Political Participation and Legitimization of Power.
The State and the Family: A Romani Case

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Modern democracies include a number of political systems that intertwine with each other. State policies encapsulate the local and regional ones, employers' policies towards employees and vice versa, policies of particular minorities, age groups, genders, and diaspora policies. The political cultures of individual political systems interact with each other but adopt specific ethics, values and norms that, in turn, influence views of legitimacy and processes of legitimation (Pardo and Prato 2010). Family policies always have a significant influence on the state, parliamentary policies, because family policies are as universal in state systems as state policies since almost all state citizens are at the same time family members. In Western democracies, as in other forms of state, politicians must legitimise the right to state power by the quality of family, and the responsibility towards their family is understood as political capital. The dynasties of the state officials, politicians and diplomats are well-known from the present-day United States, India, China and North Korea; family partners accompany politicians on state visits and participate in important decision-making processes. However, the intermingling of the state and family policies is limited, and both systems significantly differ, interalia by the setting of power relations and legitimizing of power. States firmly set boundaries between family and public interests.

Interrelations between the state and family political systems are crucial, but scholars do not study them in the contemporary world systematically. However, anthropological knowledge provides a basis to grasp these processes. Different policy strategies and practices applied to lineage systems and state systems were described on African cases in the first half of 20th century by Meyer Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). Later, Edmund Leach showed that both approaches to politics can exist simultaneously in one society and that one can transmute into the other and vice versa (Leach 1954). Edmund Leach's and Van Velsen's concepts (Van Velsen 1964), that of Fredrik Barth on flexible boundaries between societies based on the lineage system and that of centralised authority, administrative machinery and judicial institutions (Barth 1969, Verdery 1994) can help to explain the situational metamorphosis of both.

The conceptualisation of the metamorphoses of both systems and their intermingling is well visible in cases where people are not well skilled in shifting from one system to another, where the state political system is weak or underdeveloped, or the two systems are significantly different and hardly compatible. This was frequently the case of the Romani politicians in the 1990s in the then Czechoslovakia and now in the contemporary Czech Republic.

The Roma are a large minority in the Czech Republic predominantly made up of the mass of unskilled and poor people living on the margins of society (Uherek 2007, Bodewik

2008, Davidová and Uherek 2014). After 1989, with the onset of democratic changes, it seemed that the Roma would improve their social status. They were officially recognized by the government as a national minority and were allowed to report their nationality in the census, and the state authorities ceased to exert pressure on them to assimilate. After the turnover in 1989, the Roma successfully entered political life and were often smoothly engaged in the new political structures (Pečínka 2009). In November 1989, a preparatory committee for the creation of a Roma political party was established, and in 1990 the party was registered under the name Roma Civic Initiative (ROI). The newly born political party immediately created a coalition with Václav Havel's Civic Forum and became popular also among the non-Roma population. In the early 1990s, this party received mass support from the voters. It was successful in elections and became represented in all three then Czechoslovak Parliamentary Chambers (Pečínka 2009). The way had been opened to create a self-confident national minority represented in parliament and involved in the Czechoslovakian governing bodies. However, the situation soon changed.

In the census of 1991, where the Roma could first declare themselves as a minority, only a small proportion of the population expected to be Roma claimed their minority status. Of the estimated 250,000 inhabitants of Romani origin in the Czech Republic, only approximately 33 thousand declared a Roma nationality. The assumption that on the occasion of the first census many Roma did not realize what the census meant, or were afraid to claim their nationality found no confirmation. In the 2001 census, 6,149 people declared a Romani nationality and in 2011 only 5,135 persons did so.[1] In the 1990s, the questions arose as to how to conceptualise the Romani minority and who are Roma and who are not. Also, Roma politicians could not use electoral support and failed to succeed in the next election. The party leaders soon lost their positions, and the Romani party never returned to high-level politics.

The Roma political movement has broken into many factions, and many organisations have withdrawn from political activities (Pečínka 2009). Romani politicians have been repeatedly accused of having no right to speak about the Roma as a whole because they have no support among the Romani voters. On the other hand, most of the 250,000 Romani people are identifiable, often know about themselves and occasionally call themselves Roma or Gypsies, but use this label deliberately only on some occasions. What is essential for the present reflection is that they predominantly think about themselves in terms of extended families. While the number of Roma in the Czech Republic is large, there are only several dozens of extended families. A Roma individual usually knows without need of assistance to which family another Roma individual belongs to and operates on the basis of this notion.

For politicians who were used to making general family policies, it is difficult to operate on an ethnic level precisely because at this level family policy requires different political strategies. At this level family policy needs to deal with family uniqueness, frequently even separation. It needs to deal with strong identification with family members and the occasional linking of family-friendly clusters into joint action. The head of an extended Romani family does not allow the more generally defined whole to compromise his hierarchal place. His

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[1] The census data were published by the Czech Statistical Office.

authority in the family is most important to him; subordinating himself to the head of another family would mark the loss of authority within his own family. In my experience, it is sometimes easier for a Roma to accept subordination to a non-Roma than to a Roma from another family, as the 'Gaje' [non-Roma] are outside the field of their competition. On the other hand, ethnic or national policy requires openness, a talent for negotiations, ability to compromise and the will to subordinate one's interests or family interests to the interests of higher units.

The issue of succession is also significant. The superior position of a lineage political leader can only be replaced by someone from the family circle or by a relative close to the family. Otherwise, the succession in wider than a family political circle usually turns into a duel with another family — and thus families cannot cooperate. The result may be the splitting of parties or movements. The Vlax Romani in the area of sub-ethnic politics are sometimes able to cooperate in their own excluded political networks to elect their own 'kings' and to follow their ethical rules in broader coalitions. They can, however, hardly practice such policies with other sub-ethnicities, especially with the Rumungri or Servike who are the majority among the Roma in the Czech Republic (Davidová 1995, Davidová and Uherek 2014). The Vlax Romani consider the Rumungri and Servike as inferior, and unsuitable for serious dialogue.

Roma concepts of ritual purity, which are derived from the kind of family a person is born into, how he or she lives and what his or her diet is, also make communication between the Roma difficult. The ranking of families according to their ritual purity refers to the Indian concept of 'jati' and, thus, to Romani past (Hübschmannová 1998, 1999). Non-communication for reasons of ritual purity and the social status of the family cannot usually be bridged, not even when it comes to political life. It is not possible to negotiate freely with a person with different social status, sit with him or her at a meeting table or have a working lunch. Families of different status could, in the short term, support the same party, but they would be unable to negotiate anything. Serious difficulties arose when party problems needed to be solved collectively, not just a cluster of party members.

Another complication is that the Roma can hardly imagine non-utilitarian actions beyond family hospitality. Romani families provide a guest with food but they rarely share their work, skills, ideas or money with the outside world without prospects of immediate profit. If someone does so, other Romani families become suspicious and usually look for hidden benefit for such voluntary actions, or assume deception. Many examples document this claim. In a conversation with one acquaintance in 2016, I noted, for example, the following statement: 'We would organise something for children — a summer camp or summer school. But parents do not want it much. They mostly look what profit you can have from it'. That is also one of the reasons why the Roma activists and politicians are not supported by the wider Romani public. The notion that Romani politicians earn money on other Roma and exploit their poor status is widespread. On the contrary, the Romani politicians and employees in public service are constantly urged from their own families to get benefits for their own use. Irena Kašparová, in her book on Romani politicians, expressed

the opinion that the Roma who remain on the political scene are usually either Roma from mixed marriages or live with a non-Romani partner (Kašparová 2014).

Apart from the Romani movement along the boundaries of individual families, fragmentation was also caused by political views. In addition to the ROI supporting Václav Havel's Civic Forum, the Roma Democratic Party was co-operating with the Communists. The range of political interests of the Roma gradually increased and their political attitudes copied the spectrum of interests of the majority population. As the position of the Roma in broader society deteriorated, a number of the left-leaning Roma gradually developed nostalgia for the paternalistically-oriented state before November 1989.

Roma politicians, as well as people engaged in various social services, are in a state of permanent tension. They are engaged as representatives of local or Roma communities, and sometimes they are legitimated to work for the Roma, the municipality or the State. But often the primary social control that they perceive comes from the family, and their preferred social relationships are embedded in the family. They create unity — one body (Strathern 2005) — with their family. This tension has consequences that are found in many societies: misused subsidies, nepotism and protectionism. However, what is characteristic of the Roma society is that it counts on it. Roma families that do not have representatives in power circles assume that the Roma in power will primarily support their own families; therefore, often they do not support representatives of other families politically.

While the present comment focus on a specific group — the 'Romani' — it touches on more general questions that speak to the debate on legitimacy (Pardo 2000, Pardo and Prato 2010) and its current developments, as pointed out by Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato's paper on 'Erosions of Legitimacy and Urban Futures: Ethnographic Research Matters' that initiated the discussions held in the workshop of the International Urban Symposium in Sicily in 2017, and on which their Introduction to this Special Issue is based (Pardo and Prato 2018). In a forthcoming essay (2018), I expand on the present discussion to address in ethnographic detail the legitimacy of power and the balance between family and public interests. In their essay on *Disconnected Governance and the Crisis of Legitimacy*, Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato discuss citizens' needs, values and expectations, on the one hand, and governing bodies' political responsibility and ability to impose power, on the other (Pardo & Prato 2010). In every society, people strive to harmonise family and kin network interests with a professional career and broad societal claims. For an individual, harmonizing the requirements and expectations of different social networks is a question both of professional responsibility and of trust that the people to whom one delegates powers will adequately use these powers. The art of being a member of several social structures and appropriately implementing the plurality of social roles is the result of years of social training.

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