

# Roma Minority in Romania and its Media Representation

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to put into light main aspects of the relationship between the image of Roma as perceived by the majority of population and its representation in the Romanian press from 1990 until 2006.*

*The representation of Roma is considered a cause and, in the same time, a consequence of the identity problem of this population as an ethnic group, on one side, and of its social status, on the other side.*

*The situation of Roma in the Romanian society, the modalities of Roma portrayal in press and the factors that influence its representation are addressed in the paper.*

## Keywords

Group identity; Roma minority; image; media; Romania

After the year 1990, the role and the impact of mass media have often been emphasized in debates regarding violence and discrimination against Roma. Until 2007 when Romania became member of the European Union, the press was considered an active source of stereotypes anti-Roma, the coverage of this minority issues focusing the attention mainly on elements with negative connotation such as violence, crime, illegal activities etc. But is the press indeed responsible for the negative portrayal of Roma group or is just reinforcing a „mirror image”<sup>1</sup> created by ingroup-outgroup perceptions, image that already exists in the public consciousness? The representation of Roma could be considered a cause and, in the same time, a consequence of the identity problem

<sup>1</sup> Brofenbrenner, U., quoted by Alexis Heraclides, „Socialization to conflict. A case study of the national historical ingroup/outgroup images in the educational system in Greece”, *The Greek Review of Social Research* 38 (Jan.-Apr.1980). The image of a group/nation is „the totality of attributes that a person recognizes when he contemplates that nation or group” - Scott, W. A., „Psychological and Social Correlates of International Images” in Kelman (ed.), *International Behaviour* (Holt-Rinehart and Winston, 1965),72.

of this population as an ethnic group<sup>2</sup>, on one side, and of its social status, on the other side.

The ethnic identity is, in essence, a past-oriented form of identity, embedded in the cultural heritage of the individual or group. This form of identity contrasts with a sense of belonging linked with citizenship within a political state, or present-oriented affiliations to specific groups demanding professional, occupational or class loyalties<sup>3</sup>. The difference between the ethnicity claimed by the people themselves and that attributed to them by others is addressed. In either case is very probable that the perception of ethnicity will not rest upon some scientific sociological or anthropological truth, but on subjective interpretation<sup>4</sup>. This subjective position regarding ethnic identity could transform the differences between ethnic groups into source of conflict, as the theories about the nature of conflict reveal.

On the other side, an objective dimension of Roma image could consist in their status as „problem people“, due to economic and educational inequalities among them and the other groups (i.e. Romanians and Hungarians, in particular). The economic variables, associated with the cultural ones, determine an over-representation of Roma in certain socially prescribed roles, which make them „undesirable“<sup>5</sup> and isolate them at the society's periphery.

For a broader picture of Roma representation has to be highlighted how these visible and objective indicators could easily get transformed into perceptions and thus became stereotypes. Stereotypes are rooted in the web of social relations between groups and „do not derive solely or even mostly from the workings of our cognitive system“<sup>6</sup>. The cognitive differentiation effects associated with categorization let space for „illusory correlation“ and exaggeration of descriptive attributes still further to form the full-blown stereotypes. In shaping the ingroup-outgroup messages there is habitual to perceive „unambiguous, simplified and familiar messages“, which tend to be dichotomized<sup>7</sup>, and media represent one of the main sources of simplified and penetrating messages, making characterizations and pointing out those groups that do not fit the dominant social model. Symbols and stereotypes are useful means of quickly bringing to the audience's collective

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2 The „ethnic group“ notion is considered as Weber defines it, referring to „those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or of both, or because of memories of colonisation or migration“ in Montserrat Guiberman, John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader. Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration* (Polity Press, 1997), 2.

3 G. De Vos, L. Ramanucci-Ross (eds.), *Ethnic Identity. Cultural continuities and Change* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1982), 363.

4 The representation of the identification with an ethnic group can be accomplished through the use of symbols. As Anthony Cohen appreciates „ethnicity has come to be regarded as a mode of action and of representation: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity“ (Montserrat Guiberman, John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader. Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration* (Polity Press, 1997), 4.

5 „...a group's culturally distinctive behavior patterns or the particular socio-economic circumstances in which it finds itself could provide the seed-bed in which certain stereotypical perceptions about it could readily flourish“ (Rupert Brown, *Prejudice. Its Social Psychology* (Blackwell, Oxford & Cambridge, 1995), 84.

6 Brown, Rupert, Rupert Brown, *Prejudice. Its Social Psychology* (Blackwell, Oxford & Cambridge, 1995), 86. Stereotypes are defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as „conventional, formulaic, and usually oversimplified conception, opinion or belief“ (C.C. Wilson, F. Gutierrez, *Race, Multiculturalism and Media. From Mass to Class Communication* (Sage Publications, 1995), 61.

7 Alexis Heraclides, „Socialization to conflict. A case study of the national historical ingroup/outgroup images in the educational system in Greece“, *The Greek Review of Social Research* 38 (Jan.-Apr.1980): 33.

consciousness a character's anticipated value system and/or behavioural expectations. Usually they are already embedded in audience's assessment system and easily accepted. Besides, the images that correspond with the expectancies of the audience more probably resist change and are easily internalized.

The socialization process and the acceptance of a group membership, as explained by the theories of group dynamics, changes attitudes and behaviour and influence the ingroup-outgroup image. The openness in accepting diversity is limited, conformity and obedience to general tendencies become the common behaviour. The image of Roma group seen by other groups has evolved under the auspices of socio-cultural transmission and inter-groups comparison.

The stereotype is often combined with prejudice and becomes a dangerous instrument for conflict outburst. Stereotyping and frustration-aggression dynamic have received considerable attention in the psychological and sociological literature on inter-group relations<sup>8</sup>. In Milton M. Gordon's analysis on ethnic group relations, the element of stereotyping appear to be rather widespread cognitive inadequacies reinforced by affective tendencies and lack of equal-status between groups<sup>9</sup>. The inter-group relations could degenerate because of variables such as<sup>10</sup>: a) frustration-aggression mechanisms in which aggression is easily produced by frustration and directed toward scapegoats; b) felt dissatisfaction phenomena based on mechanism of relative deprivation; c) calculation of success chances, which seems to be exclusively an intellectual or cognitive phenomena, but, in fact, is affected by emotional considerations; d) conflict escalation, the tendency for parties in conflict to react to each other's threats and reprisals by escalating the level of aggression, punishment and revenge.

Within this framework, the paper highlights the main aspects of the relationship between the image of Roma as perceived by the majority of population and its representation in the Romanian press.

### **Roma in Romania between 1990 and 2006: ethnic or social minority?**

According to the 2002 census, in Romania, 535,250 (2.5%) people out of a total population of approximately 22 million identified themselves as Roma (for comparison, Romanians 89.5%, while Hungarians 6.6%). It is widely acknowledged, however, that this figure is inexact; estimates of the actual figure of Roma in Romania range between 1.5-2.0 million<sup>11</sup>. The disparity between the real number of Roma and the census figures is undoubtedly influenced by the strong anti-Roma prejudice in Romanian society, which discourages Roma from official acknowledging of their identity. Almost ten years later, in 2011, the official figure of Roma population in Romania was 619,000 people out of 19 million (3.2%)<sup>12</sup>.

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8 For a classic statement see G. W. Allport, *The nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, Addison-Wesley, 1954).

9 M.M. Gordon, „Theory of Racial and Ethnic Group Relations”, Nathan Glazer, D. P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity. Theory and Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1975), 97.

10 M.M. Gordon, „Theory of Racial and Ethnic Group Relations”, Nathan Glazer, D. P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity. Theory and Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1975), 98, n. 9.

11 „State of Impunity” paraphrasing Jean-Pierre Liegeois and Nicolae Gheorghe, „Roma/Gypsies: An European Minority” (London, Minority Rights Group, 1995), [www.errc.org](http://www.errc.org), viewed on May 17, 2003.

12 „Recensământul populației și al locuitorilor 2011”, [http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Comunicat\\_DATE\\_PROVIZORII\\_RPL\\_2011\\_.pdf](http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Comunicat_DATE_PROVIZORII_RPL_2011_.pdf), viewed on May 12, 2003

In the 1990s, the general situation of Roma population does not seem to improve much and in many cases became markedly worse. In Romania, as in other Central and East European countries, Roma had to face difficulties rising from unemployment<sup>13</sup>, deteriorating living conditions, high levels of illiteracy, indirect and direct forms of discrimination, community „skinhead“ and police violence, all of which continue to push Roma further to the margins of society.<sup>14</sup> Despite this general situation, among the Romanians became overspread the image of Roma that became „millionaires“ overnight, image determined by Roma’s life style and their disputed trade activities. This phenomenon of invidious comparison, determined by the discrepancy between the traditional image of Roma, „uneducated“ and „undesirable“ and the new image that draws them as enriched people, in a situation of rank disequilibrium<sup>15</sup>, facilitated the propagation of discontent among the majority of population. This perception, associated with Roma’s cultural and behavioural differences, labelled as „uncivilized“ people, with „non-human“ behaviour<sup>16</sup>, thieves and beggars represented an active source of conflict in early 1990s.

In 1991, Human Rights Watch reported that: „Ethnic hatred and violence against Gypsies in Romania has escalated dramatically since the 1989 revolution. During the last 20 months, rarely a month went without another Gypsy village being attacked. Gypsy homes have been burned, their possessions destroyed, they have been chased out of villages and, in certain areas, have not been allowed to return in their homes [...]“<sup>17</sup>. In most of the cases Roma represented the scapegoats for mob frustration and dissatisfaction caused by the difficulties of transition.

### Conflicts between Roma and Romanians

A short overview of the conflictual situations between Roma and the majority population is useful in order to distinguish the manner in which media mirrored these events. Ian F. Hancock, quoting Cohn, suggests that Roma exist for responding to a need of non-Roma for a marginal „contra-culture“<sup>18</sup> in order to play the scapegoating role for majority’s economic and social problems. In Southeast European countries have been identified three types of violence against Roma: community violence, skinhead and other racially motivated attacks and unwarranted police abuse<sup>19</sup>. From among these, in Helsinki Watch reports are identifiable two types of violence that could characterize Roma-Romanians relationship during ‘90s: mob / community violence and police abuse. The mob violence was present in early ‘90s

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13 Between 1990 and 2006, the rate of Romani unemployment in Romania is between 80 and 90% and in some communities even 100%. Regarding the skills level, 80% of Romanian Roma are unskilled and only 16% of skilled workers are skilled in a modern profession (“Roma in Romania”, [www.errc.org/publications](http://www.errc.org/publications), viewed on May 17, 2003).

14 „Looking at Human Security in a Regional Context – The Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE”, [www.osce.org/odihr/cprsi/index.php?s=8c](http://www.osce.org/odihr/cprsi/index.php?s=8c), viewed on May 13, 2003.

15 Jeffrey Z. Rubin, Dean G. Pruitt, Sung H. Kim, *Social Conflict. Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement* (McGraw-Hill Inc., New York, 1994), 19.

16 Isabel Fonseca, *Bury me standing. The Gypsies and their journey* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995), 166. The author quotes some statements of Romanians about Roma’s habitudes: „Even people who work all day do not have horses like theirs“, „Even the smallest Gypsy children are thieving monkeys“, „They are millionaires“, „They beat us when we tell them to get off our land“, „They kept horses up there“ [in the apartments assigned to and destroyed by Gypsies (n.n.)].

17 Human Rights Watch quoted in „State of Impunity“, [www.errc.org](http://www.errc.org), viewed on May 15, 2003

18 Ian F. Hancock, „La fonction du mythe tsigane“ in Patrick Williams (ed.), *Tsiganes: Identite, Evolution* (Syros Alternative, 1989).

19 „Looking at Human Security in a Regional Context – The Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE”, [www.osce.org/odihr/cprsi/index.php?s=8c](http://www.osce.org/odihr/cprsi/index.php?s=8c), viewed on May 11, 2003

(1990-1995) and consisted in perpetration of violent events especially in villages or small towns (i.e. Bolintin Deal - 1991, Hadareni - 1993, Bacu - 1995) with significant number of Roma inhabitants. The attacks against Roma were often encouraged by the non-intervention of police in defending them. Helsinki Watch reported that „violent attacks against the homes and persons of Gypsies, and the failure of Romanian authorities to provide protection against such violence, are a serious human rights concern”<sup>20</sup>.

As a result of Targu Mures clash (1990) between Romanians and Hungarians many Roma were singled out for prosecution, even though was acknowledged they played a small role in the violence. The conclusions of Helsinki Watch investigations in this case describe how Roma had been made scapegoats and held responsible for the clashes<sup>21</sup>. In the case of Targu Mures the police had totally failed in anticipating the violence and responding to calls for assistance once the violence was in progress.

Since 1996 until 2000, although mob violence against Roma decreased, it was replaced by systematic police raids on Roma houses, associated with high levels of brutality. What about the legal resolution of abuses, the situation remained unchanged: police officers or individuals accused of ill-treating Roma were rarely charged with a crime. The frequent raids of the police were often justified as necessary for preventing the possible Roma crimes, being based on prejudices regarding Roma' behaviour.

### **The portrayal of Roma in the Romanian press<sup>22</sup>**

In the 1990s until the year 2006, when refer to Roma, the journalists invariably tend to exploit the fictitious image of this community, catering to a public familiar with stereotypes about Roma. In general there is a world of difference between Roma' daily reality and the perception that outsiders have about it. Although the information regarding Roma exists, the mythical image of this non-integrated population persists together with stereotypes and „clichés” on the base of anti-thetical approach. In this context, media have their greatest effect when they are used in a manner that reinforces and channels attitudes and opinions that are consistent with the psychological makeup of the person and the social structure of the groups that form the target audience. The influence of media is evident when they reinforce rather than attempt to change the opinions of those in their audience. Thus, the media audience see only a slice of the Roma community, one that do not jar their preconceptions, but reinforce and even legitimize them.

Media's role does not consist only in reinforcing an already existent image about Roma, but it contributes significantly in shaping this image. The technique developed by the mass media in dealing with Roma and others outside the mainstream involve symbols and stereotypes. Because they deal with a wide audience, come to rely on symbols and stereotypes as shorthand ways of communicating through headlines, characters and pictures<sup>23</sup>. The symbol was the term that called up a whole set of characteristics ascribed to those associated with the term in the minds of the mass audience. News media rarely covered activities in Roma community, unless, in accordance with media's „surveillance function”, they were perceived

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20 Human Rights Watch, *Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Persecution of Gypsies in Romania* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991).

21 Human Rights Watch, „Overview of human rights developments”, [www.hrw.org/europe/romania.php](http://www.hrw.org/europe/romania.php), viewed on May 10, 2003

22 The examination of the references to Roma population in the Romanian media concentrates on the period from the year 1990 to the year 2000.

23 Clint C. Wilson, Felix R. Gutierrez, *Multiculturalism and the Media. From mass to class communication* (Sage Publications, 1995), 43.

as a threat to the established order, or, in accordance with the „correlation function“, they were covered during colourful cultural festivals<sup>24</sup>.

In the 1990s, one overriding factor characterized media representation of Roma: the information was not originated from a Romani source nor involved consultation with Roma themselves. Indeed, most of this news appeared without Roma even being aware of them<sup>25</sup>. This happened also because, in general, Roma tried to avoid as much as possible the contact with the external world. Although the mythical image created a Roma' ethnic identity which does not reflect Roma' reality, this situation did not provoked Roma reactions until this community started to redefine its identity. In fact, the denial of the fiction has, in many cases, a contrary effect: its repetition reinforce the stereotypes. The stereotypes, once created, remain active and become difficult to convince media to broadcast well documented information regarding Roma. In case the media inform that one Roma family or one person belonging to this group is involved in a crime, whole Roma community living in that area is suspected for crime.

According to the above mentioned arguments, could be considered three lines of approach of Roma subject in media: a) the black chronicle (i.e. crime and violence), which has been pushed from serious journalism into the yellow press; b) the „romantic stream“, a reaction to the lack of proper information and a consequent reliance on literature that present Roma in a biased picture; c) the „realist approach“, whereby the media try to view problems from the point of view of the majority: „It's nice what you say about Roma, but have you tried living next to them?“.

### Violence as a leitmotif in characterizing Roma in the 1990s

Generally speaking, the media are quite active in promoting stereotypes and in press articles the Roma people is presented mainly in violent contexts. In 1998, some titles from two national newspapers show this attitude: „A Bloody Settlement of Accounts between Two Gypsies“ (Adevarul, May 20, 1998), „The Trial of Fane Capatana Confrontation between Gypsy Mafias“ (Adevarul, June 24, 1998), „The Gypsies from Cazanesti Fight for the Stolen Aluminium“ (Adevarul, July 13, 1998), „The Fights Between Gypsy Mafias take a Break. The Perpetrators of „Assault from Straulesti“ were Arrested“ (Ziua, July 14, 1998), „Two Groups of Gypsies, Armed with Baseball Bats, Fought in the Zone of Strandul Tineretului“ (Ziua, July 29, 1998).

A study conducted by the Intercultural Institute in Timisoara as art of a project on „the role of the press in harmonizing interethnic relations“, revealed the frequency of the key words in articles about Roma in the main newspapers for the period from May 1995 to April 1996. The most frequent categories had to do with „colour of skin“, „infraction“, „Romani ethnicity“ and „group“<sup>26</sup>. Another study, realized by the Agency for Press Monitoring „Academia Catavencu“ and the Foundation Romani Criss, revealed the results of monitoring six newspapers (five national and one local), during the period February-August 2000. Roma minority

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24 Clint C. Wilson, Felix R. Gutierrez, *Multiculturalism and the Media. From mass to class communication* (Sage Publications, 1995), n. 26. Wilson and Gutierrez, describing the functions of media, take over the classification of the major functions of communication made by Harold Lasswell: 1) **surveillance** of the environment, disclosing threats and opportunities affecting the value position of the community and of the component parts within it; 2) **correlation** of the different parts of society in responding to the environment; 3) **transmission** of the social heritage from one generation to the next.

25 „The Media and the Roma in Contemporary Europe: Facts and Fictions“, Prague, September 1996, [www.per-usa.org/media.htm](http://www.per-usa.org/media.htm), viewed on May 9, 2003

26 „The Media and the Roma in Contemporary Europe: Facts and Fictions“, Prague, September 1996, [www.per-usa.org/media.htm](http://www.per-usa.org/media.htm), viewed on May 8, 2003

is protagonist in 41.35% from a total of 343 articles that were analysed. The major part of events described were conflictual, mainly of criminal nature, and almost all the stereotypes used have negative connotation: „Gypsy offender“, „violent Gypsy“, „Gypsy mafia“, „dirty Gypsy“, „illiterates“, „Gypsy law“<sup>27</sup>. If the stereotype related to Roma' skin colour is mentioned by the first study as one of the most frequent in newspaper's articles during 1995-1996, the second study does not point it out among the most frequent stereotypes in the year 2000. This reveals a change of attitude from racial discrimination to Roma representation as a social problem. But from the results of both studies comes out the persistence of a dominant feature of Roma image, as it is present in the newspapers: aggressiveness.

Part of Roma associations and Roma representatives<sup>28</sup> considered that this image reflected by the press was mainly originated in the Romanian Police practice of discriminatory recording and publishing of Roma criminal offenders. The statistics on criminality published by the police and provided to the press in specific cases of criminal offences, are seen as source of anti-Roma hostility among the public opinion<sup>29</sup>.

But is there true that Roma, as a group, are more inclined to crimes that are non-Roma? The fact that a disproportionate amount of petty crime is committed by Roma does not mean that there is a cause-effect relationship between being a Roma and committing a crime. Yet that is what is implied when it is mentioned that it was a Rom who robbed somebody. Is it Roma who are over-represented on the crime list or is it the unemployed? Is it the case that Roma commit more crimes, or that the police are more likely to arrest someone if is Rom? When audience is informed that a suspect is a Rom, they are being told not only what is perpetrator's ethnicity, but also that the ethnicity is important to the account. This facilitates the connection between Roma and criminality in the minds of auditors.

In a number of cases of anti-Roma violence, members of the majority community justified their behaviour, in part, by the alleged failure of law-enforcement officials to take appropriate steps when members of the Romani community committed illegal acts. This led them to engage in what they called „popular justice“, evicting Roma from their villages, including some who were not accused of any crime. But how media presented these conflicts?

The press coverage of the conflicts between Roma and the Romanians have evolved during years from emphasizing the deficiencies of the judicial system, which failed to punish the allegedly criminal behaviour of Roma, to highlighting the unlawful behaviour of Roma themselves, transforming them in scapegoats. A change is noticeable also in sources of information: if the 1991 incident in Bolintin Deal brought forth a wide variety of articles, many of which largely speculative, later there was greater use of official sources and local documentation. There was an increase in journalists' use of police jargon, sometimes repeating verbatim terms found in the police inspectorate's press releases: „Gypsy, without occupation“, „with (or without) penal antecedents“, „with (or without) legal domicile in locality“, „known criminal“ etc<sup>30</sup>.

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27 „Prezenta populatiei Roma in presa romaneasca“, [www.mma.ro/database/romanicriss.ro](http://www.mma.ro/database/romanicriss.ro), viewed on May 14, 2003

28 „Romania: Roma Ethnicity record in police files“, report drafted by Nicolae Gheorghe, CRISS association, Convention of Roma Association, [www.riga.lv/minelres/archive/](http://www.riga.lv/minelres/archive/) and „Images and Issues: Coverage of the Roma in the Mass Media in Romania“, Sinaia, 1997, [www.per-usa.org/imgs\\_iss.htm](http://www.per-usa.org/imgs_iss.htm), viewed on May 16, 2003

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30 „Images and Issues: Coverage of the Roma in the Mass Media in Romania“, Sinaia, 1997, [www.per-usa.org/imgs\\_iss.htm](http://www.per-usa.org/imgs_iss.htm), viewed on May 7, 2003.

## Final remarks

In this paper two main arguments are addressed: the role of ingroup-outgroup relations in shaping a certain perception of Roma image and the importance of media representation for the evolvement of the interethnic relations. The relationship between media and those portrayed by the media influence the attitudes of the other ethnic groups in rapport with Roma. In most of the cases misinformation is determined by the need of the others (the major part of auditors) to have the confirmation of their own beliefs (as individuals and as a group) and this deepens the distance between reality and its perception. The dichotomization in terms of „we“ and „they“, „good“ and „bad“, proliferated by press feeds the social need for identity, and creates or strengthens stereotypes. For responding to this need in many cases the truth about Roma is ignored and this helps the wide spreading of discriminatory views. The Roma identity is based traditionally on myths that presented them on a romantic manner, leaving space for speculations about their daily life, speculations, which became part of ingroup-outgroup imagery. These false images, that cannot be easily removed as they are internalized and correspond to an „historical image“ about Roma, make difficult the real communication between Roma and the Romanians. In the 1990s, the syndrome of finding in Roma the scapegoats for unpleasant situations came out of the stereotyped image of Roma, combined with the prejudices about their „aggressive“ character. The situation started to change after the year 2000 due to socialization with problem-solving rather than with the conflict.

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