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A Case Study on Obstacles to the Social Integration Process of Young People of Roma Origin

Abstract

There are numerous obstacles to the advancement of Roma young people coming from disadvantaged social environments. Among these, the phenomenon that can be described by the expression *köztes kitétség* [verbatim: intermediate exposure] stands out. Social integration is an integration/assimilation practice complying with majority norms, which also means moving away from the values of one's own local environment.

According to the experience gained from research conducted on this topic, there are a lot of Roma young people who are trapped between two “societies” – their own sociocultural environment and the majority environment – and, consequently, find themselves in a special situation. The aim of this study is to shed light on the general context and the social significance of the phenomenon described above through recording field experiences and applying case analyses.

Keywords: social integration, Roma intellectuals, field research, identity, Hodász

Introduction

The basic question addressed by this research project is if it is possible to become an intellectual without conflict and identity crisis, i.e., how a young person of Roma origin can break out of the constraints of disadvantage amid contemporary circumstances.¹

¹ This paper was prepared with the support of the ELKH-DE Ethnographic Research Group.



Research on the Roma in Hungary comprises several approaches to the topic of integration and, primarily, the integration of peripheral groups, from a number of different perspectives.² Among other efforts, investigations are being conducted on ethnic coexistence situations,³ but the issue of the Roma language and the shift between languages⁴ have also been explored even more intensively, and several social researchers have examined the topic of ethnic mixed marriages, too.⁵ If we look at the situation of Roma groups living in Hungary, we can find numerous research efforts that explore the relationship between hosting communities (in our case, the majority Hungarian society) and immigrating ones (in this case, groups of Gypsies). One of the frequently analyzed topics of assimilation research in Hungary is the development of cultural relations between Hungarians and Gypsies, which is usually analyzed within the conceptual framework of assimilation, integration, cultural adaptation and dissimilation.

This study deviates from the focal points listed above and examines the circumstances of Roma youth launching into intellectual careers. By presenting a case example, it aims to illustrate yet another important aspect of coexistence. On the one hand, the case study is a suitable tool to highlight the topicality of the issue, while on the other hand, it also proves that the life situation it presents cannot be solved just by involving those concerned and affected (living in it) alone.

Specifically, this study offers an analysis of the life path of a young Vlach Roma couple with a college degree, which reveals the complex mechanism of influence of the social, cultural and economic conditions that maintain what I call “intermediate exposure.” Its chief objectives include identifying the problem and outlining further investigation possibilities of the related topic.

² József Kotics has conducted numerous field research projects in Hungary and in regions inhabited by Hungarians beyond the border. For details of the theoretical-methodological approach to and research findings on Hungarian-Roma coexistence, see Kotics 2020. Gábor Biczó proposes the introduction of the concept of “resentment” to help interpret Hungarian-Roma coexistence situations. In his work, this concept, as an analysis of the culture of resentment can help understand what processes take place in the affected minority communities. Cf. Biczó 2022. Norbert Tóth investigated the impact of segregation and school segregation on the social empowerment of those affected in the Vlach Roma community of a small settlement, examining among other features the indicators of further education and school performance. Cf. Tóth 2019.

³ There are several comprehensive analyses available on this topic. For further details, see Kovács et al. 2013; Biczó et al. 2022.

⁴ See, for example, Bartha 1999; Nagygyóryné 2018.

⁵ For further details, see Tóth–Vékás 2008; Gyurgyík 2003.

Based on the research findings so far, it can be concluded that young people of Roma origin who participate in higher education while coming from a disadvantaged position in terms of their family sociocultural background and then try to make a living as intellectuals after graduation, find themselves in an existentially, psychologically and socially unstable situation between the majority society and their own immediate community, which might be dubbed the state of “intermediate exposure.”⁶

Research background and circumstances

In addition to the work done for a period of ten years in a Roma college for advanced studies, on which the present study is based, anthropological field research conducted primarily in Roma communities residing in disadvantaged areas of North-Eastern Hungary has provided specific information for this analysis. Apart from community studies, research on Roma intellectuals has also received a basis from exploring the role of social individuals in local communities. At the level of the social role of the individual, cultural shift processes in local communities, such as changes in the value system, can be properly identified. In the light of the changes in the value system of local societies determining the coexistence of the majority and the minority, the following question of practical significance can be pretty well examined: How is it possible to resolve the stereotypes that dominate the Hungarian-Roma antagonism that can often be observed in the social space? Furthermore, I have sought to understand during the course of my research what external factors sustain and operate the oppositional structure of ethnic coexistence.⁷ The concept of “intermediate exposure” makes it possible to interpret what it means to be caught between two “worlds” at the mercy of the system of stereotypes that dominate the relationship between majorities and minorities.

Becoming an intellectual of Roma origin in Hungary is a complicated process, and it cannot be simply described as the graduation process on the basis of performance in higher education. Young people, most of whom are disadvantaged because of their backgrounds, have to face mobility challenges dur-

⁶ As regards certain items of terminology, what I consider as an intellectual life path is a way of life based on a higher education degree or filling a job position requiring such a degree. What I regard as a person of Roma origin is someone who claims to be a member of a Roma community in Hungary.

⁷ Research locations included the settlements of *Nagyecsed*, *Hodász* and *Nyírvasvári*. See Szabó 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022.

ing the years they spend in college, which automatically presuppose external supportive institutional conditions.⁸

The most important component of this kind of support is the network of Roma colleges for advanced studies (*Roma Szakkollégiumok*) in Hungary, all members of which operate as genuine integrated institutions, where young people of either Hungarian or Roma origin form communities together. The rules of operation of this system, which are applied as prescribed, prevent these colleges from forming segregated inclusions in higher education.⁹

Besides supporting the chances of success in higher education, Roma colleges for advanced studies also take care of the important task of strengthening Roma identity. It is a common experience that young people from Roma families face an identity crisis in higher-education institutional settings, which is often accompanied by an identity conflict. Researching the life paths of successful persons of Roma origin, Margit Feischmidt identified the cause of the identity conflict as follows: “in most cases, the intention to assimilate and the majority rejection encoded in institutional discrimination and/or everyday racism”¹⁰ may be behind the phenomenon. Young Roma intellectuals drifting into an “intermediate exposure” situation encounter institutional discrimination and identity conflicts primarily not during their years at college or university, but later on in the labour market. Experience shows that the Roma college for advanced studies system is not yet fully prepared for the challenges facing employees, since academic success alone – as experience so far has shown – does not guarantee success in life outside the “institution.”

The circle of those concerned

Determining the number of gypsies living in Hungary is a difficult task in several respects and, even today, it is primarily the issue of identification that

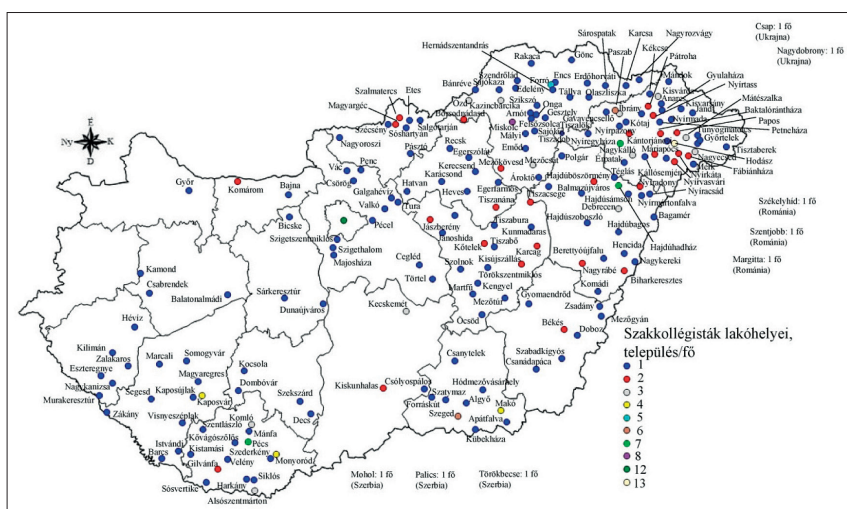
⁸ An important experience related to describing the problem of “intermediate exposure” was that, as the director of Balázs Lippai Roma College for Advanced Studies (2016–2018), I developed a “helping-supporting” work method (*Tesz-Vesz-Kölí*), which can also be applied to disadvantaged Roma university students. It basically helps students to develop their individual skills and abilities and to orient themselves in the higher-education environment by building on their individual aptitudes. (For an introduction to the working method, see Szabó 2016.)

⁹ Find more details on the integrative efficiency of Roma colleges for advanced studies in Biczó 2021.

¹⁰ Feischmidt 2008.

proves to be a challenge for social researchers. If we look at the figures of the census conducted every ten years, we can see that, in 2011, as many as 315,583 people declared themselves to be of Roma nationality.¹¹ Another important aspect of the data that can be gleaned from the survey is that only ~1% of Roma people have a higher-education degree.

A different methodological approach was applied by the research group of the University of Debrecen in their project conducted between 2010 and 2013, in which the territorial location and distribution of the Roma living in Hungary was primarily examined. Using the method of expert estimation and external classification, they estimated the number of people of Roma origin to be about 876,000.¹²



Pic. Nr. 1: *Settlements where students of Roma colleges for advanced studies come from in 2020.*
Biczó–Szabó 2020: 34.

Another nationwide survey was conducted in 2020, when Gábor Biczó and the author of this study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the members of the 11 Roma colleges for advanced studies operating in Hungary.¹³

¹¹ In *KSH* [Hungarian Central Statistical Office] surveys, persons of Roma nationality are the individuals who claim to be such, which means that the definition is based on self-classification.

¹² For the study on the findings of the relevant research, see Péntes et al. 2018.

¹³ For a full-scale presentation of the survey, see Biczó–Szabó 2020. At the time of conducting the survey, there were 326 people in Roma colleges for advanced studies, representing the test pool for our study.

It revealed that Roma students in colleges for advanced studies are present in higher education in all 15 fields of study and in a total of 122 different majors. We learned from the study that the geographical recruitment environment of students was also fairly diverse, with those coming to higher education representing a total of 204 different settlements.

It can be clearly seen in the map above that the vast majority of the members of colleges for advanced studies at that time came from parts of Hungary that are most densely populated by Romas (North-Eastern Hungary and South Transdanubia) according to data collected by the Péntes-Tátrai-Pásztor research group during the period under review. Furthermore, it can also be seen that, within the distribution of the residential settlements of college for advanced studies members according to legal status, those coming from small towns and villages are in a higher proportion than those coming from metropolitan or urban areas. Thus, the circumstances of the disadvantaged source environment fundamentally determine the initial state the compensation for which decisively shapes the development of students' college/university years.

For most of them, university or college life means a significant change in relation to where they come from. At the same time, based on the experience gained from the follow-up of Roma college-for-advanced-studies graduates, the real challenge for them begins after graduation. They are faced with a choice between four options:

- 1) One option is to return to their original living environment and try to make a living locally in their profession.
- 2) Another solution is to return to their original living environment and, in the absence of a job opportunity matching their profession, find employment in another sphere; typically in jobs that do not require a college degree.
- 3) They may also decide to look for a job related to their profession, but in a larger city or in the capital, even if it is at a considerable distance from their place of residence.
- 4) As a final variation, they can continue their studies in post-graduate education, taking advantage of the “protective system” of the university and the college for advanced studies sphere.

The above categories represent a valid analytical framework for practically all young Roma intellectuals – students who have joined the Roma college-for-advanced-studies network. After completing their studies, Roma young people who have just graduated do not always follow the path they had planned beforehand, but rather the one that “opens up” to them, so to speak. After

graduation, their career depends on the openness of the immediate majority environment to integration and the specificities of the personal living environment.

Intermediate exposure: a case study

R. K. grew up in a traditional Vlach Gypsy family in the settlement *Hodász*, located in one of the most disadvantaged areas of North-Eastern Hungary. According to tradition, her parents talked to her in the Roma language, and she learned Hungarian in kindergarten. Her parents tried to protect her from all new influences, which meant she would not be allowed to go anywhere alone. With the exception of school trips, R.K. did not leave her residential area, since according to gypsy culture, young girls were not allowed into foreign environments.

“I have loved travelling since I was a child. That’s what I always fought for with my father that I would be going still. That there is no such thing, that I am not going. Let’s say for a bike, or rather, I say this, which I really wanted. That’s all I wanted to do, to go on trips, to see the world, to get to know the cultures. For me, that was what I really wanted.”¹⁴

The internal conflict with cultural traditions was thus evident at a very young age.

“Because when I was little, I missed them, I didn’t ride trains, I only got on a train for the first time when I was 18 or 19. I didn’t take the bus, only when I was in high school, and I really liked to go and live, because my dad didn’t really give in; he was scared, and this desire only grew stronger and, when I could, I tried to do everything.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [(...) én nagyon szeretek utazgatni gyerekkorom óta. Ez volt az, amit mindig ki-harcoltam édesapámmal, hogy de én megyek. Hogy ilyen nincs, hogy én nem megyek. Mondjuk kirándulni, vagy vagy inkább ezt mondom, amit nagyon akartam. Csak ennyit akartam, hogy kimozduljak, hogy menjek kirándulni, hogy lássak világot, hogy ismerjem meg a kultúrákat. Nekem ez volt az, amit nagyon akartam.]

¹⁵ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [(...) mert kiskoromban ezek kimaradtak, hogy nem vonatoztam, csak 18-19 évesen ültem először vonatra. Nem buszoztam, csak középiskolás koromban, és nagyon szerettem menni, élni, mert ugye apukám nem nagyon engedett, féltett, és ez a vágy csak egyre jobban erősödött, és amikor megtehettem, akkor mindent.]

During her high school years, R.K. saw an example of some young people living in similar sociocultural circumstances choosing further education, but this was not a natural alternative for her.

“And when we went to grammar school, I didn’t care about the fact that I would go to further education now, but to have my high school diploma, and then what has to come will come. And then my sister and our cousins, and then they said they were going to college. But I didn’t really care about that either; let them do whatever they want, and then something will happen to me. I didn’t care much about it; I always tried to have it with the present.”¹⁶

In R.K.’s family, her brother and cousins, with the support of their high school teachers, decided to go on with their education. However, through this move, they met with complete resistance from their family environment.

“And they weren’t allowed into dormitories first; they would have been allowed into school. Due to tradition, it is not very customary to let girls into dormitories and into the world so much. [...] But in the end, my sister wanted it so badly that they had to, they had to agree.”¹⁷

R.K. was able to get into higher education because one of her sisters had already started her university studies a year before, following her own path and, therefore, there was an opportunity for them to move to the same dormitory. After successfully graduating from high school, R.K. was admitted to the University of Debrecen, where she started her studies in infant and early childhood education in 2015.

“Actually, when my sister Dalma started her college years, she already motivated me. It didn’t have to because I wanted to go see the world myself; I wanted to get away from home, but they motivated me. In fact, today my grandmother, my grandfather, too, even though they are really such very traditional Gypsy people. But still, they say, study, don’t wait, it used to be like until

¹⁶ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [És amikor elmentünk gimnáziumba, én akkor nem foglalkoztam azzal, hogy most továbbtanulás, most mennék, hanem hogy meglegyen az érettségi, és akkor majd jön, aminek jönnie kell. És akkor a nővérem meg az unokatestvéreink, és akkor ők azt mondták, hogy ők mennek továbbtanulni. De én ezzel sem foglalkoztam igazán, csináljanak, amit akarnak, velem aztán majd lesz valami. Nem nagyon törődtem vele, én mindig inkább a jellel próbáltam, hogy az meglegyen.]

¹⁷ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [És őket nem engedték először kollégiumba, iskolába engedték volna. A hagyományok miatt a lányokat nem nagyon szokás kollégiumba meg annyira világgá engedni. [...] de végül annyira akarta ugye a nővérem ezt, hogy muszáj volt, muszáj volt, hogy beleegyezzenek.]

I was married, don't wait for your husband to put a loaf of bread on the table for you. Go and make money yourself, too.”¹⁸

Going to university opened up a new path for her: a new environment and new challenges in everyday life. At the same time, membership in the college for advanced studies and the dormitory companions also meant security for her, as she had a large number of acquaintances and relatives in the institution from her settlement of origin. However, her biggest support and supporter was R.M., with whom they had already entered into a relationship during the training.

“And then it was in 2017 that we eloped in the traditional way. The way it happens is that we were still in the dormitory, and then we went to Budapest, and then I phoned my mother from there that I was already with B, that we had run away. And then we went home; we were getting ready at home, and then we discussed when the two families would take me home, because I can't go home alone, they can't come to me either, but until this family takes me home, together with my husband, we won't really be able to meet.”¹⁹

Despite the majority environment as well as the newly experienced system of customs and norms, the family tradition proved to be strong, so they decided to marry according to Gypsy customs. General experience shows that the majority society is unable to make sense of the tradition-following Roma marriage customs and is less accepting of the practice of “elopement”. This is primarily due to the fact that they do not have sufficient information about the Gypsy customs, so eloping as a form of marriage usually only strengthens negative prejudices.

¹⁸ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Hát igazából, amikor Dalma nővérem elkezdte a főiskolás éveit, akkor már engem is motivált. Annyira nem kellett, mert én akartam menni világot látni, kiszakadni inkább otthonról, de motiváltak. Sőt, a mai nappal a nagymamám, a nagypapám, pedig ők már tényleg ilyen nagyon hagyományörző cigány emberek. De mégis azt mondják, tanuljál, ne várd meg, régen ez volt, amíg nem voltam férjnél, ne várd meg, hogy még a férjed majd az asztalra tesz neked egy kenyeret. Menjél, keressél te is!]

¹⁹ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [És akkor 2017-ben volt az, hogy hagyományos módon elszöktünk. Ugye az úgy zajlik, hogy akkor is a kollégiumba voltunk, és akkor onnan elmentünk Budapestre, és akkor ott telefonáltam édesanyámnak, hogy én már B-val vagyok, hogy elszöktünk. És akkor utána hazamentünk, itthon készülődtünk, és akkor megbeszéltük, a két család, hogy engem mikor fog hazavinni, mert addig nem mehetek haza egyedül, ők sem jöhetnek el hozzám, hanem amíg ez a család nem visz engem haza, ugye a férjemmel együtt, addig nem igazán találkozhatunk.]

The situation has been handled with surprising flexibility on the part of her family. The father, defying the majority stereotype that education has no value for Gypsies, made a single request:

“we can do whatever we want, but we should get the degree, that’s all he wants done. So they have already understood and accepted how much a degree or a profession is needed for a young person, be that a Roma or non-Roma youth. That was his request. And I was already a woman then, and even then, it was important.”²⁰

R.K. then successfully graduated at the same time as her husband, who earned a vocational training qualification in higher education. He finished his studies with very good results, and always completed his practical classes receiving unanimous praise. After graduation, they planned to live and work as an intellectual couple according to the values expected to be shared by the majority middle class, so she and her husband moved into an apartment in the city where R.K. did her internship. Their goal was to get a job as soon as possible. They planned everything consciously; they wanted to make ends meet independently and without family support. *“And then we didn’t move home but tried to find a job there. To find a job, it was very difficult fresh out of college, and we were unemployed for a year.”²¹*

The reason for the unsuccessful job hunt and repeated rejections was always R.K.’s ethnic background. Its external anthropological features are rather telling at first glance; everyone classifies her right away as belonging to a specific ethnic community of origin. Besides the efforts to find a job, she also managed to join a competency development training course, which indirectly contributed to her successful employment later.

“For a year in the same dwelling, feeling aimless and all these other things and, then and there, I developed quite nicely; I felt this about myself, and then when I completed this little training, in August, I was admitted to the nursery on Görgey Street in Debrecen as an early childhood educator, and I have been working there ever since.”²²

²⁰ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [(...) azt csinálunk, amit akarunk, de a diplomát azt szerezzük meg, neki csak ez lesz a kérése. Szóval már annyira belátták, meg rálátak arra, hogy mennyire is szükség van, akár roma, akár nem roma fiatalnak egy diplomára, egy szakmára. Ez volt a kérése. És ugye akkor már asszony voltam én is, és akkor is, akkor is fontos volt.]

²¹ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [És aztán nem költöztünk baza, hanem megpróbáltunk ott munkát keresni, munkát találni, nagyon nehezen sikerült, egy évig friss diplomával a kezünkben munkanélküliek voltunk.]

²² Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Egy évig egy házban, céltalanságban, meg minden ilyen egyéb dolog, és akkor én ott egészen szépen fejlődtem, azt éreztem magamon, és akkor majd azt követően, amikor befejeztem ezt a kis

At work, the initial fears and inhibitions soon disappeared, as she quickly gained acceptance both among children and parents, as well as towards her colleagues due to her professional competence and kind, helpful attitude.

An important part in the development of their seemingly stable situation was played by the immediate social environment that surrounded them. However, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly created unexpected circumstances.

“Our lives changed a lot because, due to the virus, we just packed our stuff and moved home on an impulse. [...] My husband opened this second-hand clothes store on June 1, 2020, which went very well, and it was also actually convenient. I only did the cleaning part, which I did, whereas my mother-in-law, she is a shop assistant; she has that qualification, and then she worked in it, she was the employee. And then everything went quite well but, for some reason, I felt so out of place, and I guess my partner felt the same way. And then our lives took a big turn, [...] we didn't feel at home here, so we moved back and we rented an apartment in Debrecen.”²³

Since R.K. acquired a lot of new life experiences during the years at university by taking part in several trips in Hungary and abroad, meeting quite a few new people, seeing and experiencing new life situations from up close, she could no longer imagine her life only along the traditional Gypsy female role expectations.

Thus, the feeling of “intermediateness”, of belonging neither here nor there, became a constant part of her life.

“We didn't stay there long, as it turned out that I was expecting a baby, then we moved home again, and then we realized that this house was a refuge for us. And then, from that point onwards, we started to renovate this house, to care a little bit about it. We forged new goals that bound us here to stay in Hodász.”²⁴

tréninget, akkor augusztusban Debrecenben, ott felvettek a Görgey utcai bölcsődébe, mint kisgyermeknevelő, és azóta is ott dolgozom.]

²³ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Nagyon sokat változott az életünk, hiszen a vírus miatt egy hirtelen felindulásból fogtuk a cuccunkat és hazaköltöztünk. [...] A férjem 2020. június 1-én megnyitotta ezt a használt ruhá üzletet, ez nagyon jól ment, igazából kényelmes is volt. Én csak a takarítás részét vállaltam, azt csináltam, az anyósom ugye, ő bolti eladó, ilyen végzettséggel rendelkezik, és akkor ő dolgozott benne, ő volt az alkalmazott. És akkor egészen jól ment minden, de valamiért nem találtam a helyem, és szerintem a párom sem. És akkor egy nagy fordulatot vett az életünk, [...] nem éreztük jól magunkat itthon, visszaköltöztünk, Debrecenben találtunk egy albérletet.]

²⁴ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Nem sokáig maradtunk ott, kiderült, hogy babát várok, aztán megint hazaköltöztünk, és akkor rájöttünk, hogy nekünk ez a ház menedék. És akkor onnantól kezdtük el felhívítani ezt a házat, egy kicsit törődni vele. Új célokat szőttünk, ami ide, Hodászhoz kötött minket.]

They silicate-block and brick house in the segregated neighborhood of Hodász was inherited by them from her husband's grandparents. This predominantly Roma environment and the fundamental social, cultural and economic differences between the village and the “big” city required a high degree of adaptation efforts from the young couple. Despite this, their willingness to help their own community, their readiness to do something, along with their professional commitment was well demonstrated in the fact that R.K. and her husband established an association in 2017 with the aim of supporting disadvantaged young people in Hodász in order to help them catch up. Through organizing summer camps, distributing donations and hosting various professional events and public lectures, they tried to promote the strengthening of Roma identity and breaking out of disadvantages in the lives of Roma and non-Roma young people in need.

“On top of all, we were renovating a house. So, it was very stressful for both of us but, even though we were building, despite all these goals and dreams that we had and partially realized, Debrecen, for some reason, it always remained the true desire of our hearts, and we moved again. That time, already there, to Civis Street. By the way, I planned that for myself at the time, and M. also said that it would be like this. We would then take it from here when the little one would be born, and then I would go back to work from there. Well, but it didn't happen that way because, in January 2021, M. became very ill. He was also involved in organizing education, and that was also our livelihood. And because of the virus and illness, he couldn't do this job, and so we couldn't pay the rent of the apartment we lived in, even though we loved it very much. We had a great time there: there was the post office, the convenience store, everything. Just as much company for our needs, which was enough. The colleagues were there, in that part and in the house next door, and there it was very good. But still we had to move home. Rather, I forced this, because I already saw that the following month would be rather tight, and then we did not wait but moved home.”²⁵

²⁵ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Mindemmel pedig házat újítottunk. Szóval, ez nagyon megerőltető volt mindkettőnknek, de hiába építkeztünk, hiába voltak ezek a céljaink, álmaink, amiket megvalósítottunk részben, akkor is valamiért Debrecen, az mindig a szívünk vágya maradt, és újból elköltöztünk. Akkor már oda, a Civis utcára. Azt terveztem egyébként én akkor magamban, meg M. is mondta, hogy akkor így lesz. Mi akkor majd innen fogunk, hogy megszületett a kicsi, és akkor majd onnan fogok visszamenni dolgozni. Hát, de ez nem így történt, mert 2021 januárjában M. nagyon beteg lett. Oktatásszervezéssel is foglalkozott, és az is a mi megélhetőségünk volt. És a vírus miatt, meg betegség miatt ezt a feladatot, ezt a munkát nem tudta ellátni, és így nem tudtuk fenntartani azt az albérletet, amiben éltünk, pedig nagyon szerettük. Nagyon jól éreztük ott magunkat, ott volt a posta, a kisbolt, minden. Épp annyi társaság, ami nekünk kellett, ami elég volt. Ott voltak a kollégák, ott abban a részben, meg a szomszéd házban, meg ott nagyon jó volt. De mégis hazá kellett költöznünk. Inkább ezt én erőltettem, mert már láttam, hogy a következő hónapban már nagyon szűkösön kell, hogy éljünk, és akkor nem vártuk meg, hanem hazaköltöztünk.]

The feeling of being vulnerable to circumstances gradually became their dominant life experience.

“Here in Hodász, regardless of the fact that we have this house here, and we keep building it and making it pretty, we do it, yet there will never be a better workplace for us here. Therefore, we have no reason to stay and to live here. Family is the only thing that binds us to this place, but I think, wherever we go, we will always come back to visit home.”²⁶

The stalling of mobility filled their lives with constant conflict. After the events of starting an intellectual career, a successful departure and mobility, the turn of getting forced back into their original environment became a reality circumstance determining their situation of “intermediate exposure”.

“There are a lot of things happening in my life that pull me back, [...] I think the fact that I can’t open up at home because the role is different also plays a big part in this. Like, let’s say elsewhere, in the rented apartment. It’s completely different, even though no one tells me; it’s just that it’s supposed or not supposed to be done here at home, and there is no such thing there. Maybe that’s why my life here is uncomfortable. I think it’s because it’s very, very difficult for me to live here.”²⁷

At this point, her Roma identity and the traditional value system brought along from her original community created an obstacle in R.K.’s self-interpretation that she could not reconcile with her changed role in life and the stalling of her upward mobility. This situation usually takes the form of a permanent conflict of roles.

“I don’t know why that, here in Hodász, as if our horizons were narrowing and our opportunities were also narrowing. And maybe that’s why I, or maybe that’s why I don’t feel so good at home. There wouldn’t be any problems anyway; there just aren’t many, so many, no, I don’t see my life as bright and beautiful here at home as elsewhere. These are mainly settlements

²⁶ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Itt Hodászon attól függetlenül, hogy itt van ez a ház, és építkezünk és csinosítgatjuk, csináljuk, soha nem lesz számunkra erre felé ennél megfelelőbb munkahely. Ezért nincs maradásunk, nincs miért itt élnünk. Egyedül a család köt minket ide, de azt gondolom, akárhova is mennénk, mindig hazalátogatunk.]

²⁷ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [...] nagyon sok olyan dolog történik az életben, ami visszahúzó, [...] szerintem ebben az is nagyon nagy szerepet játszik, hogy itthon nem tudok úgy kibontakozni, mert más a szerep. Mind mondjuk másból, albérletben. Teljesen más, pedig senki nem mondja meg nekem, csak ugye itthon ez illik, ott meg nincs ilyen, hogy ez illik. Lehet, hogy ezért kényelmetlen az itteni életem. Szerintem azért, mert nagyon, nagyon nehéz nekem itt élni.]

like Hajdúböszörmény and Debrecen, Debrecen, where people can really reach their full potential and live their lives as they want. I feel good regardless of finances. I'll see if it turns out somehow. We would like to no longer live in an apartment, but in a house that is our own. Whatever we don't have to pay for monthly, and we can sit outside in the summer and stuff like that. Now we would like to flee, we would go to Debrecen but, for the time being, there is no prospect yet.”²⁸

Lessons from an in-depth interview

According to the in-depth interview with R.K., she felt that her life was unhappy at the time of the recording. The question is how to analyze this phenomenon within the conceptual framework of “intermediate exposure”, as a general phenomenon determining the social mobility of young Roma intellectuals. The majority middle-class value expectations portray the trajectory of the average intellectual’s career as a schematic process of events: successful university admission after graduation from high school, followed by a successful completion of requirements in college, graduation, employment, tax payment and establishing a family. The compulsion to conform to normative expectations and the role expectations adapted to them are inherent in living as an intellectual.

The subject chosen for our analysis, R.K., comes from a traditionalist Vlach Gypsy native language environment. Following a successful high school graduation, she went to the University of Debrecen, where she became a certified infant and early childhood educator. She managed to find a job in her line of profession, got married at college, started a family, and is currently on *GYES* [maternity leave in Hungary].

In her story, the conventional order of the stages of her career is different in the respect that marriage and having children did not allow her to stabilize in her role as an employee just after graduation. As an important feature of background circumstances, her insufficient financial background made it im-

²⁸ Biczó–Szabó 2021. [Nem tudom miért, hogy itt Hodász-on mintbogyha beszűkülne a látókörünk, és a lehetőségek is beszűkülnének. És lehet, hogy ezért én, vagyis lehet, hogy ezért nem érzem annyira jól magam itthon. Nem lenne egyébként semmi probléma, csak nem vesz annyi, annyi sok, nem, nem látom olyan fényesnek, szépnek az életemet itthon, mint, mint máshol. Főleg ez Hajdúböszörmény és Debrecen, Debrecen települések ezek, hogy igazából ott teljesen kiteszódik az ember, és úgy éli az életét, ahogy akar. Az anyagiaktól függetlenül is jól érzem magam. Majd, majd hát bogyha alakul valahogy. Szeretnék, hogy most már ne albrétbe éljünk, hanem egy családi házat, ami a sajátunk. Amit nem kell havonta fizetni, meg ki tudunk nyáron egy kicsit ülni, meg, meg ilyenek. Most már menekülnék, mennék eljele Debrecenbe, de egyelőre nincs kilátás.]

possible for her to pay rent and maintain living standards in a city and, at the same time, it was a fundamental reason for her reintegration into her original segregated environment.

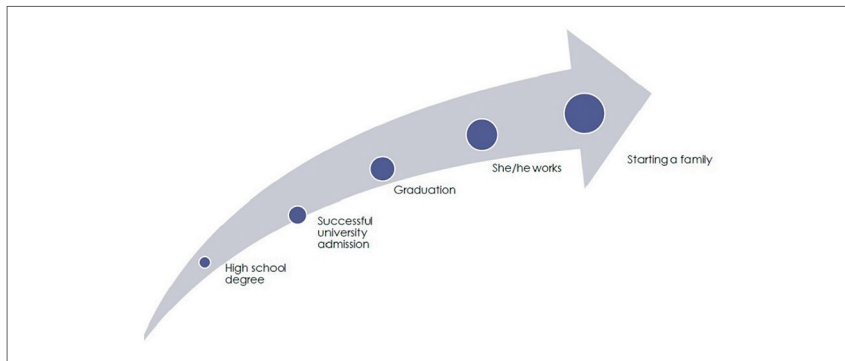


Fig. Nr. 1: *The normative structure of an average intellectual's career*
(Source: own construction)

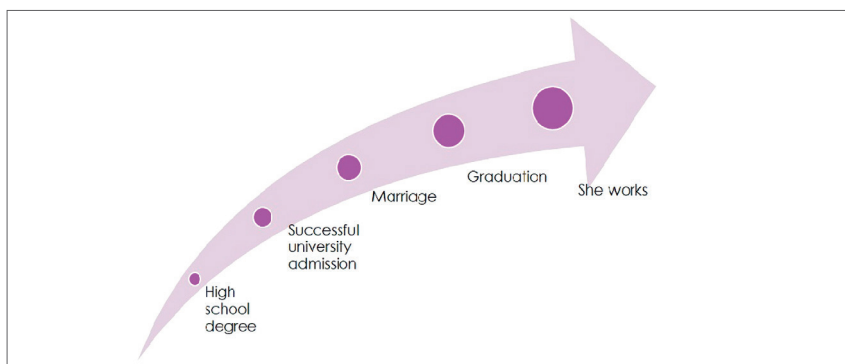


Fig. Nr. 2: *R.K.'s life path* (Source: own construction)

Beyond all that, however, the question is how the “intermediate exposure” applies in the light of the fundamentally norm-following trajectory. Also, why and how does the integration process get stuck in a kind of permanent transition?

The case of R.K. provides us with an opportunity to interpret the nature of “intermediate exposure” and its long-term survival as well as to address the question of how it constitutes an obstacle to integration into mainstream society.

R.K. took the career path of Roma intellectuals and found herself in a liminal situation. Both in her self-definition and in the qualification of her

environment, it is often stated that she is “too Hungarian for Gypsies and too Roma for Hungarians”. Following this approach, we may reckon that it depends solely on her personal choice whether she remains a Roma person or becomes a Hungarian one by assimilating. However, the fact is that, whatever is decisive here is not so much her own decisions but rather her circumstances. Do young Roma intellectuals, exposed to the state of “intermediate exposure”, really have a choice, or is it their external environment that forces them to make certain decisions? On the one hand, R.K. is a “victim” of the social expectations of her own cultural community whenever she is in her original environment. The traditional Vlach Gypsy customs, as it can be clearly seen from the previous briefly outlined compilation, represent an important system of values and norms for her, as well as a point of orientation and a cohesive community. Family customs in R.K.’s life are not present as a choice, since she was born into the culture and there is simply no question asked concerning her transcending them in any way whatsoever. In fact, she perceives and understands her own situation as a committed follower of traditions.

By contrast, the system of values and norms of the majority society has acted as unavoidable factors shaping her career, her mobility and her chance of becoming an intellectual. This latter has become an inalienable part of her personality, especially through the patterns she has followed for so many years in educational institutions. R.K. does not intend to completely break up with her original community, but the way of life and lifestyle offered by the opportunities inherent in her intellectual career and what R.K. indeed experienced after taking up employment do act as a kind of counterpoint to her original environment. Consequently, the efforts to harmonize these two “worlds” seem to bump into serious obstacles in everyday practice.

“Intermediate exposure” thus means that she cannot actually meet the expectations of either of these communities without contradicting herself. Although she has gained all the knowledge and experience to work as a graduate intellectual, she cannot maintain it because her financial means do not allow her to lead the life she desires. Forced back into her own community, she experiences the consequent situation as an irresolvable step backwards, which she defends herself against by constantly referring to the planning of relocation.

At the same time, it is also a fact that she cannot fully become part and parcel of her own original community either, because she cannot follow a professional career path parallel with community expectations and, when she pushes this urge into the background, she gets into a conflict with herself. The dilemma of this life situation, at least as it seems, cannot be solved on one’s own, without outside help. The assertion of intermediate exposure indicates

that, on the basis of personal life expectations and education, social status cannot be effectively reconciled with both the opportunities and the physical circumstances.

Theoretical conclusions

Based on the overall research experience gained so far, it may be safely stated that one of the hindering factors of the social integration of young Roma intellectuals is the development of “intermediate exposure” into a condition that rules and determines their personal life path.

During the course of examining the relationship between the Roma minority in Hungary and the majority society, it is important to keep in mind that the relations between ethnic groups and local communities are subject to dynamic change processes. The reasons for this can be traced back to both external and internal influences on communities, as well as a combination of these. The process of changes occurring in social group relations and the relations of individuals involved in them is interpreted by the discipline of anthropology from a number of different aspects. In this analysis, we intend to raise some of the most important elements of the general structural issues associated with the social mobility of intellectuals of Roma origin.

The low number of intellectuals of Roma origin in Hungarian society – less than 1% of Roma people graduate from college – gives rise to the hypothesis that, for most people, a career as an intellectual is a first-generation undertaking, which turns into a process involving a change of social status.

The change of status resulting from mobility can be sorted out by relying on *Árpád Szokolczai's* conceptual approach for interpreting the integration process of Roma intellectuals. As a basic principle, the author proposes to use four categories of analysis closely related to each other when describing the phenomenon of status change: (1) liminality, (2) imitation, (3) trickster and (4) schizmagenesis.²⁹

From the perspective of our topic, it is primarily liminality that requires further explanation. The concept of liminality has a long history in anthropology, as it was first introduced by Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in his book *Rites of Passage*. His thesis was based, among other things, on his field research in Madagascar. Gennep contends that rites of passage are “universal anthropological phenomena that accompany individuals and communities through

²⁹ For a clarification of these concepts, see Szokolczai 2015.

various transitional points in human and social life, helping to make the transition between two stable states”³⁰. In his interpretation, liminality is the middle stage of a rite of passage, which is also a central moment. What does this all mean? In order to emerge from the liminal phase, one must meet certain requirements and, where appropriate, tests, depending on socio-environmental characteristics.³¹ Rites of passage are associated with the transition from one age group or one human condition to another.

Gennep’s book was translated into English only in the 1960s. Then, in 1963, the concept of liminality was introduced into academic anthropology in connection with the name and work of Victor Turner. It was then, within this framework, that the interpretation of rites of passage became a priority topic of anthropological research. Since the 1990s, the term has been increasingly commonly used to analyze societies as they move and transform.

Important research on the social integration of Roma intellectuals in Hungary has been carried out by Klára Gulyás, who proposes to summarize their mobility characteristics in the concept of permanent liminality. In her interpretation, this refers to the life situation that characterizes the development of the social role identity of Roma graduates in the process of becoming intellectuals. This condition occurs when they “move away from their community of origin as a result of the social/mobility process, but do not become accepted members of the majority professional community and the broader majority community”³².

However, the analysis of mobility trajectories based on in-depth interviews shows that the concepts of liminality and permanent liminality may only partially describe the situation in which Gypsies living in Hungary find themselves upon starting intellectual careers. The anthropological meaning of liminality is that the transient nature of this state of existence is temporary, and the situation itself, as well as the social condition associated with it, necessarily ceases to exist. Contrarily, the concept and meaning of “intermediate exposure” emphasize that, in the light of the careers of numerous intellectuals of Roma origin, this state of being is not temporary, and the condition of being trapped between different social expectations and oftentimes systems of prejudices cannot be overcome. While liminality has a start and an end

³⁰ Gennep cited by Szakolczai 2015: 5.

³¹ Liminal conditions can be ritually regulated trials, as in the case of rite of passage ceremonies, or simply a series of ritualized events as, in most cultures, the observance of cultural rules around marriage.

³² Gulyás 2021: 8.

point, and those affected can pass through this stage as soon as they are incorporated, “intermediate exposure” – at least, as research experience reflects this – is a permanent state.³³ The life path of the young person of Roma origin presented in this study, who is a college graduate and an intellectual, taking a white-collar career path, highlights the duality that is called the life experience of neither belonging here nor there, while the socio-cultural characteristics that make up the general circumstances of the situation allow a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon. Ultimately, this topic could be discussed and sorted out as a general obstacle to the social integration of Roma intellectuals. Based on our professional experience, it can be stated that, in order to eliminate “intermediate exposure” in the phase of liminality, attendance and assistance from the majority society is required. Help or assistance here means giving young college graduates of Roma origin the opportunity to prove themselves on the labor market and, at the same time, a chance to become full members of society while preserving elements of their own culture. In addition, it is equally important that they should arrange their relations with their own original environment in such a way that their change of status and role would not evoke a voice of rejection on the part of said environment, but would allow them to see the opportunity offered by the role model.

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³³ A comprehensive theoretical discussion of this topic would certainly go beyond the scope of this study.

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