DEFINING ROMANIAN ROMA IDENTITY
AN EASY TASK OR A DIFFICULT ONE?

This paper refers to Romanian Roma in Glasgow as a case of “invisible” minority not only because its members do not declare religion or ethnicity, but also because of the lack of policy focus. The presentation is based on findings of a research run in 2013 as part of the collaboration between the University of Glasgow and the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland organisation (BEMIS). The research involved literature review, in-depth interviews with representatives of organisations and agencies that develop programs for Roma communities, and with Romanian Roma migrants who live in Glasgow.

I. ROMANIAN ROMA IDENTITY: LIFE STYLE, INFLUENCES AND THE TRADITION OF CHANGE

Considering the Romanian Roma as a historical Diaspora with common historic roots and common patterns of migration, most historians agree that the first wave of Roma migrants reached Romania from North-East India during the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries (Barany, 2004:255; Fraser, 1995:12; Fox, 1995:5). Their arguments are based on Roma traditions that could be found in the Indian caste system and tribal organisation, having two essential characteristics: the right of membership can belong only to those who are born in the community, and marriage outside the group is strictly forbidden. Each Roma group recognised only the authority of a chief elected for life, who presided over the Council of elders. Kinship was traditionally determined by lineage through the mother. When a man married a woman, he entered her family, and children spoke the mother’s dialect and not that of the father (Clebert, 1967:12; Fraser, 1995:239).

Another argument is that the unwritten Romani language is an Indian dialect. Linguists claim that Romani entered Europe in a unified form and it has since split into what
some suggest as 13, whilst others suggest as being up to 60 dialects, constantly altered and creatively rejuvenated, under the influences of the official languages of the states inhabited by Roma. It is estimated that over 80 per cent of the European Roma population speak one of these (Fraser, 1995: 302; Kenrick, 1998: 68; Barany, 2004: 257). These dialects can, however, be placed in two major groups: ‘Vlach’ and ‘non-Vlach’, the former predominating in Romania and being influenced by the Romanian language. Over the centuries, the non-Vlach dialects acquired a great diversity of innovations by borrowing words and pronunciations from the host cultures, and new divergences are occurring all the time. With no written standard, the language is handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, songs and tales (Fraser, 1995: 301).

Family values are also identified as “the important cement” in much of Roma life and this is evident in the approach to earning a living (Fraser, 1995: 306). Roles are strict delimited, the wives’ income being used to look after the family’s daily needs, while the men take care of big outlays – a car, a lorry, a caravan, the expenses of long journeys, celebrations. The children start making a contribution once they are old enough (Fraser, 1995: 306). Until then, children are raised by the women (Engebrigsten, 2007: 64). According to Ada Engebrigsten who investigated the life of Romanian Roma in a Transylvanian village and before has worked with Roma in Norway for several years, women are considered indispensable by men, but, at the same time, women are expected to show respect and deference towards their husbands and their male kin. This expectation is especially strong towards young women and decreases as women have several children and gain increased respect. In the case of men, respect and honour are achieved by behaving in a respectful manner. Respect is also gained by men in competition with other Roma and in the ability to ensure their families’ wealth (Engebrigdsten, 2007: 66-68).
Although every group differentiates from another, due to the various influences, they all are a product of a general tradition of adaptability – social, geographical, and occupational. Roma practices appear to resemble those of their ancestors: they travel in families, from generation to generation, and they have a similar way of life and similar attitudes towards the surrounding society (Fraser, 1995:305). According to Angus Fraser, this is a consequence of their strategy of survival in the face of rejection and marginalisation. They nursed their autonomy by adapting to the dominant cultures but preserving a social distance and a feeling of separateness intensified by the suspicion with which they were treated by the non-Roma (Fraser, 1995:316). These autonomy and separateness led to Roma social solidarity and is mirrored even by their version of Christianity. Emotional modes of religious expression, spontaneous testimonies and participatory style of worship appeal to their emotional and psychological needs for unity (Fraser, 1995:315).

In Romania, the presence of Roma in every region complicates the process of defining a unique Roma identity because the historical differences between regions have influenced their experience, socio-occupational structure, religion and language and, consequently, have determined cultural diversity among Roma groups (Foszto, Laszlo and Marian Viorel Anastasoaie, 2001:351; Helsinki Watch, 1991: 7). As slaves until 1864, Romanian Roma were defined by who owned them - church, Crown, or individual - and categorised according to their skills and where they worked. The old occupational names have little meaning now other than as labels differentiating one group from another, such as Caldarari (tinsmiths and coppersmiths), Fierari (blacksmiths), Ursari (bear trainers), Grastari (horse dealers) and Lautari (musicians). The last indicates that an extremely important aspect of Roma culture is its music, which is more than a tradition, it is a way of life (Crowe, 1991: 63; Fraser, 1995:224).
With regards to religion, there is also a variety of groups. 83.5 per cent being Orthodox, 4.7 per cent Catholic and 4.3 per cent Protestants, depending on the area in which they are located and the dominant religion in that area (Fraser, 1995:312; Census from 1992, Vol. I, 1994: 784; Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME-SE) 2001 Report on Minorities in Southeast Europe - Roma of Romania). This diversity influences the widespread belief that they are lacking true piety (Fraser, 1995: 319). Iulius Rostas has a different opinion giving as an example the case of Florin Cioaba who proclaimed himself king of Roma (he recently died). Florin Cioaba attracted support from some traditional communities in Romania not because of his political programme, but because of his position as a local leader of a neo-protestant church (Rostas, 2009:167-168).

With regards to language, approximately 60 per cent of Romanian Roma speaks a dialect of Romani. In the current climate in Romania, it is not forbidden to speak Romani in public and in a very small number of schools this is one of the languages of education. However, due to the fear of discrimination, both subtle and overt, many Roma, mostly the younger generation, deny their ethnicity and, therefore, their language, and speak the majority language of the area in which they live\(^1\). Besides Romanian language, small groups speak Hungarian, German, Turkish or Bulgarian language (Minority Rights Group, 1997: 242).

Considering how Roma identify themselves, Catalin Zamfir and Elena Zamfir set several ethnic levels: a) Roma who show all traditional ethnic characteristics and who self-identify as Roma under any circumstances (official and informal), such as those belonging to Caldarari. These Roma live a traditional way of life and keep to their rules and habits strictly, with girls above the age of eight forbidden to keep the company of boys unsupervised, which sometimes makes school attendance problematic; b) Roma who show all traditional ethnic

\(^1\) Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME-SE) 2001 Report on Minorities in Southeast Europe - Roma of Romania.
characteristics and are identified as Roma by others based on their lifestyle, but who do not self-identify as such in official-administrative circumstances; c) “modernised” Roma who change their lifestyle and who do not show any visible marks of their traditional lifestyle, but who self-identify as Roma in both circumstances; d) “modernised” Roma who do not tend to identify as Roma anymore or identify as such only from time to time, and who can or can not be identified by the others as Roma; e) “former Roma” who have integrated into the majority population and do not have any traditional features left, and who have renounced self-identifying as Roma even to themselves (Zamfir and Elena Zamfir, 1993: 57)

However, this classification can not be regarded as absolutely stable but more as a process (Hall, 1996:344), Roma people being known by their great flexibility and their capacity of adaptation. Their traditions, religion, language and even life style continue to borrow elements from other societies’ traditions, religions and words. They also proved a great flexibility to the pressure of changes in the economic environment. For instance, when the industry and mass-production of goods eliminated their traditional occupations such as locksmiths, tinsmiths and coppersmiths, they became specialists in boiler-making and motor-vehicles. The horse dealers became dealers in second-hand vehicles and breakers who sold the metal parts of old cars. The itinerant bear-leaders have changed their occupation and some of them have entered the realm of the circus (Clebert, 1967:34). According to Nicolae Gheorghe, nowadays, Roma are passing through a process of “ethnogenesis” – building a new Romani group identity as other groups had done in the nineteenth century. In his opinion, the present goal is to upgrade the status of members of the community from “tigan”, a word involving pejorative connotations, which attracted discrimination, to “Roma”, a word involving the recognition of their cultural difference and ethnic autonomy (Gheorghe, Nicolae and Thomas Acton, 2001:50).
II. ROMANIAN POLICY TOWARDS ROMA: FROM SOCIAL CONSTRUCTED ETHNICITY TO AN ETHNIC CONSTRUCTED MINORITY

Based on Marx’s vision of nation as an economic unit, within which ethnic minorities should be and would be content to consider themselves members of the larger nation, the Communists insisted that the Roma question was a social one and tried to assimilate the Roma into the wider society by destroying their ethnic identity through official policies and documents which did not mention ethnicity (Guy, 2001:13). The predilection for an economic interpretation of history ignored the importance of psychological, cultural and historical elements and underestimated the “magnetic pull exerted by the ethnic group” (Connor, 1984: 8). Initially, followers of Marxist theory in Romania, as well as in Soviet Union and in the other Central and Eastern European countries, tactically avoided a frontal attack on ethnicity because, on the one hand, they needed the support of the population and, on the other, they did not view the temporary concessions to ethnic diversity as a risk due to the strong control of the Communist Party upon all aspects of social life through the state’s agencies (King, 1980:99).

The year 1956 marked a turning point in Romanian policy toward minorities. A revolt such as that taking place in Hungary was regarded by the Romanian authorities as extremely feasible in Romania due to the presence of an important Hungarian minority which was suspected of maintaining strong links and even helped their fellows in the neighbour state during the manifestations. Therefore, Transylvania, a multi-ethnic region in Romania, where Hungarians, Germans and Roma lived together with Romanians, was the main target of an imposed policy looking for a strong control in order to avoid “an infection of the local population with the revolutionary virus” (Crampton, 1997: 312) From then on, the Party continued with a policy of forced assimilation in order to eliminate any risk to the stability of
the communist order (Verdery, 1996:93). Roma organisations founded in the 1930s, such as the General Association of Roma in Romania and the General Union of Roma in Romania, as well as the Roma journals *Neamul Țiganesc* (The Gypsy Family), *Glasul Romilor* (Voice of Roma) and *O Rom*, were dissolved as incompatible with the new system. The Roma were excluded from the list of “cohabiting nationalities”, although the *militia* – the police force - maintained special records and statistics for “Gypsy criminals” (Crowe, 1991: 69-70; Liegeois, 1986: 146).

The denial of Roma ethnicity was combined with an official neglect of their social problems, despite some improvements in their standards of living due to monthly incomes from stable jobs, housing and access to free education and health care under the socialist regime. Collectivisation and industrialisation left their marginality unchanged. Although Roma were not singled out for special policies, the jobs offered to Roma were in places where others were unwilling to work, and their houses were situated at the peripheries of towns and villages. Discrimination on every day level affected even the Roma children who were regarded with hostility by their fellows and teachers, attitude which determined many to live the school after two or three years (Pons, 1999; 34; Foszto, Laszlo and Marian Viorel Anastasoie, 2001:358). This discrimination made their position difficult and reinforced a feeling of being separate. It also could be regarded as an explanation for the low level of education of many Romanian Roma who are today in their forties and fifties.

In the 1960s, the idea of a homogeneous Romanian society begun to be consolidated and nationalism became an ideological tool in the Romanian strategy to assert Romania’s independence from the Soviet Union. Under the pretext of a unique pattern of the socialist worker and the slogan of “nobody could be a patriot or a nationalist besides within the party”, the regime tried to complete the process of assimilation (Pons, 1999: 27). Any manifestations of traditional Roma occupations, lifestyle or culture were regarded with hostility and
condemned as “undesirable relics of the previous social order”, and their increased rate of fertility was regarded as a “demographic threat” (Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, 2001:46). Decree no. 153/1970 punished “social parasitism”, “anarchism” and deviance from the “socialist way of life” with jail or hard labour (Pons, 1999: 28; Foszto, Laszlo and Marian Viorel Anastasoie, 2001:360).

In 1977, when Ceausescu’s “personality cult” was emerging, a new assimilation program began, which was not publicly announced because “the nationalities question has been resolved completely” according to a 1972 public declaration. The few Roma who continued to practice their traditional occupations were forced by the militia to go back to their work in factories or on the construction sites. They were also the “beneficiaries” of the systematisation politics of the territory, their houses were destroyed and they were forced to move into new blocks of flats (Pons, 1999: 36; Zamfir and Elena Zamfir, 1993: 157; Ringolda Dena, Mitchell Orenstein, Eroka Wilkens, 2005:37).

Despite the official policy of assimilation, the stereotypes regarding Roma could not be eradicated because they were deep rooted within society and, in many regions, local authorities maintained barriers against their integration, especially in perpetuating residential segregation. Roma continued to be forced to live in separate districts situated at the periphery of towns and villages (Guy, 2001:18). Although socialist policies did improve conditions for Roma by increasing access to education, employment and housing, these initiatives also created new divisions between the Roma and the state. The forced assimilation nourished mistrust and tensions between Roma and authorities, which exacerbated in the last year of communism when the centralised economy reached almost collapse and hardly afforded the paternalistic policy of provision of jobs, housing and other benefits. The collapse of communism, which brought with it benefits and losses, has left many Roma as well as others feeling abandoned and alienated (Ringold, Mitchell Orenstein and Eroka Wilkens, 2005:8).
After the collapse of communism in 1989, there was a significant opportunity for Roma to organise politically and express themselves culturally with positive developments in their political and cultural inclusion. The current constitution, adopted in 1991, contains articles which guarantee the rights of minorities such as the right to identity (Art. 6) and protection from discrimination regardless of race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, sex, opinion, political adherence, property or social origin (Art. 4). The Roma are recognised as a national minority and as such are entitled to a seat in the Parliament. In 2001, a ten-year governmental strategy for improving the situation of the Roma people was adopted. Various structures were established, including the Inter-ministerial Working Group on Roma Issues, ministerial commissions, the National Agency for the Roma People, the Offices for Romani Issues at district levels, the school and health mediators at local levels and local experts for Roma issues.

Self-organisation, extremely important in the preservation of identity, re-started in 1990, when the Democratic Union of Roma in Romania (DURR), which promoted the culture and language of Roma in Romania and their political freedom, was established and became an umbrella organisation for various Roma parties and other organisations. Other organisations, such as the Ethnic Federation of Roma, have been effective in establishing ties with Roma groups outside Romania. However, these organisations tend to compete with each other and to give priority to particular interests (Bugajski, 1995: 223; Barany, 2004:262-263). Consequently, the interests of Roma are under-represented in the local and national decision-making bodies and processes. The situation is determined not only by the inability of their

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leaders to attract the support of Roma minority which they supposed to represent, but also by a lack of interest of the Roma community in the political processes.

The most visible organisation – Partida Romilor – remains unknown to 30 percent of Roma. According to 2006 research conducted by the US-based National Democratic Institute, only 2% of Roma have ever approached an organisation and only 3% of Roma have participated in an activity of a civic group or a protest (Rostas, 2009:164-165). An explanation for this situation could be found in the lack of transparency of the majority of Romanian Roma organisations which have not made public their sources of funding, annual reports and structures, and, consequently, nourishes the suspicions among Roma that these organisations benefit out of their difficult situation, and decreases the trust in their leadership (Barany, 2004:266-267; Rostas, 2009:162).

III. ROMANIAN ROMA COMMUNITY IN SCOTLAND: AN “INVISIBILISED” MINORITY

Without making a generalisation due to the small number of the Romanian Roma respondents, the interviews and the observation on their life style revealed some of the particular attributes of Roma identity. Marriages at an early age are still common. They use a dialect of Romani language for communication among them and in their praying and in their religious songs. The dialect is embedded with Romanian words, many of them being neologisms used by Romanians with a certain level of education, which demonstrates the constant change of Romani language through the adoption of elements from the society around them.

The social solidarity which has linked Roma together during many years of marginalisation and social exclusion is reflected in the fact that young Roma men gather in
local streets just for chatting and spending time together. The findings occurring from the observation of the religious service confirmed Angus Fraser’s assertion that the church services are adapted to a Roma version (Fraser, 1995:315) being characterised by an emotional mode of expressing religious belief, a participatory style of worship, which, along with referring to each other as brothers and sisters, appeal to their need of unity.

As previous research found (Fraser, 1995:307; Engebrigtsen, 2007:42), family values continue to be “the important cement” in much of Roma life and this is evident in the approach to earning a living. The roles within the Roma family continue to be strictly delimited. Husbands and wives share the role of providing the household’s needs. The oldest women, always present in Roma households, are responsible for cooking and looking after the smallest children and grandchildren.

Regarding the status of migrants, scholars differentiate between “visible” and “invisible” ethnic minorities. The “visible” communities are considered those which record self-declared religion and self-assigned ethnicity, but in Scotland the numbers is very low – around 1 percent of which the Pakistani are the most significant minority (Hussain and William L. Miller, 2006, e-book). The “invisible” minorities are considered not only those that do not declare religion or ethnicity, but also those whose specific needs are not acknowledged by many service providers or employers (Wrench, Harbhajan Brar and Paul Martin, 1993:125). From this perspective, the Roma community could be considered “invisible”, due to their unrecorded ethnicity in the official statistics together with “a lack of data, research or policy focus” (Craig, 2011:13). Researchers on Roma migrants in the UK draw attention to British legislation, which ignores the particularities of Roma communities by treating all the migrants coming from Romania under the same label. By “invisibilising” Romanian Roma highly stigmatised social identity, the Scottish policy responds to one of

4 www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001
their current problems related to ethnic discrimination. However, it does not solve the wider roots of Roma exclusion, stemming from mistrust and stereotypes which have marked their relations with non-Roma during their long existence in Europe.

To conclude, Romanian Roma identity could be better understood by employing the Romanticism theory which emphasises the role of emotions and the subjectivisation of attitudes in the process of identity construction (Hroch, 2007:14-15). The Roma minority has no nation-state or territory, nor a written language. They have only a subjective perception of language reflected in a cult of folk customs and folk art, a collective memory of their everyday experience in relations with the majorities, and a social alienation caused by discrimination and marginalisation which links them together in “a huge Diaspora”. At the same time, the negative attitude and stereotypes which have traditionally marked the relationship of Roma with non-Roma and shaped Roma identity are also based on subjective perceptions and misunderstanding of the unique lifestyle of this minority, nourished by cases of Roma involvement in illegal activities that are presented with obstinacy by a press looking for sensational news stories.

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