



U K R A I N E

III. 1
Locations of Slovak Roma
in Transcarpathian Ukraine

3.12

'Slovak Roma' in Transcarpathian Ukraine

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Transcarpathian Ukraine is a region with the highest proportion of Roma in Ukraine. One of the local ethnolinguistic groups is represented by Slovak Roma who live in western Transcarpathia in an area adjacent to the Slovak border and in particular in the city of Uzhhorod. Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia can be characterised by a common dialect that is closely related to Romani dialects of eastern Slovakia, as well as by a sense of kinship links to Roma in Slovakia. After the introductory information on the Roma in Transcarpathia in general and on the Slovak Roma in particular, the article focuses on family and occupational traditions of the Transcarpathian Slovak Roma and briefly discusses civic engagement of their representatives.

ROMA IN TRANSCARPATHIAN UKRAINE

Transcarpathian Ukraine, in Ukrainian *Zakarpattja* ('Transcarpathia') or *Zakarpats'ka oblast'* ('Transcarpathian region'), is the smallest and westernmost region and administrative unit of Ukraine, and one with the highest proportion of the Romani population. According to the Ukrainian census from 2001, the number of Roma amounted to 47,587 in the whole of Ukraine, and to 14,004 in the Transcarpathian region (ERRC 2006: 11). Although these numbers are generally considered underestimated and the actual number of Roma in Transcarpathia may be up to 50 thousand people (Yemets and Diachenko 1993; Navrotska 2013: 135), they indicate that almost one third of Roma in Ukraine live in Transcarpathia.

Transcarpathia is a distinct region within Ukraine, with its specific political history, diverse ethnical composition, as well as distinctive linguistic and sociocultural characteristics. It was united with Ukraine only after the Second World War. In earlier times, its territory was mostly part of the Kingdom of Hungary except in the interwar period when it was incorporated into Czechoslovakia and called *Subcarpathian Rus'*. These historical circumstances cast light on why the Romani population of Transcarpathia is linguistically and culturally related to Roma living in neighbouring countries, especially to those in Slovakia and Hungary, rather than to Roma in other regions of Ukraine.

Most Transcarpathian Roma have been sedentary for centuries, living in specific 'Gypsy settlements' locally called

III. 2

Roma of Subcarpathian Rus' in the
interwar Czechoslovak period

(historical postcard)



III. 3

The Romani settlement in the Shakhta neighbourhood
of Uzhhorod in the interwar Czechoslovak period

(historical postcard)



tabory. These settlements are situated on the outskirts of villages or form distinct neighbourhoods within towns, and some of them are relatively segregated. Every settlement has an elected representative called *baron* or *birov*, who advocates for the local Romani community and mediates between Roma and official institutions.

Still, the Romani population of Transcarpathian Ukraine is not homogeneous. Its diversity is based on various linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic aspects that also play a role in the perception of identity and subethnic boundaries. An essential identity-forming factor is the native and intra-community language, which can therefore serve as the basic criterion of an ethnolinguistic classification of Transcarpathian Roma. Since most Roma in Transcarpathia do not speak Romani, we will present a survey of non-Romani-speaking groups first, before shifting our attention to those who speak Romani.

Most Roma in Transcarpathia (62.4% according to the 2001 census) speak Hungarian as their first language. Hungarian-speaking Roma inhabit the southern and southwestern lowlands close to the border with Hungary, which is an area with the highest concentration of Roma in Transcarpathia, including regionally important towns such as Mukachevo (see Braun, Csernicskó and Molnár 2010). Another group of Roma whose mother tongue is other than Romani is represented by speakers of local East Slavic (Ukrainian) dialects. Ukrainian-speaking Roma constitute 16.7% in the 2001 census data, and their settlements are mostly found in rural areas and valleys of the Carpathian Mountains. Finally, there is a small group of traditionally Romanian-speaking Roma, who are called *Volochy* ('Wallachians') and can be compared to the Boyash of Central Europe. They have earned their livelihood by producing wooden utensils, and their settlements are scattered in various places of western and central Transcarpathia.

A minority of Roma in Transcarpathian Ukraine speak a dialect of Romani. The 2001 census data identified 20.5%

Romani speakers in the Romani population of Transcarpathia (Braun, Csernicskó and Molnár 2010: 16, 24). Romani-speaking Roma can further be divided according to dialectological criteria into those who speak North Vlax Romani and those who speak North Central Romani, two of the major Romani dialect branches (see Matras 2002; Boretzky and Iglá 2004). North Vlax communities, such as the Cerhari and the Lovari, reside in several locations of southern and eastern Transcarpathia, such as Pidvynohradiv, Korolevo, Khust and Rakhiv (Kovalcsik 2000; Cherenkov 2008: 494). Roma who speak North Central Romani are linguistically and culturally related to Roma in eastern Slovakia, and some of them even refer to themselves as 'Slovak Roma'. They reside in western Transcarpathia in an area contiguous to the border with Slovakia and are in the focus of the present article.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SLOVAK ROMA IN TRANSCARPATIA

Slovak Roma live in four locations of western Transcarpathia: Uzhhorod, the administrative centre of Transcarpathia at the border with Slovakia; Perechyn, a small district town to the north of Uzhhorod; Khudlovo, a village to the east of Uzhhorod; and the townlet Serednie, halfway between Uzhhorod and Mukachevo, further east. The biggest location is Uzhhorod, where Roma live in several settlements mostly in northern and eastern neighbourhoods (Shakhta and Radvanka, respectively). The number of Uzhhorod Roma amounts to a couple of thousand people (1,705 Roma according to the 2001 census, but actually at least twice as much), while in the other locations the number of Roma is significantly lower.

Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia have a sense of common identity that is primarily based on their shared Romani dialect. This dialect, which is not spoken elsewhere in Transcarpathia, is named by linguists 'Uzh Romani', after the historical Uzh county (*Ung vármegye*), which existed in this area

III. 4

A primary school for Romani children in the Shakhta neighbourhood of Uzhhorod, in operation since 1926

(photo by Michael Beníšek)



III. 5

An evangelical sermon led by the Romani pastor Viktor Fontosh in the Radvanka neighbourhood of Uzhhorod

(church archive)



during the Kingdom of Hungary, and the territory of which is now divided between Slovakia and Ukraine. Accordingly, Western Uzh Romani refers to varieties spoken by Roma in the Slovak part of the historical county, while the varieties spoken now in Ukraine are called Eastern Uzh Romani (Beníšek 2017). Uzh Romani is part of the dialect continuum of the North Central branch of Romani dialects, with its geographical core in Slovakia, and with Uzh Romani representing one of eastern margins of this continuum. In all four locations, Uzhhorod, Perechyn, Khudlovo and Serednie, Romani is a vital means of intragroup communication and is still transmitted to children. In addition to Romani, Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia speak the local Ukrainian dialect and Russian, and many of them also speak Hungarian to various degrees of competence. The oldest generation in Uzhhorod and members of several families also speak Slovak.

Along with the common dialect, another factor through which Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia construe their identity is awareness of historical kinship links to Roma who now live in eastern Slovakia, which is also reflected in common surnames of Roma on both sides of the border. In some Uzhhorod families, contacts with East Slovak Roma, in particular with relatives from the Slovak village Pavlovce nad Uhom, are still vitally maintained. Kinship to Roma in Slovakia is also remembered by Roma in Perechyn and by some Roma in Khudlovo and Serednie, where it is generally perceived to belong to the distant past, however. Thus, the designation *Slovākika* (or *Slovā'ika*) Roma 'Slovak Roma' is a self-appellation that is used to emphasise both linguistic and kinship affiliation with Roma in Slovakia. It is a frequent autonym in Uzhhorod and Perechyn, while rarer in Khudlovo and Serednie. Some Roma in Uzhhorod also claim partial Lovari ancestry and sporadically use the ethnonym *Lovāra* for themselves even though they do not speak the Lovari (North Vlax) dialect. There is evidence that a small number of the Lovari settled in Uzhhorod in the past and assimilated

linguistically and culturally into the community of Slovak Roma. Furthermore, there is a strong sense of local identity, reflected in location attributes used for internal classification, e.g. *Ungvārakere Roma* 'Roma of Uzhhorod', *Radvankakere Roma* 'Roma of Radvanka (neighbourhood of Uzhhorod)', *Xudlovskere Roma* 'Roma of Khudlovo', etc. Other common appellations differentiate in a more general way between *Fovrikane Roma* (also *Fovrotikane Roma*) 'urban Roma', referring to Roma in Uzhhorod, and *Gāvutune Roma* 'rural Roma', referring to Roma outside Uzhhorod.

Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia have traditionally been Roman Catholics, like local Slovak and Hungarian people (hence the common designation of the Roman Catholic Church as *ungriko khangejri*, literally 'Hungarian Church', in Eastern Uzh Romani). Only few Roma (mostly in Khudlovo) have converted to the Byzantine-rite churches of the local Slavic inhabitants, i.e. either to the Greek Catholic Church or to the Orthodox Church (together referred to as *rusiko khangejri* 'East Slavic Church'). While the religious attachment to these denominations is rather formal and Roma do not attend church services regularly, a completely different situation is encountered among recent converts to evangelicalism. Since the 1990s, neo-Protestant and evangelical forms of faith, such as Adventism, Baptist Christianity, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement, have become very popular among Roma and are nowadays a prominent part of religious life in Romani settlements.

FAMILY LIFE AND MAJOR EVENTS

Family (called either *čalādos* or *simja* in Eastern Uzh Romani) is of central importance for Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia. It is a fundamental source of socioeconomic, psychological and practical support and the closest network of mutual solidarity. It comprises people who are bonded by blood or marriage relations and share a common life space. Importantly, what Roma

III. 6

A street in the Romani settlement in Perechyn

(photo by Michael Beníšek)



III. 7

A nuclear family on a horse carriage (*verdán*) in Perechyn

(photo by Michael Beníšek)



usually understand as a family is an extended family rather than a nuclear family. Roma also often maintain contact with more distant relatives within their kin (*fajtos* or *fajta*), where a distinction is always made between the matrilineal side (*o fajtos pal la dakeri sejra*) and the patrilineal side (*o fajtos pal le dadeskeri sejra*).

The residence of a Romani family is usually patrilineal. The wife (*romňi*) marries into the family of her husband (*rom*) and adopts the social role of a daughter-in-law (*bovri*), which is based on her incorporation into her husband's family and subjection to expectations and practices of her parents-in-law (*sasuj* 'mother-in-law', *sastro* 'father-in-law'). However, matrilocal marriages, when the husband lives with his wife at her parents' place as a son-in-law (*džamutro*), also occur; they are especially common for men with a lower social or socio-economic status. Members of a single extended family usually live in one place in several small or mid-sized houses situated around a common courtyard. The courtyard (*dvovra* or *drovra*) is a place of vivid family life, gatherings and interactions. A nuclear family often inhabits a single house, while close relatives such as siblings (*phral* 'brother', *pheň* 'sister') and grandparents (*papus* 'grandfather', *baba* 'grandmother') may live in separate houses within the same courtyard, but multi-generational houses of parents, children and grandparents also occur. Roma often pay visits to each other, be it family members, friends or just neighbours, and visits do not need to be announced in advance. An emphasis is always put on generous hospitality as a way of showing respect towards visitors, and hosts are obliged to entertain the guests with as much treat as possible.

In the past, almost every marriage was arranged by relatives, including the selection of the bride (*terňi*) and groom (*terno*), while mutual love played no role. Although this tradition is gone, the consent of parents is still expected for young people wanting to marry. When parents are opposed to the marriage, the youngsters often elope for several days and return as

a couple afterwards. Parents then have to decide whether to arrange a wedding, but more frequently than not the marriage is approved.

The prospective marriage is usually announced by a simple engagement ceremony (*mangavipen*), which takes place at the girl's home. The boy, accompanied by his parents and other relatives, is received by the girl's parents and expresses his wish to get engaged to their daughter. Subsequently, the parents of the engaged couple arrange the date of the wedding and discuss practical issues of its organisation. The preparation of the wedding is an issue for the whole families, and parents of the fiancés are often willing to take big loans to organise as big a wedding as possible. Although its actual realisation always depends on the economic situation of the families, emphasis is put on the abundance of food served during the wedding celebration.

The wedding (*bijav*) is connected with several rituals and practices. On the day of the wedding, the groom enters the bride's house and asks her family to show the bride, who remains hidden at the time. The family pretends to demand ransom money for showing the bride and instead of her, they show him other girls. The groom responds that the offered girls are not his fiancée and insists on the real bride, who is finally brought out after the groom symbolically shows money. Then, he gives the bride a bouquet, and the wedding may continue with vows in a church, photo sessions and a cheerful celebration. Another custom occurs during the night celebration. The bride is redressed into a traditional costume, and each male guest dances with her for money, throwing the money into a plate. The last dancer is her new husband, who subsequently takes his wife, and both escape from the scene for some time.

Many Roma do not legalise the marriage in local administrative bodies, and children born in such officially unrecognised marriages usually have the mother's surname. Moreover, many young Roma do not arrange weddings at all anymore and begin to live together after a simple engagement or even shortly

III. 8

A Romani wedding banquet
in Uzhhorod

(photo by Erik Adam)



III. 9

The Romani restaurant 'Romani Yag'
in Uzhhorod

(photo by Michael Beníšek)



after they get acquainted. However, there is still a prevailing attitude that the Romani girl should remain chaste until she has a serious relationship, and parents are closely watching their daughter in order not to lose the family honour. In contrast to some other Romani groups, there is no tradition of bride price among Slovak Roma.

Newlyweds then may become parents (*daj* or *mama* 'mother', *dad* or *apos* 'father') to a child (*ča* 'son', *čaj* 'daughter'). Parents endeavour to baptise their child as soon as possible. Only in some families that have recently converted to evangelical denominations has the tradition of child baptism been abandoned. The process of baptism has two parts that occur on the same day: the official baptism ceremony (*bolavipen* or *bolavišāgos*) in a church and the christening party (*bovňa*), which takes place the same evening and night either in a restaurant or at home. While the church ceremony is only attended by the parents and godparents, or by a few other close relatives, the evening party has numerous guests from the family, relatives, friends, neighbours. Certain customs are kept at fixed times on the baptism day. For example, upon arriving home from the church, the baby is symbolically put on the threshold of the door by the main godfather with the words: 'We took away an unbaptised one and brought back a baptised one'. The christening party is also initiated by the first godfather with a ceremonial speech, blessing and a ritual toast. As in similar events, abundance of meals and beverages is a necessity.

Baptism creates a basis for fictive kinship that involves the relationship between the godchild's family and godparents, as well as the relationship between the godparents themselves. Every child has a pair of godparents (*kresno dad* or *kresno* 'godfather' and *kresno daj* or *kresna* 'godmother'), and the number of such pairs for a single child may be as high as seven, which means that a child may have up to fourteen godparents, sometimes even more. However, there is always one couple that acts as the main pair of godparents and has the main duties towards the child and his family in the years to come. The

godchild is called *kresno čha* (godson) and *kresno čaj* (goddaughter) by his or her godparents. Godparents should also adopt the roles of parents in case the blood parents are not able to care for their children for various reasons, but in practice other members of the extended family usually take over parental duties in such situations. The relation between godparents and the godchild's parents is referred to as *kirvipen* or *kirvišāgos*; the godfather and child's father call each other *kirvo*, and the godmother and child's mother call each other *kirvi*. Both these terms are also used by the godparents themselves in addressing each other. Godparents are sought within the Romani community as well as from outside. The invitation to become a godparent is an expression of honour for the invited, and the refusal of godparenthood is considered a sin.

Another major family event is connected with the decrease of a family member. During the first three days after a person passes away, people come to the house of the deceased to attend the vigil for the dead soul (*vārta*). The vigil is a feast of commemoration, when attenders talk and recall moments in the life of the deceased. They also play special games that are exclusively performed during such occasions, and men play cards. The three-day vigil is followed by the funeral (*pārušāgos*). Numerous people set out on the journey to accompany the dead person to the cemetery. Either the whole journey or the final part of it takes place on foot with musicians in the front performing traditional funeral melodies and the favourite songs of the deceased. After the funeral, memorial tables are set up on certain fixed days (nine days, forty days and a year later) in the house of the deceased. Roma do not cremate their dead.

SOCIOECONOMIC LIFE

Although the prevailing socioeconomic status of Roma in Transcarpathia is rather low in comparison to the non-Romani population, the economic situation of Slovak Roma in Trans-

III. 10

A basket weaver
in Khudlovo

(photo by Lukáš Houdek)



III. 11

Houses of Roma
in Khudlovo

(photo by Lukáš Houdek)



carpathia is diverse. It comprises a range from poverty-stricken families living in destitution to prosperous households with a very decent standard of living. The economic situation has also been subject to alteration, depending on the interaction of various factors such as the place of residence, occupation and political situation. Uzhhorod as a city provides more economic opportunities and has therefore always had a higher average socioeconomic status of local Roma and a higher percentage of better-off people than the countryside. The Roma with the highest economic and social status traditionally included musicians, but some other occupations, in particular those connected with trading, have sometimes also contributed to the wealth of individual families. As for political factors, the socioeconomic situation of many Roma improved in Soviet times but deteriorated after the transition to market economy, when numerous working opportunities were lost. An important current factor of the socioeconomic status is the educational level, which played no role for Roma in the past. The lifestyle of educated Roma who have highly qualified jobs, such as lawyers, journalists, social workers and officers in public service, often heads in one of two directions: they either renounce their Romani origin and assimilate into the non-Romani society or represent a new Romani elite involved in various civic activities.

There has been a broad array of traditional economic activities, some of which are preserved until today. The most prestigious and, to some degree, most profitable occupation was formerly connected with music. Slovak Roma in Transcarpathia provided musical performances in restaurants, bars and at various events, and some of the musicians became renowned far beyond Transcarpathia (see Kandra-Horváth and Horváth 2011). Still, eminent musicians always formed a minority, and most Roma were involved in the small-scale production of goods, such as bricks and charcoal for blacksmiths and especially adobes (unburnt clay bricks). Ado-

bes, called *val'ki* in Eastern Uzh Romani, have until recently largely been used in building houses in Transcarpathia and beyond, and Roma have been their main producers in the local context. This kind of production was also the main reason of seasonal working migration to Russia and Kazakhstan in the Soviet period. Adobe-making has been partly maintained until these days even though its significance has declined in a shift to other building materials. Another common craft still practiced by some Roma in rural locations is basket weaving and broom making. Women often participated in these activities even though their primary role has traditionally been looking after children and households. Some women in the past also produced artificial flowers and wreaths or practised embroidery. Roma have also often been engaged in small-scale trade, including the local cross-border trade with food. Nowadays, many Roma do trade in local markets, for example with clothing, and some deal in horses. Horses still represent a palpable element of Romani settlements in Transcarpathia, even in towns, and are widely used for transportation of goods and people in carriages.

A common present-day activity of less prosperous Roma is the collection of scrap and seasonal berry and mushroom picking, while many women work as charwomen and street cleaners. Some Roma also work as janitors and watchmen. Certain better-off families run pubs, shops and similar establishments or provide unofficial monetary loans to other Roma, often with high interest rates, which contributes to the economic divide between richer loan-givers and poorer loan-takers. The present socioeconomic life is also considerably affected by working migration to the European Union. Many Roma travel to Central European countries, such as Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia, as part of the widespread migration of people from Transcarpathian Ukraine to do construction works, harvesting or labour in factories. In addition to that, working migration to the United Kingdom, less frequently to

III. 12

A house of Roma
in Uzhhorod

(photo by Viktor Chovka)



III. 13

Aladar Adam, a representative (*baron/birov*) of Uzhhorod
Roma and civic activist from a family of eminent musicians

(family archive)



other West European countries, has developed recently and continues.

CIVIC ACTIVITIES

The traditional representation of Romani settlements through the institution of local elders (*baron, biro*) has in recent years merged with the civic engagement through non-governmental organisations. Although many associations of local importance have emerged in various locations, the centre of the Romani civic movement in Transcarpathian Ukraine has become Uzhhorod. In the 1990s a new cultural and political elite arose here in families of professional musicians, who traditionally had the highest social status among local Roma (cf. Helbig 2005: 160–168). Romani NGOs based in Uzhhorod have been involved in issues related to Roma on the local, regional, state as well as international levels and have covered an array of public activities of cultural, social, educational and political nature.

The first non-governmental organisation of Roma in Uzhhorod was founded on 28 May 1990 under the name 'Roma'. After its one-year activity on the city level, it was succeeded by an association of the same name whose operation was extended to the whole of the Transcarpathian region. The organisation was led by two foremost representatives of Uzhhorod Roma, Aladar Adam and Yosip Adam. In 1993, Aladar Adam established his own association 'Romani Yag' (from Romani *romaňi jag* 'Romani fire'), which opened branch offices across Transcarpathia and grew into the dominant Romani organisation of the region. Its activities have embraced various aims, such as support, dissemination and popularisation of Romani culture, humanitarian aid and assistance to poor families, preparation and support of Romani children in the educational process and human rights protection and juridical assistance of Roma in legal issues. Between

1999 and 2007 the organisation published the newspaper 'Romani Yag', along with several books and magazines. The organisation also initiated a nursery school for Romani children in Uzhhorod and participated in the filming of documentaries on Transcarpathian Roma. Besides the 'Romani Yag' association there was a popular folk ensemble of the same name in the 1990s led by Ernest Buchko, who in 1997 was awarded the title 'Honoured Worker of Arts of Ukraine'.

Certain civic associations have specifically been connected with the development and promotion of the musical art of Transcarpathian Roma in modern conditions. The most active organisation in this respect has been 'Lautari' ('Musicians') founded by the Romani jazz composer Villi Pap senior. 'Lautari' established a Romani theatre in Uzhhorod in early 2000s, but the financial and staff shortage did not allow its continuation. At present, the association organises regular festivals, such as the International Romani Festival of Jazz Art 'Pap Jazz Fest', and also works towards musical and theatrical instruction and support of gifted Romani children.

Civic activities have been further intensified since 2010 with new possibilities of promotion through the internet and social media. One of the most active associations today (2018) is the 'Transcarpathian regional Romani association "Romani cherkhen"' (from Romani *romaňi čerxeň* 'Romani star'), which mostly helps Roma with various legal and administrative issues. Its head, Myroslav Horvat, is a Rom from Uzhhorod who graduated from the local university in Political sciences and was elected into the Uzhhorod city council in 2015. Furthermore, an increasing number of young Roma are becoming involved in civic movements. The youth association 'Pativ' (*paťiv* 'honour, dignity'), headed by the journalist Viktor Chovka, strives to empower and motivate young Roma to actively participate in community life, and is also active in the media to fight prejudice

III. 14

A musical training session of young Roma
in Uzhhorod led by Villi Pap junior

(photo by Eduard Pap)



III. 15

A view from the Romani settlement
in Perechyn to the surrounding hills

(photo by Michael Beníšek)



and hatred by disseminating balanced and unbiased information about Roma. An important role in this respect is also played by the TV programme 'Romano dzhivipen' (*romano dživipen* 'Romani life'), which has been broadcasted on the regional TV channel since 2008. Finally, there has been a close cooperation of local activists with academics that led

to the launching of the Romani Studies programme at Uzhhorod National University in 2016. Within this programme, courses on Romani history, culture, society and politics are offered to university students. In this way, representatives of Romani NGOs take an active role in developing a better understanding of Roma within Transcarpathian society.

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