The Romani ethnic minority reflected in historical discourse and media discourse

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Abstract: The present article proposes an analysis of the Romani minority, starting from the historic discourse, which offers an image of their lifestyle and traditions, continuing with media discourse, a real mirror of current mentality with respect to this minority. The first part of the study underlines the problems faced by the Romani during their travelling throughout the world and living almost exclusively at the edge of the society, which, for more or less subjective reasons, did not offer them a real chance of rehabilitation. The second part focuses on the huge role of the media in changing our perception upon the Romani minority. The first step is done: the media have dropped its negative stereotypes, emphasizing positive actions and presenting the Romani from an angle unparalleled before.

Keywords: Romani, ethnic minority, media discourse, scientific discourse, culture, identity.

1. The Romani ethnic minority reflected in historical discourse

Better known as the Gypsies, the Romani1 are classified among the "special" people in Europe, with a completely different mentality of the old continent population. Familiar with the freedom owed to the nomadic tradition because they have practiced it for a long time, gifted with craftsmen and artistic talent, the Romani are noted today by poverty, maladjustment and disobedience to the laws of the XXIst century. Lately, the European and the Romanian societies, try to unite efforts to improve the living conditions of this minority and for the integration of the Romani in the modern society.

Normally, their efforts meet a strong resistance from the Romani, living a real tragedy of the loss of identity. Compelled to live a sedentary life, people who once lived in tilt carts, are now trying to cohabit with people whose history and habits are little known. The basis of most conflicts between majority and minority are often insufficient knowledge of history and habits of this population.

Conflicts cannot be resolved without deep knowledge of the causes that generate them. But these causes can be found only in the history of this mysterious ethnic minority, coming from unknown lands and times long forgotten.

How the Romanian media reflect these problems, how often the Romanian newspapers present the Romani situation; are these positive or negative?

1.1 Theories about the origin of the Romani.

Who are the Romani? Where do they come from? What has led them to stop here? These are just some of the questions that try to elucidate the behaviour of these people. While in Europe they are recorded in chronicles of the XIIIth century, in Africa and America they appear only in the XVIIth century, and in Siberia, a century later. In his book, Între Orient şi Occident [1995], Neagu Djuvara states that the first document which mentions them as a ţigani in Romania dates from 1385. Further, the author says: "Este probabil că acest trib nomad, plecat din India cu cinci sau şase secole mai înainte, în împrejurări care nu au fost încă lămurite, să fi fost împins întruna către apus de apropierea turlor otomani"2.

Regarding the origin of the Romani, many theories more or less fantastic have been spread. There were opinions that the Romani were descendants of one of the tribes of Israel, and after Babylonian slavery they have not returned

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1 The Romani people are also known by a variety of other names: Roma, Romany, Gypsies.

2 "It is likely that this nomadic tribe, which left India with five or six centuries before, in circumstances not yet clear, have been constantly pushed to the West by the coming of the Turkish Ottomans".
to Israel, and others considered them as descendants of the Celtic droids. Finally, another theory considered the Romani survivors of the Egyptians.

Even though later studies have demonstrated without any shadow of a doubt the Indian origin of the Romani, the mystery still persists about the origin of this category.

In 1385, the Ruler of Walachia, Dan I, gives to the Tismana monastery all goods which before belong to Vodita monastery, near Turnu Severin. Among these goods were 40 hovels of atigan. The Romani slaves of Tismana monastery are all remembered in the subsequent documents which are talking about its possessions.

An issue of particular importance for the entire Romani ethnic group is the origin of their slavery. Of course, there were slaves in the early Middle Ages throughout Europe and Asia, but they were mainly prisoners of war who had no opportunity to redeem themselves. In Romania, the situation was different. The one who was Gypsy was automatically slave. Thus, in the documents of those times, the words slave and Gypsy rarely appear together, the Romani were simply mentioned as Gypsies.

Some historians consider that the Romanians would have inherited slavery of the Romani from their Eastern neighbours, the Tartars. They used to transform their prisoners of war into slaves. The Romani were free in Transylvania and in the rest of Europe, which brings us to the conclusion that, when they left Bulgaria, there was a period in which they could move freely, they were just enslaved afterwards. In the Middle Ages, all the Romani who came to the country automatically became slaves of the Ruler, and in the second half of the XIVth century and the beginning of the XVth century, the landowners could easily enslave small groups of peaceful nomads settled on their land. An important element to confirm the initial assumption of freedom of the Romani would be that some of them enjoyed a series of freedoms granted by the masters, among which the most important is freedom of movement in the country – the semi nomad Romani paying only an annual tax to the masters. All the Romani slaves of a master lived mostly at the edge of the Romanian villages.

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1.2 Organisation, customs and traditions of the Romani.

The nomadic Romani were organized in dwellings or hordes, which included several families grouped by kinship and practicing the same profession. A horde was composed of 30-40 families and had its own chief, who wore the title of jude in Wallachia and Moldavia, and voievod in Transylvania. The hordes’ chiefs were elected from the members of the community in a meeting that followed a particular ritual. They were chosen among the Romani men considered to be the wiser and stronger. The function was held for life, but it was not given to the descendants. These chieftains constitute a kind of aristocracy of the Romani. A higher position was held by the bulibaşa, who in addition to collecting taxes, judged the disputes between families. He had also the power to impose punishments.

Until the release from bondage there have been sporadic attempts to settle them down. However, it is worth to mention here the attempt of Maria Teresa to settle down the Romani, allowing them to live outside the villages and to own land.

During the hundreds of years of nomadic existence, they have borrowed a little from all the people with whom they came into contact. Lately the Romani have increasingly abandoned their traditions and the laws of the belonging community. One aspect that has supported radical changes is marriage. In Romani communities, marriage between minors was a habit. Law prohibits this today and although it is still practiced, it becomes increasingly rare.

At the beginning of the XIVth century, the Gypsies, name under which they are mentioned in the documents of that time, began to cross the Danube in small groups. Once in the country, they became slaves for the Romanian Rulers of those regions. They were divided into: țigani domnești, who belonged to the reign, țigani mănăstirești, who belonged to the monasteries and țigani boierești, who belonged to the private people.

Referring to the number of the Romani, figures vary from one author to another; in 1810 Wilkinson considers that in both principalities there would be around 150 000 people. After about a quarter of a century, Kogalniceanu assesses the number at about 200 000 people, i.e. almost a tenth of the population.

M. Kogalniceanu shows that the first entries of the existence of Gypsies in Europe dates from 1260, when the King of Bohemia, Ottocar II sent a letter to Pope Alexander IV, showing that in the army groups of the Hungarian King there was a group of people called cingari. Most historians agree that the name of Gypsy, name under which the Romani are listed in most historical documents, comes from a population that exists today in India, namely Cingar or Cengar.
In Romania of early-millennium, efforts are made, at least on paper, to improve the living conditions of Romani. Among the reasons that these efforts do not have a positive end would be the insufficient economic development of the country. Another reason would be the Romani lack of involvement; they often consider themselves to have only rights and not duties. For a real improvement is necessary a change of attitude from both sides.

Everywhere the Romani went, they have been received with hostility by the natives; and today the situation has not completely improved. Some Romanian proverbs illustrate clearly the perception of the majority about this ethnic group: "to lose by a neck", "every potter praises his own pot".

Back to the historical documents of the Romanian Middle Ages, we find out that the Gypsy slaves of the Wallachia came not only from among nomadic Gypsies, but also from legacies, presents or war trophies. After 1350, there are several documents which show the social condition of the Gypsies. Because their number was constantly increasing, it needed some laws to govern their rights and duties. These so-called laws predicted what is allowed or not to the Gipsy slave. Often these laws were unjust and cruel, but they are a mirror of the mentality of those times. Gypsies could be sold, but could not be separated from spouse or children. Marriages between Romanians and Gypsies have been banned a long time, and later, when they were accepted, it was specified that those married to Gypsy slaves automatically became slaves, as well as their descendants. The Gypsies could be beaten or tortured, but could not be killed.

A very important step in the evolution of the relations between Gypsies and the majority was the abolition of Gypsy slavery. Although shy attempts had been made until then, this happened only in the XIXth century, when Romanians were included in the vortex of revolutionary ideas, recognizing that Gypsy slavery was a wrong reality, which had to be eliminated.

In 1839, the Moldavian Gypsies get right to redeem themselves. In 1855, Grigore A. Ghica abolished Gypsies slavery throughout Moldavia. Following the abolition of slavery, free Romani in Moldavia were to receive land and tools for work, thus becoming farmers. But the state did not acquit itself of its duties so the Romani were forced to continue to work on the land of their former masters, broadly their lives remaining the same. Only after the land reform of 1864, from the time of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the Romani received some land, and became small farmers.

In Wallachia, Gheorghe Bibescu legislated in 1847 the liberation of the monastery Gypsies and of those belonging to political establishments, and only in 1856 Prince Barbu Ştirbei decided to release from slavery all categories of Gypsies.

Bewildered by the sudden freedom, the Gypsies did not know how to react to this event, extremely important to their fate. However, after 1860, two groups are gradually distinguished: sedentary Gypsies and nomadic Gypsies. Some of the liberated Gypsies received land, and earned their living in agriculture, others were seated at the edge of small towns, practicing various jobs.

### 1.3 The XXth century

Organizations of this ethnic group started to exist after 1930 and began to use the word Romani. Following the deportations that took place in Transnistria during the Second World War, many Gypsies died because of inhumane conditions.

The inter-war period is remarked by the beginning of the Romani movement of emancipation and by appearance of some literate Romani, who recognized without shame that they belong to the Romani minority.

There were established socio-professional associations of the Romani; their purpose was: to teach them how to read and write, to publish books on their history, to found a popular university of the Romani, etc.

During the Communist regime, the "private" occupations had to disappear. The policy of the communist regime not only ignored the Romani minority, but had also denied any right of this ethnic minority. Most of their traditional occupations were destroyed or lost because they were prohibited, and the Romani were forced to integrate in a lifestyle that had been imposed.

Many Romani have lost their jobs and were directed towards illegal activities, which led again to marginalization, poverty, delinquency. This justified the negative stereotypes about the Romani and increased hostile attitudes of the majority. Therefore, the attempt to socialize generated a new drama for the Romani used to have a free life, forced at once to live in one place, according to some rules that they did not understand at all.

Thus, former nomads became sedentary, they built houses and began to adapt to a new way of life, keeping the nostalgia of a lost freedom and a way of life rooted in hundreds of years. Because all the decisions about the Romani have
not been taken considering their specific and history, their isolation and marginalization have been perpetuated.

The key term in defining this ethnic minority is culture. The Romani language is not used in the religious activities, which is another reason that lead to a slow, but sure, loss of this language. Due to their way of life of symbiotic type, the Romani use more and more the language of the community in which they live. From small ages, children are taught the language of the majority, either as a second language, or as the only language they speak.

The lack of written language has negatively influenced the conservation of the traditional culture and the development of its own literary culture.

In all Romanian villages, with rare exceptions, the Romani live on the edge of the villages. Subsequently, by extending the village, their homes have been incorporated in the community, as islands that remember of the former border. In almost every village, they are a minority.

All ethnographers and historians are almost unanimous in recognizing the Romani remarkable artistic qualities. In Wallachia, they were outstanding musicians and fiddlers, recorded with admiration in the chronicles of the times in which they lived. The first entries of the Romani fiddlers dates from the XIVth century. We hear from the chronicles of the times that, at his triumphal entry in Alba Iulia, „Mihai Viteazul era însoţit de zece lăutarăţii țigani”\(^3\). In the last century, the city of Iasi is proud of the great musician Barbu Lăutarul, who plays at the courts of the great Rulers in Moldavia.

With respect to the Romani religion, we can say that nothing from the original religion was kept, borrowing a little from the religions of people with whom they came into contact.

The freedom gained by the Romanian people after the events at the end of 1989 has not changed much their situation. Poverty caused by unemployment becomes a reason for exclusion, among other causes as such as: lack of documents for both adults and children, illiteracy, concubinage, lack of housing.

The exact number of the Romani in our country cannot be specified because, hoping to obtain some benefits, they have declared themselves Romanians.

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\(^3\) “was accompanied by ten Gypsy fiddlers”.

2. The Romani ethnic minority reflected in the written media.

After turning over historical discourse, finding something about the Romani, about their origin and history, I have analysed media discourse. How often do they appear in the media, how large are the articles about them, are the articles positive or negative, these are just a few questions of highly importance to our study.

This study aims to analyse the dynamics of the articles occurence about the Romani in the written press, both central and local. The period under review is from May to July 2007, and the newspapers which are monitored are: Adevăruț, Evenimentul Zilei, Jurnalul Național, Ceahlăul, Monitorul de Neamț. We are interested in highlighting the media attitude towards the Romani, being known that for centuries they were presented almost exclusively in a negative manner. We are not interested only in the frequency of the articles occurence but also in the issues under consideration. Journalists can play a key role in “manipulating" the public opinion, this time in the right direction. Are the facts presented objectively, or we hit subjective presentations, passed through the filter of old stereotypes? This research aims to answer, with arguments, this question.

A first finding is that the Romanian press is concerned with the problems of the Romani. Articles relating to them do not appear very often, but deal with seriousness the stringent issues of this minority: lack of job availability and extremely low availability of entrepreneurs to employ the Romani workers, lack of identity cards, which is the cause of a whole series of shortcomings, lack of education - the main reason why the Romani cannot qualify themselves in a field of activity, lack of housing.

To my surprise, I found that the main newspapers contain a lot of articles about the Romani. The approach is better chosen by the journalists of the central press versus the local press. The articles are a relatively faithful mirror of the realities faced by this ethnic group. As a natural consequence, the media talk more about the problems faced by the Romani, than about their success and fulfilment. Maybe the negative tendency of the media is worth to be mentioned. However, this tendency has improved a lot lately. Most of the journalists are deeply concerned with the Romani’s condition, as shown in articles like: Români ni care nu există!, published in Jurnalul Național; Nu primesc la clasă o țigancă proastă, published in Adevăruț;
Perhaps we need more positive articles about the Romani in order to change the general opinion about them. In order to find out positive facts, we must search more, but if the lucky few cases would be presented more widely in the press, it could lead, on the one hand, to positive opinions about themselves among the Romani and on the other hand, to the "sweetening" of public perception about the Romani.

Suggestive in this respect I find the article Confruntare de top, published in Evenimentul zilei of 15 June 2007. This article highlights the artistic qualities of the Romani. The title is short and clear and the subtitle provides a brief summary of the subject; both stimulate the reader to find out more about the subject.

Most of the articles are accompanied of suggestive images. With few exceptions, they present the Romani as being very sad, poorly dressed, ignored and forgotten by the authorities. About them, the reader can only feel pity and compassion.

The media use the word Gypsy not only with a negative connotation. When a positive fact or a fortune event is reported, is less important which of the terms, Gypsy or Romani, is used.

The article Nu primesc la clasă o țigâncă proastă, appeared in Adevărul of 22 May 2007. It reflects the most exclusive attitude towards the ethnic Romani. The newspaper's initiative, to present to the public such a problem, is welcomed. The title, of incentive type, is highlighted with bold characters and is intended to draw attention to the content.

Jurnalul Național shows how the story of the Romani without identity papers can have a happy ending. Entitled Românii care nu există!, the article shows how a courageous woman, Viorica Gotu, "din neamul romilor de mătase", has started to help her fellows, once she came to the leadership of the County Office for the Romani, within the Prefect's Office of Galați. Aware of the importance of documents, she knew how to deal with problems, from cause to effect, she had patience to search the "inexistent" people in the furthest corners of the villages of Galați. Thus she made the Romani understand that nowadays they need papers. Down through the centuries, the nomadic Romani wandered the world far and wide, without papers and without a home. Now they must understand that they need documents and also an address where they can be found, not because the authorities want so, but because the socio-historical reality has radically changed. And who can make them understand this better than "one of them"?

In the local press I found less articles about the Romani. However, I noticed that little by little, things are changing. The local newspapers that I have examined are Monitorul de Neamț, which, on 19 June 2007, published the article entitled Romii, drepturi după deportarea în Transnistria, and Ceahlău, which published, on June 22, the article Azi, bursa muncii pentru rromi, and on June 23-24 the article La târgul de joburi de ieri 16 rromi si-au găsit de lucr.

The last two articles show the lack of interest, both from employers and from potential employees, but any start is difficult, and this fair employment for the Romani is a small step on the right track.

Conclusions

The media began to change their conception about this ethnic group, using most of the times a neutral tone, sometimes even positive. This will inevitably lead to the change of the public's opinion, which is the first step in a general change of attitude.

Naturally, the media in our country do not seek to clear up the mystery of the Romani's origin, but they show all their problems and they try to draw attention on the extremely precarious conditions in which the ethnic Romani live.

It is a fact that, in general, the Romani are perceived negatively by the majority. From this point of view the media have a huge role in changing this reality.

3. References


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