

The Effects of the Pandemics on Ethnic Roma

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Abstract: *This article shows aspects captured in the research conducted at the beginning of 2021 with Roma ethnics from Iasi County and refers to the effects of the pandemic on Roma ethnics.*

For a start, the paper presents a short history of the Roma, their origins, their migrations around the world, the way they arrived on Romanian territory. The period of slavery of the Roma, their liberation, carried out by the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza around 1860, the period of the Holocaust in the Second World War, when due to a racist doctrine adopted by the Romanian State, the Roma were deported and subjected an extermination program, overcoming these unfortunate periods.

The article also includes a brief description of the Roma from Iasi County and from the city of Iasi, continuing with the representation of the disease in the Roma; what does the disease mean for the Roma, how can they avoid it, what measures do they take to defend themselves against the disease, what kind of practical medicine. The article presents the research method used, the most suitable for the research group, this being the focus group. The subjects that were chosen for research are described and then the effects of the pandemic on Roma ethnics are presented, on a social, personal and psychological level. What they experienced from a social point of view during the pandemic, how social events unfolded for them, how they related socially; personally, how they managed this challenge from a personal point of view, what changes or improvements caused the pandemic; psychologically the feelings they had, the feelings they tried, the psychological struggle that took place inside them. The conclusions conclude this article by showing what the pandemic meant for the Roma ethnics and how they overcame it.

Keywords: *Roma; pandemic; psychological; effects; Romania.*

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1. Roma people from Iași area

To better understand the mentality of the minority, their culture and attitudes towards diseases, we shall present a short history.

2. The history of Roma people

The Roma people come from an Indian region called Panceab where they were known as Roma. Rom in Romanian language signifies people and man and designates this different caste of Hindus; it also means accomplished craftsman, as all Roma were considered gifted in metal processing, wood carving, music performing etc. as well as sorcery. The last aspect did not bring them much advantage, as they were perceived as filthy, or untouchables, which you should not come near, respectively atiganos (gypsies in Greek). That's how they were called by the clergy from Greece when they saw that the Roma were Hindus: they were not yet Christened, they greeted in a different way, they stayed away from people when saluting, they acknowledged all from the distance and, above all, they made spells. The priests thought they were impure and this is why they were called atiganos, namely gypsies (UNICEF, 2007).

The Roma people migrated to every corner of the world as the region from which they came, Panceab, has long been haunted by wars. Some of them arrive in Europe as free people, with the caravans, others were enslaved.

On the Romanian territory the Roma arrived as slaves and the first documentary attestation is from 1385 when the prince Dan 1st bequeathed to Vodita Monastery 40 gipsy dwelling places. A donation, at that time, was considered beneficial for the salvation of the soul.

The Roma people endured a period of slavery on the Romanian soil for over 500 years, when they had no rights whatsoever, there was no question of literacy, they were considered and treated as animals. The prince, the noblemen and the monasteries held slaves. Radu Rosetti (1925) makes a comprehensive description of the aristocratic courts as well as of the slaves dwellings. Unfortunately the monasteries, according to the documents from the archives, had the most slaves of all. This situation persisted until 1860 when Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza is deciding for the liberation of the Roma people. During this process **the owners of the slaves were compensated** with sums between 6 and 12 gold coins for each gipsy they let free.

Roma people were chased from the estates or monasteries and abandoned under the stars, without any protection, without a home, without

anything. Thus they started to settle on the outskirts of different regions and perform, with their own hands, different crafts, in order to earn their living. However the Roma people were permanently vulnerable before the Authorities or the majority population, as they were not welcomed (Banica, 2019).

Thus it was perpetuated the family care as well as towards their close ones, a feeling of being always close to each other in order to protect themselves from any outside attacks.

Unfortunately the State did not initiate any program for their socio-professional integration, although their work has been used for hundreds of years.

Although at the beginning of the 20th century and during the interwar period a Roma elite become visible and took care of their rights, helping with the integration of this ethnic group, the '40s were another hard blow for the Roma people. Romania, under the leadership of the marshal Antonescu, who embraced the Nazi doctrine for the race purity and the biological determinism, thought that Roma were good-for-nothing and the country had to "get rid of them". Thus the Roma were deported together with the Jews in Transnistria to be exterminated. Some testimonies claim that the German army together with the gendarmerie gathered the Roma from the villages and sometimes were so impatient with their train boarding so they choose to shot them at the edge of the villages. However many Roma managed to hide and avoided deportation, but for many years were hunted and during the World War II had to live in inappropriate conditions. A significant number of Roma died in Transnistria, others have succeeded to come back at the end of the war, on foot, and most of them were orphan children (Herțanu, 2020).

Those who returned managed to integrate, as best they could, as the communist period that followed, even if it succeeded to incorporate all of them, was in fact a forced assimilation.

3. How the Roma overcame these difficult periods?

First of all it was the love constantly expressed to each other, the care for your neighbor, the unconditioned support permanently granted to their peers, a feeling of brotherhood manifested even to the Roma who was not directly related to them. The Roma people do not agree with the idea of unintelligent or ungifted Roma. All of them are good, smart, resourceful and all of them are worthy. This appreciation shown to the other had created a high self-esteem, as the family is the support and the comfort which they

needed and where they could discover themselves. As they have always stayed together and knew each other, everyone's need and support which was promptly granted, had helped to overcome all circumstances. This way of living persists even nowadays. Roma are less interested in job positions, career or school. For them the family prevails, and the most important aspect is to live close to each other. It is enough to make a living.

Another way the Roma managed to overcome the hard time was **cheerfulness**. Roma always sang and rejoiced, no matter the storms they had to encounter. This manner of smiling in the face of adversity helps them to eschew the importance of the situation, or to minimize it and trust for the better.

In Iași County there are approximately 30 Roma communities and 16 of them are quite large. In three of them the Roma population exceeds 50% of the total. For example in Lungani commune, respectively within the villages Zmeu and Crucea, Roma people represent 98% of the total population and this is not accidental. In the 19th century, the nobleman Lungu freed the Roma in his possession and estate them with a piece of land sufficient to build a house. Thus they remained in the two nearby localities and developed the same occupations: zootechnics and music. In Dagata, the village Zece Prajini and Dolhesti, village Pietris, Roma people exceeds 50% of the total population. Most of the Roma from these last two communities are musicians.

According to the census from 2011, there were declared 11,288.00 Roma people in Iași County, but the real number is much bigger, we suppose rather triple. Roma people refused to declare the family component as they were afraid of the possible repercussions, as they faced back in time, during the '40s. Before the deportation there was a local census, and later they were forcibly taken and deported.

In Iași there are 1,376.00 declared Roma. This figure is not real either, as only one third of them are declared, from the same reasons mentioned above. Roma people are scattered in all the neighborhoods of the city, and the areas where they prevail are Tatarasi, Bașcauș, Metalurgie, Dancu, Pacureț, Ses Bahlui and Alexandru Cel Bun. Although most of the Roma live in apartments, they have maintained the same manner of living close to each other from a zonal point of view. There are whole families living in the same condominium or even in the same neighborhood. If they have to live in different neighborhoods, they take good care and try to see each other as often as possible, almost daily. Compared with the communities outside the city, who are more traditional, we cannot deny that the in the city, the urbanization broke some of the Roma customs. However

the Roma communities from the city are mostly maintaining their tradition and still resist change.

4. Representation of the disease in Roma people

The diseases are categorized as evil. Roma people consider that something unclean had determined the disease, such as a spell, a curse or a sin. They are avoiding naming the disease specifically to avoid its persistence. For example the cancer is named the bad/ugly disease (Rebegea et al., 2019). In order to protect their children from diseases, Roma are giving them other identities, such as a secret name or nickname, in an attempt to make the disease overlook them. This is why most of the Roma have in their birth certificates a first name, and in the family and community they are called differently, with another first name. Roma are practicing a so-called traditional medicine, such as enchantments for evil eye, incantations for the protection of the newly born, the substitution magic – the alleged sale of the ill child over the window or the modification of the first name, in the idea that it is exchanged for a healthy child, the sacrifice magic which implies the slaughter of the lamb for the tinker Easter, aiming for the recovery of the ill people from the house and for the protection of the family (Sandu, 2010).

When an adult or a child is getting ill, Roma considers that the most important aspect is to give him/her a special state of mind which can help overcome the disease. The ill person will have the attention of all the whole family, everybody is taking good care, they are speaking as nicely as they can, they are trying to cheer him/her up, are trying for all sorts of solutions. They are aiming to convey a powerful optimism, are certain that he/she will get better and that the disease is a transient state, “will be over soon” and the person will become healthy, healthier than before, a fulfilled human being! This is the why when Roma people are visiting somebody hospitalized they go in large groups, just to show them their care, to make them feel safe, protected and loved by all of them, to prove their participation to the healing process.

5. The research methods

We have chosen the focus-group as Roma are agreeing with the research methods which entail a dialogue face to face. The questionnaires are considered to be boring, are not taken very seriously and are treated in a superficial manner. The interview is accepted to some extent, but if they comprehend it is about a group discussion, Roma are willing to participate,

to take their time, especially because it is a gathering. The focus-group is perceived as a Roma meeting which is quite pleasant.

A focus-group is the most adequate tool in the case of a research with Roma people, as they not only respond easily to all the requests, but also generate debates, which Roma enjoys best, and this is an adequate technique to find out more information about what interests us.

The focus-group was accomplished on age distribution as follows: the first one with people aged 18-25 years old, the second one with people aged 25-40 years old and the third one with people aged 40-55 years old.

6. The description of the subjects

The subjects are Roma ethnic people with residence in the city of Iași, yet most of them are originated from the Roma communities in the county. All of them are, at least, high school graduates (some of them are seniors in high school) are employed or have their own business. They come from generations of fiddlers or merchants, according to the distinct community they come from. Most of them are married, less those aged 18-25 years old.

7. The research methods

If for most of the people the pandemic was translated into a closer connection with the family, for the Roma it meant family distancing. For what reason? The Roma family is what we may call an extended family, in accordance to the criteria of the other people. Roma family is not limited to parents and children; it includes aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, second cousins etc. The extended family is in fact for them their family.

• Social

From a social point of view Roma people argued that they encountered a compelling isolation. Most of them have liberal jobs such as singing or working in commerce. As long as there were not events and the commercial centers and trade fairs were closed the Roma people, collectively with the imposed “social distancing”, have encountered some type of seclusion in their activities. Roma have perceived it as an aggressive blockage, as most of them, dealing with lifetime activities have never foreseen that a change may occur; a sudden and prolonged alteration which forced them to reaffirm.

The reinvention meant an adaptation to the communication via the modern technology, something that the Roma people are less accustomed and agreed.

To use a computer, to communicate online, to transmit an online event, called for a substantial effort.

Another aspect is that although they were habituated with a specific activity, they had to perform different jobs for which they were not trained or ready. For example the musicians (most of the sole family contributors) who had a life filled with events, in very elegant environments, pleasant settings, homogenous teams, had to work in constructions or carpentry, in order to provide for their families. Some of them accepted for their wives to work, as only one income was not enough.

This imposed social distancing meant family distancing, as both spouses had to work and they had less time available for their children; others had to leave the country and work abroad, or were employed quite far from home, as they had to provide for their families. The imposed restrictions were almost unbearable for the Roma as the meetings with the extended family were quite difficult to achieve. The issues of each couple, which normally were settled within the family, were decelerated due to the restrictions.

The constraints were very hard to comply with for the Roma. Some of them didn't take it seriously, or considered that nothing bad is going to happen if they will get out buying something. Most of them stated that they defied the restrictions because they wanted to experience the joy with the extended family and searched by various means to satisfy that need of gathering with the loved ones.

Most of the interviewed Roma have blamed the lack of socialization with their friends and acquaintances, and affirmed that this had hit them a lot. It was not only the financial loss, but the lack of relationships; maintaining the connection with some people and later reconnecting with them, required substantial efforts from all of them.

In addition to these issues, the most important aspect mentioned by all Roma was the limitation of freedom. This constraint was perceived not only socially but also personally and psychologically.

• **Personal**

Most of the Roma who participated in this research have asserted that together with the limitation of freedom they have experienced:

- A bigger responsibility for the others, meaning a thorough mobilization to ensure the necessities for their families, a permanent protection, avoiding to travel long distances, and the need to remain with their loved ones;

- The care for all those close; the concern to offer all the necessities, expressing the feelings of affection even more than before, leading to some sort of indulgence articulated towards all the members of their families;

- Approaching some delicate subjects with their families, which was never done before, which helped them even more to dive into more personal awareness, attempting to solve some past issues, untold or closed for some time.

• Psychological

From a psychological point of view the pandemics, mainly due to the limitation of freedom had some effects such as: experiencing feelings of uselessness, monotony, panic, anguish and disorientation (Gilia, 2020; Nutas, 2021; Steti, 2021; Tataru, 2020). These were the most assertions expressed by the Roma people who had participated in the focus-groups.

The restriction of freedom had strong effects in Roma people and this can also explain the negative status they have experienced.

The idea that they cannot do anything, they cannot move or communicate freely, had created a powerful feeling of hopelessness as well as depressive moods (Baroiu et al., 2021).

Most of the Roma people have said that the pandemic was not about the fear of getting ill or something bad happening (Matache & Bhabha, 2020). The evil was perceived in a different manner: the restriction of freedom had induced in their souls a lot of tension and heartache.

The Roma people were not afraid of the disease; they were more afflicted because they were not able to meet, because the link with their family was cut off. During the interview they confirmed that they were shocked by the fact that everybody was more and more panicked, suffered more restrictions due to social distancing and were commented on for the compliance with the limitations.

All participants to the focus-groups have agreed that they were not afraid of the pandemics, especially at the beginning, they did not take it seriously. To their big surprise they saw how the panic gathered all around them; they saw people giving up, under psychic terror, panicked, on the brink of despair.

They have all said that the disease was not a threat, but a psychological battle they had to fight with, and they considered to have won this combat.

8. Conclusions

Roma is a nomad people and for them it is essential both the family and the liberty of movement.

If for other people the importance is given by the job, the position in the society or the professional rise, for the Roma people these are less significant.

The family, the extended family is being together with the loved ones, it stands for joy, psychological comfort, solving all issues, it all signifies a fulfilled live.

Liberty of movement, another essential aspect for the Roma people, represents not only the means of providing for their families, but yet another psychological relief and a permanent relationship with the world, a thorough comprehension of the others, it is a way to adapt to all changes.

Throughout history the Roma people have travelled extensively worldwide. Although they are originally from India they have reached other continents in various forms (servants or free merchants), they have survived to all social storms and to all challenges, because they had a simple and extremely efficient method in their defense: family and freedom.

The families were always close to them and have developed a way to support each other permanently and unconditionally. The rules, conditions and claims to the family were avoided or eliminated, especially in the face of danger. What is fundamental for Roma people is the respect, the woman cleanliness (chastity) and the concern for others.

Liberty was ensured even if in many circumstances they were slaves, as they reached an understanding with their master and they could travel freely throughout the country, provide that periodically to bring an income.

Therefore liberty offered them some sort of training of their abilities to communicate, comprehending the culture of others and adapting to new circumstances.

Family and freedom were maintained until nowadays, and in the context of globalization and the modernization of the 21st century XXI the Roma people are still holding on to all these social strains. Even if we cannot see Roma caravans, carriages used for travelling that confirmed that they were free, although they are sedentary they have maintained their liberty of movement in another form: the voyage by car, they have jobs involving travelling, frequent moves etc.

Year 2020 was a challenge for the Roma people because they were touched in their very deep structure. Roma are breathing through the others: by their families and the liberty of movement.

Roma have considered that the isolation affected them considerably just because being accustomed with large gatherings, with permanent networking, were even more distressed than the other people. They have sustained that the isolation had affected them psychologically, because all issues are solved by the Roma within large gatherings, enjoying a lot of pleasure. They had to overcome all these fighting with loneliness, and avoiding giving up.

They tried to eliminate the feelings of uselessness, panic and confusion experienced at the beginning, with all the methods at hand:

Fear – was sublimated taking care of their family and fighting for it.

Isolation – was sublimated talking more with the loved ones and developing subjects never approached before, thus harmonizing the relationships with the members of their families.

Panic – they made use of joy with the small family and even tried to identify new ways to meet with their extended family.

Confusion, blockage – they keep on speaking with the loved ones, with their acquaintances about the experienced financial issues, and they tried to discover different means to earn their living. They have answered to all requests and received without any further details or conditions, they had to do something, they had to avoid inertia.

Freedom restriction – even if Roma had to accept the imposed isolation, they travelled more than the rest of the people. They identified different methods to travel without being obstructed.

The extended family – as they had to meet less than usually, the sense of appreciation and gratitude for the family was even stronger, expressing more love and care towards their members.

In conclusion, even if the pandemic was for the Roma a terrible storm, a rough test, they have succeeded to accentuate their positive experiences towards their families doubled by an even greater desire for freedom. They have trained their abilities or tendencies which were “asleep” for some of the such as: Roma more attracted to the modern life, less traditional, have become more aware of their need for family and the utility of the Roma tradition. Others coming from families of craftsmen have started to try again the craft of their grandparents etc.

This pandemic which came overnight had triggered a bigger sense brotherhood in Roma people. A brotherhood that was threatened by the school of thought of the 21st century had succeeded to eliminate this terrible threat and to maintain the traditional values so deeply held by the Roma people: family and freedom.

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