accession, Hungarian voters elected two young Romani women, European Peoples' Party (EPP) candidate Járóka and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) candidate Viktória Mohácsi, to serve as MEPs.²⁹ Both activists had worked on Romani rights issues in the NGO sector before being elected to the European Parliament. A non-Romani Hungarian MEP from the European Socialist Party, Katalin Lévai, made the situation of Romani minority a touchstone of her parliamentary work. These developments point to the rising importance of human rights discourses in establishing legitimacy for European institutions, and with it, new discursive resources for proclaiming transnational allegiance alongside patriotism to the nation-state and for reframing Romani grievances at the international and national level.

When the Hungarian delegation to the European Parliament held a press conference to commemorate their first year in the EU, it cited their efforts to improve the conditions of Hungarian Roma and the Hungarian ethnic minority in Serbia as early successes.³⁰ The delegation underlined the leadership of the two Hungarian Romani MEPs in putting forth the Resolution on "The Roma in the European Union," which the European Parliament unanimously passed in April 2005.

Responding to the pre-accession stereotype that Eastern Europeans would be more nationalistic than their western European counterparts, the Hungarian delegation

presented itself as “European” by allying itself with minority protection and taking the lead in Roma issues. As they pushed for the passage of the “Roma resolution,” Hungary’s Romani MEPs went further, emphasizing that although fighting anti-Romani discrimination was a condition for eastern European countries’ entry into the EU, the problem occurs in *both* eastern and western Europe. During the parliamentary debates on the resolution, MEP Járóka stated:

Roma people living inside and outside the boundaries of the EU have been exposed to daily discrimination for centuries. (...) Following EU accession, social discrimination against the Roma continues in the new Member States, even as it does in the existing ones.³¹

In an interview with a reporter from the Hungarian Romani magazine *Amaro Drom*, Járóka cited the lack of commitment of older member states to the task of eradicating discrimination *within* Europe, stating:

For years, Greece has been receiving large sums of money to eradicate substandard Roma settlements but the funds have not trickled down and the settlements around Athens are in the same state that I saw them in five years ago when I was there as a student of anthropology.³²

Reflecting on the passage of the “Roma resolution,” MEP Viktória Mohácsi underscored the significance of recognizing anti-Romani racism at the European level:

The importance of the text (...) is that this is the first time that the European Parliament or the EU has declared that within its own borders, there is a human rights problem. (...) It openly states that the Romani people face discrimination and human rights problems, not just in the ten (accession) countries, but in the old fifteen also. (personal interview, 15 June 2005)

These discourses present racism against Romani as a European issue and not just an example of Eastern Europe's "backwardness" relative to the purportedly advanced democracies of "core Europe."³³ By chastising East and West alike, EU-level Romani human rights activists have been able to make their case without appearing disloyal to their nation-states, which are frequently portrayed in the international media posed as the "new Europe" that is only now developing the democratic traditions and Enlightenment values enjoyed by citizens in Western Europe.

A second theme emerging in EU-level discourses on the Romani people is that they are an emergent "European minority" notable for its presence in every country and for the severe discrimination they face from majority groups. Hungarian MEP Katalin Lévai stated, for example, "The largest ethnic minority in Europe today are the approximately 15 million Roma people, who form one of the most disadvantaged social groups of the Member States."³⁴ According to MEP Mohácsi, however, the unresponsiveness of national governments renders the Romani minority more favorably disposed to transnational Europe:

According to public opinion polls, it is in Europe where Romas [sic] feel most European. This statement is not at all surprising, as Roma people are no longer able to believe their own government in any country, especially in Central Eastern Europe. Term after term, different political parties keep replacing each other, but none of the governing political parties have been able to provide a solution to this problem and eliminate discrimination, for instance. The only hope of the Romas lies in the European Union and European Parliament.³⁵

Mohácsi makes clear her criticism of national governments and her hope that European institutions can place pressure on politicians at the national level, beyond the “conditionality” period. Although her strong words do not spare the Hungarian national government, they are somewhat mitigated by the fact that three of the Hungarian MEPs (Mohácsi, Jároka, and Lévai) played key roles as advocates of the Roma resolution.

Finally, increasing attention to Romani human rights at the EU level offers new discursive frames and institutions for addressing Romani grievances, including transnational anti-racist rhetoric and programs, equal opportunity offices and legal tools, and European policies and networks designed to fight “social exclusion.” Activists can achieve new forms of recognition, not just of “minority rights” in the older sense employed in Hungarian institutions, but also in the sense of public recognition of anti-Roma racism in both Eastern and Western Europe. Using the frame of “social exclusion” allows activists to move beyond the traditional minority protection concerns of cultural and linguistic preservation. Hungarian Romani civil rights activists were initially

skeptical of MEP Mohácsi's contention that Roma are a group that identifies closely with "Europe," citing the poorest Romani communities' segregation and lack of mobility:

There are villages where the kids never leave the area because there's no money. They grow up not having seen more than one or two Magyars, or *gaje*. They only meet other Roma. In the 20th century. In an EU member state. And beside the shopkeeper, the old farmer women or the priest they don't run into *gaje*. I mean, what's up with that? (personal interview, 29 April 2005).

Aladár Horváth, one of the leading Hungarian Romani activists, acknowledges the potential usefulness of the recognition of the Roma as a minority group excluded by racism, however:

The Roma are a European people in the sense that they are present everywhere around Europe. But if it's true that one third, or one half of the Roma live in an African state of poverty then there is Africa in Europe, and the Roma are not the most European people but rather they represent discrimination, they represent segregation from European society. The Roma are the most European people in the sense of how racist and discriminatory Europe is. (personal interview, 29 April 2005).

A number of activists interviewed expressed frustration with the requirement that EU applications include a large number of civil organizations because Roma NGOs in the

countryside do not have the relationships or networking capacity to build such collaborative projects.

Horváth and other domestic Romani activists as well as some external observers have cautioned that focusing on the European level may divert attention from the nation-state's responsibilities to its Romani citizens. In the past, Hungarian Roma overwhelmingly preferred to present their case in terms of rights as citizens or an ethnic minority group *within Hungary*. Hungarian Romani activists generally avoided framing Romani identity as one of a "transnational nation without a homeland" because this frame appeared to downplay their claims to their rights as Hungarian citizens. More recently, however, the relative success of Hungarian Romani activists in European institutions has led them to present themselves as the representatives of all the Roma in Europe.

In the 1990s Romani activism in Hungary was largely based on the premise that the Roma had to be regarded as a national minority and that their claims needed to be situated in the arena of the national state. In contrast to many other national minorities in Central and Eastern Europe the main focus of activism was not territorial self-determination, but anti-discrimination, cultural autonomy and social policy. The main issue dividing Romani activists in the 1990s was the question about whether independent protest action was the only acceptable way of organizing politically, or whether it was more appropriate to work within the state structures and state institutions meant to offer the Roma special channels for participation in the local and national decision-making processes.

Since 2004, there has been no single issue or case that stands out as an "emblem" of the new phase in the way that the Zámoly case highlighted the dilemmas of Romani

mobilization during Hungary's march toward accession. MEPs are working on issues that, while European in scope, resonate with Hungarian Romani activists' everyday concerns: unemployment, health, and education. An emerging issue is the distribution of EU funds for a housing program targeting Romani settlements, but it is still too soon to know exactly what shape the program will take and how activists will respond to it (it is notable to mention that housing was the original starting point for the Zámoly case).

As in the earlier Zámoly case, the political opportunities gained by taking Romani grievances to the European level are offset by potential drawbacks: possible cooptation of Romani mobilization at European level; institutional barriers to grassroots Romani participation at the European level; and the ongoing problem of uneven commitment at the national and local government level despite lofty statements to the contrary when a "European" audience is present. Of these problems, Hungarian Romani activists from NGOs in Budapest, Nógrád county, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplény county, and Somogy county repeatedly emphasized the incompatibility between European institutions and funding mechanisms and emergent Romani civil society organizations, when interviewed in 2002 and 2005. Institutional barriers are a particular concern for Aladár Horváth:

But, to turn to things that really matter, structurally the European Union at this point is an organizational system unfit for realizing the integrationist ambitions of the Roma. It is a slow, overly bureaucratic organization motivated by economic interest. (personal interview, 29 April 2005).

A number of activists interviewed expressed frustration with the requirement that EU applications include a large number of civil organizations because Roma NGOs in the countryside do not have the relationships or networking capacity to build such collaborative projects.

Conclusion

Applying Albert Hirschman's concepts to our case, we might conclude that the essential tension in Romani activism in Hungary before 2004 in the context of EU enlargement was one of "voice" versus "loyalty," with very little interest in "exit," in this case emigration or international shaming. When a small group of Romani asylum seekers were granted refugee status in France, it merely contributed to the "voice" versus "loyalty" debate in the domestic context. It did not lead to the visible growth of a transnational or a "European" wing in the Hungarian Romani movement. There were few initiatives from Hungarian Romani activists to pursue a European agenda versus a national agenda. Even when Romani activists relied on European institutions and on a Europeanized discourse, they only did so in order to pursue change in the domestic context.

This situation seems to have become somewhat different after 2004. Here we see a shift in the use of "Europe" in activist discourse. There does seem to be evidence of a growing group of Hungarian Romani activists who do pursue a European agenda for the Roma. Rather than simply arguing that this is the result of the emergence of a European political opportunity structure for Romani mobilization, we argue that the growing Europeanization of Romani activism in Hungary after 2004 rather seems to point to the

growth of a mutually reinforcing relationship between the minority activism and the attempts of the EU to construct a European citizenship. If the Romani movement needs Europe as an external mirror with the potential to “shame” national governments, European institutions may “need” Romani petitioners because whenever social movements or other groups of citizens ask for support, it “ratifies” Europe as a political body that is legitimate, responsive to citizens, and able to act on their behalf. Thus, even when activists make demands beyond the competencies of European institutions, these petitions potentially forge links between the institutions and the group.

Minority groups like the Roma seem thus to be moving from serving as a “litmus test” of Europe’s ability to integrate diverse groups to serving as a model of “cosmopolitan” European citizenship. Like the Jewish minority in Europe, the Romani minority has traditionally served as the excluded “other” of dominant national groups across the continent and was targeted for extermination in the Holocaust. While it seems unlikely that European politicians will soon be citing the Romani people as an exemplar of “European citizenship” (or even as a “model minority”), official discourses supporting a “Europe of minorities” do provide new discursive resources and symbolic capital to Romani ethnic mobilization.

In the long term the results are potentially far-reaching. If Romani activists and European institutions indeed have much to gain from one another and are in fact part of a mutual (but politically unequal) process of co-constitution, ratification, and legitimation, one could wonder whether the adoption of a “European” identity frame by some Romani leaders in the long term might be able to transform the fact that “majority” populations exclude Jews, Roma, and Muslims on the grounds that they are not “European”? Or are

minorities such as the Roma in danger of becoming isolated in Europe *because* of their identification with Europe? Following the resounding “no” votes against the European Constitution, will a time come when *only* minority activists identify with Europe? The evidence in this paper does not point to any clear answers to these rather speculative questions, but it does make clear that the relationship between Europe and minority activism is more complex than one would expect. When one observes a growing support for minority claims from Europe-wide institutions and the emergence of a new European space for minority activism, one should not conclude that minority activism will automatically benefit from this support in a predictable way.

More generally, the case of the Hungarian Roma points to the need to problematize the concept of a “European political opportunity structure” for ethnic minority movements. Just as movement identities (including ethnicity) are constructed by a range of actors in the course of collective action (rather than that they are a stable source of collective action), one can argue that transnational political opportunities are constructed during the process of mobilization. Identifying these political opportunities is not at all an easy affair. In order to know whether institutional and political developments on the transnational level can function as opportunities, it is necessary to examine carefully the ways in which actors perceive, interpret and portray these developments.

The Romani movement with its dispersed target audience and fragmented organizational structure might seem an extreme case, but we submit that this case points to a complexity that affects an increasing number of ethnic minority movements in the contemporary world. The growing transnational space for discourse and action may deeply influence the development of ethnic movements, but it is not so that ethnic

minority movements will automatically be able to build their action upon what at first sight appears to be a transnational political opportunity. In other words, this paper adds empirical support to the assertion recently made one movement scholar:³⁶ although political opportunity approaches help us understand movement development, they do so only if we adopt a *dynamic* model of opportunity and examine how opportunities actually work in relation to a variety of political actors and outcomes.

¹ Chris Rumford and Philomena Murray, "Globalization and the Limitations of European Integration Studies: Interdisciplinary Considerations." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 11, no.1 (2003): 85.

² Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship. Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Soysal argues that rights, participation and representation in contemporary politics are increasingly matters beyond the vocabulary of national citizenship. For a comparable argument, see David Jacobson, *Rights across Borders. Immigration and the Decline of Citizenship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

³ Michael Keating, "European integration and the nationalities question", *Politics and Society* 32, no. 3 (2004), 368.

⁴ John A. Guidry, Michael D. Kennedy and Mayer N. Zald, "Globalizations and Social Movements," in *Globalizations and Social Movements. Culture, Power, and the Transnational Public Sphere*, edited by John A. Guidry, Michael D. Kennedy, and Mayer N. Zald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 3.

⁵ Representative works in this field are Hanspeter Kriesi et al., eds., *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (London: UCL Press, 1995); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements:*

Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶ McAdam, for example, has distinguished the following dimension of the POS: the access to the political system, the divisions within the ruling elite, the availability of elite allies, and the level of state repression (Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*). Seeking to develop a broad pallet of theoretical tools for the analysis of social movements McAdam and others have not restricted themselves to these structural factors. They have also identified mechanisms of influence related to political agency such as framing techniques. For essential work on this last topic, see Robert Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26(2000), 611-639; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 1996; and David. S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30(2004), 125-145.

⁷ Peter Vermeersch, "Ethnic minority identity and movement politics: the case of the Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26, no. 5 (2003), 879-901.

⁸ See, e.g., Rachel Guglielmo and Timothy William Waters, "Migrating towards minority status: shifting European policy towards the Roma", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 43, no. 4 (2005), 763-786.

⁹ James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse, "Monitoring the monitors: EU enlargement conditionality and minority protection in the CEECs" *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 5 (2003), 1-36; Judith G. Kelley, *Ethnic Politics in Europe. The Power of Norms and Incentives* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ John Borneman and Nick Fowler, "Europeanization" *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997), 487-514.

¹¹ Michael Stewart, for example, argues that "for the ordinary Gypsy ... the maneuvers of the Gypsy intellectuals on the national and international stages rarely mean much". (Michael Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies* (Boulder CO and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997, 4).

¹² Cris Shore, *Building Europe: the cultural politics of European integration* (London, New York, Routledge, 2000).

¹³ Apart from a number of political preconditions, the Copenhagen European Council also formulated a number of economic requirements. Together they formed what became known as the “Copenhagen criteria”—conditions that had to be met before a country could start accession negotiations, and were under constant scrutiny during the process of negotiations. Typical for the political Copenhagen criteria is that they fell outside the more technical body of laws and regulations applicant states had to adopt before becoming a member (the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*).

¹⁴ See, Gwendolyn Sasse, “Gone with the wind: minority rights in Central and Eastern Europe before and after EU enlargement”, unpublished paper presented at the international workshop “Ethnic Mobilization in the New Europe”, Brussels, 21 and 22 April 2004, 2.

¹⁵ European Commission. 1997. “For a stronger and wider Union. Agenda 2000.” DOC 97/6.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Heather Grabbe, “A Partnership for Accession? The Implications of EU Conditionality for the Central and Eastern European Applicants.” RSC Policy Paper 99/12, (European University Institute Florence, 1999), 8-9; Jeffrey T. Checkel, “Compliance and Conditionality.” Arena Working Papers WP 00/18, (University of Oslo, 2000), 6-7.

¹⁷ André Liebich, “Ethnic Minorities and Long-Term Implications of EU Enlargement.” RSC Working Paper 98/49 (Florence: European University Institute, 1998); Giuliano Amato and Judy Batt. “Minority Rights and EU Enlargement to the East.” RSC Policy Paper 98/5 (Florence: European University Institute, 1998).

¹⁸ For a more systematic analysis of these interviews, see Peter Vermeersch, *The Romani Movement: Minority Politics and Ethnic Mobilization in Contemporary Central Europe*, (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006). For an article dealing with the EU’s conditionality and its influence on the Romani movement in Slovakia, see Peter Vermeersch, “Ethnic mobilisation and the political conditionality of European Union accession: the case of the Roma in Slovakia”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 1, 83-101.

¹⁹ In the Treaty of Amsterdam, the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of “racial or ethnic origin” was added as article 13. This may be regarded as an attempt to turn the minority protection requirement into an enforceable condition within the Union. Also the Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin and

the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 determining the general framework for equal treatment at work demonstrate the fact that the EU did take some steps in this direction.

²⁰ UNHCR, “Trends in Asylum Applications Lodged in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand: Analysis of the Provisional 2001 Asylum Application Data in 29 Countries.” (Geneva: UNHCR Population Data Unit, Population and Geographical Data Section, 2002), 5.

²¹ UNHCR, “Asylum Applications in industrialized countries: 1980-1999.” (Geneva: UNHCR Population Data Unit, Population and Geographical Data Section, 2001), 168; UNHCR, “Trends in Asylum...”, 25.

²² Since 1993, Hungary has entitled its minorities to form local and national self-governments. These are elected advisory bodies that have a limited say in matters of culture and education.

²³ István Hell, “The Zámoly Roma – the Road to Strasbourg”, in András Kováts, *Roma Migration* (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute of Minority Research – Centre for Migration and Refugee Studies, 2002), 107.

²⁴ Quoted in *The Budapest Sun* 9, no. 13, 2001.

²⁵ Quoted in András Kováts, “Parliamentary speeches related to Roma migration”, in *Roma migration*, ed. Kováts.

²⁶ This was especially the case when a news item was published which described that the Roma from Zámoly was seen by some as a plot by Russian agents to undermine Hungary’s bid for EU membership. The conspiratorial theory that the Russian secret service had mastered the Romani migration to darken Hungary’s human rights record first appeared in 2001 in a series of articles in *Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, a UK journal devoted to the study of secret service operations (“The new Russian Offensive,” *Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, February 26, 2001; “Questions in Budapest,” *Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, March 9, 2001). Although these allegations were strongly denied by Romani activists, political commentators, and Russian officials, they caused a stir in Hungary, both in the media and in public opinion.

²⁷ Quoted in *The Budapest Sun* 8, no. 31, 2000.

²⁸ Quoted in Gustav Kosztolány, *Out of the Ghetto*. (Prague: Central Europe Review, 2001), 67.

²⁹ Before her appointment as MEP Mohácsi was a ministerial commissioner responsible for Romani integration at the Hungarian ministry of education. In December 2004 she took the place of Gábor Demszky, mayor of Budapest, in the European delegation of the left-wing Free Democrats (SzDSz).

³⁰“Hungarian lobby strong after first year in EU, MEPs say,” MTI – Hungarian News Agency Corp., May 27, 2005.

³¹ Livia Járóka, “The Roma in the European Union”, speech delivered in the European Parliament, April 27, 2005.

³² Quoted in László Néző, “Fekete Mercedesek közt: Járóka Livia az EP-ben,” *Amaro Drom*, July 2004.

³³ Daniel Levy, Max Pensky, John C. Torpey, eds., *Old Europe, new Europe, core Europe* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

³⁴ Katalin Lévai, “Media 2007”, speech delivered in the European Parliament, October 24, 2005.

³⁵ Viktória Mohácsi, “The Roma in the European Union”, speech delivered in the European Parliament, April 27, 2005.

³⁶ David. S. Meyer , “Protest and Political Opportunities”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 141.