

Legitimacy, Statistics and Research Methodology—Who Is a Gypsy in Hungary Today? and What Are We (Not) Allowed to Know About Them?

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The question of who can be considered a Roma in Hungary goes well beyond issues of ethnic identity or, in a wider sense, the cultural anthropological aspects of ethnicity. As shown below, the terms *Roma* and *Gypsy* themselves indicate a divergent web of problems burdened by various interests. This article discusses the topic from a number of fundamental aspects: legal, statistical, methodological, theoretical, policy for minorities and practice among research organisations, all independent of how the group in question, i.e. the Roma, identify themselves or, in other words, of what their ethnic identity might be. Let us set out from the least complex of the issues, the legal regulations.

Prior to the political changes in 1989 and following them until 1993, ethnic classification in Hungary was not limited to ethnic self-definition. Accordingly, primary, middle and secondary school statistics registered individuals of Roma origin, and teachers evaluated the educational development of the Roma pupils and students separately. Statistics at the school level were centrally processed and were available. Furthermore, the school statistics reflected the judgement of teachers rather than the self-definition of the Roma students concerned or their families. Before any humanist or human rights concerns are raised against this procedure, it has to be said that it was the distortion evident in the prevailing census returns that lead to the above-mentioned applied method of 'external judgement'. Namely, according to census data gathered once every decade (which data is clearly based on self-identification) nearly half as many Roma lived in Hungary than the number calculable from the school-data. This phenomenon of distortion was even apparent in the last census (in 2001).

It thus immediately becomes evident that the inherent contradiction in the question "Who is a Roma?" must not be ignored. Clearly, those who deny their identity, for example, for reasons connected to assimilation,² but whose parents are Roma and, moreover, whose Roma environment considers them to be Roma will 'drop out' of the Roma *public* community. This means that from a politically correct and a legally unassailable standpoint they are by definition no longer 'Roma' whilst continuing to be of Roma ethnicity.

The new 1993 Hungarian Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities clearly made ethnic classification the exclusive right of the individual. Self-identification has thus become the sole legal ground for defining ethnic classification. Simultaneously and based on this law the Data Protection Act prohibited the collection of ethnicity-based statistics. This legal regulation is in force to date and, for internal political reasons, is unlikely to change.

This new legal regulation has fundamentally changed the system of possibilities for statistical data-gathering, and thus for any research concerning the Roma. It is no accident that since 1989 the Central Statistical Office is prepared to perform their first data gathering with a direct focus on the Roma as late as in 2005-2006, following a fairly lengthy legal and methodological preparatory phase.

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² Personal research experience underpins that the memory of the Roma holocaust continues even in the mid-generation, and many connect the act of 'census' with this memory, and consequently refuse to publicly acknowledge their ethnic identity.

Irrespective of the theoretical and legal debates, and given the returns indicating that on a self-identification-based ethnic classification nearly half as many Romas 'live' in Hungary today than is in fact the case, empirical sociology may come to rely on statistics fundamentally based on ethnic status according to the judgement of the environment. There was a need to work out procedures that would simultaneously comply with both legal and statistical reliability requirements. Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi first elaborated a method by which it became possible to estimate the actual Roma population in Hungarian settlements.³ In my own experience, this method of population estimation by settlement is the most valid, it is as follows: The authors gave an estimation for the total Roma population setting out from the last legally correct school-level statistics of 1993 (the census returns are dubious regarding the actual number of the Roma population but they do provide fairly reliable information on age-distribution, as well as average family size and the number of children). The number of school children in primary and middle education offered a reasonable basis for an assessment of the total Roma population beyond school age. However, in the small village-type settlements of Hungary several settlements may constitute one school district in which children from surrounding villages attended a school located in just one settlement. Consequently, in a few hundred cases the Kertesi-Kézdi estimation by settlement is incomplete. Furthermore, data concerning larger towns, and Budapest in particular, cannot be considered absolutely reliable since assessments setting out from the teachers' data were inaccurate in the larger districts.⁴ In spite of all its weaknesses, this population-assessment method has produced the only data-series describing the level of the Roma population in most Hungarian settlements. This can be used as a basis for research work in which the sample reference point needs to be settlements with a known figure for the Roma population.

Before briefly describing the theoretical debates on the definition of the *Romas*, it is worth mentioning a national data gathering and data operating practice concerning the Roma that contains all the contradictions resulting from the legal constraints. So-called Labour Centres (LCs) operate in the counties and the capital of Hungary. Their manifold tasks involve the reintegration of socially and economically vulnerable strata into the labour market and thus help unemployed Romas to find workplaces. The prevailing regulations mean neither employers nor the LCs are able to monitor the ethnic status of their employees or the unemployed, despite the state budget regularly ensuring a separate target allocation for the Romas' labour-market reintegration. The LCs resolve this contradiction by applying a special 'trick': they enter into contracts with the local organisations safeguarding Roma interests and the local governments of Gypsy minorities who then, as the representatives of the ethnic group, gather information about who is unemployed and what qualifications they have. As the law obviously also concerns the Roma organisations, only those who undertake such registration in order to find a workplace are entered into their records. The Roma organisations may then hand over lists of potential employees to the LCs, but these lists cannot reveal data about the Roma in which they are identified by name. Data on enterprises that employ Romas in larger numbers is gathered in a similar way. Ultimately, through this procedure the LCs 'know' in practice who is a Roma, although formally, according to the law, they possess no such information. During research I carried out in 2001 on enterprises employing Romas⁵, I came across

³ Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi, *A cigány népesség Magyarországon* (dokumentáció és adattár), [*The Roma population in Hungary. Documentation and data store*]. Socio-typo, Budapest: 1998.

⁴ In the larger settlements or districts, that is, where the internal migration of the Roma community in both directions is strong, the population-assessment setting out of the number of children is inevitably imprecise, because the annual school-statistics are incapable of following actual migration.

⁵ Babusik Ferenc-Dr. Adker Judit: Roma vállalkozások kutatása. (Research of roma enterprises.) In: A romák esélyei Magyarországon. (The chances of romanies in Hungary.) Kávé Kiadó,-Delphoi Consulting, Bp. 2002.

this practically insoluble contradiction: although it is the interest of the LCs to know these enterprises better they are unable to reveal data for the purposes of research since *de jure* they do not possess it.

Pointed theoretical debates on 'who is a Roma?' began in the years following the introduction of the Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities and with the recognition of the contradictions springing from the Act. Two marked and opposing standpoints are worth mentioning. One can mainly be associated with the Hungarian sociologists István Kemény, Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi. Gábor Kertesi's work has been briefly outlined above. István Kemény is seen as the 'elder statesman' of Hungarian Roma research in appreciation of his regularly repeated national studies since the 1970s. The aforementioned authors have argued that the possibility of empirical research and for accurately documented data have greater significance than the subtle philosophical debate on the essence of ethnicity.⁶ That since ethnic self-classification results in major statistical distortion, the method of determining Roma ethnic status through the defining judgement of the external environment can be employed. The authors are aware of the problem that the procedure results in any strongly assimilated Roma, who even their own environment fails to necessarily consider to be Roma, drop out of the public community of the Roma. Nonetheless, the method produces the smallest possible data-errors. Furthermore, in the procedures represented also by Kemény, the judgement of the environment was not usually made by Romas.

From among those who represent completely opposing standpoints to the above, the sociologist authors Iván Szelényi and János Ladányi stand out.⁷ They criticise the above method because in its classification of *Gypsy* the most important implicitly present dimension for arriving at a judgement is socio-economic status or, more precisely, marginalised position. The core of their concept is that the judgement of a non-Roma environment evolves along the factors of poverty and marginal status, and if Romas are primarily perceived as the representatives of a culture of poverty then this group may include numerous non-gypsies in a marginal situation and *vice versa*, more prosperous and educated Romas will be excluded from the category. Kemény's group argues the contrary: a change in social status and the character of integration with it will not result in ethnic re-classification quasi-automatically or as a strong tendency.

The above-mentioned debate also appears at the level of views held by Roma politicians, which begins to unveil the interests that can be legitimised from a given standpoint. Politicians who accept the view of Szelényi and Ladányi assess the number of poor and marginal Romas to be much lower, thus emphasising the concept in which the majority of Romas have been assimilated as 'productive citizens'. Politicians, on the other hand, who are interested in increasing state support allocated to the Romas tend to accept the view of the Kemény group, after all, the nation-wide and representative surveys regularly indicate a large number of Romas living in severe poverty.

The dissent in the use of terminology should also be mentioned: the words *roma* [Roma] and *cigány* [Gypsy] are used as synonyms in Hungary, although there is no consensus in the correct un-stigmatised name. The Minorities Act, the various government documents and local

⁶ Gábor Havas, István Kemény and Gábor Kertesi, "A relatív cigány a klasszifikációs küzdőtéren" [The relative Gipsy on the battlefield of classification] in *Kritika*, 1998/3; Gábor Havas, *Cigányok a szociológiai kutatások tükrében = A cigányok Magyarországon* [Gypsies in the mirror of sociological research = Gypsies in Hungary], ed. Ferenc Glatz, MTA [Hungarian Academy of Sciences], Budapest: 1999.

⁷ János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi, "Ki a cigány?" [Who is a Gypsy?] in *Kritika*, Budapest: 1997/2; János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi, "Az etnikai besorolás objektivitásáról" [On the objectivity of ethnic classification] in *Kritika*, 1998/3.

governments of minorities use the term *cigány*, as does the bulk of the referenced Hungarian literature. However, political usage internationally prefers *Roma (Rom)* as the name for this ethnic group. International convention agrees that all peoples are due the respect of using the name of their choice. A great part of the Roma in Hungary, the *Romungro* (Hungarian Gypsies) or the *Beás* for that matter, do not call themselves *Roma*, yet the term *Roma* has come to be increasingly accepted in political usage.

Finally, I will outline my own research experience in which I have tried to find a way out of the aforementioned theoretical contradictions and the trap in the legal regulations. In the process I present below I have successfully carried out several nation-wide and regional research projects.

No objective data is available concerning the number of Romas in Hungary by settlements, and the only valid data-series in this regard are the estimations by Kertesi and Kézdi that reflect the situation in 1993. Since there is no data about the inter-settlement migration of the Romas and, moreover, in the absence of any other data no estimation is possible, thus the only available route is to mechanically extrapolate the 1993 data for the subsequent years. The work of László Hablicsek, a leader of the Demographic Research Institute of the Central Statistical Office, served as the starting point. The study developed the demographic forecast of the total population and the Roma sub-system until 2050.⁸ The premise of the mid-version of the forecast, which describes several scenarios overall, states that in the period ahead the situation of the Roma population will neither change catastrophically nor improve radically. On this assumption data can be extrapolated for a period of approximately ten years following the date of the estimation (since the error in the projection will rise sharply after the tenth year). Thus the Kertesi–Kézdi data according to settlements can be extrapolated up to 2009 without major errors.

The research set out with a selection of settlements with an estimated Roma population according to the extrapolated version of the Kertesi–Kézdi data. Then in these settlements the local government team for the Gypsy minority and the education staff in the respective settlements produced estimations by settlement. Analysis of the surveys so far indicates that the difference between the two data-series prepared by two local government bodies and that of the theoretical data by settlements is substantial, while the median of the three data lines regularly represents the extrapolated theoretical data of the settlements. This means that the exact number of Roma people in a given settlement cannot be established through this method either, but a very accurate picture evolves on the number of Roma at micro-regional and regional levels. As in the course of wider-ranging research, the ultimate aim is exactly this accuracy of assessment at micro-regional levels, this method can soundly be used in drawing up the settlement patterns for data gathering.

In the next step the procedure applied for finding the individuals to survey is then partly based on self-definition and partly calls upon the confidence generating from the ethnic community. Our research workshop sent interviewers of Roma origin to the settlements selected on the basis of the above-described assessment. One of their tasks was to establish the distribution of Roma people in the given settlements (streets, town areas or districts where they live in larger numbers and locations where they live sporadically). Help in this was sought from workers in the local organisations safeguarding Roma interests who are familiar with the place. Once the settlement was mapped up, the number of sample interviewees was selected proportionally to this settlement 'map'. The subjects were asked if they would declare themselves to be Gypsies.

⁸ László Hablicsek, *A Roma népesség demográfiai jellemzői, kísérleti előszámítás 2050-ig* [Demographic characteristics of the Roma population, experimental pre-calculations up to 2050]. KSH Népszámtudományi Intézet, Budapest: 1999.

In our experience, irrespective of the level of the assimilation, those polled would identify themselves as Gypsy to an erudite interviewer of Roma origin, who is more integrated than assimilated.⁹

As demonstrated above, this method traverses the scale from judgement by an external agent to self-definition, but at the same time operates with the socio-psychological phenomenon of willing association with an ethnic community. In my experience, this procedure can be used with reasonable accuracy whilst at the same time falling within the boundaries of the legal regulations as well.

Nevertheless, attention needs to be called to a problem: if the predictably high level of internal migration resulting from changes in the economic environment is taken into consideration, then by circa 2010 even this method will be unsuitable for any kind of representative research on the Roma. Redrafting the legal environment, however, will probably be insufficient to resolve this question. The strong inclination toward assimilation that drives nearly half the Roma population of Hungary to disown their identity in public surveys (a disposition catalysed by justifiable fear) will jeopardise the preparation of accurate data in the future as well. That will be especially true in one hypothetical case, for example, if a name and address list of Roma voters were to be compiled, since ethnic identity then would then be connected to names, which would have at least as many advantages (for minority voters) as disadvantages springing from prejudice against a minority group.

⁹ In this study I use the term *assimilated* to mean a person who strives to dissolve into the majority society, while *integrated* represents an individual who has managed to emerge from an underprivileged position whilst being proud of their ethnic identity.