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"The Roma in Țăndărei": A few thoughts on prejudices and groupism in media representations of the Romanian Roma during the COVID-19 pandemic

„A țăndărei-i cigány": Néhány gondolat a romániai romákkal szembeni előítéletekről és a roma kisebbség csoportista médiareprezentációiról a koronavírus idején

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify a few reasons for the intensifying of "anti-Gypsyism" and scapegoating of the Roma in Romania during the COVID pandemic.

Reasons are both economic and social. The need for free movement (essential for economic subsistence of many isolated Roma communities) as well as poor access to basic services are but two reasons, which lead to circulation of prejudices, which depict Roma as "lacking discipline and a sense of self control." Focusing on the case of Țăndărei, this study intends to show that media representations are equally responsible for discourses of scapegoating and culture blame. Reports and articles which name Țăndărei as an "ecological bomb" fail to depict internal differences in the local Roma groups. Such representations (together with the process of scapegoating) may well illustrate Brubaker's theory on groupism: in that media discourse on "the Roma" indiscriminately merges people with different social backgrounds into a homogeneous ethno-racial group.

Keywords: Roma in Romania, racism, stereotypes, COVID-19 pandemic

Absztrakt

E tanulmány célja magyarázatot keresni arra, miért erősödött fel a cigányellenes beszéd és a romákkal szembeni bűnbakképzés a romániai (román) nyilvánosságban a koronavírus időszakában.

Az okok gazdasági és társadalmi jellegűek. A szabad mozgást korlátozó romániai rendelkezések hátrányosan érintették az olyan roma családokat, amelyek az informális gazdaságból élnek. A megélhetéséért kimozduló romák ebben az időszakban negatív sztereotípiák tárgyává váltak, „civilizálatlannak", „normaszegőnek" és „fegyelmezetlennek" tűnhettek a többség szemében.

A dél-romániai Țăndărei településen történt események elemzése alapján azonban azt is elmondhatjuk, hogy a cigányellenes beszédmód elterjedésében és a bűnbakképzésben a médiareprezentációk is szerepet játszanak. Ahogy azt a tanulmány második részében bemutatjuk, a települést ökológiai bombaként bemutató lapok tevékenysége (a bűnbakképzésen kívül) a

Rogers Brubaker által csoportizmusnak nevezett jelenséggel írható le. A médiareprezentációk ugyanis homogén etnikai-rassziális csoporttá („a cigányok") mossák össze a településen élő különböző gazdasági és társadalmi kapcsolatokkal rendelkező romákat.

Kulcsszavak: *romániai romák, rasszizmus, sztereotípiák, Covid–19-járvány*

Introduction

A recently published briefing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic draws attention to the worsening situation of the Eastern European Roma communities: Roma in Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Spain are exposed to high risks of falling ill or dying by the virus. It is the case that – according to this brief – that the pandemic is highlighting the previously existing structural inequalities between Roma and non-Roma (Korunovska & Jovanovic, 2020: 3).

Analyses on the situation of Roma in Romania draw attention to the discursive aspects of this problem. Anthropologists and ethnographers, historians and activists affirm that since the outbreak of the pandemic expressions of hate against the Roma have strengthened in Romania. The "Gypsies" being accused of not respecting the anti-COVID measurements implemented by the Romanian President since mid-March (reducing geographical mobility, reducing the number of social contacts etc.) (Berta, 2020). An airport worker launched a video about insulting a Roma person at the airport (Costache, 2020), a local bureaucrat made public a list of the infected with COVID, a database containing Roma names only (Berta 2020). Well-known (Romanian) intellectuals were sharing pictures, which negatively labelled the locked down Roma (referring to them as "crows") (Mutler, 2020). All these representations and stereotyped images depict Roma in Romania as those who reject social norms, who lack self-discipline, have no hygiene culture or sense of responsibility (Berta, 2020: 2). The majority of Facebook discussions, posts, comments and the media coverage on the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country blame Roma for spreading this disease, and consider them responsible for contaminating the Romanian nation (Costache, 2020).

Migrants were an other focus for hate speech during the pandemic. They were accused (in comments on social media) of "bringing the virus to Romania", as many work in infected countries (Spain and Italy), and returned as soon as the situation worsened in south Europe. Roma migrants, thus, faced a double discrimination during the pandemic times.

The aim of this paper is to examine these stereotyping images and analyse them through the concept of groupism coined by Rogers Brubaker. We also argue that such discourse is responsible for scapegoating of the Roma. The empirical findings are reduced to only one case, that of Țăndărei, a Romanian settlement, where "the Roma problem" during the pandemic became highly controversial on social media. In the following section, I intend to present the events and their representations (with the most important negative stereotypes on Roma) through the reports of the leading on-line Romanian newspapers and portals.

The events and their representations

Romania has one of the largest Roma population in Europe. Many from this minority group benefit of social allowances, live in segregated, stigmatized neighborhoods, have limited access to education and other symbolical and material resources (Horváth & Kiss, 2014).

Țăndărei is a small town of 12 000 inhabitants in the Ialomița county in the south-east of Romania. The settlement became famous all over Europe even before the pandemic, as many local Roma migrated towards West, and were said to live out of begging. From the beginning of April to the end of May more than 20 new infections and six deaths of COVID-19 were reported in the settlement, authorities and health care workers identifying the local Roma neighbourhoods (with about 3500 inhabitants) as the foci for the epidemic. Some Roma, who recently returned from infected countries, were accused of not respecting the officially assigned quarantine and thus spreading the virus through the town. At the request of the Prefect, the town was locked down and controlled by the army.

Dominant media representation of the events in Țăndărei echoed the local non-Roma viewpoint, and resorted to culture blaming (Berta, 2002: 3) and scapegoating of the Roma migrants: "Those 800 Roma coming back from abroad, who did not respect the quarantine and home isolation" were pointed out to be responsible for the mass infection (Gheorghe, 2020; Ziare.com; Tănase, 2020). Some portals did not hesitate to use racist terms (Gypsies instead of Roma) in their articles: "Corona entered Țăndărei, guys. All the Gypsies are full of corona." (Aktual24.ro). Even those dailies, which included in their reports declarations of the local Roma (who stated that they had been "treated like dogs" in the hospitals and let home with no medical treatment), still gave space to the opinion of the local authorities or medical staff, who affirm that „Some of the Roma were attending a funeral, visiting their families, going to the stores and everywhere and infecting the others. The main problem is that they keep close contact with each other, do not listen, and are difficult to dominate (sunt foarte greu de stăpânit)." (Pocotilă, 2020).

Deconstructing the prejudices

This paper cannot provide a detailed explanation and an accurate analysis of the main causes of creating and reinforcing anti-Gypsyism, but some possible reasons are identified.

Researchers affirm that the outbreak of the epidemic accentuated the previously existing social and economic inequalities between Roma and non-Roma. Roma families from segregated settlements found themselves with no income during the lockdown. The presidential decree, which restricted geographical movement, seriously affected those Roma who earn a living from collecting and selling scrap iron or plastic bottles or engage in other forms of informal trade. When free movement was prohibited, these persons and households were cut off from their basic economic resources and activities. The pandemic also made visible deprivation from running water, essential for respecting the hygienic requirements, and moreover, the majority of the Roma could not access proper health care (Fosztó, 2020). These conditions may have increased the number of infected, and encouraged the circulation of anti-Roma stereotypes in the public sphere.

A second possible reason for blaming the Roma could be the biased media representation, which highlighted certain socio-cultural traits of these communities, and hid those, which are contrary to the racialized image. Dominant media coverage of "the Roma Țăndărei" could serve as a good example of what Brubaker defines as groupism. In his view many (constructivist) accounts stress the fact that ethnicity is constructed, but little is known about the process of construction itself. Constructivism pleads for the existence of ethnic groups with closed and stable borders, but – claims Brubaker – ethnicity is rather a set of categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, which are shaped, and merged into

homogeneous entity through actions and political projects (Brubaker, 2004: 11). Thus, the utmost aim of ethnic investigation is to grasp those processes through which groupism is invoked (Brubaker, 2004: 13).

Although Brubaker does not mention the mass media as an important source of group-making, its role in creating and spreading representations is essential. Dominant ethnic groups in Eastern Europe and elsewhere do not have direct contact with Roma, these majorities gaining information mainly from the public sphere. Thus, the mass media can easily be regarded as a medium of producing and politicizing categories, cultural idioms or cognitive schemas on vulnerable groups.

Groupism is salient in media coverage of the "Țăndărei-case". In his article, sociologist Gelu Duminică gives a more nuanced description of the Roma in the settlement. He points out the existence of two Roma communities in the town: the former, made up of few people, is living in good economic conditions; the latter represents the poor majority in Stachina district, with people who work abroad. This internal diversification is essential in understanding the Roma–non-Roma conflict in the town. Many Roma are not just rich enough but have excellent relations with the local authorities too. This is why the practice of child trafficking (the rich Roma send abroad minors from Stachina) was widely known in the settlement, and is likely to be a result of a tacit cooperation between Roma leaders and the authorities. In these conditions – argues Duminică – one should not be surprised, that many Roma feel free to break the rules, including the anti-COVID presidential decree (Duminică, 2020).

Although the local minority population is not homogeneous, and the better-off Roma seem to exploit the poor ones, and force them to perform illegal activities abroad with the tacit agreement of the non-Roma authorities, the press depicts these people as members of a homogeneous group, referring to them with the general term: "the Roma".

All these arguments may reveal, why these representations could easily be labelled as prejudices. They are products of selective cognition, where some aspects of reality are highlighted (child trafficking, migrations), others completely hidden (internal differences within the community); moreover, the negative aspects are overgeneralized. But these representations also exemplify the process of scapegoating, too. This phenomenon is a reaction to (social-political-environmental etc.) crises, when certain groups are considered responsible for the downturn (Kovács, 2010). Roma are strongly connected with the spread of the pandemic (no matter they responsible or not); "the Gypsies" are ideal subject for such blames, as they are socially visible and easy recognizable, majority of them excluded from the non-Roma society (Horváth, 2006:127).

Summary

The aim of this paper was to bring forward a few explanations about the increase of anti-Gypsyism in Romania during the pandemic. It is claimed that the spread of COVID-19 accentuates previously existing social inequalities among Roma and non-Roma, which facilitates the spread of negative stereotypes about the group. Isolated Roma communities depend on free geographical movement, which is essential for them to perform basic economic activities and earn their living. Such practices give way to the circulation of negative labels like lack of discipline, lack of hygienic standards etc. Difficult access to healthcare and negative treatment in the hospitals may also strengthen this racist image.

In case of Țăndărei the media representation of the events could also have been a trigger for stereotyping and labelling. News and reports on the outbreak of the virus do not reflect the internal differences of the local Roma groups, nor their strong connections with non-Roma authorities, who could be complices in illegal activities. This representation may be a convincing illustration of Brubaker's theory of "groupism" in that media discourse on "the Roma" indiscriminately merges people with different social backgrounds into a homogeneous ethno-racial group, clearly discerned from the Romanians.

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