2. ETHNIC IDENTITY, ASSIMILATION AND THE NOTION OF 'HALF-ROMA' AMONG THE ROMA IN LATVIA

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Abstract: *The article concerns changes in Latvian Roma ethnic identity over last decades. Roma traditionally perceive society in a dichotomized way (Roma and non-Roma), but in the process of assimilation a category of 'half-Roma' has appeared. Thus, a question arises – what is the ethnic awareness and status of "half-Roma" in Roma and non-Roma communities. The study is based on interviews recorded during author's fieldwork. The author continues the exploration of ethnic boundaries actualised by Fredrik Barth. The focus here is on assimilated younger generation Roma living in the "ethnic borderland". The article discusses the modes of ethnicity articulation. The author concludes that until recently the most significant exposure of ethnic belonging has been the participation in community events and communication, not the use of ethnic attributes or a traditional lifestyle. Moreover, today ethnic belonging is a choice not a restriction more than before.*
Key words: *Roma, ethnic identity, assimilation*

Introduction

Dichotomization of society – separation between *us* and *others* – always is the basis of ethnic definition. In the case of Roma it is explicit and manifested in their daily use of language – in Latvia their endonym is *Roma* and all non-Roma are called *gādže* (there are also less popular names to designate the non-Roma). *Roma* and *gādže* are plural forms of these nouns, but singular forms are used to address a man, woman, boy or girl depending on their belonging or not belonging to the group: a Romani man is called *Rom*, non-Romani man is *gādžo*, a women is *romni* or *gādži*, a Romani girl and boy is *čhaj* and *čhāvo*, but a non-Romani girl and boy is *rakli* and *raklo*. The usage of the word *gādže* can be neutral or pejorative the same way as the Romani exonym *Čigāni* in Latvian language.

This categorization of people through the use of language demonstrates their perception of society. Until recent, Roma had a clear and nonnegotiable identity including definite borders and ideology of belonging, which are confirmed in practice. The Roma have a comparatively *hard ethnicity* if we use John Milton Yinger's terminology:

„We need to distinguish a sociologically and psychologically important ethnicity from one that is only administrative or classificatory. We might call these „hard" and „soft" ethnicities. The former connects directly with many aspects of life; the latter is marginal. A hard ethnic order is thoroughly institutionalized, with clear separating boundaries and a strong ideology. A soft ethnic order has blurred permeable lines, incomplete institutionalization, and an ambivalent ideology." (Yinger 1994:3)

While interviewing *lotfika Roma* in Kurzeme (western Latvia) I was intrigued by the use of the word 'half-Roma' (*pusčigāni* in Latvian). I started to

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question what does this category mean and how it is compatible with the traditional and rather explicit interpretation of the *Roma–gādže* dichotomy. The word then was not addressed to the persons from mixed families where one of the parents is non-Roma, but used in the cases when a person no longer meets the old and traditional standards inherent to Roma (Rom-ness). Roma use the Latvian term *pusčigāni* as criticism. In Romani language the word 'half-Roma' is not introduced and the person is diminished to the non-Roma status – *gādžo*. The following parts of this article present an analysis of, first, how do the elderly and middle age "pure" Roma define Rom-ness and what endangers its existence. Second, it focuses on two case studies on ethnic identity awareness and strategy of younger generation "half-Roma", who, if we use the metaphor of ethnicity analysis used by Fredrik Barth (Barth 1969), live on the boundary of their community.

1. Roma ethnicity

When questioned about musical traditions and traditions in general, older and middle generation Roma were frequently sceptical and talked about undergoing changes that during the last decades have affected their community and endangered its identity. Here are three informant viewpoints:

- *"We [in comparison with Latvians – I. T.] stick to each other more. Earlier. But not now. (..) Now it is not anymore so that we go to each other."*
- *"We were more with the older together. Even if we were aside, we still have the old [traditions – I. T.] inside. The youngsters now generally… We are still towards the old times. These will go lost – they do not know anything at all. The younger generation, the more that Gypsy forgets traditions and the like. What traditions? We don't have any traditions anymore – we do all towards Latvian trend. We do not have anything special – less and less we have."*
- *"Earlier there were more Gypsies, now there is no more. Inside Europe and finished. Nobody is interested [in Gypsiness – I. T.], everybody goes with the trending. Own folk gets forgotten. We become ourselves not as Gypsies anymore. Earlier – some kind of relationships… Now everybody cares about self, everybody strives in their own life."*

It is evident from the quoted informants that assimilation process divides younger generation from the previous ones and it is linked to two aspects. First, the amount of their cultural and social knowledge and its use in personal life differs. Second, the intensity of communication with the community members varies. Both aspects are mutually conjunct in the real life – sociocultural knowledge or lack thereof manifests also in communication. Noticeably, specific attributes (national costumes, etc.) are not mentioned in Romani ethnic identity discourse. Despite Herbert J. Gans in his research on ethnic groups of America in 1970s points out that nowadays ethnicity is more expressed with the help of external and easily applicable and perceivable symbols but not through continual behaviour and everyday habits (Gans 1979:9), in the case of Latvian Roma it proves the opposite. Ethnic symbols (in the meaning of attributes) such as a flag, a stylized folk costume, specific musical instruments or the usage of "folk"

songs are almost of no significance for in-group communication. This peculiarity of Roma ethnic practice is effectively demonstrated by their attitude towards such an apparently sacral aspect of ethnic identity as language.

The Roma of Latvia are hardly influenced by the romantic nationalist ideology that considers language, songs and fairy tales, as well as other expressions of intangible culture as basis of folk identity. There is a Romani saying: "Not all are Roma, who can speak Romani language". Language is a significant part of Roma ethnic identity, however their approach to language is instrumental and the usages of other languages are not perceived as a threat to their ethnic identity. One example of this attitude is seen in their musical repertoire that includes many songs in Latvian and Russian languages. Nevertheless, they consider those as "true Romani songs" and recognize the Romani worldview implied in them, as well as connect the songs with their own or their relatives' life experiences. The priority of mother tongue has to do with nuances and freedom of expression, because the Roma appreciate orator skills. One of the informants noted that the Roma recognize a speaking style that could be described as "winding language" (understanding it as the use of witticism, cunning, comparison, epithet, proverbs and ability to respond to verbal challenges). Therefore they laugh at people, who talk "straight as plug". Moreover, their traditional manners of obtaining livelihood often are connected with the communication skills within non-Roma society. Fast mastering of necessary everyday speech is one of their survival techniques. As a result, they use Romani language only in communication within their community and multilingualism is their everyday practice.

It turns out that Roma ethnic identity is not threatened by not using ethnic attributes. More important are the other two aspects – sociocultural knowledge and its use in everyday life, as well as participation in community events.

In the second half of 20th century many aspects of the traditional Roma lifestyle underwent changes. An informant, born in 1949, points out that the 1960s changed both Romani values and lifestyle: "The youth that was growing up were interested in something else. Some started to work, wanted to have an apartment. (..) Others started to get an education, stopped roaming". These are signs of assimilation that are connected with every day and social life of Roma people – household, education and sources of income. Fieldwork data proves that the Roma of Latvia settled in permanent places of residence as early as the second half of the 1960s. Despite that their houses concentrated in specific parts of towns, a tendency of alienation begun as well as a decrease of family members in each household.

Nowadays the lack of formal education is considered an obstacle for successful social and economic integration of Roma people (Lukumiete, Martišūne 2003:7). In the Soviet period even the illiterate Roma had legal or illegal income opportunities, which provided enough for ones living or even made profit above the average income level. Nevertheless, those Roma, who chose to get education and work legally, started to structurally assimilate into the society of Latvia. In accordance with the idea of Milton Gordon, it is structural

or institutional assimilation, not acculturation, which leads to irreversible inclusion (Gordon 1964:81). The pressure of structural assimilation has grown since the resumption of independence of the Republic of Latvia, the development of capitalism and the joining of the European Union in 2004. The introduction of a free market has decreased their marketing opportunities while the increasing role of education has reduced their chances to take part in the labour market. Government and EU Roma politics aim to help their community and solve the problems of Roma education and other integration issues, nevertheless the traditional Romani survival strategies become less applicable and therefore their ethnic self-confidence is not as strong as it was.

Along with worsening of financial situation, there is a decline in communication intensity and preservation of traditions, because taking part in traditional festivities includes participants' economic contributions, which they sometimes cannot afford (Tihovska 2005). An informant described that as a result of changes Roma people "do less visit and stick to each other". However, this is also connected with another significant aspect of Roma cultural knowledge and its practice – the behaviour proper to traditional social roles. "It is important that you are invited. Because you are invited only, if you are normal," an informant described the situation of taking part in festivities emphasising this aspect. Being a part of Roma community requires its members to be loyal to the Roma and to behave accordingly to sex, age and kin status. It is regulated by various laws and by social control including the Roma court as the community's juridical institution. A Roma that is integrated in the non-Roma environment and culture not always is willing and skilful to behave accordingly to the traditional social roles, for example, a Romani woman, who wants to receive higher education, is not willing to marry at a young age, because traditionally being married and getting an education is not compatible. Another example would be a person who has gained stable status in non-Roma society and thereby might be not willing to act accordingly with inherited family status or might not care to prove his loyalty to the Roma community and its values. Frequently the younger Roma generation lack also the necessary knowledge and skills, for example, not everybody can perform traditional Roma dance *tribakus* or *kozakus*, which is the most powerful show-off element in Roma gatherings.

Moreover, Roma people who marry to a non-Roma spouse do face a choice to which community they are going to belong; although, nowadays Roma people still frown upon mixed marriages, the numbers are increasing. However, such marriages have been around at least since the beginning of 20th century, but that has not troubled these families to gain respect and status in Roma community (Leimanis 2005[1939]:30–31). Definitely mixed marriage brings along extra risk for structural assimilation because spouses do not belong to the same social environment. Nonetheless, if the couple is willing to integrate within Roma community and are ready to accept its rules, then even a non-Roma spouse can become an accepted member of Roma community. This situation is well described in this comment of an informant: "If a Roma marries a non-Roma woman, so called *gādži,* and nor she does want to learn Romani language, nor is

interested in Roma traditions (..) – it turns out, that he chooses the other mentality. When he enters back into the Roma community, where are only Romani traditions and essence, there is a feeling of discomfort, because he is not anymore as our own, he is little bit like the others. (..) But some Roma have Latvian or Russian wives who have learned the language, who respect the values and speak or behave so that you cannot tell that she is non-Roma."

To sum up, the most important principle that maintains traditional Romani identity is taking part in communication while demonstrating behaviour acceptable to the Romani values. Unpersuasive performance of proper behaviour might result in a decrease of the individual status or even in becoming a community outcast. Successful integration in non-Roma society does not increase a person's status in Roma community; it rather threatens it, because fruitful border crossing might include adoption of non-Romani values and behaviours.

2. "Half-Roma" ethnicity

The following chapter is a comparative analysis of ethnic self-confidence and strategy of two Roma from the younger generation. The comparison is based on two in-depth interviews – one is recorded in May 2010, the other in February 2013. Both of them got noticed because their lives were connected with music. Informants, we will name them Dainis and Kaspars, were 32 and 31 years old. Both of them have had the experience of being called "half-Roma" and they can be taken for not typical Roma. Both have studied in higher education institutions – one of them had multiple pedagogical qualifications on Bachelor's degree level and during the time of interview he was studying music pedagogics for Master's degree, the other had an unfinished higher education degree of technical translation from English language. Both of them were not married and had no children, as well as they were successfully integrated in Latvian society – had respect and did not experience discrimination in the labour market. In the time of interview they lived in the capital Riga, one of them worked as a music teacher in a public school, the other worked as a musician, music manager and journalist. Their life scenarios are not typical for Roma and might be described as non-Romani.

If one part of their story of social belonging is the integration in Latvian society, then the other part is incorporation in Roma community – and here they have different experiences. Dainis visits his hometown in Kurzeme every week. He visits his mother and takes part in the local Roma community, as well as communicates with more distant relatives living also in other towns. Dainis regularly is invited and attends many Roma festivities, has good traditional dance skills, and has participated in few local Roma courts. However, his status in Roma community is ambivalent. On one hand, he is a stranger – many do not understand his never-ending education that is not giving the profits corresponding to the input resources, but on the other hand, he has respect – his family status in local community is rather high and he has quite good knowledge about local Roma history, families (their statuses) and personalities. Most

important is the fact that he is conscious about his behaviour in both societies and is choosing an appropriate communication style: "A wise person adapts to everything and that is what I do – I forget about my education, I act in a simple and Romani manner. When I go to the work, I cannot be only a Rom. There I have to be who I am essentially and I have to live like that. So it turns like that – adapt to every situation. (..) Because there is a boundary – you are inside or outside that community. You are a *gādžo* or not. It is very easy to get that (*gādžo* – I. T.) status."

Kaspars is less integrated in Roma community. Although, he has also grown up in a Roma family in a town of Kurzeme, his grandparents chose to disassociate themselves from local Roma community and their traditions. His grandparents wanted that their children, Kaspars' parents, get an education, which they did not have themselves. Kaspars' parents got professional education and took care of the education of their children. They had an official job and did not take part in the illegal sale of commodities in short supply during the Soviet times. Kaspars summarizes his family lifestyle: "We grew up in a rather Latvian way, I do not know how, but… Maybe it was because of my grandparents – they grow up in quite poor conditions, they were not rich. Apparently, they tried to save from this the next generations. They taught that we have to behave in a different manner, because their family experience was not pleasant and they understood that being a Roma means being rather poor and with no perspective."

At the time of interview with Kaspars, he did not participate in Roma community and communicated only with closest family members. He seldom goes to Roma festivities, which has two reasons – first, many of his relatives have emigrated to Great Britain, second, he is not among honourable guests. Kaspars no longer is an active community member and he is even criticised for his professional work, which is a paradox, because at that time he was one of those who contributed a lot to create a positive Roma image in the Latvian society. He comments their attitude: "I know that many are invited to funerals only because they are some kind of special persons in the Roma community. But I am not invited and I do no long being invited. (..) It is inevitable, that they do not accept people like me. (..) I take liberties. (..) Eventually, time is passing and I cannot wear black pants and a black jacket or turtleneck sweater all the time. I do not reproach that they do not understand it. How could they understand the details of my job?"

Although Dainis and Kaspars differ from each other by the fact how much do they participate in Roma community and how much do they know about the history and traditions of the Roma in Latvia, their attitude towards ethnicity is similar. To understand the role of ethnicity in their identities, they were asked, if they feel as Roma. The first and spontaneous answer did not approve the importance of ethnicity (Kaspars: "I feel as a human." Dainis: "I feel wonderful – as myself."). However, even as they do not live a typical Roma life and not always identify with their ethnic group, ethnicity is an important part of their lives. Both of them use their ethnicity in a practical way, they use the

opportunities of Romani ethnic niche (a term used by various authors to define the link between ethnicity and economical profits – see Alba 2000). Dainis has not only strategically chosen to be an insider in Roma community, but also is the author of several publications on Roma culture; he is involved in a Roma non-governmental organization and has been a researcher in an international documentation project of Roma dialects. Kaspars has founded a Roma non-governmental organization himself, has maintained a home page about Roma community in Latvia and has been a Roma musician (at the time of interview Romani music was his major income source), despite the fact that he is not involved in his local Roma community. However, ethnicity has a significant role in their self-reflection – both of them call themselves Roma, they value Roma traditions and make sense of their life in contemporary society in a dialogue with these values. Kaspars describes his ethnicity awareness: "First reaction is rebellious, I think that it [being a Roma –I. T.] has nothing to do with me. (..) But in reality I often notice that… As the time passes by… I see a reflection of old Romani wisdom. Then I have to deduce and admit, that it [being a Roma – I. T.] has to do with me. (..) I cannot explain that, but they are wise, those old Roma people. Only it is hard to accept their wisdom straight away – some time has to pass, when maybe we ourselves will understand these things."

Conclusion

Over the last decades there is noticeable evidence of the acculturation and structural assimilation of the Roma community in Latvia. As a result the younger generation has a weaker link to "old times" or the worldview and life model of Roma from previous generations. Another reason, why their community becomes less compact and tied, is the decrease of in-group communication. However, ethnicity still is a significant part of younger generation Roma. The most difficult challenge that has to be faced if one has to integrate both in Roma and non-Roma community, is the two different and sometimes opposing value systems and rules both societies live with. The analysis of ethnicity practice of two young Roma men shows that ethnic belonging more than ever has to do with one's choice. It corresponds to a thesis by Richard Jenkins: „…neither ethnicity nor culture is 'something' that people 'have', or, indeed, to which they 'belong'. They are, rather, complex repertoires which people experience, use, learn and 'do' in their daily lives (..) Ethnicity, in particular, is best thought of as an ongoing *process* of ethnic identification." (Jenkins 2008:15)

A further research might show how many younger generation Roma do value and appreciate belonging to their community and whether they are interested to invest time, money and other resources to be an active part of Roma community. Another question is how 21st century will shape the Roma community – will the Roma tolerate the upcoming changes and which modifications will they accept to define their contemporary identity.

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