

Chapter 6

Title

**Identity and Inter-ethnic Relations
in the Public Discourse**

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Introduction The aim of this paper is to throw light on the main aspects of the relationship between the image of the Roma minority in Romania, as perceived by the majority of population, and its representation in the public discourse under the influence of racialization. In this regard, the paper is divided into two main parts. The first part inquires the position of the minority in the Romanian society through its longitudinal and transversal dimensions and points out the main conflictual situations between Roma and Romanians. The second part distinguishes the modalities of Roma portrayal in public discourse and the factors that have influenced the trans-ethnic interaction during the last decades.

Spokespersons, the media, as well as the domestic and international institutions (re)shape and strengthen the representation of Roma as an ethnic group. Immediately after 1989, mass media became an active source of stereotypes anti-Roma, the coverage of this minority issues focusing the attention mainly on elements with negative connotation

¹ This is a revised version of previous works, namely, the papers presented at the International Conference on Trans-ethnic Coalition-building within and across States (Uppsala University) and, respectively, at the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies Annual Conference (Södertörn University). These papers together with the article included in the journal "Sfera Politicii" ("Roma Minority in Romania and its Media Representation") present results of the research on identity and Roma minority in Romania.

such as violence, crime, illegal activities etc. But are the press and some political leaders indeed responsible for the negative image of Roma group or are they just reinforcing a “mirror image” created by ingroup-outgroup perceptions, an image that already exists in the public consciousness?

Roma representation is considered a cause and, in the same time, a consequence of the identity problem of this population as an ethnic group on one side, and of its social status on the other side. The ethnic identity is, in essence, a past-oriented form of identity, embedded in the cultural heritage of the individual or group. This form of identity contrasts with a sense of belonging linked with citizenship within a political state or present-oriented affiliations to specific groups demanding professional, occupational or class loyalties (De Vos and Ramanucci-Ross, 1982: 363). On the one hand, when discussing ethnic identity, the difference between the ethnicity claimed by the people themselves and that attributed to them by others is an important factor of subjective nature to be taken into account. On the other hand, an objective dimension of Roma image consists in their status as “problem people”, due to economic and educational inequalities between them and the other groups (Romanians and Hungarians, in particular). The economic variables, associated with the cultural ones, determine an over-representation of Roma in certain socially prescribed roles, which make them “undesirable”, and isolate and place them on the society’s periphery (Brown, 1995: 84). These visible and objective indicators may be easily transformed into perceptions and, thus, become stereotypes. Stereotypes are rooted in the web of social relations between groups and “do not derive solely or even mostly from the workings of our cognitive system” (Brown, 1995: 86). The cognitive differentiation effects associated with categorization let space for “illusory correlation” and the exaggeration of descriptive attributes, still further to form stereotypes. Media represent one of the main sources of simplified and

penetrating messages, making characterizations and pointing out those groups that do not fit the dominant social model. Usually stereotypes are already embedded in the audience's assessment system and are easily accepted. They are often combined with prejudice and become a dangerous instrument for conflict outburst. In Milton M. Gordon's analysis on ethnic group relations, the element of stereotyping appears to be rather widespread due to cognitive inadequacies reinforced by affective tendencies and the lack of equal status between groups (Gordon, 1975: 97).

The situation of Roma in Romania It is difficult to find consensus on when Roma first entered Wallachia and Moldavia (the two Romanian historic provinces). A document dated 1385 and found in Tismana monastery's archives, was actually a receipt for forty families of Gypsy slaves presented as a gift. By the 1500s, the terms *Brief historical evolution* "rob" and "tigan" had become synonymous with "slave", although the latter was originally a neutral ethnonym applied by the Europeans to the first Roma. In fact, the issue of Roma slavery is very controversial. Nicolae Gheorghe, Roma sociologist, mentioned that the first Roma who reached the Romanian Principalities were free people. One possible explanation for their later status is that they accepted slavery in order to pay off debts (Centre for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe on Roma of Romania, 2001). Another explanation is that Roma from the Romanian Principalities were slaves from the very beginning, most of them captured on Southern Danube territories by Vlad the Impaler (ruler of Wallachia) in the 15th century (Fonseca, 1995: 174). In this case their position could be an explanation for that the Roma were collectively categorized as a social class: the slave caste without any legal rights. Thus, the terms "gypsy" and "slave" became interchangeable, and once Roma became a social group it was a matter of time before they would become a "social problem".

In the 19th century the condition of Roma as “liberated people” did not represent a real improvement of their situation. They were set free, but they were not given any land. This pushed them to specific occupations that maintained their condition of poverty and discrimination. They developed auxiliary occupations such as metalworking and carpeting. Having been dependent upon their “masters” for so long, they had no way of supporting themselves, and many ended up returning to where they had been enslaved and offering themselves for sale once more. This situation affected the demographic patterns of Roma in Romania up until the Second World War. A temporary change occurred during the inter-war period, when Roma organizations started to emerge. In 1934 the General Union of Roma in Romania was established, which worked to promote equal rights for Romanian Roma, but the growth of fascism and the outbreak of the war put an end to that. Together with the war started Roma’s pogrom and thousands of Roma were deported into Southern Ukraine (in Transnistria). It is believed that the official policy was never to annihilate the Romanian Roma, but only to send them away.

After the establishment of the communist regime, especially in the 1960s, nationalism became an important ideological tool claiming the consolidation of national unity and the idea of a homogeneous Romanian society. Under the pretext of an equalized socialist society, the regime tried to complete the process of Roma assimilation. Roma culture was considered as one of poverty and underdevelopment and had to be integrated. Roma were settled forcibly and were integrated into agricultural activities, their problems were often ignored, and the practice of their traditional occupations (metalworking, carpentry, jewellery making) was forbidden. Unlike Hungarians and Saxons, Roma did not have the right to represent themselves as an ethnic minority, free to promote their own cultural traditions. Roma were

considered the underdeveloped class of the society. In this way the specific culture of Roma, their distinct pattern of living and thus their ethnic identity were negated and partly destroyed.

Roma after 1990 According to the 2002 population census in Romania, 535,250 (2.5%) people out of a total population of approximately 22 million identified themselves as Roma (for comparison, Romanians 89.5%, while Hungarians 6.6%). It is widely acknowledged, however, that this figure is inexact. Almost ten years later, in 2011, the official figure of Roma population in Romania was 619,000 people out of 19 million (3.2%) (Population and housing census, 2011). In the 1990s, the general situation of Roma population did not seem to improve much and in many cases became markedly worse. In Romania, as in other Central and East European countries, Roma had to face difficulties rising from unemployment, deteriorating living conditions, high levels of illiteracy, indirect and direct forms of discrimination, community “skinhead” and police violence, all of which continue to push Roma further to the margins of society (OSCE, 2000). Despite this general situation, among the Romanians became overspread the image of Roma enriched overnight, an image determined by the Roma’s life style and their disputed trade activities. This phenomenon of comparison, determined by the discrepancy between the traditional image of Roma being “uneducated” and “undesirable” and the new image that draws them as enriched people, in a situation of rank disequilibrium, facilitated the propagation of dissatisfaction among the majority of the population. This perception, associated with the Roma’s cultural and behavioural differences, represented an active source of conflict between Roma and Romanians in the early 1990s.

In Southeast European countries three types of violence against Roma were present: community violence, skinhead

and other racially motivated attacks and unwarranted police abuse. In Helsinki Watch reports two types of violence that characterize Roma-Romanians relationship during the 1990s can be identified: mob / community violence and police abuse. Mob violence was present in the early 1990s (1990-1995) and consisted in perpetration of violent events especially in villages or small towns (i.e. Bolintin Deal - 1991, Hadareni - 1993, Bacu - 1995) with significant number of Roma inhabitants. Helsinki Watch reported that violent attacks against the homes and persons of Gypsies, and the failure of Romanian authorities to provide protection against such violence, are a serious human rights concern (Human Rights Watch, 1991). As a result of Targu Mures clash (1990) between Romanians and Hungarians, many Roma were singled out for prosecution, even though it was acknowledged that they played a small role in the violence. The conclusions of Helsinki Watch investigations in this case describe how Roma had been made scapegoats and held responsible for the clashes. In the case of Targu Mures the police had totally failed in anticipating the violence and responding to calls for assistance once the violence was in progress.

Although mob violence against Roma decreased, especially after the year 2000, it was replaced by systematic police raids on Roma houses. The situation of the legal resolution of abuses remained unsolved: police officers or individuals accused of ill-treating Roma were rarely charged with a crime. The frequent raids of the police were often justified as necessary for preventing the possible Roma crimes, based on prejudices regarding Roma behaviour.

From discrimination to politically correct In the year 2000, in its regular Report on Romania's Progress towards Accession, the European Commission stated that "Roma remain subject to widespread discrimination throughout Romanian society. However, the government's commitment to addressing this situation remains low and there has been little substantial progress in this area since the last regular report" (European Commission, 2000). The then-Minister of Justice, Valeriu Stoica, declared that "...there are no serious human rights infringements in Romania [...] As for the Gypsy minority, the issue does not deal with discrimination on ethnic criteria, but with the necessity to integrate the minority socially, which assumes a specific economic effort" (National Press Agency – Rompress, 1999). Another government official, Peter Eckstein Kovacs of Hungarian ethnicity, the Head of the Department for Minorities of the Romanian Government at that time, stated at the European Conference against Racism held in Strasbourg, in October 2000, that Roma are the national minority most exposed to discrimination [...], and "we have established the existence of certain visible manifestations of exclusion of Roma from the various segments of social life" (European Roma Rights Centre on State of Impunity, 2001: 5).

The scapegoating role of Roma is obvious in ex-Foreign Minister Petre Roman's assertion made in 2000 that the government has an obligation "to protect [the] 23 million Romanians against the few thousand Gypsies", who are preventing the country from being removed from the visa blacklist and affect Romania's image abroad (Open Society Institute on Minority Protection in Romania, 2001). The political personality that pronounced the most acid discourses regarding Roma, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, obtained approximately 28% of the votes in the first round of elections in November 2000, exceeded only by Ion Iliescu. Mr. Tudor promised back then to eliminate the "Gypsy mafia".

In 2007, the former President Traian Basescu called a journalist, who insisted on interviewing him, a “stinking gypsy” and the Court accused him of discrimination. After 2007, the year when Romania joined the European Union, the “politically correct” approach of politicians towards minorities prevented further cases of obvious discrimination of Roma people in political discourse.

Together with the political elites, other state authorities such as the police, local officials and judicial institutions played an important role in shaping the Roma image. Helsinki Watch reported that the police and local authorities had a questionable role in many of the violent attacks against Roma in the early 1990s (Human Rights Watch on Human rights developments in Romania, 2001). Besides, there is no information regarding the prosecution or discipline measure against local officials or police officers who played a role in those violent attacks. The same source argues that the Romanian legal authorities have often refused to solve cases of abuse against Roma even when demonstrated by facts. Also, the source argues that Romanian authorities expected the Roma to withdraw charges due to delays in case-solving which determine the victims to lose interest in seeking a legal remedy for their suffering. This situation shows that stereotyped images are often used by the authorities to justify their actions towards the Roma community, and such stereotyping steered in many cases to an inability to address the roots of the problems faced by the Roma.

The statements of high-ranking government officials confirm the general trend regarding public opinion of Roma. Distrust and dislike of Roma pervade all the layers of state and society. A survey conducted by the Research Center on Inter-Ethnic Relations in Cluj-Napoca shows that if given the choice, 38.8% of the Romanian respondents and 40.8% of the Hungarians would not allow Roma live in Romania (Centre for Research on Interethnic Relations, 2000).

Roma image in the media The mythical image of Roma people continued to persist in the 1990s and it was reinforced by stereotypes and clichés based on an antithetical approach. The negative portrayal of Roma has become institutionalized in the majority's folklore and this left space for the manipulation of the Roma image. In this context, media have their greatest effect when they are used in a manner that reinforces and channels attitudes and opinions that are consistent with the psychological makeup of the person and the social structure of the groups that form the target audience. The influence of media is obvious when they reinforce rather than attempt to change the opinions of those in their audience.

The media's role does not consist only of reinforcing a image already existent about Roma, but it contributes significantly to shaping this image. The technique developed by the mass media in dealing with Roma and others outside the mainstream involve symbols and stereotypes. Because they deal with a wide audience, they have to rely on symbols and stereotypes as shorthand ways of communicating through headlines, characters and pictures (Wilson and Guitierrez, 1995: 43). Symbol is the term calling up a whole set of characteristics ascribed to those associated with the term in the minds of the mass audience. In the 1990s part of the information proliferated by media was not originated in a Romani source, nor involved consultation with Roma themselves. Media did not accurately reflect the Roma reality until this community started to redefine its identity. The stereotypes, once created, remain active and make it difficult to convince media to broadcast well documented information regarding Roma. In case the media inform that one Roma family or one person belonging to this group is involved in a crime, the whole Roma community living in that area is suspected for crime.

The media are quite active in promoting anti-Roma stereotypes and, in the 1990s, Roma were mainly presented in violent contexts. In the period of May-July 1998, some titles

from national newspapers show this attitude: “A Bloody Settlement of Accounts between Two Gypsies” (Adevarul, May 20, 1998), “The Gypsies from Cazanesti Fight for the Stolen Aluminium” (Adevarul, July 13, 1998), “The Fights Between Gypsy Mafias take a Break. The Perpetrators of ‘Assault from Straulesti’ Were Arrested” (Ziua, July 14, 1998), “Two Groups of Gypsies, Armed with Baseball Bats, Fought in the Zone of Strandul Tineretului” (Ziua, July 29, 1998).

A study conducted by the Intercultural Institute in Timisoara, as part of a project on the role of the press in harmonizing interethnic relations, revealed the frequency of the key words in articles about Roma in main newspapers during the period starting from May 1995 until April 1996. The most frequent categories had to do with “color of skin”, “infraction”, “Romani ethnicity” and “group” (Project on ethnic relations, 1997). Another study, realized almost five years later by the Agency for Press Monitoring “Academia Catavencu” and the Foundation Romani CRISS, revealed the results of monitoring six newspapers (five national and one local), during the period February-August 2000. The number of articles, which have Roma as protagonists, represent 41.35% from a total of 343 articles analyzed. The major part of events described were conflictual, mainly of criminal nature, and almost all the stereotypes used have negative connotation: “Gypsy offender”, “violent Gypsy”, “Gypsy mafia”, “dirty Gypsy”, “illiterates”, “Gypsy law”. On the average, the percent of articles with negative approach on Roma was 31.78 % (The presence of Roma in Romanian media, 2000). The stereotype related to Roma’ skin color is mentioned by the first study as one of the most frequent in newspaper’s articles during 1995-1996, however, the second study does not point it out among the most frequent stereotypes in 2000. But from the results of both studies comes out the persistence of a dominant feature of the Roma image, as it is present in the newspapers: aggressiveness.

Part of Roma associations and Roma representatives considered that this image reflected by the press is mainly originated in the Romanian Police's practice of discriminatory recording and publishing of Roma criminal offenders. Is it true that Roma, as a group, are more inclined to commit crimes than non-Roma? The fact that a disproportionate amount of petty crime is committed by Roma does not mean that there is a cause-effect relationship between being a Roma and committing a crime. And yet, this might be implied when it is mentioned that it was a Rom who robbed somebody. In this case the questions that arise are: Is it the Roma who are overrepresented in the crime statistics or is it the unemployed? Is it the case that Roma commit more crimes, or that the police are more likely to arrest someone being Rom? When the audience is informed that the suspect is a Rom, they are told not only what the perpetrator's ethnicity is, but also that the ethnicity is important to the account. This facilitates the connection between Roma and criminality in the minds of auditors.

The press coverage of Roma issues have evolved during years from emphasizing the deficiencies of the judicial system, which failed to punish the allegedly criminal behavior of Roma, to highlighting the unlawful behavior of Roma themselves, transforming them into scapegoats. A change is noticeable also in the sources of information. If in the 1990s the conflicts between Roma and Romanians brought forth a wide variety of press articles, many of which were largely speculative, later there was a greater use of official sources and local documentation. An increase in the journalists' use of police jargon is observed in that period. Sometimes media repeat the terms found in the police inspectorate's press releases: "Gypsy, without occupation", "with (or without) penal antecedents", "with (or without) legal domicile in locality", "known criminal", etc (Project on ethnic relations, 1997). After the year 2000 the outbreaks of violence between ethnic

groups, in general, and between Roma and Romanians, in particular, decreased. At the same time, the information on Roma population became better documented in the media that, especially after the year 2007, adopts the “politically correct” approach in writing about Roma minority.

Conclusions In this paper two main arguments are addressed: the role of ingroup-outgroup relations in shaping a certain perception of the Roma image and the importance of public discourse in forming interethnic relations, mainly between Roma and Romanians. The representation of Roma people influences the attitudes of the other ethnic groups towards Roma. In most of the cases misinformation is determined by the need of the others (the major part of the auditors) to have the confirmation of their beliefs (both as individuals and as a group), and this deepens the distance between reality and its perception. The dichotomization in terms of “we” and “they”, “good” and “bad”, proliferated by press feeds the social need for identity, and creates or strengthens stereotypes. In order to respond to this necessity, in many cases the truth about Roma is ignored and this helps the spreading of discriminatory views countrywide.

Roma identity is based traditionally on myths presenting them in a romantic manner, leaving space for speculations about their daily life, speculations, which became part of the ingroup-outgroup imagery. These false images, that cannot be easily removed as they are internalized and correspond to an “historical image” about Roma, make difficult the real communication between Roma and the Romanians. The Roma life style and the fact that in many cases they prefer non-integration, as well as their marginal social condition, represent some of the main reasons for this distorted image.

The discourse of media and the attitudes of authorities create subjective patterns that familiarize the major part of population with the negative attributes describing Roma

individuals and the Roma community. When informed about “Gypsy thieves” and “Gypsy millionaires”, that contradict the traditional image of the Gypsy beggar, the majority of the population developed a strong sentiment of frustration, concretized in a negative feedback, which, in many cases, took the form of violence. The syndrome of finding the scapegoats in Roma for unpleasant situations comes out from the stereotyped image of Roma, combined with the prejudices about their “aggressive” character. The situation started to change after the year 2000 due to socialization with problem-solving rather than with conflict. Furthermore, during the recent years, important changes in the inter-ethnic dialogue have occurred. International and European actors, state agencies and non-governmental organisations got involved in efforts to establish a legal and institutional framework that mitigate conflicts and promote intercultural dialogue and cooperation between Roma and the other ethnicities of Romania. After Romania became member of the European Union, the public discourse adopted a “politically correct” approach to Roma minority issues.

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