Identity Resources for Positive Adaptation of Roma Ethnic Minority Youth in Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Italy, Kosovo and Romania

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Abstract

This chapter applies a strengths-based, positive youth development (PYD) perspective of adolescence by investigating ethnic and national identity resources underlying positive adaptation in Roma minority youth in Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Kosovo, Italy and Romania. In all countries, Roma are traditionally marginalized and high risk group for compromised well-being. Participants were 513 Roma minority adolescents (age: M = 15.21 years, SD = 1.59) who filled in self-reports on Roma ethnic and national identity and self-esteem. Results of separate within group comparisons indicated that Roma in the Czech Republic, Kosovo and Italy showed higher endorsement of Roma ethnic than national identity, whereas national identity was stronger for youth in Romania and Albania. We also found positive effects of Roma identity on self-esteem for youth in the Czech Republic, whereas national identity was positively associated with self-esteem for Roma in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. We suggest that the salience of ethnic and national identities for Roma is moderated by contextual conditions of countries hosting Roma and that these conditions are important factors in promoting their optimal adaptation.

Keywords: Ethnic and national identity, Roma adolescents, well-being, Bulgaria, Albania, the Czech Republic, Kosovo, Italy, Romania

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Roma are Europe's largest and most vulnerable minority, currently making up nearly 12 million people, a figure that is projected to grow in the coming years because of their relatively high birth rates (Council of Europe, 2010). Despite their relevance in size and demographic increase, Roma have traditionally been subjected to severe marginalization and therefore represent the most oppressed ethnic minority in Europe (European Commission, 2013). The detrimental life conditions and chances of Roma youth in this part of the world are rooted in historic ethnic tensions and a policy of assimilation during the communist rule (major Roma settlement is in countries of the former communist bloc such as Romania, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria). With this context in mind, we examine Roma youth through a strengths-based, positive youth development (PYD) perspective of adolescence. In so doing, we investigate ethnic and national identity resources underlying positive adaptation in Roma youth in Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Kosovo, Italy and Romania. In all countries, Roma represent large national minority group, traditionally marginalized and repeatedly recognized to be those most in need of support. In fact, improving life conditions of Roma communities across Europe is one of the foremost policy issues in the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (European Commission, 2011). We address this urgent issue by targeting positive adaptation among Roma and ways to derive optimal well-being for youth in contrast to a deficit oriented approach that focuses on how they are problematic and lag behind their peers from the majority populations. As explained further in more detail, policies toward Roma differ among these countries, with the Czech Republic and Romania being most effective in implementing integration strategies followed by Kosovo, Albania, Italy and Bulgaria. We are interested in differences in the current contextual conditions across all countries under investigation and in ramifications of these differences for identity and well-being of Roma youth. We also extend a prior line of research (Dimitrova et al., 2013; 2014) by examining multiple identity resources of Roma to outline mechanisms to enhance well-being in these youth.

Traditional Frameworks on Ethnic and National Identity

Developmental theory and research has shown that establishing a coherent sense of identity is a core developmental task with achievement (firm commitment after identity exploration) and diffusion (neither engagement in exploration nor commitment) proposed as polar points of this development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Ethnic minority youth have to navigate and achieve multiple social identities (e.g., ethnic, national) as they live in a multicultural environment with the ability to identify with different social reference groups (Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011). In fact, both social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization theories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) acknowledge the importance of societal context for identity formation, particularly for ethnic minority groups. By building on these theoretical premises, we set out to investigate two specific types of social identity referring to heritage ethnic and national host culture. Ethnic identity is the process of maintaining positive attitudes toward specific ethnic group (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Ong, 2007) and has been consistently shown to relate positively to psychological well-being of youth (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wiesskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009). National identity concerns the degree of identification with the (host) culture of settlement, including feelings of belonging and commitment to the host society where an ethnic minority group lives (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

Interactions among ethnic and national identities have been conceptualized by the most widely applied model of acculturation, referring to a two-dimensional process in which ethnic heritage culture maintenance and national host culture adoption are negotiated. Therefore, the combination of both preserving one's ethnic heritage culture and adopting the national culture (labeled integration) is the most beneficial for minority groups in terms of positive adaptation (Berry, 1997). Additional models have provided useful tools to interpret the complexity of relations between ethnic and national identity. The Rejection-Identification Model suggests that people who belong to ethnic minority groups perceive that others will reject them on the basis of their group

membership, and therefore identify more strongly with own group to derive psychological well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999). The Rejection Dis-identification Model states that members of ethnic minority groups distance themselves from people who reject them on the basis of their group memberships (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Solheim, 2009). The latter model also suggests that people who are rejected are less likely to identify with their host country. Based on these theoretical premises, we set out to assess both ethnic and national identity as potential resources of optimal psychological outcomes among understudied Roma groups in six European countries. Brief descriptions of Roma groups in these countries are presented below.

The Roma Minority

The Roma population across Europe ranges from seven to twelve million people (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010). They are Europe's largest and fastest growing ethnic minority, settled mainly in Central and Eastern Europe (Vermeersch & Ram, 2009). Yet, alongside these similarities, differences in Roma populations and their integration exist among all six countries investigated here.

Albania. Roma estimates in Albania range from 1,300 up to 120,000 out of the 3.4 million national population (Koinova, 2000). Roma in Albania are officially recognized as an ethnic-linguistic minority that has a judicial status. Yet, their situation is difficult with high rate of unemployment and poor living conditions. Roma have weak political representation and do not receive education in their mother-tongue. In 2006, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports adopted an action plan for Roma in the fields of culture, youth and sports to raise awareness of Romani traditions and create equal opportunities for the integration of Roma youth in the society (Council of Europe, 2007).

Bulgaria. Roma estimates in Bulgaria range between 325,000 and 800,000 people out of the national population of nearly 7 million (National Statistics Institute, 2011). Bulgaria has a historical record of ethnic tensions with its national ethnic minorities that experienced severe assimilation campaigns during the communist rule. In contrast to other countries, Bulgaria adopted a policy of

strict repression of ethnic identity of Roma and banning the use of their Roma language (Csepeli & Simon, 2004). Today, official policies targeting the improvement of Roma conditions are scarce and a political will is lacking to factually improve their situation (Civil Society Monitoring Report Bulgaria, 2013).

The Czech Republic. Census data report estimates between 150,000 and 400,000 Roma in the Czech Republic (European Commission, 2013; Romea, 2013). They are nationally recognized minority and their needs are addressed by social policy measures supporting the Roma language, culture, and identity (Civil Society Monitoring Report Czech Republic, 2013). The development of these measures is the responsibility of the Department for Human Rights and Minorities Protection, especially the Council for Roma Community Affairs, being composed by 15 Roma delegates who contribute to formulate new policies for Roma.

Italy. There are between 120,000 and 180,000 Roma out of the total of 65 million Italian population mostly living in Central and Southern Italy (Council of Europe, 2013). About half of them are Italian citizens and belong to groups that have lived in Italy for centuries. Around 35,000 Roma migrated to Italy from the Balkans, with recent arrivals of immigrants estimated to number about 50,000 people (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2012). Italy is the European country with the higher anti-Roma sentiments. As reported by the Pew Research Center (2014), the majority of Italians (85%) have unfavorable opinions of Roma who live in their country. This is the result of specific policies toward Roma communities that have generated tremendous controversy in recent years as well as a general uncertain climate towards immigration and diversity.

Kosovo. Roma estimates are approximately 40,000 people out of the 2 million national population (Tcherenkov & Laderich, 2004). Roma are the most vulnerable group that after the war in Kosovo either remained marginalized or emigrated. Currently, there is a government institutional plan for Roma integration in areas of education, employment, health, and social affairs. Yet, the

lack or non-provision of financial resources and the devastating postwar reality had weakened the efficacy of these actions (European Roma Rights Centre, 2011).

Romania. According to data provided by the latest Census, Roma living in Romania are 622,000 people out of 20,122,000 total population (National Institute of Statistics Romania, 2011). Roma are a national minority with representation in public and political life but still socially and economically most disadvantaged group in the country. Yet, Romania was among the first to sign the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) in line with the political commitment by European governments to eliminate discrimination against Roma and promote the Strategy of Inclusion of the Roma Minority for the period 2012-2020. Despite that the National Agency for Roma (NAR) is responsible for applying measures for the improvement of Roma conditions has been established, no action plan of the Decade has been adopted by the Romanian government (Civil Society Monitoring on the Implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy and Decade Action Plan in 2012 in Romania, 2013).

In summary, policies toward Roma differ among the countries investigated here, with the Czech Republic and Romania being slightly more active in Roma integration policy, followed by Albania, Italy, Kosovo, and Bulgaria. Although it is not easy to directly assess implications of such contextual diversity for youth, we investigated whether there might be differences in Roma youth's identity and well-being across countries.

Aims and Hypotheses

The present study investigated ethnic and national identity and well-being in terms of self-esteem in Roma adolescents across six European countries by testing the following hypotheses. First, we expected mean level differences in ethnic and national identity within the Roma samples, such that Roma ethnic identity would be more endorsed by Roma youth in countries with more explicit integration policies (e.g., The Czech Republic and Romania) (Hypothesis 1a) and that national identity would be more endorsed by Roma youth in countries with more assimilation policies and/or lack of effective policies toward Roma integration (e.g., Bulgaria, Albania, Italy and

Kosovo) (Hypothesis 1b). Second, in concordance with previous findings (Dimitrova et al., 2015), we expected specific associations among Roma ethnic and national identities and self-esteem across countries. We hypothesized a positive effect of Roma ethnic identity on self-esteem for Roma youth in countries with more pronounced integration policies (Hypothesis 2a). National identity on the other hand was expected to be positively related to self-esteem in countries with more assimilation pressure and anti-Roma sentiments (e.g., Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, and Italy) (Hypothesis 2b).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data for this study were drawn from a larger study designed to examine contextual predictors of well-being and positive adaptation among adolescents with Roma background in six European countries. Participants were 513 adolescents with Roma background (age: M = 15.21 years, SD = 1.59) of whom 90 in Albania, 91 in Bulgaria, 99 in the Czech Republic, 98 in Italy, 78 in Kosovo, and 57 in Romania (see Table 1). Participants were recruited from public schools in major towns with a large number of Roma in Albania (Tirana, Durrës, and Elbasan), Bulgaria (Simeonovgrad, Harmanli, and Haskovo), the Czech Republic (Ostrava, Brno), Kosovo (Pristina), Italy (Palermo) and Romania (Sibiu, Hunedoara, and Prahova). Prior to data collection, local school authorities were contacted and informed about the purpose and methods of the study to acquire their consent. Upon agreement by the schools to take part in the study, parental and student consent was obtained. Students filled out the questionnaire during regular school hours.

Measures

Socio-demographics. Participants in all countries provided information on their ethnicity, age, socio-economic status (SES; based on participants' parental education) and gender.

Identity. Identity measures for the present study have been previously used in work with Roma youth to comprehensively assess ethnic and national identity (Dimitrova et al., 2013; 2014). Respondents were asked to indicate their answers using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. Items were scored so that higher scores indicated greater

levels of ethnic and national identity endorsement, respectively. The *Roma Ethnic Identity Scale* contained items, such as "I see myself as Roma", "I feel strongly connected to Roma people", "I am proud to be a member of the Roma community". The scale had excellent internal consistencies with values between .83 and .97 across Roma samples. The *National Identity Scale* included items like "I see myself as Bulgarian/Czech/Albanian/Italian/Romanian", "I feel strongly connected to Bulgarian/Czech/Albanian/Italian/Romanian people" and "I am proud to be a member of the Bulgarian/Czech/Albanian/Italian/Romanian community". The internal consistencies ranged from .74 to .96 across Roma samples.

Well-Being. We used the Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) to measure youth self-esteem or how participants value themselves on a 4-point Likert scale from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. Sample items were "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I am able to do things as well as most other people". Items were scored so that higher scores indicated greater levels of self-esteem. The internal consistencies ranged from .70 to .81 across Roma samples.

Results

Preliminary analyses tested for cross-cultural equivalence across groups. Structural equivalence was evaluated with Tucker's phi (above .90 as acceptable and above .95 excellent) (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997) and checked through comparing each group factor solution. The values of Tucker's phi across Roma groups ranged from .99 to 1.00 for Roma identity, from .98 to 1.00 for national identity, and from .99 to 1.00 for self-esteem. We can conclude that all groups showed very good structural equivalence and therefore can be compared.

The first set of hypotheses refers to mean level difference between ethnic and national identities across samples. We applied paired samples t-test for each Roma group that showed results partially in agreement with expectations. As expected, Roma identity was stronger than national identity for adolescents in the Czech Republic, t(98) = 6.89, p < .001. The same pattern was found for youth in Kosovo [t(77) = 2.18, p < .05] and Italy, t(97) = 14.50, p < .001. Results also showed

that national compared to Roma ethnic identity was stronger for youth in Romania [t(56) = 20.63, p < .001] and Albania, t(89) = 8.82, p < .001. No significant difference emerged in the Bulgarian group, t(90) = 1.56, p = .12. In addition, we report Cohen's d values as effect sizes for comparisons among identity domains (Roma and national identity) in each group (Sánchez-Meca & Marín-Martínez, 2010). The interpretation of Cohen's d was as follows: 0.20 considered a small effect, 0.50 a medium effect, and 0.80 a large effect (Cohen, 1988; DeCoster, 2004). As can be seen in Table 1, effects of identity comparisons were mostly medium or large in size.

According to the second set of hypotheses, we expected specific associations among all identities and self-esteem across groups. Table 2 presents bivariate Pearson correlations among all study variables for Roma youth in each country. As can be seen there, results are partially in line with expectations and this was mostly the case for the association between ethnic identity and well-being for Roma youth in the Czech Republic (in line with Hypothesis 2a), r(99) = .35, p < .001. Roma ethnic identity showed no significant correlations with self-esteem in Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, Kosovo and Romania. On the other hand, national identity was significantly and positively related to self-esteem for youth in Albania [r(90) = .61, p < .001], Bulgaria [r(91) = .42, p < .001], and Romania [r(57) = .47, p < .001], whereas no such relations emerged for the Czech Republic, Kosovo and Italy.

Finally, the effects of identity variables on well-being outcomes were examined in a series of linear regression models with Roma and national identity as independent factors, self-esteem as outcome variable and SES, age and gender as the covariate variables. The results showed significant positive effects of Roma identity on self-esteem for youth in the Czech Republic only (β = .30, p < .001). National identity was positively related to self-esteem in Albania (β = .42, p < .001), Bulgaria (β = .28, p < .001), and Romania, β = .47, p < .001.

Discussion

The objective of this chapter was to compare how ethnic and national identities are related to well-being in Roma adolescents living in Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Italy, Kosovo, and

Romania. Policies and support available to Roma communities to improve their conditions vary across these countries, with the Czech Republic and Romania being slightly more active in Roma integration policy. Our study suggests that differences in identity endorsement reflect differences in these national policies, combined with other potential contextual factors.

With regard to our first prediction, we expected mean level differences in ethnic and national identity within samples such that Roma ethnic identity is stronger than national identity in countries with more effective integration policy toward Roma, and the latter is stronger than ethnic identity in countries with more assimilation policies and/or lack of effective integration policies. We could detect significant within-group effects among these two identity domains, confirming only partially our expectations. As predicted, in the case of Roma group in the Czech Republic, Roma identity had high endorsement levels. However, this pattern can also be observed in Kosovo and Italy. Yet, the interpretation for these results may change depending on the specific country context.

The Czech Republic is the country with more explicit integration policy promoting the Roma language, culture, and identity (Civil Society Monitoring Report Czech Republic, 2013). So, ethnic background may provide a stronger source of identification than national one for Roma youth. In a different way, Kosovo and Italy are countries where Roma continued to remain generally marginalized with high negative anti-Roma sentiments especially in Italy (Pew Research Center, 2014). In such a context, our findings on the Roma suggest the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999) that perceived discrimination encourages hostility towards the national out-group and increases ethnic identification. Moreover, recently the Rejection Disidentification Model (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009) has also suggested that rejection prevents minority groups from developing a sense of belonging to the national dominant group. Although our study did not directly measure perceived rejection, we found that Roma youth in Kosovo and Italy tend to identify with the national culture at a much lower level than with their Roma culture and identity.

Also contrary to expectations, Roma ethnic identity was found to be the lowest for Roma youth in Romania compared to their peers in other countries. Despite the fact that Romania has developed relatively fine integration policies, the underlying strategy seems do not adequately recognize Roma background and identity, as it is in the Czech Republic. This ambiguous situation between formal tolerance and lack of identification (Giurca, 2012; Preoteasa, Şerban, & Tarnovschi, 2011) may prompt youth to consider the Romanian dimension as the best positive source of identification (Preoteasa et al., 2011; Zamfir, 2014), suggesting a sort of paradox that increases the national identification at the expense of the ethnic one. The same trend of relationship, but in line with our expectations, was evident for Roma youth in Albania, a context with undeveloped integration policies although without significant forms of rejection, and tangentially also in Bulgaria, the country with the severe assimilation policies.

In summary, the salience of ethnic and national identities for Roma is moderated by contextual factors of specific countries they live in. In countries with active integration policies, such as the Czech Republic, or with factual marginalization or rejection, such as Kosovo and especially Italy, Roma youth show a higher endorsement of ethnic identity than national identity. On the contrary, in countries with ambiguous integration strategies, such as in Romania, or with undeveloped integration policies and low rejection, such as in Albania, or with assimilation policies, such as in Bulgaria, the dynamic is inversed, with a higher endorsement of national identity than ethnic identity.

With regard to our second prediction, we expected to observe specific associations among Roma ethnic and national identities and self-esteem across countries. We expected to find a positive effect of ethnic identity on self-esteem in countries with more pronounced integration policies and a positive effect of national identity on self-esteem in countries with more anti-Roma sentiments and assimilation pressure. Our findings partly confirmed this hypothesis. We observed a significant and moderately-sized association between ethnic identity and self-esteem in the Czech Republic. We also found that, on the one hand, ethnic identity was not substantially associated with self-esteem

for youth in Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, Kosovo, and Romania, whereas, on the other hand, national identity was positively related to self-esteem in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. These findings seem to reflect the contextual characteristics mentioned previously.

Thus, in the Czech Republic, ethnic identity may serve as a positive source of optimal adaptation for Roma youth given the active and clear integration policies. On the contrary, this is not the case for the other countries (including Romania), where the integration policies vary from ambiguous to lacking and where there may be assimilation or marginalization and rejection phenomena. In brief, Roma ethnic identity seems to be predictive of well-being only when there are effective integration policies, possibly signifying concrete opportunities for positive development of youth.

Relatedly, national identity may be a positive resource of well-being in countries with assimilation policies, such as in Bulgaria, and with ambiguous or underdeveloped integration policies and lower rejection, such as in Romania and Albania. In both cases, possibly Roma youth perceive the chance of tangible benefits of identifying with the dominant culture. This confirms past research showing that national identity is quite salient identity for Roma in Bulgaria (Dimitrova et al., 2013; 2014) and this study shows the same to be true for Roma in Romania and Albania, whereas a different pattern seems to characterize Kosovo and Italy. Kosovo and especially Italy are countries where Roma marginalization or rejection prevail, suggesting certain constraints for positive well-being. Furthermore, Kosovo is a very recent state with still a low degree of national identity development and Italy is the only country among the others here represented without a communist heritage and with a long historical debate on the weak national identity. In such contextual conditions, national identity has plausibly no impact on well-being.

In conclusion, these findings support the notion that ethnic and national identities can be regarded as a psychological resource to face challenges for youth, particularly those with Roma background. However, their effects depend on the contextual circumstances. In a context clearly active in terms of integration policies, ethnic identity may be the best psychological resource for

optimal adaptation, whereas in contexts with ambiguous, undeveloped or assimilation policies, national identity may serve as the best source for enhanced well-being.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although novel in its unique sample representativeness, our study is not without limitations. First, we lacked qualitative information on identity among Roma communities, which could be critical in further understanding their multiple identities. Future studies can gather qualitative data through interviews and focus groups. A second important limitation concerns the sample selection. By necessity, we focused on Roma youth who attended public schools and were available to participate in the survey. As school dropout is very common among Roma students (Ringold, 2000), we cannot generalize our findings to students who drop-out of school and are clearly at risk for poor well-being. Another shortcoming was our inability to directly assess specific public policies toward improvement of life conditions and integration of Roma in various countries. Linking external country level indicators of successful local policy implementation and positive identity and adaptation of Roma might be particularly valuable. We also lacked examining selfperceptions of our participants regarding the rejection they experience by the dominant society they live in. For example, growing nationalism and romaphobia have been documented being important sources of mistrust, perceived threat and negative evaluation of the Roma (Dimitrova, Buzea, Ljujic & Jordanov, 2015; Ljujic, Vedder, Dekker, & Geel, 2012). Despite these limitations, this chapter stresses the relevance of contextual conditions to advance our knowledge about how ethnic and national identities are related to enhanced well-being of Roma youth. These findings and implications of this study are relevant both to understanding Roma adolescents' multiple identity dynamics and provide new insights of these dynamics related to optimal adaptation of such relevant ethnic minority group across Europe.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support by a COFAS FORTE (Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare) Marie Curie Grant (Forte Projekt 2013-2669) to the first author and Lily Konowitz for her thoughtful language revision of the paper. We are also extremely grateful to the following organizations and people for their help in carrying out the study in Bulgaria (Eva Jecheva and the National Agency for Child Protection, all schools, students and teachers and particularly Neli Filipova, Ivanina Noncheva, Radka Kostandinova, Albena Damianova, Stoyka Jekova, Svetla Atanasova, Neli Kiuchukova, Ani Angelova, Lilia Stoyanova, Tianka Kardjilova, Zvetan Terziev, Elena Ianeva, Venizslav Chobanov, Kamelia Mateva, and Petko Petkov), Italy (Michele Mannoia for his pertinent remarks and useful suggestions, Manuela Casamento for her role of cultural mediator, all the schools and adolescents), the Czech Republic (the Olomouc University Social Health Institute (OUSHI), in particular Zuzana Puzova, Katerina Hamplova, and Helena Pipova, all schools and institutions across the country and the support by the Czech Academy of Sciences RVO 6808174 created as part of Strategy AV21), Romania (all teachers, colleagues and especially to Simona Steluta Marti, Iuliana Ilie, Ionut Cojan, Alina Manescu and Luiza Bratu), and Kosovo (Genc Rexhepi, Argjend Abazi, Kastriot Hasaj, Enteela Kamberi, Erduana Dermaku, Miran Xhelili, Alma Sherifi, Hillari Alidema, Elina Morina and Blerton Jakupi).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Roma Adolescents across Countries

	Albania	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Italy	Kosovo	Romania		
	n = 90	n = 91	n = 99	n = 98	n = 78	n = 57		
Age, Mean (SD)	14.21 (1.08)	15.98 (1.28)	14.59 (.89)	15.27 (1.89)	15.10 (1.59)	16.72 (1.45)		
Gender, %								
Female	51	42	63	40	53	49		
Male	49	58	37	60	47	51		
Variables, Mean (SD)								
Self-Esteem	3.04 (.69)	3.07 (.52)	3.89 (.71)	2.88 (.28)	3.30 (.61)	3.33 (.52)		
Identity								
Roma	2.61 (1.41)	3.02 (1.16)	3.74 (.95)	4.31 (.42)	3.26 (1.40)	1.20 (.88)		
National	4.21 (.90)	3.37 (1.06)	2.85 (.94)	2.58 (1.00)	2.77 (1.35)	4.12 (.56)		
Cohen's d	0.95	0.19	-0.70	-1.55	-0.25	2.83		

Note. Cohen's *d* effect size refers to comparisons between national and Roma identity within each country group.

Table 2

Correlations among All Study Variables for Roma Adolescents across Countries

	Albania			Bulgaria		Czech Republic		Italy		Kosovo			Romania					
	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.
1. ROI	-			-			-			-			-			-		
2. NI	06	-		37**	-		.09	-		24**	-		03	-		03	-	
3. SE	.04	.61**	-	01	.42**	-	.35**	.12	-	.01	09	-	05	13	-	05	.47**	-

Note: ROI = Roma Identity, NI = National Identity, SE = Self-Esteem. **p < .001.