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Title:	<i>STEREOTYPES AND BIAS IN ROMANIAN PRESS: ANALYSING THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY</i>
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STEREOTYPES AND BIAS IN ROMANIAN PRESS: ANALYSING THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT:

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO ANALYSE THE WAYS IN WHICH THE ROMANIAN PRESS PERPETUATES NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES REGARDING ROMA COMMUNITIES. SEVERAL NARRATIVES AND RHETORICS UTILIZED BY JOURNALISTS WILL BE IDENTIFIED AND HIGHLIGHTED WITH THE HELP OF MASS-MEDIA ARTICLES. THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY HAS GRADUALLY EXPANDED SINCE 1989 AND THERE ARE CURRENTLY TWO STATE INSTITUTIONS WHOSE GOALS ARE CLEARLY ALIGNED WITH THE IDEA OF CEASING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THIS MINORITY: THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR ROMA. NEVERTHELESS, THIS COMMUNITY IS ASSOCIATED WITH A PLETHORA OF STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES. ONE OF THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH IS TO ANALYSE HOW THESE STEREOTYPES ARE BUILT IN ROMANIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE. AS FAR AS THE SCIENTIFIC MOTIVATION FOR STUDYING THIS PHENOMENON IS CONCERNED, THIS STEMS FROM THE NECESSITY OF UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS THROUGH WHICH THE PRESS CONTRIBUTES TO THE STIGMATIZATION OF A COMMUNITY WHICH IS ALREADY MARGINALIZED BY SOCIETY.

KEY WORDS: STEREOTYPES, DISCRIMINATION, MINORITIES, PRESS ARTICLES

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of structural transformations that have occurred after joining the European Union, one of Romania's priorities has been ensuring the protection of minorities, including that of the Roma community (one of the most vulnerable), according to the principle of equal treatment between people, irrespective of racial origin. With the help of international institutions, particularly the European Union, the year 2001 marked the issuing of the basic document regarding public policies for the social inclusion of the Roma, entitled "*The Romanian Government's Strategy to Improve the Situation of the Roma*"[1], which proposed a comprehensive approach to the community's hardships.[2] The first chapter of this document highlighted principles such as that of identity differentiation, which ensures the

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right of the Roma to protect their identity, the principle of equality, meant to nullify the disadvantages caused by ethnicity, the principle of decentralisation, which states that every Romanian institution has the responsibility to protect the Roma on a local scale, and respectively, the principle of social usefulness, which puts forward measures to satisfy Roma needs. [2] The seventh chapter of the Strategy formulates the Government’s and representative organisations’ courses of action in the domains of economics, public administration, child protection services, justice, health, culture and social security, for which financial tools were availed of, along with structural funding being allocated.[2]

Nevertheless, although the legal framework is aligned to European standards, Romani people still face systematic discrimination. The major issues of this community are: the lack of legal identity (which leads to the loss of significant civil rights), an educational deficit (*only 20% of Romani children of appropriate age are enrolled in kindergarten.[3] The situation of higher education is even more alarming: 25% of Romani people did not attend any primary school, nearly half of them have gone through maximum four grades, only 5% graduated high school and barely 0.2% have a Bachelor’s Degree[3]*), the absence of permanent income and the lack of professional qualifications.[3] These shortcomings give birth to negative stereotypes and prejudices which, currently, prevent numerous Romani people from becoming an equal part of Romanian society. In a dynamic in which the generalization of an ethnicity becomes an obstacle against obtaining fundamental rights, the press is of utmost importance in shaping the public image of an ethnic group, concomitantly using its influence on the public to contribute to either the solidification or the erasure of negative stereotypes about the Roma.

2. THE ACTUAL STATE OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN ROMANIA

This paper shall use the term “Roma/Romani” instead of “gypsy”, as this is the correct word in the Romani language to refer to the ethnic background of the Roma.[4] The origin of the term lies in the Prakrit word “dom”, meaning “person”, and refers both to the Indian immigrants of diverse ethnic background that ended up in Europe through mixed marriages, as well as to an ethnic subgroup, which still exists today on the territory of India.[4]

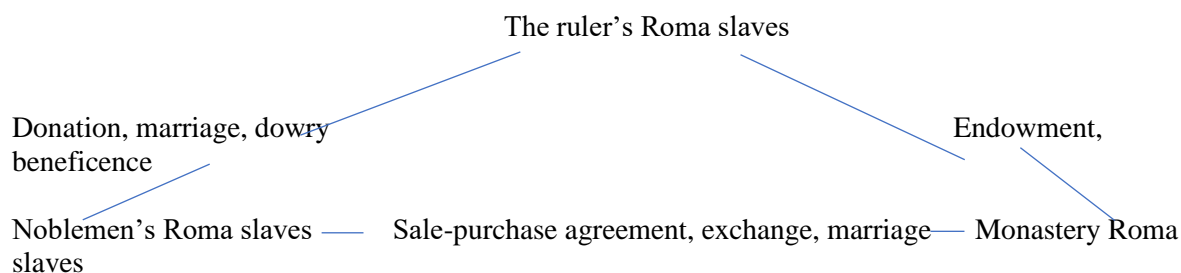
Throughout history, it has been erroneously believed that the Roma had come from Egypt or other places, this being the reason why they were named “aṭigani/ṭigani” (“gypsies”) in European states.[5] Years of research into the Romani language were necessary to gather the data we currently have about the origin of the aforementioned terms.[5]

The Old Roma	The <i>lom</i> branch	Caucasia, the North-West of the Black Sea
	The <i>rrom</i> branch	The Byzantine Empire, European countries
	The <i>dom</i> branch	Syria, North Africa, Spain

1.1 The separation of old Roma into three groups, in the Eastern Byzantium Empire, and their directions of migration

Source: Petre Petcuț, Delia Grigore, Mariana Sandu, *Istoria și tradițiile rromilor*, Editura Ro Media, Bucharest, 2003, p. 21

Historical records certify the fact that, on Romanian territory, Romani people have stepped foot ever since the birth of Early Wallachia and Moldavia.[6] For instance, there are sources according to which Mircea the Elder would have donated a considerable number of Roma to Cozia monastery. [6]



1.2 The process of transferring slaves from the ruler to monasteries and noblemen

Source: Petre Petcuț, Delia Grigore, Mariana Sandu, *Istoria și tradițiile rromilor*, Editura Ro Media, Bucharest, 2003, p. 26

Another turning point in the past of this community in Romania was the "Roma Holocaust". Although most of the victims of the Holocaust, of this horrible genocide, were Jews, the Nazi regime also targeted other groups that were considered to be inferior, including Roma people. Around 25,000 Roma were deported to Transnistria on the orders of Marshal Ion Antonescu.[7]

During the communist period, in Eastern European countries, including Romania, the Roma were subject to policies of assimilation into the majority population.[7] These policies included measures such as compulsory acceptance of jobs offered by the socialist state, mandatory education and forced relocation from rural areas to cities.[7] In theory, it seemed that the aim of these practices was to reduce the social and economic disparities between Roma and Romanians, but the reality is that once again this community was subjected to discrimination.[7] The Roma were to live in slums and poor neighborhoods, with limited access to health services, education and other resources. [7]

Today, the Roma are an ethnic community that still faces challenges in terms of fighting stereotypes, discrimination and marginalisation, with an often-troubled history in Europe and Romania, and what might help us understand who they are today is the tumultuous past they have had, which researchers are attempting to bring to light.

3. ETHNIC STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES IN ROMANIAN PRESS

In his research entitled "The Role of Mass Media in the Formation of Stereotypes. Mass Communication", Dan Cristian Ionașcu launches the idea that the image we have of reality is shaped considerably by press and mass-media.[7] The author also believes that the press has become a "social educator" for citizens, contributing to the creation of a mind map of the world that, many a time, generates inappropriate reactions to important events.[7] Another conclusion which he reaches through this idea is that the press, this teacher of contemporary society, can create and perpetuate stereotypes.[7] When the press repeats content, thus presenting certain characteristics as being fundamental for a group, what it does is only to contribute to the promotion of bias and prejudice.[7]

Over the years, campaigns by the Council of Europe and the European Union have conveyed a common message: "*there is a need to improve the social image of Roma*". [8] There are several reasons why the Roma are the target of so much stereotyping, among which, according to Dr George Porta, PhD, are their status as runaways, acquired on the move across Europe, their different customs and the fact that they were not Christians.

As far as their media portrayal is concerned, there are general opinions that claim that the way they are portrayed in the press is a serious and ongoing problem. [9] One proponent

of this is Jo Richardson, who discusses in her paper how media discourse surrounding this ethnic group, already misunderstood by much of the population, only fuels further fear and paranoia and can become a trigger for future ethnic conflict. [9] This therefore restricts the freedom of the Roma to have their own cultural identity.[9]

On the other hand, a study on Roma integration in Europe after the fall of communism, written by Adina Schneeweis, who analyzed press articles from Romania and the United Kingdom between 1990-2006, shows that the press discourse on integration and interethnic relations is dynamic and complex.[10] In other words, although there are publications whose articles may even unintentionally contribute to these stereotypes, most press articles criticize prejudices about Roma.[10] Overall, the press is considered to genuinely influence public perceptions of the Roma community, but this is not always negative and varies depending on how the subject is approached.[10]

Therefore, it can be argued that there is a growing concern about the way ethnic minorities are represented in the press, and most researchers believe that the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about such communities is an important piece of the Roma discrimination conundrum. At the same time, it is worth noting that there has been significant progress in journalists' discourse of social inclusion, but the problems still persist and addressing them is all the more important.

4. CASE STUDY

In 2011, the National Institute of Statistics reported that there were 16.79 million Romanians (88.9%), 1.22 million Hungarians (6.5%) and 621,600 Roma (3.3%) in Romania, with other ethnic groups in much lower proportions.[11] However, the statistical count based on individual statements did not present the reality of that time, especially as regards the Roma ethnic group, which amounted to between 1.5 and 2 million people according to sociological studies. [11] In 2022, according to the latest census, Romania's population has decreased and the number of Roma living in the country is considerably lower. [11] At the time, sociologist Gelu Duminiță stated that that year's census data was wrong and that NIS records did not contain the real number of Romania's ethnic Roma: "569,500 Roma in Romania according to the latest census. [12] First time in the last 30 years that the number of Roma has decreased (637,000 in 2011)".[12]

The reason why the Roma count is so unclear is that over a million of them hide their ethnicity.[11] This practice was born partly out of an ancestral fear of more than 500 years of enslavement and partly out of the harsh reality they live today, that of being discriminated against for their language, customs and skin color.[11] Several opinion polls carried out by sociologists reveal that two thirds of Romanians believe that Roma commit the highest number of crimes and that they are a real danger to this country.[11]

In 2008, "Hotnews" published an article on its page entitled "*Romania's image, shattered in Europe*", accompanied by the following explanation: "*Romania was once again jeered at these days by the European press.[14] Gypsies and beggars have brought to despair the Europeans who consider them, out of spite, ignorance or stupidity, true symbols of Romania.*"[14] From the opening lines of the article, there are several key aspects that highlight how negative stereotypes about Roma are perpetuated, and these are: the language used, the context in which the issue is presented and the lack of balance or alternative viewpoints. The term "gypsy" is considered pejorative and discriminatory, and its association with begging not only reduces the complexity of the identity of this ethnic group, but also shapes the idea that the majority of Roma people engage in undesirable behaviors. Moreover, Roma are depicted as a presence that generates conflict, a source of discontent for Europeans.

This kind of narrative, devoid of the broader context of the systematic discrimination they face, which is found in most of the selected articles, amplifies the idea that the Roma are a burden on society. Another problematic aspect is that the article does not present alternative perspectives or voices of the Roma community that could provide a response to the accusations made, and this one-dimensional approach is a fairly common practice of Romanian press.

In 2016, based on the same argument, that the Roma are responsible for the negative image that Romania has at international level, journalist Adrian Albu published an article on the news page "Cunoaște lumea", sarcastically entitled: "Roma once again tarnish Romania's image.[15] They ask for asylum in the USA because they would be persecuted in our country, where there are "neo-Nazi tendencies!!!".[15] The text is loaded with prejudice and discriminatory language, perpetuating the idea that Roma are predominantly involved in illegal activities. It also downplays the reality of discrimination and persecution, suggesting that in order to gain some advantage, Roma lie and victimize themselves. The overall tone of the article is negative and uses expressions that condemn the community for situations for which it bears no responsibility.

"Although the Roma criminal clans are often left to have their own way in Romania, although the Roma mafia writes the law in many places in our country, but also abroad, specializing in theft, robbery, human trafficking and other violations of the law, although in many towns the big shots of their ethnic group have built palaces with money they cannot justify, oh, the audacity, they are still the ones discriminated against.[15] (...) But because laws have been passed prohibiting direct truth-telling, few people dare to hit the nail of the head because they risk being accused of discrimination.[15] Such is the democracy in which we live! And as many Roma have no morals when they want to get something, they are now complaining of discrimination even at the US border, in order to obtain asylum." [15]

In addition, in order to further divide Roma from Romanians, the author resorts to conspiracy theories and deliberate confusion, invoking names such as Petre Roman and George Soros and concepts such as manipulation, by which he once again associates this ethnic group with criminality (theft, deceit). *"If today Romania is perceived internationally as the LAND OF THE GYPSIES, and there is a huge manipulation of Romania in this sense, the situation has two explanations: 1. The maneuver made in the 90s, under the influence of Petre Roman and George Soros, who staged the transformation of the name of gypsy into Rromani (later Roma), which created an international confusion between Romanians and gypsies and 2.[15] The high level of crime and begging through which the Roma in Romania have become known throughout Europe, thus casting a permanent shadow on the image of our country." [15]*

The article ends with the same sarcastic and provocative rhetoric that characterizes the entire text, with a postscript that questions all the efforts that Roma have made so far to change perceptions and eliminate negative stereotypes associated with their ethnicity: *"P.S. Trick question: Why do Roma still call themselves Gypsies? Haven't they learned that they have been Roma for the past 20 years?" [15]*

Another article in which the Roma are repeatedly presented as a negative symbol of Romania can be found on the news page of the EVZ.RO website, under the title *"In Paris, as it is in Ferentari! Romanian gypsies steal from the French in broad daylight. Correspondence from Marcela Feraru"*[15], which was published in 2019. Roma are described as being responsible for the increase in crime in France, and their actions have a negative impact on the international perception of Romania. *"In a kind of powerless fatalism, the problem of the gypsies who have arrived in France and the disaster they represent for*

Romania's image is so recurrent that it seems to no longer interest anyone in Bucharest"[15]. Fear and resentment are spreading among readers over claims that thefts are on the rise and that the authorities remain indifferent to the problems created by Roma abroad.

The visual and behavioral depiction of the community is another way in which stereotypes are perpetuated by the Romanian media. Thus, we find generalizations such as "*Gypsies in Romania steal from the French in broad daylight*", "*they usually act in organized gangs*", "*they speak loudly, are shameless and do not hesitate to smoke in enclosed spaces*", "*thick, black or bleached hair and with chipped polish on their nails*", "*the bags they carry on their backs*" [15], which build a clear image of individuals who do not fit into the standards of contemporary society, lacking education or principles.

Another problem that is the subject of this study is that the Romanian press tends to emphasize extreme cases, for example wealthy Roma who are on social welfare. These cases, although rare, have become representative for the whole community, and the general public may forget that the majority of Roma live in extreme poverty and face problems in getting a job. In 2018, the Romanian government submitted an EU-MIDIS report on the situation of Roma in Romania, in which the data showed that "Romania is among the countries where 80% of Roma live below the at-risk-of-poverty line; one Roma in three lives in a dwelling without running water; one in 10 Roma lives in a dwelling without electricity; one Roma in four and one Roma child in three lives in a household where a member of the family went to bed hungry at least once in the last month". However, an article was published by Observator News in the same year entitled: "They live on social benefits, but sleep in palaces with turrets", which not only perpetuates stereotypes about the Roma community, but also paints a distorted picture of the economic reality in Romania by presenting an isolated and sensational case. The offensive perspective offered by the article, "The gasoline in the limousine is paid for with welfare. This is pure, Romanian reality. Just a stone's throw from the capital, in the village of Bărbulești, poverty and sorrow are the words most often spoken. From the villa's gate, next to where the limousines are parked", underlines the idea that welfare abuse is a common practice among Roma and that their real sources of income come from illicit activities. The fact that considerable information about the Roma's real living conditions is omitted fuels the negative opinions of the audience.

Vremeanoua.ro presented in the same note, in January 2024, an article titled "One of the billionaire Roma from Murgeni bought a Lamborghini worth over 400,000 Euro". The narrative opens with the statement that "Vaslui County is under siege by the new wave of Roma billionaires from Murgeni", emphasizing the discrepancy between poverty and wealth, in the context of Romanians in the county facing high unemployment and poor infrastructure. This adds to a sense of inequality among the local population, reinforcing the idea that the Roma are prospering at the expense of the financially deprived population. Moreover, from the perspective of the negative stereotypes propagated by the media, there is the same tendency to associate the community with illicit activities, by describing a method of enriching themselves based on loans fraudulently obtained in England: "the scheme by which they got rich is extremely simple, but ingenious. They started with loans taken by people brought from their own country to England to study, then during the pandemic they set up their own companies for which they took the subsidy from the British state, which amounted to 200,000 pounds. The mechanism was simple. The leader of the network would take to England all sorts of people with a precarious situation from Murgeni and the surrounding area, set up companies, apply for the subsidy, then send them home in a package, with just 3000 euros. The profits are huge. With just ten companies, Murgeni's smart boys were producing 2 million pounds. Unfortunately, the number of such businesses is very large.

This is the secret behind the wealth of the Roma from Murgeni, who until yesterday were on welfare, and now they have mansions and luxury cars."

In the context of reporting an event in a press release, mentioning ethnicity is only justified when it is a key element in understanding the motivations behind an incident. In this regard, the news platform ProTv Romania published an article in May 2023 reporting a violent scene at a wedding in Brasov, which was headlined "Three jealous and armed individuals barged into a wedding in Brasov. A young man was seriously injured and taken to hospital". The factual account contained in the article was presented without disclosing the ethnicity of the three alleged culprits to the general public: "The individuals were allegedly armed and had gone to the wedding. Investigators say they were carrying a bat, knife, tear spray and even a pistol".

A month later, in contrast to this article, the same news website published an account of a violent event in Timisoara, in which the ethnicity of the perpetrators was mentioned, although this was not a factor in understanding the context in which the event took place: "Several Roma filmed terrorizing a family in Timisoara. They want to make them sell their house and move out". One of the most poignant stereotypes about the Roma community is their association with activities such as stealing, begging and fraud, a prejudice that has been reinforced by the Romanian media's highlighting of the Roma in violent contexts. In a society in which this group is already marginalized, narratives that put ethnicity in the spotlight can further destabilize social cohesion and lead to tensions, discrimination and stigmatization. Aside from mentioning this detail, the article uses provocative language that attempts to emphasize the danger that Roma represent for Romanians, "Romanian families are harassed by Roma ones".

5. CONCLUSIONS

The content analysis carried out for this research followed several directions that were addressed in the selected articles, one of the key aspects being language. With regard to "Hot News", "Cunoaște lumea" and "EVZ.RO" it was observed that the term frequently used to describe the community is "Gypsy" and not "Roma", without taking into account its pejorative implications. Recurrent words and expressions were identified to be associated with Roma, such as, "thief", "beggar", "parasite", "gang of criminals", derogatory terms by which the whole community was stigmatized. The tone with which the narrative of the news stories was presented in the press was generally critical or ironic and often alarmist, attempting to generate an emotional reaction from readers, such as fear or contempt. Also, the focus on ethnicity in the reporting on Roma is not justified in comparison to other ethnic groups and is merely a way in which Roma are associated with acts of violence or begging.

In the case of the articles analyzed, one of the ways in which the media perpetuated negative stereotypes about Roma is generalization. Publications such as "Observator.ro" and "Vremea nouă" presented individual cases of fraud or abuse as typical for the entire Roma community, without taking into account its diversity and complexity. Sensitive subjects, which are also very rare, such as the case of the Roma billionaire from Vaslui, were tackled without journalists taking responsibility for the tensions that can be generated by the preconception that the majority of Roma receive aid from the Romanian state on the basis of a non-existent motivation. Another perspective that has led to generalization, more precisely to the association of Roma with brutal, uncontrollable behaviour, is the unjustified mention of ethnicity in violent events, which would not normally have required such details to be specified, as could be observed in the case of the articles published by Pro TV. Such

stereotypes and prejudices are perpetuated by the generalization that characterizes the narrative of articles in the press.

Another essential aspect towards understanding how the press influences the perception of the public on Roma is the lack of a socio-economic or historical context, within which various events presented in the previous article took place. None of the articles (presenting Roma as the ones responsible for Romania's negative international image) included details about the precarious conditions in which they live in Romania, caused by the lack of education or of a decent workplace. Despite the fact that members of the Romanian government highlight the real situation of the Roma people in Romania in annual reports, characterized by financial hardship and instability, the media prefers to paint a picture of a powerful ethnic group owning "limousines" and "palaces with turrets," often portrayed as swindling the state to acquire these goods. Furthermore, any mention of the Roma's long history of marginalization and discrimination within Romania is absent.

In many of the cases presented by the news websites mentioned, members of the Roma community may have varied opinions about the events presented, but these were not reflected in the articles underlying the research. In order to understand the complexity of the events that took place within this ethnic group, it is important to disseminate their voices in the media, an aspect that is missing in the process of news reporting in the Romanian press. In this context, we could observe that this minority does not have leaders who maintain a constant dialogue with political leaders in order to obtain rights, and their representation is minimal. This issue of how the Roma are represented at the political level within the Romanian state, which is evident from the ease with which they were stigmatized in the articles mentioned, is one of the potential directions that could be addressed in future research.

In the light of what has been presented and analyzed, another critical aspect that outlines the negative perception of the Roma has emerged, which is the absence of positive reports about the contributions that the Roma have to Romanian society. During the course of the research, the extent of the stereotypes and prejudices identified made it increasingly evident that the Romanian press tends to contribute to the perpetuation of negative images of Roma and neglect the positive perspectives within the community. Thus, we noticed how rare are the press articles that provide a correct contextualization of the events they report. There were, however, a few examples of well-written articles, sourced from the DW Media news website, which demonstrated that good practice by journalists, such as providing historical context, explaining discriminatory action and including the perspectives of members of the Roma community, aspects that reflect the complexity of ethnic diversity, can dismantle negative stereotypes.

Changing social perceptions about the Roma community can be achieved by promoting the reflection of the more nuanced reality they face. In addition, the identification of these gaps in media literacy may provide a foundation for future research exploring the representation of Roma socially, politically or culturally. The contrast between the prevailing negative accounts and the example that manages to deconstruct prejudice by promoting social inclusion, highlights a new perspective upon the systemic issues of Romanian press.

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