

Chapter 11

Roma Social Inclusion through Higher Education Policies in Romania

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores whether the educational policies introduced by the Romanian Government during the last twenty years are examples of good practice for other European countries facing the issue of Roma integration. The authors raise the question of whether the voices of Roma intellectual élites, who represent the “products” of those educational policies, are strong enough to drive the Roma minority towards common and sustained efforts for their social integration. What are the cross products of these educational policies? Additionally, they consider the case of Roma students within the University of Oradea in Romania and examine their attitudes towards academic learning, motivational factors, academic self-efficacy, faced difficulties, and potential ways to achieve higher rates of student retention. For a more in-depth analysis of the role and impact of those policies and the possible challenges/difficulties encountered, the authors interviewed several decision makers, such as academic staff, NGO representatives, and current/former Roma students. The chapter concludes with suggested solutions for detected difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of integrating the Roma population within the European context is a topic that breeds a great deal of debate while politicians and non-

governmental institutions often find themselves standing on different or even opposing positions. However, there is one thing they have reached consensus on, that the most certain way of facilitating the social integration of Roma population

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is through education. This view was supported at the conference called “Strategies for the inclusion of Roma people - from good intentions to actual results”, by Mariana Campeanu, the Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Protection, and Elderly (from May 2012-February 2014) who stated that:

Education is the only solution for the social integration of Roma people... As long as they do not benefit from an optimal level of education, this category of people will always be on a lower social level. If Romania and Europe would be focusing on solving the problem of education, their situation could get better” (Brebenel, 2013).

Moreover, the mission of Roma Education Fund Romania (a European NGO) is to “close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma” (Roma Education Fund Romania, 2014).

It has been more than twenty years since Eastern European and Central European countries have started to make the transition towards a market economy. Even though prior to 2007, when Romania entered the European Union, a law existed that granted funded places at universities to Roma students, there weren't any systematic efforts for the education and integration of the Roma population, mainly due to lack of financing. Once Romania entered the EU, the non-for-profit organizations (NGOs) have had the ability to access EU funds for projects aimed at educating Roma people, starting with children, and continuing with youths and adults. O'Higgins (2009) argues that the Roma population has taken the least advantage of the transition towards a market economy - on the contrary, at the macro level they have been excluded both from the labor market and from the social services sector. This chapter aims to bring under discussion the Romanian higher education policies for the Roma students and their role in the formation of a Roma intellectual élite as an important actor in future promotion of the social integration of the Roma minorities.

Problems Related to the Education of Ethnic Minorities Across Central-Eastern European Countries and the USA

Statistics show that the proportion of Roma within certain Eastern and Central European countries is between five to ten percent (European Commission, 2012). There have been multiple unsuccessful attempts of solving the issue of Roma minorities across Europe, which suggests that a new direction is needed, one in which education represents the starting point of any action. Education is an important tool for promoting the social, cultural and economic particularities of the Roma population, including prevention of assimilation, support for Roma's cultural autonomy, and training for occupations that are specific of their tribal groups. Any implementation of an organized system for the education of the members of Roma communities has to consider their (local and regional) socioeconomic and religious status as well as the existence of their specific tribal groups. While most authors agree that Roma people are marginalized (increased unemployment rates, low social status, poor health, households with poor facilities, increased illiteracy among adults and children, feelings of inadequacy in relation to the rest of the population), they pinpoint the importance of synergetic and structural approaches for the advancement of Roma's progress and success. This kind of marginalized phenomena can not be approached nor solved by targeting just one segment of their integration. The progress and success of Roma minorities' education could be achieved by improving their socioeconomic status, with consideration for the national, cultural and religious characteristics that portrait this minority group (Posavec & Hrvatic, 2000).

In Croatia¹ for example, the rate of school non-completion among the Roma population is extremely high, and it is caused by the poverty of the Roma communities (Posavec & Hrvatic, 2000). In addition to socioeconomic factors,

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