IREX-IARO

Negotiating Cultural Identity:
A Comparative Study of Roma (Gypsy) Youth in Schools

Attention to marginal groups provides a unique understanding of nation- and state-building processes, largely unexplored and undervalued by the scholarly community. In the center of my dissertation project is the Roma minority, arguably the most disenfranchised group in Eastern Europe. Historically, Roma communities were "beyond the influence of state organs" and thus were viewed as "threat to political stability and ideological hegemony [of the state]" (Stewart 1997, 85). The Roma success at preserving their group identity in the face of common belief that their time has "run out," their lifestyle "outmoded," and their members finally "domesticated," is "the puzzle of Roma persistence" (ibid., 82, 84). I address this puzzle, filling several gaps in the literature on state- and nation-building and state/society relations. In the meantime, I wish to remain aware that change does not necessarily denote assimilation or a negative force. Instead, change and "[i]nnovations...[may] signal creative adaptation to situations of perpetual cultural contact" (Silverman 1988, 268).

My theoretical contribution consists of a reconsideration of the state-building theories using a combination of top-down (state-level) and bottom-up (individual- and community-level) approaches. The empirical contribution is comprised of a close examination of Romani youth in public schools. In this project I propose to analyze the role of integrated schools in shaping the identity of marginalized groups, and the political as well as societal effects of this process. The central question driving this project is: *How do compulsory educational practices compose and recompose Roma political identity in Russia and Hungary?* There are numerous corollary questions stemming from my research question, such as the following: To what extent do schools foster state control and to what extent do Roma resist it? What are the consequences of resistance and what are the conditions of successful integration?

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In both Russia and Hungary, Roma experienced centuries of persecution and were subjugated to Magyarization and Russification. The state-led assimilationist policies treated Roma as inferior to common people and their movement was restricted. States required legible and profitable populations, and in both countries the central goal was bringing Roma communities under state control, hoping to "turn Gypsies into human beings…and then keep them within the state as useful subjects" so they can lead "productive and settled lives" (Crowe 1994, 76, 156).

Scholars have long looked to public schools as a key institution and the primary homogenizing tool of the state (Gellner 1983; Foucault 1995 [1977]; Mitchell 1988). Universal schooling has been historically the mechanism "generating citizens" through political and cultural socialization (Boli 1989) and "education was the road leading towards the eradication of non-conformity" (Greeman, quoted in Crowe 1994, 76). Since schools remove children from their cultural milieu, "education can be perceived as a form of cultural assimilation… [and a] form of social control, fostering assimilation" (Kendall 1997, 86). This project aims at positioning Romani children as active participants and "re-creators" of their identity and culture in a school setting.

Research Objective:

This dissertation project seeks to examine the marginalized Roma youth in state schools in Russia and Hungary. The research is grounded in the larger debate in state-building and state/society literature. James Scott suggests that Roma, as an example of "groups extruded by coercive state-making," are essential to understanding state-building and development of state peripheries (2009, x, 328). Consequently, I intend to embed the relationship of the Roma with the state in the historical context in order to develop a clear understanding of the experience they had with state institutions, primarily schools.

Jean-Pierre Liégeois noted that "school is not a microcosm which can be isolated from the rest of the society" and it is a particularly important site where attitudes and beliefs "are re-enacted and

come into conflict" (1987, 140). He argues in his later work that Roma came to "associate school solely and entirely with...a coercive environment...[b]ecause school has a long history as a tool of enforced assimilation, [and thus] Roma feel confronted by it as an alien institution" (2007, 174). Standardization, enforced change, and assimilation policies find expression in the classrooms.

Schools are "symbolic frontlines"[1] and are the roots of many conflicts. Romani youth, as a result, is especially important for the stability of the region. Frustration between the majority and the Roma minority often begins in schools and results in bullying and grievances. The disenfranchised Romani children, many of whom drop out of schools earlier than their peers, grow up alienated not only from the majority of the society, but also from the state itself. The current school curricula results in "Roma children often feel[ing] isolated, alienated, and marginalized from the outset" and the existence of "involuntary segregated classes" contributes to the negative experience of Roma children (Guglielmo 1993). Romani families "do not want to give the school the tasks of social and cultural instruction" and non-attendance at schools is often a deliberate choice of the parents given the "unsuitable institution" (Liégeois 2007, 186; 1987, 141; Demeter et al. 2000, 239 [in Russian]). Romani youth in schools are particularly at risk "to be imbued by a value system that is not theirs and that they have no wish to acquire" (ibid 2007, 186).

Romani activists claim that education is the key to Roma emancipation, solving the Romani problem by producing educated citizens. Romanologists, meanwhile, argue that "crisis of legitimacy [of Romani identity]" is a consequence of exclusion of the educated upper- and middle class Roma who "no longer live in traditional conditions" (Gheorghe 1997, 157; Ladanyi et al. 2006; Koulish 2005). What is the role of government institutions, and schools in specific, and what form of agency do state-resisting or partially incorporated groups exercise? Education then poses a major paradox and deserves theoretical and practical attention, and schools are a necessary place to study it.

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[1] This expression was suggested by Kristóf Szombati at the Roma Research and Empowerment Network meeting, entitled "Network meeting on Gyöngyöspata, conflict resolution and our future project," on September 15, 2011 in Budapest, Hungary.

H1:

a) Homogenization effects are not totalizing because groups in resistance develop new cultural techniques to maintain their identity.

b) Non-state spaces[2] are not necessary to maintain a state-resistant identity.

H2:

a) When school curriculum ignores Roma culture and history, it serves to reinforce their identity in opposition to the state, rather than assimilate them.

b) Disenfranchisement in schools creates an environment where youth are prone to violence and feel alienated, rather than disempowered and passive.

c) When schools produce docile and educated Roma citizens, they are often rejected from their own community.

In the literature concerning Roma, there is no definite consensus regarding their relationship with the state. Alaina Lemon in her outstanding study on the Russian Roma (Russka Roma) argues that Roma are not mere rebellious wonderers, rootless, and untouched by governments, but "strongly claim belonging in Russia, know and believe in landmarks of Soviet history and society, [and] speak of patriotism" (2000, 30). Research centering mainly on Western and Eastern European Roma, on the other hand, suggests that stigmatization and state-led pressure to assimilate created an environment where Roma had to continuously assert their intention to remain Roma. As a consequence, this resistance became an integral part of "the Roma way," "created the conditions in which Gypsies consciously resisted a society far more powerful than their own," and defined themselves in the opposition to the "other" (Stewart 1997, 88).[3] By creatively overcoming the "survival test" that discrimination poses, they "unashamedly reject... the values of the majority society" (ibid., 84). I hope

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[2] Two notable works that centered on state-resisting groups and their every-day struggle to maintain their identity are Ernest Gellner's *Saint of the Atlas*, 1969 and James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 2009. Both scholars find that marginal groups escape to "non-state spaces" (desert or high mountains) to escape the state-led efforts to homogenize and manage the population. Both my case studies are set in, or in close proximity to, urban environemnts.

[3] See also Liégeois 1987, 2007; Kendall 1997 who argues that marginal areas create sites of resistance; Szeman *forthcoming* argues Romani culture is a site of resistance in itself; Hooks 1991 shows that marginality is conscious rejection of homogenization.

my research findings will enable me to address the following question: When and why do the boundaries between Roma and gaje (non-Gypsies) become more fluid? What circumstances and conditions enable the Roma to become patriotic without losing their own identity?

Preparatory Work Completed:

My educational background, previous research on the topic, and close familiarity with the two countries equip me with the necessary knowledge to execute this project. My project was encouraged and welcomed by academics and various organizations in my host countries. During my pre-dissertation short visit to Hungary, I established contacts with a group of researchers interested in Roma, the Roma Research and Empowerment Network. Andrew Ryder, himself an expert on the Roma, at Budapest Corvinus University's Institute of Sociology and Social Policy Department offered academic support and university affiliation for the time of my fieldwork (*see support letter*). Besides, I developed a network of contacts with organizations, such as the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) and Chance for Children Foundation (CfCF). The latter is an NGO whose purpose is to create equal opportunities in schools for disadvantaged, primarily Roma children. Mónika Pacziga graciously offered the organization's help for reaching out to Roma communities, finding schools with Roma segregation, participation in their field research and sharing their knowledge about Roma youth (*see support letter*).

In Russia, where schools are more closed and personal connections are nearly necessary to be allowed as an observer or volunteer in state schools, I made vital contact with Anti-discrimination Center Memorial based in St Petersburg, Russia. There, Kirill Kozhanov offered help in school placement as a volunteer (*see support letter*). The organization further agreed to assist me in reaching out to the community. My academic support and university affiliation comes from Nikolay Pavlov at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Department of History and Politics of Europe and America (*see support letter*).

The final and central stage of my preparatory work was my participation in the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) "Youth in Eurasia" workshop, where scholars from various disciplines gave valuable comments on my research. Also, my field paper project (Winter term) at University of Oregon will explore every empirical data and research about the topic that is available in libraries and Internet sources, without fieldwork. Finally, the IRB request has been submitted (on October 31, 2011).

Research Venue:

The field research of my dissertation will take nine months, and I anticipate using IREX-Predoctoral Student IARO fellowship to conduct research in Hungary and Russia. As I am researching Roma in environments where the contact with non-Roma and state institutions is the most observable, I chose schools in the outskirts of Budapest (Monor) and St Petersburg (Osel'ki) as the primary locations, where many Romani communities live together with non-Roma.

In both locations I secured assistance from local institutions in order to identify local schools with Romani children and reach out to the community. I plan on volunteering in elementary schools[4], have informal conversations with Roma families where children are not in schools, and participate in fieldwork trips with local organizations when it pertains to my research topic. Furthermore, I will conduct open-ended interviews with school staff and the Ministry of Education. Relying on content analysis, I will examine current and old standardized and state-approved textbooks to explore Roma representation, or lack thereof, in Budapest's Széchényi Library and Moscow's Lenin Library. The table in the next section summarizes my research venue concisely.

Finally, I will draw on consultation with academics in local universities while in the field (Budapest Corvinus University and Moscow's MGIMO).

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[4] In both countries elementary school education is compulsory and I expect to find more Romani children there, rather than in high schools/grammar schools or universities, where education is not compulsory.

Research Methodology:

I examine statistical and other aggregated data to look at the broader pattern of Roma exclusion; however, the project relies primarily on qualitative methodology, and draws on constructivist, pragmatist, and interpretivist schools of thought. This project approaches the issue from multiple angles: state policy regarding Romani education, state issued textbooks, schools (as a place of interaction), teachers and administrators, classrooms and school events, students, activists and Romani organizations, and finally parents. My methodology will consist of the following levels:

- *State level*: in-depth open-ended interviews with state-officials, analysis of state-policies, textbook analysis
- *Institutional level*: participant-observation in schools, interviews with school staff and administrators, evaluation of school curriculum
- *Individual level*: informal conversations with Roma families, community reach-out

My rationale for doing fieldwork is the following: only through fieldwork can one fully comprehend the context, which is critical for any study of identity formation or any work that treats meaning-making seriously (Shehata in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Fieldwork is furthermore necessary because it "facilitates accurate interpretation of data" (Moehler 2005). I argue that the Roma attitudes towards the state are constructed through their experience—past and present—with the state, rather than a primordial attribute. Interpretivism, with its emphasis on meaning-making, is particularly apt at unpacking this relationship, by stressing that meaning is embedded in artifacts that must be interpreted. This bottom-up approach therefore does not ignore the state and state institutions as those create the context for interpretation, while necessitates an ethnographic fieldwork.

The pragmatic school of thought places actors at the center of analysis and treats action as a "vital social and creative process" (Herrigel 2010, 7). Furthermore, pragmatist works embed social action and thus treat power as contextual, rather than structural (ibid.). Wide agency is attributed to the Roma in my project, who find creative "social niches" and develop "communal devices" in order to "maintain their way of life" (Stewart 1997, 83, 86) even in their role as pupils in schools. I analyze this

aspect in my role as a volunteer-teacher in local schools, which will give me the essential experience

to see first-hand the every-day experience of Romani children in schools and their interaction with

non-Roma children.

As a native speaker of both Russian and Hungarian, there will be no language barrier to the

fieldwork.[5] With the help of local organizations I plan to visit local Romani communities. Chain

referral sampling method will be employed to locate other Romani families, in addition to relying on

the above-mentioned organizations' assistance. I plan to employ content analysis for the examination

of textbooks. Finally, I will conduct open-ended interviews with Ministries of Education (or

equivalent) in both countries in order to evaluate the attitude of the state towards Roma, and Romani

youth in schools in specific.

Below is the timeline and locations of my fieldwork:

	Budapest	Volunteering in local elementary school Textbook research Interviews with local organizations Community reach-out Interview with Ministry of Education and Culture (*Oktatási és Kulturális Minisztérium*) Present findings at Corvinus University
	St Petersburg	Volunteering in local elementary school Textbook research Interviews with local organizations Community reach-out Interview with St Petersburg Committee of Education (*Pravitel'stvo Sankt-Peterburga Komitet po Obrazovaniyu*)
	Moscow	Textbook research continued in Lenin Library (*Biblioteka imeni Lenina*) Interviews with Ministry of Education (*Ministerstvo obrazovaniya i nauki Rossiyskoy Federacii*) Present research findings at MGIMO

Total: 9 months

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[5] French also might be useful accessing European Union documents or other studies done in French (*see language evaluation*).

Impact of Research:

Roma are portrayed as a "threat to the fabric of society" and as a Europe-wide problem. Roma discrimination very recently culminated in violent protests in Hungary and Bulgaria, which alarmed the United Nations, among other organizations, as well as governments across the region. The stability of this area has historically been of vital significance for the United States and an essential aim of the US foreign policy. Security, coupled with economic and political stability depends on peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic groups. Hostilities that erupt are largely based on the perpetuated stereotypes about the Roma. Ending this cycle of hostility must begin with the youth in order to create fertile ground for mutual coexistence for future generations. Understanding the impact of schools is crucial because the school is not only a product of society, but the society is also to some extent a product of the school (Liégeois 2007, 192).

The proposed study has the ambition to contribute not only to ongoing academic debates, but also help find a solution for the Roma question by highlighting the patterns of exclusion in state educational institutions.

This project has several important implications for the study of marginalized populations as well as the postcommunist region. First, it helps us reexamine the meaning and construction of modern nations. Stewart points out that because of the "illusion" that nations must have genealogy and territory, peoples like Roma are wrongly excluded from constituting a nation (1997). Second, the study will contribute to state-building literature that has largely ignored minority groups, let alone homeless minorities. Third, the project has ontological and methodological implications by contributing to identity formation research. The findings would also engage scholars in security studies, especially researching ethnic conflicts and nationalism. In addition, I anticipate being more equipped after the fieldwork to develop academic curricula to teach classes on ethnicity, identity formation, and ethnic politics, as well as collaborate more intensively with scholars researching

similar topics. I hope my research findings will inform on-going policy debates about the education of children of marginalized groups in my host countries and outside.

The study of marginal groups is a continuing project, which will not end after completing my dissertation. I have an ambitious goal to continue this comparative project in the future by examining another marginalized minority group, the Arabic-speaking Bedouins in the Middle East and North Africa, for which I already began my language studies *(language evaluation available upon request)*.

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