

Introduction

This set of policy papers is a direct result of the project “To Solve Our Problems Together”, undertaken in partnership by the ECHOSOC Foundation—Romania and the Open University Subotica—Serbia. The papers aim at portraying the situation of the Roma minority in the two countries, in various areas of social life. Moreover, they bring forth a series of recommendations meant to contribute to the identification of feasible intervention means for solving many of the different problems presented.

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Other organisations involved in the project:

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- ◆ Agency for Community Development “Împreună” [Together], Bucharest;
- ◆ Aven Amentza Foundation, Bucharest;
- ◆ Ramses—Foundation for Social Development of the Roma, Dej;
- ◆ Cultural Democratic Union of Roma from Valea Jiului, Petroșani;
- ◆ Intercultural Institute, Timișoara;
- ◆ Rrominterpress, Belgrade;
- ◆ European Voivodina, Novi Sad;
- ◆ International Scientific Forum "Danube—River of Cooperation" (ISF “DRC”), Belgrade;
- ◆ The Modern Society Movement (MSM), Zemun.

We hope these materials contribute to a better knowledge regarding the situation of the Roma population in Romania and Serbia, as well as adequate support for needed interventions.

Agnes Medve
Sorin Cace

1. Objectives

The current policy paper aims at:

- analysing the current situation of the existing collaborations regarding Roma issues, between Romania and Yugoslavia;
- stimulating the participation of active organisations in the field to regional¹ and international collaborations;
- identifying the main theoretical and concrete opportunities that may animate bilateral collaboration and partnerships among Romanian and Yugoslav organisations.

2. Identification of the problem

a. The situation of the Roma in Romania and Yugoslavia: common issues, differences, complementarity

The Roma and the society of the majority population

In both countries, as well as in various other areas, Roma people suffer from perceptions with deep negative connotations held by other ethnic groups against them. The negative stereotypes are deeply rooted in the collective consciousness and lead to the maintenance of a permanent state of unbalance, to the placement of the Roma in an inferior position when compared to other communities, whether of the majority or of other minorities. Marginalisation and frequent cases of racial-type discriminations are realities that are to be found both in the Romanian and Serbian societies.

Social-economic status

In both countries equally, the Roma population is in a precarious situation, holding a clearly inferior level of education when compared to the average of the respective society. The majority of Roma has no access to specific qualifications, and lives in difficult conditions, practising marginal professions or benefiting from the extremely small social allowances that the respective societies can afford. The difficulty of their situation is even more accentuated, in both cases, by the

¹ The term “regional” refers within this paper, to the “Region of South-Eastern Europe”, as defined by the framework of the Stability Pact. When the borders of this region are crossed, we use the term “international”.

economic crisis that, even though due to different causes, affects the entire population of these two countries.

In addition, one should note that Serbia must deal with the high number of Roma refugees from Kosovo, estimated to over 16,000 people.

Roma civil society

In Romania, the process of internal organisation of the Roma, the establishment of a Roma civil society, and the public affirmation of their identity started in 1990. Today, we can speak of a significant number of solid organisations, with a remarkable experience, capable of attracting in their activities Roma youngsters with higher education that are willing to contribute to the improvement of their communities. Roma organisations became highly visible through public statements on various occasions, and through their proven capacity to be viable partners of the authorities within the framework of specific programs.

Not the same thing can be said about the Roma population in Serbia. The establishment of a Roma civil society is only now underway, and it will probably require extensive time and sustained efforts to reach the level currently attained in Romania.

Civil society and the Roma

The Romanian civil society has not managed, in ten years of evolution towards democracy, to reach a level of development that could be compared to that of the Western countries. The Roma civil society has maintained itself at the top of the active segment of the Romanian civil society, being considered as a whole, at the same level with the non-Roma civil society.

The most active representatives of the non-Roma civil society have shown, however, a special interest, even from the beginning of the '90s, towards Roma issues.

In Yugoslavia, although it developed in a totally unfavourable political context, or maybe precisely because of that, non-Roma civil society displayed a spectacular development, reaching probably a higher level than their Romanian counterpart. However, only very recently have the top members of the Yugoslav civil society

started to show an interest for Roma issues, and get involved in actions meant to support this community.

Public policies regarding the Roma

Recently, Romania adopted a national governmental strategy for the improvement of the situation of the Roma, the strategy being formulated in partnership with a coalition of the most powerful Roma organisations. In many respects, especially education, important progress was achieved towards providing equal chances for the Roma, as well as towards improving their access to public services. Although in many other areas the developments have not been too satisfying, there are, undoubtedly, in the current context, reasons to hope in an improvement of the situation. The Roma population in Romania also benefits from special support mechanisms offered by the State to national minorities—financial support, Parliamentary representation, and association in the governmental structures.

In the case of Yugoslavia, as the democratisation process has been initiated only recently, we can expect, in the near future, that awareness will raise with regard to the necessity to formulate and implement public policies meant to significantly improve the situation of disadvantaged Roma communities, and to ensure a reduction in intolerance and discrimination. This process must, nevertheless, start with the recognition of the Roma as a national minority, and not only as an ethnic group, with all the consequences that result thereafter.

The access to information regarding the Roma and the activities realised to their support by governmental and non-governmental structures are much more solid in Romania than in Serbia.

Participation at international level

Certainly, an unbalanced situation subsists between the two countries with regard to the representation of Roma to various events and in different structures at the international level. While a series of Roma organisations from Romania are well known at international level and have a genuine “engine” role for the international movement of the Roma, not the same thing can be said in the present about the Roma representatives from Serbia.

**b. Theoretical opportunities:
there are reasons for collaboration**

Collaboration imposed from outside, even if accompanied by significant financial resources—which is not really the case in South-Eastern Europe—runs the risk of becoming artificial and inefficient, if it does not respond to real needs, if it does not fulfil specific interests of both parties subjected therein.

A series of obstacles can be considered to significantly limit the possibilities and motivation for Romanian-Serbian collaboration on Roma issues. Among the most notable are: the language differences (Romani language, having many dialects and not being spoken by many a Roma individual, cannot facilitate the contact), differences in traditions, social status, differences in immediate priorities and organisational experience, competition for resources offered by the international community.

On the other hand, analysing the situation yields some common problems and complementarity in certain sectors. Moreover, the positive processes initiated in Romania will be encouraged to develop a cross-border dimension in a partnership context, where they should provide models, and generate positive effects for both Roma organisations and the general public perception of the Roma.

We can thus conclude that the existence of certain bilateral partnerships between organisations in Romania and Serbia, whether Roma or non-Roma, can bring significant benefits to both parties, also contributing to the development of civil society as a whole.

c. Current situation of bilateral collaborations

The number of collaborations currently underway is very small in the field of Roma issues. We can even state that no real partnerships exist, as collaboration is, more often than not, limited to joint participation to conferences and workshops organised (sometimes by international organisations) in one of the countries in the region.

However, a tendency of openness towards collaboration is visible, from various organisations, Roma and non-Roma, from the two countries, and such openness can set the bases for future long-term partnerships. The efficient realisation of such collaborations cannot, however, be achieved without significant support both

from the institutions and organisations from Romania and Yugoslavia, and from the international community.

**d. Concrete opportunities:
worth being exploited**

The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe

Launched in 1999, immediately after the armed conflict in Kosovo, this Western initiative has raised many hopes in South-Eastern Europe. Considered initially as a “Marshall Plan” for South-Eastern Europe, the Stability Pact (www.stabilitypact.org) focused on promoting regional cooperation in various fields, as a stability factor for the region. With an extremely complex structure, the Stability Pact is organised on three worktables: democracy and human rights, economic reconstruction/development, and security. At the end of March 2000, the first Regional Funding Conference took place in Brussels, granting support for 244 projects, totalling approximately Euro 2.4 billion. A part of these projects targets, as beneficiaries, members of the Roma communities in the region. The new development directions for the Stability Pact will be decided at the second Regional Conference, scheduled for 25-26 October in Bucharest. An important source of support for the Yugoslav civil society is represented by the Szeged Process, a structure initiated within the Stability Pact in order to support the democratic forces of Serbia, whose access to international support had been limited by the presence of the Milosevic regime.

The Roma issue is a priority area in many sectors of the Pact, including the ones regarding human rights and minorities or education and youth. Recently, in May 2001, an official document adopted with respect to democracy and human rights restated this priority, as well as the necessity to consider the situation of the Roma in other sectors of the Pact.

Project: “Roma in the Stability Pact”

Probably the most important initiative explicitly targeted at Roma was launched by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE/Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (ODIHR/CPRSI) (www.osce.org/odih/cprsi), in collaboration with the Council of Europe and the European Commission. This project aims explicitly at stimulating the establishment of partnerships and the realisation of experience exchanges among Roma organisations from South-

Eastern Europe. The project was launched during a conference organised at the end of April in Bucharest, in collaboration with Rromani CRISS and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The program has the following main objectives:

- Establishment, in collaboration with the OSCE missions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Council of Europe, of a cooperation structure for solving the special difficulties faced by the Roma in crisis and post-crisis situations;
- Support for the process of self-organisation of the Roma, civic participation and community development in the countries of South-Eastern Europe, including the improvement of communication among various Roma groups (Christians, Muslims, linguistic groups etc.);
- Support for the associations of Roma women in order to enhance their organisational capacity and increase their participation to regional initiatives under the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe.

The basic principles of the program are:

- Partnership among governmental organisations, international organisations and Roma associations;
- Transfer of expertise/experience “from Roma to Roma”.

OSCE/ODIHR

A series of other regional initiatives regarding the Roma are being considered by the above-mentioned structures of the OSCE. Thus, ODIHR will organise, on 10-13 September 2001 in Bucharest, in collaboration with the Chairmanship of OSCE, currently held by Romania, an International Conference regarding Roma and Sinti, to define the strategy of this organisation for the following years. The Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (ODIHR/CPRSI) stimulates cooperation among various international organisations, initiating various actions targeted at solving the problems of Roma in South-Eastern Europe. Special Counsellor at CPRSI is Nicolae Gheorghe, one of the most important leaders of the Roma in Romania. One of the most important problems is, currently, the situation of Roma refugees coming from different areas of former Yugoslavia to Serbia.

The Council of Europe

Besides its involvement in the above-mentioned project, in partnership with OSCE, the Council of Europe (www.coe.int) offers various opportunities that can be seized by Romanian and Yugoslav organisations active in the field of Roma. Although

Yugoslavia is not a member of the Council of Europe, several programs of this organisation are available to the civil society of this country. Likewise, considering the on-going democratisation process, the documents, resolutions and recommendations of the Council of Europe can be used as an argument in favour of obtaining support for the initiatives that envisage the improvement of the Roma situation.

A specialised office for Roma issues has been functioning, for many years, within the Social Department of the Secretariat of the Council of Europe. This office works in close collaboration with a “Group of experts on Roma issues”, that holds regular meetings and undertakes visits in various countries that are members of the Council of Europe, in order to analyse particularly public policies regarding the Roma. This office also undertakes information activities, publishing an information bulletin and a website (<http://www.social.coe.int/en/cohesion/action/roma.htm>) that synthesise the activities of various departments from the Council of Europe working on Roma issues. These structures have not paid special attention, so far, to the Roma population of Serbia. However, the Serbian Roma have been involved in regional projects and activities.

The program “Measures for Trust” of the Council of Europe has been granting, for many years, support for the civil society of the two countries, in order to undertake actions that would contribute to the reduction of inter-ethnic tensions and to the promotion of a relation of collaboration between the majority and the minorities. It is important that the priorities of this program for the last year also included the Roma community in Yugoslavia.

Link Diversity

A recent initiative of the Council of Europe, conceived as a contribution of this organisation to the Stability Pact, is represented by the campaign „Link Diversity” (www.link-d.org.ba). This initiative aims to support certain actions that promote a multi-ethnic and democratic society in South-Eastern Europe. The implementation of the activities is achieved with support from several National Coordination Committees, and a European Coordination Committee, based in Sarajevo.

The European Commission

The most important donor institution world-wide, the European Commission (www.europa.eu.int) is one of the main funders of the Stability Pact. Unlike

Yugoslavia, Romania is involved in the process of accession to the European Union, and benefits from a series of EU programs that promote collaboration at European level in various fields of interest for Roma communities (education, youth, culture, human rights). Each of the two countries benefits from support granted by the Commission through its assistance programs: Phare for Romania and, respectively, OBNOVA/CARDS for Yugoslavia. Although the Roma issue is often cited as a priority in various documents of the European Commission, and is to be found in the context of various funding programs, there are no institutional mechanisms, at the moment, for granting direct support from this organism to partnership projects between Romania and Yugoslavia.

UNICEF

UNICEF formulated, in partnership with Romanian authorities, a strategy regarding the improvement of the situation of children and families, supporting a series of programs for community development and family education. Such initiatives are perfectly compatible with the necessities of various Roma communities, and can also be designed from the perspective of regional collaboration.

Save the Children

The British organisation “Save the Children” is currently developing a project undertaking a detailed analysis of the schooling situation of Roma children in all South-Eastern European countries, hence including Romania and Yugoslavia. A series of projects, with a national impact but with possibilities of being expanded in the framework of regional partnerships, have already been implemented by “Save the Children”—Romania.

Soros Open Network

The Soros network (www.osi.hu and www.son.ro) was certainly one of the promoters of regional cooperation and support programs for Roma communities, long before the launching of the Stability Pact. The East-East program, as well as other programs provided by the various structures of the Soros network in Budapest, but also in Romania and Yugoslavia, continue to represent an important source of information and also a possibility for financial support to those who are active in Roma issues. Within the network can be found a Resource Centre for Roma Communities in Cluj (www.romacenter.ro) and a Euro-Regional Centre for Democracy in Timisoara (www.regionalnet.org). Centre Education 2000+, based in

Bucharest (www.cedu.ro), undertakes various activities aimed at educating Roma children, one of the on-going projects having a regional dimension.

ADF

America's Development Foundation has shown interest in promoting partnerships among Romanian and Yugoslav civil society, supporting several projects that involve organisations from the two countries. The project wherein the current policy paper was elaborated is a proof that the Roma issue is very much in line with the priorities of this organisation.

The British Council

Through its current structure, the British Council's office in Bucharest also has a series of regional responsibilities, thus including both Romania and Yugoslavia. Among the notable current priorities and focal activities of this organisation are to be found the promotion of positive inter-ethnic relations, of democracy and of partnership relations between authorities and civil society. Roma organisations or those interested in these issues can undoubtedly establish partnerships with the support of the British Council network, for the above-mentioned areas, which are also priorities for the Roma.

The Northern Council

The Council of Ministers of the Northern Countries, as well as a series of important institutions from those countries, have recently shown interest for granting support to the countries in South-Eastern Europe, with a focus on stimulating regional partnerships. Although they are not explicitly addressed to Roma, organisations active in the field can obtain support for common actions through relevant programs already initiated or in course of formulation. One example is the program of support for regional cultural initiatives, scheduled to start next year.

Others

Certainly, there are other international and national organisations, governmental and non-governmental, concerned directly or indirectly with the Roma issue, that can provide support for partnership projects in this area, between Romania and Yugoslavia. We hereby extend our apologies to those omitted, at the same time

signalling the inexistence and the need for efficient and easily accessible information mechanisms with regard to the multitude of existing possibilities.

3. Recommendations

Collaboration related to Roma issues is beneficial to both countries, is possible in the current political context, and ought to be considered in the development strategies of:

- Roma organisations in the two countries;
- Non-Roma organisations active in the field;
- Public institutions in the two countries;
- Donors concerned with this issue.

Especially two categories of initiatives could bring significant benefits to the ones involved and to society, on the whole:

- Concrete partnerships and networks among organisations with similar activities, at all levels (local or national organisations, either concerned with action in a specific area or with advocacy/lobby);
- Efficient and accessible means of information and communication regarding best practices in the field, funding opportunities, access to events, possibility of reporting abuse and discrimination.