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**THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF THE ROMA MINORITY  
FROM ROMANIA ON ITS WAY TO MODERNITY**

***Piedicile și dificultățile minorității rome din România pe  
drumul ei spre modernitate***

**Abstract:** *Academic articles on minorities from Romania abound and many have been written both by Romanian academics and by foreign researchers. Since Romania became part of the European Union in 2007 and even in the years preceding this process, the Roma has been one of the most studied minorities in Romania and various institutions have focused on ethnicity in an attempt to on one hand help them integrate better into the overall Romanian and European society and, on the other hand, to increase social tolerance towards the Roma themselves. This article, written initially as a paper for a Harvard class on the development of social institutions over time, tries to provide a different understanding on the issue. It proposes that we briefly analyse the evolution of the Roma community throughout the centuries in order to understand why they are only partially integrated into Romanian and European society. At the same time, the current tensions between the Romanian state and other states on one side and the Roma community from Romania on the other show how general efforts to integrate the community are undoubtedly undermined.*

**Keywords:** *minorities, integration, Roma, Romania, discrimination.*

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From the remnants of the Roman Empire, three Romanian-speaking states emerged in Eastern Europe between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries: Wallachia, Moldova, and Transylvania.<sup>1 2 3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pop 2011: 43.

<sup>2</sup> Brezianu & Spânu 2007: 5.

<sup>3</sup> Pop 1999: 45.

The Roma, for most of history called *Gypsies*, are a subgroup of the larger Romani people, which left the Indian Subcontinent around the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Roma arrived in Eastern Europe around the same time that the Romanian-speaking states were emerging. Despite similarity in names, the Romanian and the Romani/Roma/Gypsy peoples are two distinct ethnic groups. They differ in appearance, language, dress, and culture. This paper uses both the term *Gypsies* and *Roma* depending on the historical context. *Gypsies* was the term used throughout the centuries to identify the group, while *Roma* is a new term used especially after the recent emancipation movement.<sup>4</sup>

The first Gypsy groups reached Romania around the year 1241.<sup>5</sup> Some continued their migration towards the West and the North of Europe, while others settled towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in what is today Romania. From the beginning, due to their nomadic lifestyle, the Roma were in conflict with the general population that practiced agriculture and no longer employed hunter-gatherer lifestyles. Considered prisoners of war, all captured Gypsies were declared slaves. The first documents that clearly attest Gypsies in the Romanian states of Moldova and Walachia are from 1428 and 1385 respectively, and refer to the Gypsies as “goods” owned by some monasteries, in other words, slaves.<sup>6</sup> At the time Gypsies could be owned as slaves by the Prince, the state, the boyars (noblemen), or monasteries. From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century the words “Gypsy” and “slave” were used interchangeably. The only right of a slave was that to his/her own life. In special circumstances, a Gypsy slave could be freed by his master and made a free man. Most freed Gypsies returned to their nomadic lifestyles, however some integrated successfully into mainstream Romanian society of the day, the most relevant example being that of Ștefan Râzvan, a Gypsy slave that after being freed became a boyar and later the Prince of Moldova in 1595.<sup>7</sup> After the year 1600, the word “serf” was introduced in the Romanian states, so as to distinguish the enslaved Gypsies from the free ones. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 400 years after the beginning of slavery, laws protecting slaves were passed. Also, during this period, more and more Gypsies, both free and enslaved, started picking up trades, such as iron processing: making pots, pans, horseshoes, etc. Many used their nomadic lifestyle to their advantage, turning themselves into travelling salesmen. These trades were used as sources of income by the Gypsies for centuries to come. Despite this economic emancipation, however, Gypsies continued to have a very hierarchical society, based on tribal affiliations, each tribe or Gypsy camp having its own “bulibașă” or Gypsy King. This meant that freedom from the slave-owner did not lead to

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<sup>4</sup> Achim 2004: 1.

<sup>5</sup> Achim 2004: 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Piturca 2010: 79.

<sup>7</sup> Grigore *et alii* 2005: 28.

a major improvement in a Gypsy's life. Without a family of his/her own, a freed Gypsy was left with one of two choices. One option was to live in primitivism in the wild, depending on what nature could provide. The other option was to join a Gypsy camp, where he/she would have to obey the Gypsy king, a small dictator. Gypsy camps allowed for no democratic voting or dissenting opinions. Hierarchy was not based on personal attributes or hard work, but on seniority and family ties to the Gypsy King. Women were bought and sold from a young age, and marriages were routinely arranged. Such was the reality that Gypsies lived in for most of the centuries that marching towards modernity was an impossible task. A freed Gypsy would have to choose between a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, basically going back in time on the evolutionary ladder, or a nomadic life under a dictatorial regime. The social institution of the Gypsy camp was well cemented and self-perpetuating. It could exist separately from, and almost completely undisturbed by the rest of society. Because of this, unlike most other minorities in the Romanian states, the Roma did not evolve at the same time with the overall Romanian society. Their seclusion ensured not only their continued existence, but also the preservation of hierarchy and the conservation of particular customs. Usually, modern historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnologists rejoice when identifying ethnic groups which have maintained their lifestyle undisturbed for centuries, as they provide a unique portal into the past. However, many of the customs preserved in the Roma communities, such as selling and buying underage girls for marriage, go directly against established human rights standards and are incompatible with European practices. Thus, parts of the Roma customs were and still are at odds with modernity itself.

As early as 1837 the Gypsies from the Romanian states were aware of the fact that they had come from a different part of the world and were different from the majority of people inhabiting the region, but also from other minorities. In that year, during his travels throughout Eastern Europe, when he was crossing through Wallachia, the Russian prince M. Anatole de Demidoff noted in his travel book, later published worldwide, about the non-integration of the Gypsies and how they themselves knew that they came from the Indian subcontinent:

*“We now come to the Gipsies, or Tsigans, as their Wallachian hosts call them - those wandering tribes known by as many names as there are countries in Europe; everywhere rejected, yet everywhere tolerated. Idlers and shameless thieves, haughty beggars, wrapped in ostentatious rags; these unfortunate wretches exhibit, nevertheless, beneath the filth and brutish degradation of vice, the noblest of refined physiognomies which the beautiful Caucasian type can present. The Tsigans of Wallachia, where they are very numerous, seemed to us to corroborate the opinion that they have been driven into Europe from the beautiful climate of India. There is a vast difference between the outward features of this race*

*and those which characterize the Gitanas of Spain, in whom the admixture of Moorish blood is manifest*".<sup>8</sup>

Later, when crossing through Moldavia, Demidoff noted the great number of Gypsies living in the state. Although slavery of the Gypsies had not been banned yet, Demidoff noted that the vast majority of them were servants at the time. This may imply indentured servitude, as opposed to outright exploitation slavery as in the American South. Nevertheless, the state of the Gypsies was considered to be dire by Demidoff.<sup>9</sup>

As the abolitionist movement took shape in the Romanian states in the 1840s and 1850s and the banning of slavery became a reality in 1856, it became clear that freedom did not lead to real emancipation for the Gypsies.<sup>10</sup> Even after the banning of slavery, generations of Gypsies struggled in destitute poverty and entered the vicious cycle of crime, where the Gypsy camp at many times became the substitute for a gang, and the Gypsy King a substitute for the gang leader. Also, demand for the products of their trade (iron processing) massively decreased as pots, pans, and horseshoes started being produced in factories as opposed to being handmade. Despite the changing structure of the economy, Gypsies remained socially un-integrated into Romanian society and at the same time discriminated against by said society. In 1882, James Samuelson wrote in his comprehensive book about Romania that:

*"as regards to the gipsies themselves, concerning whom our readers no doubt have heard a great deal in connection with this country, they formed, until recently, a nation within a nation, and even now they speak a language of their own, and to some extent stand aloof from the remaining population. They are the same people variously named Bohemians by the French, Zigeuner by the Germans, Gitanos in Spain, Tschinghenneh by the Turks and Tsigani by the Roumanians, who look upon them pretty much as the white man regards the negro, between whose nature and that of the Roumanian gipsy is much that is analogous".<sup>11</sup>*

Moreover, the Gypsies rarely represented more than 5% of the population at any time, so it was (and still is) easy for the general society to simply ignore the fact that they exist.<sup>12</sup> Samuelson importantly points out that the Gypsy community from Romania was organized "into distinct castes".<sup>13</sup> Thus, despite having no legal status, the social institution of the cast, more generally referred to as the Gypsy camp, maintained itself in the Gypsy community.

Throughout the Interwar Period, Romania had a liberal Constitution, based on the Belgian model, which was very progressive

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<sup>8</sup> Demidoff 1853: Chapter III.

<sup>9</sup> Demidoff 1853: Chapter IV.

<sup>10</sup> Achim 2004: 95.

<sup>11</sup> Samuelson 1882: Chapter IV.

<sup>12</sup> National Agency for the Roma.

<sup>13</sup> Samuelson 1882: Chapter IV.

towards minorities. Passed in 1923, the Constitution allowed for voting and running for office. Civil rights and freedoms were recognized for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, language, religion or social class. Moreover, the Romanian state guaranteed freedom of expression and assembly, of conscience, and of religion.<sup>14</sup> Many minorities in Romania started their own political parties and made their voices heard. The Hungarians founded their party in 1922, the Germans in 1929, the Jews in 1931. The Gypsy minority never founded a political party of their own. Lack of democratic values in the Gypsy community became very obvious as the country was moving forward and as other minorities were taking advantage of the liberal constitution. This lack of democratic values within the Gypsy community would reverberate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as we will see later on in the paper.

The Second World War was probably the hardest period for the Gypsies from Romania in their entire history as a people. After Romania allied itself with Nazi Germany, the government took part in the Holocaust and deported 25,000 Roma people to Transnistria (Transdnier). Of these deportees, 11,000 died.<sup>15</sup> During Communism in Romania (1945-1989) a process of forced assimilation was started, many Gypsies being forced to give up their nomadic lifestyle and instead move to villages, towns, and cities, to live in houses and flats like everybody else. This process, however, did not relinquish Gypsy social order, as many times entire tribes were moved together, thus preserving their hierarchy.

Since the Romanian anti-communist revolution in 1989 and the country returning to democracy, a lot of attention has been paid to the Gypsy minority, from now on called Roma, to how it can be integrated into mainstream society and the discrimination against it put to an end. Despite the spending of billions of Euros by the European Commission and The World Bank for improving education levels and lowering crime in the Roma community, many issues still remain. On one hand, discrimination is still rampant against the Roma. The Romanian President calling a journalist “a stinky Gypsy” in 2007 triggered an international scandal and an official investigation.<sup>16</sup> Failure to integrate the Roma happened not just in Romania, but all over Europe. At the same time, some states and societies blatantly discriminated against the Roma communities in their respective countries. In France, President Sarkozy launched a massive deportation of Roma in 2010. Over 10,000 Roma were deported from France to their countries of origin: Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, the European Commission intervened and officially sanctioned France for the illegal activity. The situation of the Roma is even worse in Hungary, where direct

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<sup>14</sup> Stoica 2007: 89-90.

<sup>15</sup> The report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (2004).

<sup>16</sup> Ciocan 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Sergiu 2010.

attacks against the Roma, including fire bombings, beatings, and burning of swastikas in Roma communities have been happening for years. On the other hand, there are multiple issues that are dragging the Roma community down and that start from the community itself. These issues include sex slavery, banning of education for Roma children past a certain age, and forced child marriage.

In 2003, Ana Maria Cioabă, a girl of only 12 years of age and the child of Florin Cioabă, the King of Roma from Romania, was forced to marry Mihai Biriță, a boy 3 years older than her, although an official marriage ceremony did not take place as the minimum legal age for marriage in Romania was 16. Ana Maria Cioabă ran away from the wedding, but her father hunted her down and forced her to marry. Even more horrific for a 21<sup>st</sup> century European country was the fact that the groom had, in line with tradition, to display to the participants after the wedding a bloodied bed sheet as proof that the marriage had been consummated. At the time, the age of consent in Romania was 15, so sexual intercourse with a 12-year old was forbidden by law.<sup>18</sup>

Other problems are when it comes to the democratic process. Although the hierarchy in the Gypsy communities has gradually been eroding over that past centuries, many of the current Roma groups still obey their leaders without ever questioning them. This has led to some Roma leaders taking advantage of their power in new ways, more adapted to the modern society, but exploitative nonetheless. They accept money from political leaders in order to demand their respective communities to vote for a particular candidate. Thus, instead of using their own decision-making processes and capabilities and voting for a candidate that they see fit for office, Roma individuals are ordered to vote for the person that the Roma leader wants to win. This is a widespread activity that is taking place throughout Romania and not only negatively affecting the voting rights of Roma individuals, but also distorts the democratic process for Romania as a country. So far, the Romanian government has done very little to stop or at least limit this practice. As mentioned previously, this lack of interest in, and lack of respect for democratic values by many in the Roma community had become obvious from the Interwar Period, when the Gypsies were the only major minority group in Romania which did not take advantage of the liberal Constitution that Romania had at the time in order to found a political party.

The most shocking practice in which some of the Roma in Romania still engage in today is even more unacceptable and surprising for 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe. It is so horrific that it made the news all around the world. In July of 2016, the Romanian authorities became aware of a Roma community in South-Central Romania in the village of Gămăcești where dozens of people were held in captivity as slaves. The slaves, many of which

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<sup>18</sup> Reuters 2003.

were children, had been exploited for over 8 years as beggars, but also as forced labourers for different works, mostly illegal logging.<sup>19</sup> The most shocking part was the fact that the total number of slaves was estimated to be 40, some of which were literally held in chains. They were tortured and sexually abused, besides being forced to work.<sup>20</sup> This time, the Romanian authorities took the necessary measures, conducted multiple arrests and put many suspects on trial.<sup>21</sup> It seemed, however, that this was not even the first case of slavery that had existed in that particular Roma community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As early as 2004, the Romanian authorities had investigated the enslavement of a man who subsequently died under suspicious circumstances during the investigation.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, it may seem paradoxical how a community that had struggled under slavery in its almost entirety in the past has slavery within itself today. On the other hand, the separation between the Roma community and the rest of Romanian society has been a persistent reality which allowed for outdated and barbaric practices worthy of the Middle Ages to be preserved in some places. Such practices, however, will most likely be a source of further discrimination against all Roma in the future. This is so because they paint an unwanted image for the entire Roma community in Romania and make the Roma people seem backward. Like in many other cases, the illegal and immoral behaviour of certain individuals from an ethnicity will undoubtedly be reflected negatively on the ethnicity as a whole.

When it comes to minority rights in Romania today, the most sensitive issue is when the Romanian government or other governments can legitimately intervene in the Roma community to stop particular practices and when the Roma community has the right to defend its customs. It is true that the Romanian government and Romanian society have been discriminatory towards the Roma in the past. One can easily point to slavery or the Holocaust as the most salient examples, but also to more recent discrimination practices such as the deportations of Roma from France. However, nowadays many Roma leaders use these cases in order to say that the government has no right to interfere and prevent them from doing whatever they want to do to their subordinates or their families. It is thus very hard to explain to a minority group that has been enslaved and partially exterminated why the government has a legitimate right to stop them from doing certain things to their children or relatives, be it selling them into sex slavery, arranging child weddings, or preventing them from having an education. In consequence, many of the social institutions of the Roma community will most likely continue to exist for decades to come and due to that the community itself will be unable to integrate into

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<sup>19</sup> Badea 2: 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Badea 1: 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Jianu 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Cana 2016.

the broader Romanian society and at the same time will continue to be discriminated against by said society.

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