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## The Translation of the Ethnic Minority Discourse from the U.S.A. to Romania. The Case of the Roma<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract: The present study explores the elements of ethnic minority discourse that have traveled from the United States of America to minority organizations in post-communist Romania and determines to what extent these cultural imports have been translated, or in other words, adapted locally. The multicultural model that has been influential in the United States over many decades puts forth equality and civil rights for all citizens irrespective of ethnicity, and thus strengthens the ideal of democracy that has always marked the United States ever since their foundation. The study more specifically investigates the ways in which American multicultural policies such as affirmative action have influenced the discourse of the Roma ethnic community. The research starts from the study of ethnic minority discourse in the United States and extends to the application of the terminology to the phenomena and evolutions in contemporary Romania. Recent theoretical works as well as several studies on the Roma people will enlighten the problematics of the ethnic community in question.*

*Key words: ethnicity; minority; multicultural model; affirmative action; symbols.*

The history of the Roma presence in Romania comprises several centuries and it has recently been reconsidered in view of current theories and understandings concerning the concept of ethnicity. While such diachronic revisions offer useful and rich perspectives, the period under consideration here is the post-communist era. After 1989, Romania faced major changes at all levels in the context of a transforming Eastern Europe in which alliances were reshaped and ethnicities redefined. In “Ethnicities and Global Multiculture: Pants for an Octopus”, Jan Nederveen Pieterse establishes that “the passing of the Cold War and the waning of the great political ideologies resulted in political and discursive realignments globally and locally” (28). As in several other neighboring countries, the fall of the totalitarian regime in Romania resulted in two phenomena that impacted the Roma minority.

On the one hand, the mainstream augmented its expression of discrimination; in the context of political disorientation, the “resurgence of feelings which had been held in check since the war” and “increased freedom for expression of prejudice” (Fraser 289) became the

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<sup>2</sup> This work is part of the research project “Translations of American Myths, Icons and Brands in Post-Communist Romanian Culture (TRANSMIT)”, supported by CNCSIS-UEFISCSU, Project number PNII – IDEI – 802/2009.

norm. On the other hand, the Roma minority's chance for mobilization and actions to obtain civil rights increased: "the one significant gain East European Gypsies made from the post-communist transition was the opportunity to freely organize themselves" (Barany 288). Thus the two opposing tendencies at work after the fall of communism have been interwoven and only awareness of both tendencies can lead to a balanced discussion.

In the 1990s, blaming the poor conditions in which they were forced to live, many members of the Roma community emigrated to Western Europe and transformed the Gypsy problem in the East into a pan-European one. Migration caused a lot of concern and raised delicate issues concerning the best way to tackle the situation of the Roma. One attempt to solve the problem temporarily in the West was to force it back on the Roma emigrants' countries of origin. Such a case is represented by the 1992 repatriation deal struck between the German government and Romania (Fraser 291). The repatriated emigrants often resorted to leaving Romania again and so, the fact that permanent measures, rather than temporary deals, were required could no longer be avoided.

The need for long-term concerted policies in Europe determined international bodies such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union (Barany 306) to apply a lot of pressure on East European states to implement policies that allow for ethnic self-affirmation and increased prosperity for the members of the minority group. Consequently, such pressures created the conditions necessary for the Roma community to seek political representation and non-governmental action. While acknowledging the fact that the European input has had a great importance for the Roma minority in Romania, this study aims at demonstrating that various elements of ethnic minority discourse, activism and policy-making from the United States of America have been imported locally and applied to Romanian realities. Moreover, it explores the levels at which the Roma community and its organizational structures translate, or in other words, adopt and adapt the American multicultural model to advance their aims and to achieve anti-discrimination and self-representation as far as the legal system and the people's mentality are concerned. The multicultural model that has been influential in the United States over many decades puts forth equality and civil rights for all citizens irrespective of ethnicity, and thus strengthens the ideal of democracy that has always marked the United States since their foundation and that represents an ideal to strive for in the case of emerging democracies.

In his 1997 article focusing on traditional leadership and the code of laws used inside the community, Ronald Lee underlined the fact that the Roma have to organize themselves politically in ways that will be influential in the states in which they reside: "in order to survive as a culture, the Rom will need to develop some form of representation in the future where they can have a voice in defining who they are" (392). In addition, Lee stated: "The purpose would be to work constructively with non-Gypsy organizations, instead of simply being victims of these administrations and being defined not by themselves, but by the surrounding nation state" (392). Awareness of such desiderata resulted in the formation of assemblies that claimed to defend the Roma community's best interests. Most sources on the situation of Gypsy organization in Eastern Europe bemoan the lack of unified interests, of visibility and of collaboration that define the numerous associations formed even in one country. In his extensive article "Ethnic Mobilization without Prerequisites: The East European Gypsies" (2002), Zoltan Barany dedicates an entire subchapter, entitled "A Multitude of Incompetent Organizations", to the proliferation of Roma groups and parties

after the fall of communism. Many organizational problems are discussed, but the conclusion points to the fact that the initial inefficiency of the large number of organizations that were created has been overcome in time as only a few organizations have survived, on the basis of their “pursuing projects useful for the Roma” (293).

Barany’s model for ethnic mobilization centers on: “(1) political opportunity, (2) ethnic identity and its formation, (3) leadership, (4) organizational capacity, (5) ideology, profile, and program, (6) financial resources, (7) communications, and (8) symbols” (281). From among the ingredients mentioned, the combined relevance of political opportunity and leadership as well as the shaping of symbols is discussed here. In Romania, political representativeness for the Roma has been achieved in a political environment that has become aware of the Roma plight in the context of increased sensitivity to minority issues in general. The Constitution grants ethnic minorities seats in Parliament, and as a consequence, the Roma Party representative, Nicolae Paun, has been a member of the Parliament for many years and has used his position to alert the political sphere as to some of the stringent Roma problems. Also, other politicians who identified themselves as Roma obtained seats on the list of different parties and contributed to making this ethnic minority visible.

One of the most important legislative changes that aimed at creating equality in the United States was the affirmative action policy. The United States administration launched the idea of affirmative action in 1961 and 1965 as the “product of Presidential Executive orders and aspects of civil rights legislation” (Ratcliffe 144) and it raised a heated debate concerning its real benefits. *Affirmative action* is defined as

A government mandated or voluntary program that consists of activities specifically to identify, recruit, promote, and/or retain members of disadvantaged minority groups in order to overcome the results of past discrimination and to deter employers from engaging in discriminatory practices in the present. (Ratcliffe 143)

The program was criticized for being ineffective, since it did not reach the mass of the respective minority group, for stigmatizing minorities, since it implied that all members of a minority group need preferential treatment, even if that might not have been true, and for advancing a form of reverse discrimination, since white men claimed to be suffering, while minorities were promoted (Ratcliffe 144-5). Given all these setbacks, affirmative action policies encountered strong opposition at all levels towards the end of the twentieth century.

In Romania, policies that are akin to affirmative action were introduced in the post-communist period, and most relevantly in education. They are still felt as necessary and beneficial to the Roma, their advantages overshadowing the latent criticism that has not taken hold of the public debate yet. A Ministry of Education program grants the Roma students a certain number of seats for various degrees at state universities all over the country. The program has not been perceived as a useless governmental imposition, but as an opportunity and administrative incentive that the Roma associations have supported. The Roma Party, among other Roma organizations, advertises the number of seats that universities offer to Roma students (with no tuition requirements and minimum admission criteria i.e. obtaining 5 for the entrance exam), as well as the list of application documents a candidate needs, thus helping members of the Roma community find out about such

chances for pursuing higher education. Moreover, the Roma Party informs its members that each year it develops a campaign entitled “It’s time to be high-minded”. The aim of the campaign is the increase in the number of Roma people to be admitted to higher education institutions (Partida Romilor, “Noi iti dam recomandare”). The importance of advertising these seats and determining Roma students to take advantage of them cannot be overemphasized. It is part of the effort to form intellectuals that would subsequently get involved in the mobilization of Roma communities. On the other hand, the failure to use the seats offered might send the wrong message to the institutions that control state education in Romania. A possible interpretation implying that the unoccupied seats are the result of disinterest and the lack of motivation could actually lead to the termination of the program. Struggling against such a conclusion on the part of educational institutions in Romania, the Roma organizations have joined their efforts in order to initiate a reverse trend that would ensure the Roma students’ accession to and graduation from BA and MA degrees.

Nuanced approaches are necessary for overcoming prejudice on both sides. In traditional Roma communities formal education used to be viewed as alienating for a very long time:

Most see no value in literacy because they have been successful without it, but even those who feel that reading and writing would be useful object to public schools because they teach the host society’s values. Attending school also removes children from their household’s productive economy. (Gmelch 325)

The role of the Roma organizations is quintessential in articulating programs that would counter the objections traditional Roma culture holds against sending children to school. By bridging a cultural gap that does exist, the Roma leaders encourage the young to take up university degrees, but they should not find themselves devoid of support from mainstream society and state institutions.

Besides campaigns that advance equal opportunities in education and not only, in Romania the symbols that the Roma organizations attempt to introduce so that they would be revered and shared by the community include the International Roma Day and the reconsideration of the deportation to Transnistria, a significant landmark for the twentieth century history of the Roma. Promoting such events into the collective consciousness not only of the respective minority, but of the wider public constitutes a method borrowed from the ethnic minority discourse in the United States. This is consistent with the theoretical understanding of how mobilization strategies work:

The mobilizing group is assisted by shared symbols that are widely recognized and esteemed by the community. The flag, monuments and public spaces endowed with historical meaning, poems, anthems, and anniversaries of historical events – all meaningful tokens of the community’s commitment to collective action – can also be used to cement the group’s cohesion. (Barrany 287)

The International Roma Day gives a sense of pride and cohesion and occasions visibility and the chance to bring Roma issues to the public’s attention. The celebration is marked by the Roma Civic Alliance of Romania, an organization that has a clearly-established program and a profile whose major aim is that of unifying the various Roma initiatives:

The Roma Civic Alliance of Romania (RCA) is an 'umbrella' organisation, established in April 2006, by initiative of 20 Roma associations and foundations of Romania. Our mission is to promote the values and democratic practices, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, of the economical, social and cultural rights of the Roma minority at the national and European level. (Alianta Civica a Romilor din Romania. "Who are we?")

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the International Roma Day, the Roma Civic Alliance of Romania in partnership with the United States Embassy in Bucharest organized a public debate. The announcement stated that "the debate focuses on the parallel between the African American civil rights movement and the Roma movement in Romania" (Alianta Civica a Romilor din Romania. "Activities"). The influence of the multicultural model in the US is programmatically emphasized, the International Roma Day itself being a counterpart of Martin Luther King's Day, which substantiates awareness of and debates about African American issues each January. It is also a moment when the legacy of the civil rights movement is revisited since

King had raised the profile of civil rights in the national consciousness through one of the best known events of the twentieth century: the Freedom March to Washington DC in 1963. Even more than the march itself, the day was to linger in the memory for perhaps the most eloquent and moving speech of the century. But in 'I have a dream' King was expressing views which few white Americans could find threatening. It was after all a 'dream' of a future halcyon, multicultural, integrated state. (Ratcliffe 131)

The United States Embassy created the formal context in which the debate could take place and the Roma organization translated the discussion of the civil rights movement into terms that would be useful for mobilizing the Roma community in Romania.

Besides various non-governmental organizations' adoption of the ethnic minority discourse in the United States, other instances contribute to the same translation of American developments to the Romanian context. An example is a documentary filmed by Michelle Kelso, an American filmmaker living in Romania. Her "Hidden Sorrows: The Persecution of Romanian Gypsies during WWII" (2005) tackles the Roma deportation to Transnistria, reviving oral history and revisiting a traumatic moment of the twentieth century. Its merit consists in the fact that it gives the Roma community a voice and a chance for self-representation, modeled on the rewriting of history from a minority perspective that has been quite productive in the United States. Various studies about the fate of the Roma population in Romania have discussed this historical event. One such source, David Crowe's "The Gypsy Historical Experience in Romania", mentioned that "authorities shipped 25 000 Romanian Gypsies to Transnistria, where many died" and explained that "harsh living conditions prompted some Gypsies to escape, and many eventually made their way back to Romania" (70). The film might complement the discussion of the deportation in a printed volume.

Whether projected in Romania or abroad, this documentary serves not only the director's, but also the Roma organizations' purpose of making both the mainstream and the minority communities confront the painful past, try to cope with the trauma produced over half a century ago and create ways of revisiting such a painful legacy:

In Romania, over 25,000 Roma (Gypsies) were deported to camps in the occupied Soviet Union. Roma recount their horrendous experiences in the east where they fought to survive disease, brutality, and mass murder. [...] For sixty years since the war ended, the Roma deportation was not acknowledged in history texts, and there are no monuments to commemorate their dead. (UCLA International Institute. Hidden Sorrows)

This slice of history definitely constitutes a “token of the community’s commitment to collective action” (Barany 287), if carefully promoted and advanced.

In realizing the potential of policies modeled after the affirmative action programs in the United States and popularizing their benefits for the community, on the one hand, and in contributing to the creation of powerful symbols that are going to provide dignity, pride and cohesion for an often marginalized minority, on the other hand, the Roma organizations have translated elements of the multicultural ethnic model from the United States into ingredients for ethnic mobilization that are applicable in Romania, thus advancing the struggle for anti-discrimination and empowerment. When selecting the aspects of the ethnic discourse overseas that lead to successful activism, the Roma representatives actually exercise their capacity to adapt to an ever changing political environment and insure survival and prosperity for their community.

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