

CENTRAL EUROPE

ROMA EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

Until the middle of the 19th century, the Romas were slaves in Romania, used by monasteries and landlords as agricultural workers or artisans. The last slave-markets were in the 1860s. The liberation has not changed the basic problem of the property. Without any goods, disdained by others, the marginalised population of Romas tried to survive. Some of them, working for others as serfs (a “humane” form of slavery), settled in the margin of villages chose the way of assimilation: they lost the mother tongue and a great part of traditions, but because the prejudices, the sacrifice was in vain. The marginalisation and discrimination against this group (called “Romi de vatră” – settled Romas) remains. Others chose the traditionally nomad life: travelling from localities to localities, they sold different artisan products (for example, the “Cocalari” carved and sold combs made by bones) or presented different performances (for example, the “Ursari” was bear-leaders). This way life taught the Romas, as traders, to do not have trust in non-Romas (“Gadje”) and to try to cheat them. They life depended on this – a bad bargain destroyed the possibilities of survive.

The official education was not attractive for the Romas. The settled Roma youths were scorned by teachers and colleagues, also the material conditions did not permit the schooling. The children from nomad Roma communities have not the opportunity to learn. In this situation, the education was offered by the community. The mothers taught the children about customs, the fathers regarding the craft. Elders were respected for them experiences. The “school of life” was the only appreciated, recognised and trusted.

After the Second World War, the communism changed also the life of Romas. First of all, the nomad life was prohibited, all of the Romas was settled. The land-property was ceased, all lands became the property of agricultural co-operatives. The poor people of villages (among them the Romas) sustained this process. In this way a new, latent conflict has to born between former paupers, who won with the collective form of property and the former land-owners, who lost everything.

With the industrialisation, millions of villagers were moved in cities. Between them Romas, who has not any attachment to villages, where they were settled not long time before. In small communities it was possible to maintain the traditions, the same possibility do not exists in cities. Romas, moved in flat buildings, separated and severed from roots, became a category of “lumpen-proletar”. In few years “Gypsy quarters” were formed, in some places because this was the policy of local communist leader, in other places because during the removals, the Romas looked to be in the neighbourhood of other Romas, and the non-Romas, because the stereotypes and prejudices, avoid this. An other negative effect of the industrialisation was that the traditional hand-work lost its importance. For the Roma communities, this destroyed the only possibility of existence.

The economic crisis, have begun in the 70s brought a new period in the Roma's life. First of all they lost their jobs. Because in the communist period nobody could become unemployed, men were enforced to work almost for free in the great establishments: at the Danube-channel and at Ceaușescu's palace, far a way from the family. In the other hand, as a result of the economic crisis, the hand-made products became again much in demand. Also the black-market became very profitable. The presence of Romas was significant in this. Accustomed with the commerce and travel (to buy somewhere and to sail elsewhere), also with a life in the margin of illegality (constrained by circumstances), they were able to build a trade network not only in the hole territory of Romania, but also with connections to Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland. This created an embarrassment of the non-Roma population: during the suffering of the population, "Gypsies" made fabulous fortunes. It was true, but characteristic only for a small stratum of the Roma society. Nobody recognised that the benefits were reciprocal: this black-market assured important goods as candles (in a period when the electricity was regularly switched off) or different household utensils. The communist "underground" propaganda (because officially the crisis was not recognised) accused this black-market, explicit the Romas with creating the crisis.

After the collapse of communism, the latent repugnance and aversion became undisguised nationalism. The end of agricultural co-operatives, the returning of properties creates new tensions. As a result, between 1990 and 1995, in about 30 villages mob violence took place against the Roma communities (more than 300 houses was fired, 20 persons was lynched) without any legal consequences till 1997. The discrimination against Roma population became a rule (several job-offers, published in the newspapers, declare clearly that a Roma could not apply; there are signs on the doors of certain public places, restaurants which says that Romas are not allowed to go in). The Police and the newspapers are mentioning the ethnic affiliation of delinquents if they are Romas.

The existence of a vicious circle was observed by the specialists: the marginalisation of the Romas lead to discrimination, the discrimination to poverty (affecting delinquency) and illiteracy, poverty, delinquency and illiteracy to marginalisation. The way to stop this vicious circle is the subject of debates between specialists. The human rights organisations put the accent on the importance of stop the discrimination (educating the non-Romas) and on offering positive discrimination to assure the development of Roma communities (in which the education has an important role), the governmental institutions did not recognised the existence of discrimination, they considered that the root of the problem is the education of Romas. Set off different point of views, common steps were made to find new possibilities for Romas' education.

Statistics

Under pressure, marginalisation and discrimination, an important part of Roma population did not recognised its ethnic affiliation with the occasion of different censuses. Because this, the statistical information has to be managed by well motivated reservations.

The number of Romas has changed significant from census to census: 242.656 (1.70%) in 1930, 104.216 (0.60%) in 1956, 64.197 (0.37%) in 1966, 227.398 (1.05%), 409.723 (1.76%) in 1992. By experts, the number of Romas is between 1 and 2 million. In this way, they are the most significant or the second minority in Romania (the number of Hungarians is 1.6 million). (Consequently, the Romanian authorities are using the word "Gypsy" and not the term "Roma".)

By the 1992 census, the mother tongue of Romas are Romanian (54.31%), different dialects of Romanes (40.86%), Hungarian (4.70%), Turkish (0.08%), German (0.03%). By religion, the Romas are Orthodox (85.30%), Romano-Catholics (4.80%), Reformats (4.38%), other Cristian, first of all neo-protestant cults (4.28%), Muslims (0.14%), non-declared or atheists (1.04%).

The greatest part of the Roma population is living in rural zone (58.7%), in contrast with the general population of Romania (only 45.7% in rural zone). By occupation, 28.0% of them work in primary sector (agriculture) 37.4% in secondary sector (industry), 17.5% in tertiary sector (services) with a 17.1% unemployment. For the general Romanian populations this indicators are: 23.5% – 44.7% – 27.8% – 4.0%.

The following table compares the general Romanian population and Roma population concerning age and studies.¹

	General Romanian population (%)	Roma population (%)
Age		
0-14 years	22.7	41.4
15-59	60.9	53.5
more than 60	16.4	5.1
Studies		
without or non-declared	4.7	26.8
primary level	23.6	37.5
secondary level ²	66.6	35.6
high level ³	5.1	0.1

Education before 1989

In the '50, the communist propaganda started a campaign to eradicate the illiteracy and to implement the obligation of 8 year schooling (primary school and first 4 year of secondary school). The real effect of this campaign could not be estimated, because officially the illiteracy was complete eradicated. By the published statistical information everybody has secondary or high level education (there is not any column for "without education" or for "primary educated"), and connections were not made between ethnic affiliation and education.⁴ This practice is reflected also in the statistical information published before the census in 1992, with a lack of information regarding the level of education and connection between education and minorities.⁵

Undoubtedly, this propagandistic campaign has a positive effect on the educational level of Roma population. The illiteracy decreased substantially, new possibilities opened for Roma youths. But the goal of campaign was deformed and compromised by several regulations.

1 For the population elder as 12 year.

2 It means continuing the primary studies, one or more years — up to 8 — in secondary school.

3 University level studies.

4 See: *Recensămîntul populației din 21 februarie 1956* (Census of Population in February 21, 1956), published by Central Department of Statistic.

5 See: *Anuarul statistic al României, 1990* (Statistical Annually of Romania, 1990), published by National Committee for Statistic.

First of all, the schooling was the obligation of teachers. Who did not participate in the education process (among age of 6 and 14 year), officially was registered as schoolchild. According to the communist ideology, dull and clever children does not exist – therefore the teachers was punished if the students failed to pass the year. Because of self protection, teachers let everybody through. In this way the hole Romanian education system was compromised. In reality illiterate persons graduated the high schools (obligation of 10 grades was introduced in the '70, with the “high” indication to offer certificate of final examination after 12 grades for a high percentage –close to 100%– of students).

To do not have “difficulties” with the Roma children, the teachers used three ways to do not have them in their classes. In the villages, they could graduate the school without attendance and without any knowledge (this was accepted also by the Romas, because in this way the children could be used in housework). In the cities, where a control was more possible, the Roma children were sent to special schools for mental retarded persons (the proposal for this kind of education was made by the teachers). In this way, 80–90% of the children in special schools were Romas. Also, for personal comfort or benefits, the older and more experienced teachers select the children for they classes by social background. Thus Roma classes was formed in several places (by status unrecognised), with inexperienced or not qualified teachers.

For the greatest part of Romas, this was not felt as a disadvantage. The education was considered senseless, without any practical benefit. Why to know what are the rivers of Africa or to know the speed of light? Where could this kind of acknowledgement be used in a Roma community? The school was considered to be not only meaningless, but also dangerous – an instrument of assimilation.

Also for Romas who believed in the role of education several difficulties impeded the development.

In Romania, in the '50 a strong education system was developed for minorities using mother tongue. The Romani language –as in other countries– was considered not enough developed to be the language of lessons. For the 6 year old children, the transition between using mother tongue at home and learning in Romanian (or in a non-Romani minority language) was not assisted in any way.

The difficulties are resulted from the deficient understanding of the language, the discrimination applied by the teachers, the mocking of other children, the hard social situation, another defectiveness of the Romanian education system held back the level of education in the Roma communities. In schools, even in the first years, the classroom is the place where the information are transmitted and not acquired. In this way teaching is a duty of parents. For an uneducated parents' child it was almost impossible to do the home-works, to learn, to attain the knowledge.

First steps for a new way of see the Roma education

The previous chapter was written in past, but most part of them could be declared also in present. What was changed: the teacher is not responsible for schooling – in this way several Romas remain outside schools; failing of students is not punished for teachers, so the education became a more serious issue; as stimulation, maternity benefit is conditioned by the presence of children in the school.

The general problem of discrimination, difficulties in understanding and learning remains. With the result of sending a great part of Roma children in “special schools” for mental

retarded persons or to separate them in “Roma classes”, based not on the language of teaching but on ethnic affiliation.

For poor communities, the school is important because the maternity benefit depends on this (4 USD/month!), and also assures a hope for better conditions of life. The lack of clothes, shoes, school equipment represent the considerable impediments of schooling.

The reach communities⁶ did not understand the sense, reason, utility and benefit of education. An interview⁷ with a leader of a this kind of community shows the mentality of them:

- Could it be a benefit for yours community to have a lawyer, a doctor or a teacher who is from the community working for the community?
- Yes, of course. The lawyers are cheaters, the doctor is working superficially, the teacher is not interested.
- If you need high educated persons, why do not you leave your child to go in school?
- All of my four boys have 8 grades. It is needed to obtain driving licence. How many years have you spent in school?
- 12 in school, 5 in university.
- How much do you earn a month ?
- About 100 USD.
- You see? If I did not have 100 USD in a day, that day was lost. And I have 4 grades. All what I learned in the school, was to read and to count. Everything else I learned from the school of life. I have 56 years of school. It is good to have a Roma lawyer, a doctor or a teacher, but I could not sacrifice my children. If my neighbour sacrifices his boy to become a doctor for 80 USD per month, I esteem this choose, but I am not crazy.

In these conditions, it is not easy to realise something in the domain of Roma education.

From 1990, several Roma and non-Roma NGOs was involved in finding solutions. The various debates proved that the solution is not one and unique. The “traditionalists” are sustaining that the Roma education will promote the traditional handwork because only in this way the lifestyle of Romas will not be changed radically. According to “modernists” opinion the education has to be for the next century. The future is not the handwork, but the computer; the changes in the lifestyle are inevitable, without a danger for the essence of Roma culture. The points of view are also different regarding the language of education. One opinion is that the language of education will be Romani. So it is easier for the child to learn, the traditions could be promoted in the school. The question is: which Romani language? The traditional dialect of the community or the new formed literary language?⁸ The first is closer and familiar for the community, the second help the process of forming a “Roma nation”. According to others’ opinion, a bilingual education is better. In the first grades with more subjects in Romani, gradually the Romanian will became the language of education. In the present status of the Romani language, some subjects could be learnt in this language (for example, science), others not.⁹ By others, the hole education will be in Romanian, to do not separate the children in classes by ethnic origin, because this segregation could have negative effects on marginalisation.

6 The middle class is almost absent in Roma communities of Romania.

7 Realised by the author of this study.

8 Some models exists for all of the questions regarding the Roma education. For this dilemma, a solution was find in the Middle Age by the Transilvanian Germans, where also different dialects were spoken. The literary written textbooks were written in the local dialect. The dialect was promote and also the literary language, which became lingua franca between different communities.

9 Similar situation with the native Americans.

There are debates in the field of education. Where is it better? In schools, outside of community, in schools which are inside the community or with alternative solutions for half-nomad communities, where the school will follow the community?¹⁰

The debates were not empty phrases. Different NGOs were active in transforming the results of debates in practice. Also the (national and international) pressure made effects on the point of view of Romanian government.

In the school-year 1990–1991, 55 students chose pedagogical schools (in 3 towns: Bucharest – one class, Țirgu-Mureș – a half class, and Bacău – also a half class) for special places reserved for Romas. These students learned 3 hours per week Romani language. The declared purpose was to train teachers for kindergarten and primary schools. The project appeared to be a “window action” of the Ministry of Education, to show foreign countries that the government is interested in finding solutions. The classes were established in 1990, but the programme for them was elaborated only in 1991. In Bacău the students (all of them were Romanian – they exploited the possibility to have an easier exam to enter in the school) made demonstration against learning “Gypsy language”. In consequence of this “pressure”, the government renounced teaching Romani in Bacău. Without any governmental interest, only 8 out of the initial group of 55 became teacher in Roma communities, all of them were student in Țirgu-Mureș, where the local Roma Union leader did not left the project to die. These teachers are working in classes where the students are Romas, but the language of education is Romanian. The students are learning Romani in 4 hours per week. An inspection of this education in a school in Țirgu-Mureș showed that this 4 hour did not present in the students’ timetable. The initiative to prepare Roma teachers in pedagogical schools were not repeated.

By the ambition of Roma teachers, having this possibility in the Law of education, Roma language was learned as a facultative subject. The table¹¹ on the following page presents the education in Romani language, in comparison with some of other communities. This table shows that the Romani language education is more under the percentage of Romani speakers, and also demonstrates the inconsistency of the Ministry of Education. The kindergarten is the base of the education, where children adapt the school’s conditions. For a Roma child, this could be the transition from the Romani language family to the Romanian language school. In the Romanian education system this is totally ignored. In 1994–1995 there was only one group of Romani language kindergarten, in Caracal, realised by a Roma organisation (RROM-RROM) and not by the government and not in a school, but in a house near the Roma quarter. This positive example was not appreciated. Another inconsistency is that the Roma language is learned only in the first 4 grades. For the children, Romani is mother tongue. In this way, in primary level they did not learn novelties. It should be important to learn this language in grades V–VIII, not only for continuity (what is also very significant), but also to learn the grammar of the language (to use the language consciously accurate). The variety of children’s number who are learning the Romani in different school-years prove that this depends on publicity, and this publicity is one of the deficiencies.

In the pedagogical schools established in 1990, the Anthology of Texts in Romani Language textbook was used, elaborated by Marcel Courthiade in 1991. The first textbook elaborated in Romania was published in 1992. In 1995, an Anthology of Texts in Gypsy Language was published for the grades II–IV.

10 There are models to solve this problem in France for Roma communities or in Finland for Sami population.

11 Information published in *Cadrul legislativ și instituțional pentru minoritățile naționale din România* (Legislative and Institutional Framework for National Minorities in Romania, 1994); *Învățământul cu predarea în limbile minorităților naționale din România* (Education in the Languages of National Minorities in Romania, 1995, 1997, 1998), published by the Romanian Government, Council for National Minorities.

	1992-1993	1994-1995	1996-1997	1997-1998
Total number in Romania by mother tongue				
Hungarian				1,639,135
Romani				166,635
Ukrainian				63,585
Kindergarten				
Hungarian language				
no. children	49,255	47,487	42,816	40,987
no. teachers	2,371	2,450	2,676	2,474
Romani language				
no. children	-	30	-	-
no. teachers	-	1	-	-
Ukrainian language				
no. children	305	387	311	323
no. teachers	13	15	23	17
Grades I-IV				
Hungarian language				
no. children learning in Hungarian	60,726	64,695	67,116	67,111
no. children learning Hungarian	no data	no data	no data	no data
no. teachers	3,239	3,468	3,651	3,463
Romani language				
no. children learning in Romani	-	-	-	-
no. children learning Romani	-	247	410	149
no. teachers ¹²	-	8	10	8
Ukrainian language				
no. children learning in Ukrainian	145	237	147	229
no. children learning Ukrainian	3,709	3,559	1,031	3,540
no. teachers	16	18	14	15
Grades V-VIII				
Hungarian language				
no. children learning in Hungarian	68,153	58,242	52,771	54,133
no. children learning Hungarian	no data	no data	no data	no data
no. teachers ¹²	8,233	8,379		8,249
Romani language				
no. children learning in Romani	-	-	-	-
no. children learning Romani	-	-	-	-
no. teachers	-	-	-	-
Ukrainian language				
no. children learning in Ukrainian	65	35	36	100
no. children learning Ukrainian	4,355 ¹³	3,647	1,316	3,648
no. teachers	4	16	8	25

Near the efforts of the government, Roma organisations developed alternative education systems. For example, the teaching of Romani in Maramureş county, in the localities Coltău and Vălenii Lăpuşului is supported by ROMANI CRISS from Bucharest. In 1997 PRO

¹² Teachers who are teaching in classes IX-XII.

¹³ Students in classes IX-XII.

EUROPA League, a non-Roma organisation from Tîrgu-Mureş, focused on multiculturalism, published (with the authorisation of Ministry of Education) bilingual textbooks (Romani-Romanian and Romani-Hungarian) for Arithmetic, first grades. PHOENIX Foundation, an other Roma organisation established summer camps for talented Roma children.

At university level an important education step was made in 1992, when places for Roma students was reserved at the Social Assistant Faculty in Bucharest. This initiative was implemented also in Cluj, now there are about 100 Roma students in Romania (succeeded in passing the admission exams in special reserved places) in different humanist faculties, from law to history.

A considerable degree (no. 4562 from September 16, 1998) was elaborated by the Ministry of National Education, which, between others, for the first time mentioned the problem of nomad families, guaranteeing the rights to schooling the children not only where the family's permanent address is, but also elsewhere (art. 1)¹⁴ and prescribing the establishment of "school caravans" (art. 4). The effects of this degree are not visible after a half year, but could become revolutionary if the government sincerely try to put it in practice.

Conclusions

In the entire Central and Easter Europe, the Roma education is not sufficiently developed. Romania is not an exception. What is characteristic for Romania?

- A numerical developed Roma community;
- the violent of xenophobia against them;
- the totally absence of managing the Roma issue before 1990;
- the governmental "window solutions" after 1990;
- a great interest of non-governmental organisations to find solutions and to apply them in practice;
- inconsistency of policy regarding Roma education;
- important change of government's point of view after 1997;
 - the use of positive discrimination in the university entrance exams.

The results are modest and could be not assessed in this short period after the first institutional step (creating places in pedagogical schools) from 1990 until now. It is more than clear that:

- a positive discrimination is needed after a long period of negative one;
- the order of Roma education's magnitude will be changed;
- it is necessary to have continuity of positive actions;
- the good solution is not one and applicable in any conditions – various solutions will be find and adopted for different communities and different needs;
- the co-operation of governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations could assure only the success;
- the education should be changed for non-Romas, to promote tolerance and mutual understanding between different ethnic groups.

HALLER ISTVÁN

¹⁴ A study published by European Roma Rights Center (*Roma in the Educational Systems of Central and Eastern Europe*, by Claude Cahn, David Chirico, Christina McDonald, Viktória Mohácsi, Tatjana Perić and Ágnes Székely in *Roma Rights*, Summer 1998) criticised the old practice: "In many instances, Roma may not even enter the education system because they are blocked by laws which demand that persons show residence permits in order to enroll in school".