CMR SPOTLIGHT

CENTRE OF MIGRATION RESEARCH NEWSLETTER

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Romani dar and Romano marbien pało Roma . Between fear and agency - (un)equal citizenships two years into full-scale war in Ukraine

In this issue of CMR Spotlight, participants of the ROCIT project on the transnational mobilisation of Polish, Czech and Ukrainian Roma in the face of the war in Ukraine, led by dr Kamila Fiałkowska @FiaKamila, share their personal experiences and reflections on how the past two years of war in Ukraine have influenced the Roma community in Ukraine, Poland and other countries.

Photo 1: Graffito by David Chichkan symbolises Ukrainian Roma resistance to Russian aggression, Uzhorod, Ukraine. Photo by Kamila Fiałkowska

CENTRE OF MIGRATION RESEARCH

Romani dar and Romano marbien pało Roma[1]. Between fear and agency - (un)equal citizenships two years into full-scale war in Ukraine

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Introduction

In following the transnational lives of Polish Roma, we wanted to look at how their lives are affected by structural changes at the level of the European Union. We were mainly interested in Brexit and its effects, as it is in the United Kingdom that many Polish Roma have settled. The country became the main destination for migrants from Poland after 2004, and the change brought about by Brexit was not without impact on their lives. However, it quickly became clear that, contrary to our plans, it was not Brexit that took centre stage, but the Covid-19 pandemic that dominated the lives of our interviewees in Poland, Germany and the UK for almost two years. We had not fully recovered from this crisis when, at dawn on 24.02.2022, Russia invaded Ukraine.

The team meeting we had in Warsaw from 28 February to 2 March 2022 was unusual, as we fought the distraction of instant messages with news from Ukraine and friends organising help for the arriving refugees. For us, it was the calm before the storm – the last such moments, as the war in the neighbouring country could not go unnoticed, and indeed it quickly became a central topic of conversation within our team and with our interlocutors. These conversations were accompanied not only by fear or disbelief but, as it soon became clear, by a huge change in the way we functioned, in many dimensions – professional, activist and personal.

Romani dar

At the beginning of March 2022, we (Kamila and Ignacy) met several Roma families in Warsaw. Previously, we had mostly talked with them about the repercussions of Covid lockdowns for their children's education. But the war in Ukraine soon dominated our conversations. We heard from our Roma interlocutors in Warsaw: "there are many Roma in Ukraine, we are watching what is happening, we read on the Internet", "we are worried", "some Roma have been killed in Ukraine". I remember that it stuck in our minds and we talked about it for a long time afterwards. At the same time, we received the first unconfirmed information about

[1] Romani fear and struggles for other Roma.

groups of Ukrainian Roma in Warsaw and Krakow railway stations.

The fear and threat of the invisible enemy – COVID-19 immediately gave way to the visible and tangible threat of war that was escalating in the neighbouring country. My family (Monika) living in the UK, influenced by media reports, feared for my safety. After all, Poland borders a country at war. They thought I should make preparations to leave Poland, to be ready for the situation to deteriorate. As I write these words, I recall my grandfather quoting an old Roma saying "A Roma is always ready to hit the road". I did not really understand what he meant, but today, with the perspective of time and circumstances, I understand its meaning. Living in danger and fear, the Roma attached importance to life and family, rather than to material things. After all, a house can be built anywhere, but a home is difficult to rebuild. I did not leave, I stayed. Nevertheless, for my transnational family, Poland's geographical location brings with it the fear that 'something' (a missile or a bomb) might 'fall' on Poland. These fears were not unfounded, as at least two 'lost' missiles have already fallen on Poland, which resulted in civilians' deaths.

Transnational contacts are not unusual and our previous knowledge of the transnational life of Polish Roma during the pandemic showed that they used social media to exchange information with Roma from other countries about the pandemic, restrictions, travel and other issues (see Styrkacz, Garapich, Fiałkowska 2023, Mirga-Wójtowicz, Szewczyk, Jóźwiak 2023). The war was no different. Thanks to social media, Roma in Warsaw and elsewhere were more aware of the events among Ukrainian Roma than Gadje (non-Roma) were. Simultaneously, information that caused the fear and anxiety that we all soon experienced, also reached them rapidly. Roma communities carry a heavy historical baggage of experiences of discrimination, prejudice, social marginalisation, systemic violence. They are also aware that in the event of an emergency, they will be on their own – as historical experience has shown, this is often the case. So they have to anticipate what might happen, 'be two steps ahead' and react. This phenomenon of anticipated fear is what we call dar in the Romani language.

Like any fear, perhaps on some level irrational and inexplicable to people without this experience, it is usually passed on in family stories, gestures and glances, and is deeply rooted in insightful observations of happenings around us. Information spread through social media, fuelled by anecdotal news and gossip, acts as a warning to us. This was the case during the recent pandemic and also during the first weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I (Sonia) noticed that many Polish Roma began to fear for their livelihood. They tried to be less visible, so as not to attract attention – "you'll see how many of those Ukrainians come, they'll take us and hang us". This could be interpreted as a certain adaptation of the well-known Polish saying about fear and undeserved punishment: "The blacksmith was to blame,

the Gypsy was hanged". In the Silesia region, I noticed that many Roma began to appear less frequently at the markets where they usually traded, especially where there were also Ukrainians selling their goods. This is related to what Illan Meyer describes as minority stress. Some may opt for a strategy of avoidance and withdrawal, while others may engage in activism or even a confrontation. These choices may be dictated by personal experiences and perceptions of threat, but also by the tools available, which are related to class, level of education, previous involvement in local affairs. While some feared that they would be left out from welfare provisions ("Now they are going to give them [Ukrainians] everything, while me and my daughter have been waiting for several years for a communal flat"), others wondered how they could help, e.g. by taking Roma refugees into their homes, only to realise how diverse they were in terms of customs, culture and language. These reflections concerned existential or livelihood fears, linked to the difficult economic situation of some of the people we know.

The perception of threat did not have solely an individual character, but rather a collective one, where "me and my family" were at the centre. People we know living in England, Germany, and other countries started to contact us more frequently to find out what the situation in Poland was. It was also a crucial moment to show whether Roma people feel safe in their own country, that is Poland. After all, Polish Roma are Poles. These observations showed that, despite having Polish citizenship and living in Poland forever, not everyone felt safe here, even though there was no war in our country. The threat stemmed from the experience of being visible, the one who might "steal" Polish "goods," who hears (or reads online) that he or she should go back where he or she came from (sometimes this is supposed to be Romania, sometimes India). The sense of alienation intensified. Many Polish Roma, intuitively understanding the mechanism of the scapegoat, tried to avoid being visible, and getting involved in helping Roma from Ukraine would inevitably bring them into the spotlight.

Romano marbien pało Roma

When we met in Warsaw in late February/early March 2022, information about Ukrainian Roma among refugee groups was starting to reach us. I (Monika) talked to a colleague from Slovakia, Michał Siwak. Michał put me in touch with Marek Piszta, a Slovak Roma who had been working on the Slovak-Ukrainian border since the first days of the full-scale war, and who told me how the Ukrainian Roma refugees were mistreated. There was no room for them in the centres, there was a lack of food, clothes, hygiene and cleaning products. It was clear to us that this was bound to repeat in Poland.

After the meeting in Warsaw, we returned to Krakow and Chorzow (Elżbieta, Monika, Sonia). In the two days between departure and arrival, the space of Krakow's and

Warsaw's railway stations changed incredibly, arousing feelings that were incomprehensible to us, and difficult to define. The stations became transfer and reception points, where volunteers and aid organisations were assisting the arriving refugees. With each arrival of the train from Przemyśl (a transit station by the Ukrainian border), the situation worsened. We already knew that somewhere in the crowd, there were Roma. Someone told me (Ignacy) that they met a group of 40 Roma at the Eastern Railway Station in Warsaw who refused to be separated (volunteers offered them places in various centres) and said they would rather sleep on the street. Someone else sent a message saying "I saw a group of Ukrainian Roma at the station – they must be doomed". On the form for registering our willingness to host refugees from Ukraine, we (Kamila) indicated that we would host Roma and non-white refugees, knowing that they faced exclusion and racism. The phone rang – our flat could accommodate 4-5 extra people at most, but not a family of 12. Returning to the subject of fear: the people who were already in Poland were most afraid of being separated.

Retrospection – **March 2022**

The centuries-old experience of dealing with dangerous situations has also developed a sense of responsibility and group solidarity in Roma communities. The community gives us (Sonia) security, but it also warns us of dangers – thanks to this, we have immediate knowledge of what is happening in other cities, who has attacked whom, the attitudes of Gadje (non-Roma) towards Roma, how the Ukrainian Roma are treated. Soon we were swamped with information about unequal treatment and cases of discrimination during the evacuation from Ukraine, at the stations, and in the reception centres in Poland. It was clear that something had to be done, and despite the fear that was more or less present, some of us could not remain indifferent to what was happening in front of our eyes. We (Elżbieta) were immersed in networks, both private and professional, of NGOs, minority and human rights activists, and it was within these networks that we began to organise our first activities, blindly at first, perhaps a little chaotically, but over time in an increasingly organised and strategic way, in partnership and coalition with a variety of Roma and non-Roma.

March was a festival of solidarity of sorts, which, from the perspective of the second year of the full-scale Russian invasion, is a memory that is both uplifting and sad in light of subsequent (and current) developments. Monika organised an aid campaign for Ukrainian Roma living in Slovakia. Together with a Roma educational assistant living and working in Koszary, southern Poland, and with local Roma, they organised an aid campaign for Ukrainian Roma. Roma living in the settlement have fairly low incomes, but they recognised that the Roma from Ukraine had even less and should be helped. The children from the settlement participated enthusiastically, donating their toys and bringing food and toiletries with their parents. The Polish Catholic parish was also

involved. We managed to collect about three tonnes of food, clothes, cleaning and hygiene products, and medicines. On the 7th of March, we went to Kieżmark in Slovakia, where Roma from Ukraine found temporary shelter. Part of the aid stayed there, and part was transported to Ukraine.

Also in March, we (Elżbieta, Ignacy, Monika and Tomasz Kosiek) took part in documentation activities in Poland (that also took place in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania) organised by the European Roma Institute of Art and Culture ERIAC. Our task was to observe, collect, document and record the situation of Roma in reception centres and railway stations. From 17 to 20 March, we stayed in Korczowa (where we visited the Kyiv Hall, part of the warehouse complex near the border that served as the reception centre) and Przemyśl (reception centre in "Tesco", the Przemyśl boarding school, the Greek Catholic parish and the railway station). There was great enthusiasm among us. It was also accompanied by the hope that the war would soon be over and that the problems of refugees, including the Ukrainian Roma, would be resolved. By this time the Kyiv Hall in Korczowa was beginning to glow empty, but there was still a kind of international carnival of aid. In some places, the atmosphere resembled a music festival: food trucks with free food (everyone was fed: refugees, volunteers, journalists, uniformed services), stalls with free pet food, cages and veterinary assistance, doctors, psychologists, religious groups, live music. The atmosphere was enhanced by a cloudless sky, sunshine and chirping birds. Identifying the Roma among the refugees was not difficult – they gathered in larger groups of a dozen to a few dozen people, forming informal but visible Roma 'sectors'.

Some wanted to leave for other countries, others were waiting for their relatives and friends who were on their way. Still others planned to stay near the border as long as possible, hoping that it would soon be safe to return to their place of origin. With the help of the Roma organisation Ternype and the Roma Office in Freiburg, we (Elżbieta) organised of several buses, helping more than a hundred people to reach safe and reliable centres in Germany. Safe means that they accept Roma and do not force them to leave the premises, as we kept learning about such situations. The decision to go to Germany was not taken for granted. At the beginning of March 2022, the media, social media and our friends in Germany were reporting about overcrowded reception centres, chaos at train stations in Berlin, and misinformation. Roma communication channels warned against travelling to the country. We also met people who had experienced this in Germany and were returning to Ukraine after a short stopover in Przemyśl.

A significant and remarkable example of transnational cooperation for us (Elżbieta, Monika) was the evacuation of Raisa Nabaranchuk and her family from Ukraine in March 2022. Raisa was of great importance to the international Roma community and was fairly well known in Poland. She had accompanied us several times during the

International Roma Memory Caravan in Poland, commemorating the Roma murdered during World War II. Raisa was born in 1943 in Nazi-occupied Kyiv. Her grandmother perished in Babi Yar. For most of her life, Raisa Nabaranchuk worked as a hairdresser, a profession that had been practised by her family for several generations. Raisa began writing poetry in the 1960s, but it remained her hobby until the 1990s when, encouraged by her cousin Mikhaylo Kazimirenko, she published several poems. In 2022, once again, Raisa experienced war, this time as an elderly person. In the initial weeks, with the assistance of the Romani organization Youth Agency for the Advocacy of Roma Culture "ARCA" from Ukraine, friends and activists in Poland, and thanks to the support of partner organizations in Germany (Ternype and the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma), she and her family were safely evacuated from Ukraine. For several days, she stayed in Tarnów under the care of Adam Bartosz and Natalia Gancarz (organizers of the International Roma Memory Caravan) and local authorities, later finding shelter in Germany. Unfortunately, Raisa passed away on May 10, 2023.

In the following weeks and months, we received further information, both from organizations and individuals, regarding the mistreatment of Romani refugees. Many of us engaged in various activities – informal initiatives, sharing contacts, co-organizing aid efforts in the towns where we reside, advocacy (Elżbieta, Monika, Sonia, Ignacy). However, we quickly began to observe growing expectations from institutions and various aid environments that we – Roma – would take care of Ukrainian Roma. At times, we (Sonia) felt overwhelmed by these expectations, especially with the number of people in need often exceeding the resources we had. However, this was also a crucial moment for many Romani organizations and individuals who began assertively demanding recognition of rights and equal treatment for refugees. Transnational contacts and cooperation among Roma and non-Roma organizations in Europe, and their actions, ensured that the issue was not ignored or overlooked – it was the tireless work of many Roma activists working at various levels, local, national, and transnational, for the past two years.

Flashforward. Will ethnic mobilization bring about change?

The ongoing war in Ukraine once again demonstrated that people unite in times of crisis. Transnational and local networks of Roma in Poland aided by non-Roma allies, quickly responded to the crisis, and the two-year involvement of many of them has led to changes in the professional trajectories of some individuals, greatly strengthened their professional position, or opened up new areas of educational and professional development. This unique experience in supporting this group of refugees from Ukraine is worthy not only of appreciation but also further action. This is also an opportunity to utilize the already built potential for the benefit of Roma communities in demanding recognition of

Roma rights, addressing social inequalities, and drafting and implementing the new quality of interventions in cooperation with local and central government, as well as international humanitarian organizations. We are also aware of the importance of documenting the war testimonies of Ukrainian Roma, as history shows that perhaps even in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian Roma will have to seek recognition as war victims.

We also note negative changes and various new challenges. Many people have withdrawn from supporting Roma refugees. This is most often due to the lack of financial stability of non-governmental organizations, performing work that generates stress and psychological overload, and responding to the unprecedented scale of needs that are hard to address within the overall structure of support that does not recognise the special needs of vulnerable groups. A large group of Ukrainian Roma, who were in Poland from the first days of the full-scale war, left for other EU countries (like many other Ukrainian refugees have). Information from families in Ukraine about relatively stable situations in some regions of Ukraine influenced the decisions of Ukrainian Roma to return to their homes. Women missed their sons, husbands, and fathers, and also returned; some of them have family members serving in the military, which further reinforced the need to return. However, we also know families who want to build their future in Poland because they have nothing to return to in Ukraine. Here, children go to school, teenagers acquire professions, adults work (from taxi drivers to service professions, e.g., hairdressing and cosmetic services, gastronomy, or cleaning services), they claim to feel good in Poland. We cannot overlook the fact that Ukrainian Roma themselves are also involved in supporting other refugees from Ukraine, and many of them work (or used to work) in reception centres, or in international humanitarian organizations supporting Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

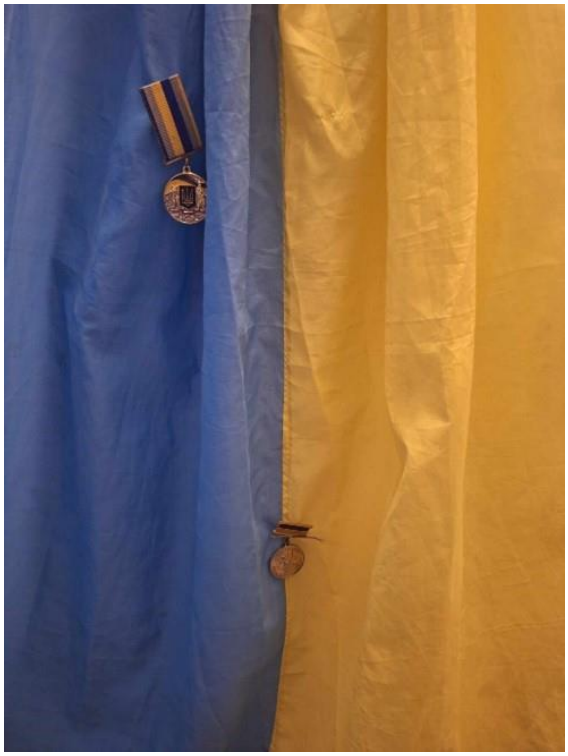

Photo 2: Medals for heroism in defence of the country pinned to the Ukrainian flag at the home of Ukrainian Roma refugee, mother of the soldiers. Photo by Monika Szewczyk

Tracking the transnational life of Polish Roma, it is impossible not to notice the impact of the war in Ukraine – therefore, we examine mobilization, their sense of agency, we inquire about the transformative potential of what is happening, and about

the sustainability of these changes for the lives of Polish and Ukrainian Roma. We challenge the methodological nationalism in narratives about "Polish aid." Commemorating, documenting, and speaking about the involvement of Romani communities in supporting Ukrainian Roma refugees is essential, as it shows that Roma are active citizens. It is also necessary to break the dominant stereotype of passive and inactive Roma. We nuance these narratives and also show how other elements of the Roma experience – migration and refuge from Poland, systemic violence from the state, and accumulated fear – are important. We take note that activism comes in many various forms but also that some forms of engagement are not accessible to everyone, due to e.g. class positioning, education, health, and other issues. The gender aspect is invaluable, especially the role of women in this movement. Behind us are two years of observing and experiencing first-hand of all the challenges of supporting Ukrainian Roma refugees. The ROCIT project is a space for reflection on these processes and further observation and continuation of Romani-non-Romani cooperation of researchers and activists from Poland, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic.

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Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz
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CMR UW, a psychologist and psychotherapist, Roma researcher and activist. Explores phenomenon of cultural appropriation and cultural identity. Within ROCIT project she is interested in "Romani Dar", i.e. the trauma experienced by Roma.

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