Contesting Neo-liberal Practices in Central and Eastern Europe: Romani Minority Governance Between Activation and Activism

Huub van Baar
University of Amsterdam

Research Paper

Financed by the European Union
Marie Curie Conferences and Training Courses
"Romany Studies"
MSCF-CT-2006-045799
Contesting Neo-liberal Practices in Central and Eastern Europe: 
Romani Minority Governance Between Activation and Activism  
A Research Paper

Huub van Baar, University of Amsterdam*

Introduction: New Governance Paradigms and Minority Formation and Representation

This paper delineates how newly developed paradigms of global and European governance have affected the various ways in which Romani minorities in Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, have recently been approached and represented. The social policies that European institutions and international organizations, such as the European Union, the World Bank, and the United Nations have recently developed and supported rely heavily on a neo-liberal trend to govern social and minority (related) affairs through processes of decentralization, the ‘outsourcing’ of public services to private stakeholders, the support of ‘public-private partnerships’, and the correlated mobilization of civil societal agencies (cf. EC 1997; 2000b; 2000a; 2001; 2002; World Bank 1991; 1997b; 1997a; 1998; 1999; UNDESA 1999; UNDP 2000; 2004). These neo-liberal modes of governance have often been heralded as endeavors to make governance and its structures better, more sustainable, more democratic, and more efficient and—particularly when it comes to minorities—as ways to emancipate, empower, develop, and include them on their own terms. However, as I argue in this paper by taking the example of recently developed neo-liberal modes of Romani minority governance in Central and Eastern Europe, it remains to be seen whether attempts to govern minority affairs neo-liberally have actually led to the supposed and desired outcomes. In many cases, 

*This research paper is a contribution to the workshop on comparative sociology of political participation and representation at the Summer University Course Multi-Disciplinary and Cross-National Approaches to Romany Studies – a Model for Europe, held at the Central European University in Budapest (June 22 – July 10, 2009) and financed by the European Union Marie Curie Conferences and Training Courses ‘Romany Studies (MSCF-CT-2006-045799). This paper is a draft version. Please do not quote or circulate without permission. Please contact the author for comments, questions, and further details: Huub van Baar – Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) – Faculty of Humanities – University of Amsterdam – Email: Huub.van.Baar@uva.nl

1 I approach contemporary forms of Romani minority governance beyond ‘grand narratives’ of neo-liberalism. Following recent non-essentialist and non-hegemonic conceptualizations of neo-liberalism, I understand it as a flexible and contestable technology of governing that has migrated globally and been adopted and reshaped by different kinds of regimes, be they authoritarian, communist, democratic, post-colonial or post-socialist (see, most notably, Ong 1999; Ong 2006; see also Larner 2000; Sparke 2006). Some have argued that neo-liberalism seems to be ‘everywhere’ and affect ‘everything’ and that it has first been developed at some global centers of power and then transferred outward to ‘peripheral’ regions of the world, including Central and Eastern Europe (Harvey 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002). Yet, as several critics of neo-liberalism have meanwhile acknowledged, this view underestimates that what are perceived as the ‘peripheries’ and their diverse circumstances may tell us more about the successes and failures of neo-liberalism than a one-sided focus on what we prevailingly hold as
processes of decentralization, the displacement of public services in favor of private or semi-private service providers, and the enhanced involvement of civil societal agencies have gone together with the diminishing of democratic control and accountability of minority governance and its processes, with a questionable reshaping of citizenship and basic social and human rights, and with the devolution of responsibilities from state (and state-related) institutions to non-governmental development and human rights organizations as well as to those members of minorities who have been disadvantaged the most by the recent transformations.

Activating the Roma or Reinforcing Stereotypical Roma Representations?

At the beginning of the new millennium both the United Nations and the World Bank have published voluminous reports on the situation of the Romani minorities in various European countries. In 2002, the United Nations Development Programme has published a ‘regional human development report’ on the Central and Eastern European Roma under the title Avoiding the Dependency Trap (UNDP 2002). In 2005, the World Bank followed with yet another large report, entitled The Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Circle (World Bank 2005b). As the rhetoric of these two titles already indicates, these reports represent the current situation of the Roma in Europe as a tough and persistent one in which poverty and dependency are far-reaching, enduring, and hard to challenge. Nevertheless, as these titles show as well, the reports want to offer strategies and suggest interventions to break the allegedly vicious circles of poverty and exclusion and to avoid the dependency of many Roma on state support and other patterns that are considered as barriers to their societal inclusion and self-determination. In a more recent report on employment opportunities of the Roma in the Czech Republic, the World Bank has elaborated on one such strategy in the field of unemployment policies. In this report the World Bank adds the term ‘inactivity trap’ to the rather heavily loaded language of other ‘circles’ and ‘traps’. As the report explains, the inactivity trap points to the phenomenon that unemployed persons who receive social welfare benefits ‘have weaker motivation to look for a job’ (World Bank 2008: 17). Dealing with the specificity of the unemployment of many Roma—of whom many would have ‘skills constraints’ (2)—the World Bank suggests dividing them into three categories: ‘In order to understand the nature of Roma joblessness it is important to divide the concepts of unemployment, inactivity, and discouragement’ (ibid. 44). The majority of the Czech Roma, the Bank suggests, is actually not unemployed, but ‘outside the labor force’ or ‘economically inactive’ (42 n38). These so-called ‘inactive’ are persons of working age who ‘are not participating in the labor market’ and ‘are also not actively looking for a job’ (44). Additionally, the World Bank divides between the ‘truly inactive’ (33), who are simply ‘disinterested’ (33) in work, and the ‘discouraged’, who had looked for a job in the past, but have lost confidence in finding one, ‘due to their actual or perceived inability to find employment’ (44). In particular those who belong to one of these two categories are at risk of yet another trap: the ‘joblessness trap’, which is closely ‘associated with the erosion of skills and morale’ (13). To avoid all these risky traps and vicious circles and to ‘make work pay’

the centers of world politics and economics. In dealing with processes of neo-liberalization, we accordingly need to address how these processes have been unevenly and inconsistently developed, traveled, and articulated in different geographical places and at different times. We need to analyze how different neo-liberal tools and rationales have been disarticulated and innovatively rearticulated in political and economic environments (such as Central and Eastern Europe) that we cannot adequately describe as ‘neo-liberal’ per se. In other words, it seems appropriate ‘to study neo-liberalism not as a “culture” or a “structure” but as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relationships’ (Ong 2006: 13).
(24) in the future, the World Bank introduces again a new set of technical expressions. Effectively ‘closing the skills gap’ (3) and avoiding the ‘path dependency’ (13) of many Roma require ‘strategic vocational skill upgrading’ (38), attempts to ‘incentivize’ (39) the Roma, ‘measures to tighten responsibilities of job-seekers’ (24), and efficient ‘client profiling’ by employment offices (25). In addition, particularly in the cases of the inactive and the discouraged Roma, the traps need to be challenged by the ‘outsourcing of activation services’ (27) to private and non-governmental organizations, as well as by the building on ‘subsidized employment, public works programs or “community employment” as a central intervention for unskilled Roma’ (38) and as a ‘crucial activation tool’ (3) to turn the tide.

How should we evaluate this discourse of activation and inactivity and the introduction of various new instruments to deal with what the World Bank calls ‘the nature of Roma joblessness’ (44)? I will shortly return to this question. First, I want to embed the Bank’s Roma approach in a more general move toward the development of neo-liberal governmental technologies to deal with and represent those who are or tend to be marginalized. The World Bank study, which is the result of a joint research project of the World Bank and the Czech government, follows a more general tendency in international and European approaches to social policy developments to describe domestic social policy reform processes as ones toward ‘active welfare states’. The website of the Active Social Policies European Network (ASPEN), for instance, describes these neo-liberal processes as follows:

Existing welfare state arrangements are being reformed and new ones introduced, reflecting a shift in the main objectives of these arrangements: from citizens’ protection to citizens’ participation. Policy developments at European Union level have a clear impact on these reforms. The European Employment Strategy as well as the Open Coordination Method on Social Inclusion are examples of European Union policy interventions that stimulate and coordinate the development of active welfare states EU wide. The introduction of so-called ‘active social policies’ or ‘activation programmes’ is an important ingredient of attempts to make welfare states more active and activating. These policies and programmes are targeted at unemployed, marginalised and excluded groups in society. Most of them aim at integrating these groups in the labour market and improving their employability (ASPEN 2009).

As the ASPEN website also explains, the aim of these activation programs is labor market integration, but also social integration, inclusion, and participation in a much wider sense. Ideally, activation needs to effectively enhance citizens’ social, cultural, and psychological opportunities. The introduction of activation programs in various European countries is therefore related to attempts to increase human and social capital formation of groups who are or tend to be excluded and marginalized. The European Anti-Poverty Network, for instance, describes activation as ‘an investment in human, social, psychological, and cultural resources’ (EAPN 2005). The EAPN also warns that—when activation policies are solely introduced to reduce dependency and the costs of social benefit schemes—these policies risk to increase, rather than decrease poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, the EAPN introduces a number of criteria for what is called ‘good activation’, that is, measures that are ‘capable of delivering alleviation of poverty and social exclusion’. It is particularly the wider notion of social activation, as well as its close relation with labor market integration, that has recently been incorporated in various forms of Romani minority governance, not only by state governments, but also by Romani and non-Romani NGOs that promote the Roma’s empowerment and their ‘active citizenship’.

Examples of the mobilization of activation policies to deal with Romani minorities are known from Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia (see UNDP
What interests me in this paper in the first place is not whether these activation programs have been successful or not. It is not primarily the discrepancy between policy formation and its implementation to which I want to pay attention. I am also not mainly interested in whether these schemes can be considered as examples of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ activation. Rather, I want to examine how these particular neo-liberal forms of governmentality aimed at delineating and constituting post-socialist forms of ‘welfare’ have shaped and reshaped various ‘Roma representations’ and led to new or renewed forms of Romani minority governance. This approach includes an analysis of the ways in which ‘activation’ works on the ground, of how techniques and ideas that are related to this notion function in daily practice, and of what effects they have on how the Roma perceive themselves and are seen by others. As I have explained in greater detail elsewhere (van Baar 2009; forthcoming), we need to understand changing ‘Roma problematizations’ in the light of shifting and conflicting notions and modes of governance and their specific impact on minority issues and conceptions. I have also shown (ibid.) that conceptions of welfare and well-being are historically variable and unstable and, since the late eighteenth century, more closely related to biopolitical preoccupations with the regulation of populations and minoritized subgroups. We need to think of welfare states as constructed, contested, and often contradictory constellations: ‘They create—not just reflect—arrangements of social divisions and differences, identities and inequalities, relationships and resources. Welfare states normalize a conception of a “way of life” and the people who live it. They promote it, they naturalize it, and they enforce it’ (Clarke 2004: 147-48). In the various ways in which ‘welfare’ is materialized, made intelligible, and connected to certain desires and imaginaries, we can see how it is inextricably aligned with, for instance, equally contestable practices and conceptions of state, nation, and culture. Suggestions of a shift from a ‘classic’ welfare state to an ‘active’ one often underestimate how notions and practices of welfare are inevitably connected with changing identity formations, most notably of those who are considered as ‘the welfare recipients’. New governmental rationalities and technologies to deal with the ‘equal’ distribution of welfare to a population do not simply shift the focus from, for example, citizens’ protection to their active participation, but vigorously reshape how welfare and well-being are understood, as well as who are supposedly contributing to a population’s or a state’s welfare. Thus, changing systems of welfare provisions go with what we could call ‘a politics of welfare’ and with new ways and patterns to invent and reconstitute the categories of the needy as well as of the privileged. In other words, activation policies, and new modes of welfare governance more generally, can only be adequately examined if we also analyze how
the ‘social problems’ they are considered to deal with, and the individuals or groups they should serve, are simultaneously shaped and reshaped (see also Newman 2007; Serrano Pascual and Crespo Suárez 2007; van Berkel and Borghi 2007; 2008a; 2008b). In the context of changing notions and instruments of welfare in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, these shifts have also gone together with new identity formations, including new approaches to ethnic, national, sexual, and religious minorities, as well as with new modes and techniques of inclusion and exclusion (see also Haney 2002).

These remarks lead me back to my earlier question of how we should evaluate discourses of ‘activation’ and ‘active citizenship’, once they are applied or related to the current situation of Romani minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. It has been widely discussed that many Roma lost their work in the immediate aftermath of the velvet and violent revolutions of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Will Guy, for instance, has outlined the influential consequences of these societal, economic, and cultural transformations on the lives of many Roma:

[B]y their widespread loss of legal employment Roma have also been deprived of whatever improvements in social identity and limited popular legitimacy they had been grudgingly accorded in state socialist society … [I]mpoverished Roma now subsist on insecure, short-term payments in the black economy or remain inactive in their urban slums or rural hovels by day … In this way many Roma are forced daily to confirm their negative stereotype in local eyes as work-shy, scrounging thieves, while those who behave quite differently are nevertheless branded with the same image (Guy 2001b: 22-23).

It is in the light of the strong relation between the legacies of socialism, the renewed corroboration of stereotypical Roma representations, and the current socioeconomic and cultural dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe that Guy vividly describes that I want to question whether we can get away with suggestions, such as the one that ‘inactivity is the technical term used to denote the status of being outside the labor force’ (World Bank 2008: 6 n1, my emphasis). The notions of activation and inactivity—when applied to the current situation of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe and attached to schemes aimed at enhancing their social inclusion and participation—cannot unproblematically be understood as politically ‘neutral’ and merely ‘technical’ interventions. By exploring how discourses and techniques of ‘activation’ and ‘active citizenship’ have recently been mobilized to deal with the situation of the Roma in Slovakia, I want to show that the emergence of these narratives and tools has led to new forms of the Roma’s exclusion and to the reinforcement of stereotypical Roma representations. Yet, the practices and strategies that aim at ‘activating the Roma’ do not uniformly contribute to a de-politicization of politically and culturally sensitive issues. By elaborating on the work of some Romani NGOs and activist networks, at the end of this paper I will explain that these strategies ambivalently move between complex processes of de-politicization and those of re-politicization.

**Changing Welfare, Changing States of Mind:**
**Activation Policies and their Sub-humanizing Effects on the Roma**

In the summer of 2002, some members of the Romani minority of the North Eastern Slovak town of Bardejov told me that every now and then when the evening falls police officers show up in their neighborhood. Around 9:30 pm a police car usually drives slowly through their streets and turns on the car’s radiophone to announce: ‘Come on Gypsies, it’s time to go to bed! Take your kids away from the street and turn off your lights. Tomorrow is a new working day!’ The Roma consider this police behavior as extremely humiliating, most of all
because the majority of them became unemployed after 1989 and did not manage to find a new job since then. One man explained to me that this kind of degrading is usually not restricted to the police: ‘From time to time, when we stand in line at the municipal employment office and it’s our turn, the office suddenly closes or we are left out’.

Many Central and Eastern European Roma have bad experiences with official state institutions that look after employment, housing, health care, education or public safety, as well as with companies where Roma have tried to apply (CoE 2005; 2006; ERRC 2006a; 2007c; 2007b; 2007a; ERRC and Númena 2007; OSI 2007a; 2007b). Employment offices, for instance, often apply double standards when it comes to attempts to employ Roma. Frequently, employees of such labor offices express their prejudices openly. When the director of a labor office in Prague was asked in 2005 for the reasons of high unemployment among the Czech Roma, he openly suggested that ‘it’s because of the Romani culture and their lifestyle; they do not fit with the discipline of work. Roma do not have the motivation to work; they are unreliable, lazy and prefer to live on social assistance [rather] than earn a living’ (quoted from Hyde 2006: 3-4). While law in most Central and Eastern European countries forbids the registration of unemployed persons on the basis of ethnicity, several cases have been documented where labor offices register either the unemployed or vacancies with an ethnic reference. In 1999, the director of the Slovak National Labor Office, for instance, publicly announced that employment offices all over the country usually marked Romani applications with an ‘R’ without informing the applicants. He suggested that this practice was not a discriminatory, but a necessary one in order to deal with the group’s ‘complicated social adaptability’. He added that this form of registration helps the country to allocate EU monies aimed at improving the situation of the national Romani minority (see RFE/RL 1999a; Zoon 2001). More recently, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)—a Budapest-based non-governmental human rights organization—has registered a case where a Hungarian labor office systematically enrolled companies that are unwilling to employ Roma by adding an ‘R’ to the company’s name in the office’s computer system (Hyde 2006). Throughout the years of its existence the ERRC has documented numerous cases where companies and state-related offices and services practiced discriminatory attitudes toward the Roma.

It is in this climate of prejudiced attitudes toward the Roma of both labor offices and companies that, in 2003 and 2004, the Slovak government introduced a thorough revision of its welfare programs, including activation policy and rather radical cuts in social benefits (GSR 2003; 2004). In February 2004, the reduction of social welfare allowances caused extreme social unrest among those who were affected by these measures. Many people who were getting social benefits, including a large number of Roma, started to demonstrate, particularly in Central and Eastern Slovakia. After a few incidents where Roma looted shops, Slovak media persistently started to frame the protests as ‘Roma’ or ‘Gypsy unrest’ and as ‘Roma riots’ or ‘Roma lootings’ (SITA 2004j; 2004i; 2004f; 2004b). In response to unorthodox measures taken by the Slovak government, a Slovak daily newspaper even headed ‘This is war!’ For the first time since the fall of communism, the Slovak government mobilized the national army to ‘monitor Romani communities’ and ‘restore public order’ (SITA 2004h; 2004g; 2004e). Suggesting a state of emergency, the Slovak Minister of the Interior canceled all leaves of his police officers (ERRC 2004b). During a visit to Eastern Slovakia, Mikulas Dzurinda—Slovakia’s Prime Minister at that time—legitimized the mobilization of 1,000 soldiers and 1,600 police officers as a security measure. He publicly stated that ‘state authorities will make use of any legal tools to punish violence so that people could feel safe’ (quoted from SITA 2004c). The Roma were particularly blamed for causing an insecure situation for their fellow citizens. Dzurinda stated that the mobilization of the army marked a turning point: ‘For thirty years we have lacked the courage to consider more
deeply the fact that those people who do not work but abuse the social benefit earn more than employed people. Maybe it was necessary for this moment to come’ (quoted from Magdolenová 2004). By suggesting that those who are unemployed make more money than those who are not, he not only strained the truth and underestimated the effects of the changing welfare system, but also neglected the reasons for extreme poverty among many, mostly long-term unemployed Roma. What is more, by suggesting that the Roma had already started to ‘abuse’ the system under socialism, he reversed the causes and effects of their current situation and reinforced a prevalent popular stereotype of the Roma as profiteers.

The political responses to the social unrest clarify that politicians, the responsible ministers in particular, related the need for the reform of the social system directly to the situation of the country’s Romani minority. In reply to the ‘Roma lootings’ and ‘Roma riots’ and in order to re-establish ‘public order’ and ‘security’, the government decided to raise ‘social benefits to those actively seeking work’ (SITA 2004d). By introducing this measure, the government tried to compensate the general reduction of social benefits with the increase of the payments for those who are involved in activation policy (SITA 2004d; 2004a; 2004b; Spolu 2004). In general, activation policy is meant to manage the trajectory of unemployed persons toward a paid job and, therefore, is considered as only a temporary solution to those who are looking for employment. As soon as they have increased their ‘employability’ and found a job, the aim of the policy has been achieved. Those who follow skills trainings or are involved in educational programs to enter the labor market get, for a limited period of six months, a so-called ‘activation payment’ in addition to some basic social benefits for the unemployed. Employers, including NGOs, who employ someone who is participating in an activation program, are subsidized. Many of those who are involved in activation policy participate in so-called ‘public works programs’ or ‘community work’, which are forms of employment that are considered as contributions to general or community welfare. This form of work, which is generally referred to in Slovakia as ‘activation work’, includes employment in garbage collection, public garden work, and other low-skilled professions. As the new Slovak Act on Employment Services clarifies ‘activation activity is defined as support for maintaining the working habits of the job seeker… Activation activity may be performed in the form of minor communal services performed by the latter, or of voluntary works organized by a legal person or by a natural person’ (GSR 2004).

The Slovak government considers the introduction of its activation policy as a big success and one of the measures that contribute to meeting the EU’s so-called Lisbon agenda (EC 2000b) and its aim to make the EU the most competitive knowledge-based economy of the world. Only in the year 2004, more than 200,000 citizens participated in activation programs, which were co-funded by the Slovak government and the European Social Fund (ESF) and mostly governed by municipalities and NGOs. The welfare system reform has heavily reduced the expenses of the Slovak government on social assistance. According to a Slovak daily newspaper, this state budget would even have been dropped to 50 per cent of what was the common spending before 2004 (Sme, 11 November 2005).

Yet, in order to evaluate the impact of this reform, we need to interrogate more closely what has actually happened ‘on the ground’. One of the most influential ‘side-effects’ of the social policy reorganization has been the deteriorated housing situation of many of the unemployed, including numerous Roma. Due to the cuts of the social allowances, the numbers of Roma who can no longer pay their rents on time have rapidly increased. After the introduction of the new welfare system, many more renters have decided to evict Roma from their apartments due to their arrears of rent. In many cases, Roma have been evicted to so-called ‘sub-standard housing’ or ‘houses for non-adaptable citizens’, which are usually abandoned or newly created apartments or houses in segregated urban or rural areas where good facilities are rare. In many of these cases, the housing rights of the involved Roma have
been violated (ERRC 2004a; 2006b; MŠF, et al. 2006; Hojsík 2008; ECRI 2009). However, even if we only examine the impact of the activation projects themselves the picture becomes gloomy. Whereas activation policy does not particularly target the Roma, many of them have been involved in ‘activation activities’, ‘activation work’ in particular. In some regions of the country, practically all who are registered for activation projects have a Romani background. In the Central Slovak town of Brezno, for instance, the Technical Service Company offers ‘activation activities’ (by the way: what’s in a name?!) to 275 employees, of whom almost 95 per cent is Romani. In Brezno and its neighborhood, this company is now commonly referred to as ‘the Gypsy Company’ (see Oravec and Bošelová 2006). We need to evaluate this ethnic labeling in the light of how current activation policies have contributed to new or renewed forms of exclusion and exploitation.

First of all, in Slovakia activation policies do not at all function as a tool to increase the number of those who have a relatively stable job. What is more, in most of the cases, ‘activation activities’ have not been substantially combined with programs for education or re-qualification (see UNDP 2007: 71). In the first year of their existence, activation measures had only led to an independent job in the case of about 1 per cent of the participants. As Laco Oravec and Zuzana Bošelová (2006) of the Milan Šimečka Foundation have knowingly remarked, this could not really come as a surprise for in this period, according to Slovak statistics, the number of registered jobs was twenty times lower than the number of registered unemployed persons. As they have also put forward, in particular after the government decided that an activation payment could be received on the basis of an open-ended term, rather than of a limited period of six months, ‘activation policy evolved from a short-term active labour market policy tool into a new form of long-term social dependency’ (2006: 14-15). From then on, activation policies have created the possibility that participants are continuously involved in ‘activation activities’, which have by now become the equivalent of underpaid jobs. During fieldwork that I conducted in 2005 and 2006 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, I often came across situations where almost all of the Roma were long-term unemployed. Upon inquiry it appeared that those who actually had a job were not employed on regular conditions, but participated more or less permanently in ‘activation’ and ‘community work’ (data correspond to my field work experience, see UNDP 2007).

A serious consequence of how these new social policies have been enacted is that activation work has enabled employers to flexibly recruit a cheaper and well exploitable labor force. Several companies ‘have dismissed their employees and replaced them with individuals from the activation programme’ (Oravec and Bošelová 2006: 16; see also UNDP 2007). This has particularly hit the most segregated and marginalized Roma. A UNDP report has revealed that about 60 per cent of the members of this group who are currently involved in ‘activation activities’ are actually carrying out the same work as they did before (UNDP 2007: 80). In other words, their working status has shifted from doing work on the regular labor market to doing it as part of activation programs. Since the general payment for activation work is substantially lower than the official minimum wage in Slovakia—only about 60 per cent of the latter—Oravec and Bošelová have justifiably called this ‘a form of modern slavery’ (2006: 15, see also Magdolenová 2003). Their research has revealed that the Romani participants in activation work habitually need to do the worst, most degrading, physically heaviest, and most labor-intensive tasks. What is more, they have documented cases where the Roma were demanded to do work that did not belong to their official duties. Romani

---

4 UNDP data suggest that almost 50 per cent of all Slovak Romani households receive a so-called ‘activation allowance’ (UNDP 2007: 49-50).

5 Since then, the results have not substantially improved (ERRC 2007a; UNDP 2007). Comparable bad results of attempts to employ or reemploy Roma and Travelers through activation policies have recently been reported from the Czech Republic, France, and Portugal (see Bedard 2007; EERRC and Númena 2007).
participants in ‘activation activities’ have been used, for instance, to do work in the
households of non-Roma, to clean the surroundings of the latter’s private houses, to perform
personal tasks for activation project managers, local officials, and mayors, to clean
playgrounds of sport clubs, and to work after official working hours—all without getting
compensation for these additional services. Even in cases where ‘activation activities’ involve
‘public works’, it regularly happens that municipalities mobilize the participants to do more or
less useless work, such as the daily cleaning of the streets of the town or village where this
was formerly done once a week.

Due to the fact that the Roma are generally overrepresented in activation work, in many
local cases the activation programs that have been initiated to enhance the ‘employability’ and
to ‘maintain the working habits of the job seeker’ (GSR 2004: art. 52, §1) function as a form
of ethnicity-based neo-liberal governmentality that racializes post-communist class
formations, naturalizes ethnic differences, and maintains, rather than reduces, ‘the habits’ of
the majority to sub-humanize or even dehumanize the Roma. Indeed, since the current
activation programs have thus far not resulted in regular employment for the involved Roma,
the activation policies merely tend to reinforce stereotypical Roma representations as if they
are lazy, useless, inadaptable, and permanently inactive rather than active. The Slovak welfare
reforms have thus produced effective sites of intervention in what could be called the sub-
humanizing effects of the activation approach. In this sense, the current biopolitical regulation
is ‘not only a process through which regulatory power produces a set of subjects. It is also the
process of their de-subjectivation, one with enormous political and legal consequences’
(Butler 2004: 98, my emphasis).

In many cases, Romani activation workers who are formally Slovak citizens do not enjoy
basic housing, labor, and human rights because their second-class work rank and
tremendously marginalized location, rather than their official citizenship, determine their
living conditions. This troublesome temporal or even long-term evaporation of a number of
important components of citizenship has much to do with the current trend toward
‘contractualism’ (Yeatman 1998; Sol and Westerveld 2007). In neo-liberal market strategies,
such as the Slovak activation schemes, citizenship has less been conceptualized as a ‘status’—
associated with rights, safety nets, benefits, and the like—and gradually more as a ‘contract’:
a conditional access to rights (Borghi and van Berkel 2007). In accordance with this tendency,
in place of the term ‘right to employment’ the term ‘right to access to employment’ has
recently been introduced in Slovak labor market policies and regulations (UNDP 2007: 77).
However, the ‘contractualization’ of citizenship goes far beyond the specific context of
employment related contracts, such as ‘individual action plans’ and contracts with job seeker
and those who are involved in ‘community work’. This contractualization includes innovative
‘social contracts’, which ‘invoke new forms of governmentality that are based on the
inculcation of new forms of governable subject, subjects in which the person—his or her
“inner will”—becomes a resource enabling the transformation of welfare states through the
transformation of obligations into commitments’ (Newman 2007: 367). Endeavors to activate
or empower marginalized groups such as the Romani could be considered as technologies in
which individuals are innovatively constituted as governable subjects: ‘activation measures
can be understood as opening up more of the person to governmental power, requiring them
to collaborate in the development of new subjective orientations to the worlds of work and
welfare’ (ibid. 366). Indeed, activation measures try to constitute citizens as freely choosing
and responsible agents, rather than as passive welfare subjects, by incorporating them in
processes in which responsibilities are increasingly dealt with at an individual, rather than a
collective level. By shifting responsibilities toward private persons, they are encouraged to be
‘active’—yet only in particular ways—and to engage themselves in partnership with the state
‘in finding solutions to the problems of welfare after the welfare state’ (ibid. 368).
Yet, the frequently one-sided focus on those who need to be ‘activated’ and on the enhancement of their human and social capital to remove their ‘skills constraints’ (World Bank 2008: 2) risks to neglect the socioeconomic and political reasons that have led to their exclusion and their supposedly ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘wrong kind of’ human and social capital. The discourses and practices of activation and the correlated narratives of ‘social inclusion’, ‘cohesion’, and ‘self-empowerment’ tend to avoid the use of ‘traditional’ categories—such as power, poverty, domination, equality, and exploitation—and often one-sidedly represent existing practices of exclusion as problems of inadequately mobilized ‘social capital’ (Mayer 2003). This tendency to isolate an individual’s biography or group’s history from the larger political, historical, and socioeconomic context has strong sermonizing and depoliticizing effects: politically complex trajectories toward marginalization and their intersections with practices of citizenship, governance, and identification tend to be transformed into problems of morality, decency, and individual responsibility, which primarily need to be solved by the marginalized themselves. As the Slovak case illustrates, governmental techniques that have officially been introduced to ‘activate’ citizens and encourage them to make choices on the basis of new social and labor market opportunities, have been turned into the exercise of coercive strategies that often require the Roma to take up what regularly remains badly paid work on the margins of the labor force in the face of the withdrawal of state welfare allowances.

The World Bank has suggested that the employment opportunities of the ‘inactive’ Roma in Central and Eastern Europe can be improved by introducing activation policies while simultaneously taking into account the ‘nature of Roma joblessness’. Interestingly enough, however, the Bank’s approach to the alleged ‘nature of Roma joblessness’ relies heavily on references to the ‘best practices’ of the governance of activation in Western states, such as Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries, and the United Kingdom. Apart from the question of whether the practices in these countries could be considered as the ‘best’ ones (for a critical view, see Bredgaard and Larsen 2008; Dahlstedt 2008; Fuller, et al. 2008), the study of the World Bank completely neglects that the history of welfare conceptions and practices in formerly socialist countries, let alone the correlated impact of socialist legacies on Romani minorities, cannot easily be compared with those in Western ones. The Bank suggests that ‘the inactive’ and ‘hard to place Roma long-term unemployed’ (World Bank 2008: 19) can be dealt with by converging domestic policies toward internationally established ‘best practices’ of activation. In the Czech case that the World Bank explores, it puts forward that this strategy involves ‘carefully reviewing international experience, adapting it to the Czech context and designing promising pilot interventions with in-built impact evaluation’ (ibid. 37). The Bank considers this procedure of the permanent review, adaptation, design, and redesign of activation schemes as a ‘reform laboratory’ or ‘policy laboratory’ approach (ibid. 37).

However, as my examination of activation schemes in Slovakia implies, we need to critically interrogate how such reform or policy ‘laboratories’ have dramatically affected the socioeconomic position of those who the World Bank describes as the ‘hard to place Roma long-term unemployed’. The Slovak case clearly shows that marginalized Roma, rather
than being actively ‘reintegrated’ and ‘empowered’ to effectively enhance their choices and opportunities, tend to be forced to perform well-established stereotypes. In this case, neo-liberal forms of governmentality have influentially rearranged disciplinary and sovereign practices of power. The ‘traditional’ seam between sovereignty and citizenship—which assumed an almost self-evident relation between a state, its territory, and full rights for this state’s citizens—has been broken open and produced spaces in which the poorest among the Roma are on a daily basis confronted with various degrees of insecurity. In order to claim their rights, more often than not, they need to look beyond the official state structures and rely on the interventions of NGOs and advocacy and human rights organizations. At the same time, the position of many Roma on the margins of the labor force exposes them to the disciplinary forces of arbitrariness and exploitation. We can consider such current developments as ones toward a differential biopolitical approach to different population groups:

Marginality itself … [has] become an organized zone within the social [sphere], towards which those persons [are] directed who are incapable of following more competitive pathways … In place of … older practices [of social welfare policies], or rather alongside them, we are witnessing the development of differential modes of treatment of populations, which aim to maximize the returns on doing what is profitable and to marginalize the unprofitable. Instead of … eliminating undesirable elements from the social body, or reintegrating them more or less forcibly through corrective or therapeutic interventions, the emerging tendency is to assign different social destinies to individuals in line with their varying capacity to live up to the requirements of competitiveness and profitability’ (Castel 1991: 294-95).

We need to evaluate these developments within a transnational framework. In particular since the end of Vladimír Mečiar’s neo-authoritarian rule—Mečiar was Slovakia’s Prime Minister from 1993 until 1997—the country has enjoyed almost permanent economic growth and has been considered as a low-wage country, at least until the advent of the present financial crisis. Therefore, Slovakia has attracted global capital, international expertise, and new kinds of technology, mainly in the country’s western urban zones of growth. Slovakia’s mobilization of various neo-liberal market and social policy strategies has enabled the country to maintain its low-wage-country status and to regulate the influx of modern industries and technologies to the country’s advantage. Such contemporary changes of ‘transitional’ political systems do not simply represent a shift to regulatory modes of control, but embody an ambiguous mixture of regulatory and disciplinary ones. The Slovak case illustrates that neo-liberal forms of market governmentality set out a combination of regulatory norms and ethnicized modes of discipline, where the latter are merely deployed to deal with those who participate practically permanently in ‘activation work’. As I suggested above, we deal with a differentiation of biopolitical investment in different subject populations, where majority groups are privileged over other, ethnicized minority ones, and professional work over what is euphemistically called ‘activation’ or ‘community work’. This fusion of ‘market calculations and ethnic governmentality means that varied populations are subjected to different technologies of disciplining [and] regulation, and in the process assigned different social fates’ (Ong 2006: 79). In accordance with this trend, Helena Krištofová, the Romani Advisor of the Czech city of Brno, has suggested that the introduction of activation schemes in the Czech Republic has already led to dramatic developments where, increasingly, ‘poverty is acquiring the dimension of [Roma] ethnicity’ (Krištofová 2006; quoted from ERRC and Númena 2007: 27).
Socialist Legacies and the Transformation of State Racism toward the Roma

Activation schemes have sometimes been heralded as forms of ‘workfare with a human face’. Whereas neo-liberal ‘workfare’ programs are often considered as attempts to merely reduce the costs of welfare provisions, activation policies as endeavors to largely combine labor market integration and ‘social’ and ‘human capital’ formation with an individualized approach to the unemployed and marginalized are frequently seen as ‘tailor made’ to an individual’s circumstances. In the specific context of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, we need to analyze how such allegedly individualized approaches could nevertheless go together with attributing the same ‘social fate’ (Ong 2006: 79) to a collective or community. How is it possible that neo-liberal social policy strategies, such as the governance of activation in Slovakia, have become intimately related to Romani communities? Insofar as this linkage has not been directly realized by how activation schemes actually function, it has been enabled by, first of all, the complex ways in which socialist practices toward the Roma have been disarticulated and rearticulated under new, post-communist conditions. Secondly, the close connection between individualized and collectivized approaches to the Roma has been brought into play by numerous Romani and non-Romani NGO interventions initiated to ‘empower’ the Roma. In this second case, to which I turn in the next section, we deal with various approaches to increase the ability of Romani groups and individuals to develop their skills, to claim their rights, to manage their own risks, to participate more fully and equally in processes of decision-making, and to collaborate with other societal agencies.

Tracing the multiple influences of various socialist legacies on diverse past and recent forms of Romani minority and community governance goes beyond the scope and ambition of this paper. Valuable work in this field has recently been undertaken (Stewart 1997; Lemon 2000; Guy 2001a; Barany 2002; Klímová-Alexander 2006; 2007; Sokolova 2008), but much research on this subject is still in its infancy. In this section, I point to some of the issues that we need to take into consideration to understand the influence of communist Roma approaches on present circumstances. Discussing the impact of the social reform on the housing situation of Roma in Slovakia, I have mentioned that the dwellings where many of them have been evicted to are often called ‘sub-standard housing’, ‘houses for non-adaptable citizens’ or even ‘houses of an adjusted standard for non-adaptable groups of citizens’ (for the latter case, see GSR 2000: 29, §3). The biased discourse of ‘inadaptability’ and ‘non-adjustability’ is quite at home in Czech and Slovak narratives on the Roma. The idea that the Roma need or deserve less ‘advanced’ services and that they are inadaptable to whatever the ‘modern world’ requires or represents has a long and turbulent history.

In 2005, a Slovak Romani man told me that he had worked more than twenty years for the same collectivized industrial unit when he was fired in the beginning of 1990. When he asked his boss why he had decided to fire the Romani employees first, he answered: ‘You know, it is impossible for us Slovaks to live on 1,000 crowns a month, but you Roma know how to manage that’. The implicit idea that the Roma are second-class citizens, who know how to manage poverty—apparently because they have already experienced how to do so—and who know how to mobilize their own kin-based clandestine or even criminal networks to generate income, has often been cross-fertilized with the suggestion that the Roma are socially or even mentally inadaptable. In this context, the following anecdote is telling. During an informal address to his party members in 1993, Slovakia’s first post-Czechoslovak Prime Minister Mečiar stated that it was necessary to restrain the ‘extended reproduction of the [country’s] socially inadaptable population’. Nobody really doubted about the target of his speech: he had spoken about the Roma. However, when human rights agencies accused Mečiar of racially discriminating against the Roma, he defended himself by stating that he had not at all mentioned them in the disputed lecture (cf. Kohn 1995: 178-79).
Mobilizing de-ethnicized discourses of inadaptability, non-adjustability, and social deviance to frame Romani identity and Roma related issues has a notorious legacy in most of the formerly socialist countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in particular (Guy 1975; 1977; Grulich and Haišman 1986; McCagg 1991; Haišman 1999; Sokolova 2008). Official Czechoslovak socialist practices of state racism upon its Romani minority population were articulated in a language that was almost entirely stripped of ethnic or racial references (Sokolova 2008). From laws that were adopted to ban ‘nomadism’ and eradicate numerous other bad ‘inheritances from capitalism’ (SÚAR 1958b) to measures that were implemented to ‘reeducate’ Czechoslovakia’s ‘unfortunate fellow citizens and their children’ (Kuchařová 1970), and from extensive handbooks for social workers on ‘care for socially unadjusted citizens’ (MPSV 1972) to the notorious sterilization decree of 1972 that was introduced to limit threats to the country’s ‘healthy population’ (PRP 1977), official state discourses generally avoided to explicitly refer to race or ethnicity (the citations are quoted from Sokolova 2008: 91, 201, 224, 232). Yet, all these measures and practices actually functioned to deal with the Czechoslovak Romani minority.

In the first decades after the Second World War, most socialist countries reframed their ‘Gypsy question’ as a social one and based it in one way or another on a Soviet Marxist notion of class. The common socialist way to reframe minority issues in the early postwar period was to rely upon Joseph Stalin’s approach to the ‘national and colonial question’ (Stalin 1935). However, the Roma did not fit as ‘easily’ in Stalin’s model of what constituted a nation as ‘national minorities’ did (Stewart 2001a). In general and historically, the Roma were not at all considered as a national minority. Communist regimes often re-invoked and reshaped nineteenth and early twentieth century stereotypical Roma representations as if they constituted a ‘foreign’, ‘drifting’, and ‘rootless element’ to suggest that the Roma first had to be actively assimilated into the nation to enable in any way a consideration of the ‘Gypsy question’ as part of the ‘national’ one. The Czechoslovak case illustrates this approach well. An important Czechoslovak socialist party ideologue suggested that the ‘Gypsy question’ could not without problems be reframed in nationalist terms. Since the national question could be considered as representing only a special case of the social question, he stated that the ‘Gypsy question’ could only be solved by the Roma’s ‘social and cultural assimilation [and] a fusion with a more advanced cultural environment’ (Sus 1961: 9-11; quoted from Sokolova 2008: 92). Consequently, the ‘Gypsy question’ had to be effectively solved by ‘the gradual liberation of gypsies from the consequences of retardation as a legacy of the capitalist regime’. This emancipation had to be achieved by the cultural and social ‘reeducation of the Gypsy population’, which had to ensure that the Roma would ‘become proper citizens of our homeland, who will understand that only hard work toward the development of socialism will provide them with the security of an increased standard of living and hence a happy future without wrongfulness, poverty and hunger’ (SÚAR 1952; quoted from Sokolova 2008: 83).

Put differently, by effectively drawing the Roma into the working class, they would turn from an alienated, ‘mobile section of Czechoslovak society’ (SÚAR 1958a) into ‘citizens with a nomadic origin’ or into ‘citizens with a gypsy origin’—as the official socialist discourse rendered the Roma. In this way, they would become good socialist laborers, who would ultimately be released from the yoke of their former ‘capitalist’ lifestyle. In the first years after the Czechoslovak communists came to power, the authorities claimed that their approach was already successful for ‘work [had] transform[ed] [the] gypsies in truly miraculous ways’ and they had ‘willingly and quickly adjust[ed] to reliable work’ (SÚAR 1950; quoted from Sokolova 2008: 85).

Whereas various scholars have pointed to the crucial importance of the fact that communist regimes generally regarded the Roma as a social problem, rather than as an ethnic one, few have analyzed how the gradual de-ethnicization of discourses on the Roma under communism...
was inherently related to the emergence of novel forms of state racism. Ultimately, the idea that the essential function of the state is ‘take control of life, to manage it, to compensate for its aleatory nature, [and] to explore or reduce biological accidents and possibilities’ was not at all uncommon to socialism. In this respect, socialism made no substantial critique of what Foucault termed biopower. Socialism had ‘in fact taken it up, developed, reimplanted, and modified it in certain respects, but it [had] certainly not reexamined its basis or its modes of working’ (Foucault 2004: 261). Socialism produced new and renewed modes of state racism, which were in many (but not all) respects different from the ones that were inscribed, for instance, in national socialist discourses and practices toward those who were considered as a threat to the health, wealth, and development of the majority population. It has been argued that ‘racism—not a truly ethnic racism, but racism of the evolutionist kind, biological racism—[was] fully operational in the way socialist States … [dealt] with the mentally ill, criminals, political adversaries, and so on’ (ibid. 261-62). Whether the kind of state racism that was gradually developed under Czechoslovak socialism was really of an evolutionist or biological kind or not, is not my main point. Yet, it certainly embodied ‘not a truly ethnic racism’, but a form of racism that heavily relied upon the strategic reformulation of ethnic and racial issues in terms of social categories.

Thorough analyses of various practices of Czechoslovak socialist state authorities, scientists, social workers, medical doctors, surgeons, anthropologists, pedagogues, and the like (Sokolova 2008) substantiate that the kind of racism that was inscribed in their discourses was not explicitly ethnic. In the history of Czechoslovak communism we can distinguish various ways in which often de-ethnicized official state discourses and popular approaches toward the Roma were frequently combined to discriminate against them. After the Second World War, they were first of all problematized as a foreign and socially derailed ‘element’ that had to be reeducated and resocialized in order to assimilate it effectively into Czechoslovak society. From the late 1940s to the 1960s discourses of nomadism were mobilized to control every form of lifestyle that was considered as ‘dishonest’. While the largest part of Czechoslovak Roma lived a sedentary life when ‘anti-nomadic’ legislation was introduced in 1958, discourses of nomadism were nevertheless effectively governmentalized to constantly control the Romani population and its ‘mobility’. The definition of nomadism was stretched and included, for instance, the trips that Slovak Roma made to work in the Czech Lands, where many of them were actually forced or encouraged to work. From the mid 1960s onward, the so-called ‘social and moral causes’ for the ‘developmental’ and ‘medical problems’ of Romani children were instrumentalized to legitimatize the gradual developed of a widely disseminated and segregated ‘special school system’, in which Roma were generally overrepresented. In 1970, a pedagogical study on this system concluded that ‘gypsy children achieve better results in remedial schools … because the conditions of [these] school better suit the mentality and preparedness of gypsy children’ (Macháčková 1970: 46; quoted from Sokolova 2008: 204). Such fallacies are typical of how discriminatory measures toward the Roma were legitimized under Czechoslovak socialism. Last but not least, in the 1970s a sterilization decree was introduced ‘to prevent the involuntary and ill-informed sterilization of all Czechoslovak citizens by outlining strict requirements an applicant had to fulfill in order to be granted permission to undergo the procedure’ (Sokolova 2008: 10).

Vera Sokolova (2008) has convincingly argued that, by the time that the Czechoslovak authorities introduced the notorious sterilization law, the term ‘Gypsy’ was almost universally translated as ‘unhealthy’ in social, medial, educational, and scientific narratives. She refers to the content of a methodological handbook for social workers that was developed in the early 1970s to show how far the official and semi-official discourses had moved into the direction of a total pathologization and criminalization of the Roma. The four-hundred-pages long handbook, which was entitled ‘Care for the Socially Unadjusted Citizens’ (Péče o
společensky nepřizpůsobené občany), included articles that psychologists, sociologists, sexologists, criminologists, lawyers, and physicians had written to discuss, define, explain, and solve the problems of ‘socially abnormal, pathological, and deviant persons’. In the authors’ attempts to elucidate the phenomenon of ‘inadaptability’ they produced various circular arguments. First, they firmly related the behavior of ‘non-adaptable persons’ to social phenomena, such as criminality, alcoholism, parasitism, and prostitution to finally consider all these interrelated residues ‘of the previous capitalist regime’ and the ways in which they constitute ‘deviant, socially not-adapted persons, problem families and conflict groups’ as a problem of ‘social inheritance’ that was hard, if not impossible, to eradicate:

If a child is raised in a pathological subculture, which is in contradiction with the prevailing culture, he or she will become delinquent in a similar process, in which an Eskimo becomes an Eskimo... Most carriers of socially pathological phenomena come from seriously deficient families. Many criminals, recidivists, alcoholics, prostitutes, citizens avoiding work and other non-adjusted citizens grew up in conditions of broken families, families of alcoholics and otherwise non-adjusted persons, as well as from families with substandard cultural levels (MPSV 1972: 9, 26; quoted from Sokolova 2008: 225-26).

Not a single time the book did explicitly mention the ‘Gypsies’. Yet, the book and the general information on ‘fundamental problems of socialization and non-adaptability’ that it contained was designed for and used by ‘social workers and curators’, who, according to their official work description, often had to deal with ‘citizens of gypsy origin’. While this does not yet indicate that the handbook was only used to deal with the Roma, it nonetheless implies that the term ‘citizens of gypsy origin’ and the basic concepts that were used to define the phenomenon of inadaptability were interchangeable (cf. Sokolova 2008). This becomes particularly clear when we see how the practices of sterilization, school segregation, demographic research, and discrimination against the Roma came together on the ground. While the Slovak government promoted a more adequate demographic monitoring of the ‘unhealthy population of gypsy children’ and the development of so-called ‘health indications, which could be used as justification for sterilization’ and as a new means ‘to suppress further unhealthy populations in these [gypsy] families’ (PRP 1977: 5), a local communist secretary suggested that the Gypsies’ ‘obvious retardation [did] not have to be measured by any special tests’. According to her, this retardation is ‘readily apparent to anybody who sees the ways the Gypsies live’, and obvious since their ‘children are unable to succeed in the regular elementary school’ (quoted from Sokolova 2008: 229). In the town in question, the Eastern Slovak village of Jarovnice, many Romani women were actually sterilized between 1971 and 1989, as was the case in numerous other towns throughout Czechoslovakia. In the context of the widespread sterilization practices, and of the shifted Roma problematization from one in ethnic terms to one in social categories more generally, Sokolova has concluded that:

7 Though widely documented, the sterilization of Romani women in communist Czechoslovakia, but also in the postcommunist Czech Republic and Slovakia, remains a highly delicate issue that has thus far only marginally been recognized by the involved authorities. One of the important reasons for the poor recognition of the past sterilization practices is certainly related to the ways in which ‘the Gypsy question’, and official documents and laws that promoted sterilization in particular, were largely, if not entirely de-ethnicized. In this respect, Sokolova’s excellent study on Czechoslovakia’s cultural politics of ethnicity substantially contributes to better understanding the contexts of the sterilization practices, as well as the current difficulties to get them adequately recognized (for critical views and overviews, see HRW 1992; CRR and Poradňa 2003; Cahn 2004; 2006; ERRC 2004c; Kopalová 2006).
Many local offices translated ethnicity-neutral instructions as a mandate to sterilize Romani women in a belief they were acting in the interest of both the nation and the Roma women themselves. Such a high level of agreement on an ordinary level demonstrates that, contrary to the official rhetoric, racism was a pervasive and vital phenomenon manifesting itself in the everyday life of the society. ‘Gypsy’ was almost universally translated into a ‘Czechoslovak’ social speech as ‘unhealthy’, complying with the officially marketed image of a ‘Gypsy’ not as an ethnic/cultural subject, but as a socially/mentally/sexually deviant object (Sokolova 2008: 230, her emphasis).

At a more theoretical level, we could say that the far-reaching Czechoslovak biopolitical preoccupations with their Romani population—including the segregated school system, the practices of sterilization, the delegation to ‘substandard’ housing for ‘non-adaptable citizens’, and similar dubious practices of social workers, general practitioners, and the police—express the way in which governmental power had effectively reinstated, or at least substantially reconfigured sovereign power. The suggestion that the members of the Romani minority represented a threat to the security, stability, and development of ‘the healthy [majority] population’ brought an important configuration of sovereignty into being, where newly introduced laws, such as the ones on nomadism and sterilization, were no longer ‘binding by virtue of established laws or modes of legitimation, but fully discretionary, even arbitrary, wielded by officials who [interpreted] them unilaterally and [decided] the condition and form of their invocation’ (Butler 2004: 62). This transformation of sovereignty corresponds to what could be considered as the instrumentalization of laws as ‘tactics’ that are no longer necessarily bound by virtue of their status as laws. The various ways in which the field of governmentality as a means to intensively manage populations has inherently changed the multiple functions of sovereignty have opened up a broader set of tactics, including governmental strategies and techniques that shape and deform what we mean by ‘the human’. In this respect the specific way in which the Czechoslovak Romani minorities were governed, was by constituting the Roma ‘as the less than human without entitlement to rights, as the humanly unrecognizable’ (ibid. 98). In this context, it is telling that the Slovak socialist government’s ‘Bureau for the Questions of the Gypsy Population’ (Sekretariát Komisie vlády SSR pre otázky cigánských obyvatelov) suggested that the sterilization decree itself could not yet fully guarantee the protection of the ‘healthy population’:

In practice, Gypsy citizens are still being encouraged too little to use the possibility of sterilization … In many cases, especially when the parents are mentally retarded, they are not able to realize that for their own health, as well as for the child that would be born psychologically defective, sterilization is necessary. But even such parents cannot be sterilized without their consent. The only legal way to circumvent this problem right now, allowed by … the Civil Code, is to constitute such a citizen legally incapacitated and [officially] assign her a social guardian (PRP 1977: 6, my emphasis; quoted from Sokolova 2008: 232)

The possibility to circumvent the necessary consent of the involved ‘mentally retarded’ woman to sterilize her by letting ‘a social guardian’ decide on the necessity to do so was often used to sterilize Romani women without even letting her sign an official form to consent with

---

8 I do not want to suggest that we dealt with a sudden transformation from a ‘good’ to a dubious articulation of sovereignty. Practices that instrumentalize laws as tactics to differentially deal with population groups could be considered as characteristic of diverse European histories of the transformation of sovereign practices (cf. Foucault 1991; 2007).
the medical treatment. This practice illustrates how the law was instrumentally mobilized to first deprive these women from their basic rights and then letting them undergo a degrading medical treatment. In these cases ‘the systematic management and derealization of populations function to support and extend the claims of sovereignty accountable to no law’. These practices are a clear manifestation of ‘how sovereignty extends its own power precisely through the tactical … deferral of the law itself’ (Butler 2004: 68). Indeed, only if the Romani minority would be entirely assimilated into the Czechoslovak nation, they could be considered as full and equal members of this society. As yet, however, that was supposedly not the case.

By way of this excursion on socialist preoccupations with the biopolitical management of the Romani minority population I want to argue that we cannot deal with recent and current manifestations of the discourses of inadaptability and inactivity in isolation. Let me return once more to the speech that Mečiar gave in 1993. What makes his speech particularly interesting in the light of the socialist legacies is that it marks the beginning of a post-communist tendency to reshape the dominant socialist discourses on the Roma, and to explicitly and increasingly ethnicize the once de-ethnicized narratives. At a later stage, Mečiar came actually under fire of racial discrimination. A secret recording of his speech revealed that he did not directly refer to the Roma in the targeted part of his lecture, but that he had nonetheless started his address with reflections on the grow of the country’s Romani population. Their birthrate, he had suggested, is much higher than that of the ‘whites’:

So, the prospect is that this ratio will be changing to the benefit of Roma. That is why if we do not deal with them now, then they would deal with us in time … [later in his speech:] Another thing that we ought to take into consideration is the extended reproduction of the socially inadaptable population. Already children are giving birth to children, or grandmothers are giving birth to children—poorly adaptable mentally, badly adaptable socially, with serious health problems, who are simply a great burden on this society (PM Vladimír Mečiar, Spišská Nová Ves, September 1993, address to members of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia [Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko], quoted from Kohn 1995: 178-79).

Explicit references to radical measures to deal with the Roma are not at all uncommon in contemporary Slovakia. In 2000, Róbert Fico—the leader of the political party Smer and the current Prime Minister of Slovakia—followed in Mečiar’s footsteps when he suggested that ‘the population growth of the Roma threatens to ruin Slovakia’s social system’. He described the Romani issue as ‘a time bomb that will cause trouble if not kept under control’ (Angelovic 2000). Attempts to essentialize Romani culture, to blame the Roma for their own and even for other people’s problems, to inscribe whiteness and blackness in discourses on cultural and

---

9 In general, Romani women were sterilized when they needed medical assistance in a hospital or clinic (during a delivery or an abortion). They had to sign an official form before undergoing the medical procedure. In most of the cases, the women were not informed that, by signing this form, they were at once agreeing with their sterilization. Only after the operation they were told that they were also sterilized or, in yet other cases, they only found out when they did not succeed in getting another child.

10 Mečiar suggested solving ‘the Romani problem’ by cutting the social benefits of parents with many children. When he had left the center of the Slovak political scene, ‘his’ proposal to enact this measure was actually adopted by the Slovak parliament (GSR 2003).

11 To solve ‘the Romani issue’ Fico again followed in Mečiar’s footsteps (see the previous note) by suggesting to substantially cut the social benefits for Romani families with many (more than three) children (Togneri 2000). Fico has used anti-Romani rhetoric to increase his popularity. In the spring of 2001, the outcomes of Slovak polls suggested that he was considered as the most trustworthy public representative of the country (Nicholsonová 2001). In the course of the years, the popularity of his party Smer has steadily grown. In 2006, Smer won the parliamentary elections and Fico was elected Prime Minister.
socioeconomic issues, and to suggest either moderate or radical forms of Romani population management have not been reserved to populist politicians, such as Mečiar and Fico. These attempts are actually centered on the Slovak political arena. In 1999, the then Slovak president Rudolf Schuster, remarked that the Roma ‘lack the will to integrate … and … profit from state help, but are neither willing nor capable of assuming responsibility for the improvement of their own situation’ (quoted from RFE/RL 1999b). Later, he also suggested that

The lifestyle of many [Roma] is oriented towards consumption, and they live from hand to mouth. Because of their lower educational level, the philosophy of some is to simply survive from one day to the next. If we add their increased propensity for alcohol abuse, absence of at least a minimum degree of planning, and low concern for developing normal habits including a sense of responsibility, hygienic habits and ethics, this philosophy of survival is becoming one of living “from one benefit to the next” (GSR 1999; see also ERRC 2000).

Last but not least, even those who are officially appointed to deal with the situation of the Roma have often used a comparable rhetoric. In 2001, the Slovak-Hungarian politician Pál Csáky was Slovakia’s Minister for Human Rights, Minorities, and Regional Development and, therefore, officially responsible for dealing with issues that were related to the Romani minority. When he was asked whether the solution to the ‘Roma problem’ was a question of money, he answered: ‘the Roma problem arises from the absence of a model for mutual coexistence between completely different cultures. If you had an unimaginable amount of money, could you change India into a modern European country in four years? No. Roma mentality, culture, thinking, reactions do not stem from the classic Slovak culture’ (Reynolds and Habsudová 2001; see also Vermersch 2003). More than once, Csáky has represented the difficulties that the Roma face as rooted in problems that are caused by themselves as well as by their allegedly homogeneous and ‘underdeveloped’ culture (compare Csáky’s statements on recent attempts of Roma to ask for asylum abroad, see Vermersch 2002). Csáky’s comparison of the situation of the Slovak Roma with the development of India is revealing. He represents India as a traditional, backward country that is not yet as ‘modern’ as most European countries including Slovakia ostensibly are. He considers India and ‘the’ Romani culture at the same level of poor development, lagging far behind in comparison with the ‘completely different’, modern, and well developed culture of Slovakia. By persistently representing the Roma and their culture or lifestyle, rather than, for instance, adequate minority protection or socioeconomic changes, as the main problem to be dealt with, Slovak politicians tend to pass the responsibility for the difficulties that many Roma face, as well as the necessary action that needs to be taken, onto the Roma themselves.

12 In some cases, even those who have analyzed the current development of ‘Roma policy’ and the majority’s attitudes toward Roma in the light of communist approaches to them have reproduced the narratives of modern vs. traditional communities as well as the developmental logic that is usually integral to such discourses. Imrich and Michal Vaščík, for instance, have suggested that for many Roma the Czechoslovak communist regime’s attempt to make the Roma ‘part of the “people of the Socialist country” … meant liberation from their original society and from traditional ties’ (Vaščík and Vaščík 2003: 33, my emphasis). Here, the authors reinforce a reified and homogeneous understanding of what ‘Romani culture’ would be. This understanding is even intensified by their suggestion that ‘the majority of the Roma’, due to ‘their historical marginalization, lifestyle and a consciousness that is ill-suited to a post-industrial way of life’, ‘are literally “out of time”’ (ibid. 36-37). Despite their reflections on the historical specificity of policies toward the Roma, Vaščík and Vaščík follow a minor yet persistent tendency in scholarship on the Roma to examine their ‘culture’, ‘communities’, and ‘lifestyles’ as relics of a traditional society or in (relative) isolation from wider socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts and patterns.
As these examples illustrate, the discourse of ‘inadaptability’ and other narratives that were mobilized to problematize the Roma in the past are far from absent in the current debates on the situation of the Roma in Slovakia. These examples show how the socialist de-ethnicized discourses have recently been disarticulated and rearticulated in dissimilar yet equally ambiguous ways. On the one hand, the once practically de-ethnicized discourses on the Roma have been gradually more ‘re-ethnicized’ in the post-1989 period by the explicit and often blatant projection of the ‘old’ socialist narratives of ‘inadaptability’ and ‘non-adjustability’ onto the collective of the Roma. They have now explicitly been ethnicized, not only by officially recognizing them as an ethnic minority, but often also by persistently essentializing and homogenizing the ethnic identity that has recently been attributed to them. On the other hand, new discourses have popped up after 1989, such as the ones of activation, active citizenship, and empowerment, which often have an unrecognized double dimension. These more recently developed discourses have often been considered as ways, or at least attempts, to enhance the Roma’s self-determination, participation, agency, and emancipation, and are thus seen as ethical or political interventions that are critical of and want to resolutely break past approaches of the Roma. However, these interventions simultaneously have an ambiguous relationship with the revitalized socialist narratives of ‘inadaptability’ and ‘non-adjustability’. Whereas propagators of strategies to ‘empower’ or ‘activate’ the Roma have directly or indirectly suggested that these new approaches leave behind coercive, therapeutic, punitive, and other authoritarian ones toward the Roma, I conversely want to argue that the contemporary mixture of various overlapping, intersecting, and often mutually contradictory governmentalities toward them results in a much more ambiguous situation than these propagators have put forward.

**NGO Interventions and the Empowerment of the ‘Powerless’**

Romani activists and Roma advocacy groups have not passively gone through the recent changes and the dramatic shifts in how the Roma have been problematized in popular, media, and official state discourses. On the contrary, when social unrest started in Slovakia in 2004, a number of local and national Romani activists came together to discuss their strategy toward the plans of the government. Mobilizing international human and minority rights standards, NGOs such as the Brussels-based European Roma Information Office, the European Roma

---

13 Even in those cases where dubious socialist terms to deal with the Roma have recently been abandoned, the traces and effects of the communist Roma approaches, as well as how they have been reshaped, often remain highly ambiguous. The Czech government, for instance, has recently decided to formally remove the category of ‘special schools’ from its national educational system (GCR 2004a). Yet, the subcategory ‘children with social disadvantage’ that the educational system currently uses is vaguely defined to include children from ‘family environment with a low social and cultural status’ (GCR 2004a; quoted from ERRC 2007b: 43). Whereas the involved law does not clarify how this category needs to be applied, yet another formal Czech government document (GCR 2005) explicitly associates this category with the Roma. This indicates that their cultural background is considered to be a disadvantage (ERRC 2007b). Elsewhere, I have discussed how the legacies of both National-Socialism and communism have contributed to the inadequate recognition of the Nazi genocide of the Roma and Sinti (van Baar 2008b).

14 My arguments have affinity with the viewpoints of those who have argued that we cannot simply undo concepts with an ambivalent history from the problematic practices and histories with which these concepts are inherently connected. For a convincing critique of those who have recently defended the reintroduction of the concepts of ‘the underclass’ and the ‘culture of poverty’ (Ladányi 1993; 2001; Ladányi and Szelényi 2002; 2003; 2006; Vašečka 2001; Vašečka and Vašečka 2003; UNDP 2007), see Stewart (Stewart 2001b; 2002). See also my critique of Ladányi’s and Szelényi’s work below. For a convincing critique of those who have recently defended the reintroduction of the concept of ‘assimilation’ (see, most prominently, Morawska 1994; Joppke 1999; Joppke and Morawska 2003; Brubaker 2001; 2004), see Jansen (Jansen 2006; forthcoming).
Rights Centre, and the Milan Šimečka Foundation in Bratislava have repeatedly addressed the effects of current social policy reforms on the Roma (MŠF, et al. 2006; ERRC 2007a; 2007b; Hojsík 2008). Non-profit organizations, such as the Roma Press Agency in Košice have relentlessly tried to challenge popular and populist rhetoric dealing with the Roma as well as to contest the persistent and often counterproductive ethnicization of inequality, exploitation, and poverty in Slovakia (Magdolenová 2005). Some Roma and pro-Roma NGOs have also capitalized on the momentum of the social unrest of 2004 to discuss strategies toward Romani empowerment and a more effective Romani movement on a wider regional, national, and even transnational scale (Spolu 2004; van Baar 2005; 2008a). Also in 2004, various Romani activists have initiated a Romani diplomacy network to try to conduct and direct various kinds of political and cultural relationships between Romani minorities and other agencies (Liebich 2007; Nicolae 2007; Nicolae and Slavík 2007). Altogether, many different agencies, including Romani ones, have thus tried to politicize or re-politicize discourses and policies that have contributed to the marginalization of the Roma and to processes and practices that have enhanced, or at least failed to challenge inequality and poverty. We could also consider these developments as part of an ongoing heterogeneous and promising Romani social movement at a transnational level in and also beyond Europe (Klímová-Alexander 2005; Vermeersch 2006; McGarry 2008).

Yet, the attempts of advocacy groups, grassroots organizations, and Romani activists are characterized by their own ambivalences. One important ambiguity is that the Romani movement has often been articulated as an identity-based social movement. Partly, this trend is more or less inherent to every social movement. As Peter Vermeersch has recognized, ‘activists demand equality and thus protest against those who see marginalized groups as inherently different. But at the same time, for political purposes they must reaffirm the difference between these marginalized groups and the cultural majority’ (Vermeersch 2005: 466). In a similar way, Romani activists have made ‘their voice heard successfully by engaging in identity politics and asserting Romani identity as the main focus of political action’. However, ‘in doing so they run the risk of reifying, politicizing, and perhaps even intensifying the boundary between minority and majority identities’ (ibid. 454). Since the Romani movement could be considered as one that has strongly been motivated by group-based experiences originating from a situation of inequality and oppression, Vermeersch, among others, has suggested that ‘not the recognition of cultural and ethnic difference in itself should be the target of activism, but the elimination of structural inequality’ (ibid. 469). Trying to overcome the drawbacks of a Romani movement that is one-sidedly based on ethnic or cultural identity and to redirect the movement toward addressing inequality, Vermeersch has proposed to pay more attention to circumstance-based, issue-based, and interest-based forms of collective action.

However, as the case of the almost immediate and effective ethnicization of social unrest in Slovakia in 2004 illustrates, forms of collective action that are motivated by specific circumstances or issues—in this case the general reduction of social benefits—are not without the risk that they are lastly problematized in terms of ethnic or cultural identity. Elsewhere Vermeersch (2003; 2006) has acknowledged that Romani attempts to represent their minority affairs on their own terms have often effectively been hampered by various counter-strategies or what, in Goffman-inspired social theories of frame analysis, is called ‘counter-framings’ (Goffman 1974; Benford and Snow 2000). Throughout this paper, I have mentioned various examples of strategic counter-framing, such as the Slovak politicians’ reduction of political and socioeconomic problems to questions that would inherently be related to Romani ‘culture’, ‘behavior’, and ‘lifestyle’. The often-conflicting relationship between complex modes of framing and counter-framing points to another, more fundamental ambivalence that characterizes the current Romani movement and the socio-political environment in which it is
embedded. As my elaboration on ‘the sub-humanizing effects’ of neo-liberal forms of
governmentality toward the Roma has attempted to clarify, identities that have been attributed
to the Roma are often not only, and even not primarily, the result of how individual or
collective actions are intentionally framed, but the effects of different rationales and
techniques to govern minorities or, in other words, of the multiple tools, discourses, forms of
expertise, and the like, that Romani and non-Romani agencies have mobilized to articulate
Romani minority governance. In order to address and evaluate these identity-effects, as well
as how they relate to reinforcing or challenging inequality, we need to analyze more explicitly
the tools and discourses that have up until now profoundly shaped the Romani movement.
This analysis also leads to addressing the question how activist and NGO interventions meant
to empower the Roma are related to the trend to articulate minority governance neo-liberally.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the multifaceted discourse of Romani capacity building,
community development, and empowerment has rapidly become one of the dominant ways to
frame the ‘Romani issue’ in Europe, Central and Eastern Europe in particular. The tendency
to scale Romani minority governance at the level of (often territorialized) communities has
taken place in the context of the decentralization of national governments and public
administrations, the increased involvement of NGOs and other local partners, and the support
of European institutions and international organizations as well as of international umbrella
NGOs for Roma-related development and empowerment programs (see also van Baar 2007).
At least in name, these post-socialist projects are no longer related to programs to discipline,
control, or even police the supposed constituencies of these communities. Whereas the latter
kinds of programs dominated various communist Roma approaches, many post-socialist
projects are infused with notions of self-government and self-help, participation, self-
organized activities, human capacity building, active involvement through training, shared
responsibility, self-sustainability, awareness-raising, promoting self-esteem, the scaling-up of
local initiatives, and the like. In these projects, the subject of Romani minority governance
has often been constituted as a person who needs to be helped to develop the practical,
logistic, ethical, cognitive, and emotional skills that are considered as necessary to take the
personal responsibility for rational self-government. Romani minority empowerment and
development have increasingly become a matter of professionals and ‘Roma experts’ teaching
the Roma how to claim their rights, to improve their situation and prospects, and, more
generally, to conduct and manage themselves in socially and culturally respected and
responsible ways. The publication of various self-help and self-management guides for Roma
and for Romani activists underscores this tendency (ECRI 2001; PFDC 2003; ERRC 2004d;
community work and Roma inclusion, for instance, describes the so-called Roma community
worker as ‘a professional social worker focused on collective problems and self-management’
of the Roma. While the authors suggest that the process of community development could
also be achieved ‘without a community worker’, in most of the cases there is nonetheless ‘a

---

15 Central to post-structuralist critiques of identity politics is that a movement that frames and constructs its
politics on the basis of identity tends to reinforce that identity and naturalize the boundaries between majorities
and minorities. In order to avoid these drawbacks, post-structuralist thinkers, such as Judith Butler, have drawn
on Foucault’s work to emphasize the ways in which identity could be considered as an effect of various
overlapping, intersecting, and often contradictory governmentalities (see Butler 2002; 2004). This position does
not necessarily lead to neglecting the possibilities of agency. Indeed, ‘construction is not opposed to agency; it is
the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible
… The critical task is … to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the
local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute
identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them’ (Butler 1990: 187-88).

16 In Bulgaria and Macedonia, some of the Romani community centers are literally called ‘Roma self-help
bureaus’ (PFDC 2003: 10).
need for a professional who can motivate, stimulate, and activate people to organise themselves and to teach them how to find a way to tackle their problems.’ Yet, the community worker needs to know his or her place in the complex process of the mobilization of a community. Indeed, for her or him it is essential to realize that ‘you do not develop a community, the community develops itself; the most you can be … is a catalyst … to that process’ (Schuringa and Spolu 2005: 33, 34, my italics). The book’s chapter on community work and development ends with an outline of the ideal profile of a Roma community worker. Her or his most important competences are ‘being able to support Roma in their process of emancipation via self-organisation’ and ‘to create a bridge to the surrounding environment and society’ (ibid. 34-35, my italics). The book indicates so-called ‘mobilized’ and potentially ‘active communities’ on the basis of the following characteristics:

- Awareness: Are people reflecting on their situation?
- Activeness: How active are the people for their community?
- Mentality: Are people positively oriented towards the future?
- Human capacity: What are the competencies of leaders and people?
- Social structures: How is the community organized?
- Leadership: Are there local leaders who are respected, trusted and accepted?
- Democratic procedures: Is there a tradition of democratic decision-making?
- External network: How are the relations with the outside world structured? (ibid. 39)

The rhetoric and proposed strategies of this book, though representing a rather extreme case, are no isolated phenomenon in the current Romani movement. The narratives in which the subjects of Romani empowerment have been described often bear great resemblance to the neo-liberal discourses of self-organizing, active, and responsible individuals or communities that need to be encouraged to manage their own risks and lives. Of course, Romani activists and NGOs as well as Roma advocacy groups have also tried to make strategic use of these discourses to address the various ways in which many Roma have been confronted with inequality and poverty. More frequently, however, similar kinds of discourses have been mobilized to frame empowerment and development programs. Spolu International Foundation—a Dutch NGO that has coordinated the development of a large network of various Romani organizations in Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia—has described its strategy as follows:

By promoting active citizenship of Roma, Spolu aims to counter their exclusion. Once Roma become aware of their situation, and once they start using the tools of citizenship, they can change the prevailing ideas of being inferior to others. As active citizens, the Roma minority can hold governments accountable for their actions and thus claim their rights and place in society … Through active citizenship Roma are able to take back their lives in their own hands (quoted verbatim from Spolu 2008a: 14, my emphasis).

Spolu (which means ‘Together’ in Czech and Slovak) and its Romani partner organizations belong to a pioneering group of NGOs that and activists who try to shape and direct the current Romani movement. They try to reflect constantly upon their own strategies, their advantages and disadvantages, and on how they could better contribute to a more effective Romani movement in Europe and to what they call ‘strengthening the Roma voice’. As part of this ongoing process of internal negotiation and self-critical evaluation, Spolu’s partners have gradually redirected their central strategy from one that was largely based on local forms of community development to one that, through processes of trans-regional and transnational collaborations, builds networks of organizations that try to set the agenda not only on local,
but also on regional, national, and even international levels (cf. van Baar 2005; 2008a). As part of their renewed strategy, in 2002 the Spolu partners established the European Roma Grassroots Organizations (ERGO) Network, which has also become a member of the larger EU Roma Policy Coalition Network. The renewed strategy, however, remains strongly embedded into Spolu’s original approach:

Spolu applies a process oriented and contextual approach. Partner organisations are enabled to design their own strategies and methods that address the specific Roma issues in their region and area. Instead of providing fixed models or blue prints of programmes, we coach Roma organisations to design tailor made approaches that fit their realities … Already, when starting partnerships with Roma organisations and networks, Spolu creates an exit scenario, coaching partners to develop initiatives that make them sustainable. This allows Spolu to remain a flexible organization that stimulates Roma to take their lives back into their own hands (quoted verbatim from Spolu 2008b: 4, my emphasis).

What is characteristic of the strategies of many Roma advocacy groups and Romani activists, including Spolu and its partners, is their focus on awareness raising and self-organization as tools toward making the Roma and their own organizations more sustainable and effective. Nominally, many of these organizations encourage a bottom-up approach to the Romani movement. Yet, the bottom-up approach is often imposed from the top down. Even though discussions with the ‘grassroots’ may characterize the ways in which bottom-up approaches have been negotiated, it is typical of many of them that they constitute the collective Romani subject as more or less ‘powerless’ persons or at least as ones who potentially possess human and social capital, but do not (yet) know how to mobilize it effectively. Empowerment and development programs are subsequently considered as the necessary ‘technical’ interventions to turn the tide. In many of these programs, ‘empowerment is typically treated as a simple quantitative increase in the amount of power possessed by an individual’ or a collective (Cruikshank 1999: 71). Consequently, these programs ‘all seek to mobilize and maximize the subjectivities of those perceived to lack the power, hope, consciousness, and initiative to act on behalf of their own interests’ (ibid.). However, ‘understood as a means of combating exclusion and powerlessness, relations of empowerment are, in fact, akin to relations of government that both constitute and fundamentally transform the subject’s capacity to act; rather than merely increasing that capacity, empowerment alters and shapes it’ (ibid.). In other words, empowerment and development programs do not merely turn ‘powerless’ persons into ones who possess power, but change the relations of power in which the subjects of these programs are embedded. Correlatively, many of these programs presuppose a modernist, evolutionary logic as if their interventions will unilinearly and cumulatively lead to ‘more agency’ for the involved subjects and to sustainable, accountable, and independent minority organizations. However, particularly where structural inequalities are great and in a climate where short-term funding of empowerment projects is the rule,
rather than the exception, processes of minority empowerment are partial and intermittent and, what is more, have often been reversed (cf. Cleaver 2004). To evaluate the impact of empowerment and development programs that have been explicitly shaped to deal with the Roma, I finally want to turn to how some of Spolu’s programs in Slovakia have actually functioned in daily practice.

A number of the projects that Spolu’s partners in Slovakia have developed explicitly deal with employment and forms of community building. Spolu has followed an international tendency to support and develop employment-related projects on the basis of micro-credits or similar forms of micro-finance. In collaboration with some Romani communities, Spolu’s local partners have usually tried to firstly identify the priorities of these communities, to formulate so-called ‘income generating activities’, and, finally, to grant to those who are going to establish such activities a loan that they need to pay back once the project has generated a more regular income. Between 2004 and 2005, the Romani association Uhrody in the Central Slovak village of Zvolenská Slatina—one of the partners of Združenie Spolu in Kremnica—managed a pig-breeding project. The project aimed at ‘creating work incubation apparatus for Roma families stimulated by the real entrepreneur’s environment. In the work incubation apparatus should families learn to breed pigs, to think like businessmen and try to make meat’s reserve’ (quoted verbatim from Spolu Slovakia 2005, my italics). A few families signed a contract in which they agreed upon breeding the pigs, getting piglets, and trading the meat of some of the older ones, while using the younger ones to maintain the breeding process. In the same period of time, Spolu’s partner in the eastern Slovak village of Chminianské Jakubovany—one of the most segregated and poorest Romani settlements in Slovakia—managed a beekeeping project, where beehives were bought for some members of the local Romani community with the aim of producing and selling honey. With the help of the Milan Šimečka Foundation, Spolu Chminianské Jakubovany had also established a ‘woodworking club’ that aimed at making ‘handy young people’ familiar with ‘the working of different kinds of wood prevalent in the local area’ in order to ‘create wicker products from the wicker abundant in the surroundings’. On its own website, this Spolu partner wrote that ‘the primary aim of the club [was] to promote development of fine motor skills in its [the community] members’ (quoted verbatim).

When I visited these and other villages in the summer of 2005 and discussed the projects with some of the local Roma, it not only became clear that they had been highly ambivalent about these projects since their start, they also suggested that the projects were not really initiated or prioritized by themselves. Rather, they considered them as a kind of experiments initiated from above. In Chminianské Jakubovany, those Roma who were involved in the beekeeping project were actually looking for what they considered as ‘real’ employment. They politely waved aside the project as without real impact. Later in 2005, the pig-breeding project in Zvolenská Slatina was canceled. Rather than keeping some of the pigs for future meet production, the Roma had slaughtered all their pigs at once. In Chminianské Jakubovany and Zvolenská Slatina the projects had also contributed to tensions within the communities. During my visits, it became clear that those who were not directly involved in the Spolu projects did not really like or even strongly disliked these recent interventions. In Detva in Central Slovakia, yet another Spolu partner had tried to establish a community center as a means to organize pre-school and playing activities for the local Romani youth and a kind of consultation center for Roma who were looking for a job. The Romani woman who had organized most of these things told me that she struggled day by day with getting the trust from her fellow Romani citizens. More than once, she had faced difficulties to go on with her work. Having almost no financial and logistic support and trying to get the best out of the few resources, she suggested that the scaling up of her activities and the building of networks on a trans-local basis could only be considered as future projects.
Contesting Neo-liberal Practices in Central and Eastern Europe

Huub van Baar

The Romani woman who translated for me during some of my trips through Slovakia said that she did not want to doubt the good intentions of those who had initiated the pig-breeding, beekeeping, and woodworking projects, but that she nevertheless considered them as racist. She suggested that attempts to employ Roma by means of teaching them how to work wood, to cook, to make baskets, to keep bees, to breed pigs, and the like start from the dubious assumption that the Roma are people who live ‘close to nature’, who need to be trained to take up such ‘traditional’ professions in the agricultural sector, or who even have a collective ‘cultural’ history in these traditional niches of the economy. Others have also pointed to the ‘traditionalizing’ or ‘naturalizing’ attitudes that are often linked with these kinds of NGO interventions. János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi, for instance, have suggested that these ‘failures’ have to do with ‘the incompetence of the outsider experts’ who have launched these programs, with ‘the disadvantageous conditions’ under which they have been initiated, and with the Roma’s response to an assumed ‘underclass formation’ (2006: 96). However, Ladányi and Szelényi have underestimated that these kinds of programs fit rather well with a neo-liberal tendency to deal with those who are or tend to be marginalized in isolation from the wider socioeconomic and political circumstances. What is more, they have (at least partly) related the ‘failures’ of these and other interventions to the ways in which the involved Roma have responded to their deprived and marginalized position. These Roma have supposedly contributed to the formation of a ‘culture of poverty’ that tends to reproduce, rather than challenge, their exclusion (ibid. 112). Ladányi and Szelényi reflect upon the ways in which neo-liberalism has affected welfare regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and on how these recent transformations have deteriorated the situation of the marginalized and contributed to the formation of an underclass (ibid. 23-26). However, they largely fail to address how neo-liberal rationales and tools have simultaneously and influentially affected the general conditions under which interventions of NGOs and Romani activists can take shape at all. Instead, Ladányi and Szelényi fall back on mobilizing the questionable concepts of ‘the underclass’ and a ‘culture of poverty’. As Michael Stewart has convincingly argued (Stewart 2001b; 2002), these notions have a highly problematic history and cannot easily be undone from the ambiguous practices and histories with which they are intrinsically linked (see also note 14, Aponte 1990; Imre 2006; van Baar forthcoming).

Rather than one-sidedly blaming the Roma or the non-state and activist agencies that have developed empowerment and development programs for them, we need to analyze how these programs and the ambiguous situation to which they have often led are strongly related to the limited conditions under which activist and NGO interventions can actually take place. This implies that, rather than blaming NGOs, such as Spolu and its partners, for the often-difficult work they do, we need to analyze how their empowerment strategies partake in a more critical philosophy of activism as well as in a troublesome climate that endangers the foundations of contemporary activism. In the case of Spolu and its partners, for instance, it is important to acknowledge that they are aware of the limits of some of their projects, reason why they have tried to simultaneously focus on a process-directed, rather than a project-oriented Romani movement. The fact that in many cases local projects and processes toward empowerment do not directly succeed does not imply that a discussion of these strategies with other domestic and international partners has not led to redirecting their general or case-specific approaches. What is more, we need to assess activities such as those of the Spolu partners and ERGO from a transnational point of view. Since some of their strategies in, for instance, Macedonia and Bulgaria could be considered as rather successful (see van Baar 2005; 2008a), other partners in their European network try to see whether, and under what conditions, they could benefit from the experiences and results elsewhere.

Yet, there is another, maybe more important issue to discuss, which has to do with the ways in which neo-liberal forms of governance tend to displace what could be considered as
the main issue of empowerment programs. We need to recognize that the tendency of market forces to generate more inequality and the parallel profound transformations of welfare states have not only contributed to the current problems of marginalization and segregation, but ‘they tend to jeopardize the very qualities that are the basis of the success and valorization of community-based initiatives: their empowering and solidarity-creating capacities’ (Mayer 2003: 120). An important effect of current neo-liberal governmentalities is that NGO projects and activist initiatives that try to help marginalized groups such as the Romani have come ‘under pressure to substitute for … public services, or are co-producing and partnering in the delivery of such services’ (ibid., see also Newman 2001). As for the latter case, we have been able to notice that many NGOs that are officially related to the empowerment or social inclusion of the Roma are or have actually been transformed into so-called GONGOs or government-organized NGOs. These agencies are largely financed or even developed by a country’s government to provide the Roma, as well as others, with services that were formerly state-organized. This tendency to ‘outsource’ public services has frequently led to the devolution of responsibilities onto these NGOs and the involved activists (see also Olomoofe 2007). However, these NGOs and the ‘public-private partnerships’ in which they are strongly encouraged to invest, have often not been able to develop the necessary tools and capacities to adequately deal with these responsibilities. Under-funded and under-staffed as these development and human rights agencies usually are, taking these responsibilities upon them has often led to a situation in which they are structurally demanding too much of themselves. Additionally, they can often not comply with ‘globalized’ benchmarks of NGO performance and, in some cases, even not guarantee an equal treatment of their own personnel (Trehan and Kóczé 2009) or are tempting themselves into representing their project outcomes as less ambiguous as they frequently are. Correlatively, the devolution of several important responsibilities to civil societal agencies has often yet another crucial de-politicizing effect: the reduction of the democratic accountability of how, for instance, anti-poverty and anti-inequality measures are enacted, in particular where the monitoring and evaluating of civil societal organizations is inadequate or even lacking.

NGOs and activist networks that have explicitly based their activities on human and minority rights standards need to negotiate diverse systems of value and bridge the gaps and contradictions that more regularly than not exist between these standards and the situated ethics of local settings. Often, this only leads to temporal, highly unstable, even reversible, and therefore ambiguous resolutions to displacements, violations, and other instances of marginalization and deprivation. In other words, these activists and organizations often help the Roma more in ‘getting by’—i.e. somehow dealing with their impoverished situation—than in ‘getting ahead’—i.e. really getting them out of their marginalized position. While I not at all want to underestimate the importance of ‘getting by’, we need to acknowledge that, under the current conditions, many activist groups have actually turned into a kind of repair networks. Even where activists and organizations have tried to directly target the ‘side-effects’ of current economic growth and profound transformations in the provision and conception of welfare, these agencies hardly realize the desired ‘sustainability’ and frequently

---

19 Elsewhere, I have suggested that we need to extend the language of GONGOs and BONGOs (bank-organized NGOs) with so-called EURONGOs or European institutions-organized NGOs (van Baar forthcoming). Indeed, strategies toward European governance have explicitly encouraged building on the extensive participation of non-governmental and other nonstate agencies to more effectively facilitate the EU’s politics of integration throughout the Union’s member states (see EC 2000a; 2001; 2002; 2003).

20 Martin Kovats has pointed to a similar diminishing of democratic accountability of practices of Romani minority self-governance in the context of the Hungarian minority self-government system (Kovats 2001a). He has also and importantly related this problem of limited political accountability to the ways in which academics and intellectuals have often inadequately addressed the wider socioeconomic and political context of poverty and inequality (Kovats 2001b).
even end up stuck in ‘ghetto economies, where they contribute to isolating disadvantaged communities further by drawing them into a localized [or globalized, HvB] circuit of capital disconnected from the mainstream economy’ (Amin, et al. 1998; quoted from Mayer 2003: 121). Indeed, NGOs and activists have often contributed to connecting marginalized Roma to the global aid and development circuits of capital, rather than to including them into the economies of their region or country; a process that has produced its own forms of political and cultural disintegration. Under the current circumstances, ‘precarious labour conditions and new marginalization processes thus tend to get reinforced rather than countered, undermining the solidarity within the groups as well as the empowering effects’ for them (Mayer 2003: 121).

Does this analysis finally lead to the conclusion that ‘neo-liberalism’ impedes every form of activism? I do not believe that this is the case. My analysis does not imply a victimization of Romani activists and NGOs or the impossibility to challenge neo-liberal governmentalities toward the Roma. Rather, it implies that Romani activists and NGOs need to be highly critical of the neo-liberal discourses of entrepreneurship and human and social capital formation, and of how these discourses themselves have often contributed to isolating their target groups from the wider socioeconomic and political circumstances. Not only have activist and NGO interventions be based on or extensively intermingled with these discourses, also international donors have often encouraged them to frame their work in this way in order to get funding for their projects or networks. Yet, a focus on social and human capital formation—for instance by means of granting micro-credits to try to turn marginalized persons into ‘entrepreneurs’—neglects that the socioeconomic and political conditions under which many Roma live, rather than the Roma, their ‘skills constraints’ or their alleged ‘culture of poverty’, will simply hamper or even deteriorate their ‘empowerment’. It has been convincingly and repeatedly argued that, by concentrating on the marginalized as agents of their own improvement, theories of self-help and of human and social capital building obscure ‘the structural sources of inequality produced by the present political-economic conjuncture’ (Rankin 2002: 10; see also DeFilippis 2001; Fine 2001; Harriss 2001; Walters 2002; Nederveen Pieterse 2003; Berner and Phillips 2005; Zetter, et al. 2005; Daly and Silver 2008; Field 2008; Nakhaie, et al. 2009). This critique does not imply that, for instance, all forms of micro-finance are essentially problematic, but that they, when mobilized in isolation, may actually lead to defending or reinforcing existing hierarchies along the lines of class, ethnicity, or gender (Rankin 2002; see also Ivanov and Tursaliev 2006). Influential international organizations, and the World Bank most prominently, have considered social capital as one of the most vital ‘indicators of sustainable development’ and as ‘the missing link’ to combat poverty and inequality (World Bank 1997a; 1999). Consequently, we need to be on the alert of how this widely disseminated paradigm of global governance has also influenced (the support for) the Romani movement, for instance through the World Bank’s collaboration with the Open Society Institute in the so-called ‘Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015’ program and through the activist and development NGOs that have committed themselves to this transnational program for the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.21

21 We can clearly see the influence of the World Bank’s social capital paradigm on their analysis of the current situation of Romani minorities in Albania. A recent report on this topic tends to ignore the larger socioeconomic and political context, in particular where it suggests that Albanian Roma have recently faced a decline of their culture and of the social capital that the authors of the report consider as necessary to build sustainable, reliable, and socially and economically successful relationships with their fellow citizens (see World Bank 2005a; see also van Baar forthcoming).
Conclusion:
Activism Beyond the Rhetoric of Activated and Active Citizens?

Let me review where this paper has taken us. I have analyzed how two recently developed general paradigms of global governance—the governance of ‘activation’ and what could be called ‘participatory’ governance—have affected newly emerged modes of Romani minority governance in Central and Eastern Europe. In the former case, I have shown how neo-liberal activation schemes and related welfare reforms that have officially been initiated to enhance ‘employability’, and improve social inclusion more generally, actually function as a form of ethnicity-based governmentality that has naturalized the ethnic differences between Romani and other parts of the population. This has led to a situation of graduated citizenship in which preexisting racializing and biopolitical schemes—which had already been inscribed onto Romani populations under communist rule—have been reinforced, reshaped, and intersected by new modes of governance that differentially value population groups according to market mechanisms. The governance of activation has frequently resulted into a situation where Roma who are formal citizens do not enjoy basic social and human rights because their extremely marginalized and second-class work position, rather than their official citizenship status, determine their current living conditions. In these cases, the specific ways in which neo-liberal rationales and tools have been articulated in Central and Eastern Europe have led to what could be considered as the sub-humanizing effects of these forms of governance on the Roma. I have argued that the reasons for why these effects have gone together with effectively attributing the same ‘fate’ to a collective Romani population need to be looked for in how current neo-liberal market governmentalities intersect, overlap, crosscut, and to some extent contradict with disarticulated and rearticulated socialist Roma approaches, as well as with various forms of Romani minority governance that are based on participatory modes of development and empowerment.

Secondly, I have shown how many current activist and NGO interventions—in their focus on turning the involved Roma into active and participatory citizens and coaching them toward independency and sustainable minority organizations—have often mobilized concepts, theories, and practices that fit perfectly well with a neo-liberal logic of self-sufficiency. However, in their one-sided focus on the promotion of various forms of self-help and self-sustainability, as well as on theories and techniques of human and social capital formation, many of these activist human rights and empowerment organizations tend to obscure ‘the structural sources of inequality produced by the present political-economic conjuncture’ (Rankin 2002: 10). More generally, in my analysis of the role that neo-liberal governmental technologies and rationalities have played in contributing to contemporary forms of marginalization, I have argued that we, additionally, need to look at how they have also put in danger empowering and solidarity-creating capacities that we generally relate to various forms of activism.

We could conclude that hierarchical and managerial forms of the governance of activation as well as participatory modes of governance and self-governance that start from the concept of active citizenship appear to be in tension with activist notions of citizenship that want to address and challenge current forms of inequality, poverty, and exclusion more generally. As Janet Newman has put forward, ‘the question of how—and where—the activism of the future might emerge in a period where the predominant focus is on the inscription of activated and active citizenship is deeply troubling’ (Newman 2007: 373). The mainstream literature on current neo-liberal forms of governance through activation has thus far paid little attention to, for instance, the effects that they have on living circumstances, the drop of wage levels and their sub-humanizing effects in particular, or on the diminishing of employee control over labor processes in the rapidly growing number of civil societal organizations (cf. Lewis 2005;
Some have argued that we need to distinguish between ‘activated’ and ‘active citizens’ on the one hand, and ‘activist citizens’, on the other: ‘While activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene, active citizens follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created’. While activist citizens ‘are creative, active citizens are not’ (Isin 2008: 38). One of the main aims of this paper, however, has been to argue that we can neither easily distinguish between practices of active citizenship and those of what could be considered as activist citizenship, nor between ‘script-producing’, creative, or ethically and politically challenging acts, and mainly ‘technical’, ‘script-following’ actions. The boundaries between both sets of practices have been profoundly blurred and it would be disparaging to judge current attempts at empowering the Roma as largely uncreative. To address and challenge the wider socioeconomic and political context of current forms of inequality we cannot rely on forms of contestation that are conducted in the form of complete exteriority. Rather, we need to make perpetual use of tactical elements that are pertinent in contemporary struggles for equality, insofar as they fall within the general horizon of various forms of governmentality. We need to take into consideration the ambivalent character of governmentality, which includes ‘on the one hand, rational forms, technical procedures, instrumentations through which to operate, and, on the other, strategic games that subject power relations they are supposed to guarantee to instability and reversal’ (Foucault 1997: 203). We need to look for these subversive strategies within the scope of current governmentalities to try to transform, re-utilize, and re-implant some of the basic elements of neo-liberal discourses and practices into a direction that destabilizes them and challenges the negative effects that I have discussed throughout this paper.

References


Fuller, Sylvia, Paul Kershaw and Jane Pulkingham. (2008) "Constructing 'Active citizenship': Single Mothers.


_____. (forthcoming) Secularism and Assimilation: Reading Proust in a Post-secular Age. Imiscoe Research Series. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.


_____. (2004g) "Police is Monitoring Roma Settlements, Say Situation in Stable." Slovak News Agency SITa: 24 February.

_____. (2004h) "President Discusses Robberies in Eastern Slovakia with two Ministers." Slovak News Agency SITa: 24 February.


van Baar, Huub. (2005) "Romany Countergovernmentality through Transnational Networking." Web publication at South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX), St Antony's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.
