

Building Hope and Communities- Young Romas' cultural and economical implication in Romania

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Abstract

Now that the situation of the Roma population is becoming a priority issue in Romania as well as in Europe, it is important that we have a clear perception on Roma ethnicity and minority. Progress in key fields like education, health and economy within the Roma community is due to succeed only with the active contribution of its members. The main part of the paper tries to offer pertinent response to the following research question: To which extend the young Roma are motivated both by their communities and state policies to have an education?

Education is vital for the young Roma in order to preserve their culture and develop the entrepreneurship spirit in Roma communities. Nevertheless, challenges as Roma education patterns and the low access to higher education define the sector and slower the improvement of Roma situation in Romania.

The young educated Roma assume more and more the responsibility of “engaged actors” bringing change among their population, coping both with modernity and tradition. The interviews taken for this paper with young Roma show the wit and sophistication of a “young Roma elite” as they proudly name themselves.

The present research was made possible with the help and contribution of Roma students and young graduates that engaged themselves in an open and vivid dialogue with me.

Introduction

- *History*

The Roma population migrated from India in the 13th century and found on the Romanian old provinces economy niches for their crafts and entertainment (Hancock, 1999). They were enslaved for more than 500 years becoming the monasteries' and landlords' work force and servants. After their liberation they remained a marginalized group and faced massive deportations in Transnistria during the Second World War. The communist regime began a policy of integration and assimilation, an era that will end after 1989. The Roma minority was officially recognized as an ethnic group and started to affirm its identity once the 1991 Constitution "granted the liberty to express one's identity and belonging to a certain ethnic group". In the same period, taking advantages of Law 68/1992ⁱ some Roma organizations went into politics: The Ethnic Federation of the Roma, The Roma Party, The Roma Union. Civil society began to flourish and the number of Roma NGOs has increased considerably since 1993.

- *Statistics*

The recent statistics show that the Roma population represents 2,5% (535 250) of the 21 698 171 Romanian citizens. At the same time, a survey carried out by the Institute of Research of the Life Quality into the Roma communities led to an estimate of 1 580 000 Roma, approximately 7% of the total population of Romania.ⁱⁱ This numerous population, eager to express freely, is confronted with specific problems that derive both from the marginalization that are faced with and the present transition process in Romania. The hardships that the country experienced in the process of transition towards a free market are more severe for the Roma population.

- *Introducing education*

Roma are historically the least educated minority in Romania. Even some of those who start going to school will not even graduate from primary school. Very few succeed to complete their education and even fewer to get to the university.

The access of individuals to education is determined largely by their social and cultural status and strongly influenced by economic and political factors.

Education issues should be analyzed in close connection to the economic situation. In 1992, 27% of the adult Roma population had only went to primary school. 44% of the men and 59% of the women could not read or write, practically they were illiteratesⁱⁱⁱ. As most of them are unqualified and are employed in unprofitable sectors, they were the first to be laid off.

The law stipulates that children who had been out of school for 3 years or more can not return to continue their studies. Nevertheless without a minimum of elementary school people can not be employed or procure a 'work card' and the pension, unemployment and health insurance that derive from a legal work place.

Few succeed to reach a higher education level. At present, just 1% of the Roma population has the chance and opportunity to attend university. Some of these 600 students receive a higher education with the government assistance programs aimed at enabling Roma to obtain advanced degrees. In 1993 special places for the young Roma were reserved at public universities. The studies ranged from law, sociology, natural sciences and literature. The applicants had to pass a qualifying exam to enter university. The achievements of those who graduated from university demonstrate the great human potential that lies within the Roma communities and the progress made due to the government strategy of encouraging higher education among Roma.

- *The national Government strategy for improving the condition of the Roma*

Chapter XII of the 1995 Education Law brings the needed clarification to minorities education. Article 118 states that "the persons belonging to national minorities have the right to study and receive instruction in their mother tongue at all levels and all forms of education in accordance with the present law". Most Roma students study in Romanian, but the statistics show that there were 1 680 pupils whose language of instruction was Romani in 1999. On the other hand, the collaboration between the Ministry of National Education and NGOs specialized on Roma issues led to the development of alternative and informal education practices. In May 1998, an inspector for Romani language was appointed to facilitate the Roma pupils schooling. Nevertheless both E. Pons and Iulius Rostas mention that "given the fact that just 60% of the Roma in Romania speak Romani language there is little interest to produce Romani textbooks for children's instruction".

In 2001 was launched the national strategy for improving the Roma situation. The program aims at "encouraging school attendance and cutting down dropping out, particularly with the poor segments of the Roma population." Another point in the strategy stresses the importance of

“further granting incentives and subsidized places especially for young Roma who wish to attend university or college”. As Alina, Sociology and Social Work Faculty graduate and Roma Women Emancipation Association (RWEA), pointed out “the strategy looks good, but its implementation lacks political will. If all the deadlines would be respected maybe the Roma communities would feel some positive changes. Ramona, the Faculty of Economics graduate and member of RWEA as well admits that in real life situations so many unexpected events appear so that will take years until the strategy effects will be visible”.

Education Patterns in the Roma family versus Roma children schooling

To educate means to offer, especially to young people, personal development opportunities and to bring knowledge that will improve one’s life. What happens when a group’s perspective on personal development and on knowledge differ from classic norms? Most likely a clash will appear and a latent conflict will be nurtured. But how is the case when, within a group, there is a multidimensional perspective on a specific issue? Let’s take for example the education. Seen as both “the school of life” and the classical formal system, the education of the young Roma is trying to combine two different perspectives.

In many communities, Roma children’s attendance to school and the ability to take advantage of education is severely influenced by their racial and ethnical identity. Besides the external factors involved in shaping education, there are a series of reasons that harden the schooling of the Roma population.

- *Reasons for which Roma children do not attend school*

To start with, the lack of registration papers creates a vicious circle that denies children access to education, insurance and any kind of benefits. There are cases when Roma mothers fail to register their newborns.

Secondly, the elders of a Roma caste consider that “the school of life” is being more important than the regular education received in schools. Tradition prevails in front of any effort to modernize completely the education process of young Roma. Very often Roma parents discount the value of an education, as they did not receive one. Iulius Rostas claims that the Roma, “being subject of forced assimilation and discrimination for centuries, developed their own strategy of

survival". For example, family life is strictly regulated, with the male as the head of the family and the male children, the breadwinners.

Thirdly, in some very traditional Roma communities, girls above the age of 12 are forbidden to keep the company of boys unsupervised, which makes school attendance problematic (Moisa, 2000).

A fourth factor refers to the discrimination against the young Roma who are sometimes regarded as "stupid" and "dirty". The racial barriers persist even in the educational system, with teachers and colleagues that ignore the Roma students. The discrimination of the Roma community perpetuates also in the teacher-parent relation and creates a climate of mistrust and insecurity.

Last, but not least comes Romania's economical situation. Once the communist system collapsed and the full-employment policy was replaced by the market mechanisms, the low profile jobs disappeared. Moreover the niche professions like flower-sellers and jar collectors became futile in time. The income sources for a Roma family decreased and the effort to afford to send a child to school is considerable. In addition, a child who is either at school or doing homework is not available to help around the house or even earn money.

- *Motivation to study*

The negative consequences of the poor social and economical situations are partially reduced by the inner motivation of the young Roma and the community support received.

Alina is one of the persons to whom discrimination, ironically, played an encouraging role. Finishing high school, she was refused a job at the city hall in her village on ethnic grounds. She then decided to contribute to the changing perception on Roma and to improve her own people image and situation. She went to university and now she is working for the Roma Women Emancipation Association.

Referring to inner motivation, Iudita, 3rd year student at the Faculty of Economics, said: "It's true that there are just a few Roma that go to the university...but this is not because they are afraid of school, on the contrary young Roma want to learn." Alina continued: "We go to university because we want to satisfy our deep belief, to see what are our limits and to overpass prejudices like "gypsies are stupid" or "they don't have the same mental capacities as the majority population. We want to show to everybody that we, the Roma, can be as competitive as others both socially and intellectually."

The question “ How are the young Roma encouraged and supported by their communities to have an education? appears naturally.

The answers come from the young Roma that experience and experienced themselves the support or on the contrary the lack of encouragement from the community.

Alina: “I worked, while I was a student, as a teacher for Roma children. It was the first special class created to better integrate Roma children in the society in the entire country. On several occasions I talked with children’s parents. Those who are young understand the importance of being educated, but the elders of the community affirm that the school of life is the important one. And their opinion is respected, ...is sacred.”

Mariana, 3rd year student, the Faculty of Psychology: “Since I was little I wanted to go to the university. When I was 16, the age when young Roma women get married, the son of a family friend proposed me. Fortunately, I entered university and my parents let me come to Cluj.

Alina: “ In traditional communities as the Gabors in Cluj, a 13 years old girl can’t go to school anymore because is shameful. They have to get married and form a family. This is the reason for which the class was dismantled”.

Access to higher education: 1% of the Roma

- *A new cast is born: the young Roma intellectuals*

The number of the university places is increasing constantly every year. More and more Roma young people have the opportunity to have a higher education and to get a well paid profession. As Alina was saying “There is a movement of the young, high-educated Roma who are trying to make a difference in their communities.”

A large number are actively involved in student associations and NGOs and participate to training programs that offers them a practical experience for a future career. As a positive trend I would mention the Roma students from Cluj-Napoca who joined in a student organization: Romano Suno and develop programs to help Roma communities. Their effort is recognized among student organizations and their experience acquired in the field made them gain the colleagues’ admiration and respect.

How do they see themselves as representatives of the educated Roma

The young Roma who attend university in Romania are faced by many challenges and the most significant ones are the integration process they experience and the roles they assume in their communities as intellectuals. If we take the example of the Cluj Napoca university center, we will see that this young people receive great support and encouragement from Roma students' association *Romano Suno*. Alina admits that because of the multiple training sessions she participated in, offered by the Roma NGOs, and her personal experience, made her obtain high grades as a student. Moreover, her colleagues looked at her with admiration and successful collaboration among Roma and non- Roma student association was developed. Along with this active student experience came also the responsibility of a young educated Roma.

Alina: "We can see around us a movement of the Roma graduates who are doing their best to bring a positive in Roma communities. Nevertheless there is a long way to go."

The young Roma graduates, as both agents of change and insiders, have strong opinions about their roles in the Romanian society. Discrimination, poverty and social marginalization can be transformed through a proactive attitude in Roma communities; this is the message that they want to transmit: "We should be more united, this is what matters the most. We can see that our image among the Romanians is pretty bad and this generates a vicious discrimination circle. We have to mobilize and contribute to changing perspectives".

Ramona beliefs that young educated Roma are responsible for changing the general perception on their own people. Volunteering in a Roma student association helped her fight for protecting ethnical identity, paternal language, tradition and spiritual values. As statistics mention only 60 percent of the Roma speak Romani language, their paternal dialect. Ramona unfortunately does not speak Romani at all, Alina is studying it now, but both of them realize that studying the Romani language is very important and only in this way the Romani culture can be perpetuated. Although in Ramona's family not even her grandfather speaks Romani she does not feel assimilated by the Romanian society: "I don't agree with these 'integration' and 'assimilation' terms. If a person has been leaving for dozens of years in one place and the same her/his grandfather, how can we speak about assimilation? My grandfather still preserves some of the traditional way of life..."

There are 28 Roma castes at the national level, some of the most special are the *gabors*, who although live in the center of Cluj Napoca, surprise by their traditional life style. We can distinguish the Roma castes especially because of their unique lifestyle, and economical

preoccupations: Tinsmiths and Coppersmiths, Blacksmiths, Bear trainers, Horse dealers, Musicians etc. Iudita wore a traditional outfit when she became a student. She is now trying to wear them each time she goes in a more traditional Roma community. Many Roma crafts are about to disappear as they represent niche professions, which are very much influenced by the Romanian transition. Still many Roma communities earn money and manage to survive because of these seasonal and low-income traditional crafts. In the context of Romania's accession to the EU, the traditional Roma communities will need financial and managerial support in order to preserve and develop these traditional professions and to transform them into profitable businesses.

As Ramona many young Roma wonder what one can do today with the "school of life" when in order to be hired one should have completed at least the Primary School. This question is looking for a response from both the Roma and government sides.

Conclusions

No doubt, being a young Roma nowadays in Romania is a long-term challenge. Probably will take time and a lot of effort to transform their community in a "modern" one and make the majority understand and accept the Roma culture. I see the Roma students and graduates the real connector between the traditional communities and the government's strategies and policies. Active, educated, responsible they engaged themselves in a long term transformation process. All these expected and desired changes will be produced if the Roma and the majority learn to listen to each other. An honest and immediate dialogue needs to start so that the Roma and the Romanians could have a positive interaction.

And for sure, one of the main challenges is to succeed in seeing "education" as an investment in time both in the Roma communities and at the governmental level.

Endnotes:

ⁱ The 68 Law from 1992 stipulates that organizations belonging to national minorities can participate in the elections and can have a representative in the Representative's House

ⁱⁱ E. Zamfir and C. Zamfir, *The Gypsies between Ignorance and Despair*, Alternative Publish House, Bucharest, 1998

ⁱⁱⁱ E. Zamfir and C. Zamfir, *The Gypsies between Ignorance and Despair*, Alternative Publish House, Bucharest, 1998

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