4   **Encounters at the Margins:**

Activism and research in Romani studies in post-socialist Romania

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This chapter is based on my personal experiences of working in Roma-related research within the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities (RIRNM), an institute founded by the Romanian Government in 2007, the same year when Romania joined the European Union as a member state.[1] RIRNM has the mandate "to conduct inter- and multidisciplinary studies and research with regard to the preservation, development and expression of ethnic identity, as well as about social, historical, cultural, linguistic, religious or other aspects of national minorities and of other ethnic communities living in Romania."[2] Thus, the institute is *par excellence* a site of applied social research at the service of ethnic communities, policy-making bodies, and decision makers. Returning to Romania after finishing my studies abroad, I joined the RIRNM; on the one hand, this offered me the opportunity to continue fueling my academic interest in minorities, and on the other hand, it brought me into more systematic contact with activists and social mobilizers, some of whom were Roma. Living and working in Transylvania, I acquired a good sense of cultural boundaries, ethnic and class differences, past and present social injustices; while maintaining sensitivity to human rights abuses I encountered or noted threats to the personal dignity of the people with whom I worked, I never considered myself an activist of any sort. This was on the one hand a personal inclination; I felt my capacities were more suitable for analysis than intervention; on the other hand, I considered that given the Romanian context, where a strong generation of Roma and pro-Roma activists was already emerging, I could contribute more by doing social research,

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since this is what I was trained for. My interactions and encounters in this field during the past decade strengthened my conviction that the solid contribution of researchers is more needed than ever.

The analysis below will discuss these encounters in the context of social and institutional transformations within the post-socialist Romanian state. My starting point is that, in spite of the widely held view that Roma activism is best understood as part and function of "civil society," it is more useful to put the state back into the equation and investigate the dynamic interactions between activists, representatives of the state, academics and other sympathetic or less-than-sympathetic outsiders, and society at large. More specifically, I argue that activism is at least partially driven by intentions to transform the state. Activists aim to "correct" the shortcomings of state institutions, monitor and litigate the abuses of the authorities, and improve the social inclusion of the Roma population. Therefore the state, which routinely operates in these domains, is an important frame of reference for these processes. Moreover, in some cases, the state apparatus can accommodate activism (for example, part of the educational system can be put to the service of language activism); in some other cases, as I demonstrate in my ethnography below, institutions can become sites for contestation and struggle between different actors taking roles as bureaucrats, stakeholders, experts of different statuses, or activists, in a complex web of relationships and in shifting sequences.

In what follows, after a brief literature review, I discuss two episodes of my engagement with Roma-related activism. My involvement in these events can be described as marginal, since I was a rather passive newcomer in the domain of activism, working in a regional centre (Cluj) far from the capital city—the main site of Roma-related activism in this highly centralized country. The moments I refer to were, on the one hand, an initiative which aimed to stop and prevent the occurrence of ethnic violence in Transylvania (2009–10), and,

on the other hand, the events surrounding the public debates in 2010–11 around one of the legislative initiatives to change the official ethnonym of Roma from "Rom" to "*ţigan*" (Gypsy) in Romania. The term *ţigan* is pejorative in Romanian society and the term Roma, according to Romanians, facilitates confusion between Romanians and Roma. These events are connected by the presence of recurrent issues and returning actors, among them the sociologist and activist Nicolae Gheorghe, whom I first met in 2008 during an event organized in Cluj. Part of the analysis is inspired by his ideas.

Attracted by "civic spirit" between projects, service providers, watchdogs, and the state

While important elements for a general historical and contemporary description of Roma activism in Romania are available, a comprehensive overview is yet to be written.[3] Such a history should encompass a broad range of initiatives on behalf of the Roma or emerging within the Roma communities also as responses to the growing number of targeted interventions. There are some persistent definitional uncertainties. To start with the most important one: it is rather difficult to define what exactly Roma activism is.

The common-sense understanding is that activism among, and on behalf of the Roma has to do with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and their "projects." Viorel Anăstăsoaie and Daniela Tarnovschi (2001) edited a volume about the projects on Roma between 1990 and 2000, offering an overview of the impressive NGO scene of the 1990s. Iulius Rostas (2009), in a chapter on the institutionalization and mobilization of Roma, also focuses exclusively on the NGOs and deplores the growing bureaucratization of Roma associations while calling for "the genuine spread of a self-help civic spirit as an alternative to "NGOization"" (Rostas 2009, 182). This call remains vague and undefined, as it remains unclear how this process could be enacted. These approaches routinely overlook the influence of religious movements[4], or the mobilizing impact of artistic and musical expressions, which

also seem routinely ignored (for a critical approach see Pulay 2014). Moreover, NGOs, as frames and sites for activism, are presented in opposition to the state, which is a binary oversimplification. As a counter example, Gheorghe Sarău (2013) offers an overview of the language movement, which is arguably a rather successful area of Romani activism, which became institutionalized within a state actor—the Ministry of Education. A particular form of national and international NGO is the "watchdog" organization, for which I will provide an example in my first case study. I will show below how the state / NGO opposition can become problematic.

A second observation is that Romani activism cannot and should not be only interpreted narrowly within any single state, since the Romani movement challenges the confines of individual nation states, even if there are particularities observable in each case. Thus, as a consequence of its transnational character, the Romani movement poses methodological challenges to empirical studies. While the events tackled by activism are clearly localized in communities or institutions, they are also connected to other sites and processes, which complement their description and interpretation. Indeed, academic work has previously connected the different sites and scales of Romani activism, showing the complexity of the processes through which activism "travels" (van Baar 2009 and 2017). Doing fieldwork on activism or with activists, however, requires hands-on engagement in the local context, in order to elicit details of local knowledge and identify the structures underpinning these forms of knowledge (for a critical example of why local knowledge is crucial, see Chirițoiu, this volume). At the same time, one should be aware of the broader significance of these events and interpret them with reference to the processes which unfold in-between locations (see Fosztó 2003a).

Issues connected to this process were attended by anthropologists in other contexts; in discussing the relationship between activism and anthropology with reference to his own

work on the USA-Mexico border, Josiah Heyman (2010, 291) summarizes a set of assumptions which also inform my own approach in the current chapter. He concludes:

> [T]he ethic of ethnographic solidarity is insufficient without an analysis of the historical power placement and fields surrounding our specific ethnographic subjects. Second, we must examine thoughtfully our possible engagement with states and politicians.… We cannot, in our current social arrangements, assume that the state is inherently and uniformly an evil institution (e.g., Taussig 1991), nor markets and businesses either. Likewise, [...] we should not assume a naïve, power- and history-innocent analysis of poor and low-power communities nor of organizations and activists involved with them.

In most of my previous work on mobilization in Roma communities, I focused on the role of religion and ritual practices rather than on that of NGOs and state institutions.[5] This is partly due to the existing practices in my—mainly rural—field sites, where associations or foundations and civic activism were barely visible, while the presence of religious activists (missionaries, pastors, preachers) and the regular calendar of religious activities offered a structured domain for my inquiries. The religious groups I worked with (Pentecostals) are remarkably autonomous, independent from state support, and instead of being nationally based, they are organized in transnational networks. In addition to this decisive empirical observation, there was a conceptual limitation coming from my own background, being myself a member of a Hungarian ethnic group (Szekler) living in Romania.[6] I had taken for granted the idea that minority activism coming from "the community" might only be supported by its "own" institutions like ethnic churches (Fosztó 2006), and ideally independently from—or even in opposition to—the state. It took me some years to realize that while some minority groups practice ideologies and rituals of independence and

autonomy, these practices interact intensely and often rely on structures and institutions provided by the state. This realization made me also more reflexive about my own position within a governmental research institute.

Sam Beck (1993) argued that the socialist system in Romania not only preserved, but actively produced ethnic distinctions, and that therefore we need to contextualize the formation of Romani ethnic identity as part of a broader process. The social and institutional processes of producing distinctions became even more intensive after the fall of the socialist regime. Partly as a response to societal processes, and partly due to international pressure, a number of new institutions emerged within the post-socialist state to deal with issues of ethnic and cultural diversity, social and ethnic differences, or to combat racism and discrimination. The emergence and workings of these institutions need to be described and interpreted as context for the encounters which are the focus of this chapter.

As I show in the next sections, the state should not be seen as a homogenous actor, not even as an actor in itself. It is better viewed as bundle of social relationships controlling a set of rules; exercising real and imaginary powers (see Trouillot 2001). Its structure is layered in various ways, central authorities might have different understandings and intentions than local institutions, and there are geographical, regional disparities in terms of access to resources and capacity to penetrate local social relationships. The state provides a domain for orientation and navigation for individuals and a good part of what activists do is a particular form of participation in this domain. The role of the activist is performed by a wide range of individuals, employees of the public or non-profit sector, self-employed, social workers, local politicians, journalists, lawyers, pastors, students, professors, or other academics. The activist's role is relational, defined by interactions, often bound to situations and "taking position." An anthropological analysis of activism, like Huub van Baar's contribution in this volume also suggests, should offer an understanding of the motivations and positioning of the

actors who perform activist roles within and without the frames maintained by the state, but almost always with reference to it.

On ethnic conflicts and shared responsibility

In mid-summer 2009, a series of events happened which threatened to escalate into a wave of violent ethnic conflicts in a number of rural multi-ethnic Transylvanian settlements. These violent events emerged after a long, relatively peaceful period, which characterized the relationship between Roma and local ethnic majorities. As members of RIRNM, we felt compelled to respond to this situation. We were aware that during the early years of post-socialism in Romania a high number of clashes between Roma and ethnic Hungarians or Roma and ethnic Romanians had taken place, which often resulted in property destruction (the burning of houses) and even casualties (for a comprehensive account of one of these events, see Ana Chirițoiu's chapter in this volume). But, by the mid 1990s, these conflicts stopped and ethnic tensions changed in character. These changes may be attributed at least partly to emerging Roma activism and the involvement of international human rights organizations (Fosztó and Anăstăsoaie 2001). Intervening institutional actors, police and other state authorities transformed the tensions between local groups: while violent conflicts between locals were more typical for the first decade, police raids in Roma settlements or other abuse of power by authorities became more characteristic during the 2000s (Toma 2012, 192). Also, there was a transition from the early post-socialist, almost exclusively rural, clashes to more urban forms of conflict epitomized by the evacuation of urban Roma settlements by local authorities. Some of the earlier cases remained legally unsolved, court cases dragged on for decades, or even when a final court decision was made, it was not

enforced (see Haller 2009, also Chiriţoiu, this volume). During this relatively peaceful period, between 1995 and 2009, the belief that these earlier tensions were "solved" was widely shared and the few new instances of ethnic violence involving Roma were perceived as isolated cases. This understanding was seriously challenged in June-July 2009.

On 31 May 2009, an extended conflict, involving large groups of locals in Sânmartin (in Hungarian, *Csíkszentmárton*) occurred; on 9 July 2009 a second instance of violent confrontation happened 15 km away, in Sâncrăieni (in Hungarian, *Csíkszentkirály*), both in Harghita county. Both cases involved fighting among local Roma and Hungarians (Szeklers): in the first case, property was damaged, and in the second a stable was burnt and a horse killed (see the localization of the events on the map in Image 1). The motives which sparked the violence were different: accusations of theft from the fields in the first, a conflict in the bar which ended in a knifing in the second. In both cases the intervention of the military police (in Romanian, *jandarmeria*) was necessary to restore peace. There were similarities between these two cases; for instance, in both cases village authorities laid down so-called "protocols": sets of rules for peaceful cohabitation drafted by the local ethnic majority (Szekler Hungarians) and agreed upon, under the pressure of the moment, by representatives of the local Romungre (in Hungarian *magyarcigány* or "Hungarian Gypsies") . The protocols prescribed measures, aimed to restrict, discipline and supervise the behavior of the local Roma community. For example, Roma who do not own or rent pastures should give up keeping horses; Roma should vaccinate and chain their dogs; they should stop stealing crops from the fields; make sure that their children go to school regularly, etc. Each expected action point had a well-defined deadline. These "protocols" contained prejudiced statements about the Roma, and even if the local councils approved them, their legality and effects later became sources of much controversy. A group of vigilante villagers in Sânmartin paid regular "monitoring visits" to the area of the village inhabited by Roma to see if they indeed sold their

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horses or if they respect other rules "instituted" by the local council. A part of the local Roma took refuge in the nearby forest and a Roma-led human rights organization, Romani CRISS, visited the villages repeatedly, prepared reports about both events (Romani CRISS 2009a; 2009b), and ran an advocacy campaign suggesting that Roma who left their houses should be considered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) according to the international law.[7]

Some weeks after the events, on 20 July, the RIRNM organized a roundtable discussion with researchers, journalists and human rights experts. The results were published shortly both in Romanian and in Hungarian (Sipos 2009a, 2009b). The main arguments in this discussion explained the economic background of these conflicts and suggested the role state institutions should play in managing local social tensions. We also developed an understanding of the long history of local customary law and self-regulation, including the internal social control in Szekler villages (Hungarian, *falutörvények*) which can be seen as a prototype of these "protocols."[8]

The bulk of local and regional Hungarian language newspapers downplayed the significance of the conflict and emphasized how the process of reconciliation progressed as a consequence of the protocols. One exception was an article by Tímea Bakk-Dávid (2009), working for a leading Hungarian language news portal, who visited the field and published a balanced report, including photographs documenting the damage done to the houses of the Roma. The article soon attracted a massive wave of negative comments from the readers, to such an extent that the Transindex portal felt compelled to disable commenting (Bakk-Dávid 2009a). An opinion piece by Boróka Parászka, another Hungarian journalist with a distinctive voice, attracted even more outrage. She not only criticized the passivity of the state institutions, but also blamed local inhabitants for being active perpetuators or silent accomplices. To give emphasis to her conclusions, she labeled the perpetrators of violence "animals" (Parászka 2009). As a consequence, sixteen mayors in Harghita County,

Szeklerland, led by the president of the county council, sent to the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) a complaint against the journalist, for discriminating against the Hungarian community. The head of the NCCD, a Hungarian himself, dismissed the complaint as being "absurd and ridiculous" (S.M.L 2009).

On 23 July 2009, at the initiative of Romani CRISS, about fifty to sixty people representing a coalition of Roma associations organized a protest in front of the central office of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR) in Bucharest. [9] The protesters handed over a list of "eleven commandments for the Hungarians." These included demands such as "obligatory schooling and educating the children and adults to enable each Hungarian to learn the proper pronunciation of twenty Romanian words such as *stork, cabbage, badger, foal, cheese*;[10] "a (proper) civilized everyday conduct, unlike Hun behavior" or "giving up wearing mustaches, as this facial architecture has been patented by Roma ancestors" as cited in an press article (Safta 2009). These echoed Romanian stereotypes of Hungarians (stubborn, intolerant, violent and stupid) and this sarcastic Roma response to the Szekler Hungarians" "protocol" was not lost on the amused broader public.

The same coalition of Roma organizations intended to visit the villages and organize protests there, but local mayors refused to grant them permission to do so on the grounds that local inhabitants, including the Roma, do not want peace disturbed by their interference. The intention of the local community to keep out the activists was rather clear.[11] To prove claims of reconciliation, the local authority gathered and presented signatures from members of the local Roma community in the form of a message faxed to the organizers of the demonstration. While one can question the validity of the signatures, particularly having in mind the limited literacy and lack of knowledge of the Romanian language of some of the signatories, and the social pressure to which they were subjected at that moment, we should not dismiss the

possibility and significance of a local process of reconciliation that these signatures represented.[12]

Finally, a pro-Roma protest was organized in Miercurea Ciuc (in Hungarian, Csíkszereda), seat of Harghita County, and some fifty to sixty people marched on the city streets with banners inscribed in Romanian, with messages such as: *"Is ethnic cleansing the first step towards territorial autonomy?"*;[13] *"Harghita above everything, above justice and human rights!?"*; *"Prevent spreading of interethnic conflicts!"*, in addition to a number of other calls for non-violence. Even if some of the banners were bilingual (Romanian/Hungarian), conscious spelling mistakes in the Hungarian texts attracted criticism and amusement from local Hungarians (Mihály 2009). As the demonstrators lined up for the march, a handful of men wearing black masks also gathered, holding insulting banners in Hungarian and chanting anti-Roma slogans. They were quickly apprehended and fined by the gendarmes who were present to protect the demonstrators. It turned out that the masked men were members of the "Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (in Hungarian, Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom)," a far-right youth organization nurturing nostalgia for Greater Hungary and promoting revisionist ideology. Some Hungarian locals complained that these youngsters are just worsening the situation by confirming that Szeklers are by definition intolerant. Meanwhile Hunor Kelemen, a leading politician of the DAHR and the ethnic Hungarian candidate for the presidential elections, commented on these events stating that any demonstration such as that organized by Romani CRISS, carrying such banners in the region, can only be seen as a provocation: "Organizers should protest in Bucharest in front of the Government instead, rather than taking these fifty-sixty people to this city. They would do better to persuade their co-ethnics to follow social norms, since Szeklers are law-abiding citizens," he concluded (quoted in Mihály 2009). A group of villagers from the settlements involved in the conflict attended the demonstration as bystanders (both Roma and Szeklers),

including a local councilor from Sânmartin. They came to town to see "what intentions the Roma demonstrators have," while one Roma leader from Sâncrăieni declared to the Hungarian language newspaper Krónika that they also consider themselves Hungarian so there is no "ethnic conflict" and everybody just wants peace in the village (Krónika 2009). This particular double allegiance of the local Hungarian-speaking Roma in Szeklerland would need more in-depth analysis. Here I just would like to note that being Hungarian and "cigány" are not mutually exclusive social and ethnic categories so the Romungre can chose to identify as Hungarians, as they usually do, for example during the national censuses or other interactions with the officialdom.

While the initially declared intention of the demonstration was to protest against human rights violations and to stop the violence against Roma in the region, the majority of the local inhabitants clearly perceived the march as an anti-Hungarian event in spite of the original intentions as a pro-Roma demonstration. Some of the participants in the protest also realized that their message was "lost in translation." The Roma sociologist Nicolae Gheorghe and Gergő Pulay, a young anthropologist from Hungary working in Romania, were both present at the demonstration in Miercurea Ciuc and immediately after the event co-authored and released a brief and insightful report (Gheorghe and Pulay 2009), arguing that the local understandings of the events should not be neglected but brought out into open discussion. They identified two narratives. The "ethnic cleansing" discourse conflated the image of contemporary Hungary, where actions against the Roma, underpinned by rising anti-Roma sentiment, were taking place, with the local villages where Szekler Hungarians live, turning them symbolically to "nests of racism and violence" against Roma. The other narrative was a more general opposition between "peasants versus nomads"; these oppositions are clearly embedded in the region, generally perceived as marginal and economically underdeveloped. These discourses framed the general contradiction between the universalistic messages calling

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"against violence" and for "human rights" and their understanding in the local context as demonstration of "strangers versus locals" or even as "Romanians versus Hungarians." Gheorghe and Pulay called for an alternative discourse of *shared responsibility* and advocated for a dialogue with local forms of knowledge.[14]

The idea of *shared responsibility* became the catalyst and headline for a meeting convened later that summer in Târgu Mureş (in Hungarian: Marosvásárhely), the seat of Mureş County, on 17 and 18 August. Two local human rights activists, a Romanian and a Hungarian[15], jointly hosted the workshop; Nicolae Gheorghe and several Roma activists from Romania and Hungary organized and attended the workshop. The main aim was to further the understanding of the emergence of ethnic conflicts in the region and more broadly in Romania and Hungary, and also to prevent the spread of such events. András Bíró, a journalist from Hungary with a long personal history in human rights advocacy and community development, was among the participants, as well as a number of university professors from Budapest and Cluj-Napoca (in Hungarian, Kolozsvár); the RIRNM was represented by Stefánia Toma and myself.[16] Representatives of Romani CRISS did not attend the meeting, but the reports of this organization, in addition to other documents, were shared in advance and discussed.

After a long day of discussions, all participants agreed to sign a common position paper, which was published in the Romanian press in Romanian and Hungarian. The position paper laid out a vision for social peace and anti-discrimination, but it also proposed to complement the anti-racist fight with new ways of engagement and shared responsibilities which would encompass a whole range of actors, political stakeholders, civil society organizations—including Roma associations—, state authorities, and actors responsible for implementing public policies for Roma inclusion. A subgroup of participants agreed to develop a joint research project that would look into the local conditions of the villages involved in the conflicts, following up the social consequences of the events that led to the

conflict, and organize public discussions with local authorities. This plan was later enacted

with the support of the Open Society Institute (see Magyari et al. 2010).
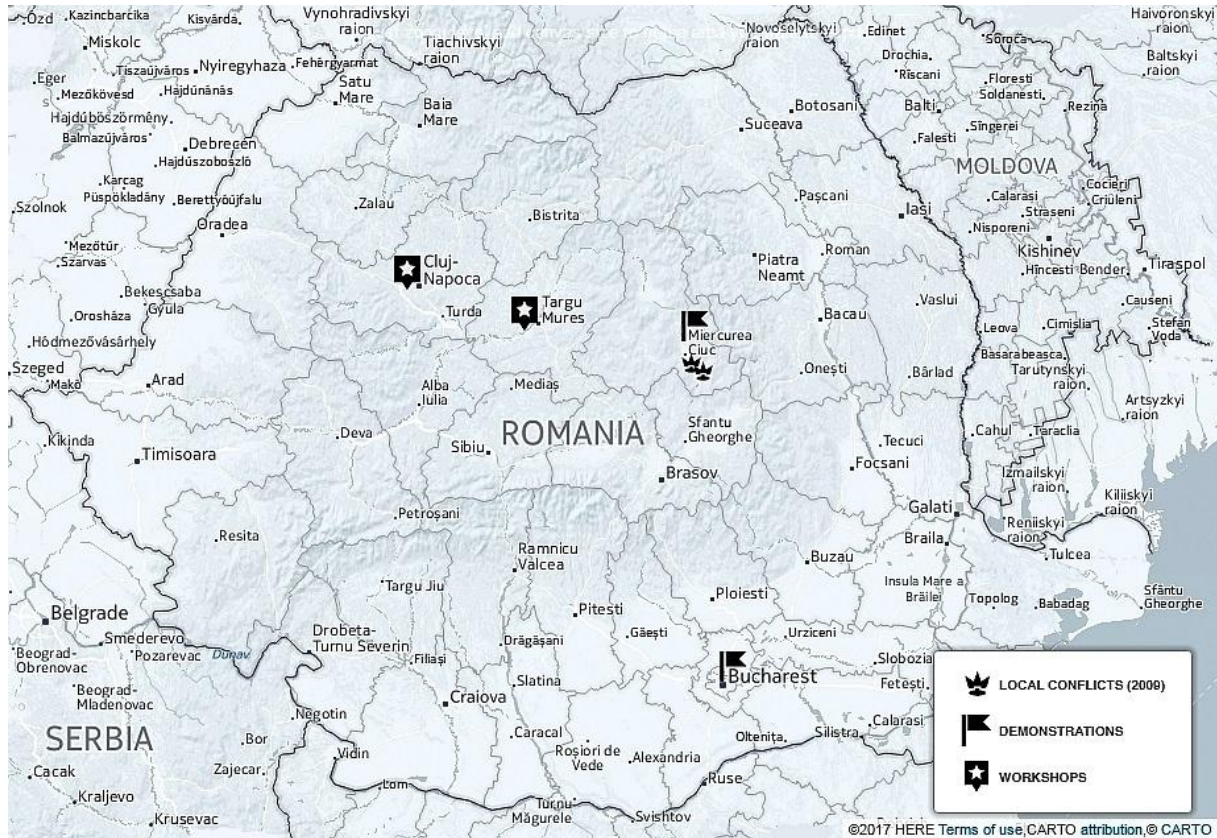

Image 1. The locations of the events described in the chapter (map by the author, attribution

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The initiative contributed to creating a more balanced approach and opened dialogue

between different stakeholders of various backgrounds, as none of these actors would have

been able to act on their own with the same effect. While advocacy groups, epitomized by

Romani CRISS in the description above, performing their "watchdog" role, are fast in

reacting to situations by sending unequivocal public messages, identifying targets for legal

action, or formulating demands for public apology, individuals working for state institutions

are relatively slower in their reactions.

Through their reflexivity, academics tend to be more temperate, understand phenomena in more complex ways and seek to nuance their messages, often even questioning the basic assumptions defining the situation as problematic. I would not like to suggest that researchers per se are, or should be, disengaged; rather, I argue that this proclivity to reflection makes them better suited to ask questions than to provide simple answers, or suggest easy solutions. In the next section I turn to discuss some events related to issues of definition, in which academics usually feel at home.

Țigan versus Roma; the debate around ethnonyms

After a long day of discussions during the "shared responsibility" meeting, on a warm August evening, we sat down with some of the participants in a beer garden in Târgu Mureș. Nicolae Gheorghe was leading the discussion switching between three languages, depending on who he was addressing.[17] After a vivid exchange in Romani with the delegation of Roma from Hungary about the sources of "*Gadjo* power" (in Romani, *zor le gadjenge*) he turned towards me and teasingly said in Romanian, "So at least we finally agreed today that while I would like the Gypsies from Szeklerland (in Romanian, *țiganii din Secuime*) to declare themselves Roma, László wants them just as much to say clearly that they are Hungarians."

We both burst into laughter. For sure, I did not want anybody at that moment living in those villages to claim any other identity than the one they claim in their everyday interactions, a point which I tried to make during earlier discussions. Even if Gheorghe was more strategic in suggesting contextual identity claims as a form of ethnic mobilization, stating that simply vocal allegiance to the term "Roma" will be empowering enough, sounded like a self-ironic caricature. Little did I know that in a few months time, issues related to "definitions" and "ethnonyms" would become the main Roma-related topic in the media.

As I have shown, there are Gypsy groups (like the "*magyarcigányok*" discussed above) who do not necessarily identify themselves as Roma. Members of these groups can opt for being or "becoming" Roma; joining a political identity which is organised at the higher levels, but often the experience of this political identity is rather limited or even lacking in the local context. Gheorghe was a leading promoter of this political identity at the national and international levels, but at the same time, he was reflecting on its political dynamism, being well aware of the limitations of its appeal in certain contexts. I was familiar with Gheorghe's arguments about the institutional context of social constructions of Romani identity (Gheorghe 1992, 1997) and it was also well known that in his practical social projects around the idea of *pakiv* (in Romani, loyalty / honesty / reliability) he insisted on connecting identity building and economic activities as forms of exercising both trust and self-reliance within Roma communities (see also Tanaka 2015). At the moment of our exchange, we shared the understanding of the Romungre in Szeklerland as a group with locally embedded socio-economical relations and a particular identity formation.

Starting in 2009, the conservative newspaper *Jurnalul Național* published a series of articles culminating in 2010 in a campaign for a referendum demanding that the ethnic group known in different European states as Gypsies or *Zigeuner* should be officially named "*țigan*" in Romania, and that the "Rom" or "Roma" terms should be taken out of use. Similar initiatives existed previously, as since the 1990s there were political and public campaigns attempting to "revert" the ethnonym Roma to "*țigan*. The initiators of this campaign argued that the confusion between "Romanian" and "Roma" should be avoided, and that the "correct" name should therefore be used; this "confusion" was even more disturbing in the wake of the westward migration of an increasing number of Romanian Roma.[18] In September 2010, a legislative initiative supporting the name change was submitted by Silviu Prigoană, a Member of Parliament. The initiative passed by check of the parliamentary Commission for

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equality of opportunities, but it was rejected by the Commission for human rights and national minorities-related issues.[19] The Romanian Government requested an opinion from the Romanian Academy. The Section of Philology and Literature of the Romanian Academy issued a letter in late October 2010 which argued: "Having in mind the situation of groups which belong to the Gypsy ethnicity (in Romanian, *etniei ţigăneşti*) in Europe and in the Romanian area, our Section considers that the term *ţigan* represents the correct name for this transnational population."[20] After obtaining this "scientific reassurance," the proponents of the law persevered with their proposal, in spite of the growing concern and open protests from Roma NGOs, human rights activists and other political actors. It would be misleading to imagine that this letter by the Romanian Academy represents the position of all researchers of that institution, let alone of all scholars doing Roma-related research in Romania. However, the symbolic and political consequences of this letter should not be downplayed: it was used strategically by political actors in order to grant legitimacy to the conservative turn seeking to introduce in public administration the stigmatizing ethnic label for Roma.

Late 2010, in the middle of this period of intense political debate and confrontation, I received a phone call from Nicolae Gheorghe. He proposed that the RIRNM should convene a workshop with researchers and activists, and debate the issues related to the ethnic terminology. He suggested that such a workshop could be well in line with the profile of our institute and after scientific debate we could come up with a position which might differ from the one expressed by the Romanian Academy. I agreed with his proposal, and following a discussion with my colleagues and the director of the institute I started to organize this meeting.

The event finally took place on 18 January 2011, with the participation of a large number of activists and social researchers from different disciplines. In the meantime, an unexpected event happened in Cluj-Napoca (in Hungarian, Kolozsvár) on 17 December 2010;

the Office of the Mayor decided to evict fifty-six Roma families, demolishing their settlement in a coveted central part of the city (Coastei Street). The evicted families were offered shelter at the margins of the city's administrative area, in the vicinity of the municipal landfill. This action brought Cluj into the headlines of the national media, and with the effective help of a group of local civil activists and academics, a campaign was initiated, which also attracted the attention of international human rights and advocacy groups (Amnesty International, European Roma Rights Centre, among others). The issue of the eviction and of its consequences generated a continuous discussion in the past years (see Vincze 2013).

In the process of preparing and organizing the workshop on ethnic terminology, I received many suggestions from Nicolae Gheorghe, including on whom to invite. It became increasingly clear to me that he had a rather well-defined strategy for how we should disseminate the results of the workshop on the international scene most effectively. Finally, a large number of invitations were sent out with the expectation that many would attend the meeting. On the morning of the workshop, Nicolae Gheorghe showed up wearing a large hat, a red scarf, and a broom under his arm. He used the broom as a walking stick but also clipped documents on it while sitting among the participants. By using the broom, his main purpose was to popularize the work of a particular Roma group who makes brooms, in a public performance of ethnicity (Image 2). This became even clearer when the next day Gheorghe attended a demonstration organized as a protest against the Mayor of Cluj who had evicted the Roma. He symbolically attached a Romani flag on the top of his broom (see cover image of this volume), holding it up in the air for everyone to see (Transindex 2009).[21]

Image 2. Nicolae Gheorghe during the event organised by the RIRNM in January 2011

(courtesy Albert Zsolt Jakab)

The workshop consisted of a number of presentations by RIRMN researchers and other invited academics and activists, as well as a long and intense debate on issues connected to identity, self-determination, political correctness and human rights. Gheorghe was often provocative, and challenged his younger colleagues active in the Romani movement to be more creative and open to discussions. He challenged them in particular, as he later explained to me, because some of them nurtured political ambitions and they were in the process of building up a large coalition of NGOs which had electoral ambitions during the forthcoming local elections, and he feared they lacked the necessary determination.[22]

The tensions surrounding the meeting contributed to a lively debate, resulting in the conclusion that we need to reject the position which claims that there is a single "correct"

term for the name of an ethnic group. Rather, we should look into the classification process itself and be aware of the social and political processes at work in the right of ethnic self-determination, maintaining that the rights of ethnic communities should prevail. The conclusion seemed not to fully satisfy all the participants. A minority of Roma activists prepared a position paper, which listed additional historical and philological arguments supporting that the term "Roma" should remain the proper ethnonym. We all agreed that a report would be prepared about the results of the workshop and posted on the Institute's website, and circulated among the workshop participants and the general public. I made a summary of the proceedings, which was quickly translated into English and widely distributed. A volume—*Rom sau țigan. Dilemele unui etnonim în spațiul românesc* (Rom or Gypsy: Dilemmas of an ethnonym in the Romanian space) was later edited on these issues (Horváth and Nastasă 2012).[23] At the book launch, activists criticized the editors, claiming that such a volume should have made a clear case for the term "Roma." Moreover, one activist started an email campaign claiming that the RIRNM is playing a duplicitous game, and that we made a case for the term "Gypsy" by publishing in the same period an ethnographic working paper titled in quotation marks "We are Gypsies, not Roma!" (Marin 2010). This title reflects how some local Roma groups identify themselves as "*țigani*" (Gypsies) and distance themselves from the term "Roma."

The topic slowly seemed to lose its actuality but in press outlets we kept emphasizing the importance of avoiding stigmatization and respect for the self-ascription for ethnic groups.[24] Finally in April 2011, the legislative initiative for making the term "*țigan*" the official name for the ethnic group was rejected by the Senate. At the RIRMN, we put together an archive of the whole debate, gathering, with the help of volunteers, hundreds of sources from the press and other publicly accessible sources. While I had hoped that it would be the final moment of this narrative, in early 2015, a new petition appeared for the same purpose, to

obtain the necessary number of signatures for a referendum on the "*ţigan*" / Roma

terminology, and another MP (Bogdan Diaconu) announced his support for this cause.[25]

Clearly, the debate about this issue is far from being settled in the Romanian public sphere;

some politicians will continue to rely on anti-Gypsyism as a political vehicle.

Conclusions

Concluding the reflection on these cases, I argue that Roma activism should not be interpreted

independently from the processes and exchanges in which it is entangled. Activism, by its

very nature, is embedded in these entanglements. The dynamics of racism and anti-Gypsyism

(Romanian *antiţiganism*, Hungarian *cigányellenesség*) is a persistent element of this scene.

Strong emotional reactions from activists and researchers are evoked when threats of violence

occur, be it physical—as in the first case discussed—or symbolic, through the manipulation of

symbolic categories and terms—as in the second case). The two cases are different in many

respects. The first is an example of a localized conflict and the subsequent intervention of

state institutions and external actors, like Romani CRISS. In this case, a watchdog NGO

addressed and denounced issues related to the ineffectiveness of the state to protect the rights

of its citizens in case of physical threat by their neighbors. Yet the local understanding shared

by the authorities and the majority of the local population turned these activist undertakings

into an unwelcome intrusion. Conflicting regional, social and ethnic categories pop up time

and again, so ethnic ascriptions, other social identities, and belonging cannot be seen as

politically neutral. Positions are both actively self-assumed and externally attributed (Barth

1969). Neglecting local perceptions of activism has a potential for misguided action. The

example of the Miercurea Ciuc protest illustrates that defining human rights without tuning

them to local understandings might easily be interpreted as a nationalist or anti-Hungarian intrusion in the region, or both, shifting the nature of the original conflict.

The second case—the nation-wide debated issue of the definitional struggles around the ethnonym Rom / "*țigan*," demonstrates how different actors are orienting themselves between institutions like the Romanian government, the section of the Romanian Academy conferring pseudo-scientific legitimacy to political actions, the Parliament, NGOs, academics, and the RIRNM. Activism, as exemplified by the intervention of the late Nicolae Gheorghe, can be described as skillful navigation between different organizations and actors in order to forge alliances, achieve balance and reach one's goals.

There are some implications for the position of researchers and their relationship with activist roles. As I tried to show in the ethnographic description, every person involved in these events is politically engaged and needs to take a particular position: no one can stay "neutral." Certainly, there are more marginal and more central positions in processes associated with activism. From the beginning, I perceived myself at the margins, where I remained throughout these events; this proved to be a rather comfortable position for me as a researcher. However, a marginal role is still political, but not necessarily activist. Other people had a more central role in these stories, and Nicolae Gheorghe was such a person. Undeniably, he had an important role in shaping these discussions, but it would be misleading to say that he was the one who defined these situations. The main force leading these events was the logic of the dialogue, the discourse created throughout the encounters. Definitions of the situation emerged from the conversations into which I tried to offer a glimpse, and as I intentionally positioned myself at the margin, I sought to document all sides of the arguments and present the outcome. While doing this, I tried continuously to negotiate my role as researcher as a distinct position, not in terms of absolute neutrality but in relations to my and others" personal engagement.

This chapter could be read as a fragment of institutional history, an attempt to summarize, in some detail, some of the activities in the field of Romani studies carried out within the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities in its early period. The idea of this institute emerged as part of a broader process of institutionalizing the system of minorities protection (naturally oriented toward activism and advocacy) and knowledge production on ethnic minorities in Romania. The context of these exchanges between research and activism was shaped, on the one hand, by powerful external agencies, and, on the other hand, by ongoing social processes on the ground. Entering into these dialogues, the parties benefited from the exchanges without blurring or merging the roles of activist and researcher. While many researchers are also involved in activism, those whose positions do not overlap and are engaged in either activism or research should certainly continue to engage in dialogue. They should seek to reach common goals, while trying to improve the situation, for example by influencing state institutions to be more effective, and by providing a more complete and nuanced analysis of the ongoing processes. We can walk different paths towards these goals, while keeping up the dialogue which defines our roles as researchers and/or activists.

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Notes

[2] Source: http://ispmn.gov.ro/ (acessed January 20, 2016).

[3] Viorel Achim's general history of the Romanian Roma (Achim 2004) includes chapters on Roma leadership and organizations. Petre Matei described the "Gypsy assemblies" (1919) which were organized following the Union of Transylvania to Romania (Matei 2010; Matei 2011); in addition, he prepared a chronology of the Roma-related events (Matei 2016). There are pioneering studies by Sam Beck (1984,1990, 1993) and Nicolae Gheorghe (1991, 1997) on the more recent history of the Roma, public policies and activism. István Haller (2009) offered a glimpse on the history of ethnic conflicts.

[4] For exceptions, see Paloma Gay y Blasco's (2002) work for Spain and my publications (Fosztó 2009; 2010) for Romania.

[5] Together with Viorel Anăstăsoaie I published an overview (Fosztó and Anastasoaie 2001), and continued to keep an interest in the development of Romani activism in the domestic context, while also developing an international outlook (see Fosztó 2003a; 2003b; 2009; 2010).

[6] Szeklers are a particular group of Hungarians who live in Covasna, Harghita, and Mureș countries. Historically, they enjoyed special status and their distinct ethnic / collective identity persists in our days.

[7] For a detailed discussion of the events and the interpretation of the conflict see Stefánia Toma (2012).

[8] The social historian István Imreh published several volumes about these local laws, which were effective until the late 19th century (for example Imreh 1983); for similar self-governing village communities among Romanians see Henri Stahl (1980).

[9] In that period, Romania was in the middle of the presidential electoral campaign, and the DAHR had its own candidate.

[10] These Romanian words: "*barză, varză, viezure, mânz, brânză"* are considered to have roots in the ancient Dacian language, so pronouncing them properly might account as a test for being a "proper Romanian."

[11] A Roma activist woman whom I met in Bucharest months later told me about her experience in trying to work in the region: she felt that not only language barriers are in place, but that the local ethnic Hungarians were refusing cooperation: in one of the villages, when the Szeklers noticed her presence in the village, they quickly notified the person in charge with the church bells, who started to sound the bells, like when a house burns in the village.

[12] Most of the Roma in the region speak Hungarian as their mother tongue. The advocates of Romani CRISS used translation in their interactions with them. The name list consists almost exclusively of Hungarian names.

[13] The idea of "ethnic cleansing" connected to "autonomy" emerged earlier on the main e-mail list of the Roma activists in Romania (RomLink); the situation was also associated with the threatening vision of an emerging "new Kosovo" in Transylvania, where the local majority will expel internal minorities.

[14] These ideas are developed in more detail in Gheorghe and Pulay 2013, 88-94, the intellectual testament of the late Nicolae Gheorghe.

[15] Namely the ethnic Romanian Smaranda Enache, and the ethnic Hungarian Maria Koreck.

[16] The list of participants (a total of 23) included Roma activists both from Romania (Doghi Pavel, Dan Pavel Doghi, Viorel Zaharia, János Venczi, Florin Hajnal, Rudolf Moca, Radu Răducannu, and Florin Cioabă) and from Hungary (Balogh József, Orbán Kolompár), as well as academics (Professor Vincze Enikő, Dr Margit Feischmidt, Gergő Pulay, and Nándor László Magyari).

[17] Romani, Romanian, and English, which was used between Hungarians from Hungary and the ethnic Romanians.

[18] The collection of the contributions to this debate and the campaign is accessible at http://jurnalul.ro/campaniile-jurnalul/tigan-in-loc-de-rom/ (accessed February 10, 2016).

[19] http://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/upl_pck.proiect?cam=2&idp=11279 (accessed February 10, 2016).

[20] http://www.transindex.ro/images/__leo/cikkek/cikkek_41518.pdf (accessed February 10, 2016).

[21] See also the press article: "I am Roma, I want to live in dignity": Street protest against evacuations by the Mayor of Cluj (19 January 2011). Source: http://itthon.transindex.ro/?cikk=13438 (accessed January 20, 2016).

²² Alianţa Civică Democrată a Romilor (ACDR) (The Civic Democratic Alliance of the Roma).

²³ In this volume there is a single note on the workshop in January 2011 (footnote 3, page 320).

²⁴ Gy. A.: Tananyag ne "niggerezzen". És mi a helyzet a Román Akadémia "cigányozásával"? [Didactic material should not use terms like "nigger". What about the Romanian Academy calling the Roma "ţigani"?], February 2, 2011 Transindex, available at http://itthon.transindex.ro/?cikk=13542 (accessed January 20, 2016).

²⁵ http://www.petitieonline.com/inlocuirea_denumirii_de_rrom_cu_tiganstop_discriminarii_romanilor (accessed January 20, 2016).