

## ROMA BEGGING, A WAY TO EARN A LIVING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**Abstract:** *The idea of this paper originated in the research conducted as part of the project “The Untold Story. An Oral History of the Roma People in Romania” (Babeș-Bolyai University & University of Iceland, 2014-2017), regarding the history and present state of the Romanian Roma. One of the aspects discussed concerns the survival strategies of the Roma in the European Union as migration intensified over the past two decades. Primarily, these strategies are informal work and begging. The latter will be analyzed in the present study, offering data from the literature as well as testimonials of persons interviewed as part of the aforementioned project.*

**Key words:** *Roma; begging; migration; survival; discrimination.*

Begging was and is often associated with the image of the Roma, who are seen as responsible for various crimes. A sociological study conducted in the Republic of Moldova showed that, to a large extent, the Roma are described by non-Roma as: liars (37,5%), thieves (37,1%), beggars (29,7%), dirty (21%) etc. (UNICEF, 2016: 28). In the past decade, in a series of states of the European Union, the increase in Roma immigrants responsible for various crimes raises the question of whether interdictions regarding begging and sleeping on the streets are necessary (Muižnieks, 2015). “Economic activities in the informal economy and other income-generating activities, like begging, are frequently undertaken by Roma” (FRA, 2009: 7). Considered an illegal act<sup>1</sup> in Romania, as stipulated in the Penal Code, begging provides sums of money for certain migrant Roma, varying according to certain factors (for instance, the destination country of the immigrant, the frequency with which it is undertaken).

Like undeclared work, begging abroad has changed the lives of many Roma families and communities in Romania and in other ex-communist countries. The phenomenon is perceived differently by the Roma and the non-Roma. The latter, as a majority, condemn it; among the Roma, some individuals practice begging as sole income-generating activity while others practice it temporarily, during the stage or stages when they cannot find work, be that work formal or informal. Therefore, the analysis of begging demands a differential approach, considering, above all, the intention of the migrant when going abroad: to work or (exclusively) to beg.

The majority of the Roma’s occupations are marginal, ranging from street vendors (of miscellanea like cigarette lighters, handkerchiefs, newspapers) to windshield wiping, and begging (Parker and López Catalán, 2014: 389). Such means of earning a living may seem insignificant, but they are real means of subsistence for a large part of immigrants. Behind these experiences lies the complex and tragic situation of the Roma ethnicity, whose difficulties in becoming integrated on the labor market stem from limited access to material and non-material resources.

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<sup>1</sup> “Infraction regulated by art. 326 of the Penal Code, which consists of the act of a person who, even though has the ability to work, appeals repeatedly to public mercy, asking for material help.” (Art. 326)

In Romania, issues connected to education, healthcare and housing reveal a much more difficult condition of the Roma, compared to other ethnicities. A report of the European Union from 2016 showed that 75% of the Roma interviewed were living below the poverty line in their home countries, a third did not have access to running water, and half of the persons between the ages 6-24 were not literate (European Union, 2016: 3). Persisting discrimination against Roma, especially in terms of access to the fundamental resources in a society, has led (after 1989) to the formation of a critical mass of individuals constantly trying to find solutions for survival. One of these solutions is the temporary relocation to countries in Western Europe. Here, Roma immigrants manage to accumulate higher incomes than at home, but from menial, informal work, and from begging or stealing. The low level of education and, implicitly, professionalization of these individuals leads to them being trapped in the gray zone of the economy. An uneducated population generates economic problems: "Without education, Roma children begin adult life with extremely reduced employment opportunities. Thus, discrimination against Roma children perpetuates a cycle of unequal opportunities and extreme poverty and contributes to the fact that, even in European Union member states, 71% of Roma households live in extreme poverty, on the same level as the poorest regions of the world" (Javanaud, 2016: 13).

The lack of formal education, of professional development, in concert with discriminatory policies, especially in day-to-day life, explains the considerable percentage of Roma active in the informal sector, in unregulated occupations that are badly paid, often in precarious working conditions. Because these occupations are severely underpaid in their home countries (agriculture, construction work), the idea of doing the same work for better pay abroad animates many of the Roma (and other Romanian citizens). Being faced with the realities of the destination countries often proves painful for migrants. The working conditions, the amount of pay for the work performed, living expenses prove to be different from their expectations (and evaluations made at home). In other cases, the situation deteriorates in time, once they become unemployed. Finding a new position (a new occupation) can be a lengthy endeavor. Financial instability is the framework within which, for some of the Roma, begging becomes an alternative.

"We went and begged, sold newspapers" (A. C.) "(Tell me, is there begging?) – There is some begging, yes. (Is it a means of survival when other work is not available?) – Yes, yes, yes, so you don't sit around doing nothing, because it's difficult for them if they don't have work, because they need food, clothes, a change. And if they have nothing [to do], they sometimes beg." (M. C.) "(Where did you go?) – To France in 1995: I couldn't do it, I wasn't made for something like that. I thought it would be different there, work and better pay, something to pull us out of our misery and it turned out to be begging and I couldn't do it. I was ashamed of myself." (I. R.)

Being at the mercy of others and asking for charity produces feelings of inferiority about which some of the interviewees spoke openly. The periods in which they begged are explained as extreme situations like unemployment and the impossibility of pulling through financially.

"I don't like to beg. I don't beg in Romania, I had to learn to do this here [in Finland] because I couldn't find a job. There is no employment here for Roma women. What can I do?" (Interview with a Roma woman, Finland, 6.5.2009)" (FRA, 2009: 52).

Such testimonials show a different standpoint from which the phenomenon can be interpreted, namely the perspective of equality of opportunity and gender equality. Having more limited access to education than Roma men (and belonging to the most uneducated Romanian ethnic group), Roma women have very limited opportunities. "I

came to work. I thought I would find a job, but that wasn't the case and I eventually chose to beg.' (Interview with a Roma woman, Spain, 17.3.2009)" (FRA, 2009: 53). The small likelihood of finding employment in their home country decreases even more abroad. The conditions of immigrant women reflects how great the gap is between expectations and what is required on the labor market, where their background makes these women virtually invisible. On one hand, we identify the wish of these women to earn a living and send money home, on the other, their inadequacy given the demands of an economy that is increasingly more selective and competitive.

The analysis of begging, as a phenomenon, requires taking into consideration whether the subjects are part of Roma subgroups. Roma clans are defined not by cultural models, but by standard of living. Named by occupation (Kalderash, Fierari – smiths, Spoitori – tinsmiths, Cărămidari – brickmakers, Florari – flower sellers, Ursari – bear trainers etc.), the subgroups have not been able to support themselves financially in the past few decades from their traditional activities. The crafts and trades they used to do have meanwhile disappeared, and the Roma communities have been left uncovered, living on the poverty line, from expeditors, children's allowances, day labor or temporary employment. The only subgroup that has managed to adjust professionally are the Gabori, who moved on from selling troughs to the import and retail of used clothing. The fact that they can lead their lives without committing crimes, including begging, can explain the pride this group takes in their identity in comparison to other subgroups. The Gabori are offended by their identification with Roma who perform illegal acts: "But even now it happens: we go to an establishment and we are told that you cannot be served because you are Gabori. [...] Those are the most backward people, those who discriminate against us and lump us together with all gypsies. They consider me the same as the one who begs. I have money in my pocket when I go out to eat. [...] And not to be served as an intelligent and clean person?!" (Ștefan Burcea, in Dălălu, 2017).

Describing the other Roma in pejorative terms, in the same manner as non-Roma would – because they consider themselves superior, the best of all Roma subgroups (Florea, 2008: 24), the Gabori see themselves as different because they have always tried to do "honest" work. This means that they have never clashed with anybody, Roma or non-Roma, having the ability to always be aware of economic tendencies, to know what is in demand on the market, so to always be able to have a legal occupation. Consequently, they feel entitled to tax the behavior of other Roma, especially if they damage the image of the Roma. "There are many gypsy nations and people say: 'They are gypsies.' But if a gypsy likes to work and likes to have a place to sleep, he does so. And he can lead a decent life. In our country or abroad, because there's work anywhere, not begging. [Enunciates] I do not agree with begging. I do not agree with doing nothing. Doing nothing. If someone is sick, has an amputated leg, hand, limb and you go and offer help, that's something else. And if he gets disability benefits, that's also different. But the one who has a clean bill of health, why should you give him money for nothing?" (G. R.)

For the Roma communities that have not found a means of earning a living, asking for alms produces existential, rather than moral dilemmas. The phenomenon is well known in states like France, Italy, Spain, where different Roma subgroups, not only from Romania, but from other Eastern European countries as well, live on vacant and marginal lands on the outskirts of large urban centers (the so-called *plațuri*), travelling to the city centers to beg. Having a very low level of education and professionalization, these groups generate income through illegal means, justifying their behavior through the lack of opportunities in their country of origin.

The Cărămidari (brickmakers) from Dolj county or the Cortorari (tent dwellers) in the Sibiu area are among the inhabitants of the *plațuri*. The Cărămidari (brickmakers), who lead a relatively settled life, continued to practice their trade during the communist period, while the Cortorari (tent dwellers) became settled late, around 50-60 years ago. During the Ceaușescu regime, they made a living selling copper goods – licensed through a document called “craftsman certificate” (Roșu, 2016), or working in the collective farming system (being illiterate and socially rejected, many of them ended up not receiving the meagre pensions for agriculture workers). Neither before, nor after 1989 did the Cortorari (tent dwellers) – or other conservative Roma groups (very attached to traditions), attempt to gain employment, their cultural model being learning the family trade. Given the changes in the post-communist Romanian economy, the interests of these groups turned to Western countries: they went there to beg, holding the belief that this activity constituted labor. For instance, the non-Roma are unaware of the difference between what the Cortorari (tent dwellers) call “manglimos” (begging), an activity that brings in considerable earnings, and “kerel buti,” referring to domestic work (Tesăr, 2016: 186), hard physical labor, which is often unclean (Hübschmannová, 2013: 241).

These categories, deeply rooted in the culture of some Roma groups, generate different income amounts: in other words, kerel buti generates sums high enough to build houses that are the envy of other Romanians, and of other Roma groups. The Kalderash or the Cortorari (tent dwellers) use ambiguous language when talking about their earnings, arguing that some of them “take advantage of the naiveté of the people” (Roșu, 2016). Begging is justified by the fact that asking for alms is normal, so long as there are people willing to be charitable. Pity is taken advantage of to different degrees. Those who have spent a longer time abroad and are experienced, have strategies for begging:

“(Did people say anything to you when you begged? Did they ask where you were from? Why did you do this?) – Well, they often asked ‘why do you beg?’ or something like that. Well, we didn’t really understand the language. There were some of us who did. But those of us who did – look, for example, I’ve never begged in my life. OK, generally speaking. But my wife has begged. She used to say: ‘well, I don’t have enough money’ and so on, and so forth. Nonsense...It wasn’t nonsense, it was true. There were many times when...but you didn’t make a lot. 50 here, 70 there...It depends on the beggar. Is he professional, is he a beginner...” (A. C.)

The more convincing the way of begging (a speech, an eloquent text, dressing as a mime or a statue), the larger the amount of money received can be. The professional beggar has some years of experience. “Knowing how to ask, knowing what to say to the people. We, if the guys here came and gave us one leu, we were happy with it. But a professional, when he sees only one leu, says: ‘But I have no gas tank, my rent is not paid.’ They dug up more money, they gave him 5 more lei. See, that’s what professionalism means. Others did it too. But we were content with what we got. (Were you more modest?) – With 50 bani...We weren’t so resourceful. And that was our life (in Germany, author’s note). Then we went to France, Finland, Ireland. We spread out over there, each with their family. I procreated there. Instead of 5, we came back 8, when we came back to Romania. We had three children.” (A. C.)

Such testimonials illustrate the dynamics of the begging phenomenon in the post-communist period. In the 1990s, Germany and France were the destinations of choice for migration and, consequently, for begging. In the following decade, the Roma started migrating to Italy and Spain, and later to the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian states etc. In the first years after 1990, some Romanian Roma were the first

beneficiaries of the German state policy which offered financial and material aid to immigrants from the former Eastern Bloc. Moreover, a public appeal was made to the mercy of the society for the victims of totalitarianism.

“(What did Germany seem like to you, compared to Romania?) – Like heaven compared to hell. It was very good, because we received social benefits. Not working, getting 2000 (the interlocutor was referring to the sum exchanged in lei) every month. You didn’t have to work, nothing. We sometimes begged too. We saved 10-15-20,000 [lei] and came back to our country, bought houses, put some money in the bank like that.” (A. C.)

As the interest for Germany waned (the earnings from begging decreased, it became harder to find even informal work), France, Italy and Spain became alternatives. “Some go to work, some to beg, others to steal.” (L. B.). The large number of Romanian migrants to Italy means a considerable number of Romanian Roma on the peninsula. It is also important to note that the Italian legislation does not define begging as a crime, unlike countries such as Denmark or Hungary, where this act is forbidden (Alexe and Ceapai, 2018). The recent realities and experiences of Western countries when it comes to the Roma have led to a tightening of measures against begging, especially begging that exploits children or is aggressive.

The interviewees stressed the difference between these forms of begging. In their accounts about the way in which they begged, they underlined their non-confrontational behavior, aiming especially not to be mistaken for the individuals proven guilty of the above-mentioned crimes. “Every time the police came...I showed them my papers and said: ‘I don’t do, as they say, *disturbo*.’ (You mean disturbance?) – Yes, disturbance of...a person, or something. How can you bother a person if you greet them and say ‘good afternoon’ and you respect them...is that disturbing a person? If you say hello and you don’t pull at their clothes, no... (Why? Did they accuse you of...?) – Yes, that we harass people and such. That’s what they say. And they write whatever they want in the paperwork, not what we want. (Maybe they’ve seen some?...)) – Well, there are nations (clans, author’s note) and nations, who do that. They pull at people’s clothes or harass them, they do other things...They’re other nations, nations from Ploiești or from Vâlcea, nations from Călărași. (Are they Romanian or what are they?) – Romanians, Gypsies, all kinds. They do all sorts of things there. (How are they different from you?) – So we have a *plaț* where we live. It’s only us there, from the township of Bârgăniș (Sibiu county author’s note).” (A. L.).

The humiliating or immoral connotations of begging seem less important in the view of the interviewees, who consider that the way in which they asked for money does not involve violence, is not aggressive, does not produce damage, but is dependent on the goodwill of the passersby. Explaining the process through which they ask for alms seems to them necessary, in the context of the media discourse, which is targets Roma crime, being a discourse built on racist prejudice. Negatively perceived, the public image of the ethnicity demands a nuanced approach, as a counterweight to the reactions of society (and of the authorities), which pays little attention to the obstacles the Roma face on the road to integration into the formal economy. The impediments are greater in the case of elderly Roma immigrants, who are more inclined to appeal to public mercy. In contrast to young immigrants (who, for instance, learn the language of the host country, and, to some degree, become part of the system of education), the elderly are difficult to integrate, not having access to educational and professionalization resources. With minimal survival skills, these individuals can be seen in crowded areas, especially around tourist attractions, stores, places of worship.

"I spent 5 years in Italy. When my husband died, I didn't go back alone. (What did you do in Italy?) – I begged. At the traffic lights, at the marches (supermarket, author's note), at these markets. I didn't steal, nothing, and who wanted to give you something, they did. Those who didn't, didn't. (Did you sell newspapers or did you just beg?) – No, I just begged, that's why I went to Italy. That was it." (R. C.). It may be noted that the narrators do not see begging as a crime, a tag often placed on the Roma. The narrators insist on stating their position/place among the Roma groups, setting themselves apart from the Roma involved in theft, human trafficking, prostitution.

This self-definition is confirmed by the validation given by the authorities, through a fingerprint system (in Italy), aiming especially at the youth (many lacking identification), thus making possible a tracking system for migrant Roma that is as complete as possible (Gheorghe, 2015: 53). "They card us, our shanties have numbers, we are numbered, and all of our fingerprints are taken. They can't do anything to us, because there is no theft, there's nothing. That's it. If you've said: 'we are beggars and look, as you can see, our shanties are extraordinarily clean, go to those who commit crimes, not here'" (A. L.).

In a series of cases, begging becomes a way of life for those who do not have other options (especially elderly women, who are housewives and almost illiterate); plus, belonging to a conservative clan (as the Kalderash or the Cortorari) generates dependency on the male members of the family, so that the women beg if their husbands do. "Better than in Romania...You have no job, you have nothing, no pension. And the police saw us begging, they didn't bother with us because they saw we had no complaints from the owner, from the people, we didn't harass people, they noticed..." (R. C.).

To sum up, the testimonials presented above showcase the dramatic experiences of Roma migrants striving to find means of survival and earning in accordance with their expectations regarding the greater possibilities that the West seemed to offer compared to their countries of origin. Some respondents described their experience as reprovable and transitory, others saw it as a way to make a living, more or less justified by the personal and general circumstances of the world in which they live.

### **Conclusions**

Incriminated by law (in some European states), morally condemned, begging by Roma immigrants constitutes not only a phenomenon in itself, but is symptomatic for their countries of origin. Individuals, families, groups, communities lacking a stable, regulated income continue to resort to begging every time this is more convenient, compared to other ways of making a living. Several factors (both external and inherent to Roma culture) contribute to the perpetuation of the situation: ethnic discrimination, unequal access to material and spiritual resources in a society, the mentality regarding schooling and professionalization, the desire to earn easily and/or fast, along with decreased interest and information concerning the social security system. Thus a counterproductive mode of existence and mental model is maintained, especially for the next generations, which will fail to grasp the necessity, benefits represented by vital services such as those offered by medical insurance or pensions. Those who resort to begging fail to see it as an emergency measure and a non-model for the youth in their families. While it does bring in some income, begging is outside the formal economy, not being officially recorded and not providing any benefits, in contrast to formal work: a contract, experience and seniority, bonuses, overtime, pension.

The examination of the phenomenon reveals drawbacks on both sides. The non-Roma resort to stereotypes when speaking about the Roma, overlooking the numerous

obstacles they face when seeking employment (obstacles which quickly demotivate those who look for work). Among the Roma, there is low interest in changing the inherited customs connected to concepts like work, earning, the utility of schooling, the idea of being employed (as opposed to being one's own master), early marriage, flaunting power through ostentation (Roma palaces). To this the ambiguous condition of begging is added, which – where it is not illegal, offers immigrants administrative breaches (through limited and/or conditioned access to public mercy).

The future generations are largely unaware of the fear, insecurity associated with begging, being raised in a spirit and/or environment in which public mercy seems to be the sole economic option. We cannot disregard the fact that the large number of individuals found begging or doing informal work generates problematic questions: "First of all, to what extent do the Roma want to be involved in such activities or do they resort to them to survive; and secondly, how should the authorities react, especially when these activities represent the only means of earning a living available." (FRA, 2009: 7). These questions await an answer, as the aspirations of Roma migrants looking for employment in the formal economy await fulfillment.

**Acknowledgement.** *The research leading to these results has received funding from EEA Financial Mechanism 2009 - 2014 under the project contract no. 14SEE/30.06.2014.*

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**List of interviewees<sup>1</sup>:**

- B. (female), b. 1968, interview conducted by S. Preda in Bistreț (Dolj county), August 7, 2015.
- C. (male), b. 1957, interview conducted by S. Preda in Căpîlnaș (Arad county), September 1, 2015.
- M. C. (female), 30 years, interview conducted by S. Preda in Nocrich (Sibiu county), June 6, 2015.
- R. C. (female), b. 1952, interview conducted by Ionela Bogdan in Măguri (Timiș county), August 23, 2015.
- A. L. (male), b. 1977, interview conducted by S. Preda in Ighișu Vechi (Sibiu county), June 6, 2015.
- G. R. (male), interview conducted by I. Bogdan in Tîrgu Mureș (Mureș county), July 7, 2015.
- I. R. (male), b. 1972, interview conducted by I. Bogdan in Măguri (Timiș county), August 22, 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews belongs to the Oral History Institute of Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania and includes interviews conducted under the EEA Financial Mechanism 2009 - 2014 research project "The Untold Story. An Oral History of the Roma in Romania".