



## Globalization, Reality TV and Cultural Inclusion: the Case of the 2005 Czech Search for a Superstar

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*This paper examines the relationship between reality television, representations of national identity and mechanism of cultural inclusion, as manifested in the 2005 Czech Search for a Superstar, a local version of the global format Pop Idol. This issue is set within a wider theoretical framework describing television formats as currently one of the most prolific constituents of global cultural flows and, at the same time, important agents of construction and re-construction of cultural identities. Following this introduction, the author presents a case study of the 2005 run of the Czech Search for a Superstar, which was surprisingly won by a young Roma singer Vlasta Horváth. The analysis focuses particularly on the media discourse which has surrounded his victory and which attempted to ascribe to him, often in a very stereotypical way, an identity of a Roma leader and a role-model. Contrary to the predominant media narrative, hailing his achievement as an evidence of society's changing attitudes and greater acceptance of diversity, this paper argues that Horváth's television triumph rather confirms assimilation as a preferred integration strategy, and indicates therefore neither a symbolic recognition of the Roma minority and its culture nor the much-invoked shift towards a more inclusive notion of the Czech national community.*

“Within just one spring, Vlasta Horváth did more for the Czech Roma than our politicians during the entire decade.”


Michal Horáček, the 2005 Czech Search for a Superstar judge, on the address of the winner of the contest.

It is perhaps becoming a truism to say that television programme formats known as “reality TV” have recently become one of the most widespread and successful forms of media entertainment.<sup>1</sup> Formats like *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Popstars / Pop Idol* and many others are currently circulating around the world, filling the prime time on TV stations in countries with very diverse cultural backgrounds (Moran & Keane 2004; McMillin 2007), and so gradually becoming the leading indicator of cultural globalization. Illustrating the velocity of this process, it is worth noting that in one of the first comprehensive books specifically dealing with the topic of global television, which was published just about ten years ago (Barker 1997), there is no mentioning of the genre of reality shows; instead, the emphasis is put on soap operas (or telenovelas) and news as “the most prominent narrative forms of global television” (Barker 1997: 74).<sup>2</sup> Following their rapid global spread, these new formats have generated vivid public discussions, often fulfilling the definition of a moral panic (Biltereyst 2004). While most of the public (and media) attention is usually devoted to issues of nudity, sex, and bad language, which have become almost an inextricable part of the “container” type of formats like *Big Brother* (and undoubtedly also the main source of its appeal for a substantial part of the audience), in academia the influx of reality TV has stimulated, among other things, questions about the interaction of global popular forms with local (national) cultural and identity patterns, as well as about representation and symbolic inclusion of the up-till-now marginalized social and cultural groups within mainstream popular culture (cf. McMillin 2007; Frau-Meigs 2006; Waisbord 2004; Turner 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> For Albert Moran, a television format is defined as a “set of invariable elements in a programme out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced” (Moran 2004: 5). Reality TV is one of the most successful genres of the current international programme formats trade (Moran & Malbon 2006). Sometimes also referred to as “factual entertainment” (which is distinguished by the TV industry from other genres like drama or comedy), reality TV takes on many different forms (subgenres), which Anette Hill (2002: 327-328) divides into three main categories: “observation programmes” (watching people in everyday places), „information programmes“ (usually docu-soap, which use true stories to tell the audience about something like driving, first aid, fighting criminality or pet doctors), and “created for TV programmes” (broad category of programmes based on putting real, “ordinary” people in a manufactured situation, either studio contest or a house or an island - the so called gamedocs, shows of which *Big Brother* is probably the best known representative). In this paper I mostly focus on the third category (created for TV programmes).

<sup>2</sup> According to Barker, “while global television certainly promotes other televisual forms - sport and music television are perhaps the most high profile - nevertheless, soaps and news are amongst the most enduring and watched forms of television” (1997: 74).




These questions also form the basis for my paper, which deals specifically with the relationship between the broadcasting of global television formats, representations of cultural identity and issues of cultural belonging, with the Czech Republic as an empirical example. In the first part, I will try to position the issue of reality programming and its possible cultural implications within the existing globalization discourse. Further, I will briefly sketch the current state of reality TV in the Czech Republic and then, in the form of a case study, focus closely on the 2005 *Czech Search for a Superstar* contest, a local adaptation of the global format *Pop Idol*, which, in the final stages of its second run in Spring 2005, raised an interesting and widely welcomed challenge to the tense ethnic relations between the majority society and the Roma minority. In this context, I will also discuss whether this particular case reveals some kind of progressive potential of this television format - specifically, to what extent could this show open up space for a more inclusive concept of the Czech nation.

### Reality TV, glocalization and cultural identities

As the above-stated quote from Chris Barker's book indicates, prior to the true international "boom" of reality TV between 1999-2001, which overlapped with the time when *Big Brother*, arguably the most (in)famous show of this kind, started its global conquest (Holmes & Jermyn 2004: 5),<sup>3</sup> the academic debates on both the political economy and cultural impact of transnational television have mostly focused on the whole ("canned") programmes, especially fictional series, soap operas or telenovelas, which - just like other internationally traded goods - were made, packed and trafficked from their land of origin into the households of their land of destination, bringing along the values and symbolic representations of the culture of their manufacturers. In other words, it was the content of the package that mattered, and it was that which was considered to challenge present values, attitudes, habits and ways of self-understanding of the local audience. In the 1970s and 1980s, this kind of approach used to provide the main empirical basis for the so-called cultural imperialism thesis, pointing towards the considerable imbalances in the international television flows which in those decades were heavily dominated by programmes of Western, and particularly U.S.-American origin (cf. Schiller 1971; Boyd-Barrett 1977; Tunstall 1977). This gloomy picture of the world under the hegemony of the American film and television industries started losing its empirical backing in the 1990s, when researchers across the continents witnessed the emergence of many regional centres of television (as

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<sup>3</sup> *Big Brother*, format created by the Dutch production company Endemol, was first broadcast by the TV station Veronica in the Netherlands in 1999. However, shows displaying the "real life" of a group of contestants in an enclosed space - the core idea of the format - have existed since at least *The Real World*, broadcast on MTV already in 1992 (Griffen-Foley 2004: 543).



well as film) production which were able to not only compete with U.S. or British programmes and satisfy their own national markets, where the domestic programmes started becoming more popular than the imported ones,<sup>4</sup> but also to successfully export them abroad, becoming regional hegemonies themselves (cf. Sinclair et al. 1996; Straubhaar 1997; Curran & Park 2000). This development, together with the concurrent ethnographic turn in media/cultural studies which stressed the creative reception strategies of the “active” audience, including its capacity for “cultural resistance” (Liebes & Katz 1990), helped in shifting the prevalent academic perspective on globalization and transnational cultural flows, which has gradually substituted the concept of globalization as homogenization (“Dallasification”, “McDonaldization”) with a more colourful, quilt-like looking picture of the world, where processes of regionalization, heterogenization and hybridization play the most decisive role (see Barker 1999; Lull 2001).

However, the current proliferation of global trade in television formats and, particularly, reality TV, brings along yet another challenge for the media globalization theory, as the form and the content of the programme have been separated, both in terms of production and consumption. What is being globally sold - and it is important to stress that the flows already go both ways, not just from the West to the Rest - is not a full TV show, but only a copyright and a package of guidelines; a “bible”, as the industry calls it (Moran 2004: 5), which tells the local producer exactly how to make the programme.<sup>5</sup> As Michael Keane and Albert Moran put it, “more than in the past TV programmes are not simply created and produced for local buyers with the (often faint) hope that they might sell elsewhere in the world. Instead, they are consciously devised, developed and distributed with the deliberate intention of achieving near simultaneous international adaptation” (Keane & Moran 2005: 3). Obviously, it is difficult to ascribe to such a product a mark of origin, as it doesn’t quite fit into the standard dichotomy of “domestic” (national) versus “foreign” (global) production.


In order to analytically capture this situation, the media theorists increasingly turn to Roland Robertson’s (1995: 29-31) concept of “glocalization”. This term, originally borrowed from Japanese marketing textbooks,<sup>6</sup> tries to step beyond

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<sup>4</sup> Today, “most of the world’s television programmes are produced and broadcast in national television systems and do not receive international distribution” (Moran 2004: 4).

<sup>5</sup> However, the “bible” is only one part of the format, which altogether consists of a “short written account known as the paper format, a full dossier of written and other information now referred to as the programme Bible, compilations of demographic and ratings information, programme scripts, off-air videotapes of broadcast programmes, insertable film or video footage, computer software and graphics, and production consultancy services” (Keane & Moran 2005: 3).

<sup>6</sup> According to Robertson, who quotes the Oxford Dictionary of New Words from the year 1991, the term glocalization has its origins in the Japanese word dochakuka, which was originally used to describe adaptation of agricultural technologies and practices to local conditions. Then



the binary opposition between the local and the global, and argues for the dynamic notion of relationship between these two supposedly distinct categories. According to Robertson, the local becomes an inherent part of the global, which is visible exactly through its locally specific manifestations. As Robertson developed the concept of glocalization before the contemporary heyday of reality TV, he was merely referring to the diversification strategies of multinational companies, marketing their global products with regards to the local cultural contexts. However, the term has been successfully domesticated in media studies and used in relation to the global television format trade (cf. Moran & Keane 2004; Iwabuchi 2004; Waisbord 2004; Chan 2005).

Trying to explain the worldwide success of television formats, Silvio Waisbord points exactly to their double-layered nature, combining globally applicable know-how and production strategies with peculiarities of the cultural tastes of the local audience. According to him,

The popularity of formats is more than just another trend in an industry perennially hungry for hit shows and eager to follow them. It reveals two developments in contemporary television: the globalization of the business model of television and the efforts of international and domestic companies to deal with the resilience of national cultures. (Waisbord 2004: 360)


For Waisbord, television formats successfully answer to the television ratings across the globe, which have repeatedly “confirmed that when given a choice, audiences prefer domestic and regional content to foreign programs” (Waisbord 2004: 369).<sup>7</sup> For whatever the origin of the programme format is, its content is always local, referring to the culture of the audience. In fact, the very aim of the format is to make itself as culturally unidentifiable as possible, and therefore expand its possibility to become accepted (indigenized) by the particular national public. According to Waisbord,

Formats purposefully eviscerate the national. Could we say that *Survivor/Expedition: Robinson* is unequivocally a Dutch show? What makes *The Bar* Swedish and *Taxi Orange* Austrian? How does *Waku Waku* represent Japanese national identity? What is British about *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? Because formats explicitly empty out signs of the national, they can become nationalized—that is, customized to domestic cultures. (Waisbord 2004: 368)

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it was adopted by the vocabulary of business, for which it meant “global outlook adapted to local conditions” (Robertson 1995: 28).

<sup>7</sup> However, as the author adds, these ratings do not dispute the continuing Western domination on the global television market (Waisbord 2004).



While the TV format as such is stripped of any specific cultural characteristics in order to increase its global appeal, its local adaptation is, on the other hand, usually filled with cultural meanings attached to the nation and national identity. In Waisbord's view, the global TV formats can even take on an active role in processes of articulation of national identities, as they "organize experiences of the national", "provide spaces for the representation of national cultures" and, perhaps most importantly, "offer opportunities for audiences to recognize themselves as members of national communities" (Waisbord 2004: 372). This latent nation-integrative function of the TV formats was, this time more specifically, pointed out also by Graeme Turner in his case study of the first series of the *Australian Big Brother*, broadcast in late 2001. According to him, the producers of the show strived to emphasize the "Australianness" of the house where the contestants lived; and the eventual winner "was the most conventional version of Australian manhood imaginable" (Turner 2005: 419). This kind of conformism, resulting in nominating the "least disturbing candidates" to win, has been observed also in many Western European countries where *Big Brother* was broadcast (Frau-Meigs 2006: 42). Other kinds of formats have been examined from this perspective as well. For example, in their analysis of the Finnish reality TV programme *Extreme Escapades*, a spin-off version of another widely popular and globally distributed format - *Survivor (Expedition Robinson)*, Minna Aslama and Mervi Pantti argue that this programme, through a combination of setting, themes, communication conventions and other cultural practices shared by the contestants "flags the Finnishness" and acts thereby as an agent of banal nationalism (Aslama & Pantti 2007).

However, Aslama and Pantti also point out that despite their general role in reinforcing the sense of national belonging amongst the audiences, the TV formats may at the same time contribute to challenging established identity patterns and cultural representations, leading to the emergence of hybridized forms of culture. While reinforcing Finnishness, the programme *Extreme Escapades* "[...] still offers an interpretation of a new national identity in which globalizing cultural conventions (in this case, the reality television format) are coupled with some of the most fundamental traditional stereotypes and myths [...]" (Aslama & Pantti 2007: 64).

A number of other researchers have also expressed their opinion that the television formats do not automatically or even exclusively reproduce the "canonical" representations of national culture or "official" versions of national identity. Paraphrasing the statement of Albert Moran, Silvio Waisbord says that "[f]ormats neither crystallize a static notion of national culture nor are pure impositions of external values. They are texts in which different understandings of national identity are projected and redefined against the backdrop of imported formulas" (Waisbord 2004: 372). As Frau-Meigs sums up, the cultural transfer where the global TV formats play a significant role



[...] has an impact on the construction of national identity and its dynamic foundations as it reshuffles inter-, intra- and transcultural relations. [...] The significant presence of reality TV programmes may play a part in the transfer of new values or in the weakening of national values. Reality programming may also promote an alternative culture, especially among young, malleable generations or minority social groups. (2006: 36)

It is interesting that the fewer empirical studies there are on the subject of “moral corruption” of a particular national community by allegedly alien and dangerous values and social patterns, brought about by reality TV, the bigger the public outrage seems to be about the cultural effects of these formats.<sup>8</sup> In such a state of moral panic, the “moral guardians” - usually an inorganic coalition of religious groups and leaders, intellectuals, quality press journalists, conservative politicians and even the new social movements - have sometimes been able to put strong pressure on the national broadcasting regulation authorities, resulting in modifications of the format, as happened for example in France and Germany (Biltereyst 2004: 96-97).<sup>9</sup> But again, these reactions, which on some scale appear in every country, but the intensity and social influence of which vary substantially from one society to another, demonstrate that not only production, but also reception of global TV formats remains culturally-specific. Even if the reality TV programme makes it through the barriers of public (usually Europe) or state’s (Asia) opposition, there is no guarantee of its success, as the audience may refuse programmes which insult or simply don’t match the local beliefs and habits. This was for example the fate of *Survivor*, one of the world’s most popular shows, in Japan, because it allegedly relied on “overemphasizing individual success achieved at the expenses of others”, which was seen as a value alien to Japanese culture, traditionally stressing “collectivist logics rather than individualistic tactics” (Iwabuchi 2004: 25). Similarly, but probably for different reasons, there was the failure of *Survivor* in the U.K., or *Big Brother* in Sweden and the United States (Hill 2002: 325-326).

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<sup>8</sup> According to Annette Hill, the debates in the British and French press about the rise of reality TV “generally adopted a similar critical, often elitist approach”, criticizing the suspected moral corruption of the audience as well as the rise of commercialism in TV programming, which the factual entertainment is a direct product of (Hill 2000: 195).

<sup>9</sup> In Slovakia, protesters led by the Catholic Church collected over 100,000 signatures on a petition for stopping the local version of *Big Brother*, and called for a boycott of goods advertised during the show. During Christmas, Catholic priests refused to visit the competitors in the house and offer them spiritual solace, even though they were specifically asked to do so by the competitors. See <http://realityshow.sme.sk/clanok.asp?cl=2420688> [Accessed 10 April 2009].

## Big Brother and his relatives: the coming of global formats to the Czech Republic

Even though programmes with elements of reality TV first appeared in the Czech Republic (then Czechoslovakia) already back in the 1970s,<sup>10</sup> the inflow of the “true” reality TV formats on Czech screens was somehow damped, compared to the situation in most of Europe. All three national terrestrial TV stations, the public service station Czech Television (ČT) and the two commercial stations TV Nova and TV Prima, have long remained either critical or sceptical towards the possibility of introducing reality type programming, focusing instead on the support of original domestic fiction and entertainment (in the case of ČT), or on the purchase of U.S. or Latin-American fiction, including soap operas and telenovelas (in the case of TV Nova and TV Prima). Until 2004, practically the only global TV format shown on prime time in the Czech Republic was the quiz show “*Kdo chce být milionářem?*” (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*), which had been broadcast by the leading commercial station TV Nova since 2000. The picture started changing in 2004, when TV Nova bought the rights to air its adaptation of *Pop Idol*,<sup>11</sup> which was launched under the title “*Česko hledá Superstar*” (*Czech Search for a Superstar*). Just as in many other countries, the show was greeted with tremendous audience attention - the Final evening reaching almost a 40% rating and 65% share - which secured continuation of the show for at least the next two seasons.


The following year (2005) finally witnessed the coming of a first “container” type of reality show on the Czech screen, and two of them right at the same time. The previous objections from the commercial stations against reality shows were purely commercial; according to their management, investment in this kind of formats was perceived as too expensive and too risky in an environment with an allegedly conservative audience. These concerns, publicly expressed at least up until 2003, were quickly put aside in 2005, when TV Prima launched a copycat version of *Big Brother* (under the title *VyVolení*, meaning The Chosen Ones) and TV Nova, now backed with the capital of its multinational owner CME, followed suit only two weeks later with the licensed version of the same reality show, which was broadcast directly against its competitor. However, it was the first one, the “mock-Big Brother” from TV Prima which took the bigger slice of the audience share cake, eventually forcing the “true” show off prime-time air.

Just as elsewhere, both versions of *Big Brother* became one of the most discussed public topics, stimulating criticism from a diverse coalition of commentators, intellectuals and politicians from both sides of the political

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, the Czechoslovak state television (ČST) used to air the show “*Zpívá celá rodina*” (*Family Singing*), which contained elements of factual entertainment.

<sup>11</sup> The *Pop Idol* format, produced by the British companies 19TV and FremantleMedia, built upon the global success of its predecessor *Popstars*, a format originating from New Zealand (1999). *Pop Idol* was first broadcast on ITV1 on October 5, 2001 (Holmes 2004: 150).




spectrum, and suffering a number of steep fines from the Czech Broadcasting Council for breaking the Broadcasting Act, mainly due to inappropriate content before 10pm (these decisions were later all revoked by the court to which the cases were brought). Regardless of that, the two shows literary opened the door for other reality formats which followed shortly after them or which are right now being aired or prepared for launching. In 2006, TV Prima started with the first Czech adaptation of one of the most successful global formats ever, *The Survivor*,<sup>12</sup> which confronted Czech households with the exoticism of the Pacific Islands. Following these reality shows, an increasing number of “docu-soaps” (documentary shows with the elements of reality TV) have been shown on Czech screens, and also new types of gamedocs. TV Nova increased its audience ratings with *Wife Swap*, originally a British format built upon the idea of women changing places in the other’s family for a certain amount of time. TV Prima counterattacked with shows like *You Are What You Eat* (orig. produced by Channel 4) or *Family Feud* (Fremantle Media). The public service station Czech Television, after only a couple years of reluctance, has also entered the field, specializing in adaptations of British formats such as *The Weakest Link*, *Greatest Britons* or *Star Dance*, as well as in formats from culturally more distant environments, like *Shiawase Kazoku Keikaku*, originally a Japanese reality game show with the participation of whole families.

As it has been demonstrated here, the global television formats, being an occasional and rather shy guest before 2004, have firmly settled on the Czech screens during the past several years. In regards to the theoretical concepts and discussions reviewed in the opening part of the paper, this process evokes questions like what kind of strategies are used for localization of these global products; how exactly do these programmes articulate cultural meanings and representations, and whether those are rather reaffirming or challenging of dominant conceptualizations of national culture and patterns of national self-definition. Elaborating on these issues and following the concept of cultural citizenship (Stevenson 1997; Miller 2001; Hermes 2006) which describes processes of cultural production and representation as mechanisms operating along the lines of symbolic inclusion and exclusion,<sup>13</sup> it is also possible to ask

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<sup>12</sup> *The Survivor* was first aired in Sweden in 1997, but it attained global success only after its purchase by the American station CBS in 2001. Up to today, the format has been broadcast in more than 48 countries.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of cultural citizenship has been usually understood as an attempt to point to an insufficient elaboration of culture and identity in the modern theory of citizenship elaborated by T. H. Marshall, which distinguishes between civil, political and social rights but, according to many political and cultural theorists, does not pay enough attention to the cultural and symbolical domain of citizenship (Stevenson 1997). According to Stevenson (1997: 44), “such a cultural view of citizenship emphasizes that the symbolic inheritance of the nation and participation in its cultural institutions should be the subject of wide-ranging forms of inclusive practices,” which would enable various minority and marginalized social groups to actively participate in all the forms of national life (popular cultural forms notwithstanding), including their right to propagate their cultural identity and lifestyle. In this respect, cultural understandings of citizenship “are concerned not only with ‘formal’ processes such as who is



how exactly the national community - which constitutes the target audience and from which the actors are selected - is represented in this kind of programming; what kinds of roles do the contestants, actors and other participants have in the programme scripts; and what kinds of symbolic statuses or cultural and personal stereotypes are ascribed to them by the production industry and/or by the media following these programmes. Since addressing all of these questions would certainly be a task far exceeding the scope of this study, in the following part of the paper I will examine only selected aspects of the broad issue of cultural identity construction and representation in a local adaptation of a global TV format - by means of a case study of the singing contest *Czech Search for a Superstar*, which was broadcast on TV Nova in the spring of 2005.


### **Vlasta Horváth Superstar: media construction of Roma identity**

The second series of the *Czech Search for a Superstar* attracted a slightly smaller number of viewers than the first one; still, the final part determining the winner was watched by almost 35 % of the audience older than 15 years, with the share of 64 % of those who had their TV sets switched on during that evening (almost 3 million people). But these figures were not the most striking difference between the two series; more important was the winner himself. Arguably, Vlasta Horváth, the then 28-year old carpenter, earned the respect of the jury and 73 % of votes from the audience because he was a good singer and performer. But that was not the reason why he became an object of political commentaries and analysis in the broadsheets during the following week. The reason was his ethnicity - Vlasta Horváth was a Roma. This fact itself is quite remarkable given the generally antagonistic or even hostile attitudes of the majority Czech society towards the Roma minority, which nurture ground for open manifestations of racism which the Roma people are often a victim of. In polls asking the Czechs which nationalities they would not mind living together with in their neighbourhood, the Roma have repeatedly come in at the very last place, way behind Arabs, Chinese or Russians (STEM 2006).<sup>14</sup> The Czech Republic is being permanently criticized by the Council of Europe and by various NGOs for its insufficient institutional approach to the Roma minority, which is stuck deeply in the circle of poverty and subject to various forms of social exclusion, including persistent media marginalization and stereotypization (Sirovátka 2006).

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entitled to vote and the maintenance of an active civil society, but with whose cultural practices are disrespected. Cultural versions of citizenship need to ask who is silenced, marginalized, stereotyped and rendered invisible” (Stevenson 2003: 336).

<sup>14</sup> In 2005, only 13 % of Czechs said they would not have any problems with having Roma as neighbours (STEM 2006).



The problem of social exclusion of the Roma people in the Czech Republic is closely related to the predominant mode of Czech national self-definition, which has since the 19<sup>th</sup> century been derived from the “ethno-cultural” model of nationhood (Holy 1996). Rooted in the understanding of a nation as a “primordial” community sharing a common history and distinct ethnic and cultural traits (as opposed to the “civic-territorial” model, conceiving of a nation primarily as a legal-political community sharing civic-political culture regardless of people’s ethnic or cultural background, see for example Smith 1991), this model makes a clear distinction between nationality and citizenship: having a Czech passport or ID does not automatically mean belonging to the Czech nation. The Czech national “We” is being constructed and placed in opposition not just to an external “Them”, but to an internal one as well - and this time, the role of the Other is ascribed not to foreigners but to the country’s own ethnic minorities, mainly the Roma (gypsies). Ladislav Holy in his anthropologically-oriented study of the Czech national identity makes an explicit reference to this phenomenon, as reflected upon by his informants during his fieldwork conducted in 1992:


When talking about the sense of Czechness, on the whole, people mentioned three criteria: having been born in the Czech lands, speaking Czech as one’s mother tongue, and having been born of Czech parents. [...] Hardly anyone thought that those Gypsies or Jews who were born in the Czech lands, and who sometimes spoke only Czech, were Czechs, and most people asserted quite strongly that ‘someone who speaks Czech is not necessarily a Czech: a Czech-speaking gypsy is not a Czech’. Many people spoke of ‘Czech gypsies’ or ‘Czech Jews’, but particularly as far as gypsies were concerned they vehemently denied the possibility that they could become Czechs: ‘A gypsy will always remain a gypsy’ was a phrase I heard many times. (1996: 64)

In the context of the widespread xenophobic attitudes towards minorities,<sup>15</sup> as well as in the context of the very primordial and culturally exclusive conceptualization of the Czech nation, the results of the 2005 *Czech Search for a Superstar* certainly require closer analytical attention. So, how is it possible that Vlasta Horváth, literally “out of the blue”, reached a stunning victory in such a contest where the fate of the participants doesn’t lie in the hands of an enlightened jury, but relies upon the volatile tastes of the general television audience?

One of the most plausible explanations heard in discussions following Horváth’s triumph pointed to the fact that he fit perfectly into the (latently existing) picture of a fully “integrated” young Roma man who does not substantially

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<sup>15</sup> According to longitudinal surveys conducted by the Centre for Empirical Research (STEM), the tolerance of the Czech society towards minorities is not only low but has even been declining since the mid-1990s. In 2001, most people thought that minorities already have too many rights and 84 % of the population agreed that “National and other minorities should submit to the interests of the majority” (STEM - Trends 1993-2001, available at <http://www.stem.cz/tisk/php?id=208> [Accessed 10 April 2009]).



differ from the members of the Czech majority. He speaks Czech without the typical Roma accent and actually doesn't know a word in Roma. He doesn't live in a ghetto but in a nice flat within the "white" community. At the time of the contest, he had a Czech fiancée and, unlike most of his ethnic coevals, a "decent" job. In other words, on screen there was hardly anything, apart from his slightly darker skin, which would bring viewers to place him ethnically, as he had never specified his ethnicity during the contest himself. And perhaps the audience, especially its teenage viewers who are used to seeing people of colour on the screen and, at the same time, are lacking a long-term personal experience with Roma people, did not indeed perceive him as a member of an ethnic/cultural group other than their own. In other words, ethnicity as an identity category might simply not have been present in the minds of the viewers during the Superstar series, (or in case it was, it could have played only a minor role). This can at least be hypothesized on the basis of an internet chat with Vlasta Horváth shortly after he was crowned the winner; his internet adherents were mostly interested in his music, his effort, his private life and future plans, none of the questions being even slightly related to his ethnic background.

Despite this apparent absence, such a question was almost never missing in numerous interviews Vlasta Horváth gave to the media after his victory. In this context, it can be argued that the media forced him into a narrative construction of his ethnic identity as a Roma man. During the interviews, he confirmed several times that he didn't enter the contest with the idea in mind that he actually was a Roma, or that he, due to his success, could somehow help the Roma community, which was a question the journalists seemed to be truly preoccupied with. From Horváth's answers, it is obvious that he was uncomfortable with being manipulated into the position of a "Roma role-model" or even a Roma activist:

And I often ask myself - what the hell? I entered the contest to sing. I am not a politician, and not even somebody who would deliberately do anything for people.<sup>16</sup>


Asked specifically if he was not afraid of a being labelled a Roma Idol and then "appropriated" for political goals, he answered:

Of course I am a bit afraid of that label, and I want to get rid of it. I would like the people to perceive me through what they sent me their votes for, through the music. It is only logical, then, that I want the music to speak for me, and I don't want to always deal with the question of nationality or descent. I want the people to say that Vlasta Horváth is a musician, who sings this and that. And please judge me according to whether I can sing well or not.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=archiv/2005-07/08091011> [Accessed 10 April 2009]

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=archiv/2005-07/08091011> [Accessed 10 April 2009]



In their attempt to fit Vlasta Horváth into an appealing narrative about a Roma self-made-man, who heroically overcame the racial barriers and “made it” from the very bottom to the very top (invoking thereby the “success-myth”, commonly used as part of the “ideology of democracy in capitalist society” - see Holmes 2004: 157), journalists often confronted him with stereotypes about the Roma people, which he had to disclaim in relation to himself. In an interview for the largest Czech broadsheet, Mladá Fronta DNES, the reporter asked him if he ever sniffed toluene, which is a type of drug addiction commonly associated with the Roma youth living in ghettos in the Czech Republic.<sup>18</sup> Other, arguably less controversial questions drew on romanticized portrayals of Roma folk, as they have been present in Czech literature and iconography since the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Q: And what about a nomadic nature, the heart of a wanderer - do you have these?

Vlasta Horváth: Look, a wanderer is something I am just about the least of all. On the contrary. I am a totally stay-at-home type.<sup>19</sup>

During a radio talk-show, the moderator asked Horváth about his planned wedding. Not satisfied with the answer, he tried repeating the question, as if he was almost disappointed with Horváth’s lack of interest in identifying himself with Roma traditions:

Moderator: Vlasta, is it going to be a Roma wedding?

Vlasta Horváth: No, no, it’s not. I would say that it will be just a normal wedding, an ordinary, medium-sized, normal wedding.

Moderator: Medium-sized, normal - like a thousand people, or something like that?

Vlasta Horváth: Jesus, no, I would say about fifty people.<sup>20</sup>

### **Roma celebrity: difference within boundaries**


As I tried to document here, it was primarily the media who were responsible for inventing the category of ethnicity in relation to Vlasta Horváth, rather than the second Czech Superstar himself. Even though he has never rejected

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<sup>18</sup> After Horváth expressed his indignation with the question, the reporter apologized, confessing to him that she had bad experience with Roma.  
<http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=archiv/2005-07/08091011> [Accessed 10 April 2009]

<sup>19</sup> [http://revue.idnes.cz/tiskni.asp?c=A050616\\_155043\\_superstar\\_jup&r=superstar](http://revue.idnes.cz/tiskni.asp?c=A050616_155043_superstar_jup&r=superstar) [Accessed 10 April 2009]

<sup>20</sup> Interview on commercial national radio station Frekvence 1, 19.9.2005, transcribed at [http://www.frekvence1.cz/index/porady/pressklub/archiv/vlastimil\\_Horvath.html](http://www.frekvence1.cz/index/porady/pressklub/archiv/vlastimil_Horvath.html) [Accessed 10 April 2009]




his ethnic background, and if asked, he always expressed great respect for his parents and for the Roma culture, his approach to this subject was merely passive, always initiated by the media, which almost seemed to “remind” Vlasta Horváth of his roots.

Vlasta Horváth’s refusal to fully take on the media-fabricated role of the Roma envoy (and perhaps even redeemer) represents a significant objection to the optimistic commentaries speaking of a trailblazing success of the Roma minority in its long-lasting struggle for recognition by the majority Czech society. For in the eyes of the audience, Vlasta Horváth was most likely a perfectly “normal” Czech, whose appearance, habits and language did not substantially differ from the norms shared by the non-Roma majority. It is also without doubt that the television significantly helped in making it easier for the audience to identify with Horváth-as-a-*Superstar*, standardizing him during the course of the contest into the form of a generic pop-culture celebrity, which he, after his victory, truly became. Therefore, we should be cautious about interpreting the 850,000 votes sent in favour of Horváth during the final evening of the show as a direct indicator of some kind of attitude change in Czech society, turning away from the above mentioned ethno-cultural conception of the Czech nation towards a more pluralistic and civic model, which would, in a non-assimilationist way, accept the Roma minority as an integral part of Czech society. It is much more plausible that the Czech television audience chose as their *Superstar* somebody from within the societal community (in Talcott Parsons’ words), not from outside of it, where the large majority of the Czech Roma still exist today.

But before formulating any general implications which may stem from these observations, I believe it is important to recall probably the most important aspect of this issue - and that is the fact that all the production and operation of these formats is deeply rooted in the logic of transnational cultural industries, looking at them primarily as means for gaining profit through selling their audiences to the advertisers. In the eyes of the broadcasters (with the possible exception of the public service media), any other functions and consequences these formats might have, including cultural ones, are only important insofar as they lead to an increase in the rating figures - or, at least, do not lead to them dropping. As Waisbord puts it:

Formats are a form of McTelevision. Shorthand for the McDonald’s fast-food chain, the prefix *Mc* stands for a business model characterized by efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control that caters products to specific local requirements, usually informed by cultural factors (Ritzer 1998). Applied to the television industry, formats represent the global commercialization of an efficient and predictable program that can be tweaked according to local tastes. (2004: 378)

Vlasta Horváth’s victory in the 2005 *Czech Search for a Superstar* might not have been fully predicted, but it was definitely not objected to by the media




industries which cared for his publicity in the months following the show. Horváth's exceptionality was visible enough to gain attention and stir the dead waters of the Czech popular music scene, but not sticking out too much, so that people would not really see him as the (potentially threatening) image of the Other. He got the chance to become Superstar because, from the TV production's point of view, he fulfilled certain basic requirements for this role - an attractive appearance, nice voice and, most of all, an ability to "look good" on the TV screen. The crucial "importance of the image" for the whole show (Holmes 2004: 158) can be easily demonstrated through the story of another "non-typical Czech" contestant Annamaria D'Almeida, a participant in the following 2006 *Czech Search for a Superstar*, who made it to the quarter-finals but then, despite her unusually talented voice, was denied the chance by the judges to compete for the audience's votes in the final stages of the contest. This case clearly illustrates the power of the cultural industries, represented here by the judges (Holmes 2004), to define reality and offer to the public only limited, more or less standardized images to choose from, thereby securing that no "alien image" will be able to distort the carefully orchestrated show.<sup>21</sup> According to Susan Holmes, "media participation and interactivity take place within pre-established rules, regulations, and choices", which means that "the audience is essentially able to select from a limited range of narrative paths that are initially defined by the text" (Holmes 2004: 165).

In this respect, Vlasta Horváth's victory itself probably does not represent a substantial challenge to the construction of Czech national identity and does not inevitably indicate a shift towards a more inclusive concept of the Czech nation. If we should judge solely on the basis of the second *Czech Search for a Superstar* contest, it could be argued that this symbolic inclusion of the Roma minority might only follow an assimilationist way, expecting the Roma to virtually give up their ethnic identity and to attempt to fit into the dominant (culturally-based) concept of the Czech national identity. So far, television

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<sup>21</sup> Annamaria D'Almeida, a 16 year old dark-skinned, curly-haired girl from Prague, apparently did not fulfil the above mentioned criteria for a potential Czech celebrity status; at least that was the prevalent opinion of hundreds of internet users on the 2006 *Czech Search for a Superstar* official website (<http://superstar2006.nova.cz>) after the surprising elimination of this talented child who, according to most of the contributors, surpassed by far the other contestants with her singing abilities. Almost unanimously, the contributors criticized the decision, some of them even accusing the jury of racism, and called for a boycott of the contest. Nevertheless, the affair was soon forgotten and the general audience remained loyal to the show, assumed from share figures regularly exceeding 50% ([http://www.superstar.cz/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=424&Itemid=47](http://www.superstar.cz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=424&Itemid=47) [Accessed 10 April 2009]). Overall, this case showed some similarity to the British 2001 Pop Idol contest, where the audience, against the will of the judges but this time backed by the tabloid press in apparent search for controversy, supported an overweight contestant Rik Waller (Holmes 2004). Despite the overarching ideology of equal opportunity, both cases make it clear that "opportunity is not equal for all, and we are invited to enjoy this process of inequality as it is played out as serialized spectacle" (Holmes 2004: 158).




formats like *Pop Idol* have focused on the mainstream audience whose cultural tastes and expectations they have tried adjusting to, and any major differentiation from them - like an active representation and support of people with truly distinct, alternative identities - could be risky business, at least in a society so ethnically homogeneous and xenophobic as the Czech Republic currently is. As Silvio Waisbord reminds us again:

It would be a mistake, however, to celebrate formats as harbingers of cultural diversity. Just because formats are 'glocalized,' they do not necessarily usher in multiculturalism or stimulate cultural democracy. (2004: 380)

### Concluding remarks

That being said, this paper does not aim to sign off with an entirely negative assessment of the potential of global television formats for challenging the established patterns of media representation of national communities. After all, the scope of analysis in this paper does not indeed enable such a broad conclusion, which would require examining issues of identity and citizenship in other television formats and, possibly, their cross-country comparisons. The conclusions must therefore remain on the level of this particular case study. It argues that, even though it cannot be expected from reality TV programming in the Czech Republic to play a truly progressive role in the mediation of cultural representations, promoting genuine alternatives to dominant conceptions of national identity, there can still be some cultural and political significance to the spectacular triumph of Vlasta Horváth in the 2005 *Czech Search for a Superstar*. For regardless of how weak or strong his Roma identity was prior to the TV contest, and regardless of what means were used by the media industries to fabricate it during and primarily after the show, it still is an identity he since then cannot simply put aside or forget about, even if he wanted to. There is no reason to believe that the above demonstrated interest of the media in his ethnicity should somehow cease; it is, after all, a topic which fulfils many of the criteria for news attractiveness. Therefore it can be argued that as long as Vlasta Horváth remains at the centre of media attention and is willing to take on the role of a *Roma* celebrity, the issues of racism, multiculturalism, tolerance as well as questions about national self-definition and belonging to the national community will have a greater chance of remaining a vital part of the public debate. It might be an overstatement to say that Vlasta Horváth really “*did more for the Czech Roma than our politicians during the entire decade*”, as the chair of the judges in the 2005 contest claimed at the end of the show, but it might be true that his performance in the show and especially further continuing presence on TV screens, CD covers, concert stages, at public events, in radio programmes and tabloid photos could be seen as the first step towards opening up the public sphere and making it more easily accessible for the representatives of culturally marginalized groups, so they could be “able to make themselves and their social struggles




visible and open the possibility of dialogic engagement”, which is what Nick Stevenson (2003: 336) sees as one of the key elements of the idea of cultural citizenship.

Nevertheless, this presumption has to be considered carefully and with an awareness of the above stated structural limitations, imposed by the global TV format industry. As the popularity of reality TV does not appear to be diminishing in the near future, there will certainly be opportunities to observe how the coming series and formats will deal with symbolic portrayals of the Czech national community and with manifestations of majority/minority relations. With respect to the Roma people, it will be interesting to see whether their participation in these kinds of programs will grow further, or whether Vlasta Horváth will be left alone as a kind of “token-Roma”, a lone symbol of plurality in the realm of popular culture and an aspiration model within the overarching ideology of success where everybody can “make it” - except for all those who, unfortunately, happen to fall outside of the media-defined range of “normality” and cultural acceptance.

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