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Identity shift: the case of Roma people in the European Union

Radu Enache*

National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

In the EU 28, the Roma people are the largest European minority. Unevenly spread, having in almost all the countries a peripheral social position and often generating harsh problems due to this position, the Roma had got, in the last two decades, a clear conscience of their ethnic identity. Moreover, the Roma elites are speaking about a “Roma stateless (European) nation”. In this respect, the Roma became a geopolitical factor that cannot be neglected.

The paper presents a series of results of a field research on Roma identity, achieved this year in urban and rural areas from nine Romanian counties and in Bucharest. There were more than 60 in depth interviews with adult persons that identified themselves as Roma, belonging both to the elite (high educated persons, occupying official and/or prestige positions) and to ordinary social classes.

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1. Introduction

The last 50 years brought several major changes in the whole world. I shall briefly name those which directly influenced the context of the identity shift of Roma population from Romania in particular and from Europe, in general.

Economy is a first level of change. During the second half of the XX century the gross world product increased seven times (Maddison, 2006). As a comparison, the same indicator raised, from 1913 until 1950, only two times. Therefore, the world has become much richer in a short time. The growth in wealth was as unequal as it was spectacular. Statistics also show that the deepening of polarisation between rich and poor countries, as well as between rich and poor people in a country (Milanovic, 2002).

* E-mail address: raduenache.i@gmail.com

We should say that „wealth” as it is reflected by indicators such as the gross product is not noticed by an individual (5). More important than the wealth of a country is the *welfare* of the citizens in that country. And here we mean the guaranteed access to a clearly defined level of welfare. This welfare level is defined besides abstract notions (such as education, life expectancy etc.) by easy access to concrete goods: place to live, car, electronic appliances, clothes, food, and entertainment. From this point of view, during the last 60 years took place an extraordinary polarisation between the West[†] and the rest of the world.

A second level regards technology and we shall only refer here to the communication technologies: cinema and television (especially for 1950-1990) and lately mobile telephony and internet. All these communication media showed to the whole world, in the most direct way, the wealth and, more important, the welfare of the West. In a certain way, for the „rest of the world”, rather than the Western welfare, there exists the *image of the Western welfare*.

The third level is the ideological one. Although we do not have quantified data, it is reasonable to admit that similar to the dynamic of goods production in the West during the last decades it was the „production” of ideologies or, more precisely, the dissemination in the public space of some projects to transform politically, economically and socially human communities (Baradat, 2012). We do not refer here to systematic, academic scientific research but to ideas debated in an amateur or even vulgar manner in mass media. Among these, the most important and interesting from our perspective is multiculturalism (Inglis, 1995). Initially launched to manage inter-ethnic and/or inter-religious tensions in immigration countries such as Canada, Australia, USA, this ideology entered, especially after 1990, in the political discourse in West-Europe, i.e. in countries where immigrants had not represented until then a massive phenomenon.

At this point, the debate became harsh. The supporters pleaded for the need to avoid the discrimination of immigrants by the majority. But this rapidly lead to an extreme version of an atomised society, where some groups become self-sufficient and interact very little or not at all with the rest of the society. This vision gave way to reactions from theorists (Sartori, 2007) and from political leaders (Daily Mail, 2011), as well. The political rejections of multiculturalism only lead to increased media exposure. The frequency of the topic in the media shows its importance. By extension, the message, the public message can be read as: *each group has the right to be recognised as such and to live by its own rules wherever in the world*.

Finally, the fourth level is the political one. After the Second World War the world was separated in two blocks. The cold war also meant an obstacle for the free movement of people. This obstacle appeared not only between the two ideological blocks but also within these for some reasons we shall not discuss here.

During the Cold War the free movement only existed in some directions controlled by stronger states. The Single European Act is the first document which states the free movement as a right given by the belonging of the individual to a supra-national organisation. From this perspective, it is easy to understand that the fall of communism and the free access of people from East Europe to the Occident meant as well the overcome of an obstacle and its symbolic value is much more important.

We presented these four levels of recent changes in the last 30-40 years in order to underline the existence of a set of vectors that influenced the deprived populations, determining them: 1. to perceive the welfare of the Occident, 2. to want it, 3. to act upon it, and 4. to consider this as a *right*. This pattern applies in general (*vis-à-vis* groups or individuals in the whole world), but especially to Roma ethnics in ex-communist now EU member countries.

After 1990 the Roma issue became important for the West firstly because of population de-homogenisation in ex-communist countries. Communism had treated population in an egalitarian and homogenous manner. As this treatment had been imposed administratively, when this constrain disappeared the various social segments redefined and repositioned themselves on „natural” basis.

As a consequence, during the early 1990, at least in Romania, a „natural segregation” of the Roma took place in the very fluid social context at that time. Here is not the place to analyse the causes and evolutions of these phenomena. We just intend to show the existence of inter-ethnic conflicts between Roma and the majority

[†] By “West” we mean not only Western Europe, but also the “Western offshoots”: USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

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