

**Challenges of a new Europe:
In between local freeze and global dynamics**

The Roma problem

**Discrimination, stereotype and the clash
between tradition and modern society**

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1 Introduction

The Roma problem is still a sensitive issue both on a European and on a national level. This category of citizens is still considered as second class citizens, as a “misery” of the society. Different programs both on the European level and on a national level are set up, with the purpose of helping to integrate them into the society, into a modern society, which in most cases is very different from their traditional way of living. In this paper I will try to focus on the problem, what I would like to call as a cultural clash, a clash between the modern way of living and the traditional way, which can be identified in the Roma communities. I know that the issue regarding the Roma problem is well debated, but I would like to raise some questions, which may be helpful in understanding this community and their particular way of life.

In the first part of my paper I will tackle some general data’s about the Roma minority in Romania and present some general topics where the discrimination of this particular minority can be highly observed. Also, I would like to say a couple of words about the stereotypes associated with them, and how those can affect this community. And I will try to say a few words about the perceptions of this category of population, which in my opinion should be changed in order to integrate them into the society. The perceptions I would like to present are mainly those which I faced during my life.

Also, I will highlight a solution, which it can bring to a better understanding of the Roma problem. The main argument for why the Roma community is considered as a misery, as an element which makes a bad image for Romania, in the eyes of the majority of the population and also in the eyes of some of our policy makers, is that we hardly know anything about this minority. This easily can lead to perceive them as a stranger and then try anything to marginalize them.

In the second part of the presentation I would like to tackle the problem of the cultural clash, how the modern European way of life affects the traditions of the Roma community, what should be done in order to save this traditions and to make them acceptable on a national and European level. I know that we can’t speak about a common culture, tradition in the whole communities. The Romas in Spain, Romania, and Hungary behave in a different way, and also in the same country there are particularities,

differences in the communities, but some similarities exist. This presentation will tackle only the Romanian communities and their customs like marriage, school and the tradition way of living (clothing, housing).

2 General data about the Roma minority in Romania

In Romania lives quite a big number of different ethnic minorities, almost 10% of the total population is composed by persons belonging to a particular minority. . The country recognizes as national minority 20 of them (even though a clear definition of national minority doesn't exist, but this aspect will be detailed above). According to a census made in Romania in 2002 the total population of the country were 21,698,181 peoples. In the following I will list the proportion and the number of the citizens belonging to a national minority: Hungarians (1,434,377, 6.6 %), Roma (535,250, 2,5%), Germans (60,088, 0.3%), Ukrainians (61,091, 0.3%), Serbs (22,518, 0.1%), Turks (32,596, 0.2%), Tartars (24,137, 0.1%), Slovaks (17,199, 0.1%), Russian – Lippovans (36,397, 0.2%), Jews (5,870), Bulgarians (8,092), Czechs (3,938), Croats (6,786), Greeks (6,513), Polish (3,671), Armenians (1,780), Italians (3,331), Slav-Macedonians (731), Ruthenians (262), Albanians (520) and other minorities (which doesn't have a parliamentary representation): Slovenians (175), Carashovanians (207), Chinese (2,249), Gagauz (45), Csangos (1,370), other ethnicity (13,653) and undeclared (5,935).¹

As this statistics shows the Roma minority is the third largest group in the country and it represents two and a half percent of the total population of the country. Even though the official statistic tells only about a little bit more than a half million of Romas in my country other sources estimates the Roma population between 700000 and one million. A research made in 2005 by the World Bank and the National Agency for Romas (Agenția Națională pentru Romi), entitled “*The Roma Communities in Romania. A map of communitarian poverty*”², estimates that in Romania are around 968 275 persons belonging to this minority.³

¹ Census 2002, *Population according ethnicity*, <http://www.recensamant.ro/> [accessed on 10 May 2008]

² The original title in Romanian is “Comunitățile de Romi din România. O hatră a sărăciei comunitare prin sondajul PRORomi”

³ Agenția Națională pentru Romi, *Comunitățile de Romi din România. O hatră a sărăciei comunitare prin sondajul PRORomi*, World Bank, București, July, 2005,

There are several arguments why is this big difference between the census and the different estimations made by several associations. Miralena Mamina, program coordinator in the “Save the Children” organization, presents the following reasons why it is this big discrepancy between the legal census and the estimations:

- They are afraid to declare their ethnic belonging because they think that they would face problems with the police and they would be discriminated
- They don't find themselves included in the term “Roma”, still considering that the term “gipsy” is what it represents them – but also, argues Ms. Mamina, maybe it wasn't explained to them what is ethnicity or Roma during the process of the census.⁴

3 Discrimination and stereotypes

One of the main obstacles faced by the Roma minority is the discrimination and the stereotypes associated with them. In a report published by the Council of Europe on 6th June 2005 regarding the protection of minorities in my home country, they welcomed the steps made by the Romanian Government regarding the inclusion of the minorities, but they also underlined the fact that further actions are necessary. One of the main points tackled by this report was the situation of the Roma community, which is still affected by the poverty, by discrimination, by lack of education (in their own language or in other language like Romanian or Hungarian). The Committee welcomed the initiatives of the Romanian authorities to improve the situation of Romas, but “while the first results start to be visible, in particular in education, the impact of these measures remains on the whole limited, and the Roma continue to face serious difficulties, such as discrimination in most key areas, including employment, housing and health.”⁵

http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/statistici/PROROMI_Comunitatile_de_Romi_din_Romania_187.pdf

[accessed on 10 May 2008]

⁴ Wordpress.ro, *Numărul Rromilor îl va depăși pe cel al Românilor în decurs de circa 60 de ani*, <http://stirea.wordpress.com/2007/11/12/numarul-rromilor-il-va-depasi-pe-cel-al-romanilor-in-decurs-de-circa-60-de-ani-daca-indicii-de-crestere-demografica-se-mentin-la-nivelul-actual/> [accessed on 10 May 2008]

⁵ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, “*Second Opinion on Romania*”, adopted on 24 November 2005, ACFP/OP/II(2005)007, Council of Europe, http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/2_framework_convention_%28monitoring%29/2_monitoring_mechanism/4_opinions_of_the_advisory_committee/1_country_specific_opinions/2_second_cycle/PDF_2nd_OP_Romania_eng.pdf [accessed on 10 May 2008], p. 4-5

The problem of the discrimination even if it is regulated by law⁶ and also a National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) was set up, its actual application in practice leaves place for interpretation. The Pro Europe League in its report mentioned several cases of discrimination, which were presented to the National Council for Combating Discrimination, but a solution didn't appeared or it was solved in an improper way. Also the NGO notes that according to the law the NCCD should run its activity independently, in practice it is organized and function as a special body of the central public administration.⁷ Beside the examples given in the report by the Pro Europe League we also can find more recent examples, speeches of recent politicians containing discrimination: the Romanian President, Traian Băsescu, on 20th May 2007 after offending a journalist, he took her mobile, and during a private discussion with his wife in his car (but the phone was still recording) he said referring to the journalist "țigancă împuțită" (stinky gypsy).⁸

An other important issue tackled by the Pro Europa League is the problem of teaching the history and traditions of minorities. Even though the authorities suggest that the curricula of the history taught in schools presents the historical contexts of the minorities. The report emphasizes that the traditions of minorities are taught only in classes in which the teaching is on a minoritarian language; also the name of the curricula is wrong, it's not History of Romania (so these would include also the minorities), it is "The History of the Romanians", and also different course books strengthen negative stereotypes about minorities.⁹ The report speaks in general terms regarding the teaching of the culture and history of minorities, but I consider it is needed to add that, while a few minorities (for example the Hungarian, German) have a little space in the school curricula, the Roma community is hardly mentioned in the history books.

⁶ The initial regulation was made by Governmental Ordinance nr. 137/2000 and it was modified several times. The final modification was operated in 2007 and entered into force on 11th February 2007.

⁷ Pro Europa League, "*Shadow Report on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Romania*", 2005, Minority Electronic Resources, http://www.minelres.lv/reports/romania/PDF_Romania_ProEuropa.pdf [accessed 10 May 2008], p. 3-4

⁸ Ionut Baias, "Traian Băsescu i-a „confiscat” telefonul unei jurnaliste" (Traian Băsescu confiscated the phone of a journalist), Hotnews, 20 May 2007, http://www.hotnews.ro/articol_73270-Traian-Basescu-i-a-confiscat-telefonul-unei-jurnaliste.htm [accessed 10 May 2008]

⁹ Pro Europa League, "*Shadow Report on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Romania*", 2005, Minority Electronic Resources, http://www.minelres.lv/reports/romania/PDF_Romania_ProEuropa.pdf [accessed on 10 May 2008], p.5-7

The report mentions a few aspects regarding the teaching about the discrimination. They argue that "On the "Civic culture" subject, taught in classes V- VIII, the school- curricula does not include issues like minorities, minority rights, problems related to discrimination. The curricula of the VIth grade makes mention of discrimination as a principle of the ONU Convention related to children's rights, the curricula of the VIIIth grade refers to the equality of chances but only makes mention of the " problems of poverty and wealth" and does not mention the problem of equality of chances between persons belonging to different ethnic communities."¹⁰

All this argument presented above underlines that the most of the Romanian population hardly knows anything about the Roma community, the discrimination persists in every level. Somehow aren't we a cause of their situation. Shouldn't we start changing our behavior, attitudes towards them in order to obtain a change in their relation with the society? The stereotypes associated with the Roma communities, like all of them are stinky, non-educated, beggars or robbers. By saying all time this to them aren't we shaping their way of life. Also, by marginalizing them we make harder their integration in the society. Most of them are working only in the most miserable jobs. And if they would like to get employed in an other place they are rejected because of their ethnic origin. But also I saw cases when they wanted to enter in a bar, a common place, open for all citizens, they were not allowed to enter only because of their ethnic origin.

3.1 The role of the mass media

The mass media, considered by some specialist the fourth power in a state (after the legislative, executive and judicial powers) has a major role in shaping the attitude of a particular problem. Unfortunately, the media in Romania has a negative attitude toward the Roma minority.

The mass media, when it writes about a murder, stealing etc. performed by a person belonging to the Roma community, they always emphasize that it was a Romanian who belongs to that community. By doing in that way they create a negative image which is easily adopted by the rest of the population.

¹⁰ Pro Europa League, "Shadow Report on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Romania", 2005, Minority Electronic Resources, http://www.minelres.lv/reports/romania/PDF_Romania_ProEuropa.pdf [accessed 10 May 2008], p. 6

The mass media should change its attitude, from an approach characterized by presenting all the bad things and mistakes done by the Roma minority to an approach focused on the presentation of some positive aspects. One thing shouldn't be forgotten by the media representatives, that "good" and "bad" people exist in all communities, so the same can be applied to the Roma community.

The most important is that the media could have an important role in helping the integration of the Roma minority into the Romanian society. By different TV programs it could present history and the culture of this ethnic group, it could highlight the most important particularities of the community, which could lead to a better perception of them in the eyes of the majority.

4 Modern society vs. traditional way of living

The different Roma communities had various ways of living, but generally speaking, in the past, their main area of activities were trading, different iron works and another part of them were used as "slaves" to different agricultural and other kinds of works. The development of the technology and the also the modern way of living affected the traditional living of the Roma communities, but also we can see, among them reticence to adopt the new, modern way of living and by that try to accommodate with the new trends.

In this chapter I will focus on several problems regarding the Roma community. The question of marriage, which recently came in the attention of the local media and authorities, the question of education (which is also related to the problem of education) the problem with the justice, they try to maintain their traditional ways of solving different conflicts amongst them, which is in contradiction with the state of law. Cases of fighting between different Roma communities are quite often in Romania, and sometime they involve also guns, which can affect the integrity of the rest of the population.

First of all, I think it is necessary to mention once again, that we cannot speak about a common way of life among the different types of Roma communities. Also, there is a problem inside their own community, because they are not united and those who could help their poorer fellows aren't doing so. In most cases the rich families are feeling ashamed, because of their poor fellows and they don't do anything to help them. Also,

they consider this part of the community as an obstacle also for them; they can not obtain a higher status because they are considered same as their poor fellows.

4.1 Marriage in the Roma communities

In the traditional Roma communities the age when they marry their children is between 12-14 and also in most of the communities it is made for specific purpose, like money, power. This is mainly the case of the richer communities. But in the last one and two year in Romania a major debate was around this issue. The Romanian Family Code, adopted on 4 January 1954 and modified for a several times, in article 4 states that the marriage can took place if the husband is at least 18 years old and the wife 16 year old. In special cases the marriage can take place if the wife is more than 15 year old.¹¹ Even though this law is old, the problem of the Roma marriages wasn't a recent topic till now. They couldn't register the marriage legally but nobody stopped them to make them in their local communities. Different NGOs and also the state started to make a campaign against this traditional marriages considering that it is against the human rights and that the children are forced to do that.

I completely agree with the position of the NGOs and the state, you can not ruin the life of such young persons, but in order to make a change in their behavior, in one part of their tradition, you need some time. It can not be imposed from one day to another. An intercultural dialogue should be promoted, and a decision should be taken, but it should be an agreement between both sides. A compromise should be made and some time should be give to them in order to change their tradition and make it acceptable by the modern standards.

4.2 Education, school dropping among the Roma minority

The problem of school dropping among the children belonging to a Roma community is high and it is due mainly to three causes: the discrimination faced by them in the school system, the problem of poverty and also the problem of marriage. The rate of abandoning the school among the Roma children is very high.

- 17.3% of the Roma children haven't been subscribed to the educational system

¹¹ Romanian Family Code, http://www.dscllex.ro/coduri/c_fam.htm [accessed on 12 May 2008]

- The rate of Roma children subscribe to special schools is high: almost 12% of the subscribed youngsters attend to this kind of learning institutions
- 12-20 % of them drop the school in the primary or middle school and mainly the girls are affected by this phenomenon
- More 20% are illiterate and around 17% face major difficulties in reading

An article published in a Romanian news paper lists several reasons why the Roma children go to school. The author also makes two distinct categories: the poor children and the rich one.

Reasons for poor children to go to school:

- For the allocation given by the Romania state for its students younger than eighteen
- For other assistances given by the authorities
- For the program entitled “Roll and Milk”, which gives everyday this products for the scholars in the primary schools
- Because the football and the interactive lessons
- To be able to get a job in the unskilled labor market

Reasons why the rich Roma children go to school:

- To be able to get the driving license, to run a business, and to have basic skills to use a computer
- To be able to read the subscription in the TV and to open a company
- For a modern way of live
- For a carrier in politics, culture or science¹²

Even tough this characterization is a little bit over exaggerated in some aspect; it reflects the major points of interest among the Roma children regarding the school. Also, in some universities¹³ and high schools special places, funded by the state, were created in order to encourage the continuation of the studies for those children belonging to the Roma minority, whose parents can't afford to finance their pupil's education.

¹² Elena Larion, “Copilul rrom, între legea țigănească și școală”, *Gândul*, 12 May 2008, <http://www.gandul.info/scoala/copilul-rrom-intre-legea-tiganeasca-scoala.html?3934;326423> [accessed on 12 May 2008]

¹³ Special places were created in universities like: “Babeș-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca, University of Bucharest or „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iași

Unfortunately, in some cases these places are occupied by students, who even if they don't belong to the Roma minority, they declare themselves as being part of it.

The problem of discrimination can be found also in the educational system. By segregating the Roma children, by sending those to special institutions is one kind of discrimination. Another one occurs in the mixed classes, where some parents protest because their child is learning in a common class with a Roma and want to have its pupil separate. The article mentioned above suggests that in the mixed classes the temptation to abandon the school is relatively lower, than in the classes specially created for them.

The Roma language is taught only in a few schools across Romania. The main problem is that we don't have enough teachers. So in order to implement this program you need to train the personnel and have these classes in order to preserve their culture, even though, according to different researchers we can not speak about a common Romanes language.

Efforts should be made in order to bring the Roma children to school, by making the school an attractive place for them, where they are treated as normal people, where they can learn using their mother-tongue. By facilitating their access to school I can hardly believe that rate of school dropping will remain on the same level.

4.3 Making their own law

It is commonly known that these communities have in the center of their social organization the family and this institute is considered for them as the most important. Also, several cases of rivalry, which can degenerate in fights, can be observed. An enormous scandal broke up recently in Romania, in Sintești, where 200 Romas members of two different families started to fight. The main reason was also the problem of marriage.¹⁴ Another example could be the cases of Craiova, a city, where the fightings between different clans is very often. These cases are not unique, it happens quite often in these communities, they try to settle these problems by themselves.

¹⁴ "Sintești: Scandal cu bătaii și împușcături între două familii de romi" (Sintești: Row with fighting and shootings between two Roma families", *Mediafax*, 27th February 2008, <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/sintesti-scandal-cu-batai-si-impuscaturi-intre-doua-familii-de-romi.html?1688;2418499> [accessed on 13 May 2008]

An important role in settling this conflicts, according to Nicole Martinez, has the The Council of the Elder composed by the family leaders, which, mainly after a fighting try to settle the problem and solve it in a way. I completely agree that a special position should be given to this Council, but not in solving the conflicts but in preventing it. The justice must be applied to them in the same manner as for every citizen of the country.

5 Conclusion

The topic of the Roma community will remain an important issue both in a European and in a local level. We have to address it, but it is not enough to make some programs for integrating them. This year in Europe is the year of Intercultural Dialogue, so we must start communicating with them and by learning about their culture, make the programs is a way which would be reasonable for both parts.

Also, the authorities both on a national and on a local level should try to find some examples, best practices in other countries which had the same problems as Romania. By learning form their experience they could approach in a better way the problem of the Roma communities. The existence of a representative of the Roma community in the Romanian Parliament¹⁵ is not a solution for solving the different problems described above. It is a step, but it is not enough. Working groups should be created with the purpose of brainstorming and finding the proper solutions.

Changes should and must be made by both “actors”. In order to be integrated in the community, the Romas must start adopting the modern way of life, based on the rule of law. If they don’t start doing that they will remain excluded from the society. I know that the hardest thing is to change the mentality. But it must be done. It needs time, and I am optimist that a solution will be reached in a reasonable period.

¹⁵ The Romanian Constitution in Article 62(2) states that: “organizations of citizens belonging to national minorities, which fail to obtain the number of votes for representation in Parliament, have the right to one Deputy seat each, under the terms of the electoral law. Citizens of a national minority are entitled to be represented by one organization only.”

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