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Marginality, Ethnopolitics, and The Question  
of Security: The East European Roma

Zoltan Barany

MARGINALITY, ETHNOPOLITICS, AND THE QUESTION OF SECURITY:

THE EAST EUROPEAN ROMA

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## INTRODUCTION

After the fall of communism a plethora of political, social, cultural, and ethnic groups could seize the opportunity to freely organize and assert themselves through the various channels of expressions freed from Communist control. In a matter of months, a wide range of interests that were either repressed or purportedly "represented" by agencies of the party-state could be voiced, debated, propagated, and fought for. These new participants in political and social processes hitherto closed to them faced tremendous hurdles in making their voices heard and getting their messages out. In many cases they were confronted with popular animosity, lack of organizational competence, shortage of funds, and even ambiguities about their own identity.

This paper is concerned with the Roma (Gypsies), the largest ethnic minority in Eastern Europe, who in many ways have experienced enormous changes in their political and socio-economic situations since the fall of the ancien regime. How has the nature of Romani marginality changed since 1989? Is there an unambiguous Romani identity and if so what are its major attributes? How to create a new political elite for a people who had none? How to organize parties for a people who had no history of political activism and what were the chances of political mobilization amongst the Roma who had historically were left out of politics?

What dangers arose to the security of the Roma and, in turn, did they also pose a threat to the security of the majority population and other ethnic minorities around them? The first part of this paper lays out the three theoretical themes--marginality, identity formation, and ethnic mobilization--particularly useful for the understanding of the Roma's conditions. Subsequent sections are concerned with the same issues as they pertain to the case of the East European Roma. The penultimate part of this paper will briefly address the physical security of the Romani population and, on the other hand, the potential threat they may pose to the security of the region. In this paper I employ a multidimensional concept of security and consider its economic, psychological as well as conventional aspects pertaining to the conditions of the East European Roma.

#### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Favorable political conditions may enable marginal groups to improve their situation through political mobilization. A fundamental requirement of political mobilization is the presence of a clearly formulated identity that members of the marginal group share, accept, and uphold. In order to fully appreciate the uniqueness of the Roma's marginal situation, ethnic identity, and

experience with political mobilization, it is necessary to devote some attention to these concepts.

#### A. MARGINALITY

The term "marginality" denotes a subordinate position which arises out of a conflict between races, cultures, religions, lifestyles, social and economic positions, etc.<sup>1</sup> The flip side of marginality is "centrality," a notion that indicates a domination or, at the minimum, a dominant position. Marginality is relative to centrality just as a subordinate position is relative to a dominant one and the identity of a stranger is relative to that of the host. Although the concept of marginality evokes a geometric metaphor of center and periphery, there are many different and interrelated dimensions of marginality (such as socio-economic marginality) which counsel against a mechanical acceptance of this image.<sup>2</sup>

Marginality is a multidimensional condition. On the individual level, a poor and oppressed male, for instance, is often the central and dominant person in a household just as a woman belonging to a dominant ethnic group may be a marginal member in her home.<sup>3</sup> Nearly everyone is marginal in one context or another. To take a specific example, the young Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the scion of Hudson Valley aristocracy who belonged to dominant and

privileged groups in virtually every category (race, gender, economic position, social status, etc.) was marginalized at Groton where his lack of athletic ability relegated to him the role of carrying the school baseball team's bags.

The relative proximity or closeness to the dominant group is an integral factor in determining and maintaining membership in a marginal population. Spatial, social, and cultural proximity between dominant and marginal groups are some of the most important factors that define the nature and extent of a population's marginal condition.<sup>4</sup> Although the immense variety of marginal groups frustrates attempts to arrive at reliable generalizations, one can confidently state that indigenous people, multistate populations who straddle international boundaries, displaced people and refugees, as well as legal and illegal labor migrants are nearly always marginalized.<sup>5</sup>

A marginal condition might result from a variety of sources: distinctive appearance, race, ethnic origin, immigration, culture, place of residence, etc.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, marginality might be eliminated or alleviated by a number of methods: state policies and legislation, changes in societal attitudes, assimilation, emigration, etc. Marginality may be perpetuated by the reaction of the marginal group to its peripherality and/or by the persistence

of a dominant group's discriminatory policies, laws, and attitudes. A dominant group explicitly and/or implicitly discriminates against marginal groups through official policies and/or attitudes shared by a substantial proportion of that group. Although state policies might unambiguously prohibit discrimination (or "marginalization") of any sort, such discrimination may persist through dominantly accepted views, mores and customs, and due to ineffective protective mechanisms for the marginal group. The dominant group need not out-number the marginal group, as is evidenced by the situations of South African Blacks and of Albanians in Kosovo.

Marginality is manifested in a variety of ways: by limitations on political representation, denial of cultural rights, exclusion from certain professions, restrictions on housing, refusal of public and/or private services, etc. Forms of marginalization (political, social, economic, cultural, etc.) may not, indeed, often do not coincide; a given population (e.g., the Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) might be politically marginalized (e.g. barred from public office) but economically dominant, possibly marginalizing others (e.g., refusing to employ members of other ethnic groups). And marginality is not a static condition; through time and across boundaries marginal status may change. For instance, Russians in Estonia enjoyed a dominant position during



the Soviet period but since 1991 under home rule they have been politically marginalized. And while ethnic Turks suffer from discriminatory state policies and social prejudices in Bulgaria, they dominate in Turkey, and can and do marginalize the Kurds.

#### B. IDENTITY FORMATION

A prerequisite step for ethnic groups en route to political mobilization is the formation and definition of their identity. The shared history, traditions, culture, language, and experiences by persons of the same ethnicity to a large extent make up their common ethnic identity. The presumption that an ethnic group would by definition possess a well-formed identity is erroneous, particularly in the cases of such populations marked by cultural, social, and linguistic diversity. According to Esman,

Ethnic identity is the set of meanings that individuals impute to their membership in an ethnic community, including those attributes that bind them to that collectivity and that distinguishes it from others in their relevant environment.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to realize that ethnic identity is only one of a number of other identities (social, occupational, gender, etc.) with which a person or a group of persons might identify. "It is developed, displayed, manipulated, or ignored in accordance with the demands of particular situations."<sup>8</sup> Neither should ethnic identity be confused with national identity; culture, for instance,

is a far more important ingredient of ethnic than national identity.<sup>9</sup>

Even more than national identity, ethnic identity in order to survive needs to be preserved and maintained. Assimilation may be the goal of an ethnic group (but not that of a nation!). Throughout history, the identity of many ethnic groups had, in fact, vanished as these groups had gradually become parts of other ethnic groups and in time adopted their identity. The steadfast maintenance of spatial, social, and cultural distance from other ethnic groups, the refusal of ethnic assimilation and integration may, in favorable circumstances, ensure the survival of an ethnic group's unique identity.<sup>10</sup>

Marginal ethnic groups which maintain nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles, ceteris paribus, are usually more effective in preserving their ethnic identity than their settled counterparts which the dominant population can control with less difficulty. For a heterogeneous ethnic group--one that is marked by geographic, cultural, linguistic diversity and class, generational, or tribal conflict--the formation and articulation of its identity may be expected to be more difficult than for ethnic groups which are more cohesive. Identity is closely connected with collective memory and thus it is reasonable to suggest that literate cultures with

written sources chronicling a common past may be more successful in formulating their identity than preliterate ones.<sup>11</sup> The power ethnic opinion elites derive from their knowledge in preliterate cultures enables them to manipulate their people who, in the process of formulating their identity, might lose their cultural autonomy.

Whether or not members of an ethnic group are aware of their shared ethnic identity they do, by definition, have such an identity. The purpose of identity formation, confirmation, and articulation is precisely to make members of the ethnic group cognizant of their common identity, in other words, to make them appreciate their collective past. An ethnic group which contemplates collective action must succeed in developing

a heightened group consciousness in which cultural traits which were usually taken for granted are given new meanings and in which these symbols become salient markers in the construction of new (political) identities.<sup>12</sup>

There are many ways through which ethnic identity formation may be accomplished. These may include the organization of ethnic festivals, active support of the ethnic group's traditions and culture and participation in related activities, the commemoration of pivotal past events whether fortunate (e.g., a victorious battle) or cataclysmic (e.g., the Holocaust). While the political

mobilization of an ethnic group is extremely difficult without a well-rounded collective identity, such a process itself contributes to the formation of the ethnic group's political identity.<sup>13</sup>

### C. POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Political mobilization is the process through which an ethnic community becomes an active participant in politics through the representation of its collective interests and ambitions. Conditions of relative deprivation--whether cultural, social, economic, or political--are nearly always at the root of political mobilization. Marginalized groups of individuals--more specifically, those excluded from the political process--have found that through the organized representation of their interests they may be able to alleviate or, in a few cases, erase their political peripherality. Although the source of their marginalization may be as varied as gender, sexual preference, and racial or ethnic identity, in a democracy where universal suffrage ensures that nearly all (with the exception of the mentally handicapped, prisoners, etc.) citizens have the opportunity to affect political outcomes marginal groups have been able to get political recognition and clout. Put differently, the power chances of marginal groups are "increased if they manage to organize themselves in a cohesive way, since they are then able to act

collectively to disrupt the wider mesh of interdependencies."<sup>14</sup>

The political mobilization of ethnic groups generally stems from the real or perceived deprivation they feel they suffer owing to the ethnic identity. In the past fifty years many marginal ethnic groups residing in states whose political systems did not forbid their activities attempted some sort of political organization. In a recent study only 27 of 233 communal groups surveyed did not leave any record of political organization since 1945.<sup>15</sup> Successful ethnic political mobilization, that is, one that manages to galvanize and activate a significant proportion of group membership and achieves at least some of its political ends depends on a number of variables.

Some of the most important factors necessary for such mobilizational success include cohesive leadership, viable organizations, past mobilizational experience and political resources, a realistic political program that enjoys the support of the ethnic group, adequate financial resources, the size of the ethnic minority, a legal framework that allows for the expansion of the ethnic group's political role, sympathetic treatment from the state/dominant population, positive media coverage, and attention of international organizations. It may be argued that 1) the fewer the ethnic leaders the more support they will enjoy from their

community; 2) the more reasonable the objectives of the ethnic group the more likely is the successful occurrence of mobilization and their realization (although it ought to be remembered that the realism of the aims is largely situational and depends on who considers what plausible); and 3) the more united and cohesive the ethnic group the smaller the number of its ethnic political organizations.

From the perspective of my case study it is particularly important that during the phase of systemic political change (and especially in the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes) social and political movements--whether urban, ethnic, nationalist, or environmental--seem to flourish.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the East European Roma's political mobilization efforts have been made possible by the replacement of Communist rule with democratizing regimes in the region.

#### **THE CHANGING NATURE OF ROMANI MARGINALITY**

As I noted above, marginality is a condition that may vary with time, place, as well as with changes in the given political system. The purpose of this section is not to offer an in-depth analysis of the various facets of Romani marginality but to suggest the fundamental changes in its nature.

In the case of the Roma it is particularly important to distinguish between three different dimensions of Romani marginality: social, economic, and political. The reason for this distinction is that while the Roma have been a marginal population from their appearance in Europe in the early fourteenth century, they have not always been marginalized in all three areas.

#### A. ECONOMIC MARGINALITY

Until the early twentieth century the Roma's traditional skills--dealing in scrap metals and livestock (particularly horses), repairing pots and pans, etc.--were very much in demand in Eastern Europe's relatively backward, predominantly agricultural economies. In fact, in some historical periods such as the late middle ages, the Roma's skills as blacksmiths, weapon-makers, and metal workers were so highly regarded that, in fact, constituted the practical rationalization for their enslavement in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. By the middle of twentieth century the demand for these skills was gradually disappearing and most Roma were unable to adapt to the new economic realities. As a result, their economic marginality became more acute.

The Communist era brought some important changes in the nature of the Roma's economic marginality. One of the essential

components of Communist economics was full--and mandatory--employment which meant that all Roma had to join the mainstream organized labor force. The new regime, at least initially, did not care much for consumer goods and the types of services that the Roma had provided and, together with the plummeting demand for their skills, a profound change had taken place in their economic marginality. Most Roma were hopelessly undereducated by societal standards and thus joined the work force as unskilled laborers or semi-skilled physical workers in factories, mines, construction, etc. At the same time since practicing their traditional professions was neither feasible nor profitable, the majority of Roma had gradually lost these skills and an important part of their traditional ways of life and identity with it.

It is important to realize, however, that both before and during communism the Roma did have a role to play in the region's economies. They provided worthy and needed services--i.e., practicing their ancient skills and doing much-needed physical labor--and their contributions to these economies were necessary if undervalued. Even during the Communist period the Roma could feel "useful" members of society--that is, after all, what the Communist regimes wanted them to "become"--even if it meant the partial loss of their old customs and way of life. In other words, the dominant



politico-economic group's attitude toward the Roma as far as their economic role was concerned could be depicted as "toleration" in the first half of the century and "inclusion" during the Communist era.

Economic "inclusion" was abruptly changed to "exclusion" after 1989 for the new age signified an unmitigated disaster for the Roma's economic status. Given the a) imperatives of labor rationalization of the economic transitions; b) that most Roma had been employed as unskilled workers; and c) discrimination to which many Roma are subjected at their places of employment; it is not surprising that the Roma have been the first to be fired and the last to be hired. As a result, in the postcommunist period Romani unemployment has skyrocketed across the region. In some rural areas with large Romani population, such as eastern Slovakia, Romani unemployment is nearly universal. In January 1994 when Hungary's unemployment rate was at its highest, 13.8% of the gadje (non-Roma) but 49.7% of the Roma were registered as unemployed.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that many Roma and non-Roma alike register themselves as unemployed even though they may be unofficially employed in the gray economy.

A further factor that has negatively affected the Roma's economic situation in the past several years has been their

exclusion from the various land distribution and de-collectivization schemes. Although many Roma had worked in agricultural cooperatives and on state farms during the Communist period, they did not own land prior to World War II and were not in the position to purchase any after 1989. As a result, many of these people ended up increasing the number of the unemployed and under-employed.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the economic marginality of the Roma has undergone several profound changes in the twentieth century. It is clear that these shifts have had an overwhelmingly negative effect on Romani conditions and that their current economic position is probably more alarming than ever before.

#### B. SOCIAL MARGINALITY

If there is one constant facet of Romani exclusion it is surely their social marginality. Throughout the ages, the Roma have been nearly uniformly disliked, discriminated against, and persecuted by the populations next to whom they had lived.

For the last century or so the Romani predicament has been quite similar across Eastern Europe. It may be conceived of as a vicious circle that begins with substandard education and results in inferior employment opportunities. The consequence is often a variety of social ills ranging from poor health to rampant criminal

activity. The Communists were not unacquainted with these phenomena and endeavored to dramatically improve the educational standards of the Roma, provide them with jobs within the framework of the system of full employment, and extend to them the benefits of universal healthcare and selective housing and social programs. Although there were some variations across the region, there is little doubt that the employment, educational, housing, health, and overall living standards of the Roma had improved although still remained vastly inferior to those of the general population.

The other side of the issue is that these results were achieved at least in part via coercive methods and many Roma simply did not consider a forty-eight-hour work-week and mandatory schooling in the schools of the gadje as benefits. Rather, Romani communities across the region came to the realization that they paid heavily for these "improvements" in terms of a significant loss of their culture, traditions, and identity. The fundamental problem was that while politicians and administrators may have been motivated by desirable objectives their vast majority possessed no knowledge or comprehension about even fundamental aspects of Romani culture, customs, and traditions which, to a large extent, continued to determine their behavior.

Notwithstanding some of the positive aspects of Communist

polices toward the Roma, it should be remembered that the overall approach included numerous discriminatory and coercive elements as well. In fact, none of the Communist states shied away from institutionalized discrimination against and persecution of the Roma in order to achieve their objectives. In Romania and Slovakia their horses and wagons were confiscated to reduce their mobility, in Czechoslovakia Romani women were subjected to involuntary sterilization to reduce their birthrate, in Bulgaria they were forced to Bulgarianize their names, and in every East European state they were assigned substandard housing in urban areas.<sup>19</sup> Although the state prevented the breakout of anti-Roma violence, it rarely restrained the less tangible but extremely pervasive social discrimination against the Roma which showed up in virtually every area of life.

Since 1989 the social conditions of the Roma have undoubtedly deteriorated in every East European state. One of the key problems facing the Romani community in the postcommunist period is the declining participation of Romani children in the education system. While in the Communist era reluctant Romani children were in many regions visited by social workers and educators and often taken to school, since 1989 there is neither the political will nor the monetary resources to employ such people.<sup>20</sup> Education--which is

considered by many Roma and non-Roma activists and scholars the key to the Roma's socio-economic marginality--has profound implications to the Romani community. In several countries of the region various initiatives and pilot programs have been introduced to alleviate this worrisome trend and reverse the poor educational standards of the Romani community. For instance, in Pecs, Hungary a new high-school was established to educate Romani children, in Nitra, Slovakia a program was started to train Romani teachers, and the premier university in Macedonia (Skopje) set aside a number of places for qualified Romani applicants. As welcome as these developments are, they are clearly the exception and cannot hope to solve the vast educational disadvantage of the Roma compared to the other ethnic groups.

Given their desperate economic situation it was not--or, at any rate, should not have been--surprising that Romani crime rates substantially rose in the postcommunist period. While most of the Roma's criminal activities in the past were property-related (such as subsistence theft), since 1989 the number of violent crimes among them has also shown a marked increase.<sup>21</sup> Many of the latter have been responses to anti-Roma attacks by local populations as well as semi-organized racist (mostly skinheads) groups.<sup>22</sup> The socio-economic difficulties affecting many living on fixed incomes

and possessing no convertible skills have led to scape-goating and renewed racism.<sup>23</sup> The Roma, having no powerful protectors, have been easy prey. Dozens of Roma have been murdered and hundreds of their dwellings have been burned down in Eastern Europe. Between 1990 and 1993, skinhead groups murdered 16 Roma in the Czech Republic alone.<sup>24</sup> This problem is further magnified by the fact that while local police generally pursue Romani suspects and criminals enthusiastically, they are also likely to look the other way when Roma and their property are threatened.

### C. POLITICAL MARGINALITY

The Roma simply did not seem to register on the political radar of Eastern Europe's monarchic and authoritarian systems. One of the few exceptions was the "civilizing efforts" of the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa (1740-80) and her son Joseph II (1780-90) who first turned their attention to the Roma and actually endeavored to encourage their social integration.<sup>25</sup> Given the failure of these attempts, for 150 years thereafter the Roma were basically ignored by the politicians of the region. Hitler's solution to the "Gypsy problem" was mass extermination, a program that was not seriously opposed in Eastern Europe and resulted in losses of the European Romani population similar in proportion to those of the Jews.<sup>26</sup>

To say that the Roma had been politically marginalized under

communism is not particularly meaningful since, save for the higher echelons of Communist Party hierarchy, the entire society was excluded from politics. One of the most important changes in the political marginality of the Roma during this period was that even though the Roma numbered in the hundreds of thousands in several East European states (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania), Communist regimes (with the exception of Yugoslavia after 1981) did not even acknowledge their existence as a separate ethnic group let alone give them the rights accorded to other nationalities.

The Communist penchant for establishing organizations in order to control virtually any identifiable group (e.g., women, youth, bee-keepers, grandchildren of partisans) reached the Roma as well. Across the region state-sponsored political organizations were established to give a forum for Romani activists and intellectuals and, more importantly, to keep tabs on them and to control the various debates within the ethnic community. When the "Roma Federations" outlived their usefulness they were unceremoniously dissolved without any explanation (e.g., in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia). One positive contribution of these organizations to the Roma was that they provided some training ground for the emerging group of Romani activists and intellectuals.

The Communist governments should be credited for their limited

policy of positive discrimination which effectively developed the nuclei of Romani intelligentsia. "Promising" Romani youths were selected for advanced education supported by various state programs. The Romani identity of many new Roma intellectuals had vanished in the process, however, and some became increasingly reluctant to identify with their people. In any event, the circle of university-educated Roma slowly but consistently expanded and, once limited private enterprise was allowed in the late-Communist period, the number of well-to-do Roma also started to rise.

It is precisely this extremely small "middle class" that has been able to make a social and political impact on the Romani community in the postcommunist period. Although in the new era the social and economic position of most Roma has clearly deteriorated, their political marginality has diminished. They are not only permitted to form organizations but in several states these enjoy state financial support. While in the past the political marginality of the Roma was the result of the dominant group's exclusionary practices, since 1989 the Roma have had the opportunity to rectify this situation.



## ROMANI IDENTITY FORMATION AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

The Roma are a non-territorial and transnational ethnic group marked by considerable linguistic, religious, social, occupational, and tribal diversity. Notwithstanding their seven-century long presence in Eastern Europe a number of misconceptions survive about them there as elsewhere. The vast majority of the Roma have been settled for generations in this region although there remains a small minority who maintain nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles. There are nearly a dozen major Romani tribes who are often quite antagonistic to each other. The linguistic diversity of the Roma is such that Roma living in France may not be able to communicate with Roma in Russia. As noted above, such diversity, and the fact that Romani culture is fundamentally preliterate with no written language until recently, has made the formation and articulation of Romani identity unusually difficult.

The Roma rather well fits the type of the "sojourners" in Paul Siu's typology who distinguished between three types of strangers: the marginal man, the sojourner, and the settler. In this conception the marginal man is characterized by a "bicultural complex" whereas "the essential characteristic of the sojourner is that he clings to the culture of his own ethnic group."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps owing to their multidimensional marginality and separateness from

dominant people and cultures, the Roma have maintained their unique identity in spite of amazing obstacles. In the postcommunist period one of the main tasks of Romani activists in Eastern Europe has been to articulate this ethnic identity and to encourage the Romani communication not only to accept it but to uphold and strengthen it.

Since 1989 a number of Romani activists and their organizations marked the formulation and endorsement of their ethnic identity as the community's main task. Innumerable Romani festivals have been held--either portraying the Romani culture alone or in conjunction with those of other minorities--across Eastern Europe.<sup>28</sup> In the past several years Romani intellectuals--frequently supported by non-Roma linguists--have done a tremendous amount of work to standardize a written Romani language comprehensible to the Roma around the world.<sup>29</sup> Through new newspapers, magazines, and books on, about, and by the Roma both members of the Romani community and populations around them have been able to familiarize themselves with the treasure trove of Romani culture. Although the negative stereotypes that have been maintained about the Roma are not expected to disappear anytime soon, these efforts have been successful in creating a more positive image about the Roma in Eastern Europe.

One important area in which Romani marginality in Eastern Europe has noticeably diminished since 1989 is politics. The region's new laws on association and political parties allowed the Roma and other ethnic minorities to establish political, cultural, and other organizations. The East European Roma have established literally hundreds of political organizations, but they have not succeeded in gaining representation proportional to the size of their communities. The Romani minorities in Eastern Europe are characterized by diversity and disunity, they do not possess either a tradition of political activism or material resources, and most of their leaders have failed in devising workable political platforms and effectively communicating the community's demands to the state. The seemingly perpetual infighting within Romani parties has led to a proliferation of parties and the consequent frittering away of the Romani vote. For instance, Romania's 17 Romani parties, organized primarily along tribal lines, see each other as rivals not as allies. Their ineffectiveness, in fact, gives an excuse to governments for not paying more attention to Romani concerns.<sup>30</sup> Although some of East European Romani leaders blame gadje politicians for their political problems, the Roma themselves are largely responsible for the weak performance of their political parties. Notwithstanding the shortcomings of

Romani political organizations, the Roma's parties and political activities have drastically increased the presence of the Romani community in national politics.

The postcommunist East European states have developed different approaches toward the Roma. The Roma have been the most adversely affected by the policies of the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia while state policies toward them appear to be the most enlightened in Hungary, Macedonia, and Poland. The Czech Republic's new citizenship law implicitly discriminates against the Roma and Czech authorities have been extremely lenient with anti-Roma persecution in particularly Northern Bohemia.<sup>31</sup> In Slovakia the prime minister, Vladimir Meciar, has openly castigated the Romani community as "socially unadaptable" signalling the central government's attitude which was interpreted by local authorities as an endorsement of anti-Roma prejudices.<sup>32</sup> Hungary's policies toward the Roma have been widely considered as the most progressive in the region.<sup>33</sup> The July 1993 law on minorities (Act LXXVII/1993) forbids policies directed towards assimilation or of changing the ethnic composition of the region and guarantees the rights to communicate with the authorities and allowed all ethnic/national minorities to set up self-administrative bodies.<sup>34</sup> Macedonia's Romani community has fared well compared to the rest of the region partly owing to

the presence of a larger and more politically assertive other ethnic minority (the Albanians), and the enlightened views of the country's president, Kiro Gligorov.<sup>35</sup> Although Romania's human rights record has been widely and justifiably criticized, it is important to note that, while the Roma's conditions are perhaps the worst there of all the East European states, the Bucharest government has created an institutional structure and initiated or participated in a number of programs that have the potential to improve the Roma's lot.<sup>36</sup>

The political institutions of various East European states hold differing attitudes toward ethnic minorities in general and the Roma in particular.<sup>37</sup> Presidents are generally sympathetic toward the Roma and have supported policies targeting solutions to their predicament. Central governments are often less sensitive to minority issues in part because they have more regular contacts with the often prejudiced local authorities and are more cognizant of the great gap between the magnitude of the Roma's problems and their own political imperatives and fiscal possibilities. Local government officials tend to be the least educated and most prejudiced. They often claim that the national officials' more enlightened views are naive and idealistic because their sympathy is not based on actual experience with the Roma. Although many

local officials are genuinely concerned with improving the situation of the Romani community, good intentions are frequently swamped by poor working conditions, inadequate resources, and low material rewards.

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**Table 1** The size of Romani communities and their proportion in the population in selected East European states<sup>38</sup>

	Total population	Roma population	Proportion of Roma in total (%)
Bulgaria	8,950,000	750,000	8.3798
Czech Republic	10,302,215	275,000	2.6693
Hungary	10,335,000	575,000	5.5636
Macedonia	2,034,000	240,000	11.7994
Poland	38,377,000	45,000	0.1172
Romania	23,198,330	2,150,000	9.2680
Slovakia	5,274,335	500,000	9.4804

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The size of the Romani minority in relation to that of the dominant population and of other ethnic minorities appears to make a significant difference in the treatment they receive from the state. The relationship between the Macedonian state and the Romani community there is perhaps the most illuminating example. But one can look elsewhere. In Poland the situation of the Roma is not a major concern for the state given that there are no more than

50,000 Roma in a population of approximately 38 million.<sup>39</sup> In Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, where the proportion of the Roma in the overall population is at or above five percent, they pose a more pressing dilemma to state and society although the actions of some of these governments do not necessarily reflect an awareness of the weight of the issue.

In short, the experiences of the East European Roma underscore the relevance of four criteria of successful political mobilization: the importance of 1) the past mobilization activities and accumulated political resources; 2) the "conventional" factors of group effectiveness (i.e., leadership, platforms, organizations, etc.); 3) state actions; and 4) the size of the ethnic minority. Romani political mobilization have thus far been largely ineffective owing, in part, to the lack of past experiences and the weaknesses in their political organizations. Moreover, the political situation of Romani communities has been determined by the minority policies of the state and the size of Romani minority in the given country.

An important and very positive development in the postcommunist era has been the fact that the Roma and their plight have received more publicity than ever before. International organizations, human rights groups, foreign and domestic

foundations, and the academic community have become more interested in and knowledgeable of Romani issues since 1989. Organizations like Helsinki Watch, Minority Rights Group, and Amnesty International have done a great deal of important work to publicize the abuses of the Roma's human rights. Domestic and foreign foundations and organizations, such as the Autonomia Foundation in Hungary, the Rom Center for Studies and Social Intervention (Romani CRISS) in Romania, as well as the U.S.-based Soros Foundations and Project on Ethnic Relations to mention just a few, have clearly shown that practical programs and initiatives can succeed in making a real difference in the lives of an increasing number of Romani families.<sup>40</sup> In the postcommunist era a number of international Romani organizations have become more active and more responsive to the needs of the international Romani community while other international institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, have pressured East European governments to observe minority rights.

#### **THE SECURITY QUESTION**

The notion of security in relation to the Roma should be addressed from three related perspectives: threats to the physical security of the Roma on the one hand and the danger the Romani



community might potentially pose to the states and societies of Eastern Europe; the cultural/psychological security of both the Roma and the majority population; and the potential changes in the dominant ethnic group's economic security.

#### A. PHYSICAL (CONVENTIONAL) SECURITY

Since 1989 the Roma's physical security has been violated on innumerable occasions. Dozens of Roma have been killed, hundreds of their dwellings have been destroyed, and anti-Roma groups have been increasingly open and unabashed about their activities. In the Czech Republic alone, skinhead groups had murdered 16 Roma between 1990 and 1993.<sup>41</sup> With a few exceptions, local and national police forces have not been successful in effectively resisting such attacks partly due to lack of funding and resources and, in part also owing to their own prejudices. The situation is not uniformly grave as there are important regional variations. States which have been more effective in prosecuting the perpetrators of such violence are usually the same where relatively few attacks have occurred. On the basis of their personal security alone, the least dangerous places for the Roma are Poland and Macedonia whereas the Czech Republic and Romania seem to be the most unsafe.

In the conventional meaning of the concept, the Roma cannot be said to pose a serious security concern in any East European state

at the present time. In terms of potential security threats the only problem worthy of mention has been the international Romani migration which has irritated some European governments (e.g., Germany, France, Czech Republic, Poland) but it has been relatively easily dealt with by simply repatriating them and by offering their home countries financial compensation in some form.<sup>42</sup> In theory, and only in theory could one envision a string of Romani terrorist attacks which could conceivably pose a real security threat to the region's governments and populations. Such a campaign would require a great deal of organizational finesse, total secrecy, and much general sophistication let alone financial resources and therefore appear to be beyond the Romani community's current capabilities in the foreseeable future.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, owing to an overwhelmingly apathetic ethnic community that is more intent on finding solutions to its economic concerns, it is difficult to see widespread Romani support for extremist actions.

A far more threatening scenario may be the criminalization of large segments of the Romani population. This is not at all a far-fetched prospect when considering the dramatic decline of Romani children's participation in Eastern Europe educational systems and the high birthrate of the Romani population. If no substantive, large-scale, social and educational programs are forthcoming to

relieve the Roma's socio-economic problems, thousands of young Roma with little to lose might be motivated to take to the streets.

#### B. CULTURAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL SECURITY

In a very real sense the question of cultural/psychological security is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, ethnic minorities possess the potential to threaten the cultural and psychological security of the populations that surround them. On the other hand, and this is the more likely possibility, the minority group's cultural security and identity might be at jeopardized by the dominant ethnic population.

In times of socio-political upheaval and economic hardship people often blame their problems on those who may have been able to adjust better than themselves or to those who are vulnerable.<sup>44</sup> The Roma have been ideal for this purpose because they do not have powerful domestic or international supporters or protectors. In some of the region's states perpetrators at time "justified" anti-Roma attacks by the Roma's "provocative wealth" and "parasitic lifestyle."

The political mobilization of the Roma appears to have increased the threat that many non-Roma perceive the Roma pose to their psychological security. In the Czech Republic, for instance, although the number of anti-Roma attacks--primarily committed by

skinheads--has decreased since the split from Slovakia, many politicians continue to find it in their best interest to openly discriminate against them. During the campaign leading to the 1996 national elections, Rudolf Baranek, chairman of the Czech Association of Entrepreneurs, posted a "No Roma" sign barring Roma from his hotel.<sup>45</sup> President Vaclav Havel called the sign scandalous and Baranek was demoted from second to fifth place on his party's list of candidates. In a more recent verbal attack on human rights, Miroslav Sladek, Chairman of the Republican Party (which garnered eight percent of the vote in the 1996 elections), declared in his first nationally televised post-election speech in parliament that Romani children should be considered criminals for having committed the criminal act of being born. Sladek likes to talk about the "final solution to the Roma problem."<sup>46</sup>

The cultural/psychological threat to the Roma is more acute in Eastern Europe than the threat they might pose to dominant populations. The omnipresent potential of physical attacks signifies a very real psychological threat for millions of Roma across the region. The threats to their cultural identity are equally important, however. Many "upwardly mobile" Roma feel that they will only be accepted among the majority population if they surrender their cultural identity. In fact, those Roma who

successfully blend into the fabric of mainstream society in an economic sense often find themselves in a socio-cultural no man's land where they are fully accepted neither by the dominant group nor by their Roma cousins. Roma leaders often complain that many educated Roma consciously try to discard their cultural identity and thus the community's desperate needs of educated leaders and role models are not satisfied.<sup>47</sup>

### C. ECONOMIC SECURITY

State-minority relations have an important albeit often neglected economic dimension. The state, particularly a democratic state, must devote resources to social and economic programs to ensure that the reasonable demands of ethnic minorities are met. These outlays might include funds for bilingual or native-language education, preferential terms of credit for minority construction or of leases of state land for agricultural activities, and support for minority cultural and political organizations. Just as importantly, resources need to be allocated to safeguard the domestic physical security of both the minority and the majority groups. States undergoing systemic change from communism to democracy in most cases are resource-poor and must make painful distributive choices.

The political mobilization of the Roma signified the

increasing vocalization of their demands for bilingual education, state support for their organizations, as well as a wide variety of positive-discrimination programs. Although the East European states are woefully ill-equipped to satisfy all or even most of these demands, in the majority of cases they could have done a great deal more to alleviate the Roma' conditions than they have. The recognition that money spent now will, in fact, save a great deal more money later, does not require special forecasting talent but does command political will and the ability to communicate to mostly anti-Roma societies why such expenditures are imperative for the general well being of society. This political will has been generally lacking in Eastern Europe. Partly as a result of the postcommunist economic transition processes in several states some social groups (pensioners, wage-earners, unskilled workers) societal segments have become extremely poor together with the Roma and often they are unable to see the wisdom of "spending money on them."

Another aspect of this question pertains to the enormous resources necessary to maintain public order. The escalating crime rates in postcommunist societies--for a disproportionate part of which the Roma are responsible--require increased government spending on police forces, correctional services, and the prison

system. The population that often has an exaggerated conception of Romani criminality resents that a growing portion of public spending is devoted to fight against and prevent crime.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although the Roma constitute by far the largest ethnic minority in Eastern Europe their political representation in the local and national legislatures is clearly inadequate. Considering that they have been marginalized socio-economically and/or politically for centuries, the absence of actions that could pose a potential threat to the security of this region is somewhat puzzling. Still, as I have attempted to show, there are compelling reasons for the lack of such security threats in the past and at this point it is difficult to see how this state of affairs could drastically change in the future.

One of the important reasons for this conclusion is the overall character of Romani marginality. Since the reign of the Empress Maria Theresa a number of rulers in various system types (including the Communist regimes) have attempted to assimilate or integrate the Roma who steadfastly refused to cooperate. Since 1989 their relative status *vis-à-vis* the rest of the population has clearly deteriorated in socio-economic terms although their

political exclusion has diminished. They remain by far the least educated and least organized ethnic group in these societies; moreover, owing to their great diversity, traditional distrust of authority, and experience of having seen the demise of one Romani organization after another, a drastic change in this area is difficult to foresee. The shortage of widely respected Romani leaders and role models, the paucity of Romani intellectuals, the inadequate education of nearly all Roma, the absence of cohesion among their groups, the almost total lack of a tradition of concerted action, and the low organizational culture of existing groups are all reasons supporting this conclusion.

Since 1945, both the absolute size and proportion of the Romani population has grown quickly in nearly all East European states. This demographic trend is expected to continue given the relatively slow increase (or, in some cases, negative growth) of dominant ethnic groups and the still widespread ignorance of and resistance to modern forms of contraception among the Roma.<sup>48</sup> Neither the Roma nor the socio-economic and political dilemmas they pose to these governments are going to go away. Realistic and long-term programs need to be devised and implemented in order to begin solving what appear to be profound and long-term social and economic issues. Some of the critical prerequisites of any



potential solutions are governmental determination to alleviate the Roma's socio-economic marginality and a significant amount of financial resources necessary for their implementation. At present both of these criteria appear to be missing in some East European states while in others the will to reform is not matched by available funds.

Surely, another equally important imperative for achieving satisfactory long-term solutions to the Roma's predicament rests with the Roma themselves. The nascent Romani political mobilization efforts have been relatively successful in attracting the attention of states and some international organizations to their problems but have failed in becoming an active participants in the search for remedies. In other words, aside from voicing their demands for attention and resources the Romani community as a whole has been unable to contribute to its salvation. An important reason for this failure has been the Romani political organizations' extremely low level of institutionalization.

A cursory evaluation of Romani parties and non-party political organizations by the four criteria set out by Samuel Huntington reveals that, on all but one count, Romani institutions receive poor grades.<sup>49</sup> First, Romani organizations tend to be rigid and unadaptable. Even petty disagreements between party leaders

customarily lead to organizational break-ups rather than accommodation. Second, the typical Romani organization has a simple structure (usually few if any subunits) and few, often ill-defined, objectives. Such goals may be propitious (e.g., averting the construction of ghetto-like settlements for the Roma by local authorities) or unethical (e.g., to squeeze money out of minority councils for personal gain) but rarely do these (or any other) single-issue organizations survive if they fail to attain their goals. Third, on the "autonomy-subordination" scale Romani political organizations fare better. They are, indeed, highly independent but the reason for their institutional sovereignty may well be their lack of accountability. To the extent that there is any stable membership of these organizations it tends to be divided and lacks the political agility to hold leaders responsible for their misdeeds. Finally, Romani parties across the region are famous for their disunity. One of the key reasons for the astonishing proliferation of Romani organizations has been the lack of coherence and unity within them.<sup>50</sup>

This unfavorable report on the level of Romani political institutionalization is not intended to suggest that progress is unlikely to occur. As Romani organizations and their leaders mature by virtue of participating in the political process and

learning the rules of the game they are likely to achieve a higher level of institutionalization and develop more progressive and effective organizations. It is important to recall that the Roma constitute an extremely diverse population with minimal political experience and age-old suspicions of organizations and structured activities. Thus, the initial failings of Romani politics should not be unexpected.

#### NOTES

I am grateful to Robin Alison Remington of the University of Missouri-Columbia for her insightful comments and criticisms.

1 For definitions and some of the classic works on marginality, see Georg Simmel, Soziologie: Untersuchen uber die Formen der Vergesellschaftung (Berlin: Duncker and Humbolt, 1908); Robert E. Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," American Journal of Sociology, 33 (May 1928): 881-893; Everett V. Stonequist, The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937); and Thomas McCormick, "Marginal Status and Marginal Personality," Social Forces 34 (October 1977): 48-55.

2 This is especially true for a Marxist approach to the subject. See Antoine Bailly and Eric Weiss-Altaner, "Thinking About the Edge: The Concept of Marginality," in Costis Hadjimichalis and David Sadler, eds., Europe at the Margins: New Mosaics of Inequality (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1995): 219-232.

3 For an insightful treatment of this notion, see Jung Young Lee, Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), chapter 2.

4 On this issue, see Lesley D. Harman, The Modern Stranger: On Language and Membership (Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), 12-13.

5 Sam C. Nolutshungu, "International Security and Marginality," in Sam C. Nolutshungu, ed., Margins of Insecurity: Minorities and International Security (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1996), 21-22.

6 This and the next paragraph are taken, with some changes, from Zoltan Barany, "Living on the Edge: The East European Roma in Postcommunist Politics and Societies," Slavic Review, 53:2 (Summer 1994): 323.

7 Milton Esman, Ethnic Politics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 27.

8 Anya Peterson Smith, Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 1.

9 See Cynthia H. Enloe, Ethnic Conflict and Political Development (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), 159.

10 For an interesting discussion of cultures of progress and survival, see John Berger, Pig Earth (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1979), 195-213, and especially 204.

11 See David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and James Fentress and Chris Wickham, Social Memory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Another side of the same coin is that members of a literate culture are often able to manipulate those of a preliterate culture.

12 Beatrice Drury, "Ethnic Mobilization: Some Theoretical Considerations," in John Rex and Elizabeth Drury, eds., Ethnic Mobilization in a Multi-Cultural Europe (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1994), 22.

13 For an unorthodox treatment of this notion, see Anne Norton, Reflections on Political Identity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

14 Stephen Mennell, "The Formation of We-Images: A Process Theory," in Craig Calhoun, ed., Social Theory and the Politics of Identity (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 183.

15 Ted Robert Gurr, Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1993), 7.

16 C. G. Pickvance, "Where Have Urban Movements Gone," in Hadjimichalis and Sadler, Europe at the Margins, 206. For a substantive discussion see chapter 2 ("Regime Change and New Ethnopolitics") in Rasma Karklins, Ethnopolitics and Transition to Democracy: The Collapse of the USSR and Latvia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 23-41.

17 "Aranykulonbseg," Amaro Drom (Budapest), 6:3 (March 1996): 15.

18 On this issue, see Alaina Lemon, "No Land, No Contracts for Romani Workers," Transition, 2:13 (28 June 1996): 28-31.

19 See, for instance, Elena Marushiakova and Vaseli Popov, Gypsies (Roma) in Bulgaria, manuscript, 1995, 40.

20 Interview with Catalin Zamfir, former Minister of Labor and Social Affairs (1990-1991), Bucharest, 1 June 1996.

21 See, for instance, Zoltan Barany, "Living on the Edge: The East European Roma in Post-Communist Politics and Societies," Slavic Review, 53:2 (Summer 1994): 331.

22 This phenomenon has been widely chronicled in the literature. For comprehensive treatments see Isabel Fonseca, Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey (New York: Knopf, 1995); and Paul Hockenos, Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Eastern Europe (New York: Routledge, 1993).

23 See, for instance, Ilona Tomova, The Gypsies in the Transition Period (Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 1995), 81-84.

24 Zoltan Barany, "Grim Realities in Eastern Europe," Transition, 1:4 (29 March 1995): 5.

25 See Archduke Joseph with Henrik Wislocki, A ciganyokrol (Budapest: Pallas, 1894); and Willy Guy, "Ways of Looking at Roms: The Case of Czechoslovakia," in Farnham Rehfisch, Gypsies, Tinkers and Other Travellers (London: Academic Press, 1975), 208-210.

26 The Romani Holocaust or "Porajamos" has only recently become a topic of serious scholarly inquiry. For examples of this literature, see Alexander Ramati, And the Violins Stopped Playing: A Story of the Gypsy Holocaust (New York: Franklin Watts, 1986); Betty Alts and Sylvia Folts, Weeping Violin: The Gypsy Tragedy in Europe (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1996); and especially Henry Friedlander, The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

27 Paul C. P. Siu, "The Sojourner," American Journal of Sociology, 58:1 (1952): 34.

28 Recent examples are the Romani festival in Bratislava (July-August, 1996) financially supported by the Charter '77 Foundation and the annual Day of Nationalities held on August 20 across Hungary.

29 For a report on an international conference set out to standardize Romani dialects, see International Herald Tribune, 28 August 1990.

30 Laura Bruni, "Living on the Edge," Index on Censorship, 25:4 (August 1995): 10.

31 See, for instance, Fredrik Folkeryd and Ingvar Svanberg, Gypsies (Roma) in the Post-Totalitarian States (Stockholm: Olof Palme International Center, 1995), 34-38.

32 See, for instance, Klara Orgovanova's testimony and prepared statement, Human Rights Abuses of the Roma (Gypsies), Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations, and Human Rights of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 7-8, 26-28.

33 See the interview with Andras Biro, "Helping Self-Help," The Hungarian Quarterly, 36:140 (Winter 1995): 70-77; and author's interview with Nicolae Gheorghe, Bucharest, 31 May 1996.

34 "On the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities," Kisebbsegi Ertesito (Budapest: Office for National and Ethnic Minorities, 1993).

35 See Zoltan Barany, "The Roma in Macedonia: Ethnic Politics and the Marginal Condition in a Balkan State," Ethnic and Racial Studies, 18:3 (July 1995): 515-31; and Mirjana Najcevska and Natasha Gaber, "Survey Results and Legal Background Regarding Ethnic Issues in the Republic of Macedonia," Center for Ethnic Relations of the University "St. Cyril and Methodius" (Skopje), October 1995.

36 See, Zoltan Barany, "Favorable Trends for Romania's Roma," Transition, 1:19 (20 October 1995): 26-31.

37 On this issue, see Barany, "Grim Realities in Eastern Europe," 3-4.

38 I arrived at these numbers of the Roma by taking the mean of the 'minimum' and 'maximum' figures in Jean-Pierre Liegeois, Roma, Gypsies, Travellers (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press, 1994), p. 34. Although I disagree with some of the numbers in this book--in my view the numbers for Macedonia and Romania are exaggerated; they are closer to 75,000 and 1 million, respectively--I elected to use them here for the sake of consistency. General population numbers were taken from Stephen White, Judy Batt, and Paul G. Lewis, eds., Developments in East European Politics (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

39 Interview with Andrzej Mirga, Co-Chair of the Council of Europe's Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies (Cracow, 29 July 1996).

40 See, for instance, "Helping Self-Help," The Hungarian Quarterly, 36:140 (Winter 1995): 70-77; and author's interviews with Nicolae Gheorghe and Livia Plaks (Bucharest, 31 May 1996).

41 Zoltan Barany, "Roma: Grim Realities in Eastern Europe," Transition, 1:4 (29 March 1995): 5.

42 See, for instance, Washington Post, 18 September 1992; New York Times, 7 February 1993; and Isabel Fonseca, Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey (New York: Knopf, 1995), 199-206, 220-229.

43 See Zoltan Barany, "Ethnic Minorities and Regional Security: The Case of the East European Roma," paper read at the Ethnic Conflict and European Security Conference, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario (23-24 September 1994).

44 See Zoltan Barany, "Mass-Elite Relations and the Resurgence of Nationalism in Eastern Europe," European Security, 3:1 (Spring 1994): 162-181.

45 OMRI Daily Digest, no. 60 (25 March 1996).

46 Interview with Jonathan Stein of the European Studies Center of the Institute for EastWest Studies, 14 August 1996, Prague.

47 See, for instance, International Herald Tribune, 1 December 1986.

48 In Hungary, for instance, the Roma currently make up about five percent of the population but their share is expected to increase to eight percent by 2015. Author's interview with Eva Orsos, President of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities (Budapest, 25 July 1996).

49 See the discussion on the criteria of political institutionalization in Samuel P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 12-24. I am grateful to Robin Alison Remington for urging me to consider Huntington's criteria.

50 In the fall of 1996 more than 240 Romani organizations were registered in Hungary.