

ROMA SEGREGATION. MARGINAL PLACES, MARGINAL PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT: *The current problems signaled by the academical world with reference to the Roma are, first of all, connected to resources (both material and non-material). The causes and effects of the phenomenon are multiple and they are linked to some key aspects for the Roma in Romania, such as life standard, employment, education, and health¹. Connected to the above mentioned issues, there is also the problem of dwelling (houses and areas where Roma communities are set). There is a strong connection between the economical power and the residence type which has a multifold effect on the individual and community life. Some aspects regarding living on the periphery of the localities will be tackled in this research.*

Keywords: *Roma, segregation, marginal, places*

For a part of the Roma in our country, housing has become an issue in the past few decades, after the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, where most Roma live. One possible explanation would be the ancient vulnerability of this ethnic group. Although the situation improved in the second half of the 20th century, by the inclusive politics applied in the socialist countries, the Roma were among the first to take the blow from the shift to the free market economy, once democratic regimes were installed in the 90s. In Romania, there was an assimilating policy initiated by the communist state meant to offer them, alongside all the citizens, access to jobs, houses and social services. But the hindrance of the Roma communities (especially due to poor schooling and professional training) and their traditional marginalization could not be wiped out by such inclusion measures. Thus, many of the advantages gained concerning the socioeconomic integration of the Roma were lost after 1989. Therefore,

especially in the last two decades, most Roma problems have involved jobs, housing, and access to basic services.

Our study analyses the idea of spatial marginality of the Roma communities, viewed from the perspective of some people interviewed inside the project “The Untold Story. An Oral History of the Roma People in Romania” (Babeș-Bolyai University & University of Iceland, 2014-2017). In the interview guide used in the project (actually the main instrument of our research) we questioned everyday life topics, thus touching aspects regarding housing, as well as the appearance and development of the Roma communities in certain areas. We were particularly interested in the representations people have regarding the idea of “living at the margin”; we started from the fact that territorial segregation, generated by ethnic criteria, is much more visible in the Roma case compared to other groups. The explanation lies in their history in the Romanian Countries (Țările Române) (their

¹The research leading to these results has received funding from EEA Financial Mechanism 2009 - 2014 under the project contract no. 14SEE/30.06.2014.

serf status), as well as in the socioeconomic consequences of that specific status.

The processing of the interview generated data revealed that the spatial intercommunity distance as seen by the interviewees is mainly due to two causes. The first refers to the traditional treating of the Roma as belonging to the margins; discrimination or lack of interest in reference to a certain community leads to their limitation of access to the most important resources (e.g. running water, electricity). The second cause underlines the socioeconomic post-socialist exclusion some Roma subgroups have to face: the manifestation of this phenomenon – at the level of living in a certain urban or rural area – is what Wacquant (2007) calls “territorial stigmatization”.

The spatial distance (more or less significant) between the Roma and non-Roma communities (most frequently Romanians or Hungarians) always has a story in the background. This distance was maintained and consolidated in time because of the social distance. The neighboring relationship is seen differently by the majoritarians in contrast to the minority members in the area, in connection to the meaning given to the interaction they have had along the time. The former have included a specific term in their mentality and vocabulary to eloquently define the spatial proximity of “the other”, namely “țigănie”. The word (which has also acquired a pejorative shade) refers to a territorial reality represented by the Roma, in the sense that it shows a dense concentration of exclusively Roma population. “Țigănia” refers to a group of people reaching at some point the edge of a Romanian, Hungarian, Serbian or Saxon German village, who are determined to settle down and establish a new hearth and home. We have to mention that the term is sparsely used, so that only a part of the Roma communities are thus identified by their neighbors. It is also worth mentioning that “țigănie” does sometimes no longer refer to a territorial reality, being used

more as a local toponym, since the inhabitants of the “țigănie” have migrated to other places.

In the case of the communities with a strong oral tradition, the locals still preserve the memory of the beginnings of that settlement. We have to deal with the transmission, from generation to generation, of a narrative (frequently fragmented) about the Roma establishing themselves in a certain location. In one documented example from the Banat region, the story re-configures the narrator’s ancestors’ settlement next to a community of Romanians and Ukrainians. (*Where did the Roma come at the Măguri² from ?*) – ...*My ancestors...were already living outside (outside the present village, author's note). Somewhere close to the brook, in a forest, those were their whereabouts. I went there, just passing. Where there were Russians too (Ukrainians, author's note). They were a few families. You know they stayed there because some families were born there. That's what I heard from my grandparents, from the old ones, here in the village. You know they lived there even in the time of the Austro-Hungarians. And then the communists came to power, then with the collectivization, then...And then that died too, and the Austro-Hungarian autonomy disappeared and...then a few families, then when the Communist Party came to rule, then that thing with Austro-Hungary disappeared and then they gave them several plots. Cause on the other side there lived the Romanians. (Here, towards Cireșu ?)* – Yes, towards Cireșu³. (C. G.).

Another narrative, also from Banat, mentions households settled in the open

²*Măguri*, a village in Timiș county, near the town of Lugoj, with an important roma community.

³*Cireșu*, a village linked to the community of Criciova (Timis county) inhabited by Romanians and a Ukrainian minority (less than 10%).

field, far from the main village road, a fact which made access difficult, especially for children to get to school, particularly during unfavorable weather. The limited financial potential allowed them to build only rudimentary houses, made of perishable materials, with one or two rooms, inadequate for a whole family. *Look on that field, nobody used to live here near the road, just me and two other families, in our times, when we were younger, kids actually. The rest of the Roma were all gathered in one place in small houses and shacks. At the edge, there, on that field, there were all the Gypsies overcrowded. (So the Gypsies have moved quite recently in the village premises ?) – Well, yeah, after the Revolution. Now they have spread all through the village. They've come with money and stuff* [Adamiță Căldăraș].

The residential shift of the described community took place due to the change of regime. The fall of the communism gave people freedom to travel abroad, the Roma being among the first citizens to leave the country in search of a better life. The money obtained abroad were and still are usually invested in rebuilding the house/household or in the building of new housing. Thus the increase of their financial power has brought about a change in their social status. Many inhabitants of the “*țișănie*” considered that living at the edge of the village no longer corresponded to their new situation and started trying to invest in plots and houses inside the village rather than far from them. *(Many Romanians moved to the city and their houses were left for sale.) – Yes, or maybe the elders died, others decided to sell. (Were you born in “?ișănie”? Did you live there?) – Yes, I remember I also lived there for a few years. After that, my father, as I explained before, worked there in Nădrag and bought this house. Well it used to be a smaller house. We had money, you realize in 20 years he could gather a lot of money and he made the house that still stays today. (Did you get to see the hovels, dug underground?)*

– They weren't dug, just had a small surface. (They were made of cob.) – Some of cob, others from clay. (Two rooms, or... ?) – One, two rooms. They lived quite crowded together indeed. After that, I took the boys to Germany and they succeeded there. They came back and bought houses. Now they are spread all over the world [Adamiță Căldăraș].

This narrative is eloquent for the residential evolution of many Roma communities in the past 50-60 years. As the Roma became employees in the socialist factories, the capital gathering modified their perception and claims referring to housing. We are not taking into account the salary quantum as much as the fact that they got paid regularly, which triggered some changes in the mentality of a group accustomed to seasonal jobs and sparse earnings. The salary brought about stability and thus the possibility to engage in more serious expenses such as houses. But radical changes took place after 1990, as the money brought from abroad visibly changed the housing landscape in several Roma communities. Mud hovels can still be seen in the poor areas, but wherever finances allowed it, *tișănie* dissolved and the Roma mingled among the other inhabitants inside the villages whose margins they used to live at not long ago.

Living together is valued by the Roma, who understand the benefits of cultural exchanges. When residential segregation is a surmountable barrier (due to the benevolence of the majoritarians and the perseverance of the minorities), they get much better chances to successfully develop life projects. School – the way in which child development occurs – constitutes one of the fundamental keys to progress. Some Roma parents decide to give up their ethnic group customs and choose what they think best fits their offspring. We have even met parents who believe that a Roma child has nothing to learn from their peers in the same ethnic group, only from Romanian children [Telus

Dumitru]. *I lived in this Roma village until I was six...I didn't really have any perspective there since kids hardly went to school. Roma children rarely attended school. They became fiddlers and abandoned school. At Galbeni, my mother's native village, there were fewer Roma people and they were better integrated among the Romanians. There was one Roma house to five or six Romanian houses. And there they went to school. So we moved to my mother's village, at Galbeni* [Anghel Năstase]

By leaving their community and settling among the Romanians, Hungarians or others, the Roma had to suffer some cultural loss, both at the individual and at the collective level. An illustrative case is that of the Gypsy whittlers, whose occupational identity was connected to their dwelling close to the forests, their specialty being wood processing. As they were linked to procuring wood, the whittlers founded settlements near areas where they could easily obtain it, so that long distance transport would not be required. When their specific products (spoons, spindles, tubs) ceased being on demand (because of the mass produced objects), the whittlers turned to other activities (such as agriculture), getting closer to the Romanian villages and settling gradually among them. *The Rudari were the first to live amid the majoritarians. Because the Gypsy had always been placed at the edges of the towns, not in the village, in the middle of the majoritarians. Still, the Rudari were the first to live amid the majoritarians, I have to repeat myself, and they lost their tongue, the Gypsy language* [Rygumber Duroi]. For this group, the coming out of isolation (partially self-imposed, due to their previous occupation) meant a radical change, not only regarding their means of living, but also their linguistic identity.

The distance from other ethnic group communities is frequently regarded by the Roma in negative terms. Through the way they associate spatial distancing with

segregation, the Roma prove they have internalized the majoritarians' depreciative judgment on them. Our interviewees perceive themselves as groups living outside the world of the others, because they are actually, physically, spatially rejected. *This is how it usually works. Usually. The Gypsy stays on the edge, on the border, so to speak. (laughing) (How do you explain this?) – I don't know, explicitly, how to...I don't realize why. Probably they are rejected by people, by the Romanians. I think so: (determined) I believe so* [Cornel Rezmiveș]. To the Roma, it is obvious that life at the margin of the village/town means stagnation, getting left behind, a fact reflected by their lack of progress. “[...] marginalized and set at the outskirts of towns. This reality created a gap between the majoritarian population and the Roma, a gap bound to influence the further evolution of this ethnic group.” (Sandu, 2014, 18)

The reports, the conclusions of the sociological inquiries (as well as of other types of research) are abundant in examples of discrimination between “us” and the others, usually, the Romanians. The living conditions, the areas where the Roma communities are set are often inappropriate, and the favoring of the majoritarians sharpens the Romas' feeling of rejection. “The Roma around here are quite miserable, they live in terrible conditions, sometimes five in a house, there are families who live three in a house. You saw that hill is coming down on us, collapsing. My house over there has moved half a meter lower, all the walls are cracking. I went to the mayor to tell him to do something about this landslide. He gave us a few beams, about 4 sacks of cement and that was it. He went to some Romanians and did a lot for them, ditches and everything, but not for us. He sees us on a lower level cause we know not to talk or to think what we speak. (Roma woman, Alba cluster)” (Pop, Muraru, 2014, 93)

The spatial marginalization is explained by the Roma through cultural differences;

nevertheless it is also due to the enslaving actions applied onto their Indian ancestors when they came to Europe to settle amid other peoples in the Middle Ages. The cultural distance has been preserved by the Roma as a way of protecting their language and specific traditions. By living separately they have managed to maintain their own ethos, which, part of them, have in time renounced, by acculturation, becoming “Romanianized” Romas. But the residential segregation is first and foremost the result of the Roma having been used by their masters for work and entertainment. *The Gypsy were still withdrawn on the edge of the town at that time, because they had been rejected by communities, always on the outside. For the reason that they couldn't adjust to the rest of the people. The others used their girls, their women, their work, their fun. And when they got bored, they chased them away. So they were no longer needed and new ones were brought* [Șandor Lakatoș]. A serving group could only live at a distance from those it served. Their release from servitude just brought about a theoretical change of status, the Roma continuing to live apart from other ethnic groups.

The fact that most of the Roma live in worse conditions than the other ethnic groups is well known and characteristic for the Roma groups in the Balkans. The diagnosis resulting from the research done by the EU, together with the governments and organizations in the countries with a Roma minority, show the high degree of spatial segregation of the Roma communi-

ties. For example, in Romania, it exceeded half of the total number of Roma households, merely a few years ago. (Achieving Roma, 2014) A series of intervention projects, financially supported by the European Commission, are aimed at changing this state of facts, and, above all, at increasing awareness of the discriminatory meaning beyond the physical distance between the Roma communities (districts) and those of the majoritarians.

The segregation is strongly, yet not exclusively, connected to the economic aspects. As I. Hossu notices (2014, 118) the segregation and marginalization are varying concepts which can be understood in accordance to the local context. In those places where the majoritarians and the minorities had a more or less common evolution, the territorial separation is not really valued. In those areas where their histories have been different, where the possibilities and aspirations of the two groups have diverged, the separate dwelling is an aspect which highlights the Romas' feelings, who suffer from rejection, undesirability and repudiation. The legal freedom gained by the Roma in the 19th century did not trigger a transformation in the mentality of the majoritarians, who could have facilitated the integration – a gradual one, of course – of those considered inferior. This change still remains a goal in a society with new milestones in which the relationship between the Roma and the others is being reconfigured and bound to evolve.

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List of interviewees

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2. *Telus Dumitru*, b. 1971, interview conducted by S. Preda in Craiova, August 8, 2015.
3. *Rygumber Duroi*, interview conducted by S. Preda in Dudașu (Șimian, Mehedinți county), August 22, 2016.
4. *C. G.*, b. 1959, interview conducted by S. Preda in Măguri, August 22, 2015.
5. *Șandor Lakatoș*, b. 1960, interview conducted by S. Preda in Oradea, June 11, 2016.
6. *Anghel Năstase*, b. 1949, interview conducted by Ionela Bogdan in Bacău, August 31, 2016.
7. *Cornel Rezmiveș*, b. 1973, interview conducted by S. Preda in Zalău, February 29, 2016.