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The Cultural Importance of Integrating Socially Assisted Vulnerable Groups within Society – The Case of the Roma Community

Petronela Polixenia NISTOR [1]
Cristina Carmen ACHIȚEI [2]

[1] Lecturer PhD, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi, Romania, polixenianistor@yahoo.com
[2] Student, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Programme of study: Orthodox Theology Social Work, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi, Romania, cristina_achiţei@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This article aims to analyse the cultural importance of integrating Roma within society in the context of the continuous increase in the number of members of this minority in Romania's communities. The global community is increasingly open to cultural inclusion. Some forms of discrimination based on criteria such as religious affiliation, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, nationality, marital status and physical appearance seem to subside in intensity.*
The tolerance of individuals has increased considerably, and diversity is accepted, supported, encouraged and sometimes even imposed in order to build a globalized and inclusive society that respects diversity and provides equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender, race or socioeconomic status.
However, the Roma remains a social category that hardly adapts to the majority's rules. In addition, Roma rights and freedoms are much less emphasized than the rights of other minorities in the European public discourse by politicians and social influencers. Thus, in this paper, we aim to emphasize the importance of integrating the Roma population within society, but also analyse one of the ways that would make this desideratum possible - launching a positive mass media campaign to highlight the cultural heritage of the Roma ethnic group.

Keywords: *marginalization; social exclusion; social inclusion; discrimination; integration policies; mass media promotion.*

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Introduction

There is a series of concrete data about the migration of Roma from the province of Punjab, in northwest India, to Europe, but also multiple speculations. Some sources (Petcuț et al., 2003) state that these people fled from their homeland due to the Mongol invasion, other sources (Achim, 1998) indicate that the Roma were driven away by the Arabs, but the most pertinent theory (Chelcea, 1944) is the one according to which the Roma left their native geographical area due to the drastic enforcement of the Laws of Manu. According to this law (Bühler, n.d.), when a person committed a crime, they were not deprived of liberty, but instead became outcasts and were considered to be part of an inferior social group, had all their property confiscated, both their own and that of their family. Due to the high criminality among the Romani castes and the subsequent convictions under the Laws of Manu, many members of this ethnic group fled from the law and were forced to lead a nomadic existence, struggling with financial shortages even for their basic survival needs. In their nomadic journeys to Europe, the Roma stationed for longer periods of time in countries such as Persia and Armenia, where their vocabulary became enriched with many expressions from the local languages.

Worldwide, according to the latest statistics (Harvard Center for Health and Human Rights, 2018), the Roma population totals between 15 and 30 million people. The large difference between the minimum and maximum number is due to the fact that many Roma people avoid declaring that they belong to the Roma community, because they deny their ethnic origin. Of these, about 12 million live in Europe, and 6 million within the borders of the European Union (European Parliament, Multimedia Centre, n.d.). The Roma is the largest ethnic minority on the continent. Although the largest ethnic Roma community was established in Eastern and Central Europe, the accession of the countries in Eastern and Central Europe to the European Union brought on an accelerated migration of the Roma to Western and Northern Europe, as they were attracted by the higher standard of living in these regions.

Although the migration to Western Europe was significant, including of the Roma who were settled in Romania, Romania still has the largest Roma community in Europe. According to the data of the last census of 2021 (National Institute of Statistics, 2021), the Roma constitute the third largest ethnic group in Romania, after the Hungarians, but from the unofficial data it appears that the Hungarians are, in fact, the third largest

ethnic group, because the Roma total a population between one and a half million and two million people. The data of the National Agency for Roma (2020) indicate that their number would even exceed two million people and that, in reality, the figure is two and a half million inhabitants. Unofficially, the Roma represent 10% of Romania's population, and statistical predictions for the year 2050 show that the percentage will tend to increase to 15-16% of the population.

The arrival of the Roma on the current territory of Romania took place during two migratory waves: in 1026, when they entered through the routes from the south of the Danube, as free people, migrating from Bulgaria and Serbia, as well as in 1192, when they were brought as enslaved people by the Tatars, on which occasion they entered via the migratory routes from the south of the Danube and the north-east of Moldavia. In Moldavia, ruler Alexander the Good granted them "free air, land to roam and fire and iron to forge" (Dimitrie, 2012), in other words, they were given land and their status as blacksmiths was recognized, but even in these circumstances, some Roma were still used as slaves, and free Roma were either sent to the front line in wars, or worked as cheap labour on the estates of the boyars or the lands of the monasteries, so they were considered an inferior social group. They had various trades, such as being farmers, herdsmen, buffalo herders, swineherds, salters, sowers or harvesters, cooks, pitters or bread makers, suffragans, coachmen, gardeners, tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths and fiddlers, while Romani females were employed by the wives of the nobles as helpers in the domestic activities of the manors, as maids, tailors, cooks or laundresses (Zamfir & Preda, 2002). In Bucovina, the Roma were bondservants of landlords, monasteries and princely courts (Dimitrie, 2012).

Even though the Roma had the status of enslaved people for centuries, some individuals who managed to redeem their freedom offered the rulers substantial sums of money in exchange for the status of a free man. There were also cases in which representatives of the Roma community bought land, thus becoming land owners, and there were even Roma who climbed the social ladder to become part of the most respectable social classes in the society of those times, becoming rulers, such an example being Stephen Răzvan Voivode, who reigned in Moldavia at the end of the 16th century (Chelcea, 1944).

The liberation of the Roma takes place for the first time in Bucovina, approximately 50 years before it happened in Moldavia and Muntenia, following the decree given by Emperor Joseph II in 1793 (Achim, 1998). From then until 1789, the number of the Roma increased approximately 6

times, from 800 to 5,000 people. After they became free citizens, the Roma continued to provide important services for difficult or odd jobs, especially for the monasteries of Putna, Dragomirna and Sucevița, which remained active during the occupation of the Romanian Principalities and which even function today.

In the 19th century, the Roma began to migrate from rural to urban areas and settled in cities, where they adopted different trades and traditions, such as metalworking or providing entertainment services at various parties, such as weddings and baptisms. A century later, during the communist period, the Roma were subjected to discrimination and persecution by the communist regime, which confiscated their homes and forced them to move into tenements or forced labour camps.

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Roma continued to face problems related to discrimination, poverty and limited access to education and health services, all against the background of a majority population who was reluctant to integrate them socially, a reluctance determined by the elevated level raised of endemic criminality in the Roma community. Regardless of where they live in Romania, the Roma are one of the most marginalized ethnic groups, facing problems related to limited access to education, jobs and social services, but the lack of education and access to minimal services is partly also generated by their refusal to comply with the legal and social norms specific to educational institutions, hospitals or workplace discipline (Achim, 1998). Although the Romanian Government has adopted numerous social inclusion policies to improve the situation of the Roma, Romania still faces numerous problems that prevent the integration of the Roma within society.

This article aims to highlight the importance of integrating the Roma in society, especially as their number increases from year to year, and statistically they are even a majority population in some areas of the country. In certain municipalities, the Roma population exceeds 50% of the total number of inhabitants (for example, in the commune of Bărbulești, from the county of Ialomița, 83% of the population is Roma, in the commune of Slobozia Bradului, from the county of Vrancea, 79% of the inhabitants are Roma, in the commune of Augustin, from the county of Brașov, 67% of the population is of Roma ethnicity, in Brăhășești commune, from Galați county, 59% are Roma, in the communes of Vâlcele, from Covasna county, and Tâmboieti, from Vrancea county, 58% of citizens are Roma) (Tarnovschi, 2011).

The integration of Roma into society is a complex and multidimensional process, which requires the involvement of all social and

institutional actors. In order to support the integration of the Roma into society, it is crucial to adopt a holistic view of the problem, which considers issues related to education, housing, health, crime, employment and combating discrimination and stigmatization. Supporting Roma integration into society should be done in close collaboration with Roma communities and take into account their cultural specificity, experiences and particular needs, so that the integration would be authentic and sustainable (Achiţei & Nistor, 2023). Roma are often discriminated against in the workplace, where they are rejected for employment due to employers' fear that they will behave criminally at work or will not respect work-related rules or rules regarding proper socialization in the workplace. When they are hired, often the Roma are paid less for equal work compared to other persons, of Romanian ethnicity or of another ethnicity, even other minorities. Limited access to education and quality health services is another problem that perpetuates the cycle of poverty and, implicitly, the difficult integration process. Because of reduced possibilities of access to housing and social services, the Roma live in precarious conditions, a factor that increases the chances of criminal recidivism and, correlatively, of social exclusion. Stereotypes and prejudices also have a negative influence on the Roma community and lead to marginalization and stigmatization by the majority population.

Methodology

This article aims to analyse the cultural importance of integrating Roma within society in the context of the continuous increase in the number of members of this minority in Romania's communities

In this sense, we established the following ***research objectives***:

1. Analysis of public policies for Roma integration;
2. Identification of optimal methods of social inclusion of the Roma.

In order to achieve the research goals, we started with the following ***research questions***:

1. What were the public policies for the integrating of Roma into Romanian society over time?
2. What was the impact of Roma integration programs and what are the causes of their inefficiency?
3. Is promoting the positive aspects of the Roma community in the mass media a method of improving the image of the Roma in Romanian society?

The practical managerial significance of this topic is that in this article we make a revision of the steps undertaken in Romania, as a country part of the European Union, to integrate the Roma people and the effects of those steps. Our study covers a broad period, starting from the Romanian Revolution up until the present, and in this regard, it is interesting because it follows, in particular, those public policies that failed to make any difference for the Roma people. The conclusions can help modify the current public policies in order for them to be more effective.

This study is mainly a study in the sociology of culture and the topic can only be discussed interdisciplinary, because the effectiveness of the public policies for a minority social group are influenced by the culture of that group. The reason why the public policies for the Roma people had a minimalistic positive effect, in the long run, is mainly that those policies failed to understand the specificity of the Roma culture and the rejection that these cultural elements would bring upon the public policies thought and embodied mainly as a set of values of the majority group.

Integration of minority groups must take into account their cultural specificity and heritage. Therefore, any sociological step undertaken for the Roma people has to be in accordance with the Roma culture. Otherwise, it will be rejected by the beneficiaries of the intended public policy.

The background of our research is based on several papers (Iusmen, 2018; Matache & Oehlke, 2017; Rostas, 2019) written in the scientific literature regarding the fact that a current problem for Roma integration is the fact that public policies tend to have little effect during their implementation and sometimes minor to no effect after a while has passed since the public programs were put into action. Therefore, we thought it important to analyze the impact of the public policies on integrating the Roma people into Romanian society.

The novelty of our research is based on the fact that our approach is not mainly statistical, as are most approaches in the sociological (Agarin, 2014), economical (Gallego-Noche & Goenechea-Permisán, 2024) or political (Anghel, 2024; Appel, 2024) literature. Our approach is a cultural one, and we analyze the impact of the cultural markers affiliated with the Roma lifestyle on the failure of public policies. Also, we take into consideration the cultural elements that make the majority community reject the Roma. The best public policy can fail if the cultural aspects of the two sides (the majority and the minority) do not come together in harmony. If the cultural aspect is overcome, then the economic and political factors will follow. Through this article, we propose a new approach to the Roma problem: instead of creating public policies that will bring the Roma closer

to the desiderata of the majority group, accept more of the Roma culture as it is and accept the Roma for what they are. People who feel accepted will tend to also to accept the requirements of those who accept them.

Public policies of Roma integration

Social integration policies aim to provide equal opportunities for all citizens, because their purpose is to contribute to the development of the sense of belonging to society and to reduce discrimination and racism. In the last twenty years, the policies for the integration of the Roma into society have targeted the problem of poverty, which has spread in areas such as education, employment, health and the provision of housing, generating numerous social problems and reactions, both from the majority population (which did not support these programs due to the lack of social conviction that those policies of inclusion would fundamentally change the mentality of the Roma and their ability to adhere to social and legal rules) (Silian, 2009), as well as the Roma themselves, who either refused the help, or destroyed the goods that were made available to them, or did not follow the programs specially designed for them (Giurcă, 2012).

Regarding education, Romania has implemented a series of projects aimed at ensuring Roma access to compulsory education, improving the quality of education, expanding access to preschool education, improving access to post-secondary and adult education, stimulating school attendance and reducing school dropout by providing scholarships and school materials for Roma students. The main objective of state policy was the literacy of the Roma population, considering that Romania has the highest illiteracy rate in the European Union and the lowest results in the PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS international student assessment tests. Regarding the level of high school studies, as well as of university studies (bachelor, master and doctorate), Romania granted a number of tax-free places for Roma pupils and students, taking important steps in order to reduce inequalities and promote social inclusion (Fleck & Rughiniș, 2008). Education is undoubtedly one of the Roma's great opportunities for personal and professional development, which can facilitate integration into society.

After achieving the objectives proposed in the social program regarding education, the next step was the creation of jobs for Roma and facilities for companies that employed people of Roma ethnicity. In order to be able to occupy stable, socially visible and substantially remunerated jobs, education, along with professional training and professional retraining courses (Nistor, 2022;2023), is the fundamental condition for developing a

career and a *sine qua non* condition for reducing poverty and integrating into society. The projects that were implemented only had a short-term effect, and the lack of coherent and long-term policies made the small progress attained due to the initially implemented projects lose its effectiveness over time. Despite social work inclusion programs, members of the Roma community continued to prefer working as day labourers or casual workers instead of concluding permanent employment contracts, and a significant percentage of the population frequently resorted to begging, this being the most effective method to obtain an income for the Roma population (Cace, 2007).

If education and employment are two interconnected areas, the same can be said about living conditions and health. The lack of adequate housing has a major impact on health and even school performance, but also on the way the individual is perceived in society, often becoming a reason for discrimination and exclusion (Berescu et al., 2006). In order to solve the problem of housing for the Roma, the Romanian state aimed to improve their living conditions by building social houses. Even this social policy did not prove to be effective in the long term, as the problem of housing for Roma still remains a major one.

In terms of health, the situation of the Roma is extremely difficult. Living in an unsuitable environment, without access to basic utilities (electricity, water and sanitation), lack of health insurance, birth certificates and identity documents, medicines, as well as a lack of minimal health education have a negative impact on the state of health of the members of the Roma people, thus explaining the reduced life expectancy of the individuals who are part of this community. The statistical indicators show that the life expectancy of the Roma population is at least 10% lower than the rest of the population.

Beyond all the problems faced by the Roma community, perhaps the biggest, most frequent and most visible problem is the continued discrimination they face among the majority population and even among other ethnic minorities. In order to combat discrimination and promote social inclusion, the Governmental Anti-Poverty and Promotion of Social Inclusion Commission (Romanian Government, 2002a) was established in 2002, which aimed to build a society that would align with the values promoted by the member states of the European Union (facilitating employment and access to resources, rights, goods and services for all; preventing the risk of exclusion; helping vulnerable social groups; mobilizing all relevant institutions).

A year later, the National Anti-Poverty and Promotion of Social Inclusion Plan (2002-2012) was approved (Romanian Government, 2002b), based on the principles of social solidarity, social activism to increase the level of awareness regarding poverty, collective and individual responsibility, social economy, increasing social support for economically disadvantaged groups, public-private partnership to combat poverty and citizen participation in social programs. The National Anti-Poverty Plan refers to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion of the Roma, by involving them in the activities of Romanian society in all aspects: social, economic, educational, political and medical (Nistor, 2024a,b,c).

In 2005, important steps were taken in terms of combating poverty and discrimination (Cace, 2007), by facilitating Roma access to professional qualifications and jobs, measures that were absolutely necessary for Romania's accession to the European Union. In the years following accession (Giurcă, 2012), the Romanian government developed different strategies that included concrete objectives and measures against the social marginalization of the Roma and improving their living conditions and social inclusion. In 2020, the new strategic framework for the period 2020-2030 was adopted within the European Union (European Commission, 2020), which seeks the integration of marginalized Roma. This initiative was also supported by the adoption of a recommendation on the equality, inclusion and social participation of Roma by the Council of Europe (2021), through financing projects aimed at the social and economic integration of marginalized communities, as well as combating all forms of discrimination.

The Romanian Government was one of many concerned with the problems of the Roma and their social inclusion. Several non-governmental organizations have been involved in the Roma integration process, by carrying out programs and projects that have attracted European funds or financing from church institutions or embassies, such as the Japanese and British Embassies in Bucharest (FRA, 2019). According to the field addressed, the following types of projects are distinguished: preparation for employment in public administration, preparation of high school graduates for college admission, pre-school and school education, training in various fields, research, publications, defence of human rights, festivals, culture, improvement of interethnic relations, community development, learning and perpetuation of the Romani language, development of resource centres; the categories of beneficiaries targeted by those projects were artists, researchers, children, pupils, civil servants, journalists, unemployed people, students, young people or even whole families (Ionescu & Cace, 2006).

Public state policies aimed at priority areas for the development of society, while non-governmental organizations considered projects that took into account the promotion of positive aspects within the Roma communities. Festivals and/or exhibitions that attract the public's interest in the culture and history of the Roma community, its traditions and customs, the products and services offered by the community are means that can contribute to a positive visibility of the Roma in society, a better understanding of the community and, implicitly, acceptance of its members.

Positive promotion of the Roma in the mass media

In order to initiate a promotion campaign in the mass media, we have to identify the problems that must be solved in the Roma community and design the activities that lead to the fulfilment of the established objectives. The problem that we have identified and which we consider to be omnipresent in Romanian society regarding the Roma is the discrimination they face at all levels. One of the stereotypes aimed at the Roma is related to the ethnicization of poverty. This constitutes a label and a stigma against the Roma, along with other stereotypes that arise from the lack of resources and access to basic services (education, health and so on.). These stereotypes led to the suppression of the Roma identity, as the members of the community ended up denying their own identity for fear of social rejection, hence the large differences in statistics in terms of the number of Roma living in Romania between the data held by the Agency for Roma (2020) and the results of the last census, from 2021 (National Institute of Statistics, 2021).

In the paper entitled "Research on the Roma minority", a study performed by the Research Institute for Quality of Life (2001), it is stated that "stereotypes, like learned behaviours, can, in the opinion of several researchers, be changed especially among young people. The concept of interculturalism, increasingly present in the discourse of different researchers, a concept that implies closeness, conjunction, majority-minority relations, is often invoked as a principle that must be introduced in social policies in order to eliminate social representations and negative stereotypes of Roma in the long term" (Research Institute for Quality of Life, 2001). Studies and research in the field (World Bank, 2005) show that many of the Roma have low self-esteem caused by their ethnicity and continuous social stigmatization, which had a negative impact on the mental wellness of the community.

One of the methods of regaining the self-esteem of the Roma from an ethnic point of view is to identify and promote the positive elements of the Roma community, in order to reduce discrimination and social

marginalization. This can be achieved to the extent that the positive aspects that can be found in the Roma community are highlighted, such as the promotion of examples of good practices, of socially successful Roma personalities, of traditions, customs, music, etc. Regarding the resources that can be used in a mass media campaign, we can point to a multitude of Romani festivals, held in different parts of the country and even internationally, with diverse themes, among which we mention: the International Festival of Roma Culture, the Festival "Romani Kultura", Roma Festival, Gypsy Traditions Festival, Roma Gastronomic Festival, Roma Crafts Festival, Flower Festival - Roma Florist Days, Roma Film Festival, International Romani Music Festival.

Although they were a population with a nomadic way of life, the ethnic Roma managed, over time, to create and maintain their own traditions and customs, which led to the consolidation of their cultural identity (Achiței & Nistor, 2023). Among the Roma traditions that have withstood the cultural influences of various stages of history is the craft of metalworking, within which the Roma are especially recognized for the art of modelling iron and brass, as well as the processing of wood and animal bones, from which they make ornaments and decorative items. One of the best well-known traditional trades of the Roma people is fiddling, as prominent figures of Roma fiddlers, but also a series of solo artists have benefited from wide recognition within Romanian society, including among the majority population. Roma personalities can be encountered in other fields, such as sports, art, cinematography, publishing, as the merits of some of these people were recognized through national distinctions, such as the case of Alina Șerban, who received the Order Cultural Merit in the rank of knight in 2024, for her activity against the discrimination of the Roma (Bian, 2024).

A media campaign to promote the Roma community in the mass media implies that, before launching the event, the drafting and distributing a press release to local and national media agencies should be done, regarding the intention to present the Roma community and the positive elements within this community to the general public. The campaign should aim to reduce discrimination, stereotypes and marginalization of Roma among the majority population. Once the goal is defined, the organization of press conferences would be beneficial, in order to present the Roma community and its initiatives to the media. Also, the creation of a website dedicated to the promotion campaign of the Roma community can be an effective promotional tool, which would impact the public opinion both in the short term (during the campaign) and in the long term (the information will be accessible anytime, from anywhere and by anyone). Complementary

to the website, posting content on social networks and their appropriate use can help form a positive perception of the Roma community. The dissemination of information on social networks leads to a better knowledge of the Roma community, which leads to the connection between the minority community with the majority and the building of healthy social relations between the majority population and the Roma. Roma influencers and public figures can contribute to their integration into society by promoting positive messages about the community they belong to, as well as successful examples of good intercommunity relations with other members of society (Sandu & Nistor, 2020; 2021).

To achieve the desired social effect, the content of the messages must be relevant, clear and concise, authentic and creatively presented, visually attractive, with a strong emotional impact. In all promotional materials (posters, leaflets, brochures), advertising spots, documentaries, interviews that will appear on social networks, on television, on the radio, in online and offline media, the message conveyed must highlight the idea that in the Roma community there are positive aspects, that progress is being made to overcome social barriers to integration, that Roma music, customs and traditions, together with their cultural influence, are an integral part of the majority culture, making the national cultural heritage more diverse and richer, and that there are examples of good practices in the field of entrepreneurship carried out by members of the Roma community, which contribute to the local economy and create jobs (Sandu & Nistor, 2020; 2021).

Organizing events to highlight Roma culture, holding photography or film contests to promote community traditions and customs, involving community representatives in social responsibility or anti-discrimination campaigns are other actions that can be taken by the Roma community to highlight the social potential and heritage of the Roma and which is unknown or ignored by the majority population.

Conclusions

The Roma and their history of social inequality compared to the majority population goes back at least five centuries. Although the Roma were recognized as a national minority by the Romanian government in 1990, they still do not fully enjoy the rights deriving from this status, due to the stigma generated by their ethnicity, the persistence of racism within society and social exclusion, being considered a vulnerable or socially disadvantaged social group.

The integration of Roma into society is a slow process, which started in Romania immediately after the Revolution of 1989 and continues today through national and European measures and public policies. The success of Roma integration depends to the greatest extent on the Roma community's access to resources, because this is where the other factors that prevent integration stem from, such as discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices, etc. As long as poverty, lack of education and housing in improper conditions are ostentatiously visible within the Roma community, acceptance (Huidu & Sandu, 2020) by the majority population will be difficult. According to a survey carried out by the World Bank in collaboration with the Roma Agency (World Bank, 2005) it is shown that 1 in 10 Romanians would accept having a relative of Roma ethnicity and 2 out of 10, a friend with Roma origins, while just 3 out of 10 Romanians trust the Roma. From these data it can be deduced that the image of the Roma is generally negative among the majority population and that it is due either to the unfortunate interactions between the minority and the majority population, or to stereotypes transmitted from generation to generation within the majority population. An important role in intercommunity relations is also played by the need for more involvement of the majority population and the desire to discover, raise awareness and recognize the positive aspects existing in the Roma community. For this to be possible, one of the solutions can be the positive promotion of the Roma in mass media, which can lead to a better knowledge, understanding and tolerance of this minority and, finally, to their integration.

The integration of Roma into Romanian society is vital for economic and social reasons. If we talk from an economic point of view, it must be taken into account that the Roma represent a significant labour force, which can contribute to economic growth, especially in those sectors where the requirements are commensurate with their qualifications and skills, while also reducing poverty and their social marginalization and increasing the chances of integration. From a social point of view, through the social inclusion of the Roma, criminality, conflicts and inter-ethnic tensions are reduced, contributing to a safer and more stable, cooperative and united society. Likewise, the integration of the Roma into political life increases representativeness in decision-making forums, while ensuring better transparency and knowledge of human rights, reducing discrimination and inequality.

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