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In the Czech Republic, they call you 'Mister' – The Migration of Slovak Roma as a Tactic to Overcome Exclusion

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It came as a great surprise when I repeatedly heard the sentence “In the Czech Republic, they call you ‘Mister’” during my anthropological fieldwork in the East Slovak village of Dolina¹. Is the Czech Republic really that different? Having a rather poor opinion about the situation of Roma in the Czech Republic, I tried to find out the basis of this claim. What I found out is that this statement is indicative of how Dolina’s Roma perceive the treatment of Roma in other countries. Thus migration and connection to those who have migrated helps residents of Dolina acquire social esteem and respect. To provide a context for this study I will first describe the situation in Dolina, then introduce the different forms of exclusion and the tactics to overcome it, concentrating especially on that of migration.²

Dolina is a calm village in the hilly region near Prešov with more than a thousand inhabitants, including about 250 “Roma” with Slovak nationality. Local Roma say they are Roma or “Gypsy” rather than Slovak, but they do not declare it in population censuses. To the Roma of Dolina the idea of “changing” their nationality today³ seems unusual and perhaps even a bit discriminatory. Dana Prešovská said: “*Up to now, we wrote Slovak nationality everywhere, so why to write Romani nationality? I am not ashamed that I am a Romani woman, but why I should change my nationality?*” Roma from Dolina are part of the family of Slovak Roma, and the East Slovak dialect of the Romani language is the mother tongue of all children.

In contrast with a frequent view of Slovak Roma as living on the edge of survival, in Dolina they are significantly less marginalised. Roma there do not live in totally segregated settlements next to the woods; they live inside the village in brick houses, all of them have electricity and some of them have running water. This image can lead us to a mistaken conception about an unproblematic coexistence of the residents of Dolina. However, the boundaries between Roma and non-Roma do exist. The Roma of Dolina face several types of boundaries ranging from political and economic to social ones. They exist not only between Roma and non-Roma; the Roma social structure is very divisive as well.

Types of boundaries

Some of the boundaries that divide Roma and non-Roma are visible; Romani houses are older, smaller and are clustered together in the upper part of the village. The pavements along the tarmac road that link the upper part of the village to its centre end just a few meters below the Romani neighbourhood. Till 2003, this was also the case with the water supply and still is

¹ All names of places and people have been changed.

² The text is based on five years of research in Dolina and the Czech Republic that lead to my MA thesis *Roma: Boundaries and Migration*. It was presented at the *Workshop on Developments and Patterns of Migration Processes in Central and Eastern Europe* in Prague from 25 to 27 August 2005.

³ From 1989, they can declare the Romani nationality.

with sewage. The fact that Roma are deprived of these municipal services is one overt sign of exclusion.

Romani houses are situated on both sides of the little river Bystrička. In between the road and the river there is a space where an old lorry often sits idly, where wood is unloaded and women stand chatting in small groups while children play. It is the official Romani communication space, for which Milena Hübschmannová (1999b: 123) uses the term *loci communi* – public space. Families connected by kinship, or extended families, have their own communication spaces in clay backyards.

Non-Roma usually do not stop on the main road, and they seldom cross the river. If they do cross this border, then they are, as a rule, professionals working on an official mission as police, health care providers, priests, local representatives or journalists. The visible territorial boundary is at the same time a social boundary, a boundary of non-communication. Most of the non-Roma do not know and do not wish to know what goes on behind this boundary, and do not consider the neighbourhood a public place. The Romani area remains a white space on the non-Romani communication map of the village.

The neighbourhood is also isolated economically and politically. Roma are not involved in the local traditional economy that is based on the borrowing and lending of machines, exchanges of children's clothes and the pooling of skills and labour. This economy works on a reciprocal, mostly non-monetary basis; it does not distinguish between providers and recipients and is a subject of public pride. Roma, on the contrary, are involved in one-way paid relationships, in a "hidden economy of segregation" that supports existing boundaries (Kužel 2000: 144-164).

Roma are seen as a homogeneous political unit. There is one Romani representative in the village council, but he does not have the knowledge required to verify the information he is given and oversee the flow of funds. The village and the state apply specific rules to the neighbourhood and thus separate it from the rest of the village; meanwhile, the local authority can benefit from the existence of the concentrated Romani neighbourhood. The Romani presence makes the village eligible for grants directed towards "people in material need", but these funds do not tend to be implemented on a "social" but on an ethnic basis.

There are several places where Roma and non-Roma can meet: in the centre of the village, in shops, at the doctor's office, in the local authority building, at school and at work. The possibility to meet at work has remarkably diminished after 1989 with privatisation and the collapse of heavy industry. The current overall unemployment rate of the village is about 30 % while the unemployment rate among the active Romani population is around 80 % and has continued to be on the rise. Because of former workplace contact, older local non-Roma personally know some older Roma. The only other place of intimate daily contact is the local grammar school. The segregation exists even at school; non-Romani pupils refuse to sit next to Roma, there is a Slovak language-only policy in the first years of education, most Roma learn Russian instead of English or German and most of the Roma eat separately in the old dining-hall, where lunches for "pupils in material need" are served.

Boundaries that are even less visible and less known to the non-Roma are the boundaries between Romani families, which are marked by standardised behaviour. The category of ritually unclean persons⁴, frequently found among Roma, exists here as well. Families with a higher status usually do not visit these families, do not drink or eat in their

⁴ Ritual cleanliness is a concept that supports the maintenance of the hierarchy between Roma. There can be unclean objects and animals (dogs, cats) and unclean people (women after giving birth) or body parts (lower part of the women body). Dealing with unclean things requires knowledge of the rules of "good behaviour". Whole families could be contaminated after not having respected these rules (eating unclean food, preparing food in an improper way, doing unclean jobs, etc.). "Unclean" status is inherited. Nowadays, the rules might not be so strictly respected, but the notion of "bad families" persists.

homes, and do not let their daughters to be married to them, as their society is generally patrilocal. Lower-status families usually live further from the centre of the non-Romani village. Women who marry into these families usually come from the villages considered unclean. The knowledge of clean and unclean families and villages is a part of the mental map of Roma in Dolina, and migration of women usually supports this division. Wealthy families are usually most easily integrated into the non-Romani society and are attractive to local authorities as partners for discussion. The relationship to the “right” kinds of people is important in both Romani and non-Romani social structures. The notion of a “bad” family inside the Romani social structure is hard to manipulate and inner Romani boundaries tend to be respected from both “good” and “bad” families. On the contrary tactics are frequently employed in an attempt to improve the standing of a person and his or her family in the non-Romani social structure.

Responses to exclusion

The deteriorating economic situation of Roma, especially after the lowering of social benefits in 2004, constricts their spatial and social mobility. This process which I call ‘territorialisation’ involves strengthening the aforementioned boundaries, the restriction of contact between local Roma and non-Roma, and reduced contact of Roma with the world outside of the village. Families cannot afford to send their child to a secondary school outside of the village, they travel less to visit their relatives and telephone them less frequently.

Many studies consider Roma as a group which is subjected to certain social processes and assimilation efforts of the state. However, if one looks at Roma as actors whose actions and interpretations form an important part of the process, it is possible to find, for example, that growing exclusion is not accepted without counter-action on the part of Roma. Boundaries are a product of people and institutions; they are not static and can be changed by those who they affect. Boundaries are a political matter and how they function depends largely on how different actors negotiate them and on the power of those actors. I will describe three main tactics that Roma from Dolina use to improve their social status in the non-Romani social structure.

The first tactic Roma use to give the sign of one’s “good” status is a visual signalisation. Local Roma have always tried to fight their negative image in non-Romani eyes and prove that they come from “a good family”. Being excluded from the inter-personal communication of non-Roma, the best channel to use is a visual one – building a big house, having a car, buying new clothes, having a satellite TV, a mobile phone or a bathroom. It is of note that the satellite TV does not need to operate, the mobile phone can be used to lull children with its melody although there is no credit, high-heeled shoes can be worn despite the muddy roads and there can be no running water in the bathroom. These things do not have to serve the same function as a non-Roma would expect them to; they signal one’s – and his or her family’s – high status. Apart from such material things, the fact that the child goes to a kindergarten may serve as a signal of status as well – even though the child is there just once in a while. Up to now, Roma of high economic standing could even escape being categorised as a “Gypsy”. Ms. Kohoutová, a non-Roma from a neighbouring village where only two Romani families live, says: “[...] *they are decent, they are no more Gypsies and, above all, they work. Some Gypsies here are natty; boys are dressed up and well-groomed.*” If Roma lose the possibility of showing their economic status, non-Roma will not be able to discern higher-class Roma from lower-class Roma. The visible difference of Roma will grow, and so will the exclusion.

In face to face communication the second tactic called “good references” is used. This tactic is again a mechanism to enable non-Roma to distinguish among Roma. Roma point out that their family is different, that they do not have any contacts with lower-class Roma. Roma try to shift the boundary of “another world” below the position of their family and their village. David Prešovský, a Romani man from Dolina, for example, dissuaded me not to go to one village where 3000 Roma live: *“I don’t recommend you going there, it’s another world. Grass does not grow there and even policemen don’t go there.”* The boundaries of the social status that Roma seek to achieve seemed to be more porous than anticipated, and were supported by references from contacts across the social boundary. To have a good relationship with non-Romani neighbours, to visit non-Roma in their homes, to host non-Roma visitors, to marry a woman from a village where Romani is no longer spoken, or to generally live on good terms with non-Roma, all of these contacts with non-Roma or ‘the right kind of Roma’ build valuable, positive references for the Roma in Dolina.

Migration to the Czech Lands

Migration is another of the tactics used by local Roma to obtain a higher social status. Roma from Dolina have been using it for quite a long time. Since WWII, about half of Dolina’s Roma population have migrated to the Czech Lands. There were several “techniques” or ways to migrate employed in this migration: short-term migration included “examination” of terrain for a possible long-term migration, seasonal work and visits of relatives; long-term migration included migration for the permanent job, reunification of families and migration due to the marriage. After the initial wave of short-term migration for work-related reasons, there was a migration of families and young single people who left to join their future husbands and wives. Those who returned to Dolina used their money to build a house or accumulate a dowry.

Contrary to expectations, in Dolina migration from the WWII till now has not been purely motivated by economics. Moreover, it has not been the sole domain of the poor and was not organised by Czech labour recruitment. After carefully assessing the advantages and disadvantages of migration, one finds that families from all levels of social hierarchy have been leaving Dolina. Their decisions have been largely based on information received from relatives and from individual short-term visits to the Czech Lands. To have a network of relatives who live in Czech part of Czechoslovakia and later in Czech Republic has been a source of income and prestige for families. In fact, to the majority of those who have migrated or their families in Dolina, the only perceived drawback of relocation to the Czech Republic is the loosening of family ties.

Thus far, Dolina’s youth have a much lower level of migration activity than that of the “middle generation” which experienced the socialist regime. This trend is a consequence of the deterioration of three central, intertwined factors. As time passes, Slovak Roma have been losing contact with Czech Roma and Roma who migrated there in the past. Similarly, to Roma in Dolina the Czech Republic seems less close and familiar than it has in the past. Lastly families no longer demand that young people look for jobs outside of their home area. Contacts with Czech Roma have deteriorated for both intentional and unintentional reasons. As time passes, the migrants age, their parents in Dolina die, and they become increasingly integrated into the social structures in Czech Republic. Simultaneously, Roma are becoming increasingly territorialised, and their economic situation is worsening. Aside from these situational shifts, some family members located in Czech Republic have created a social boundary separating them from their relatives in the “backward village” of Dolina.

If the practical value of having relatives in the Czech Republic is diminishing, their symbolic value remains high. The description of their social status is used as one of “good references” about oneself and his/her family. Apart from television programming, accounts from relatives still provide some information about conditions in the Czech Republic. Roma in Dolina learn that jobs and social benefits are easier to come by in Czech Republic than in Slovakia. There exists a stereotypical image of the Czech state and people; Czechs are said to be “less racist”. They allegedly address Roma with the formal grammatical form of “you” – “*Vy*”, unlike Slovaks who use the informal version – “*ty*”. Another popular stereotype is that Czechs use Mister and Missis before a surname to non-Roma and Roma alike and not just a plain surname or a name. Roma from Dolina can thus be proud to say that they have relatives privileged to live in such conditions. The Czech Republic has become the closest and most important point of comparison for Slovak Roma, even for the young people who have never been there. The image of the Czech Republic serves as an important point of comparison, and creates the idea that more equitable and respectable society exists “just over the border”. Using migration as a tactic to overcome exclusion became even more important after a wider comparison of countries further West has become possible with the fall of socialism.

New ways of migration

After 1989 and even more so after 1993, “the West” emerged as a new destination and Roma now employ, together with the techniques of short-term visit and long-term techniques like family reunification and marriage, the application for asylum as a new migration technique. Although asylum is desirable, it is considered too costly and risky, so nobody directly from Dolina has left for “the West”. However, Dolina Roma are aware of some of their Czech relatives who had experienced the asylum procedure, went to the West for a visit or married a “Westerner”. Migrants’ families from the Czech Republic I spoke to mentioned discrimination as one of the most important causes of migration. The moment in which a subjective feeling of discrimination reached an unbearable level was described as a “loss of hope”. The departure was talked about as a completely legitimate tactic to ensure a brighter future for their families. Economic motivations were included, but again they were considered only a part of the expected improvement of situation.

Alžběta Prešovská, a Romani woman from Rokycany in the Czech Republic and relative of the people from Dolina, described her two experiences visiting her sister in England: *“I did not feel any racism there. There was an Englishman, there was a black, there was an Indian, there was a Pakistani, there was a Pole, everyone was the same. We lived there one next to the other, people were willing, they are used to it, they are integrated. But Czechs cannot integrate, they say: ‘You, Roma, have to adapt.’ They are giving us orders... I went there and said to myself: ‘I don’t ever want to return.’ That feeling of freedom that cannot be described.”* Alžběta did not feel any pressure there to prove her “decency” to the majority. To her, freedom was to be herself, without worrying about being seen as “different”. The experience of “being abroad” was a very positive one, but also illuminated the problematic and disrespectful aspects of life in the Czech Republic.

The result of Alžběta’s travels to England is the importance of the concept of “England” to Czech Republic, and her wish that similar conditions could exist in the Czech Republic. Roma who have not visited Western countries feel that the current state of things is unacceptable, but the experience of living abroad plays an important role in the ‘verbalization’ of this concept. The Roma who have spent some time abroad can describe possibilities they had abroad and can become vocal critics of the situation in the Czech Republic.

The important thing is that people with the experience of migration talk about it after returning to the Czech Republic. Through the family information network even people in Dolina knew about Alžběta's migration. The relatives gained a partial image of another system of interethnic relations. This image can encourage them to migrate or to initiate changes in their sending country. It would be a gross overstatement to say that every Roma who returns home becomes a political activist, but there is a clear political effect of Romani migration. Even though the time that migrants spent abroad may be short, migration holds the potential for meaningful experience.

The Roma who choose not to migrate because of the economic risk, for old age or basic satisfaction with their lives often support the migration of their relatives instead. They assist them with financing, provide them with information about discrimination of Roma in the Czech Republic, and they accommodate returnees in their homes.

Conclusion

If one compares migration to the Czech Republic and migration to the West, the techniques might be different (people from Dolina, did not claim asylum in Czech Republic, as did people from some other Slovak villages and the techniques of work migration were not present) but the motivation is the same; to improve the social status of one's family, to improve their economic situation, and to move to a place where there is no discrimination or territorialisation. Roma from the Czech Republic assume that about fifty per cent of Roma from their towns have tried to migrate, which might be quite exaggerated but it signifies the importance of the image of migration. The other two tactics, "visual signalisation" and "good references", can work and are important in the local setting, but none of them brings such a potential of experience.

Revenues from both types of migration can be material (economic) or non-material. Migration, whether personal or through the experience of a relative, remains a popular tactic to improve one's status among the Roma of Dolina. Migrants become owners of a unique experience that can be further used in their activities in Romani and non-Romani social networks. Migration brings a special power that helps to overcome exclusion and territorialisation. The potential of the migration experience, of course, can be exploited on different levels and cannot serve as the only means of the improvement of one's situation. Fighting the mechanisms of social exclusion is a challenge especially for the local authorities and institutions. Without their cooperation significant changes cannot be realised, so future research should concentrate on the institutional reactions as well. The introduction of the (relatively) free movement of EU citizens and the opening of EU labour markets may modify the tactics and require further attention.

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