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Romania

The Roma Business 160 years since the end of Roma slavery in Romania

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On 20 February Romania celebrated 160 years since the official abolition of Roma slavery. In a typical Romanian way the event was, of course, surrounded by scandals and controversy. They are revealing insofar as they function as a symptom for the way Romanian society functions and for the very status of the Roma population. [1]

A couple weeks ago Nicolae P?un and M?d?lin Voicu – two Social-Democrat MPs of Roma origin – were accused of money laundering and embezzlement. In a nutshell, the two allegedly misappropriated large sums of money from EU-funded projects aimed at Roma integration. The money was supposed to reach the more disadvantaged segments of the Roma population, the target group of the project. Instead, it found its way into the MPs pockets by way of fictive contracts and false papers.

This is the first high-profile corruption case linked with embezzlement of funds for Roma integration. Also, it is the first case of corruption that has at its center protagonists of Roma origins. What is surprising is that it took so long for such details to emerge since it was something of an open secret: everybody knew or at least suspected that Roma funds –either provided by the state or by the EU – must disappear into thin air. The more money was poured in order to deal with Roma issues, the more the misery of the Roma population deepened. The more politicians and NGOs were in charge of running programs for integration and for dealing with the rampant poverty and social insecurity of the Roma communities, the more these communities became poorer, marginalized and discriminated against.

Even before Romania's EU accessions there had been political pressure and sizeable funds available for dealing with Roma issues. The need deepened particularly around the end of the 2000s when Roma people were expelled –usually violently – from western countries, especially Great Britain, France and Italy, following allegations of illegal migration, petty thefts and beggary. Roma migration was considered to be an issue that the Romanian state failed to deal with, therefore a series of EU projects and budget lines were made available to local communities and NGOs. As such, Roma business became good business, a healthy source of revenue in an otherwise very competitive, project-based and generally precarious NGO sector. As a result, many NGOs introduced Roma integration among their activities in order to be able to secure at least some parts of this stream. Academics followed suit and Roma studies and preoccupations – already a very established niche in the global academia for the past two decades – simply burgeoned, to the level that there are now professional MA and PhD degrees in Roma studies on offer in the universities of Bucharest.

However, such project-based, NGO-driven and academic-backed projects largely failed to achieve their overall goals. Roma population constitutes the poorest segment of the population; it is marginalized, ghettoized, harassed and held in contempt by the ethnic Romanian majority. Some inroads made by particular people cannot hide the fact that Roma population is structurally excluded, socially very vulnerable and with virtually no chances of social mobility. This is not some leftist conclusion, but the results of a World Bank report from 2014. According to it, the rate of poverty risk for Roma population (estimated at around 2 and a half million people) is 84% (three times higher than that of the Romanians) and 90% of Roma households are below the poverty line. Only 0,4% of Roma people ever get to the university and only 10% ever get to finish high-school. About 60% of Roma people live in crowded places in marginalized communities. And the statistical data only get worse once we reach chapters related to health, life expectancy, and so on.

Moreover, institutional racism and popular prejudice portray Roma as inferior and feral, which in turn call for nationalistic and quasi-fascist responses. Roma population function as the perfect scapegoat for Romanians' own discrimination and humiliation abroad: it is because of Roma that Romanians have a negative image in the eyes of the westerners.

Some particular projects and interventions did manage to alleviate and respond to specific situations. For example, activists and academics mobilized against the evictions and subsequent ghettoization planned in Pata Rat by the Cluj municipality. In Bucharest, the Common Front for Housing Rights opposed the eviction of 50 families, some of them Roma. The brutal ghettoization of the Roma population in Baia Mare sparked the ire of activists that managed to bring the case to national attention. Scores of activists, NGOs and academics, in their own ways or together, work hard in many concrete situations and manage to substitute at times the lack of state involvement by providing housing, schooling, training and general support for various segments of Roma population.

While such efforts should not be easily dismissed – since in many cases they make the difference between a modicum of integration and total abandonment – they should not blind us to the fact that NGO logic and practices cannot replace structural changes. In fact, NGO logic seems to be more part of the problem, than a truly viable solution. By linking Roma integration to the logic of projects this issue is just being reproduced. After all, NGO people are people who get their salaries precisely because there are some more things that need to be done.

Another, even more problematic, outcome of this NGOization of the Roma issue is the creation of what anthropologist Gergo Pulay rightfully called a Roma middle class – the poster image of Roma integration. The Roma middle class is formed by people from the discriminated community who learned how to speak the language of the majority. Then they use this language –and the practices associated with it– to discipline their own people but also to make claims in their name in relation to the majority. Their function is basically double: on the one hand to demonstrate that Roma integration works, that there is mobility and acceptance; on the other to give voice and make claims in the name of the community as ethnic organic intellectuals. This leads to an ambiguous status: they embody the legitimate, “proper” Roma person with whom the majority is able to interact with, but at the same time they lack any sort of meaningful link with the Roma community as such. A creation of the majority’s fantasy about what a proper Roma should look and act like, the Roma middle class is unable to represent anything else except itself. While they are called to stand for the entire community, as an example of what can be achieved, the representatives of Roma middle class can only represent themselves. This is why, for example, all the middle class Roma art that has been produced in the past half a decade is strictly autobiographical and auto-referential. Roma middle class has only one story to tell: its own.

Nicolae P?un and M?d?lin Voicu, the two MPs mentioned above, represented the upper reaches of this Roma middle class, an older generation that emerged during socialism and was able to link up with mainstream party politics after 1989. Both were high profile figures of Partida Romilor (the Roma Party), a political vehicle aimed at offering political representation to Roma people but which in practice functioned as a way to secure political representation for its leaders. But the strength of the Roma middle class as such, largely a product of the transition period, especially after the 2000s, is palpable and its interests are now quite antagonistic to those of the older generation. This was visible during the official celebrations marking the abolition of slavery when groups of Roma NGO representatives and activists openly spoke out against against people like P?un and Voicu and the type of political representation they are able to offer. Basically, the celebration offered the opportunity for the Roma middle class to assert its existence and autonomy and to demand a new form of political and public representation.

Ciprian Necula, a secretary of state in charge of Roma affairs in the Ministry for European Funds and himself the embodiment of post-communist Roma middle class, was quick to take distance from the corruption affair involving the two MPs. He pointed out that the irregularities discovered by the prosecutors is rather an exception than the rule regarding the usage of European funds for Roma. However, not very late after his statement, some journalists wrote about gross irregularities at the Ministry of European Funds regarding the organization of events for the February 20 anniversary. While these allegations must be properly substantiated, it becomes increasingly clear that the level of public scrutiny directed towards the spending of money for Roma purposes is now very high. In a twisted way, the anti-corruption discourse overlaps with a racist prejudice that portray Roma as serial thieves and untrustworthy. Only that now it is the Roma middle class and its representative that are being suspected.

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All in all, it seems that Roma business is good business for many, with the notable exception of the actual Roma population itself. The creation of a Roma middle class in postsocialism is the outcome of a particular ideology of integration. It comes after the demise of the integration philosophy promoted by the socialist state with its explicit goals and unexpected outcomes and consequences. While the history of the successive attempts of Roma integration (and its obverse forms of exclusions) since the above-mentioned abolition of slavery is yet to be properly grasped (a surprising omission given the amount of Roma studies available), it must be noted that anti-Roma prejudice was central to the formation of Romanian state and its subsequent project of nation building. In different forms, it still is. One of the most interesting recent Romanian movies – *Aferim!* – managed to capture this relationship perfectly. The movie tells the story of a local sheriff and his son trying to catch and bring back to his owner a fugitive Roma slave in 1830s Wallachia. What is striking in this story is the "naturalness" of the Roma slavery itself. While the main protagonists might entertain some views that would cast slavery as morally wrong, the end of the movie leaves no room for ambiguity: the Roma are treated worse even than the animals.

Sam Beck noted that the ethnic character of Roma slavery in Romania paralleled similar conceptions in the capitalist west about naturally inferior races and populations. This allowed Romanians to imagine themselves as superior and civilized in contradiction with the Roma slaves and constituted the cornerstone of the national identity of the new state, formed three years after the official Roma liberation. This umbilical connection explains the fear and fascination exerted by the Roma people on the Romanian population. Today, 160 years after Roma liberation, Romanians continue to remain the slaves of their own fantasy.

[LeftEast](#)

[1] This article was originally published on Feb 23 in *Bilten* "[Romski biznis: 160 godina od ukidanja ropstva u Rumunjskoj](#)".