

## 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:**

- ◆ CATALACTICA Association, Bucharest;
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- ◆ 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. To whom is this *policy paper* addressed?**

The target group that makes the object of the current analysis is the Roma population in Romania in general, and the Roma individuals who are dependent on the social protection system, in particular.

There are several categories of potential beneficiaries of this paper:

- Decision-makers, especially representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, Ministry of Education and Research, representatives of the local and central administration;
- Romanian civil society in general and Roma NGOs in particular;
- Researchers working in the field of social policies and inter-ethnic relations;
- General public;
- Think-tanks from Romania, Serbia, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe;
- Funders and/or donors for programs in Roma communities.

## **2. Objectives**

The current paper aims at achieving the following objectives:

- Evaluation of the degree in which the social protection system responds to the real needs of the Roma families;
- Identification of the main social benefits targeted at the Roma population (child allowance, social support), evaluation of the negative effects generated by these measures and of the degree of focus on the Roma population displayed by these measures;
- Recommendation of several measures for a better focus of the social security system on the Roma population.
- Providing information services and solutions for action.

## **3. Methodological framework**

The current paper is supported from a methodological perspective through documentary analysis of reference works in the field and secondary data analysis. The main data sources were papers elaborated by the Institute for the Research of the Quality of Life (ICCV) between 1992-1998, formulated based on a research series on representative samples for the Roma population.

We also considered qualitative-type research based on focus groups and individual interviews, carried out by ICCV in Buzău county, as well as by UNICEF and Save the Children in 10 Roma communities geographically distributed in all historical regions of Romania.

Documentary research and secondary data analysis were combined with direct observations of the author who participated during recent years in a series of field researches in dozens of Roma communities in Romania.

#### 4. Identification of the problem

While an important part of the Roma population, due to precarious income, is in a situation of social dependency, requiring increased assistance from the state, the social security system is in fact focused only in a small degree on the Roma population. This fact has negative consequences, like extreme poverty and social exclusion, that characterise large segments of the Roma population in Romania. Besides the error of exclusion in what regards the Roma population, the main social transfers, including child allowance and social support, generate a series of corrupted effects, with negative consequences.

Research data show that an important part of the Roma population is in a state of extreme poverty, justifying their status of a socially assisted category of populace. Compared to the majority of the population, the degree of extreme poverty is much higher in the case of the Roma population.

#### **Percentage of Roma families being in a state of poverty, compared to the poverty situation for the entire population**

	Under the minimum level		
	Decent (DL)	Adjusted (AL)	Subsistence (SL)
Roma population	80.9	75.2	62.9
Entire population	42.0	31.0	16.0

Source: Elena Zamfir, Cătălin Zamfir, coordinators, *Țiganiii între ignorare și îngrijorare*, [Gypsies, between ignorance and concern]. Bucharest: Alternative, 1993.

Poverty is not only more extended amongst Roma comparing to the majority population, but also the degree of poverty is much higher than in the case of the majority population. Relatively recent data<sup>1</sup> indicate that “the average income per person [in the case of Roma] was around ROL 150,000, which represented around

<sup>1</sup> Simona Ilie, *Standardul economic al gospodăriilor de rromi* [Economic Standards of Roma Households]. Bucharest: in print, 2001.

15% of the average net salary on the economy, at that time [1998]”. Data from the same report show a ratio of 40% between the average income per person at the level of the total population and the average net salary on the economy. In these conditions, almost 70% of the Roma declare that their incomes are insufficient for sustaining the basic needs.

We can thus conclude that a big part of the Roma population is in a state of poverty, even extreme poverty, requiring a special focus of the social protection system on this segment.

Subsequently, we present a review of the social protection measures applied to date, and of the negative effects that they may produce. Later on, we are going to propose a series of recommendations meant to improve the current situation.

## **5. Social protection measures taken**

We have to mention first that Roma individuals participate in a very small degree in the labour market. Hence, salaries have a very low percentage amongst incomes of the entire Roma population. Thus, in the case of Roma, only 27.5% are employees who receive salaries, while at the national level this percentage is of 58.4% of the total employed population<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, due to the fact that only a small part of the Roma hold employee status, the percentage of unemployed is over 12 times smaller in the case of Roma than at the level of the entire population (0.5% comparing to 6.3%). In these conditions, we can infer that the percentage of the Roma population benefiting from unemployment benefits and support allowance is much smaller when compared to the majority population. The situation is similar when we look at the percentage of beneficiaries of pensions, which is four times smaller than in the case of the entire population. We can say that marginalisation and even exclusion of the Roma from the labour market determines that the social insurance system contributes only in a small measure to the welfare of the Roma families.

We should expect that the social assistance system compensates this exclusion of the Roma from the labour market and attempts to reduce the social polarisation between the majority population and the Roma population. In fact, as we will show below, some of the social assistance measures which used to have a good focus on the Roma segment were withdrawn, while others have been modified, generating corrupted effects; yet a third category is granted on a discretionary

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see Sorin Cace, *Ocupațiile populației de rromi* [Occupations of the Roma Population]. Bucharest: in print, 2001.

basis. In 1995, the special allowance destined to mothers with more than three children has been withdrawn, this being a social benefit that contributed in an important measure to the budget of Roma families. The cancellation of this benefit has negatively affected the Roma population, for which “the average number of children for a woman whose fertility age has not come to an end is of 4.35 (7,665 children for 1,757 mothers), comparing to 1.79 children/woman at the level of the entire population, according to the census of 1992 (E. Zamfir, C. Zamfir, 1993, p.79)”. The percentage of Roma women who gave birth to 4 children is double that of the national level, while for those who gave birth to 5 children is four times bigger; this tendency is maintained in the case of increased number of children. It is obvious that this measure of cancelling the supplementary allowance has affected, in the first place, the Roma families, depriving them from a necessary support.

One criticisable measure seems to be that of conditioning the child allowance to school frequency, starting with 1994. The child allowance represents the most common income source, benefiting 66.2% of the Roma families<sup>3</sup>. The main negative effect<sup>4</sup> of 1994 decision was its transformation from a universal measure into a constraining measure, addressed exclusively to those families whose children attend school. Although not mentioned explicitly, the objective of the 1994 decision was to increase school participation of the Roma children, characterised by very low levels. In many cases, the conditioning of such an allowance of an insufficient—and increasingly smaller—value (around USD 5) deprives the Roma families, who cannot cover the collateral costs related to school attendance (textbooks, notebooks and instruments, clothes, shoes, food, transportation, etc.) from a support which is absolutely necessary for taking care of the children. Almost 20% of the Roma children who never attended school and around 30% of the children who abandoned school during the compulsory education years were deprived of this right. Practically, half of the Roma children are being excluded from this right through this discriminatory measure. Moreover, due to their participation into seasonal agricultural works and absence from school, lots of Roma families do not benefit from this right for a few months a year. Although it seems that the school frequency has improved, as the data from the questionnaire and the discussions with teachers reveal (88.2% of the Roma children come to school daily), the percentage of the uneducated children remains relatively the

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<sup>3</sup> Simona Ilie, *Standardul economic al gospodăriilor de rromi* [Economic Standards of Roma Households]. Bucharest: in print, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see Mihai Surdu, *Efectele condiționării alocației pentru copii de prezența școlară în cazul populației de rromi* [Effects of Conditioning Child Allowance to the School Frequency, in the Case of the Roma Population]. Bucharest: *Quality of Life Journal*, 2, 1998.

same. While the 1994 decision does not have a significant impact with respect to the attraction of Roma children in schools, it led, in turn, to an over-crowding of schools (that function in many cases as segregated Roma schools, with 3-4 pupils at a desk) and thus to a decrease in school performance. Moreover, the perception of the Roma regarding school did not improve but, on the contrary, the teachers came to be perceived as a sort of administrator for family incomes instead of representing a social model to follow.

Another form of social assistance, which should theoretically cover an important segment of the Roma population, is the social support. Introduced by Law 67/1995 and based on the principle of social solidarity, the social support would have represented, theoretically, a permanent income source for all the families that achieved monthly incomes smaller than a certain threshold established by Law. This threshold, however, does not have any significance, practically, being not correlated to relevant indicators like poverty thresholds, minimum salary, and the like. Practically, the determination of the threshold is made according to existing resources, the social support being unable to assist more than 10% of the poorest people, and not all the persons being under the level of subsistence. The social support benefit consists in the difference between the threshold stipulated by law and the family incomes, in the condition in which the family incomes are demonstrated by adequate documentation and registered at the labour office, a procedure which needs to be followed every three months. The measure of testing the means is not only expensive from an administrative point of view, but also difficult to realise in a context where the underground economy holds an increased percentage from the entire economy, representing a source of occasional but unregistered incomes. Moreover, for the Roma population with an increased rate of illiteracy, of almost 50%, excessive bureaucracy represents a major impediment in filling the applications for social support. However, the biggest deficiency of this measure is the discretionary nature of its application, the decision being left with the local authorities, depending on existing resources. As in the case of the land law, in which the granting of property rights to Roma is left at the decision of local authorities, depending on the existing available land, the granting of social support is blocked in many cases in the Roma communities. In the investigation carried out in 1998, more than 3/4 of the interviewed Roma were considering themselves eligible for receiving the social support from the state,

although only one third were accepted and granted the right to benefit from social support. For 16.4% of them the answer was negative, other 5.2% were still waiting for a reply. There was a group of 20% from these persons who, for various reasons, have not submitted applications for social support, although they considered they had a right to receive it. Almost half of them are discouraged, considering that support "is not given",

anyway. For the other ones, the reason for not submitting the file was the lack of appropriate documentation . . . . Although in some cases it represents the most important income source of the household, the social support is not a certain source of income. Out of the persons who were recognised the right to benefit from social support, only 24% benefited from it for the entire period starting with the beginning of the year and ending at the moment of the investigation. More than 43% of them had benefited from neither kind of support for the three months that passed from 1998 . . . . (Simona Ilie, 2001, pg.12).

From discussions with Roma individuals, we concluded that the granting of the social support was more of a conjectural nature, during or before electoral campaigns. Besides the structural deficiencies of the social protection system, which exclude a big part of the Roma from social benefits, the lack of identity cards is also another important reason for social exclusion. Depending on the estimations,<sup>5</sup> between 4-5% of the Roma do not have IDs, thus being automatically excluded from receiving social benefits—especially child allowance—and from benefiting from free medical assistance.

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<sup>5</sup> Vasile Burtea, *Documentele de stare civilă și cetățenie în comunitățile cu populație de rromi* [Documents of Civil State and Citizenship in the Communities with Roma Population]. Bucharest: in print, 2001.

## 6. Recommendations

Our recommendations aim, in the first place at eliminating the negative effects of the social protection measures described above, and also at obtaining a better focus of the social security system on the Roma segment of the population.

Such improvements can be obtained by:

1. Initiating proactive policies of employment for the labour force in the case of Roma, meant to take them out of the social dependency circle and to put them under the protection of the social insurance system. In the first place, we consider here:
  - introduction of affirmative action or positive discrimination on the labour market, in the favour of Roma,
  - support via granting loans to Roma individuals who want to open their own business, and
  - correlations between educational policies and employment policies.
2. Granting property rights to Roma in the rural areas, so that they have a certain income source, meant to take them out of the social dependency status.
3. Modification of the social support law, through:
  - Simplification of bureaucratic procedures;
  - Correlation of the social support threshold with the minimum subsistence threshold;
  - Compulsory allocation, by law, of the social support benefits, to families that meet the proof of eligibility.
4. Allocation of the child allowance unconditioned by school frequency. In this way, almost half of the Roma children would receive this support which is absolutely necessary for health and a normal development.
5. To increase school participation of the Roma, a supplementary system of scholarships could be introduced, for children coming from Roma families with a precarious economic situation.
6. Re-introduction of the supplementary allowance for mothers with more than three children. The withdrawal of this measure did not lead to a decrease of birth rate amongst the Roma population, but has worsened the living conditions of this population.



7. Increase educational opportunities for Roma in general and Roma women in particular, since education and cultural norms have a much higher influence on birth rates than any birth-control policies.

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