

# THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ROMA ETHNICITY IN BULGARIA, ROMANIA AND HUNGARY DURING MARKET TRANSITION

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**Abstract.** Who are Roma? What is the size of Roma population in a given country, a region of the world or in the whole world? To date, most social scientific research done in the Central European region on Roma populations operated with the assumption that one can arrive at an objective definition who Roma are and thus to come up with an accurate estimate of the size of Roma population. Rather than aiming at an “accurate” estimation of the Roma population, in this paper we hypothesize that ethnic groups are “social constructions”. The boundary of any single ethnicity is “fuzzy”: who is “inside” and who is “outside” this boundary will vary depending who does the classification. This paper tests survey results on two systems of classification: 1) self-identification by the respondents, and 2) and classification by interviewers in three countries, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania; and we show that there are substantial variation across countries. The paper offers strong support to the hypothesis that ethnic boundaries and various systems of classification are alterable across cultures. About two-third of those who were classified as Roma by the interviewers in Hungary and Romania do not regard themselves as Roma. In Bulgaria two-third of the respondent who were classified as Roma by the interviewer identified themselves as Roma. Therefore the task of social research is not to identify which classificatory system is „correct”, or „accurate”, but to understand the social processes how these various classificatory systems are created.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, poverty

Who are Roma? What is the size of Roma population in a given country, a region of the world or in the whole world? These questions are the subject of intense controversy among social scientists. This controversy points to some of the most fundamental issues concerning the social construction of race and is therefor relevant for all scholars of ethnicity (Barth 1969; Eschbach and Gomez 1998; Waters 1992 and 1999).

To date, the most recognized social scientific research done in the Central European region on Roma populations (see Kemény 1976 and 1997; Kertesi 1998; Kertesi and Kézdi 1998) operated with the assumption that one can arrive at an objective definition who Roma are and thus to come up with an accurate estimate of

the size of Roma population. Kemény and his co-authors correctly point out that self-reporting of Roma ethnicity in population censuses tend to vary a great deal from census to census, thus it should be judged unreliable. In order to correct this, the Kemény-team used the judgment of the “social surrounding” (basically a “jury” composed of well informed experts in communities) to identify who Roma are, and they arrived at the conclusion that this way they receive a reliable identification which is also corresponding to by those who are labeled Roma by the experts. Therefore they came up with a figure how many Roma lived in Hungary in 1971 (Kemény, 1976) and in 1993 (Kertesi and Kézdi, 1998).

In our earlier publications (Ladányi 1996; Ladányi and Szelényi 1998; Emigh and Szelényi 2001) we applauded Kemény and his collaborators for subjecting the census data to critical scrutiny, but we urged them and other scholars who study the Roma or any other ethnic minority to go even further and subject all ethnic classification (including their own) to similar critical analysis. We hypothesized that ethnic groups are “social constructions”. The boundary of any single ethnicity is “fuzzy”: who is “inside” and who is “outside” this boundary will vary depending who does the classification. Furthermore, the act of classification is not “innocent”. Classificatory acts take place in highly contested social terrains where some, occasionally a great deal of ethnic prejudice and discrimination can be detected. Thus when a classifier decides that an individual belongs to ethnic group *A* rather than ethnic group *B*, this judgment is highly consequential for the person thus classified. In this sense every act of ethnic classification is an act of classificatory struggle. The outcome of this struggle does not only depend on the characteristics of the person who is classified, but also varies by the social characteristics, interests and prejudices of the classifiers. These epistemological considerations led us to a new research strategy: instead of searching for the reliable or correct system of classification, the right estimation of the number of people who belong to a given ethnicity, in our view the object of social inquiry should be to map all possible systems of ethnic classificatory systems and to study empirically the characteristics of both those who were classified and those who did the classification in order to understand in the tradition of interpretative or hermeneutic social science the social mechanisms of ethnic classifications.

As far as the Roma population of Central Europe is concerned there are at least three different systems of classification which could be fairly easily be studied by social scientists:

1. self-identification by the respondents,
2. classification by “experts” who deal with the Roma (teachers, local government officials, nurses, social workers, policemen, etc.), and
3. classification by interviewers in commercial or scientific surveys.

One could add other possible classificatory systems – for instance it would be very interesting to study how neighbors classify individuals or their families who live in their neighborhoods. Given, however, the limitations imposed on social research by human subject protection consideration this may not be feasible.

Our central hypothesis is that all of the above systems of classification are “real”, tell us something important about the people who are classified and who do the classification (Ferrante and Brown 1998; Telles and Lim 1998). We also believe that

the three classificatory systems classify individuals differently. In particular experts often classify subjects as Roma, though they would not identify themselves as such, and interviewers may classify some subjects as Roma who are not believed to be Roma by experts. We think about the three systems of classification as circles. The largest one is by the interviewer. The expert classification tends to be almost exclusively within this circle, but is a smaller one. The circle of self-identified Roma is the smallest one, but it is likely to be almost exclusively within the boundary drawn by experts. What follows is a brief discussion of all three systems of classification and elaboration why we believe they are all “real”, worth to be studied.

Let us begin this exercise with the problems of *self-identification*. As we wrote before when careful empirical research on Roma in Central Europe began in the early 1970s, it was pointed out that self-identification in population censuses is unreliable. The change in the proportion of ethnic groups (not only Roma, but also other ethnicities, thus Hungarians in Slovakia, or Romania, Slovaks or Germans in Hungary etc.) varies too much and unsystematically from one census to the next. We know from numerous surveys that subjects who do not identify themselves as Roma are still often classified by experts or interviewers as such, hence the conclusion drawn by most researchers that self-identification “under-estimates” the size of Roma population. Well, this conclusion may not be accurate. The difference in self-identification and expert or interviewer identification is real, but it does not follow that one of the estimates is accurate and the other is not. Those who self-identify as Roma tell us one story, the experts or interviewers who classify others as Roma tell us another story. It is an important task of empirical research to understand who are the people who classify themselves as Roma, to what extent can this be explained by the characteristics of the individuals who self-identify, or to what extent the result of self-identification is the result of social conditions under which such classification takes place. Self-identification may mean that subjects have no choice, but to accept the Roma label, for instance because they are Romany speakers (our cross-national survey shows that there is a strong correlation between language and self-identification), or because they live in Gypsy ghettos as may most of Roma still do in Bulgaria. Self-identification may also be the indicator of ethnic or national consciousness. With the strengthening of Roma civil right movement we would not be surprised if over time the gap between expert or interviewer classification and self-identification would narrow.

It makes also a lot of sense to study those who are classified by experts (such as schoolteachers, social workers, or the local police) as Roma. In particular in research that is concerned with welfare issues this is an excellent way to identify the population which regarded as Roma and which may need special policy instruments in order to get their problems managed. But why would experts think they know who are Roma? In small rural villages they may believe they know this, since they know the ancestry of the people, they think they know whose parents were Roma. Even in these situations care is recommended – various expert classifiers may use different criteria to establish who is of Roma ancestry. For some the “one-drop-of-blood” rule may apply – everyone whom they know have any Roma ancestry, may be called Roma. Other classifiers may use different criteria, people from mixed marriages may

not count as Roma at all, or they may count only as Roma if they continue the “Roma life style” – thus if they are poor, to put it simply and crudely. But how do experts arrive at their judgment concerning the ethnicity of a subject in urban settings? In rare occasions in Central and Southern Europe Roma lives in what appears to be completely segregated urban ghettos, for instance in the Nadezhda district in Sliven in Bulgaria. Here the address seems to be a proof of ethnicity, though at closer scrutiny it may or may not be one. Though all local officials we interviewed during the summer of year 2000 in Nadezhda insisted that all inhabitants are Gypsy, we may wonder how could they tell it for sure. What if some residents of Nadezhda are simply no-hopers, poor, who ended up in Nadezhda? Finally, if subjects do not live in Nadezhda like setting in cities, it is arguable that the classification by experts is primarily based on their social conditions. To begin with, they know the subjects, since they need, or seek their assistance, or they were brought to their attention. People who are classified as Roma by experts tend to be “social problem” cases, if they would not, how would the expert know about them? (Wade found a strong relationship between low social status and being classified as “Blacks” in Latin America. [Wade 1997]). Why would it occur to a teacher that a child may be of Roma ethnicity if his /her parents are professional, the child is doing well in school and has one sibling only? The color of his/her skin may be a little darker (though even this is not necessarily the case: there are blond Gypsies with blue eyes), but there are enough Hungarians, Romanians and Bulgarians with dark complexes. It is reasonable to assume therefore that experts will classify subjects as Roma if they are poor, if they demonstrate signs of “Roma life style” (and what else is it than poverty?)

Under no circumstances do we imply that research which uses expert classification of Roma ethnicity is not useful. But from the above analysis it ought to be clear that such definition of Roma conflates poverty and Roma ethnicity, which makes any serious investigation of the interrelationship between Roma ethnicity and poverty extremely difficult if not impossible (Csepeli 2001).

This leads us to the question of classification of subjects by interviewers as Roma. There is a long tradition in social research (even in census) to use classification by interviewers to identify the ethnicity of the respondents (for the usefulness and limitations of racial classification by interviewers see Telles, forthcoming). This was widely used in the United States and has been used to identify Roma also more recently in Central and Southern Europe. Those who believe in expert classification as the proper way to identify ethnicity (Kertesi 1998; Havas, Kemény, Kertesi 1998) interviewer classification is highly suspect. Indeed, interviewer classification is not unproblematic. The divergence of self-identification from interviewer classification can be great, and it is likely to vary substantially. In the United States, for instance, in the case of African-Americans the two classifications are very close (according to research done by Edward Telles over 90% [Telles, forthcoming]), thus one can easily substitute interviewer classification for self-identification. In Brazil, however, the coincidence is much smaller between interviewer classification of Black and self-identification (according to Telles it is 58% [Telles, forthcoming]). As we will show later in this paper, in Central and Southern Europe there is an almost analogous cross-cultural difference in the gap between the two classificatory systems. Given this fact

the objection by scholars like Kemény should be taken seriously. Interviewers are “uninformed” when they classify respondents by their ethnicity and this classification is therefore rather unstable, unreliable.

While this criticism is well taken, let us make a case why interviewer classification is important. True, interviewers make their judgment concerning the ethnicity of the subject “on-the-fly”, but their classification has merit. First of all, lot of similar uninformed judgment is being made in a very consequential way in everyday life situations. If the interviewer judges a respondent to be Roma, the security personnel of department store may arrive at the same conclusion thus to treat the subject as if he/she was a Gypsy. If that person applies for a job, it is not inconceivable that a potential employer will make a similar judgment just “on-the-fly”. Thus whether someone is harassed in a store, or not offered employment etc. might follow the same dynamics as the classification by the interviewer does. Equally important is the fact that the interviewer in one sense is actually better informed than the “expert”. If a family or person is not a “welfare problem”, the expert will never scrutinize its ethnic ancestry. The interviewer, however, spends an hour or so in a household, it has the opportunity to observe interior decoration, look at other family members and make a comprehensive judgment about a family which is not a welfare problem case, but may very well of Roma ancestry and occasionally treated as such. There is no better way we can think of in conventional social science research to identify the assimilated Roma or the Roma on the way of assimilation that rely on information by interviewers. Interviewers are more likely than experts to identify Roma among those who do not declare themselves Gypsy, and since they live in consolidated conditions they may not be registered in the minds of the experts as Roma. Roughly speaking we believe that about half of the Roma of Eastern Europe is actually assimilating or is already assimilated. Assimilation is, of course, not a one way street but we have good enough reasons to believe that with self-identification (with the rare exception of Roma political activists) and with expert classification we get only a great part of the Roma story, we miss altogether the story of successful assimilation.

As we have pointed out earlier (Ladányi 1996), self-identified Roma differ from non-Roma more than people classified as Roma either by experts or interviewers. Self-identified Roma – at least in Hungary, according to research conducted before our current investigation – tend to be ecologically more segregated, have more children, tend to have less education, are more likely to be unemployed etc. The gap between the “Roma” and “non-Roma” if Roma is defined by expert is smaller than in the case of self-identification, and this gap is the smallest, when interviewer classifies the respondents.

This paper – like all other papers in this special issue – is based on statistical data from the 2000 survey on “Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Transitional Societies” and on ethnographic evidence gathered in conjuncture with this study. We present data here from three European post-communist countries with large Roma population: Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

These three countries have – according to various estimates – the largest proportion of Roma population. Estimates – how reliable they are, it of course depends on the considerations presented above – put the Roma population in

Romania as between 1.8 and 2.5 million, in Bulgaria between 600,000 and 700,000 and in Hungary between 500,000 and 600,000 (Davidova 1995). The three countries have many common features, first of all, geographic proximity, similar experiences with state socialism. Thus if their ethnic stratification system turns out to be different, that will require an explanation.

In our survey we collected data on three different systems of ethnic classification:

- a) all respondents were asked to declare their ethnic background (self-identification);
- b) experts (mainly social workers) were asked to review the list of names of all households in our samples and classify the sample by ethnic origins ((expert classification);
- c) we asked the interviewers to classify respondents on random samples on the basis of their ethnicity (interviewer classification).

Interviewers and experts were also asked to explain on what basis they arrived at their judgments and they also have to fill out a short questionnaire about their own social and ethnic background.

This paper reports finding on the cross-cultural differences in the ethnic classification systems in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, in particular on the gap between self-identification and interviewer classification. While we collected data on expert classification as well for the purposes of this paper, we do not analyze the results from that leg of our study in detail.

Let's first have a look at the way interviewers classified respondents. Our research progressed in two stages. During the first stage we conducted screening interviews attached to monthly market research surveys. The purpose of these screening interviews was to accumulate a large enough sample of Roma. We only had funds to interview about 2,000 individuals per country. A proportional non-stratified random sample would contain about 100 Roma households. In order to be able to analyze statistically our results on Roma we needed a Roma sub-sample around 300–500 per country. We therefore “hooked-on” to market research firms and screened over a period of a year or so between 10–19,000 households. We asked the screening interviewers to tell us whether in their view the household is a Roma household, and this way we created a Roma “over-sample”. We did so because we believed that this was the largest circle: the number of those who classify themselves Roma, but in the interviewers view are not Roma is likely to be negligible. Similarly interviewers according to our experiences tend to identify as Roma practically all those who are classified as Gypsy by experts, they only classify as Roma many more, who are not known to the experts at all, or at least they are not believed to be Roma by experts. All those households which were classified as Roma during the screening interview were interviewed in our survey. In our own survey we asked the respondents what their own ethnic background is, and at the end of the interview we requested the survey interviewer to make a judgment about the ethnicity of the respondents.

The first question we explore is how consistent the reports by the two interviewers were. We anticipate some discrepancies. According to our hypotheses different interviewers will arrive at different judgment concerning the ethnicity of the respondent depending on the interviewers own social characteristics. Furthermore the

survey interviewer was in a different situation as screening interviewer – screening interviewer was asked to make a “blind” judgment (during the screening interview respondents were not asked whether they are Roma or not). During our own survey interviewer was helped (or “polluted”?) since they judged the ethnicity of the respondents after we asked the respondent what is their ancestry. If a respondent insists that he or she is not of Roma ancestry, it will be more difficult for the interviewer to insist that the person is Roma.

*Table 1* shows substantial differences across countries how consistent or inconsistent classifications of the two interviewers were.

*Table 1.* Ethnic classification of respondents who were reported to be Roma during the screening interviews after completion of the survey (%)

Ethnic classification of respondents	Country		
	Bulgaria	Hungary	Romania
2 <sup>nd</sup> interviewer certain	87.2	48.5	37.5
2 <sup>nd</sup> interviewer not certain	6.5	16.3	34.2
Non-gypsy by the 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviewer	6.3	35.2	28.3
Gypsy by the 1 <sup>st</sup> interviewer	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	524	481	368

In Bulgaria interviewer classification of the ethnicity of respondents produces highly consistent results: only six percent of those who were classified as Roma during the screening interviews by the interviewers were believed not to be Roma after the survey interview was completed. Hungary and Romania, however, offer a very different picture: in these countries roughly a third of those who were selected into the Roma over-sample during the screening interviews were classified as non-Roma by the interviewer of the survey.

*Table 1* offers strong support to the hypothesis that ethnic boundaries are alterable over time and across cultures. Let’s think about the interviewer as an ordinary person, who based on a brief conversation attempts to make a judgment concerning the ethnicity of the person he talked to. We can conclude that in Bulgaria ordinary people will arrive at almost identical judgments concerning the ethnicity of alter. In Hungary and Romania the judgments of ordinary people will be substantially less “reliable” – we get consistent responses in only two-third of the cases. The boundaries which mark Roma from the rest of the society are more sharply drawn in Bulgaria than in the other two countries.

Our table offers further evidence for the fluidity of the ethnic boundaries in Hungary and Romania. After the interview for our survey was completed we asked the survey interviewer whether in their view the respondent was Roma and if the answer was yes, we asked them to report how certain they are that they arrived at the correct conclusion. There is little sign of doubt in Bulgaria by the classifiers, almost all of them are sure they could not make an error in their judgment. In Hungary, however, a sixth of the second interviewers hesitate, and in Romania a third of the “jurors” actually think they may be making an error when they call somebody Gypsy.

*Table 2. Ethnic self-identification of respondents during survey who were classified as Roma during screening by the interviewer (%)*

Country	Roma
Bulgaria	73.3
Hungary	36.8
Romania	30.7

About two-third of those who were classified as Roma during the screening process in Hungary and Romania do not regard themselves as Roma. It is quite clear what was going on. Once the respondent told the interviewer that he/she is not Roma the interviewer either simply accepted this answer, or insisted that the respondent may be Roma, though – understandably, given the denial by the respondent – with some hesitation.

The Bulgarian story is quite different. In Bulgaria almost two-third of the 27 percent of respondent who were classified as Roma during screening, but who during the interview claimed not to be Roma identified themselves as Turks, and this did not impress particularly the survey interviewers. The survey interviewers still insisted that though the respondent claims to be Turkish, he actually is Roma, and they insisted so with a great degree of certainty. Thus the relatively high percentage of Roma in Bulgaria who do not identify themselves as Roma is not really an indication of the fuzziness of the definition of Roma ethnicity (as the low level of self-identification in Hungary and Romania the most certainly is). Muslim Roma in Bulgaria preferred to identify themselves as Turkish, though neither Turks, nor Bulgarians will accept this self-definition.

The above tables offer rock solid evidence that the definition of Roma varies a great deal cross-culturally and depending who are the classifier. In Bulgaria there is a great deal of agreement about who Roma are and Roma tend to accept the labeling by non-Roma, with the exception of Muslim Gypsies. In Hungary and Romania, however, this is very different. The majority who is seen as Roma by the social environment resent to be called Roma.

Interviews with experts in Hungary confirm that this discrepancy between outside classification and self-identification holds also if the classification is not done by the interviewer, but by a local expert. In our study, once the survey was completed, our interviewers visited experts (mainly social workers at the local government), and gave them in sealed envelop the complete list of names of families both of our population sample and Roma over-sample in an alphabetic order. The experts were asked to indicate the identification number of those households which in their view was Roma. In two-third of the cases the experts and the interviewers classification was the same, and only in one-third of the cases did the expert believe that the household called as Roma by the screening interviewer was not Roma. This has two important implications:

1. the classification by the interviewer reflects the general stereotypes who Gypsies are quite well;
2. many persons classified by the experts as Roma reject the Roma label when asked whether they are Roma.

The high consensus about the ethnic boundaries in Bulgaria can be attributed to two factors. As *Table 3* shows there is a substantially greater degree of segregation in Bulgaria than in the other two countries. 77 percent of Bulgarian Roma lives either in Gypsy settlements or in neighborhoods where the majority of the population is Gypsy. Only 34 percent of the Hungarian and 28 percent of Romanian Gypsies live under such conditions of segregation. Now the degree of segregation is almost identical with self-identification and of course once a person identified him/herself as Roma, neither the interviewer nor the expert is likely to disagree. The similarity between *Table 2 and 3* is striking and instructive.

*Table 3.* Residential segregation of the neighborhood by countries in Roma over-sample (%)

Residential segregation	Country		
	Bulgaria	Hungary	Romania
Gypsy settlement	56.2	11.6	10.9
Majority of the population is Roma	21.0	22.5	17.1
Majority of the population is non -Roma poor	11.7	26.0	27.4
No concentration of either poor or Roma	11.1	39.9	44.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	524	481	368

Spatial segregation is only one of the mechanisms to draw the ethnic boundary sharply and guarantee that the classified will have little choice but to accept the ethnic classification by others. Language is another similar mechanism. Those whose native tongue is Romany will more likely accept the Gypsy label put on them, but those who do not speak Romany are much less likely to be classified as Gypsy, and will less likely accept this label. Roma self-identification therefore is the result of residential segregation and language use – Bulgaria has a higher level of self-identification since both Roma language use is more frequent than in Hungary and Romania and the degree of segregation is also more widespread.

Data collected by the “Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender in Transitional Society” project offers ample evidence that there are substantial differences in the ethnic classification systems among the three countries we studied. Most importantly in Bulgaria ethnic classification is much more stable than in Hungary or Romania. Interviewers tend to classify the same subject to be member of the same ethnic community with more consistency than interviewers do in Hungary and Romania. Furthermore, the difference between self-identification and interviewer classification is modest in Bulgaria. If we take into consideration that Roma self-identification as Turkish is frequent in Bulgaria and is just another way to tell the interviewer that the respondent actually is Roma, the correspondence between interviewer classification and self-identification is similar to those of African-Americans in the United States. The story is strikingly different in Hungary and Romania where in repeated interviews the interviewers tend to classify subjects inconsistently and there is a substantial gap – similar to those to the classification of Blacks in Brazil – between self-identification and interviewer classification.

These major differences among the countries can be largely explained by the differences in ecological segregation. Bulgarian Roma tends to live in highly segregated neighborhoods, while Roma in Hungary and Romania lives in more integrated ways. Bulgarian Roma is also more likely to speak Romany. While Romany speaking occurs quite frequently in Romania as well, it is rather rare in Hungary. On balance it is ecological segregation which appears to be the best predictor how good the correspondence between respondents' self-identification and classification by interviewer and how consistent interviewers classification is if several interviewers are asked to classify the same subject in terms of his/her ethnicity. Residential segregation reflects social disadvantage and ethnic discrimination. Extreme spatial differentiation contributes to sharp social and ethnic differentiation.

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