

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS REGARDING THE ROMA POPULATION'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION. A CASE STUDY IN RACOS, ROMANIA

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Abstract: *This paper deals with the theme of the Roma population's education, presenting the premise from which the European educational policies start, the specific problems to the Roma population's access to education and the solutions highlighted in the recent literature. In the latter part of the paper, there is presented a case study in Racoş commune, Braşov county, Romania, where a Roma community lives in conditions of extreme poverty. The research emphasizes solutions identified at a local level, in order to raise the Roma children's participation in the educational process.*

Key words: *Roma population, education, poverty, community.*

1. Introduction

The Roma population represents the biggest ethnic minority in Europe [5]. In Romania, as in other countries of South-Eastern Europe, the most disadvantaged communities belong to the Roma minority; their members are frequently marginalized, discriminated and judged by the others [4], [8]. In Europe, although the Roma have lived here for centuries, "they have always faced social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination. They still experience poor quality of life, low life expectancy, high unemployment and low income (Council of EU, 2009 apud [5]).

Nowadays most authors claim that a high percentage of Roma live in poorer conditions than the majority population [9],[3]. Recent academic research has identified a decline in the Eastern

European Roma communities' socio-economic status [9], [10], so that during the post-socialist transition, Roma population became a "symbol of poverty and [economic] backwardness" (Radicova and Vasecka, 2001 apud [10, p. 81]. After the ex-communist countries' acceptance in the European Union and the elimination of visas, the Roma issue appeared very often in mass media and on the EU institutions' agenda because the Roma migrants shocked the public with their level of poverty and with their unusual practices (begging, theft, illegal camps) [2]. At the same time, the "Roma issues" have become a focus for international policy, which aims at improving the Roma population's life conditions [10].

At European level, there are various institutions which deal with the social protection of the Roma population (EU

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Commission, Council of Europe, the European Social Fund, EU Regional Fund), having the responsibility to improve the social condition of Roma people and to promote their social integration [5].

2. Romanian Roma communities' social problems

The first work with a monographic character of the Roma minority in Romania, published after the fall of the Communist Regime [13], shows that this population's "life situation" unfolds by two interrelated parameters, generating a negative cycle: the cultural parameter ("some components of the Roma's traditional lifestyle, which are responsible with the current unfavourable situation and which act towards its perpetuation and even aggravation.") [13, p. 160] and the social-economic parameter (unfavourable situation, in economic, professional and educational terms, specific to most Roma population).

Many other sociological or anthropological studies published in the last two decades have reinforced the idea that the Romanian Roma minority has the characteristics of a disadvantaged population, subject to the risk of social exclusion and discrimination [12],[7],[14]. In 1999, E. Pons showed that the Roma ethnicity "displayed a series of symptoms typical to an undeveloped population" [7, p.70]: high fertility rate; family size and housing density per household, much above the national average; increased infant-mortality index; decreased labour-force employment index; low education level; as well as low marriage age. A sociological study that made the diagnosis of the social problems in 15 Romanian Roma communities [12] highlights these communities' common problems: a) unemployment and lack of employment opportunities; b) low level of human

capital (poor education); c) health problems and reduced access to healthcare; d) overcrowding of houses and residential areas; e) lack of property titles over houses and fields; f) passivity and lack of involvement in solving their problems.

Another research recently conducted in Cluj County has identified five main issues of the Roma communities [8]: a) lack of equal opportunities to education for Roma children and poor family role in education; b) poor life; c) marriages between minors; d) the Roma women's lack of rights, inside the ethnic group and e) the Roma people's inability to obtain a job after participating in professional training courses. According to Fleck and Rughinis (2008), the Roma's socio-economic situation is poorer, as compared to the one of other non-Roma Romanian citizens, who live in similar areas. Although in the public sphere, there is promoted the image of very rich Roma people, the Roma ethnicity is generally confronted to a higher risk of poverty than the non-Roma population.

3. Issues regarding Roma people education

The Roma people's lack of education is an important issue in the public education system. The studies which analyze the Roma citizens' participation in education show that only 30-40% thereof attend school; and, consequently, adult illiteracy rates are very high (above 50%); the Roma children's involvement in pre-primary and primary school is lower than the one of the general children population; moreover, according to a World Bank Report from 2009, only a percentage of 0,6% of Roma people, aged between 25-29 years old, completed higher education [4], [5], [6].

In Romania, only 1% of the Roma persons have graduated high school and 40% have never attended any form of school [1]. In the young adults' case (aged between 18 and 30

years), only 9% of the Roma are high-school graduates, as against 41% of the non-Roma young adults. Among those aged over 14 years, 22% of the Roma are illiterate, as against 2% in the case of the non-Roma [3]. According to recent studies, the major obstacle in attending school is poverty [8], [12]. There is a vicious circle that explains the Roma population's lack of education: "the parents have no education, thus they don't have jobs, so they do not have money to buy necessary supplies for school children. Therefore children early drop out school, so they will become unemployed adults" [8, p. 718]. In other words, school failure generates low social mobility in Roma communities and produces a vicious circle of "failures and economic traps" [3, p. 146].

A recent qualitative study conducted in Slovakia shows, however, that the Roma's perception towards education takes various forms. If, for some people, school has no sense", others see education as something good; and some others even claim they have a great need, within their ethnic group, of people with higher education [9]. These affirmations reinforce the perspective upon education, as "effective resource which can be used to improve one's way of living" [9, p. 2725] and the importance of the relation between education and the escape from poverty: "Education as a strategy is mainly utilized by families which already are educated. Poor families anticipate that education will bring them an improvement of the quality of their lives" (idem).

As regards Romania, based on the results of an extensive research on the Roma people's socio-economic situation, Fleck and Rughinis (2008) claim that, although "some practical measures have been taken, with a view to improving the Roma pupils' school participation, with a view to reducing the school segregation and with a view to improving the visibility of the

Roma culture, these measures have not yet led to a substantial change, as regards the Roma people's risk of dropout" [3, p. 145]. The two authors enhance two types of causes leading to dropout and school failure, in Romania's Roma communities: a) formal causes that are related to the educational system: shortage of equipment and infrastructure, shortage of teachers, great distances to school, overcrowded classrooms etc; b) structural causes that are related to the Roma communities' daily life and cultural practices: early marriage, child labour in the household, minimization of the importance held by school, as long-term investment.

4. Solutions for improving the Roma people's access to education

Education is considered a key factor in the Roma's social inclusion, as a higher level of education is a strong force in modelling an individual's life trajectory and in his/her removal from extreme poverty [3]. EU tries to facilitate the Roma people's access to education. Since 2000, a series of policies have been elaborated, in order to diminish the Roma children's dropout and to improve the Roma population's access to education and on the labour market. Yet in most countries there are no monitoring activities and statistical data upon the impact of their policies [6].

Anyway, according to EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies adopted in 2011 by the European Commission, education represents one of the four key areas (education, employment, healthcare and housing) established as priorities, for the elaboration of the Roma-integration social policies, at a national level [15]. Therefore, the Romani's participation in education must be permanently considered in all European and national policies established by 2020. In Romania, a series of programmes were

elaborated and implemented, programmes meant to contribute to the Roma population's socio-economic integration, under the coordination of the National Agency for Roma [16]. These programmes aim, on one hand, at reducing the discriminatory practices; and, on the other hand, at keeping the Roma's cultural identity [6].

In the field of education, various activities are organized, such as: courses in Roma language for students; training teachers for didactic activities in Romani language; printing educational materials in Romani language; the presence in each County School Inspectorate of an inspector for the Roma minority; programmes for the people who wish to complete their studies and to improve their school performance, such as "Second Chance" or "School after School"; special places in universities for Roma students who wish to pursue academic studies; creation of specific professional occupations, useful in the work deployed in the Roma communities (such as educational assistant, health mediator etc). For example, in the period 2003-2009, a number of 3000 special places were created for Roma children in high schools and about 500 special places in higher education institutions [1].

The Romanian Government also developed a Strategy for the Roma minority's inclusion, in the period 2012-2020. In this document, six priority fields of action, are defined: 1) education; 2) employment; 3) health; 4) dwelling and small infrastructure; 5) culture and 6) social infrastructure (child protection, justice and public order, administration and community development) [17]. The literature emphasizes new measures and solutions, with a view to improving the Roma population's educational situation. According to Roman (2013), studying in mixed classes seems to be a good solution for Roma children. Thus, Roma children

obtain better school results and integrate themselves more easily in the community, as they make friends with their colleagues of other ethnicity. The teachers interviewed in this study claimed the importance of Roma pupils' integration in mixed classes since pre-primary school, as well as their involvement in both school and extracurricular activities.

A study conducted in 2013, which focused on the relation between teachers and pupils, in three Romanian schools with Roma prevalence highlighted the importance of teachers belonging to the Roma minority: "Gipsy children in classes with Gipsy teachers unanimously stated they were satisfied with their activities, and they enjoyed coming to school" [1, p.132]. The main reasons declared by pupils were: the Roma teacher's positive attitude towards them and their parents, the fact that the professor speaks the Romani language, the teacher's good knowledge of the Roma ethnicity's cultural features, the fact that the teacher is seen as a model by his/her pupils etc. An important aspect highlighted in this research is that a good relation teacher-pupil targets not only the communication in the school activities, but also life beyond school.

E. M. Pasca (2014) suggests several measures that can be taken, with a view to raising the Roma's educational level throughout Europe: harmonization of the socio-economic policies; financial and material support provided to Roma families, conditioned by the children's participation in the school activities; introduction in school, of the Intercultural-Education course; creation of special educational programmes for the adults who have not completed their studies; organization of professional-training courses and programmes, enhancing the traditional crafts specific to the Roma ethnicity; involvement of the universities in professional formation and reconversion

programmes, for the Roma adults etc. The idea of offering scholarships to the Roma children is also supported by Roman (2013), as a poverty-reduction measure and as support for acquiring the materials necessary in the formal-education process.

The research at a national level, coordinated by Fleck and Rughinis (2008) highlights a series of solutions for raising the Roma children's level of education: a) the social mediator, who has a key role in the relation school-community; b) mixed classes and optional classes of Romani language; c) provision of free school supplies and books for the Roma children; d) social responsibility and specialized training for the teaching staff; e) creation of special rehabilitation-classes for Roma children; f) a more careful body hygiene meant to ease the Roma children's integration in the mixed children-groups. In the authors' opinion, developing partnerships between parents and school, is the most efficient modality to raise the Roma children's participation rate in the education process. This is because, even if the Roma parents have a low level of education and, in many cases, do not encourage their children to go to school, both they and the educators target the children's betterment (even if their perspectives, knowledge and methods vary!)

5. A case study in Racos, Romania

In the period August-December 2014, I coordinated a community study in Racos, Brașov county, Romania, with a view to identifying the citizens' perceptions upon the main community problems, upon the commune's development needs and upon the solutions and resources for local-problem solving. The research had the Association for Community Partnership Brașov, as a beneficiary, within a project entitled "*Racoș – responsibility and*

participation for community development".

The research method was the sociological survey of the type PNA - Participatory Needs Assessment - a research method whereby the community members are asked how they see their community's most important needs or problems; the research results guide the future actions to be undertaken in the community [11]. The research was conducted in two phases. In the former phase, the data were collected on the basis of a survey applied in 443 households; the survey included six open questions, significant to the research theme, and seven questions, which targeted the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. The research was of the exhaustive type. The survey targeted all households that were inhabited or where persons were found, at the date of the research, after two visits of the field operators. In the latter research phase, two focus-groups were made, with key persons of the community (formal and informal local leaders) in order to deepen and refine the data obtained through the survey-based inquiry, as well as to obtain new ideas on the local social change. The research data were processed with the software NVivo.

In this article, I will present mostly data related to the education of the Roma citizens in this commune. Yet, why was chosen Racos village for research? According to the data collected from the Commune Hall and from the archives of the Association for Community Partnership of Brașov, Racos locality is known at Brașov county level, as the area with the most frequently occurring conflicts between the Roma community members and the Magyars. In ethnic terms, in 2012, the commune had 3179 inhabitants, whereof 1750 Magyars, 738 Romanians and 668 Roma. Most Roma citizens live compactly in a district called "Țigănie", under conditions of extreme

poverty; and the great number of conflicts recorded by the local police is caused by the thefts perpetrated by the Roma from the Magyars' agricultural properties. In 2012, the police forces intervened 234 times, with a view to appeasing the conflicts between Magyars and Roma; and, as a consequence, local-budget funds were provided, so as to pay security companies which should guard the Hungarian inhabitants' properties.

Within the focus-groups we made, local authorities and formal or informal representatives of the citizens from the three ethnicities that live together in the commune, participated. The Roma ethnics' high rate of criminality was explained by the poverty in which the Roma live and by the lack of other mechanisms to procure the basic resources for their families. This has been admitted even by the Roma ethnics: in order to feed their children or the animals in the backyard, they are compelled to steal from their neighbours, as they have no jobs and their families' incomes are totally insufficient.

According to the data of Racoş Commune Hall, in 2013, the level of employment of the labour force in the commune was of 43%; and the rate of unemployment was of 15%; 1066 persons (34% of the total population) were beneficiaries of the guaranteed minimum income, the majority being Roma ethnics. Most Roma adults in the commune did not complete the 8 classes necessary for attending a vocational training course, so they cannot find jobs and cannot support their family. In the framework of the Roma community in "Ţigănie", in 2014, there were 240 school-age children, whereof 215 attended the school courses, with a school dropout rate of 14%. Likewise, there were numerous cases of repeaters.

In order to reduce the Roma pupils' school dropout rate and to improve the school results in this community, the

Association for Community Partnership of Braşov, initiated in 2014 an after-school program, where Roma children received lunch (a sandwich) on a daily basis and were helped by the Association's volunteers, in partnership with the village school teachers, to do their homework.

Within our research, we have noticed that the program is assessed by the community members and by the local authorities, as a positive measure; and we have tried to identify other solutions for raising the Roma's access to education.

Although at a theoretical level, there is a close connection between poverty and the lack of education, we have noticed that Racoş commune members do not regard the lack of education as a priority problem for their community. Rather, what falls under the functioning of the commune's educative institutions is seen as a strength of the commune where they live. Instead, the lack of workplaces, is seen as a priority issue, especially in the youths' case, a fact that maintains poverty and criminality.

The Romanians in Racoş commune consider that the commune's most serious problems concern the infrastructure deficiencies; beside similar problems, the Magyars declare that the Roma's presence in the commune, is a problem, too; the Roma claim that the commune's problems are related to poverty, lack of workplaces and property problems: they have no agricultural fields; their dwellings are not tabulated and they have no ownership documents; they have no electric current and the roads in their area of habitation are in a very poor condition. The perception of the police bodies' violence is also linked to the Roma's specific vision: *police behaves badly; they beat us, do not talk to us, if we need help; the village police terrorizes the Roma ethnicity persons; we cannot bring firewood, as they beat us and fine us.*

Although most respondents (57%) do not see positive aspects in the commune's

socio-economic life, those who enumerate the community's strengths, refer to the educational, cultural institutions and to the medical services: the school and professors are commended, much as the activities in the commune's cultural hall, churches and physicians. As solutions for the commune's development, Racos citizens invoke, first of all, the creation of workplaces and the attraction of European funds. For the Roma ethnics, the attraction of special funds, for the resolution of their specific problems, is the commune's best development measure. Both in the framework of the survey and in the framework of the two focus-groups, we identified an attitude of the paternalist type, in the Roma's case: they see problems, identify solutions, yet expect others – mostly the local authorities – to deal with their resolution/ implementation. They are willing to a very small extent, to get involved in making changes, at a collective level.

In the framework of the two focus-groups, the participants confirmed that poverty, in general, associated to the lack of employment possibilities and to the Roma community's extreme poverty, are among the commune's most serious problems. Yet, the discussion of sensitive issues created situations characterized by lack of consensus, the participants blaming each other for the persistence of several problems in the community. For instance, the Magyar leaders and the local-police representative accused the Roma with thefts and careless attitude towards their own inconveniences. The Roma defended themselves, on one hand admitting that the committed thefts explain themselves by their need of survival (for instance, the fact that they take wood from the forests in the Magyars' property, with a view to heating their dwellings); and, on the other hand, showing they are in the vicious circle of poverty: although they attempt to find workplaces, nobody hires them.

As regards the Roma children's education, the discussion was borne in consensual terms, all participants in the focus groups seeing it as a necessity. The Roma parents claimed that the main reason why they do not send their children to school, is the lack of material goods: they have no clothing, no shoes, especially in wintertime; they have no textbooks, school supplies and food, so as to prepare their children a sandwich for school. Here, several proposals were submitted, with a view to raising the Roma children's rate of participation in school: a) establishment of a canteen at the school village; b) clothing and footwear donations for the Roma children, especially in wintertime; c) school supply and book donations for the Roma children; d) continuation of the after-school activity, initiated by the Association for Community Partnership Brașov, for an unlimited period.

6. Conclusions

School is the only chance for Roma children not to become the next generation of marginalized and pariah of society [1]. Through achieving a qualification they can avoid at adulthood the poverty, the lack of employment or the homelessness. The literature emphasizes the need of offering financial and social support, for the Roma children, with a view to raising their participation rate in the educational process and to improving their school performance. The adults' school and professional training is also envisaged, by measures promoting the continuing education and the acquisition of a qualification, necessary for the integration on the labour market. Together with scholarships and financial support granted to the Roma families, the recent studies suggest the organisation of education, based on mixed classes and Roma-ethnicity Romani-language speaking teachers in the schools with a significant population of Roma

children. Within the research in Racos commune, solutions were identified, in line with this Roma community's specificity, in order to raise the Roma children's participation rate in the educational process.

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