

## THOUGHTS ON ROMA SELF - ORGANIZATION AND ITS RESULTS IN THE MIRROR OF RECENT DECADES

Sitting in front of television or using the Internet, people nowadays meet a flood of information. From time to time, the Hungarian media cover events in connection with the Roma as leading news. In multinational countries, however, any news items get the spotlight if someone from the minority living in the country is involved even if superficially.

History books also reveal that minority questions have been in existence for a longer period of time than the recent decades. Considering the number of people living in multinational states, in a way, 90 % of humanity are involved in minority issues.<sup>1</sup>

In Hungary, the Romani people make the largest minority group whose national roots can be traced and who live in their own community, but cannot be connected to any particular nation state. Apart from their culture and language, which they share, Romani people do not have anything from the cohesive elements capable to make them a nation.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Council of Europe the situation of Romani people is specific compared with other ethnic minorities: *"The Roma form a special minority group, insofar they have a double minority status. They are an ethnic community and most of them belong to the socially disadvantaged groups of the society."*<sup>3</sup>

Romani ethnic groups are widely dispersed all over the world. All ethnic groups that identify themselves and mutually recognize one another Gypsies or Roma, belong to Romani ethnicity. The ethnic groups that are (either due to lack of education or derogatorily) considered Roma just because of their complexion or other similar features by the non-Roma only, whereas they do not identify themselves as Roma and other Romani ethnic groups do not recognize them Roma either, cannot be reckoned among them, of course.

Gypsies can be found in several parts of the world but most of them live in Central and Eastern Europe. The estimated number of Romani inhabitants in Europe was 7 – 8.5 million already in 2001.

According to the estimate above, the Roma compose nearly 9 % of the population in the Carpathian Basin, so they are the fifth most populous ethnic group after the Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks and Croats. In some regions they already form a relative, elsewhere an absolute majority and this situation occurs in almost each part of the Carpathian Basin.<sup>4</sup>

In Hungary the Roma have been recognized as an ethnic minority group for decades, but despite the population statistics above and the several reminders from the Council of Europe, there are still countries where the Roma are not regarded as a minority or ethnic group, thus they cannot enjoy the rights pertaining to this status. This state of emergency urged Romani people to build international organizations from the bottom up, in order to promote the highest possible level of representation of their interests.

The international Roma movements came to life in the 1930s, but the First World Romani Congress took place in England with delegates from several countries of Europe, Africa, Australia and America between 8-12 April 1971 only. Since the word *Tzigan* seemed to reflect a negative prejudicial attitude in the various languages (German, English, French), the participants of the congress decided on the use of the word *Roma* as the official designation of their people, and their congress was named as the *World Romani Congress*.

There were important decisions made by the 23 representatives delegated to the congress. The various Roma groups mutually decided to accept one another as brothers and sisters and consider themselves as members of the same nation. They agreed on the Roma national emblems: their flag, anthem and motto. At the congress they also formulated the necessity of the standardization of the Romani language used by the various Roma groups and accepted the Lovari dialect as their official language. This congress also adopted the first Romani alphabet with a proposal to develop a final, generally applicable form of Romani writing system.<sup>5</sup>

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

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All the subjects on which decisions were made by the First World Romani Congress in 1971 had to be cleared up. Without doing so nations stay invisible and cannot represent themselves. Moreover, at the time of decision-making it was unpredictable how the resolutions would be received by the communities in whose name they were made and who were to be formed as a community.<sup>6</sup>

In order to achieve their objectives effectively, the participants formulated the need for calling the congress together regularly. Besides, they established five commissions which were supposed to keep working between the world congresses. These commissions were created to examine social affairs, economy, Porajmos (war crimes and compensation), culture and language.

Obviously, there was an international cooperation never seen in the history of the Romani people before, where beside the unified social and political representation of interests the most important field of activity of the congress and its bodies was to formulate the principles of the Roma cultural autonomy and to elaborate its conditions.

Furthermore, it was a tremendous success that the UN and other international organizations recognized the decisions of the congress and its International Romani Union (IRU) as a sovereign and legitimate executive body.

It is to be noted that April 8 was officially declared by the UN to be the International Day of the Roma Culture in honour of the 1st World Romani Congress.<sup>7</sup>

The 2nd World Romani Congress was held in Geneva (Switzerland) in 1978. The movement's growth was indicated by the fact that the event was attended by 60 delegates from 12 countries and by observers from 26 countries. The main result of the second congress was that the delegates applied for consultative status with the UN and it was given in 1980.

In 1981, the 3rd World Romani Congress took place in Göttingen (Germany) with 300 delegates from 20 countries already. The rehabilitation of the Roma holocaust victims was the major topic of discussion.

In 1990, the 4th World Romani Congress was held in the suburb of Warsaw, in Serock (Poland). What made this meeting special was that, partly supported by the UNESCO, one third of the 250 delegates attending the congress arrived from the former Soviet bloc. The main items on the agenda were some organizational and leading questions, the situation of asylum seekers, the compensation to holocaust victims, the Romani language and the compilation of a Romani language encyclopedia.

In 2000, when the 5th World Romani Congress was organized in Prague (Czech Republic), some organizational, political and integration questions were primarily discussed.

The 6th World Romani Congress was held in Lanciano (Italy) in 2004 when 200 delegates from 39 countries elected a new board. Besides some new issues were raised, such as the situation of Romani women, children and families.

The main items on the agenda of the 7th World Romani Congress held in Zagreb (Croatia) in 2007 were health care, dwelling and other social issues.<sup>8</sup>

Reviewing the Roma self-organizing process, we can declare that Romani ethnic groups dispersed all over the world have already welded into a community and over the years they have been able to acquire increasing legitimacy with some international organizations. The International Romani Union (IRU), which works as the executive body of the Romani congresses, gained consultative status with the Economic and Social Commission of the UN in 1979, then, in 1986 became a registered NGO partner of UNICEF, and in 1993 obtained an even stronger, so called *category 2* consultative status with the UN.

An even more important result is that several declarations and statements in defence of the Roma were publicized by the UN and the Council of Europe indicating the imperishable achievements of the International Romani Union.<sup>9</sup>

An organization of this kind can logically be efficient only while it is believed to be able to represent the interests of the community. This, however, needs not only shared interests, but also an efficient system of representation, which is not easy to reach if the communities involved live in dozens of countries. There are equality-related conflicts and clashes

of interest between the different centres of the Romani self-organizations at the distinct levels of representation, which considerably divides the Romani elite with the personnel and decision-making issues of the movement. Despite all emerging problems, however, the process and results of the Roma self-organization can be exemplary for any nation.

*Kulcsszavak:*, roma, érdekképviselet, önszerveződés, Roma Világkongresszus, Nemzetközi Roma Szövetség, nemzetközi szervezetek,

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