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DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF SELF IDENTITY: CONTEMPORARY FINNISH ROMA IN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract: *The article examines the current state of Finnish Roma group identity. The Roma people constitute a pan-European minority and have been living for centuries in almost all European countries. The history of Roma is a part of European history, and Roma culture is part of European culture. The general perception is, however, that Roma are still strangers in society. As “others”, they were forced to develop a special way of interaction with members of the majority population. The way involved (besides other changes) modifications of self identity, occurring in various forms and to a different degree, depending on the individual and the group.*

The case of Finnish Roma constitutes an example of deconstructing and reconstructing self identity in the complex process where the group’s place in the society has to be constantly negotiated.

The Finnish Roma, like the other Gypsy communities in the Scandinavian countries, remain on the cultural fringe. The experience of coexistence of these nomadic people within the societies of the North European countries shows various (both positive and negative) sides of relations of indigenous inhabitants with the incoming strangers.

Today Finland is a home for over five million citizens, among whom the majority are indigenous Finns constituting 94% of the population. The rest (not counting the refugees and the immigrants with residence permits) are four languages minority groups: finlandssvenskar, the Saami, the Roma, and people using sign language (suomi.fi). The other method of typologization of minority groups divides them into the so-called old, historical or national minorities in Finland: “The “ old” , “ historical” or “ national” minorities in Finland today are the Swedish speakers, the Saami, the Roma, the Jews, the Old Russians, and the Tatars.” (virtual.finland.fi)

The exact number of the Roma inhabitants is difficult to establish for certain reasons: first of all, there are limitations imposed by the Finnish law which prohibits revealing personal data regarding ethnic background or religion, and secondly, some of the Roma purposefully do not wish to reveal their ethnic origin. However, official statistics give the approximate number of the Roma as 10,000 people, which would constitute around 0.19% of the whole Finnish population. The same source of information – Finnish Statistics – mentions also 3,000 Finnish Roma inhabiting the east part of neighbouring Sweden. This specific settlement is a result of two big economic migration waves which occurred in the sixties and seventies of the last century. The Finnish language can still be heard in that region.

An outline of the history and the present times

The historical beginnings of the Roma arrival in Scandinavia date back to the XVI century. The Finnish Roma, belonging to the *Kaale* group, came from the West, and the route of their journey led from the British Isles, through Denmark, and Southern Sweden. Also, the migration from the East took place - from the areas of the contemporary Baltic countries, and North West Russia.

The very first record of the Roma in Sweden (which ruled over the Finnish territory) is written in the Stockholm Annals under the year 1521. The next mention of the Gypsies in the Annals appears 40 years later, followed by two other, in which the minority group is named Tatars. Since the beginnings of

Roma presence in Scandinavia, the group experienced hostility coming from the receiving society. Gypsies were pushed eastwards, where the land was sparsely populated and needed to be settled. Such moving of the Roma was mirrored in the Swedish law (obligatory also in Finland), which ordered settling of the Gypsy people on the Eastern side of the Scandinavian Peninsula.³ Moreover, those who did not obey the law were in danger of being sentenced to death according to the legislation established in 1637 (Social- och hälsovårdsministeriets 6). Another example of the hostile attitude towards the minority was not allowing the Roma to take part in church ceremonies or to seek a doctor in case of emergency.

Relative liberalisation of the law took place between 1750 and 1850, when it was not as strictly executed as it had been before. However, the thaw did not last long. The recurrence of discrimination in the second half of the XIX century, forced the travelling groups to unconditional settling down and leading non-nomadic life, which was abnormal for the Roma culture.

At the turn of the XIX and XX centuries new obstacles arose for the Roma people. In 1901 the first legislative act implemented by Russia on the non-autonomous Finnish territory made the minority assimilation one of the pillars of the national policy. In the Roma particular case, it assumed purposeful, obligatory “remodelling” of the Gypsy culture in order to create a more unified one, free of its typical characteristics. The process of unification consisted once again of moving and migrating restriction. Even Finland’s gaining of independence in 1917 did not bring positive changes for the marginalized group. On the contrary, crossing the Swedish-Finnish border was strictly prohibited for the Roma, especially in the years 1934 – 1954. At the same time, some of the Swedish Roma were sterilized in order to keep the Swedish society racially “clean” (Roth 106).

The policy of the Roma assimilation in Finland continued in the second half of the XX century. The legislative act passed in 1952 imposed placing Gypsy orphans and half-orphans in the orphanages run by the state. “Tearing off” the children from their ethnic culture was regarded as an effective way to instil the Finnish national consciousness. The strong support for this policy came from the mainstream society, which allowed conducting the practice until the 70’s in the XX century.

Another phenomenon that occurred at that time involved intensive religious (Evangelical and Lutheran) indoctrination, which aimed at implementing so-called “new” and “better” Christian values. Simultaneously, attempts were made to remove the Romani language from the public sphere, by prohibiting it in the public places. All this was accompanied by the atmosphere created in the Finnish society where the Romani language and dress became signs of social backwardness. The real ethnic renaissance came in the 80’s of the XX century. It was triggered by a few factors: first of all, passing the law which made discrimination illegal, secondly, the attitude of the Roma themselves – proud and willing to stand up for their culture and identity, and thirdly, the less hostile attitude of the majority towards the minorities.

The symbolic and breaking year for Roma was 1995 when Finland joined the European structures. Many changes have been reinforced since then, both in the legislative and social dimension. The Finnish legacy guarantees the right of the Gypsy minority to preserve their culture and language, to form ethnic organizations, to introduce lessons in the mother tongue – Romani, at school and, once a week, to broadcast the news in Romani on the national radio station. All these actions have their legal source in the new constitution of Finland of the year 2000. The supreme ordinance in paragraph 17.3 clearly states equal rights of the minorities to cultivate, preserve and develop their culture, language and religion.

In the case of the Finnish Roma, the spokesperson for minorities in the Ministry of Labour (2000) and four regional offices (2004), which cooperates closely with the government representatives,¹ plays a very important role in the formation process of equal rights.

¹ The offices in the West, Southern and Eastern Finland and in Uleåborgs län.

Open dialogue

The dialogue between the Finns and the Roma proceeds on different levels. On the state level it happens between various government ministries and representative bodies of the minority. On the local level, both legal persons, in forms of social and cultural organizations, and private persons are involved in the co-operation. An example of this kind activity is given by *Romano Missio*, one of the five leading Roma institutions. Established in 1906, the oldest child welfare organization maintains two orphanages, one family home, organizes summer camps for Gypsy children and teenagers, and cooperates closely with the local Finnish governments, establishing an efficient link between the society of the majority and the minority. In addition, *Romano Missio* publishes its own magazine “Romano Boodos”, which comes out five times a year.

Finitiko Phirro Romano Missio (established 1964) is a much younger organization, engaged in the missionary and humanitarian development work in Finland and around the world. Moreover, it organizes seminars and summer educational camps for the Roma. Similarly to the first one mentioned, *Finitiko Phirro* also publishes its quarterly magazine called *Elämä ja Valo*² which contains articles in Finnish and Romani.

On a more secular basis, the organization called *Finitiko Romano Skokka*, set in 1967, promotes the idea of increasing awareness among society members of the civil rights, culture, language and tradition varieties. It fights also against discrimination promoting equal rights with regard to education, housing, life conditions and job market. “Zirikli” magazine is a useful vessel to convey the above ideas and issues. A vital role for the Roma community is played by the organization called *Ryhdy* (established 1993), which constitutes a kind of network of the Gypsy representatives working as liaison persons between the Roma minority and the Finnish authorities. After fifteen years of activity, *Ryhdy* belongs to the leading bodies in the cultural, social and political dialogue led in Finland today (National Minorities of Finland).

The most complex and developed institution is the Advisory Group for Roma - *Romano Saakengo Rakkibosko Skokka*, which has been operating since 1956 under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The aim of the group, whose many members are representatives of government departments and the representatives of the most important Roma organisations, is to launch initiatives and proposals that may lead to legislative and administrative reforms. The common efforts should simplify functioning of the minority group within the dominant society. (Social- och hälsovårdsministeriets 14)

The Finnish Roma participate actively in works of international co-operation such as European Commission, ERGO (European Roma Grassroots Organization) or UNO³. Their official international co-operation is conducted primarily through the proposals of solving key issues such as: battling discrimination and prejudice, equal access to education, job market, or health service.⁴ Thanks to their initiative, in 2002, with the support of European Commission, the Finnish Ministry of Education, the Nordic Cultural Foundation and Ars Baltica the International Roma Writers Association - IRWA - Kansainvälinen *Romanikirjailijaliitto* was established, gathering partners from many European countries, e.g. Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, Italy, Poland, Romania and Macedonia. The basic aim of the organization is the cultivation and development of the Roma writings, language and culture, maintaining the intercultural dialogue and consolidation of the minority groups through art and literature (ERICarts, romaniwriters.com).

² In free translation: “Life and Light”.

³ Miranda Vuolasranta was the first Roma person who took part in the Works of the European Commission in October 2002.

⁴ Relations with the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) Co-operation with DG IV Project “Education of Roma Children”, the first Roma employee in the Council of Europe in its Roma, Gypsies and Travellers Division - Miranda Vuolasranta.

Language and literature of all kinds constitute the basic tool of communication between a minority and a majority group. Publishing writings that undertake the topic of the Roma in Finland has an educational function, which helps to bring both groups closer to each other and communicate better.

The publications can be categorized according to the topic into four groups:

-informative writings, which come from non-governmental organizations: - they undertake the problems of fighting with discrimination, xenophobia, and racism;- they describe the history of the Roma, their culture, tradition, customs and habits. The aim of these is to inform, educate all society, and inspire open, liberal attitude of tolerance and respect of other cultures.

-publishing of government institutions, such as: - Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; - Immigration Office; - Ministry of Labour. The target of the above is to deliver the statistics and the information needed to settle the formalities regarding functioning of a person as a member of society;

-cultural texts dealing with: -the culture and the language of the Roma, preserving it and developing; - Finnish Roma identity and its core elements, the process of constructing one's identity; -similarities and differences (cultural, language) within the Gypsy group;

-sociological texts about the problems of: -the status of the individual within the minority group; -the relation between the majority and the minority groups; -marginalization and social exclusion of the minorities.

The numerous publications and the variety of the published texts manifest the concern to create a friendly atmosphere and to enable the majority group to get to know the Roma. Literature with its broad multifariousness occurs here as an important means to help discovering and learning about each other. This in turn, may gradually lead to mutual acceptance and co-operation. It is a long and costly process which involves first of all fighting with stereotypes and prejudices developed over the centuries. With the nearly 500 year presence of Roma in Scandinavia, it is not possible to quickly heal wounds inflicted on the sixteen generations.

The stereotypes and prejudice against the Gypsies were reinforced through strengthening the attitude of dislike and hostility. The examples of these deep-rooted beliefs are the opinions that the Roma are unable to work efficiently and have a tendency to cheat and steal.⁵ Prejudice and false images regarding the nomadic lifestyle of the Roma are erroneous. At present, about 20% of the Roma groups in European Union live a not settled (nomadic) life (Dosta 7). The other examples of the stereotypes are the image of the Gypsy clothing, their jobs, customs and habits, their family life, limited abilities to gain knowledge and learn. Especially the last one seems to be, paradoxically, confirmed by the surprisingly high number of the Roma children attending special needs schools (for children with learning difficulties). The fact is not, however, linked to the worse predisposition of those children to learn, but to the curriculum, which is not adjusted to such cultural differences. (Hoelscher 17-20)

The media such as daily newspapers, magazines, the TV, the radio, or the Internet have played a vital part in strengthening the stereotypes regarding the Roma lifestyle and culture. Journalists, consciously or not, have left the "open door" for the simplified interpretation of events in which the minority group individuals belonged. Usually, through such manipulation, the minority was the disadvantaged side. Finnish literature also contains such examples of stereotypes, presenting the Roma as:

- romantic heroes – free wanderers, not tamed by civilization, beautiful, energetic, sentimental, musical, "the children of nature" who live according to nature's rhythm.

- mysterious characters – gloomy, unknown, not revealing their culture or customs, speaking "strange", not understandable language.

⁵ This is not only a local or a regional problem. As one can read on the website of the European Commission: „ (...)Today anti-gypsism has become a worrying phenomenon thriving on age-old myths and constantly resulting in all forms of discrimination and aggressions. The European Commission Report on the situation of the Roma and Sinti in an enlarged European Union states that "the treatment of Roma is today among the most pressing political, social and human rights issues facing Europe". Source: Council of Europe. Roma and Travellers. <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/Coordinator/Report2004_en.asp>

- arousing sympathy – poor, neglected, socially “retarded”, unable to keep up with the progress of civilization, needing the constant care and concern of the society.

- individuals who are social misfits, excluded from the society because of their inborn inclinations to live “sinful” life. Such an image clearly manifests the attitude of disdain and hostility towards the Roma people.

These tough and straightforward images of the Roma characters, having such simplified construction, reinforced the distorted image of the minority in the eyes of the majority. The discomfort caused by such a picture of themselves caused various reactions of the Roma. Therefore elements such as shame, confusion, disorientation, but also prejudice and pride, appeared when establishing the Roma identity. Goffman, when writing about shame, said that it comes from stigmatization (Goffman 20-35), which is born from the “trained” and approved by the group's negative interpretation of the qualities of being different. Race, ethnic background, nationality or religion, constitute in some cases such determinants of otherness or dissimilarity.

Contemporary Roma - actors of the social interaction, aware of being “different,” undergo the process of reconstructing their “stigmatized” identity. This applies not only to the whole group (the Roma, the Finnish Roma) but also to individuals. In extreme examples being “not the same or alike” is perceived by themselves as a burden, causing the feeling of shame and the need to hide the inconvenient quality (in this case their ethnic background). Stigmatization – as mentioned above – is a process which, in order to take place, must be commonly approved. Approval and acceptance must exist; only then will it be possible to experience true mutual respect and equal rights for all society members.

The present times

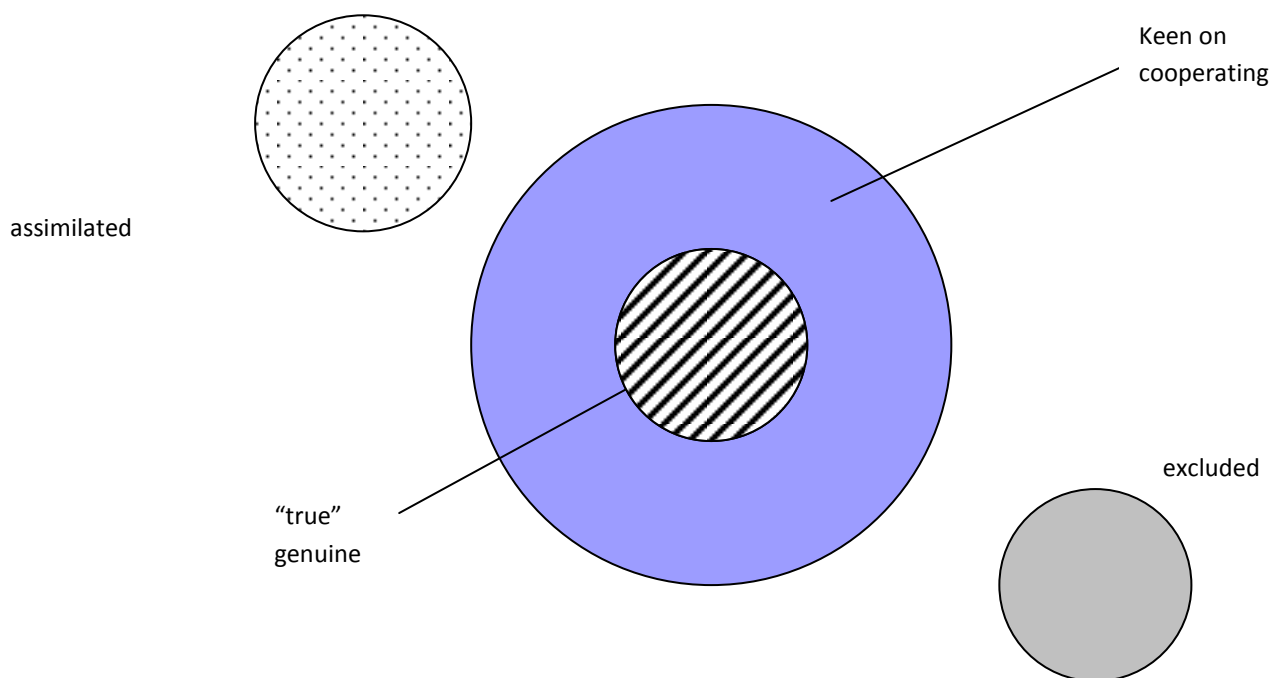
Today the relations between the Finnish Roma and the majority group take various shapes: from the most clear, orthodox one, to the liberal attitude, open and ready for a dialogue with the majority. There are also the examples of the social margin – people living their lives in constant tension, fear, and even being ashamed of their background. The possible shades of meaning between the concepts of *pride* and *shame* mark the area in which the identity of the Finnish Roma is forming. The process is in progress. It is dynamic, but, to a certain extent it can be predicted. It is desirable that the space is filled with pride and satisfaction of being Roma. This actually can happen, if favourable conditions for open dialogue between the majority and the minority groups are created. Both sides need to be ready for that. It seems that they are, since on both sides there are more and more people engaged in the dialogue.

The most open “speakers” on the side of the minority are the individuals who have strong Roma identity, which is the basis of their pride and self-confidence. Feeling safe in the zone of their own culture, they move with relative ease in the Finnish social space. Gaining the competence for such *travel*, they become the “ambassadors” of their own group. Their skills and abilities to communicate, gained through education and professional work result in their open attitude towards searching for the common language with the Finnish society. To this group those individuals belong who respect the norms and ethnic culture and are able to care for it along with the values of the Finnish cultural patterns. When in contact with the majority group, they do not avoid the factors of the ethnic culture such as language or clothing, and also gain respect because they are well educated or have a good job. However, such an “in between” position is stressful, as it requires being constantly alert and concentrated, in order not to make a move that could be read negatively by either the Roma or the Finns, which could result in exclusion or marginalization.

The other, hermetic group of the Finnish Roma comprises those who are closed and unwilling to take part in the dialogue. After centuries of experiencing discrimination and hostility coming from the majority group, some members of the minority group have built a special “others-proof” space, only for them, functioning as a shelter. Now they are not eager to look for understanding and harmony with the society, but are guarding their exclusiveness, using their culture as a strictly prohibited sphere, not

accessible for any *gajé* or *valkolainen*.⁶ The orthodox attitude is accompanied here by a very strong feeling of pride which urges the Roma to keep distance from *gajé* in almost every possible dimension. The escape or enclosure into the clearly defined space of cultural cleanness emerges in this case as a safe way of defending one's own dignity and identity. Again, the phenomenon of staying away from the "threatening subject" appears, since the distance guarantees safety and inviolability.

[Picture 2. a schematic drawing showing the types of identity of the Finnish Roma]



The other identity type of the Finnish Roma is represented by individuals characterized by a high level of assimilation into the majority group. They do not keep in contact with their group of origin or limit that contact, preferring relationships with the rest of society. The applied strategy here is to hide their ethnic origin, and not reveal officially the Roma roots, even while asked. The "odd" secret has of course its costs. It involves living in constant uncertainty and fearing for the moment that, by chance or not, the hidden facts about the ethnic background will be revealed. The constant presence of uncertainty and shame makes their lives uncomfortable and defective. These individuals function in the society as the "fellow countrymen", balancing on the verge of acceptance (respect) and negation (being discredited).

The last identity variant – the fourth one – is visible among the Roma who are excluded, marginalized, pushed away by their own ethnic group and at the same time not accepted by the majority group. The reason for that status is the fact that in the past they attempted (unsuccessfully) to come closer to the majority group, which caused friction with their ethnic group. As the previous type, this one has a strong feeling of guilt, multiplied by the reluctance on both sides of the society: the Roma and the Finnish. The individuals who bear such a load of shame are, sooner or later, noticeable because of their patterns of behaviour. This leads to the attempts made by majority to explain such behaviour. Very often in such cases a simplified way of perceiving appears which means the already existing stereotypes are used. They lead to treating such an individual in a contemptuous or disrespectful manner, which results his/her defensive reaction, such as withdrawal; they create their own stereotypes of the "other" and "different" non-Roma. The phenomenon of stigmatization comes back like a reflection in the mirror.

⁶ *gajé* means non-Roma and *valkolainen* means a person of light skin and fair hair (white person) as opposed to the word *mustalainen* (a person with dark complexion and dark hair).

The dynamics of the process of constructing the identity suggest a conclusion that in time new identity types might appear, existing next to or replacing the ones that already exist. Our wish would be to strengthen those types that stem from the pride, the satisfaction of being Roma, and at the same time are open and ready to participate in the cultural dialogue. Let us hope that even more types that promote the dialogue between the Roma and the Finns come to existence. It is possible, since there are already people who make an effort to meet the other coexisting culture.

For many centuries of living in the same social, cultural and political space, the Finnish society sent signals (sometimes very clear ones) saying that the Roma group is undesirable. For the Roma, it had a tremendous meaning, as it would have for any other individuals or groups, since the identity as a reflexive structure is a phenomenon for which the individual and the environment are responsible (Giddens 15). People become who they are by constructing their own identity on the basis of the psychological tendencies (*me*) and the social ones (*me* seen by the others).

Defining one's own identity cannot happen in a vacuum, but is a constant interaction between the individual, the group and the society (Schwartz 27-49). Therefore, the dialogue with all its meaning is a vital element of coexistence and development of the groups of different cultures, races, ethnic backgrounds and religions, which constitute the necessary element to construct one's identity – as groups and as individuals.

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