

THE INTEGRATION OF THE ROMA IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Elena NEDELUCU*

Abstract

To start with, this paper intends to describe the economic and socio-cultural situation of the Roma in Romania. Then it analyses the particular aspects and the complex social process of including the Roma in the Romanian society nowadays. We try to identify the main causes which led to this situation. How it was born, how it was maintained and how the economic and socio-cultural gap between the Roma and the main population deepened. Another main objective is to identify in Romanian society the main stereotypes, prejudices and forms of discrimination regarding the Roma. The conclusion is that in the Romanian society, the social inclusion of the Roma is a process that is far from being closed. A more firm and systematic mobilisation and accountability of all agencies of socialisation is needed in the elaboration and application of programs meant to fight prejudices and ethnic discrimination.

Keywords: *Social inclusion (of the Roma), stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, democracy*

Introduction

Motto: “In Romania, wherever you might be, you are 15 minutes walking distance, in any direction, from a community of poor gypsies. With the exception of a minority enriched at the limit of law, for more than two thirds of the approximately 1,5 million Romanian gypsies, the confusing years after the fall of the communist regime meant a transition towards hopeless poverty, delinquency and violence. They were among the first fired during the restructuring in the 90s and many of them haven’t managed to find another job. Almost 75% of the gypsies live on state welfare and occasional activities. 80% have no profession. Like in the village of Mocirla, where almost all poor gypsy communities are affected by the same problems concerning work, income, education, access to medical services, ID-s, property titles, poverty and overcrowded houses”².

The present paper discusses the following issues: the economic and social situation of the Roma in present Romanian society; the causes of poor social inclusion; the identification of the factors which contribute to the improvement of this situation and the role of the agencies of socialisation in a more efficient social inclusion process of the Roma. The paper focuses especially on the identification of the main causes which led to this situation.

What is the relation between the paper and the already existent specialized literature?

The paper turns to account the results of some renown sociological researches in Romania, done in the past 20 years, as well as the results of national investigations made within the ETNOBAROMETRU of CRDE program. We used also certain statistics from the Roma Inclusion Barometer as well as direct observation of the interethnic relations in the educational environment.

The subject we approach in this paper is of major importance in a well-functioning society, its democratic evolution, for growing cohesion, cooperation and social trust.

It was noticed that in the societies with a low level of social inclusion, the numbers of districts and areas where people live in miserable conditions is growing: the economic resources

* Associate Professor, Ph.D., Social and Administrative Sciences Faculty, “Nicolae Titulescu” University (e-mail: doina.nedelcu@yahoo.com).

² Catalin Gruia, National Geographic Magazine, November, 2006.

are at the limit of subsistence or even worse, the levels of education and social assistance are insufficient.

Such a life generates and deepens the frustrations, anger, "street culture" or the so-called "around the block subcultures", at the same time leading to the rejection of projects, institutions, values and norms of the "marginalizing" society. Studies show that where the number of the people and marginalized groups is growing, democracy is in danger. Social exclusion is a failure both for society as well as the individual. Romanian society is also affected by this phenomenon. The Roma population is one of the most disadvantaged social categories – a well-known fact especially in the last decade. In other words, the social inclusion of the Roma is a real problem in Romania which should bring together all agents of socialisation involved. The study of the causes which brought about discrimination, of the factors which contribute to the improvement of the situation of the Roma in Romanian society could offer solutions for solving this problem.

1. The Economic and Social Situation of the Roma

The integration of the Roma is one of the important problems the present Romanian society is confronted with. Democracy is by definition a society for all, where every human being, meaning every social category – Roma also- must find their place and role, must enjoy equal chances and must turn to good account its aptitudes and talents. But, in comparison with the rest of the population, we notice that the Roma are lagging. The biggest part of the community continues to live, somewhere, at the outskirts of society, in poverty, with a minimum level of education and social security, or even under this level. Under these circumstances, sociological studies show that 2/3 of the Roma live in poverty and a quarter of them in extreme poverty, in improvised or abandoned houses, in small spaces, lacking sanitary facilities and heat. Within this ethnic group, 24% of the people aged 10 or more do not go to school and 84% of the Roma aged 14 or more never worked with a workman's pass, do not have secure income, health insurance, unemployment or retirement benefits. Why are the Roma in this situation? What should society do to correct this situation? What should the Roma community do?

2. The Causes of Poor Social Inclusion

By analysing the following three social processes we might find the answers to the questions mentioned above: the historical discrimination of the Roma and its consequences; the attitude of the main population towards the Roma: stereotypes and prejudices; the attitude of the Roma towards the society that tries to integrate them: self-exclusion.

a) The Historical Discrimination and the Economic Backward State

Motto: „Ignorance feeds the fear and the fear feeds prejudices and intolerance. For centuries the Roma have been discriminated against because of their way of life and the attachment to their traditions. For centuries Europe has unjustly treated the Roma population thus missing the chance to understand and appreciate all its wealth, patrimony and cultural diversity. By learning, tolerating and respecting the Roma and their culture we could create the best Europe for everybody.”(Terry Davis – The Secretary General for the Council of Europe)

For many centuries from the moment they settled on Romanian territory until the XIXth century, the Roma had a marginal social status as being slaves. Because their social they were not treated as human beings, as persons but as working tools on the property of a master, an "instrument" which could have been sold, given or ill-treated. The masters had unlimited rights over the slaves on their property, but they could not take their lives. The marriage between two

slaves was allowed only with permission from the master. If a free man would have married a slave, he or she would have become a slave too as well as the children resulting from that marriage.

Beginning with the XVIIIth century, there are new regulations improving the situation. The free husband could keep his free man status as well as the children resulting from that marriage. Regarding the selling of slaves, it was forbidden to separate a legally constituted family as well as the parents from their children.

In the second half of the XVIIIrd century, during the reign of Maria Tereza and Joseph the Second, a set of values concerning the assimilation and the compulsory settling of the Roma population in the Empire was passed, thus the Roma from Transylvania were also affected. They had the following restrictions: free circulation, language, traditional costumes, traditional occupations, marriage etc.

Even when slavery was abolished (1864) and their status somehow improved, the centuries of tragic history left their mark on the economic and socio-cultural evolution of the Roma, and on the relations with the main population. Today, in Romania, it is officially acknowledge that, in relation to the main population, the Roma form a disadvantage marginalized social category.

The poor and very poor Roma are subject to a double social exclusion: an external one caused by the main population which does not show citizenship solidarity when it comes to the Roma, and an internal one caused by the corrupt "class" of the ethnic community. Lacking any kind of resources, the poor Roma are extremely vulnerable in front of the internal mafia, falling victim to prostitution, beggary, any type of exploitation.

b) The Attitude of the Majority Population towards the Roma: Stereotypes and Prejudices

Another factor which decisively contributes to the marginalization of the Roma is their negative portrayal made by the other communities, *the perpetuation and the consolidation of a strong set of stereotypes and prejudices regarding their behavioural characteristics*. Stereotypization consists of the undifferentiated treatment of the members of a group, the generalizing rigid simplifying ideas regarding a situation, an individual, a group. The belief that all Roma are lazy and dishonest is such a stereotype. Because of these stereotypes, prejudices are born: feelings, negative attitudes towards people and groups of people. The belief that the birth rate of the Roma should be controlled and the contempt towards this ethnic group are eloquent examples of prejudices based on wrong and rigid generalisations.

Often, prejudices give birth to discrimination, negative, unjust behaviours for certain persons and/or groups. For instance, the refusal to hire Roma in a firm is a form of discrimination. Sociological studies show the fact that not always prejudices give birth to discriminatory behaviours. People's behaviours depend not only on their beliefs but also on external circumstances, rules and laws which govern the society. If the laws forbid discrimination, even if a person has prejudices it will avoid openly manifesting them. On the other hand, even if the prejudice limited by law does not convert into behaviour (does not manifest itself) it still becomes a negative predisposition at any time ready to come out and manifest itself. According to the "theorem" of Thomas, the condition and the human behaviour depend not on the given situation but on the way it is defined by those who take part in it. A formulated definition becomes reality as soon as it is shared by a big number of people. The negative definitions given to some social groups (populations, ethnic groups etc.) are very dangerous and can lead not only to their isolation and subestimation but also to their annihilation.

R. Merton notices that in the 30s, the black people were portrayed as dishonest, lazy, strike breakers, thus the white people were avoiding them. This social defining reduces the employment

possibilities of the black people on the labour market. A similar situation exists in Romanian society. The fact that the main population perceives the Roma as dirty, lazy, dishonest has negative effects on their professional chances, on their self-esteem and the capacity to overcome their condition. Even if a Rom has the same professional qualifications as a Romanian, usually the latter is preferred. Studies indicate the fact that in comparison with the Romanians, the Roma carry on activities which are less paid but which require physical work, take place in toxic environments, which indicates on the one hand lack of education, and on the other hand a form of discrimination. Sociological research shows that Romanians built up a quite rigid stereotype regarding the Roma community, its core part gravitating around the following four characteristics: dishonesty, laziness (the opposite of work), filth, uncivilized behaviour.

The main population has the tendency to delimit itself from the Roma, to avoid having relations with them: only 9% of the Romanians declare that they like talking or collaborating with the Roma, while 35% admit that they do it sometimes but have restraints, and 56% avoid doing it altogether. A big part of the Romanians (63%) dislike the idea of having Roma neighbours or of doing business with them. It is a paradox that although Romanians have a rather negative attitude towards the Roma, avoidance-rejection (78%) rather than acceptance-appreciation, they consider themselves tolerant and understanding towards them. In other words, they do not admit, they are not aware that they are carrying prejudices towards the Roma. But it is a fact that you cannot get rid of prejudices if you don't even admit you have them.

So, the first step in our liberation from the preconceived ideas should be to find them by analysing ourselves, our attitudes, reactions, behaviour towards the other ethnic groups, and then followed by the awareness of the negative social effects that come along. Apparently, by doing this analysis, even the most democratic personalities will be surprised by themselves to notice that in certain circumstances they might do impermissible generalisations, having rigid, negative attitudes towards certain social groups. Returning to the above-mentioned study, we notice that most of the main population is in abeyance regarding the Roma. The Romanians expect change to start from the Roma. They expect the Roma to prove they are honest, hard-working, civilized etc. In other words they don't see themselves as parts of this change. Their role is a passive one. Under these circumstances, it is not possible to change the present situation of the relations between the Roma and the Romanians. Change needs active participation of both sides, even more of the main one that has to integrate the minority.

The above-mentioned study shows that most Romanians (80%) are distrustful of the improvement of the relations between them and the Roma. Only 20% of the people interviewed consider that, in time, these relations will improve.

Still, according to the Roma Inclusion Barometer, initiated by the Open Society Foundation, the intolerance of the Romanians towards the Roma was reduced by half in the last years. Even if Romanian society became more tolerant and the level of intolerance was reduced from 73% in 1993, to 36% last year, the Roma still feel discriminated when coming in contact with the town-halls, police and medical system employees. However, the school is the place where they feel less discriminated. According to the OSF study, 45% of the Roma from Romania declare themselves Romanianized Roma, educated in the spirit of the Romanian culture, approximately 15% are *rudari* and *vatrari*, categories relatively assimilated by the main culture, only 15% identify themselves with the more traditional relatives of the copper-smiths, gypsies and brick makers, while the remaining 25% consider themselves "only gypsy" or affiliate themselves to another group.

c) The Attitude of the Roma towards Society: Self-exclusion

The long history of discrimination and marginalisation of the Roma put its mark on their mentalities and behaviour. The Roma enclosed inside a conservative cultural tradition, based on a

moral of survival under unfavourable conditions, on practicing activities at the limit of legality, low interest in education, general norms of social convention. Their cultural tradition tended to develop a certain internal solidarity, simultaneously with the maintenance and even deepening the distance between them and the rest of the population.

Lacking resources and their fellow citizens appreciation, the Roma have isolated themselves even more from the rest of the society, self-expelling themselves socially. The situation of the Roma confirms once again the fact that the society which has disadvantaged some of its social groups is tempted to perpetuate – even involuntarily - this situation, harming itself in this way. Marginalization is a social phenomenon hard to solve. It contains in itself a vicious circle: on the one hand, the disadvantaged population, constantly discriminated, lacking economic, educational, political resources cannot overcome the situation they are in; on the other hand, and consequently, it tends to stress the isolation, the inferior social statute, making their own values, norms, particular life styles, opposite to those preferred by society choosing a deviated identity instead of a normal identity. It is obvious that the solidarity of the disadvantaged around these values, deviated norms has no advantages for them, and even less for society, being obstacles in the way of social integration.

Returning to the Roma, we notice that their familial and ethnic solidarity was born out of the need to handle critical situations, to compensate poverty, discrimination, inferiorisation playing a modest role in the development of individual capacities, in the adaptation of the members of the society to the exigencies of modernity. They have shown little importance to education, professional training, identity cards or residence cards in this way maintaining the economic backward state and losing rights they are entitled to. Thus, statistics indicate that 3,1% of the Roma have no identity card, meaning that 47.000 persons are excluded from all the citizen rights in the Romania: education and free sanitary service for children, emergency help, other rights concerning social assistance and social insurance. They won't be able to get education, to work legally, won't be insured, cannot vote, cannot become members of any organisation, marry legally, make identity cards for their future children. And this is how a disadvantage entails many other disadvantages.

On the other hand, another factor which contributed to maintaining this disadvantage was the grown birth rate of the Roma. The big number of children per family, combined with the high level of poverty is another explanation of their incapacity to overcome on their own the state of social integration and economic backward.

3. Conclusions regarding the Factors contributing to the Improvement of the Roma Status in a Democratic Society

Society as well as the representatives of the ethnic group and each member must contribute to overcoming this disadvantage. It is a process in which all involved must contribute for everybody's benefit. Some factors of the improvement are the duty of the main population, some are the duty of the minority, and others are the duty of both sides.

In what follows we want to review these factors with the intention to develop the analysis during the next themes.

- a) The formulation and the application of some social policies meant to increase the access of the Roma to decent life conditions;
- b) The development of the skills of the Roma to contribute and to benefit from the economic, cultural and political development of the democratic society;
- c) Increasing communication and intercultural, interethnic cooperation;
- fighting prejudices and any other form of interethnic discrimination;

- practicing and developing a culture and respecting the others;
- respecting and valuing the Roma culture;
- growing the mutual trust between the main population and the Roma community;
- changing the Roma perception on education and increasing their educational performances;
- improving their self-image. The conciliation of the identities: individual, ethnic, civic.

If we try to catch in one phrase the condition for improving the situation of the Roma, we could say that they should enrol in the trend of modernization. Modernisation is the great corrector of inequalities and discriminations. (Catalin Zamfir)

In a competitive system, such as the capitalist society, a minority which cannot cope with the competition no matter how much well-meaning support might get from the society, remains, in essence, marginalized. And modernisation implies first of all the increase of the educational, professional and civic performances.

References

1. Catalin Zamfir, 2003, *The Issue of the Roma: A New Approach of the Relation between Ethnic and Modernisation*, Social Assistance magazine/2003
2. Ticu Constantin, 1996, *Conditions for a New Possible Change in Attitude. Case Study – Expectations of the Main Population from the Roma, The Psycho-sociology of Change*, Polirom
3. Catalin Zamfir, Marian Preda, 2002, *The Roma in Romania*, Ed. Expert, Bucuresti
4. Ana Maria Preoteasa, 2003, *The Presentation of an International Research Regarding the State of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe*, in *Quality of Life*, XIV, no. 2
5. *The Situation of the Roma in the Extended European Union*, European Comission - DG Emploi et Affaires Sociales,
6. Sorin M. Radulescu, *The Roma, in the Synchrony and Diachrony of Contact Populations*, ed. Lumina Lex, 2002, Bucuresti
7. Luana Pop, *Social Politics Dictionary*, Polirom, Bucuresti, 2004
8. C.Zamfir, E.Zamfir, *Gypsies, between Ignorance and Concern*, Editura Alternative, Bucuresti, 1993
9. C.Cucos, T.Coзма, *Minorities, Marginalised*, Editura Polirom, Iasi, 1996