

## WORKING ABROAD. ROMANIAN ROMA EXPERIENCES.

Sînziana PREDĂ

Lecturer, Ph.D., West University of Timișoara (Romania)

Email: [sinziana.preda@e-uvt.ro](mailto:sinziana.preda@e-uvt.ro)

**Abstract:** *In Romania, the Roma constitute the third largest ethnic group and the group considered the most disadvantaged in economic and social terms. Their marginalization originates in a long history of rejection, starting from the condition they initially had in society, that is of slaves (the liberation of the gypsies from servitude ended in 1856). The communist regime tried to assimilate them, especially through measures of integration in the national education system, in factories, in agriculture. Many Roma believe that their life has been better in socialism, as they have found relatively easy employment and access to housing. Nostalgia for these benefits is constantly marked by their discourse, in the narratives about the current standard of living, unemployment and going abroad, for a better life. The impossibility of finding a job does not only affect the Roma, and it is not only them who decide to migrate abroad for better salaries. Many Romanian citizens go to the West but unlike them, Roma are less likely to achieve a decent life in their origin countries. "Roma are exposed to a much higher degree of extreme poverty, discrimination and exclusion in their countries of origin."<sup>1</sup> This background characterise the phenomenon of labor migration represented by Roma. In this paper we will analyze a several migration experiences, based on some interviews collected in the first project dedicated to the oral history of Roma in Romania, "The Untold Story. An Oral History of the Roma People in Romania".*

**Keywords:** Roma; poverty; survival; abroad; migration.

An ample national report on the Roma situation (Situația romilor, 2012) showed that in the first two decades after the December Revolution, more than 20% of the Roma went out of the country, mainly in order to find a more substantial income form than the one at home (Șerban, 2012: 55). No other ethnic minority in Romania has shown a similar percentage for the same migration objective. The Roma leaving abroad was and still is justified by a chronic lack of resources (Șerban, 2012: 55). It goes on, given the unchanging condition of the Roma (as well as that of many Romanian citizens afflicted by poverty) and it is supported by the benefits generated by their experience there.

Poverty is the first and principal reason for their going to work abroad, but Roma sometimes mention their fellow citizens' intolerance. The two are frequently closely connected. The mentality according to which the Roma are poor because they do not want to work is often met. The inability to get a job diminishes the self-esteem and the esteem from the others too, generating a feeling of "non-belonging" and increasing the separation between ethnic groups (FRA, 2009: 6). "I lived in very poor conditions in Romania. There they only have working positions for the Romanians, not for the Roma, you can't make a living there. Here, in Spain, if you seriously look for a job, you will finally find one, but not in Romania." (Interview with a Roma woman, Spain, 17.03.2009)" (FRA, 2009: 22). The states in the West of Europe are credited by the Roma as a space of tolerance, an image which reinforces the belief that they can

---

<sup>1</sup> Nils Muižnieks, "Time to debunk myths and prejudices about Roma migrants in Europe"(16/07/2015), [online] available at: <https://www.coe.int/az/web/commissioner/-/time-to-debunk-myths-and-prejudices-about-roma-migrants-in-europe>.

reach a decent life standard there (FRA, 2009: 21). "You should know that the Germans are very civilized, very thoughtful people. If they see you are alright and hard-working, then you are...they are very welcoming and greet you, talk to you and..." (I. S./Gelu)

After the Romanian revolution, the Roma were the first Romanian citizens to initiate this type of experience, being less fearful to venture in a world which most people had just heard of. The group's ability to move seems to be a feature which ensured its survival along centuries, in various historical contexts, often not in their favor. "Faced with the changes taking place in the Romanian society after 1989, this population will react according to its specific adaptive pattern. J. P. Liegeois (1994) points out that territorial mobility is an important adaptive element for the Roma, when circumstances change." (Voicu, 2002: 232). The conditions created by the fall of communism offered the possibility to know the Occident directly to the Roma as well, which led to a new way of earning money, either by contract-based employment or by unlawful activities.

However, the Roma were also the first to be affected by the transition to the market economy during the 90s. Under Ceausescu's regime, their life standard had risen to a threshold never reached before, but they were the first to be made redundant too, because of the low occupational training and deficient school education. In the new democracy, the Roma could hardly find a job, a fact which triggered inherent difficulties in benefiting from basic services (such as health care) and from decent housing (Situția romilor, 2012: 10). The educational capital (skills we acquire in school and outside this institution) (Voicu, 2004: 137-138) was and stays low among the Roma population, despite some support measures taken by the school training system.

On the other hand though, school tuition is seen as separated from the socio-professional path, since it does not generate advantages, as it does for the majoritarians. "Our life as Roma is harder...because the Romanians, they have education, they go to faculties and what not, so they find jobs, enjoy their own businesses and stuff. We, the Roma, can cope harder, for the fact that we have no literacy: it is not only that, though it does matter, but this fact does not help us at all, because we don't know, we don't have a job, a salary, some certain income from somewhere." (L. B.) It is difficult to explain to the Roma living in poor communities (places from where many people leave to work abroad) the usefulness of school, given that attending school requires resources and a set of facilities which those people lack.

After the fall of Ceausescu's regime, especially in highly industrialized towns during the socialist era, there emerged a poor layer of society consisting in workers who used to live in the factory dorms. Once the institutions and the affiliated housing buildings were closed, they could not go back to their native places (Ladányi and Virág, 2011: 65). Among these, the Roma, originally coming from countryside environments had settled in towns only a few decades before. They used to do unqualified jobs, were given access only to "underpaid and vulnerable positions, thus being the latest to arrive and having to leave the jobs among the first in case of redundancy." (Duminică and Preda, 2003: 31-32)

"(These people, how come they have to beg and live from day to day? Are they from the town or did they come from other places? Were they employed?) - They are (she sighs)... there used to be a district here, 'Peace'. Back then here lived just the Gypsy the poorer ones... But they could not support the flat. They all used to have flats, but just couldn't keep them. They didn't work. Only the social aid they got, plus those who

had children. And all of them were thrown out in the street. (Who did that?) - The council [the County Council] All of them. They threw out the poorest ones too and no place to go to. (In Ceausescu's time, how did they make a living?) - They would work. Back then, the cleaning women who would sweep the staircase were all Gypsy. But now, now everybody can also sweep the staircase. Or there used to be a public toilet, a long time ago. Well, not any more. There the Gypsy women would work and clean and do stuff. So they had where to go. (And from the pensions they received or...couldn't they keep living in the blocks?) - (she sighs) I don't know what the poor people did, but a lot of them were left out in the street. A lot!..." (M. L.)

Outsiders in the areas they inhabit, lacking support nets (large family, relatives), having too few years of work experience and thus no social welfare, these persons are characterized by "high" vulnerability. (Duminică and Preda, 2003: 32). Vulnerability has been a constant of the Roma population, especially due to the lack of professionalization. This is the reason why the work done abroad has been part of menial jobs, such as: dish-washing (in restaurants), car washing or slaughter houses jobs (V. H.) Stefania Toma also mentions the "historical determinism": in time, the Gypsy have been day laborers, hired for a season or periodically (Toma, 2011: 148). A state of affairs perpetuated by the force of the majoritarians, it has created an inter-generational pattern among the Roma. A lot of Roma young people copy occupation-wise what they see at their parents, believing they cannot become more than daily laborers. Their development in this mental frame also stimulated the idea of migrating abroad as a way of getting out of the imprescriptible economical and social status. Work migration is seen by the Roma as bringing about a double advantage: in the Occident, they can find better paid jobs, and also the ethnic-based discrimination is less frequently met than at home (our interlocutors said that it appears especially in cases of begging).

The Roma have sensed the economic instability also in the segment of the conservatory groups, those (self)identified by a trade. Their professional specifics have disappeared in the last decades (including the communist era). The products made by tinkers or brick-makers, as well as the services of the painters and blacksmiths getting out of demand, the occupational identity has not been pursued by the youth. A part of them, to which elderly members of the family were added, left abroad. At the beginning of the 90s, they used the political asylum as a pretext for leaving, invoking persecutions from the communist. Germany was mainly aimed at, but there are documents about other target states too: the Roma from Floresti arrived in the UK in 1995 (Situția romilor, 2012: 11) and others went to France (Ilie, 2016: 92). Thus, they benefited from subventions and material aid given by the host state, for a period of 4 to 6 months, which encouraged them to bring more and more relatives from Romania. According to an estimation regarding the asylum seekers coming from Romania into Germany between 1990-1992, almost half of them were Roma ethnics, that means about 70,000 people (Voicu, 2002: 248). Germany represented the standard of well-being, an "El Dorado" which attracted particularly the Roma from Banat and Transylvania, regions in the West of the country exposed for centuries to the German cultural influence through political conjunctures (they belonged for a while to the Habsburg Monarchy and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire)

Dumitru Sandu believes that the attraction of the Roma could also be explained by the (permanent) emigration history of the Transylvanian Saxon<sup>2</sup>, who they lived together with, locally or regionally (Sandu, 2010: 78). He points out that in the 90s, it was not the majoritarians who first showed an interest in migration, but the minority (ethnic) groups, such as the Roma and the Saxons. However, once the financial aid from the German government stopped coming, very few of the illegal Roma migrants entered the German labor market, turning instead to other countries, unexplored before (Yaron Matras, 1998, cited by Voicu, 2002: 249). “My father-in-law was in Germany, in...Munich. He was then in the 90s. Furtively, you see. Well, they put him in a camp...gave him a salary [welfare aid]. My wife was with him too. So that’s how... how ours... have made it. Then they left to Poland...till 2000.” (A. O.) The quote emphasizes the importance of family nets as the main support means for circular migration. The family ensures the support of the new-comer in the host society. Compared to those of the majoritarians, the Roma nets are much larger, denser, reflecting their cultural specifics (large families, with lots of children, multi-generational families living together). They sustain the migrants in the adaptation process. “(Why did you choose Poland?) - We all followed one. He went there and said: ‘Come on, there is...’ – One of ours went there and he managed well. Then another one left, and after him, another one, and so we let each other know and left one by one. Till ‘96. We all came back till ‘96 -‘98. There are others who continue to go... I was a child, I even went to school there. We lived there for two years. In Białystok. (Did you learn Polish?) - Well. I still know it. And so, one by one, we went all, we helped one another there.” (A. O.)

The migration to the West of Europe experience proves that the Roma often do occasional jobs and/or work in agriculture and construction. Here they get bigger amounts compared to the money they would earn in the country for similar jobs. However, such tasks remain in general poorly rewarded, both in Spain and Italy, countries mainly chosen by the Roma for seasonal agriculture contracts (picking up olives, asparagus, strawberries, grapes, tomatoes etc.). Generally, the money is spent on the migrant’s daily expenses and those of the family left at home. Longer staying stages or multiple cycles in the circular migration process allow them to gather more significant savings aimed at reaching meaningful objectives (building a house, buying a car). “The kids kept saying they would come back home to make a block [house]. Here, in the back. To build a block, ‘cause they are two. Two sons! Both are in Spain. And they said they come home to make it, they made a project and what not. Yes, a block with two exits.” (I. S.) At the beginning of the 90s, when the migrants flux had not reached the current number, the money for such ample investments was earned in a shorter time. “I was in Germany. In ‘91-‘92. I stayed for a year and a half. From there I made my house as well. I worked in construction and agriculture, at harvesting, as they paid good money there.” (I. D.) The people whose circular migration experience started 15/20 years ago, tend to tell that “back then” (that is at the beginning of the period), they acquired important sums which allowed major material investments.

“For four euros and you had to work hard in order to...(like) damsons – you’ve seen damsons, what it’s like to pick them up to fill [a basket]. They would fall a hundred,

---

<sup>2</sup> Population of German origin, colonized in the Middle Ages in Transylvania and which repatriated almost entirely to Germany in the 20th century.

sometimes thirty, other times, twenty, if there was rain and we had to go back. No way to...make thousands of euros. Just for the house and children, for the living..." (B. F.) The money transfers are not significant enough to be capitalized: they are aimed at providing for the daily needs, including the expenses regarding household management (for example: repairs, purchasing appliances or furniture). The money can be rarely/hardly saved, considering that the families have children who go to school, moreover being the most exposed to mass cultural temptations. Many families who practice circular migration live in the rural environment, thus sending the children to high-schools in the city increases the financial pressure required by their support. "We have to keep them in school too. We have to offer them a loot and if you have no money saved, it's hard!! When they say 'Mom' or 'Dad', and you don't have what to give them, it breaks your heart. She is a young lady now too and she must have: 'Mom, I want this and that.' If we don't have to give her, it's hard. (What do the children ask for?) - All that's necessary, which they see at another girl... a tablet, a phone, living conditions. A lot... Now she's in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, she will also go on. In Craiova it's hard to support a child, but..." (B. F.)

The Roma continue to be pleased with menial jobs, as in the previous decades, the main focus being the money reward. To become professionally-trained is not an objective of the circular migration actors (maybe more so for their children – compared to their parents, they benefit from wider access to various resources, in particular, educational, formative and informative ones). The parents pick up certain occupations which are in higher demand in the countries where they work (also accessible to them, as there are no high skills required), and whenever they seize the opportunity for better terms, they change their destination. "(Has your uncle been gone before?) – Yes, he has. (Where?) - Through France. Now in Ireland 'cause they are paid better than here. And there is more work. (What occupations have you noticed to be the most wanted – or the easiest to find a position for, in fact?) - Those who know how to paint or make houses. (and also) in construction, jobs like that. And also, and in the kitchen too. For instance, my cousin, who is in England. There... where they make bread... at the baker's. Wherever they can find something to make money. Where they can find work. Even if they don't know, they still learn and go. And yet they like it and they can manage." (V. H.)

The changing of the migration destination often depends on the amount estimated to be earned. The living conditions, the existence of an employment contract, its duration, the presence of the family/friends (acquaintances) net, the fact that the job is relatively stable, are all parameters which can be differently assessed by one and the same person, depending on the nature of the experiences gathered. "(You live in barracks, didn't you?) - They had those barracks too, we lived in an older house and now, in the last years, in a school. Well we, what can I tell you? About conditions: to have conditions you have to pay and we were glad they didn't ask us for any money. So we lived together seven women, we got on well 'cause we are from the same town and of course one shouldn't have problems, we had money, we had hot water and it made us happy. And a shared kitchen... so I can't say it was bad. There are others in other places worse than this. So we can't complain." (A. T.) The living conditions are overlooked, as long as the basic need of having a roof over your head is satisfied; knowing that other migrants' experiences were less fortunate increases the positive value of one's own experience. A series of factors can influence (alter) the situation,

particularly the migrants' earnings. People have expectations, but they are placed out of context. For instance, considering the fact that a lot of contracts view agricultural work, they do not understand that nature is unpredictable, which can shorten (significantly) the season's length, a fact reflected by the remuneration received.

### **Conclusions**

The synthesis of all the above mentioned experiences reinforce the well-known reality, that of economic stagnation for most of the Roma, lack of perspectives – especially for the youth, finding momentary solutions, leaving and returning, to and from abroad, alternatively with getting occasional makeshift jobs. The very existence of these people is placed under the sign of the temporary, being unstable and offering them little access to capital resources. Even if a part of the actors involved in the work migration phenomenon appreciate the benefits resulting from their experience in the foreign lands, this can be considered neither a long term solution, nor a model for the young generations.

The dragging economic state in Romania and the possibility to circulate freely in the European space maintain the migration fluxes. Under the socio-economic circumstances of the Romanian space over the last decades, a lot of Roma, especially in the rural environment, have been faced with the necessity to take radical measures in order to survive: for those willing to work, going to a Western country has become the first option. Particularly, given the old inequity background between the Roma and the others, the former assess circular migration as an advantageous way of satisfying their financial needs. Season contracts especially, linked to agricultural needs in countries such as Spain and Italy, do not require professional training and bring a quick income. The constant demand for work force in the West generated and now supports the idea of a “safe income – coming from opportunity jobs” (Ilie, 2016: 83). Finding and keeping a job in the country (a path associated by the Roma with countless difficulties) is thus surpassed by the reality of an income obtained from circular migration. Even if they do not leave abroad constantly, people are pleased with this pace. They believe that, at any rate, they will manage to get at least one contract per year and in the time left they will come back home and stay with the family and mind the household. Having been through the experience of several such periods, they nurture trust in a somehow regulated income or anyway, easier to access than getting one in Romania. The Roma invest trust in this income source “which has improved the life of their community both economically and socially” (Goina, 2009: 254). Thus, segments of the community have gradually reached a decent standard of living, a fact which raises self-esteem and also rearranges the hierarchy, the power terms with the majoritarians.

Circular migration does not offer a solution for socio-economic problems faced by most of the Roma. To integrate the Roma on the labor market at home to a larger extent would be a key element for improving the life standard of this ethnic group. The increased number of Roma employees in Romania stirs interest among the Roma militants, but not also among the employers or the public sphere. Activists, community facilitators, mediators, sociologists and anthropologists have been involved in various projects trying to insert the Roma on the local labor market. They have been taking place in the aboriginal space and yet the chronic issues of the community have not been solved. The continuous leaving abroad stands out as one of the solutions the Roma has

found in order to cope with the vicious cycle formed by these three factors: poverty-lack of education-discrimination.

#### *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.*

#### **List of interviewees<sup>3</sup>:**

- L. B. (female), b. 1968, interview conducted by S. Preda in Bistreț (Dolj county), August 7, 2015.
- I. D. (male), interview conducted by D. Săcărea, I. Bogdan, N. Cristea in Craiova (Dolj county), August 13, 2015.
- B. F. (female), b. 1960, interview conducted by S. Preda in Orășani (Ostroveni) (Dolj county), August 6, 2015.
- M. L. (female), b. 1960, interview conducted by S. Preda in Zalău (Sălaj county), February 27, 2016.
- A. O. (male), interview conducted by S. Preda in Sîmbăta de Jos (Brașov county), June 8, 2015.
- I. S. (Gelu) (male), b. 1953, interview conducted by D. Săcărea in Sebeș (Alba county), February 7, 2015.
- I. S. (male), b. 1959, interview conducted by S. Preda in Eșelnița (Mehedinți county), August 18, 2015.
- D. T. (male), interview conducted by S. Preda in Craiova (Dolj county), August 8, 2015.
- A. Ț. (female), b. 1966, interview conducted by D. Nistor, I. Bogdan in Uila (Mureș county), September 6, 2015.

#### **References:**

1. Duminică, G. and Preda, M.. (2003). *Accesul romilor pe piața muncii*. Bucharest: Cărții de Agribusiness. [online] available at: [http://www.agentiaimpreuna.ro/files/publicatii/Accesul\\_romilor\\_pe\\_piata\\_muncii.pdf](http://www.agentiaimpreuna.ro/files/publicatii/Accesul_romilor_pe_piata_muncii.pdf).
2. FRA [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights]. (2009). *Situația cetățenilor romi din UE care se deplasează și se stabilesc în alte state membre – noiembrie 2009* [online] available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/705-090210-roma-movement-comparative-final\\_ro.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/705-090210-roma-movement-comparative-final_ro.pdf).
3. Goina, M. (2009). Între “țigani de mătase” și cei ce “fierb în suc propriu”. Studiu de caz al comunității de romi din Curtici. In *Incluziune și excluziune. Studii de caz asupra comunităților de romi din România*, Kiss, T., Fosztó, L., and Fleck, G., eds. Cluj-Napoca: ISPMN, Kriterion. 254.

---

<sup>3</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".

4. Ilie, S. (2016). Cap. 4. Ocuparea minorității rome între strategie și flexibilitate. In *Incluziunea romilor din România: politici, instituții, experiențe. Roma Inclusion in Romania: Policies, Institutions and Examples*. Bucharest: Soros România: 74 – 90.
5. Ladányi, J. and T. Virág. (2011). Schimbarea formelor de segregare rezidențială, socială și etnică în perioada tranziției la economia de piață din Ungaria. In *Spectrum. Cercetări sociale asupra romilor*, Toma, S. and Fosztó, L., eds. Cluj-Napoca: ISPMN, Kriterion. 61-89.
6. Sandu, D. (2010). *Lumile sociale migrației românești în străinătate*. Iași: Polirom.
7. Șerban, M. (2012). Al treilea val al migrației romilor: mobilitate și migrație internațională la populația de romi din Romania după 1989. in *Situația romilor în România, 2011. Între incluziune socială și migrație. Raport de țară – România*, Tarnovschi, D., ed., Preoteasa, A. M., and Șerban, M., authors. Bucharest: Soros România. 51-69.
8. Toma, S. (2011). Cercurile incluziunii. Aspecte ale educației copiilor romi în România. In *Spectrum. Cercetări sociale asupra romilor*, Toma, S. and Fosztó, L., eds. Cluj-Napoca: ISPMN, Kriterion: 127-58.
9. Voicu, B. (2004). Capitalul uman: componente, niveluri, structuri. România în context european. *Calitatea vieții* 15 (1-2): 137-57.
10. Voicu, M. (2002). Migrație și intenție de migrație la populația de romi. In *Romii în România*, Zamfir, C. and Preda, M., eds. Bucharest: Expert. 227-63.
11. \*\*\**Situația romilor în România, 2011. Între incluziune socială și migrație. Raport de țară – România*. (2012). Bucharest: Soros România.