

QUANTIFYING THE UNQUANTIFIABLE: HISTORICAL DETERMINANTS OF – AND POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO – THE FLUID ‘ROMA IDENTITY’

Andrey Ivanov¹

Abstract

The article explores the challenges and possible approaches to quantification of Roma communities – both for the purpose of sampling surveys and for the needs of operational policy-making. The starting point of the analysis is an overview of the history of Roma presence in Europe, which provides the argument for the idea of the multiple and fluid nature of Roma identity. Against this background the specific challenges related to developing a ‘single and precise’ definition of “the Roma” are analysed. Those challenges are stemming from the patterns of coexistence with the (equally vague and fluid) Gadze universe and the patterns of socialisation during modernity. Many of those elements still remain valid today.

“Roma” is not just a meta-group, but a complex construct and its meaning differs depending on the interpretative frameworks of the different sides involved in the debate on the issue. Roma identity is also quite situational and reflective defined vis-à-vis the non-Roma (the Gadzo). Seen in historical perspective, this pattern of identification is not just the result of centuries of discrimination and prejudice against the Roma. The discrimination and prejudice themselves were an inevitable outcome to the process of modernisation, in which the way of living of Roma was increasingly in conflict with the emerging disciplining structures of sedentary societies and with the existing non-Roma hierarchies, both cleric and secular. The process intensified with the consolidation of nation-states in the 19th and 20th century.

In the context of today’s post-modern society, the non-Roma populations are facing challenges similar to those faced for centuries by Roma. This is the challenge of how the existing (in most cases – modern) institutional frameworks can reflect and absorb the multiple identities of the post-modern citizens. Seen from this perspective, Roma inclusion could provide valuable insights.

As for the issue of quantification, rigid definition or exact “counting” of Roma is not necessary for achieving real progress in Roma inclusion. Methods reflecting the fluid nature of the term “Roma” and corresponding to the policy priorities leading the process of data collection should be used instead. The author provides a specific example of such methods from the area of quantitative sampling surveys.

Key words: Roma identity, Roma inclusion, marginalised groups, quantitative surveys.

Roma inclusion is increasingly visible on political agendas both of governments and international institutions. On the 5th February 2012 even the

¹ **Andrey Ivanov** is a UNPD advisor on human development policies; he is based in Bratislava, Slovakia. E-mail: andrey.ivanov@undp.org

USA – a country not known to have acute problems with Roma exclusion – joined the Decade of Roma Inclusion² as an observer.

Roma inclusion entails many challenges which are usually reduced to its practical aspects - what to do and how to do it, so that real progress is achieved. Against the background of those practical aspects, one issue is gaining less attention than it should – clear definition of the basic concepts. What is “inclusion” supposed to mean and who are the “Roma” that are to be “included”? The task of defining becomes even more challenging if we take into consideration the fact that both “Roma” and “inclusion” are vague – and interrelated – concepts. They are intellectual and political constructs to which different people (Roma or non-Roma, politicians or ordinary citizens) usually attribute different meanings. In addition, given the interrelated nature of the two concepts, the practical content of “inclusion” varies depending on the meaning attributed to “Roma”.

This article is an attempt to, at least partially, address these definitional issues and put the debate into a more pragmatic perspective. Different options of addressing the issue have different policy implications and it is worth bearing them in mind. The article roots the debate in its practical dimensions, providing feasible options for quantifying the challenges of Roma inclusion (magnitude of tasks, resources and timing).

THE UNIVERSE OF STUDY

Defining the universe of study (and the one of policy intervention) is the first and most important task a researcher or policy-maker needs to address. This is not a unique challenge – any targeted social program has to face it. In the case of the Roma, however, the task is almost a “mission impossible”. Census data (the source usually used by the government which needs formalised data sources) notoriously and significantly differ from “experts’ estimates”. On average, the difference can be four-fold.³ This is a fundamental problem because demographics is at the core of both sampling (it is really challenging to construct a representative sample of a universe with unknown parameters) and of the denominator of any indicator (even if the number of Roma unemployed could be estimated, the “unemployment rate” would differ depending on the estimated size of the Roma labor force). What is more important, precise (to the extent possible) numbers are needed for practical responses: it matters whether you are planning a resource allocation for 100,000 or for 400,000 people to be targeted in whatever intervention.

Two approaches are usually used to define one’s affiliation (ethnic or other): self-identification or external identification. In the first case the individual respondents are

² The Decade of Roma Inclusion is an initiative of national governments from CEE and (initially) three international organisations – OSI, the World Bank and UNDP – to reach within a 10-year timeframe (2005-2015) tangible improvement of the status of Roma in Europe. For more information: <http://www.romadecade.org/>

³ One of the most frequently cited source of population estimates on “Roma” is the Council of Europe. It provides estimates of the “Roma” population for countries of CoE area, for EU member states and Europe in total. The ratio between the “minimum estimate”, “maximum estimate” and “average estimate” to and the official census data (for countries which register maintain ethnicity in their censuses) is respectively 2.7, 5 and 4. www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/Source/documents/stats.xls