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## Informality and the Invisibility of Roma Political Participation

Intersections. EEJSP

2(1): 159-182.

DOI: 10.17356/ieejsp.v2i1.138

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

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### Abstract

The past decades have been characterised by a puzzling dilemma of the politics of the ‘Roma issue’ in European societies and also on the international level. On the one hand, due to the intense work of a range of influential international organisations of Roma representation and the enduring efforts of a group of dedicated politicians acting on the European level, the case of Roma has become thematised in political terms and as such, it has been drawn into the arena of governmental and inter-governmental politics and policy-making. As a peak of such efforts, the formulation of a national strategy on Roma inclusion has been made a task for all member states of the European Union and this way it has been successfully elevated to the existing mechanisms of monitoring and reviewing as parts of the Europe-wide applied open method of coordination in outlining developmental plans and policies. On the other hand, domestic statistics and research signal the lack of any improvement in the situation of Roma: occurrences of discrimination and segregation have not diminished, poverty and the extreme inequalities hitting Roma in education, work and the daily conditions of living have not been decreased, and the tendencies of exclusion have become stronger in a wide range of local communities all across. In an indirect way, these latter developments indicate the weakness and marginal state of Roma politics in attaining any breakthrough in the structures of power. A closer look at the conditions in a broader scope of political participation reveals how informality in articulating needs and claims weakens the potency of the minority in influencing decision-making about their cause, while the very same relations properly fit into their experiences of daily living. An overview of the conditions and prevailing relations in education and work in marginalised Roma communities will serve to demonstrate the congruence of informalisation between the daily realities and their political representation.

*Keywords:* political participation; informality; minority rights.

## *Introduction*

The past decades have been characterised by a puzzling dilemma of the politics of the 'Roma issue' in European societies and also on the international level. On the one hand, due to the intense work of a range of influential international organisations of Roma representation and the enduring efforts of a group of dedicated politicians acting on the European level, the case of Roma has become thematised in political terms and as such, it has been drawn into the arena of governmental and inter-governmental politics and policy-making (Vermeersch, 2007; van Baar, 2011). On the other hand, national statistics and research signal the lack of any improvement in the situation of Roma: occurrences of discrimination and segregation have not diminished, poverty and the extreme inequalities hitting Roma in education, work and the daily conditions of living have not been decreased, and the tendencies of exclusion have become stronger in a wide range of local communities all across Europe (FRA, 2014; Kullmann et al., 2014). In an indirect way, these latter developments indicate the weakness and marginal state of Roma politics in attaining any breakthrough in the prevailing distribution of power and thus signal the perpetuation of the social and political contexts that bring about an undisturbed reproduction of deprivation and exclusion.

Such a duality suggests that the politics of the 'Roma issue' is caught by unbridgeable departures. On the one hand, new institutions and new mechanisms of negotiations are in place in international and macro-level domestic currents, but these function largely without Roma participation; on the other hand, politically meaningful representation is seriously lacking in the settings where Roma live and where their lives are framed by the largely unchanged conditions of the communities that they are part of (Kóczé, 2013; Pajic, 2013).

However, this duality and the sharp discrepancies between the macro- and micro-level politics around the 'Roma issue' call for explanation. Most frequently it is pointed out that, as part of the Europeanisation process driven by shared interests of unity of Europe's nation-states, powerful alliances could be created around the 'Roma issue' as framed in terms of discrimination (human rights violation) and the rights of national minorities (Vermeersch, 2007; Sigona and Trehan, 2009; van Baar, 2011). At the same time, issues of segregation, poverty and deprivation as daily experiences in local communities rarely invoke political responses. Such failures of local-level politics and policy-making are, however, generally attributed to the widespread 'indifference' of Roma. 'Indifference' is usually reasoned to be due to their low education and their preoccupation with struggles for securing daily subsistence; it follows that the great majority of Roma neither have the potentials in time and energy nor have the knowledge to play politics (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2005). Therefore, exclusion from participating in politics has to be seen as a 'natural' consequence and as a deeply ingrained cultural feature that is daily reproduced by the very conditions at the heart of the problem. This way the duality is represented as an unchangeable given and the responsibility for such a state of affairs is left with the Roma minority and its 'uninterested' orientation.

This article aims to show that 'indifference' as an attitudinal trait of Roma does not provide a proper conceptualisation of the reality of Roma participation in local

affairs. Instead, I propose to approach the phenomenon by extending the notion of political participation through embracing both its formal and informal manifestations<sup>1</sup>. As I will attempt to show, a closer look at the conditions that shape Roma participation in local public life reveals the dominance of personified informal relations between the local majority and the minority. It will be pointed out that these relations largely hinder the evolution of organised political representation and actions while they maintain informality and the adjacent invisibility of Roma political involvement.

The theoretical foundations of such an extended approach to the phenomenon are provided by the classic work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward on *Poor People's Movement* (1979) who propose to conceptualise the often non-traditional movements and actions of the poor American working class by framing their cases in the structural positions of those involved, on the one hand, and the potentials – and the limitations – of accessing various organisational settings in attaining their specific goals, on the other hand. Such a framing of the political processes allows for seeing the emerging claims in the context of changing needs that are generated, in turn, by the dynamics of structural forces and it also helps to see how the often informal associations behind these claims find their way to political expressions by reinventing and reinterpreting the existing organisational arrangements of collective action.

A similar approach seems fruitful in the case of local Roma communities. Instead of 'throwing out of the boat' all the non-traditional incidences of participation and activity, the extension of our analysis to the embedding of such occurrences into the local social structures and their reflective analysis against the locally given organisational frameworks promises to bring in new aspects of involvement and expression. As I will argue below, such an extension of the scope implies the recognition of the formal and informal aspects of Roma daily living whereby a largely unrecognised duality of formality/informality can be brought into the understanding of everyday Roma political participation.

The empirical foundation of the discussion that follows is provided by a recent cross-country comparative study on 'Faces and causes of Roma marginalization and

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the formal and informal forms of political participation considers the difference in the ways how participation is organised. Formal participation takes place either in registered organisations that follow legally defined rules of functioning and accountability, and/or it involves engagement in political activities that are organised according to set general regulations (e.g. elections). In addition to political organisations, participation in formal politics also embraces involvement in politically meaningful actions of non-political organisations (e.g. political demonstrations of trade unions). At the same time, the informal forms of political participation rely on spontaneously evolving loose associations of people and/or on one-time actions that do not claim lasting membership. Such loose associations and actions often emerge in response to certain non-political claims (e.g. educational needs, access to public work, etc.) and it is the public character of them that makes them 'political'. It is often the case that spontaneous informal collectives make steps towards formalisation through setting up a new registered entity (mainly a new NGO). However, such a development requires a modicum of human and material resources that are often not available to those involved in informal actions. It has to be noted that the border between the formal and the informal forms of politics is sometimes quite obscure: due to internal conflicts or the lack of resources, attempts at providing organisational framing to local politics might fail or the experiment might prove transient, while a group of the most dedicated members of the community go 'underground' and try to maintain the political content of their work and network in the form of initiated informal actions.

exclusion in local communities' that was run between 2012-14 in selected urban and rural communities in Hungary, Romania, and Serbia. This study looked at the structures and processes of marginalisation and exclusion in multi-ethnic communities with substantial Roma population and important groups of the non-Roma living in close proximity to the concentrated Roma communities. By combining quantitative data-collections and qualitative techniques of personal interviews and focus group discussions, the study looked in details at the locally existing provisions and developmental attempts in education, work and employment, and housing and infrastructure and contrasted these conditions with the daily experiences of their users, the young and adult generations of Roma and the poor. Experiences and opinions of the inhabitants of the marginalised Roma/poor segments were seen also in a relational way by facing them with the views of the representatives of the local non-Roma community whose explanations for the prevailing ethnic and ethnicised inequalities gave important points of reference in understanding the local power relations. This mirroring exercise helped us in detecting the major points of controversies and constraints between how Roma in dependency and non-Roma in power receive, explain and handle the same set of phenomena and the same set of relations in their background. Furthermore, the study put substantial weight on exploring the forms and the contents of participation in various domains of education, work and daily living in the broad sense of the term. It was our explicit aim to test how existing organisational settings are used and mobilised in meeting the needs of marginalised communities and how certain inadequacies of these settings are challenged by varied forms of informal participation. Given such extensions of the classical notion of engagement in politics, the collected material provides fertile soil for scrutinising the conditions and the logic of various forms of political participation ranging from informal involvement to the take-up of roles of representation and leadership. The discussion that follows builds on the extensive analyses of these conditions and manifestations as presented by the three in-depth country-studies of the research (Váradi and Virág, 2014a; Vincze, E. et al., 2014a; Cevjić, 2014a).

### *The institutional frameworks*

The claim for creating appropriate frameworks for minority representation as parts of the legal, regulatory and administrative structures was one of the fundamental requirements that the three countries faced in joining the European Union. The case of Roma enjoyed particular importance in these preparatory negotiations. The responses to the claims of the EU required a thorough exploration of what 'minority status' and 'minority rights' mean in their respective social contexts. For sure, the concept of minority rights was new in their socio-political contexts. Given the 'one nation – one state' approach of the ruling Communist ideology and politics during the decades of state-socialism, even sizeable national minorities were denied special rights and institutions. With the profound turn now towards a liberal understanding of nationhood and towards the celebration of multinational/multicultural social relations, the concepts of nationhood and minority status gained new interpretations and these became the cornerstones of conceptualising identities and membership in the polity.

At the same time, these new interpretations had to be positioned against the prevailing traditions of representation and administration. The former problem meant to interpret the minority status of an ethnic group and meaningfully relate it to those of national minorities. The latter task bore on the institutional design: the frameworks of representation and rights protection had to be adjusted into the existing structures of national, regional and local governance. The three countries responded in three different ways to these challenges. However, their responses had an important common element: the case of Roma was kept apart from that of the traditional national minorities, and frameworks were created to guarantee the long-term maintenance of structural separation.

Hungary<sup>2</sup> experimented with the inauguration of a brand-new institution: in 1993 it established the system of local minority self-governments that were perceived as elected representative bodies to safeguard the cultural rights of the country's 13 national and ethnic minorities. This decentralised system of minority representation fits well into the highly decentralised structures of public administration. However, the restriction of representation to culture and the cultural contents (but not the framings) of education has implied that, from their inception, the local Roma self-governments were emptied of providing true representation.<sup>3</sup> After all, the preservation and revitalisation of Roma culture meant that the most pressing issues of discrimination, poverty and exclusion remained outside of the assigned competence of the new bodies. What is more, expectations in this regard implied the outright maintenance of those structures of deprivation that largely conditioned Roma culture in the past. Despite all these controversies and despite also the often constrained functioning of the new institutions due to tense local majority-minority relations, the system of minority self-governments provided for the first time electoral opportunities. Mainly this is the qualifying aspect of the new system that made it rather popular in Roma communities which is tellingly shown by the steadily growing number of local Roma self-governments by each election. Such a growing popularity reflects strong expectations of the Roma communities. Given the only available framework of representation and interest protection, they hope for some effective mediation and 'lobbying', although they are aware that such functions are not formally assigned to the institution. The discrepancy between the formal entitlements and the informal expectations surrounds the local Roma self-governments with a good deal of informality: the local leaders of the institution are faced with a permanent duality and use their formal power to strengthen their informal position in the community while they simultaneously maintain similarly informal relations with the municipalities and the non-Roma leaders of the community-at-large.

Romania<sup>4</sup> gave a different response to the EU requirements concerning Roma minority rights. On the one hand, a set of new legal regulations on anti-discrimination, acknowledged minority status as part of citizenship, the banning of segregation and the

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<sup>2</sup> The presentation of the Hungarian case of local Roma representation relies on Váradi and Virág (2014b).

<sup>3</sup> Due to the relatively high educational level and above-average material conditions, further, due also to their small size and the support arriving from their mother-countries, the new system with new entitlements offers appropriate institutional framing for the other 12 minorities.

<sup>4</sup> The presentation of the Romanian case of minority representation relies on Vincze (2014b).

extension of multicultural education were seen to circumscribe minority rights. On the other hand, due representation of Roma was understood as a matter of communication between the majority and the minority. Such an approach implied the administration of the Roma cause without changes in the prevailing administrative structure. Institutional innovations were driven by this latter consideration: within a short while the system of educational and health mediators was set up with the clear goal of providing better bridging. However, the new mediators were not armed with proper power. Their positioning between the Roma communities and the authorities in charge of public administration introduced a good deal of insecurity in their status and left them without clear means as much for proper minority representation as for enacting regulations and municipal interventions. Such a floating position gave birth to all-round suspicions. Roma saw the extended arm of authoritarian control in the work of the mediators, while the authorities found disturbing their 'inappropriate' claims and interventions as hindering their functioning instead of helping it. This way the system of mediators quickly became de-legitimised from both ends and it suffered personal losses by the mass-scale departure of the personnel. However, the dramatic weakening of a system that was weak from its inception left the Roma communities without channels for formal representation. Apart from the handful of Roma participating in national politics, Roma remained enclosed in the informality of their communities where interest representation and protection remained the direct derivatives of personal relations – on rare occasions for the fortune, but mainly for the misfortune of the affected communities.

The Serbian case<sup>5</sup> is different yet again. It is important to note that Serbia is still not a member state of the European Union. Although the ongoing negotiations accompanying the preparation of accession put important weight on the acknowledgement of Roma minority rights, a fully-fledged functioning of the respective institutional arrangements has not been expected yet. In this sense, the current administration of the Roma cause can be seen as transient and incomplete. Nevertheless, the outlines seem to be clear and nothing points towards any intentions for their alteration. As it appears, Serbia does not conceive of the 'Roma issue' in the framework of minority rights. Instead, the case is conceptualised in the refinement and better targeting of administrative arrangements. This is reflected in the fact that the EU challenges were responded to by creating a wide range of administrative positions: 'Roma referees' and 'Roma departments' with clearly defined tasks and responsibilities have been inserted into the ministerial hierarchies and also into the functioning of the regional offices of public administration. This rigidly top-down construction does not reach the municipalities and the local offices which suggests that it is mainly coordination and control that they are assumed to provide. More to the point of rights and representation are the recent legislative acts that, in concordance with the EU requirements, tackle discrimination in the first place but that do not entrust any Roma minority bodies or institutions with representation and political negotiations. The latter are left to the rather weak structures of Roma parties and a rather immature build-up of a system of Roma health and educational mediators. However, neither the competing Roma parties, nor the loose network of mediators

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<sup>5</sup> The presentation of the Serbian case of minority representation relies on Cvejić (2014b).

have been strong enough so far to provide needs articulation and interest protection for Roma on the field. Given the overweight of administrative arrangements and regulations, the traditional relationships between Roma and the majority in local communities have remained unaffected. The frames and contents of the prevailing patron/client relations largely continue to rule the scene with their ingrained informality. Any challenging of these relations falls outside of the competences of the Roma-specific administration. It is perhaps better and more accurate to say that a new administrative professionalism is actually built on the unchanged functioning of majority-minority relations that set the boundaries of rights and representation according to the well-established patterns of domination and subordination. New initiatives founded by a new understanding of the Roma cause find themselves outside of the political arena and the civil organisations called into being are confined to act on the margins of society.

The above brief overview of the responses that the three countries gave to the challenges of the 'Roma issue' as an important constituent of their EU accession carries a few lessons. First, it shows that despite the remarkable differences in conceptualisation and practice, none of the applied solutions provides proper framing for Roma representation and none of them can be considered satisfactory in expressing and exercising minority rights. Instead, secondly, a common line can be identified in tackling the issue as a matter of expertise in administration and management. Given the common pursuit of administrative responses that maintain the prevailing power of the majority in governing the relationships with the Roma minority, it is not surprising that the new arrangements quickly lost the interest and support of the Roma community. In a way we can say that, by driving Roma interests away from the institutions and stages of meaningful politics, these attempts and arrangements help to reinforce the distancing of Roma from the scenes of true politicisation while they extend the control of the majority above all needs, issues and claims with potential implications for distinguished Roma articulation.

The third implication follows from these trends. Since the new arrangements either never aspired to providing representation to the Roma minority or quickly lost any such potential, they actually contribute to new waves of informalisation. As we saw, the deliberate reduction of competencies in the case of the Roma minority self-governments in Hungary, the discrediting of representation through mediation in the case of Romania and the drawing of the Roma cause under administrative settings in Serbia all failed to create the scope for articulating and protecting Roma interests in changing or at least improving the structural conditions of daily living. However, the squeezing of issues of segregation, poverty, discrimination and exclusion into the sideline does not erase the needs of and the claims for betterment. Instead, these needs and claims find new ways to informality where the lack of proper institutions and organisations has induced permanent insecurity, instability and an unceasing working of the haphazard patterns of personification. Amid these conditions, all what appears to the outsider as 'indifference in politics' is part of a fundamental feature: the all-round ruling of informality in driving the lives of the Roma community.

The causes of such a state of affairs are manifold. Beside the above discussed discrepancies between the official framing and the everyday realities of Roma political representation and participation, a closer look at the conditions in a broader scope of

participation may help us to see how informality in articulating needs and claims fits into the experiences of living up to the ruling of informal relations in the various domains of everyday life. An overview of the conditions and prevailing relations in education and work in marginalised Roma communities will serve to demonstrate the congruence of informalisation between the daily realities and their political representation.

The selection of these two domains is reasoned by a number of specificities. First, both provide experience concluding in common concerns and claims of the majority of the Roma communities. Second, both areas have been affected by important formal changes as parts of the broad reforms of post-socialist transformation and thus clearly show how marginalisation is reproduced in profoundly changed conditions. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Roma gave clear responses to the experienced institutional changes, still these responses and the claims that followed did not cross the boundaries of informality: the prevailing majority-minority relations and the implied inequalities of power have kept them caught in the established patron/client contacts of personal dependency.

### *Informalities in education*

When considering recent trends in Roma education, two contrasting developments deserve particular attention. The first is an important change in the parental attitudes towards education. By experiencing the strengthened association between educational attainment and one's employment opportunities, Roma parents have started to emphatically pay attention to their children's schooling. Throughout the fieldwork – much in accordance with earlier findings<sup>6</sup> – parents gave voice to their conviction that the completion of schooling was the most important guarantee of employability, hence they are ready to make all efforts for extending schooling to a level affordable by the resources and conditions of the family. This way accomplishment of the primary school became a norm and most parents make serious efforts to facilitate their children's continuation also at the secondary level.

At the same time, the ongoing reforms in education have deepened the segmentation of the school systems in all our three countries by tightening the association of the various school-types with the expectable labour market and social positions. The adaptation of the designated social groups has been assisted by the various new forms of private education (including the extended interest of the churches in schooling) and the concurrent enactment of new rules of admission in public institutions. While these new trends affect mainly the schools and training forms at the secondary level, primary schools adapt to the new challenges by intensified streaming according to different clusters of knowledge and skills.

These manifold changes importantly affect Roma children's opportunities. As a rule they find themselves in the least valued streams in primary schools and face

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<sup>6</sup> See the results of the qualitative inquiries with parents of school-age children in the four post-socialist countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia) that participated in the cross-country comparative study on 'Ethnic Differences in Education and Diverging Prospects for Urban Youth in an Enlarged Europe' (EDUMIGROM) (Szalai, 2011).

severe segregation into the units of poor vocational training at the secondary level (Messing, 2014). All these processes have been accompanied by pronounced informality that drew the claims of Roma parents and children under the uncontrollable and uncontrolled relationships between the schools and educational authorities on one side and Roma families on the other. A few examples may highlight the point.

The first is the case of the one-time special schools that used to host substantial proportions of Roma children away from the 'ordinary' arrangements of schooling. At the strong claims of human rights groups and the pressure of the European Union that considered such schools the embodiment of unlawful harsh segregation, the number of special schools has been significantly reduced in Romania and Serbia, and enrolment to these institutions was banned in Hungary. The new 'invention' in substitution was the introduction of a new educational category of students with 'special educational needs' whose education is expected to be organised in integrated arrangements in ordinary primary schools. However, being classified as a 'SEN child' carries a strong stigma resembling the old institutional labelling. As a rule, these children are considered inapt by intellectual and behavioural qualities to progress according to the ordinary pace and structuring of schooling. Hence, they usually find themselves at the bottom of the educational segments of the primary schools that usually implies outright deprivation of certain forms and contents of instruction.

Parents do not fail to see this form of segregation and try to give voice to claims for putting up their children into the 'normal' conditions. However, they are without means for making their claims complied with. These claims are seen by the school as 'unauthorised' intervention: after all, the new system of identifying who is and who is not a SEN student is built on the exclusive competence of the teachers and it implies their expertise in finding out 'the best' way for the child. Parents' claims are thus seen as unjustified and as inducing a disturbing 'noise' into the regular functioning of the system. And the schools' liberty to deny them is further underscored by the vastly shared views about the low competence of Roma parents in child-rearing and their unreliability relating to the requirements of education. It follows that Roma parents are left to acknowledge their multi-sided 'incompetence' and they remain without even the loose control that the old system provided by binding special school enrolment to parental consent. In brief, the acceptance of the low positioning of their children with gloomy prospects on continuation remains a rule that is seldom challenged by the rare occasions of fortunate personal relationships with one or another member of the school staff who acts on behalf of the child and the family by strongly emphasising the special favour implied in the exceptional case. Exceptionalness of such interventions underscores two important aspects at once: it demonstrates the significance of informality in transgressing the prevailing limitations while it also points to the severe restrictions on any such attempts.

The second powerful example of informality in education comes from vocational training.

Vocational training has been the target of important reforms in all the three countries. These reforms served two, partially conflicting, goals. On the one hand, vocational training schools as parts of the system of secondary education gained increased power in shaping their admittance policies by founding those on the

acknowledgement of students' earlier performance and by launching streams with clear hierarchical arrangements according to the measured indices of knowledge and skills. On the other hand, vocational schools have been considered in their relation to local labour market needs. More than before, these schools exercise a good deal of freedom in tightening their relationships with selected entrepreneurs and firms while declining interest in other fields and actors. The dual bondage of the reformed system is reflected in its administration: while the educational authorities maintain control over the educational tasks of the schools, their actual management and financing is bound to the local industrial boards having direct influence on their professional shaping.

The needs of Roma youth have to be seen against these frameworks. Given the state of sharp selection among the various forms of secondary education, apart from the tiny minority of some 15 per cent of the Roma students attending one or another form of secondary schools providing graduation in all the three countries, it is the vocational domain that has to accommodate the majority. However, the dominant part of the schools seems reluctant to open its doors to Roma. Their elevated prestige as educational units inspires them instead to apply the methods of 'good old' streaming. By building on their new freedoms of defining the profiles and the rules of admittance, the vocational schools devote themselves to the principles of competition and declare unbiased justice by applying these principles in admittance.

Roma students populate with very high over-representation the lowest-ranking streams and classes. They and their parents see the risks of how such separation implies segregation that does not lead anywhere on the formal labour market. However, there are only limited means at their disposal to respond, and all the available means fall outside of the frames of any formal protection. The first response – seemingly the one applied with the highest frequency – is to leave behind the school as soon as the age of compulsory education (16 years) is reached. Although this way the fleeing students risk later employment, and they also create hardship for the school in maintaining the 'emptied' tracks, the ceasing of outright humiliation together with the work on offer in the informal economy provide strong enough pulling factors. The second response also leads to informality: in cases when the parents succeed in keeping alive the old working contacts with their one-time non-Roma colleagues, these old friends are asked for mediation in order to attain a better and more meaningful placement for the child.

However, admittance is not the only point under informal rule in the system. Obscurity is perhaps even greater concerning the heart of acquiring a vocation: apprenticeship. The reforms in secondary education introduced decentralisation in this regard by shifting the responsibility for practical training from the regional or municipal educational boards to the schools. In the new arrangement, vocational schools are compelled to find placements for their students, and this implies tightening their relations with the local economic actors. However, this way the quality and later usability of the training has become directly dependent on the interests and willingness of these actors who, in turn, consider apprenticeship solely in terms of their recruitment policy. This way openness or refusal of their role in providing apprenticeship is conditioned by their position and success in the local competition. It is no surprise that such a direct competition creates its own hierarchy by offering

differentially attractive placements with highly differing contents and prospects for later employability. As a rule, Roma students are at the bottom of this hierarchy. Given their attendance in classes and streams with highly restricted opportunities for later employment, they are either refused any placement or are accepted by firms which themselves struggle for survival and which thus prove unable to offer usable practical training.

In addition, the family interviews revealed a great number of cases of harsh stigmatisation and direct discrimination. As parents disclosed their frustrating and annoying experiences, it turned out that, by referring to the prevailing prejudices of the non-Roma majority as a 'given' to set the stage, local entrepreneurs tend to refuse acceptance of Roma as a potential risk for the success of their business. Due to such refusals, Roma find themselves excluded from working in a non-Roma dominated shop floor or they are denied training in vocations that involve bodily contacts like butchers, waiters, hairdressers, etc. This way exclusion and sharp humiliation become parts of the experience of Roma in vocational training, and thus escaping this arena of education seems the only rational response.

Again, students and parents at best have informal ways of seeking personal favours and support. The availability of such contacts is conditioned by the old socialist acquaintances and/or by the offering of extra services within the prevailing system of patronage. It is easy to see that the younger generations of families can hardly mobilise such contacts and favours and this way remain without help and protection. The outcome is clear. Despite strong efforts for modernising the system, vocational training is still a domain of traditional relations of pre-modern patriarchy and it 'uses' its Roma clients to assure the unbroken maintenance of such relations. Part of the characteristic features of the domain is the low level of institutionalisation that provides a free flow to the ruling of informality. Given the weak positions of Roma in the system, informality implies deepened dependency that, in turn, concludes in segregation and ultimate exclusion.

The case of vocational training demonstrates perhaps even better than the segregating trends in primary education that these disturbing outcomes do not follow from the alleged 'indifference' of Roma in education but reflect the strength of the prevailing structures and the weaknesses of informal intervention for attaining any change of them.

However, informality hides the political momentum. Given the lack of collective political representation of needs and claims and the consequent lack of organisational frames, the actions and steps of Roma parents and students appear as purely personal intentions that do not add up to any collective claims. Their personified perception allows for reducing their handling to matters of individual behaviour that justifies the lack of any systematic responses and that also allows for maintaining personified patron/client relations as their base. At the same time, personification and a case-by-case management of the claims help to preserve the structurally conditioned distance between the individual attempts and the existing organisational settings. The differential conceptualisation in itself safeguards the departing workings by emphasising personal 'deservingness' on the one hand and the fulfilment of macro-level political and policy aims on the other. Given their departing conceptualisations and the implied divergences in daily working, the two levels do not

get into interaction and this fact alone helps in maintaining the unchanged relations of the prevailing structures.

Informality helps this process in additional ways. The personified perception of Roma claims for reducing discrimination and segregation reinforces the personified views of the majority on the entirety of the Roma community. The widespread views about Roma parents' 'indifference in education' and their inaptness in nurturing child development remain in place in justifying 'white flight' as a proper response of non-Roma parents for protecting their children's undisturbed progressing in education. By elevating personification and the implied behavioural characterisation at the level of the community, Roma families' actions and claims for change are not simply denied but become declared as unjustified attempts. Furthermore, personification at the level of the community pulls out discrimination and segregation from their institutional framing whereby it helps to hide the structural features of these processes and renders ill-placed (if not illegitimate) any claims for change. In brief, informality and the involved currents of personification are important constituents of preserving the prevailing relations of dominance and power by serving the needs of the non-Roma majority. At the same time, these processes keep breaking down Roma attempts at politicisation and suggest that any such strivings are in vain.

### *The ruling of informality in work*

As the above examples suggest, despite the growing importance and depoliticising impact of informality in education, a modicum of public visibility and responses is maintained by the sheer fact that certain formal ties and involvements in the educational and training institutions have been maintained in the meantime. Even if deprived of providing proper representation and protection, these ties and engagements preserve some potential for the success of efforts of the Roma families and communities to remain involved in the mainstream relations and thus frame their claims in ways that allow for publicly controllable negotiations and actions for changing the structures and contents of schooling. This is an important difference when comparing the potentials of Roma representation to the currents of the past twenty years in employment and work. For given the processes of vast privatisation and marketisation, employment has been driven out of public control and it has become a private matter framed by the exclusive relationship of the employer and the employee. It follows that the recent developments have led to a severe weakening (sometimes utter disappearance) of all formal ties and involvements and have produced a concurrent overall ruling of informality in regulating access and omission.

As I will attempt to show below, such a development has devastating consequences on Roma employment and work. For informality helps to purposefully frame an important segment of competition in marketisation: the race for employment in the least qualified segments of work where informal re-framing of the relationships by ethnicity serves for maintaining non-Roma primacy while keeping it under hierarchical control. At the same time, all-round informality assists in drawing Roma attempts at employment under the personified relations of behavioural adaptation and acceptance whereby – similarly to what we have seen in education –

employability becomes a matter of individualised arrangements and it remains confined in the traditional patron-client relations of the prevailing local social structures.

As I will show in details, the drawing of Roma work under informality directly follows from the single most important development in their socio-economic position: the massive erasing of their ties to formal employment and the enforced accommodation of the community to permanent unemployment and inactivity. The high prevalence of unemployment is not simply a matter of economic change. Despite marked differences in the economic development of our three countries and also despite the variations in their economic structures, the high rates of Roma unemployment show little variation. A high degree of invariability also is reproduced at the level of settlements: whether in industrial or agrarian settings, whether in urban or rural areas, Roma face unemployment as their typical state, and their lead remains in place also in comparison to similarly educated and qualified non-Roma groups (Hyde, 2006; O'Higgins, 2012). All these indicate that deep ethnicisation of access to work is an outstanding feature of post-socialist employment, and as we will see below, it proves an important constituent of the informalisation of the involved economic and social relations.

It is easy to see that in the conditions of massive economic exclusion Roma would be highly interested in forms and ways of collective interest representation for claiming the extension of employment and for providing meaningful training that renders access to new opportunities. However, such bodies of attaining collective political goals have not come into being in the course of post-socialist transformation. Out of the complexity of the causes in the background, let me point here to the falling apart of the old trade unions and the limited strength and outreach of the new ones that have proven ineffective to represent labour interests and to inform the prevailing neo-liberal economic policies by elevating these interests to partnership in privatisation and marketisation (Dimitrova and Vilroks, 2005). Further, the evolving tripartite bodies of macro-level negotiations do not even strive for universal representation and steadily remain under the pressures of the best organised parts of the labour force. Moreover, the development of the collective forms of representation has been severely hindered by the sharpening competition among the different groups of employees and by their often contrasting claims considering training and the rules of admission (Kubicek, 2004). At the same time, the emerging few civil initiatives dedicate their activity to developing new forms of employment for their membership which is enough to show alternatives but which is inadequate in attaining deeper-going structural change.

Given this landscape, it follows nearly by definition that, for the most part, employment remains a highly individualised domain in the post-socialist economies that is put under the ruling of informality. It is this broader context that frames Roma attempts at employment. However, while informality remains a rather subordinated aspect of the employment of the well-established groups of society, it gains exclusivity in the case of Roma. Due to its domination, it is worth seeing its varied functioning in the everyday ways and techniques of seeking jobs in Roma communities.

As our research has brought it up, three major facets of informality could be recorded behind such variations in mobilising the available resources outside of the

framework of formal institutions: adaptation of earlier occupational experiences and the traditional trades of the different Roma communities; reinvented application of the patterns of cooperation between Roma and non-Roma in former employment under state-socialism; and exploitation of the potentials provided by the division of roles and tasks within the Roma community.

The collection of interviews focusing on the history of work and employment of younger and older male and female members of the investigated communities revealed important differences. It turned out that the chances for re-entering the labour market or for preserving one's relatively stable positioning were deeply affected by the former work experiences as embodied in different occupations and different routines of exchange during socialist times. Some occupations and types of work practically disappeared from the scene, while others could be fruitfully converted to new forms of engagement. Mining and the involved auxiliary activities are a good example of the first, while the adaptation of jobs in the food processing industry makes the case for the second outcome. By considering such differences, the potentials for reconstructing ties with organised labour greatly varied across our investigated communities. Of course, it was not the occupation per se but the involved skills, practical knowledge and the inventive adaptation of the earlier routines that mattered.

Earlier participation in the informal economy added to these differences. In this regard, traditional occupations of the different Roma groups entail diverging paths. While experience with trading renders knowledge about the play of the market and good skills in contracting and accounting that can be profitably preserved and adapted to the new conditions, the old trades of wood-carving or metallurgical processing have been swept away by the respective modern forms of mass-production. As the interviews revealed, it is not only the content of the previous occupation that matters, but being engaged in a multi-pillar arrangement in different jobs also deeply influences participation in the informal economy: the different degrees of involvement opened up opportunities or set limits for changing the prevailing constellations also after the regime change. In this sense we could observe that certain Roma groups stood firmly in socialist production without attempts to gain completion and/or compensation in the informal economy, while others established a living based on simultaneous involvement and a purposeful constant moving between the two domains. The former groups faced high risks with marketisation and privatisation, while the latter usually reserve some scope of manoeuvring.

The picture is even more colourful when the gendered differences are considered. As the interviews demonstrated, the familial strategies of involvement take into account what the formal labour market offers for men and women. As a rule, while the opportunities to stay in employment or to become re-employed are markedly less for women than for men, their 'profiles' relate to each other. Hence, in communities deeply ingrained into the functioning of the socialist firms with relatively well-paid jobs for men, rigidly shaped constellations driven by the rules and routines of the planned economy were on offer also for women, though usually in different fields and with less favourable material conditions. As a rule, if there were some opportunities for re-employment for men in the course of marketisation and economic modernisation, similar opportunities hardly ever came up for women.

Therefore, women have been forced by the conditions to turn to the informal economy. However, they experience significantly lower chances and high instability in this domain where they face a lack of skills for proper adaptivity and a range of disadvantages in comparison to those for whom working and trading in the informal domain was conditioned by decade-long experience.

While the interviews demonstrated the importance of knowledge and skills and the capacities for adaptation, it turned out that what primarily mattered was their embedding into the inter-ethnic relations of work. In other words, good vocational knowledge and a long history of experience remain 'dead material' unless these are ingrained into meaningful cooperation and divisions of roles in cross-ethnic relations that deprive them of their ethnic content. As it turns out, the frequency and the content of inter-ethnic encounters greatly differ according to the branch of production and the requirements of the specific occupations. In certain terrains, the physical conditions of the work and a high degree of mutuality and cooperation follow from either the risk or the complexity of the tasks that should be performed – a typical case is provided by mining. In other terrains the work requires individualised routines and those performing the given tasks simply work side by side but without cooperation – most activities of animal husbandry or land cultivation provide cases in point. In a third type, although cooperation is needed but takes place among purposefully set groups of people who, while they rely on each other's work, might not even see each other – this is the case in all those types of factory work where the employees are organised into distinct shifts and their work and the division of tasks among them are framed exclusively by these units.

While these differences in cooperation seem to be merely technical, it turns out that involvement in one or another form has significant implications amid the post-socialist conditions. The accounts of the occupational histories testify that personal qualities, earlier experience and knowledge of the vocation did not carry enough weight in attempts for re-employment: without having somebody among the established workers who offers some personal guarantee, Roma have practically no chance. In other words, the mediation of a non-Roma actor proved essential. At the same time, such contacts are rare assets that, by their nature, require a long history of acquaintance and unconditional trust. It follows that it is at best the first type of close cooperation that nurtures assistance on the part of the non-Roma workmates; experience in earlier work based on loose togetherness or, even more, on the hierarchical order of often ethnically composed shifts is simply not enough for mediation. It is worth adding that earlier experiences originating from the informal economy also matter. By framing them in neighbourhood relations, memories of cooperation in the informal domain also colour non-Roma willingness in providing testimonies in favour of the Roma applicant for employment.

At the same time, the official institutions for the purpose of providing placement do not work. It turned out in all our countries that the work exchange offices or centres provide at best bureaucratic justifications but we did not come across a single case in which such institutions would have succeeded in bridging the Roma applicants and their future firms.

Altogether, these experiences show that Roma employment takes place under the rule of private relationships and hence, it is governed by the patriarchal contents of

such relations. One has to note in addition that such an embeddedness of the work and employment opportunities into the private relations deprives Roma of organised protection while it hides their efforts from the public eyes and this way contributes to maintaining the general views and convictions about their 'idleness'.

The third important factor with immediate impact on the chances for Roma re-employment is the state of cooperative relations within the community. Of course, the foundation of such cooperation lays in the families and relates to the division of roles in them. The roots of these divisions are usually in experiences of participation in the informal economy. Decades have shaped these practices: as we saw above, intensification of work in the informal economy has been a widespread response to the fading away of employment in the formal economy. At the same time, the content of work greatly determines the extent and the form of dividing the roles within the family and, on familial bases, within the community. The most important dividing line is formed by gender. As a rule, the young and middle-aged male members make efforts for gaining employment at any distance on an individual basis, while the female members and often the older children set up a chain of mutual help to compensate for the losses. In other cases, women offer auxiliary help to men: this is the frequent case with traders in informal exchanges for whom women usually render storage, packing and often even driving. Yet in other cases, the contemporary practices mean a continuation of earlier patterns: whole 'shifts' of men and women are formed to accomplish different tasks in agriculture.

These diverse forms of engagement in the informal economy matter in two aspects with regard to re-employment. First, well-organised communities can accumulate quite important resources to finance the employment search of their male members while providing compensation for their absence through supporting their families. Second, the practised divisions of roles in the informal domain provide an important relational backing: as we saw above, the inter-ethnic encounters in the informal economy fill with impressions and meanings the patronage that non-Roma offer to their Roma acquaintances. This secondary source of working relations proves exceptionally important when remembrance of cooperation in the first economy cannot be relied on any more with the passing of time.

It is worth noting that the informal relations of intra-community work and support have the greatest importance for migrants. For the most part, migration is a personal path forced by necessity. It is again men who leave first and they do so full of uncertainties regarding the possibilities of being followed by their family (Cahn and Guild, 2010). In addition to the support that these families need for sustenance, usually it is a must for them to find female employment or at least work in the informal economy. However, such work does not grow out of the blue: it is the working relations and practices within the community that condition it. The deeper distinct female roles ingrained in the division of tasks within the community are, the better are the chances of migrant families for coping with the hardships of the transient phase and also for joining the male members in migration.

All put together, it seems that there are important variations in the state and level of deprivations that Roma suffer due to being cut off from the regular, safe and well-paying segments of the economy. At the same time, these variations are not strong enough to induce different patterns and paths of work formation: the general

trend remains that of deprivation and exclusion and in an ultimate reading, the trends are uniform by genre. The differentiating factors and processes have an important feature in common: these impact Roma unemployment, re-employment and participation in the informal economy in very small circles, at best within the local communities that Roma are part of. The impacts always remain individual and they never reach whole collectives. Beyond the favourable consequences manifesting in better earnings and improved safety of the sources of living and some assistance for maintaining the ties to the mainstream, the success always appears rewarding individual qualities and efforts, and the sporadic occurrences even underscore such impressions. In brief, the positive exceptions are too weak to change the general trend.

On top of all this, the rare instances of re-entrance into the world of formal labour are not potent enough to change the public view that considers Roma in work as exceptions to the rule of inactivity, which is understood, in turn, as the own fault of the ethnic minority. According to the customary reasoning, idleness and reluctance in accepting the rules and the rigour of formal employment are parts of the Roma worldview, and the high rates of unemployment accompanied by reduced re-employability are rooted primarily in the bad habits and damaging routines of Roma living. It follows that the efficiency of efforts to lead Roma out of this situation depends on attaining profound changes in Roma lifestyle, in other words, the key to significant modifications lays in the success of *educating programmes towards behavioural change* that take the notion in its broadest sense. This reasoning does not observe borders: it follows the same structure and the same arguments in our three countries and does not demonstrate differences according to the positioning of the communities on the exclusionary/inclusionary scale. The widespread prevalence of the involved notions inspires us to call this mainstream argumentation the iron rule of majority approaches to Roma that finds access to work and employment a 'civilisational' issue with sole responsibility of the minority.

The introduced differences imply the breaking up of common interests: the more potent and better negotiating groups are interested in the maintenance of the attained informality that favours their attempts and aspirations. Given that usually these are the best qualified groups with the best chances for re-employment, the Roma majority loses its potential leadership and it remains left to the risky experimentations in the informal economy.

This state of affairs is exploited by the recently 'invented' form of Roma employment in the framing of public work. Although public work schemes look from a distance as if offering collective solutions for the first time, a closer scrutiny reveals their deep embedding into informality and into the reproductive cycles of traditional patriarchy. First, the schemes are run and controlled by the local majority (the municipalities in the first place), and admission amid the usual shortage of placement is regulated by the applicants' behavioural 'aptness'. Second, public work is not seen as a form of employment but more as a corrective measure: by re-establishing the link between inputs and rewards it is meant to suspend the ill-famed dependency of the poor (and Roma poor in the first place) on accessing welfare funds without returns to society. Although the strength of the association between participation in public work and entitlement for welfare assistance varies among our three countries (rendering the

strongest ties in Hungary where conditionality has been expanded to practically all types of public provisions), public work programmes rapidly gained a unifying profile: a new arena has emerged with deeply ethnicised contents to establish a separate segment of the labour market more or less exclusively for Roma and the 'Gypsy-ised' groups of the non-Roma poor. Under the ruling of these contents and the lack of generally controllable rules, it is a natural development that participation becomes a matter of personal services and favours on offer that is pulled out of any monitoring and public accountability.

While this way public work fulfils a number of 'useful' functions by meeting important majority interests, it has devastating implications for Roma. First, by understanding public work as a 'Roma segment' of the world of labour, it powerfully annihilates attempts of Roma to avoid the segregated and ethnicised paths and try accessing employment according to mainstream rules and steps. Second, the strong stigmatising contents of participation block seeking employment in more valued segments of the economy: Roma carry the stamp of 'worthlessness' as associated with public work far beyond the time of actual involvement and this sole factor limits their capacities in finding more rewarding alternatives. Third, recent expansion of public work towards the vocational schools by offering work to youth who start their career as being unemployed points towards tendencies of creating a larger arena of education, training and work that governs the working lives of Roma apart from the majority. It is clear: these spontaneous developments make segmentation and segregation the very foundations of deep ethnic divisions in the local society and this way overwrite (actually: debilitate) all attempts towards integration and inclusion. The ruling of informality serves the undisturbed reproduction of these relations and keeps away Roma needs and claims from proper representation and political articulation.

In sum, when looking at the different aspects and segments of the work and employment of Roma, one sees the unbroken ruling of informal relations. Such relations navigate entrance to the rarely accessible different forms of employment and also to the distribution of all kinds of work. Informality implies personification of the working relations that are set less by knowledge and skills but more by behavioural traits: the major expectation towards Roma work is to provide flexible reserves for meeting majority needs and to keep apart an important segment of the population from the constrained employment-opportunities that characterise the post-socialist transition. The non-Roma majority has important interests in maintaining the current state of affairs. Besides limiting and controlling competition on the labour market, informality helps to regulate the at-risk groups of the lower middle class and the working class, whereby disciplining is put under spontaneous forces and slips institutional control. Furthermore, informality creates an ample arena for personified selection whereby the potentials of mass organisation and the politicisation of the claims of non-employed Roma are efficiently reduced and kept under strict control of the non-Roma community. Finally, informality helps to maintain the personified ideology and the adjoining public discourse that visualises Roma non-employment in terms of 'idleness' and 'indifference'. This way all recognised employees gain: even if earnings are low and the working hours are long, they may see themselves as acknowledged and useful members of society whose positive qualities are perceived in opposition to the negative ones of Roma. Such an ideological contrasting carries the

additional advantage of creating insurmountable difficulties for associations and collective actions across social and ethnic boundaries and this way directly helps the smooth reproduction of the prevailing relations and structures of uncontrollable informality.

However, all these advantages come from the majority's perspective. Against this, informalisation largely deprives Roma of the potentials of articulating labour needs in collective forms. What is more, informality keeps in place their personal dependence and helps to frame it in behavioural relations and actions. The revival of the old patterns of patron/client relations deprives them of applying an alternative framework of processes and structures whereby they become deprived from the language of politicisation. By losing the language and the opportunities, Roma themselves become active players of the reproduction of the prevailing, highly unequal and highly humiliating, relations. Yet again, it is not their 'indifference' that hinders politicisation, but it is the pressure of the institutions and processes in place that turn even the slightest attempts at expressing claims with some political momentum into personified categories and behavioural failures.

### *Conclusions*

The above excursion to some important segments of education and work as experienced by Roma in their daily lives revealed the domination of informality in the ways of expressing and fulfilling needs and articulating claims for a change. Of course, education and work are not the only areas where Roma experience collective exclusion from the forms and scopes of functioning that are put into institutionalised frameworks in case of the majority and that are distinguished to a large extent by limiting access according to ethnicised principles of participation of the minority. For sure, one could find similar constellations if looking at the structuring of the housing conditions, access to healthcare or the organisation of fulfilling daily needs. Nevertheless, a single paper does not allow for extensive explorations all across these areas. At the same time, the lessons drawn from education and work seem powerful enough for providing a few generalisable conclusions.

The first among these relates to the sources of informality in representing Roma needs and claims. Here one meets a high degree of congruence: whether claiming desegregation, proper training or local job-creation, the hindrance or the outright breaking down of collective representation is conditioned by the in-built structures of informality. As we saw above, informality characterises the conditions of daily experience. Attempts at seeking proper education and training or finding gainful work take place to a large extent away from the ordinary institutional frameworks and channels and build mostly on invisible personified relations. As the examples repeatedly showed, these personified attempts are deeply embedded into the varying individual relationships of Roma with the non-Roma majority and convert the fulfilment of needs into the contents of the prevailing patriarchal patterns that these relations contain.

Reliance on such patterns has several further implications. Most importantly, these personified arrangements powerfully break up collectivity and allow for singular

histories with singular outcomes. This way the potential political claims are successfully converted into spontaneous and individualised attempts and rule out any collective interpretations and actions. As a consequence, informality with its implications of being deprived of institutionalisation and thus being freed from external control becomes a self-sustaining feature. Those profiting from it become interested in its maintenance, while those who are losing out face deprivation not only of similar opportunities but even of the concepts and the language of collective representation that others' success in private encounters makes obsolete and inappropriate. As a consequence, deep informalisation of the political potentials is fully congruent with the informal working of the system that maintains personification as a basic rule of functioning. It could not be otherwise. Amid the informal relations and patterns that keep away from the visible and controllable institutions of society it is structurally conditioned that needs and claims of the Roma community appear in the web of personal favours and services and remain enclosed into myriads of personified individual relations all with unique and ungenerisable characteristics and contents.

While the ruling of informality establishes congruence between the conditions and the attempts at changing them, it is not in the intentions of Roma to maintain it. Instead, such a state of affairs serves the interests of the non-Roma majority and does so by providing multiple advantages for its members. First, as already mentioned, informality means the squeezing out of Roma from the institutional domains and allows for the application of 'irregular' solutions for their case. Informalisation of access to certain streams in training or to the restricted opportunities of entering employment in certain occupations reduces competition and helps maintaining domination over those segments in education or work where external insecurities or the prevailing limitations or simply the shortage put at risk direct access even for the powerful groups. Second, informality allows for depriving the claims of Roma of their collective nature. By breaking up the always partial and haphazard fulfilment of these claims to personified relations and negotiations, these claims appear as if rooted in purely individual needs whereby the majority finds it justified to relegate them into the private domain and refrain from providing collective responses through collectivised institutions and services. Third, informality provides important advantages in politics as well. The experience of personification justifies personified argumentations that help to paint the Roma cause in a behavioural conceptualisation. Such an approach makes the fulfilment of Roma needs a matter of 'deservingness' and frames it in terms of loyalty and proper adaptation. This way Roma lose the language of politicisation before even attempting to translate their personal experiences of discrimination, segregation and injustice into criticism and claims of the collective. At the same time, the behavioural framing of the approach of the non-Roma majority calls for education in the broad sense of the term, whereby political issues and claims are pulled out of the play of power relations and are deposited into the professional settings of disciplining and 'educating'.

When looking at the ruling of informality from the angle of the internal relations of the Roma community, the disruptive implications of this state come to the fore. First, the breaking down of the claims and strivings of the community to more or less successful individual attempts undermines solidarity. This is an unavoidable

outcome of depriving the claims and actions of their collective nature. But this is not the sole consequence of the process. Since good personal relations with members of the majority depend on the richness of the content on offer, more qualified and well embedded members of the Roma community have better chances when opting for individual solutions. However, this way the more vulnerable parts of the community lose the protection that the better qualified and better-off groups could provide. Being left to their poor resources, these groups have no means to reduce dependency and this way their conditions and potentials remain at the mercy of the majority without any mediation. Second, the stratified nature of personification induces contrasting interests within the Roma community: those with good chances for gaining personal favours join the majority in their attempts at maintaining informality, while the more vulnerable parts of the collective increasingly experience the devastating aspects of their state. Third, through the lens of personal successes it seems that dependency can be reduced and the smartest members of the community gain some scope for manoeuvring. However, the always one-time character of the favours that they enjoy often fall back to the general conditions of dependency that hit the Roma community in its entirety. The frustrations over the betrayal of those following individualistic paths and the arising mutual blaming within the community hide the conditioned nature and deep structural embedding of the given state of affairs and thus importantly block the potentials for collective action through politicisation. This way the illusions of betterment through individual strivings and actions contribute to the unbroken maintenance of informality and assist the fulfilment of the interests of the majority in keeping its relations with the Roma minority outside of the formal domains of making politics.

Finally, informality helps to shift responsibility for the plight of Roma to the community itself: Roma appear as 'uninterested' in utilising the new institutional frameworks that have been created for advancing their rights as a minority whereby they miss the opportunity for enriching the contents also of their citizens' rights. To a large extent, such an argumentation gains its empirical evidence from observing the speedy emptying of the new legal frameworks, institutions and officially rendered services. As we saw above, despite their variability, the respective institutions were all called into being by providing administrative arrangements for managing the 'Roma issue' largely without Roma participation, while no fora and mechanisms have been developed to provide institutional framing to the actual local Roma needs or at least to offer formal representation of Roma in policy-making. Due to these developments (that prove uniform across countries, regions and settlements), the formal arrangements themselves have contributed to the informalisation of the Roma cause. By forcing the genuine collective needs of Roma onto the sideline, they actively invigorate informality as a substitution. However, due to the prevalence of personified relations and the lack of collective articulations that are the very characteristics of informality, Roma pressures 'dissolve' in the arrangements and processes that deprive their claims of visibility. The issue of minority rights as a typical collective claim is pushed into the background as an 'empty notion' and it becomes invisible among the manifold needs and claims of immediate daily living. What is more, the emptying of the institutions from their respective contents appears as an unavoidable outcome - clearly at the responsibility of the minority.

In sum, our overview provides two main conclusions – both with far-reaching implications. First, the ruling of informality in Roma politics is not at will or at a choice by preference. Instead, it reflects the dominance of informality in the lives of Roma that does not allow for collective organising and that does not accommodate collective representation. Although collective representation and the institutional framing of Roma needs and claims would be the sole most important guarantee for elevating the Roma cause to societal level and for making it part of the political processes in society-at-large, such an advancement hardly can be hoped for amid the continual maintenance of large-scale poverty and exclusion. In this sense strengthened claims for efficient economic and welfare policies targeting poverty and exclusion across ethnic lines might be argued for as prerequisites for increased Roma political participation and a fair positioning of the Roma minority in the socio-political structures of representation.

The second important lesson of our overview regards the structure of interests. As we saw, the maintenance and unbroken reproduction of informality serves primarily the interests of the non-Roma majority. It helps limiting competition for the scarce material resources and labour; it helps to break up unities and collective solidarities as potent resources of representation; it helps maintaining informalised and personified structures of rewards and sanctions with all their disciplining implications; and it helps to deprive the Roma minority of entering into associations behind scattered and ill-balanced private formations. In the light of such multi-sided advantages, it seems difficult to claim more self-reflection, clearer identification and better organisation in Roma politics with extended Roma participation as their backing. Nevertheless, the still existing initiatives and the attempts all across the region for developing Roma political parties as recognisable institutions in political partnership are promising seeds of a gradual change. While such parties and the emerging civil organisations with similar aims often face insurmountable difficulties, one has to welcome them as the potential actors to turn the wheel around. Their future success is not guaranteed. However, their potential in challenging the fate of informality and their attempts at developing representation along the claims and aims that are articulated by the Roma communities promise to break down the web of personal dependencies and help Roma towards elevating their lot out of the rule of informality by making visible the vested interest of the non-Roma majority in it.

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