



The possibility and limitation of Roma empowerment

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THE INITIAL PROBLEM AND CONTEXT

The Place

Nádas¹⁴ is located in the eastern periphery of Hungary, near the Romanian border and despite the fact that it has a town status, it is rather a larger village with only 6300 inhabitants. Small towns represent a special category in the Hungarian settlement structure not only regarding their size, but also their economic and administrative position. Although they officially have a town status and some administrative public service functions, in fact, they are rather underdeveloped economically and they function as centres for the surrounding rural settlements.

The Political and Social Context

The settlement is situated in an economically and socially disadvantaged region where the lack of workplaces is combined with a low educational level. During the socialist period, people commuted weekly to the capital city. Later,

many of them, mostly non-Roma, young and educated people moved away from the town of Nádas to the capital city. Due to this selective migration process, the social composition of the settlement has been changed.

The town has a high rate of Roma population now. According to a national census based on self-identification (2011), every fifth local resident is Roma. In this ethnic group, there are two social and cultural subgroups are distinguished: the Vlach Roma and the Romungro¹⁵. According to different estimates, the rate of Vlach Roma is 5 to 10% and the rate of Romungro is 20% of the town's inhabitants. There are also two separate Roma neighbourhoods in the settlement characterized by different features making the distinction between the socially and culturally different Roma subgroups visible. The majority of Romungro families live in a stigmatized ghetto, while the Vlach Roma group lives in an ethnically compact neighbourhood in the vicinity of non-Roma residents. The ethnic and social boundaries between the Vlach Roma and the Romungro are sharp; the need for separation and distinction is more powerful, than the boundaries between any Roma group and the non-Roma inhabitants. From a non-Roma point of view, the Vlach Roma are better educated and wealthier, their housing conditions and family structure (having only one or two children) are more close to those of the

¹⁴We changed the name of the town to a fictional one. See more Keller et al 2015.

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/article/view/176>

¹⁵ According to different surveys in Hungary, at least three main Roma groups have to be distinguished. The Hungarian Roma identify themselves as Hungarian

and/or Musician Roma and speak exclusively Hungarian (they are called Romungro in the scholarly literature). The Vlach Roma speak Romani besides Hungarian and identify themselves as Vlach Gypsies, while Boyash people speak an archaic dialect of Romanian language and identify themselves as Boyash Gypsies.



non-Roma, while the majority of the Romungro are uneducated, unskilled, live in poor, mostly unkempt buildings and have many (sometimes five or more) children.

Besides the distinct social circumstances and livelihood strategies, a crucial source of the differences between the Vlach Roma and the Romungro is their relationship to Roma culture and traditions: the Vlach Roma are usually proud to use the Romani language and dance tradition. However, in recent years, development programs aiming at alleviating poverty built bridges between these two Roma communities, where the Vlach Roma were involved in the design and the implementation of the projects and in the majority of cases, they worked with the Romungro in order to advance.

The Initial Problem

The lack of Roma community space and Roma NGOs is one of the initial problems for this story. The local government offers a community house in the town centre where different cultural events related to Hungarian folk culture are organized, e.g. the Pensioner's Club for local elderly people. Roma families are not excluded from the community house but there are no opportunities for presenting Roma culture and there is no space for the Roma community's specific events. The local government also started to operate an

'Ethnic Minority Office', whose function is supplementary to the Roma Ethnic Minority Self-Government¹⁶. The Ethnic Minority Office is staffed with young educated Roma people. In the first years, exclusively Vlach Roma people were recruited, but nowadays the Romungro are also employed. They help people in need: they write requests for them, prepare tax returns, record applications for public work and help to submit requests for utility providers.

The Local Government had an empty run down old 'peasant' house in the town centre, but had no money for renovation. For the non-Roma inhabitants, this is a symbolic place of peasant tradition and it represents the history of the settlement.

THE STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR INITIAL POSITION

The local government and its institutions

The current mayor, elected a decade ago, deliberately began to build a network of experts and professionals working for Roma integration and facilitated the transformation of some of the local institutions to enhance social cohesion. He appointed a new leadership and staff in the Family and Childcare Services and initiated additional development programs. His commitment to organizing coalitions can be seen as linked to his willingness to form

¹⁶Although the political position of the president of the Roma Ethnic Minority Self-Government (RMSG) has been stable for years, his local acceptance and reputation has been controversial among the Roma and non-Roma population. Due to his political position, he could influence the recruitment of local participants in public work programmes as well as the distribution

of emergency welfare assistance. Moreover, as a building contractor, he could offer jobs for Roma men, though he did not become the partner of the local government in development projects for Roma integration. The members of RMSG were not invited to the development programmes.

a team with the head of the local Social Centre and work together in close cooperation in the implementation of local development projects. Both leaders are deeply embedded in the local society and they have the recognition from diverse local social groups. The reputation of the mayor is based on a diversity of social roles: his family is part of the non-Roma local elite, and he is also a presbyter of the Protestant community. Their recognition helped them in their efforts to integrate conflicting local interests under the umbrella of one concept for local development.



Autonómia Foundation

Autonómia Foundation (AF) is a nationwide private foundation established in 1990. Their efforts focus on strengthening the civil society and supporting marginalised social groups with a special emphasis on Roma integration. Their activities include local trainings, project generation, community development and supporting community initiatives, identification and presentation of good practices (mainly through study visits). The Foundation aims for the social integration of disadvantaged social groups and the creation of partnerships and cooperation. An

especially important objective is to facilitate the effective use of European development funds to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged Roma communities.

One of the objectives is to bring these funds closer to the Roma communities. The staff of the Foundation helps the beneficiaries to articulate local problems, to shape ideas and to come up with possible solutions, to write applications, while supporting them in building local partnerships.

The Roma inhabitants

As stated before, Vlach Roma inhabitants are better educated and wealthier than the Romungro and have a diverse social relationship to the non-Roma local elite, which enables them to represent their own interest. However, due to the lack of a Roma community space and the possibility for practicing their own music and dance culture in the local events, they do not feel as fully esteemed and accepted members of the local society.



The Romungro inhabitants are mostly uneducated, unskilled, living in poverty and excluded from most of the town's

institutions and they are not able to represent their interests.

THE STORY

Phase 1: Establishing a Roma community house in the town centre

Roma integration projects took place gradually, initiated by different actors. The local government was a top-down initiator in several projects, where they combined different kinds of funding in various project cycles to create, maintain and enlarge Roma community houses in the settlement.

The Autonomia Foundation (AF) played a major role in generating these projects and in empowering the local Roma minority. The local government decided to apply to the AF MtMt (Making the Most for EU Funds for Roma) programme. In addition to the mayor and the head of the RMSG, the coordinator of AF came in contact with the head of Family and Childcare Services and the staff of the Roma Ethnic Minority Office. This role was performed by a Vlach Roma woman at the time. *'I was very surprised to see that there are people who fight for Gypsies.'* - this is how this Vlach Roma woman recalls the appearance of the experts of AF. The Autonomia Foundation project generating activity aimed to develop capacities for a subsequent bottom-up and socially embedded development. This initiation was strengthened by the social network created through the Foundation's trainings and the emancipation policies of the local government.

The initiator of the changes was the above mentioned Vlach Roma woman, who had begun her career as a cleaning lady in the neighbouring town's hospital at the age of 20. She has become a crucial actor in the integration programs in Nádas. From the hospital, she moved to work at the Ethnic Minority Office in Nádas, then at the Family Support Service. During this time, she received her high school diploma and a college degree. Her career was supported by the mayor and the head of the Social Centre of Nádas, who treated her as a partner on equal terms. After the successful application to the Social Renewal Operational Program (SROP) she was appointed as the head and the Vlach Roma Women's leader in integration projects. She served as a positive example for the local Roma population: an increasing number of local Vlachs and Romungros perceived education as more important than before and an increasing number of them restarted their (adult) education.

As a result of these external efforts, an NGO was founded by local Vlach Roma women, who they could implement numerous minority programs with the support and financing of other NGOs and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs.

As a result of the SROP project, a community house was created in the town centre in the empty peasant house owned by the local government. It practically serves as the community space of Vlach Roma. Several Vlach Roma worked in this community house partly employed in the development programmes and partly in public work programmes. Different



programmes were organized to support disadvantaged Roma children, to empower and support Roma women in education. Several cultural events were also held here when Roma, especially Vlach Roma music and dance was presented for the inhabitants of the town. The staff of the community house, also mainly Vlach Roma, often cooked and had lunch together and company for a coffee was also available any time. At the same time, the operation of the community brings attention to a very important local problem: the development and implementation team consists mostly of Vlach Roma and they are also most often the target group of the programs, while the original target group of the projects were the Romungro families living in the segregated neighbourhood.

Turning point 1 – Ending of the EU financing

At the end of the EU financing period of the SROP programme, LG takes over the funding. This period falls between two EU funded development programme.

Phase 2 - In between two development programmes: limitation of Roma empowerment

At the end of the first SROP grant, the management of the community house was taken over by a new team who won a tender for the Complex Settlement Program, aiming to develop the stigmatized ghetto populated by the Romungro. This program also contributed to the maintenance of the community house previously led by the Vlach Roma

woman, but the space had now different social functions.

The Vlach Roma woman previously worked for the development programs and she was also appointed as expert manager of the Complex Settlement Program as one of the founders of the community house. Even though her professional competence is unquestionable, some people in the town's leadership and in the local society have been critical about her fast upward social mobility: *"a Gipsy cannot be the leader of a project spending hundreds of millions of forints."* A local non-Roma woman became the manager of the house and she was paid through a different project funding by the local municipality. The former manager of the house and the kitchen workers - all ethnic Roma - were laid off and replaced by a new non-Roma staff. This reflects the new fragile position of the Roma community and the empowered developmental elite, emerging through previous development projects.

The central community space serving the Roma integration program started to be used to host civic organisations of the non-Roma majority. In general, the integration of Roma and non-Roma organisations in a common space could be seen as a success. However, the change of staff overshadows this interpretation and implies an exclusionary process. The community centre, the old peasant house located in the town centre thus became the place of symbolic struggles over urban spaces.



Turning point 2 – Creation of a second community house

Based on another EU Fund, the Complex Settlement Program, a new community house was established at the edge of the town for the Romungro living in the stigmatized ghetto.

Phase 3 – The success of the new Roma community house at the edge of the town

At the edge of the town, a newly purchased house was renovated in order to function as a new Roma community house in the vicinity of a stigmatized Romungro neighbourhood. Residents of the Romungro neighbourhood regularly pass by the house on their way to the town centre. Social and developmental professionals have a daily contact with the residents of the neighbourhood. The project manager of this program formerly worked at a foster home in a neighbouring town for 5 years, so she knew almost every family in the settlement.

The house has two Romungro employees, both of them from the neighbourhood, which was an important aspect in their selection. Due to the project leader and her colleagues, social experts are not perceived as authorities by the poor Roma families of the settlement but as supporters.

The leadership of the town supports the house financially as well as symbolically. The mayor and the Protestant reverend attended the opening ceremony of the house and they have visited the house weekly since then.

One of the most important community-shaping activities of the house is volunteer work. In order to receive social benefits, you have to provide annual documentation proving 30 days of official employment. Public works can only employ a limited number of people, so it is challenging for many people to bring evidence for 30 days of work a year. As a solution, the unemployed person can sign a contract with the Family Care Service for volunteer work in the community house. They take care of the garden and of the house, plant flowers etc. *"We do not have a cleaner, a guardian, or a repairman, but these works are all provided by the volunteers. Thus we do not have the problem that somebody is working for money and the other person for nothing."*

A kitchen garden has been created in a part of the backyard and the products of the garden are cooked in the kitchen of the community house. This kind of operation requires almost non-stop opening hours to fit the daily life of the Roma families. Officially, the house is open from 8 am to 6 pm, to 4 pm on Saturdays. But on winter evenings, people stay there to watch TV and to chat only in order to save on heating costs. So the leaders decided to remain open for the locals' convenience. Although voluntary work to cover the 30 days of mandatory public work is rooted in a structural constraint, it provided an opportunity for social workers to get in touch with many families living in extreme poverty and isolation until then, as well as with the retired non-Roma residents of the neighbourhood. These people have become active members of the Community House since then.



CONCLUSIONS

The creation of a new Roma community house at the edge of the town could be seen as a replacement of the old central community house, which was symbolically taken over by the non-Roma, however these spaces do not have the same social functions. The groups they target and reach are completely different: the new community house is exclusively frequented by the poorest Romungro group living in the stigmatized neighbourhood, while the old community house served as a community and cultural centre for the Vlach Roma and later on for the non-Roma residents. The present set does not serve the long term integration of the non-Roma, Romungro and Vlach Roma groups, but it strengthens the institutional segregation. Despite the steps towards integration of the local government and other stakeholders, the top-down Roma empowerment could only be maintained

for a limited time period, until the EU funding provided financial resources to renovate and maintain a symbolically important urban area. After the end of direct investment, the hierarchical relations reverted to the traditional schemes.

