

Roma Issues in Romania - The Year 2000 and Beyond

The last official National Census (in January 1992) registered 409,111 Roma in Romania. However, it has to be considered that only a fraction of the Roma people would have enough courage to declare themselves as such. The fact that it is difficult in principle to obtain precise figures is due to a basic ambiguity about identity, ethnicity and prejudice. The most conservative estimations of the Roma population in Romania would put their number somewhere between one and two million people. Some Roma activists assume that the numbers are much higher, even exceeding three million. Additional difficulties in registering Roma arise due to their geographical spread, cultural diversity and high degree of social stratification, which in turn make it impossible to develop separate strategies on the Roma. Moreover, the Roma of Romania are being faced with a high degree of assimilation into the majority populations (be it Romanian or, as is the case mainly in Transylvania, Hungarian) and some important elements of Roma ethnic identity have simply disappeared over the centuries. This is not only true of the Romani language (in Romania, only 40 per cent of the people who declared themselves to be Roma speak Romani as their native language - in Bulgaria, the percentage is 98-99, in Hungary, only 20 per cent, and in Spain it is zero per cent), but also of many other historical Roma characteristics (occupational, educational, housing, structure of families etc.).

From 1990-1995, the successive Iliescu's governments set the general framework for the protection of national minorities in Romania. This framework has for all practical purposes not changed since, despite the fact that it was developed as a response to a kind of "political command" by the governmental coalition in power at that time (which included junior partners like the nationalistic, xenophobic and isolationist Greater Romania Party or the Party of Romanian National Unity). The actual system of protection of national minorities in Romania is legislatively based upon Article 4 of the Electoral Law¹, which stipulates that the NGOs of national minorities can take part in elections and be represented in the lower chamber of Parliament (i.e. the Chamber of Deputies) on condition that one of their candidates accumulates at least five per cent of the average number of votes needed by the representatives of political parties to be elected. Initially, this system was developed to "balance" the legislative and electoral influence of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (DUHR), but it was also a result of internal and external propaganda. After the elections of November 1996, at which time the DUHR joined the new governing coalition, the Hungarian leaders in Ro-

1 Law no. 65 of 15 June 1992.

mania realized that: *first*, to reform the Iliescu's system would be very difficult; *second*, the action required to create real reform of the system for the protection of national minorities in Romania would probably have delayed the fulfilment of the "corporate" tasks that DUHR had promised its electorate they would fulfil; *third*, because of this, the Iliescu's system was not a threat to the fulfilment of DUHR goals, and had the advantage that *fourth*, the entire system cost less (e.g. in 1999, a total amount of 40 billion Romanian Lei - approximately US-Dollar 2.5 million - a tiny drop in the ocean of the State budget. It still remains to be seen whether this system will be sustainable in the near future - and I do believe it will, as it comes "cheap", but also gives a "good impression"). Still, seen from a distance - "from a satellite view" so to speak - it was possible to view public policies on national minorities in Romania as a remarkable achievement, especially in the South-eastern European context² and specifically within the context of the Yugoslavian conflict and the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

Except for developments concerning the Roma minority, the year 1999 could be considered as one dominated by stagnation with respect to public policies on national minorities. Moreover, especially compared to the period before November 1996, I can say that important progress has been made linked with this extraordinary national minority in Romania. In my opinion, there are only two national minorities in Romania with specific and major problems: the Hungarians and the Roma. All the other minorities (Armenians, Jews, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Bulgarians, Turks etc.) "only" have problems preserving their cultural thesaurus, native language etc. Basically, these other minorities have the necessary resources to ensure the fulfilment of their interests (for example, they have access to the necessary financial sources). I would even say that the Hungarians know how to take care of their corporatist interests very well, and the political context after 1996 has been to their advantage - of course, I am not saying that it has been easy for them. But the experience of the years following 1989 shows that Hungarians in Romania are very resourceful (first and foremost, politically and humanly), and that they can make themselves heard and get responses to the Hungarian communities' petitions in Romania.

On the other hand, the Roma situation is in certain respects more serious. The issues the Roma communities are facing (organizational, social, educational, sanitary-medical, occupational, cultural, housing, discrimination etc.) require quick and firm solutions that would significantly improve the condition of the majority of our Roma co-nationals. Far from being only a matter of "social integration", the Roma issue in Romania is extremely complex, as the situation of most Roma communities is very complex. The Roma populace's main characteristic in Romania is a high stratification level and at the same time there is high degree of assimilation into the majority populations (Romanian

2 Cf. the article in the Washington Post of 1 June 1999 written by Mr. James Rosapepe, the US Ambassador in Bucharest.

or Hungarian, but also, in the Doubrodja region, Turkish). This reality relates, organizationally, to a diversity of forms, some of them historical, others inspired by recent developments. Thus, Roma public policies must be geared, on the one hand, towards people organized in modern NGOs. Nevertheless, they must, on the other, also include people who call their leaders the "King of all Roma" or the "Emperor of all Roma" (these two are in fact cousins and their "royal" and, respectively, "imperial" palaces are on the same street in Sibiu, a city right in the centre of the country).

Many important aspects of Roma problems are common to the majority of the population, irrespective of its ethnicity. Apart from that, in addition to "regular" transitional difficulties, the Roma minority has been confronted with certain other problems, the most relevant of them being discrimination. As long as mainstream newspapers still publish ads like "Security personnel required, no Roma need apply", or "one-room flat for sale in non-Gypsy residential block", it is obvious that there is something wrong with a lot of people in Romania. And what is more, it took the European Union to tell us we were required to care for our citizens of Roma ethnic origin. One of the few political criteria that have to be fulfilled, if Romania is to become part of West-European structures some time in the future, would be the Roma situation in Romania would have to be significantly improved (curiously, it seems that all too often international bodies have to "remind" us of our responsibility to take care of our citizens, of our children etc.).

Since 1999, there has been a sort of political consensus among the main parties that the Roma issue is sensitive and important for the country. Because in Romania, as all over Europe, the Roma seem to prefer to vote left or centre-left, probably because the rhetoric of these parties emphasize phrases like "social protection", "equality of chances" etc. Several Roma organizations in Romania are ready to support these parties. On the other hand, the existing governing coalition (of centre-right orientation) is interested in Roma issues because of the strategic importance the coalition parties attach to the accession of Romania into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Any government will continue to act for the improvement of the Roma situation in Romania irrespective of what governing coalition will be formed after the late-autumn 2000 elections and for very different reasons. By and large, as a group, the Roma in Romania have a very limited electoral potential. They vote mostly according to political criteria and give most of their votes to left and centre-left political parties. But even if it is only on a minimal basis, the Roma electoral potential should not be neglected. In the case of close elections, especially in the presidential elections, Roma votes could make the difference between the winners and the losers.

In order to try to avoid the political distortions in an electoral year like the year 2000, the government believed that one of the most suitable forms to elaborate a "national strategy on Roma" was through a PHARE project. This would require any (present and future) government to take steps in order to

ameliorate the Roma situation in Romania, including elimination of any kind of discrimination.

Through the Department for the Protection of National Minorities (DPNM), the government of Romania has received two million EURO within the framework of the RO 9803.01 PHARE project, in order to develop a national strategy for the Roma and to test it through pilot programmes. After it became operational at the end of March 2000, the PHARE project RO 9803.01 was off and running. By the end of the year 2000, a White Paper will be published, which should include the already famous "national strategy on the Roma", as a joint proposal of the government and the Working Group of Roma Associations (WGRA). This White Paper will then be the subject of public debates.

Even if it is true that PHARE project RO 9803.01 was delayed for several months, it is remarkable that the project was started at all and that it reached an advanced level of development even before PHARE grants. This is due to the active partnership between government and civil society, especially Roma organizations and associations. In 1999, there were several gatherings of Roma associations (in Mangalia, Predeal, Sibiu, Bucharest etc.). This partnership with the government came about through the protocol between the DPNM and the WGRA, signed on 3 May 1999. According to this protocol, the WGRA is to assign experts to the Inter-Ministerial Sub-Commission on the Roma (ISR), which includes representatives of the WGRA and representatives from different ministries on a parity basis with all ISR members sharing the same rights. Moreover, the ISR has two co-chairmen, one named by the government, and the other by the WGRA. Monthly ISR meetings are held in order to analyse the drafts of "sectorial strategies" (in fields as education, health, culture, housing etc.), and to discuss the general principles of the forthcoming national strategy on the Roma. Almost more important than the ISR debate is the atmosphere based on mutual trust and reliability within this body. Government representatives have had the opportunity to meet authentic Roma experts in various fields of activity and WGRA representatives have realized that not all public officers are corrupt and racist or mean and incompetent.

In contrast to other Central and Eastern European countries, Romania has for historical reasons profited from a remarkable Roma elite. This fact was internationally recognized in the spring of 1999, when the Romanian Roma activist and sociologist, Nicolae Gheorghe, became the Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw. It is widely acknowledged that Nicolae Gheorghe is a kind of irreplaceable Roma leader and activist, although other Roma leaders have endeavoured to fill this "gap". However, it is notable that Roma leaders are sticking to their course of partnership with the Romanian government. They have understood how important it is to have a comprehensive

national strategy on the Roma. Of course, this is just more evidence of the extraordinary "political maturity" reached by our Roma elite.

Some other countries of Central and Eastern Europe have (or are about to develop) national - i.e. governmental - strategies on the Roma. But I do believe that Romania is the first country to produce such an important programme with the direct participation of the Roma themselves, through the activity of Roma representatives in the WGRA, who are democratically elected by the Roma associations in Romania (currently, there are about 150 such associations and organizations, legally registered).