

The assimilation of the Roma people during the communist regime

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Abstract: The paper “The assimilation of the Roma people during the communist regime” aims to present the disadvantages and, in some case, the advantages of the Roma community during the communist regime. After the deportation in Transnistria, the Roma people are targeted now by a new set of rules that will diminish the cultural identity of their community in exchange for a more integrated concept through the ‘romanianization’ process .

Keywords: assimilation, Roma people, communist regime

1. Introduction

After the end of the deportation from Transnistria, the Roma who survived returned to their villages, while nomadic Roma settled on the outskirts of Bucharest. Under Gheorghe Niculescu's leadership, the General Union of Roma in Romania resumed its activity, but did not produce publications.

The populist agrarian reform of Petru Groza's government in March 1945, aimed at poor peasants, also included an appreciable number of Roma. In addition, the ethnic minority legislation of February 1946 and the following period completely ignored the Roma. Above all, the harsh measures taken against the nomadic Roma, already decimated by their deportation to Transnistria, meant the elimination of nomadism.

During the communist regime, the Roma people will face different movements that will be aimed at changing the core of their communities, integrating them into the socialist way of living, with the use of force if necessary.

2. Early stages of the assimilation process

The early moments when the communist arrived offered a glimmer of hope for the Roma communities to be seen as an integrated and well respected part in the society. In the 1946 election campaign, the Bloc of Democratic Parties (the electoral alliance led by the Communist Party) sent special manifestos to the Roma, addressing them as "Roma brothers and sisters!"¹

In the March 1948 elections, the Popular Democracy Front, also led by the communists, spoke to the Roma through the voice of Gheorghe Niculescu or Petre Rădiță. The latter, the Union's secretary-general, with medical training, seemed to appeal more to the communists than Niculescu, somehow making the transition to the level of Roma leaders between traditional professions and intellectuals, a trend that would increase later during the communist regime. This was also a form of assimilation, given that intellectuals were, through their social path, more "cut off" from the Roma tradition.

¹ Cf. L. Cherata, *Istoria țiganilor. Origine, specific, limbă, s.l., [1992], p. 48.*

It is worth mentioning with regard to the subordination of the Union by the communists that this resulted in a number of positive measures for the Roma, the most important being the use for the first time in the administration of the term 'Roma' instead of 'Gypsy'.

Unfortunately, from the moment the communists were fully installed in Romania in 1948, Roma no longer appear in official documents of a political nature. The motion of the Politic Bureau of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party on the national question of December 1948, which laid the foundations for the new regime's policy regarding ethnic minorities, ignored the existence of Roma. They were not included in the list of 'nationalities living in common'.

Without any warning, in January 1949, without taking the normal steps in such situations, which only needed an approval from the "Securitate"², the UGRR was abolished by a government decision, which enshrined a proposal of the Ministry of Interior regarding several cultural associations. Afterward's, they were not permitted to form a new organization and they were not given any specific reason when asked for one.

The communist authorities' actions regarding Roma were supported by the small number of citizens who declared Romani as their mother tongue. Only 53,425 people in the January 1948 census declared themselves of Roma origin.

The experience of war was still fresh among the Roma, so that even in the next census, in 1956, only 104,216 people (0.6% of the population) declared themselves "Gypsies", and 66,882 registered as Romani speakers in the family. However, there is still an increase, which is more important than the figures themselves. In fact, in any census that also takes into account Roma, whether from the interwar, during the war or communism, attention must be paid more to the evolution of figures.

The differences from one census to another provide an important indication of the situation of Roma in society: on one hand, they express their adaptation to different social and political conditions (they feel discriminated against, in danger, see opportunities, etc.) and, on the other hand, they express how the authorities see them as a social and/or ethnic group at one time or another. This is an interpretation drawn from Sam Beck and Nicolae Gheorghe's assessment of the almost threefold increase in the official number of Roma between 1966 and 1977, explained by their greater trust in the system.

For example, the small increase up to 1956, beyond the natural increase or the gradual passage over the trauma of war, was the result of a stage of accommodation between Roma and the regime, which nevertheless included encouraging developments for those who wanted to declare their true identity. Inspired by proletarian internationalism, which put ethnic differences in the background and promoted social equalization, *the Gypsy Problem in the People's Republic Romanian* generated four directions of action: eliminating tribal organization (nomads), raising living standards (literacy, hygiene and social assistance), integration into the labour market and combating prejudices about them

Based on these objectives, a forced sedentarization of Roma was carried out, including by settling them in the houses of the Saxons, sometimes next to them, in the same house. Many Roma have had a hard time getting used to such situations, in some cases not at all, also creating resentment among a population that had significant prejudices against them anyway. Certain aspects of integration into the labour market have also contributed to the deepening of prejudices.

Some Roma that were more open to assimilation were used for certain administrative and political positions (party secretaries, militiamen, Securitate workers, mayors, heads of agricultural households, party secretaries, political deputies, etc.). In addition, for many, integration into work meant, as in the interwar period, occupying the positions of sweepers, garbage collectors, pest control workers, etc., occupations traditionally blasphemed by the great mass of the population.

Given that it was starting from very low, the regime's policy succeeded best in raising the quality of life, with many Roma being integrated into schools and social programs. However, not all things were positive in terms of their social progress, considering that also in the '50s a number of Roma were moved from the big cities to Baragan or to the outskirts of smaller localities

² The name given to the Romanian intelligence service during the communist period.

3.Key developments after 1960

During the communist regime, especially in the '60s, nationalism became an ideological tool, being used as a counter-attack strategy against Kremlin policies and as proof of its independence. From that moment on, "no one could be patriotic or nationalist if he was not part of the party³." The idea of a homogeneous Romanian society, of consolidating national unity was introduced. Under the pretext of a unique model of the socialist worker, the communist regime tried to complete the assimilation process. The stated goal was to gradually eliminate national differences, but in fact they were trying to eliminate ethnic minorities.

An important aspect to highlight here is the culture of "romanianization", which means that the set of measures addressed to them or that affected them neglected their identity, emphasizing the values of the Romanian majority. In fact, to a greater or lesser extent, the most important struggle that the Roma fought during the communist period was with "romanianization", the regime's permanent objective regarding them.

And the way Roma perceived romanianization, sometimes unconsciously, influenced how they perceived themselves and how they declared themselves in the census. Thus, if during Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's period (until 1965) romanianization was more aggressive, it weakened during Nicolae Ceaușescu's period (1965-1989). In the 1966 census, the result of assimilating pressure and the advantages of romanianization made only 64,197 people (0.4% of Romania's population) declare themselves Roma, a drop to almost half in 11 years.

"I grew up with the idea that I am a gypsy, I wanted to use this identity, but I was taught to be Romanian, I rediscovered my identity, but I want to die as a human person".⁴

The communist regime in the early 60s, in order to assimilate the Roma population, approached a series of measures and policies regarding them - such as forcibly settling, followed by ignoring their existence. Unlike Germans and Hungarians, they had no right to be represented as an ethnic minority. In short, they were not free to promote their cultural traditions. Communism or socialism destroyed many of their traditional occupations and the specific elements of their way of life, and the Roma began to integrate into the lifestyle imposed on them. During communism, Roma, like other Romanians, were given jobs on state farms and factories.

The measures offered by the communist regime succeeded to some extent in turning Roma into workers, integrating them, sometimes forcefully, into the modern way of life. They were sent to schools, provided with stable employment and housing. The economic and social transformations of the communist period negatively or positively affected the Roma. In 1962, the measure of sedentarization of nomadic Roma was taken, trying to attract them into society, but not knowing well their specificity and not being treated with enough attention, significant results were not recorded and this is felt in the current period.

Roma were considered foreign factors that must become Romanian, their culture being considered a culture of poverty and underdevelopment. Because of this, something had to be done to destroy the specific culture of the Roma, as well as their distinct way of life - the most important element that has characterized them over the centuries. By removing from its speeches any reference to Roma communities in Romania, the state was actually denying its specificity.

In the early stages of housing systematization, which generated silent discontent among residents affected by the demolition of their own homes. Roma were also affected by forced systematization policies, the neighbourhoods in which they lived being among the first. However, this process had positive effects on a large part of Roma, especially on those living on the outskirts of cities, because systematization began primarily with the abolition of unsanitary neighbourhoods on the outskirts of cities.

³ Pons, Emmanuelle, *Tigani din România - o minoritate în tranziție*. (București: Compañia), 1999.

⁴ Nicolae Gheorghe în „Revista română de sociologie”, serie nouă, anul XXIV, nr. 5-6, p. 367-368, București, 2013, p. 368)

If we analyse the situation 11 years later, in 1977, we see that the number of Roma declared in the census was 229,986, that is, 1.1% of the country's population. The explanations for this exponential growth are multiple, but they are also related to their relation to the regime and its policies. First of all, numerically, Ceaușescu's anti-abortion measures of 1966 must be taken into account, but, given the lack of abortion practice among Roma, they did not have as much weight as attributed to him. More important, however, were the developments related to romanianization. At a general level, the regime became aware of the failure of assimilation by denying the specificity of the Roma.

Thus, he reoriented his policies towards a more punctual social aid, which contributed to the "de-romanianization" of many Roma in order to benefit from these measures. The archives keep a range of examples, from help for every child born, to soup kitchens to rewards for sending children to kindergarten and school.

In addition, the advantages of "healthy origin" had disappeared once the regime had strengthened and the fear of registration was no longer topical. The Roma had become accustomed to the regime, and it had become accustomed to them, trying to manage them in the same atmosphere of duality of relating to them. On the one hand, the authorities were trying to eliminate nomadism permanently, including by criminalizing "social parasitism" as a result of Decree 153/1970, a cause from which many Roma ended up in prison or forced labour. On the other hand, however, there are many cases in which nomads were provided with CFR wagons or car means to move from one place to another. Sometimes they received very easily documents that allowed them to practice their usual occupations, even if they were occupations at the limit of the law, including the valorisation of household waste.

In 1977, when Nicolae Ceaușescu's personality cult was in full swing, a new assimilation program was launched, but it was not made public. Roma who remained with their traditional occupations were forced to return to jobs in factories or construction sites. Some Roma continued to practice traditional crafts, especially the most discreet ones that were harder to verify by the communist regime, such as spoilers, merchants, carpenters. Roma also "benefited" from the pact between Romania and the former Federal Republic of Germany. In the early 80s, Germans could emigrate to the Federal Republic of Germany if the German state paid a tax for each woman, man or child emigrated, an understanding known as the "sale of the Saxons". The state confiscated the houses of the Saxons and forced the Roma to move into them⁵.

As an integral part of the "systematization" process, Nicolae Ceaușescu will try to force the relocation of Roma to poor "ghettos" in cities or semi-urban settlements in agricultural areas. Valuable Roma objects – gold coins from the Austro-Hungarian period, their preferred form of hoarding – were confiscated by the Securitate and the Militia⁶.

Thus, traditional communities could not adapt well enough and quickly to the new conditions and did not benefit from special state aid, which led to marginalization by the majority population and self-marginalization of Roma, who isolated themselves from change and modernization. Following the economic crisis, some Roma are returning to the traditional model of life, but adapted in modern forms: they become specialists of the "black market"⁷

Until after the fall of communism, when they were recognized for the first time in the country's history as a national minority, the ethnic manifestations of Roma continued to make themselves felt, but quite rarely. Since the mid-70s, in the context of the Communist Party's increasing interest in Roma issues, Nicolae Gheorghe, a Roma sociologist, considered the first activist for Roma rights in Romania, stands out. However, identity activity remained largely illegal until the fall of communism.

In 1979, under the care of an anonymous editor, the Gospel of St. John appeared in the Romani language. Nicolae Gheorghe tries to highlight the problems of the ethnic group, including abroad, which brings his supervision by the political police of the communist regime. Thus, in 1982, he had only the

⁵ Catalin Zamfir, Elena Zamfir, *„Tigani, intre ignorare si ingrijorare”*, Editura Alternative, 1993

⁶ A. Fraser, *Tigani*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2008, p. 298-299.

⁷ Pons, Emmanuelle, *Les Tsiganes en Roumanie : des citoyens à part entière ?*, Collection "Pays de l'Est". 1995.

solution to make known the problems of the Roma in Romania by publishing texts under a pseudonym in France, together with another Roma sociologist, Vasile Burtea. In addition, romanianization, which allowed only a very limited identity activity, also had the effect that many Roma personalities did not have the courage to speak out publicly in favour of the Roma, although in particular gestures of solidarity were not lacking.

Although many Roma remember the communist period as a good one in terms of living standards, the problems of Roma as a socially disadvantaged ethnicity persisted, deepened and diversified over the years. Even in the 80s, when everyone had a job, unemployment was about 40% among Roma, and deprivations reached an even greater proportion. Like Romanians, Roma had many reasons to be dissatisfied with the regime and to want it overthrown. As they have always been, that is, scattered among the mass of Romanians or other ethnicities in Romania, the Roma also participated in the Revolution of 1989, finding them even among the victims.

4. Conclusion

In order to make an overall assessment of the communist period, although there were obvious differences between Roma and the majority population, highlighted by the authorities themselves in internal documents, from an ethnic point of view the communist regime considered Roma to be Romanians, treating them as persons already assimilated, but not yet fully integrated into the majority. In the modernizing boom of the regime, many Roma improved their social condition, but in common with the Romanian peasant or worker.

However, in the absence of comprehensive policies aimed at them, Roma retained a marginal status, fuelled in large part by the same historical stereotypes, which were not erased just because the regime tried to treat Roma like any other ethnic Romanian. In the deep Romanian society, these prejudices have been preserved and even accentuated. Although the communist authorities tried and succeeded to preserve interethnic peace between Romanians and Roma, the fall of the regime gave way to the manifestation of anti-Roma prejudices, which resulted in serious incidents and outbursts of hatred against them.

5. References:

- [1] Cf. L. Cherata, *Istoria țiganilor. Origine, specific, limbă*, 1993
- [2] Pons, Emmanuelle, *Țigani din România - o minoritate în tranziție*, 1999.
- [3] Nicolae Gheorghe „*Revista română de sociologie*”, 2013
- [4] Catalin Zamfir, Elena Zamfir, „*Țigani, între ignorare și îngrijorare*”, 1993
- [5] Fraser, *Țigani*, 2008.
- [6] Pons, Emmanuelle, *Les Tsiganes en Roumanie : des citoyens à part entière?*, 1993