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New Perspectives in East Central European Historiography on Roma History

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In addition to historiographical traditions that claim objectivity and factual neutrality, there is a parallel approach that views the historian not as a passive chronicler, but as an active participant in shaping historical meaning—a narrator who constructs stories and communicates values. Every scholarly work, in this view, is a distinct intellectual creation, and the notion of a wholly neutral observer is a fiction. It is therefore essential that historians articulate their perspectives and aims from the very outset of their research. The historian's task extends far beyond the mere reconstruction of events. Their work plays a crucial role in shaping collective memory and public understandings of the past, including the complex relationships between majority and minority populations. This interpretive responsibility surpasses the task of deciphering internal logics or identifying individual and collective motivations. As Hayden White's meta-historical framework suggests, historiography is governed by its own narrative conventions and rhetorical strategies. Historical texts can—and should—be examined not only for their content, but also for their form, structure, and ideological implications.

All historical interpretation involves a degree of creativity and subjectivity. A reflective historian engages with sources analytically and imaginatively, with an acute awareness of their own position in the production of historical knowledge. Equally important is the recognition that sources themselves are not neutral vessels of information, but narrative constructions shaped by the ideological and argumentative frameworks of their time. They too warrant critical, contextualised reading. Such sensitivity becomes especially vital when addressing histories of marginalised groups. In the case of Roma communities in East Central Europe, historical inquiry is not only an academic pursuit, but also an ethical and human rights engagement. This essay explores the specific challenges faced by scholars working in this field today, and the responsibilities they bear in representing historically silenced voices.

For a long time, Roma communities were defined by external actors in the public sphere, primarily the non-Roma majority or the state. Consequently, it is crucial

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for historians to contextualise former definitions of Romani identity based on the perceptions of the majority as reflected in historical sources. Not only the sources created by contemporary authorities, but also the historical works based on these sources often reflect the viewpoints of state power and the majority, which, in turn, perpetuate stereotypes and negate the minority perspective. Not only historical works, but even critical sociological research in the East Central European region did not rely on Roma perspectives, neglecting self-identification. Empirical sociology used outsider definitions—regarding as Roma those individuals perceived as such by the majority population—in order to facilitate representative studies, as the public declaration of Roma identity was often impeded by prejudices. Sociological investigations have frequently linked Roma identity indirectly with poverty, marginalization, and even social exclusion. From this perspective, it also followed that the separation of the Roma community was determined not primarily by internal cohesion, but by the exclusionary behaviour of the majority society, which sustained the minority group's disadvantaged social position.

One pivotal question in Roma historiography is defining the researcher's position. The historian must not only reflect on her sources or the works of others but also on her own research position. A reflexive-critical approach—i.e., the awareness of external constructions—is essential for interpreting sources. A fundamental issue in Romani studies is the role of Roma researchers in shaping the historical narrative concerning Roma communities. A democratic historical discourse cannot be conceived without the inclusion of internal perspectives and interpretations. There are many perspectives on researching Roma history, but non-Roma researchers must approach sources that often depict the minority's situation from a majority perspective with particular sensitivity. This involves a critical reflection on their own standpoint, avoiding the pretense of 'neutrality,' and taking seriously the epistemological contributions of Roma academic and non-academic authors. This is reflected in the slogan of critical Roma research: "Nothing about us without us." It is important to present all dimensions of Roma history, including the social contexts that have shaped the lives of Roma communities across different countries and societies. Non-Roma historians can also play a significant role in the historical writing on Roma—for example, by holding up a mirror to majority societies and revealing the historical roots and mechanisms of prejudice and exclusion.

The question of activist research often arises in Romani studies. Although academic researchers traditionally distinguish between the supposedly objective scientific observer and the committed activist, this boundary is far from clear-cut: both are part of the same discourse. Academic historians often distance themselves from activist researchers, questioning their methods and results. (However, East Central European historians also direct such criticisms at one another. Academic researchers from different nation-states

often clash over interpretations of the shared regional past, each framing it through the lens of their own national perspective. This highlights that relativism is not exclusive to activist scholarship but can also characterise academic interpretations.) Indeed, activist researchers have played a vital role in advancing the study of marginalised groups—also in the case of Roma history. A key contribution of activist scholarship lies in its ability to question and revise dominant historical narratives that reflect the prevailing perspectives of state institutions. Membership in national academic institutions does not, by itself, confer epistemological superiority—nor does academic rank guarantee impartiality or comprehensiveness. More broadly, it is essential to ensure that members of marginalised communities have the opportunity to participate in the exploration and representation of their own histories. The democratization of access to historical sources—through initiatives such as community-based research and the creation of open-access digital archives—enables Roma communities to actively engage in the production of historical knowledge.

In general, it is an important goal to ensure that members of minority communities can participate in uncovering their own past and in shaping the historical narratives about it. The democratization of access to historical sources, such as through community-based research or the creation of freely accessible digital archival databases, provides an opportunity for Roma people to research and interpret their own histories. A democratic approach to Roma history thus not only serves to uncover the past but also strengthens minority identity and promotes broader goals of social justice.

In East Central European historiography, Roma communities continue to be represented predominantly through state and political narratives. A primary reason for this lies in the nature of the archival sources, which are mostly preserved in state repositories and tend to depict Roma as marginalised, needy populations. Archival documents—such as police and court records—typically portray Roma life in situations of conflict, and predominantly from the vantage point of majority society. Recent scholarship has sought to critically reinterpret these materials and to construct alternative narratives that centre the perspectives of Roma communities themselves. Such counter-histories, drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, aim not only to recover the silenced memories of oppressed groups but also to challenge the hegemonic power structures that have historically shaped knowledge production. This approach enables morally grounded reflections on both past and present social injustices, as well as a critical revision of the discourses surrounding them.

One of the dominant interpretive frameworks applied to Roma history in the region is the modernization paradigm. This theory tends to frame social development as a process orchestrated by the state—historically absorbing Roma communities into the nation-state project by defining and constraining their social roles. Within this framework, however, Roma are often positioned as representatives of archaic or

premodern modes of existence, and their relationship to modernization is typically characterised as ambivalent or contradictory. From the perspective of minority communities, both the self-ascribed altruism and the presumed beneficence of state interventions warrant critical scrutiny. The theory of "multiple modernities" challenges the unilinear, teleological narratives that have long dominated East Central European historiography. It posits that distinct historical phenomena may coexist across diverse temporalities, rather than being subsumed under a single, progressive developmental trajectory. This interpretive shift calls for a reconsideration of the state's role in modernization, as well as a critical re-examination of "backwardness" as an interpretive framework. Viewed from this perspective, the coerced or violent "modernization" of marginalised groups may be understood as a form of internal colonization within nation-states—an expansion of state power over minority populations.

Consequently, recent Roma historiography endeavors not only to reconstruct historical realities but also to engage in a creative, community-centred project aimed at reinforcing collective identity. One of the foremost objectives of historiography on this subject in the region is to move beyond earlier nationalist and anti-egalitarian narratives of nation-states and to generate alternative historical accounts. Importantly, such accounts must increasingly grapple with transnational dynamics. While efforts to foster unity among Roma communities have deep historical roots, they became particularly pronounced following the First World Roma Congress in 1971. Early Roma nation-building projects in the 1970s and 1980s often centred on the creation and mobilization of national symbols, the standardization of language, and the construction of collective memory—strategies that echoed the symbolic repertoires of nation-state nationalisms in their struggles for recognition. In recent decades, however, these movements have diverged from this tradition, increasingly adopting a human rights-based framework and aligning themselves with European institutions such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The formation of Roma minority and national identities, however, is not solely an endogenous process. State institutions, as well as international and transnational organisations, play a pivotal role in shaping these identities. In the post–Cold War period, the Roma emerged as the largest national minority within an increasingly unified Europe. Since then, international organisations that recognise Roma groups living in different countries as part of the same national minority, acknowledge this demographic significance, and extend collective rights to Roma communities have assumed an increasingly influential role in shaping both Roma policies and identity discourses. This raises an important question: What is the role of transnational space in the formation of Roma identities, representations, and historical narratives today? One key objective of the transnational Roma movement is the creation of spaces for national

collective memory—particularly through the commemoration of the Porajmos and the establishment of shared memorial sites. At the same time, as previously noted, Roma history cannot be adequately conceptualised in isolation from other histories. In the case of the Porajmos, for example, it is essential to frame it not only as a collective national tragedy for Roma communities, but also as a universal European tragedy. Responsibility did not lie solely with the crimes of the Nazi German regime against the Roma; these atrocities were perpetrated by Europeans against Europeans—by non-Roma Hungarians against Roma Hungarians, non-Roma Slovaks against Roma Slovaks, non-Roma Czechs against Roma Czechs, and so on. Representing this history from multiple perspectives is crucial not only for majority societies but also for acknowledging the complex, multifaceted identities that characterise European Roma.

Since the 1970s, numerous historical works have presented Roma history from an internal Romani perspective as a diaspora narrative—framed as a unified story of dispersion from a presumed common homeland, India. These accounts often share structural similarities with modern Jewish historiography, with the notable difference that the Roma lack a nation-state. The perspective offered in such works is one of mutual discovery and identity consolidation. However, in the case of the Roma, this process of nation-building—often referred to as transnational nationalism—unfolds not through the institutions of a nation-state, but rather within a diffuse, transnational European space, mediated by loosely connected networks and organisations. Unlike traditional nation-state frameworks, international human rights regimes provide relatively open institutional contexts with limited coercive power. Yet, they offer inclusive ideological platforms for diverse Roma communities. These regimes foster a form of unity and shared collective identity that is not rooted in state authority, but in interpersonal relationships and localised, community-based affiliations.

In East Central Europe, the revision of historiographical traditions shaped by nation-state structures and majority perspectives poses a significant challenge for scholars of Roma history. Simultaneously, the adoption of a transnational perspective introduces additional complexities, particularly in terms of adequately representing the internal diversity of Roma communities. One of the most urgent tasks of contemporary historiography on Roma history is the construction of narratives that can simultaneously convey a sense of collective belonging while acknowledging intra-group heterogeneity. This objective may be advanced also through a micro-historical approach that foregrounds individual, local, national, and regional narratives as both sources and articulations of a shared Roma identity. Such an approach counters the tendency to reinterpret these accounts solely through globally institutionalised frameworks of transnational knowledge production and standardised historical representation. Ultimately, the integration of a transnational perspective in Roma historiography necessitates a sustained and careful negotiation between unity and diversity. It is only

through such narrative pluralism that historiography can authentically capture the lived experiences and voices of Roma communities—transcending earlier externally imposed identities and the exclusionary, nation-state-centred historical frameworks of the past.