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Romania: introduction

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Romania

Introduction

Petre Matei, Raluca Bianca Roman and Ion Duminica

The movement for Roma civic emancipation in interwar Romania can be described as one of the most active Roma/Gypsy movements in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, in terms of the number of Roma organisations that were set up, the number of Roma-led publications that would be published and in terms of the number of Roma leaders and activists that would emerge within the midst of the movement. The goals and aims of the Roma movement in Romania were connected with the broader social and historical context of the country in the aftermath of the First World War, wherein the overarching goal was the shaping of a unified Romanian identity, in a context of a newly multi-ethnic country.

Most importantly, the historical context of interwar Romania was, much like that of other countries in the region, connected to attempts at creating a common Romanian identity. Following the First World War, the Kingdom of Romania incorporated several important regions, including Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia, and parts of Banat, Crişana, and Maramureş, which almost doubled the territory and population of the country. In this context, the desire to create a homogeneous Romanian state was countered by the everyday realities of the time, a country which now comprised numerous multi-ethnic and multicultural communities (for more on this general context, please see works by Livezeanu, 1995; Bucur, 2002; Korkut, 2006; Radu & Schmitt, 2017; Bejan, 2019). The end of the First World War also brought with it the agrarian and electoral reforms, which offered land and right to vote to Romanian citizens.

The changes brought about by the war also opened new opportunities for Roma, even if this meant, oftentimes, the loss of traditions and their integration in the general mass of the Romanian population. This is evident from the Romanian census of 1930, which recorded a significantly lower number of Roma than the previous estimates at the end of the 19th century: 262,501 people of Roma ethnicity, representing 1.5% of the country's population; 84.5% of them living in the rural areas (Achim, 1998, pp. 145–147). The new democratic context set up after 1918 offered ethnic minorities in Romania the opportunity to be active in organisations and associations with an economic, cultural, political character, set up on ethnic basis. This contributed to a modernisation of the Roma organisations, visible also in the attempts to organise socially, culturally, and politically.

For example, the signing of King Ferdinand I of Romania, on the November 14, 1918, of a Decree-law concerning electoral reform put an end to the censitary voting system and introduced instead the universal vote for male citizens over the age of 21. In other words, adult Roma men (over the age of 21) entered in the possession of an electoral capital and many different political fractions would become interested in it (for more on this, see Matei, 2010, pp. 159–160). The emergence of Roma leaders can thus also be explained by the fact that they were encouraged to enter discussion with Romanian political leaders. Furthermore, as discussed elsewhere (Matei, 2010), knowing that they now had the capacity to influence a significant number of votes, Roma leaders quickly learned to behave accordingly.

As such, the support of the Roma community served a political benefit, and was sought after also by authorities, who believed that the Roma movement could potentially contribute to the solving of broader societal problems. This was also connected to a broader need to gain the political support of Roma to counteract the other ethnic minority groups. In this context, new possibilities of collaborating with different political parties emerged, as well as collaboration with the police or the Romanian Orthodox Church. In turn, modern Roma leaders expressed loyalty towards Romanians, Church and King. They proved willing to help in the process of Romaniasation of the Hungarianised Roma, the enabling of the Romanian authorities' control over nomadic Gypsies, the conversion of the non-Orthodox Roma to Orthodoxy; the attraction of Roma voters on the part of Romanians in the multiethnic areas, etc. Thus, in order to understand the specifics of these manifestations of Roma civic emancipation, one must take account of the context of the era, wherein a collaboration with Romanian authorities existed and, within which, the latter were willing to help, at least to some extent and at least under certain conditions (Matei, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, the Roma elite adopted a discourse which did not contradict Romanian authorities, or even the Romanian public opinion, but shaped itself according to them. As discussed elsewhere (Ibid, 2010, pp. 159–161), a process of modernising the forms of Roma organisation would unfold. For example, new, modern forms of organisations were set up which would co-exist with traditional ones (i.e., characterising specifically the nomadic Roma). Gradually, the former would not only spread their influence across the country but express an aim to represent all Roma in Romania. Furthermore, these new forms of Roma organisation would move beyond looking after the interests of specific categories of Roma. For example, even the unifying efforts of *lăutari* (or Roma musicians), while taking place across the country, targeted only the interests of a specific professional category, and did not represent the interests of the entire Roma community (Ibid.).

The crucial moment for the birth of the Roma civic emancipation movement of all Roma in Romania would be April 1933 when, at the initiative of one of the prominent leaders among Roma – Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu – *Asociația Generală a Țiganilor din România* (The General Association of Gypsies in Romania, or AGȚR) was founded (Ibid.,

p. 160). The latter, alongside *Uniunea Generală a Romilor din Romania* (The General Union of Roma in Romania, or UGRR), led by Gheorghe A. Lăzurică and, later, *Asociația Uniunea Generală a Romilor din România* (The Association General Union of Roma in Romania, or AUGRR), led by Gheorghe Niculescu, are the best-known Roma organisations from interwar Romania, with AUGRR also proving to be the most influential in the long run. Noteworthy here is that AUGRR derived from UGRR, after Lăzurică was forced to resign in May 1934. Unlike UGRR, however, AUGRR (led by Niculescu), would gain legal entity status in November 1934 (for more on this, see Niculescu's portrait, in this chapter). As will be evident from the portraits presented in this chapter, these organisations were connected and often fed off each other and the dynamics of the Roma movement itself could be also visible from the struggle for legitimacy which would develop among Roma leaders at the time and, most importantly, between the leaders of the different organisations.

As discussed elsewhere (Roman, 2021b, p. 95; see also Matei, 2012), it is noteworthy that the first Roma organisation was the Neorustic Brotherhood (in Romanian, *Înfrățirea Neorustică*), which was set up in 1926, in Făgăraș, and led by Lazăr Naftanailă, but its influence remained limited geographically to the region of Transylvania. Likewise, other regional organisations would also be set up across the country, with different degrees of influence. For instance, an Oltenia circle of AGȚR would be formed in 1933, led by Marin Simion. Also important in connection to the Oltenia circle of AGȚR was the role of a Romanian Roma academic, C. S. Nicolăescu-Ploșor, who intended to set up a Roma House/Museum and a Roma Library. The regional dynamics were also made visible in some of the regional Roma newspapers which would eventually be published: for example, in *Neamul Țigănesc* – published in Făgăraș (whose editor was Lazăr Naftanailă) and in *Foaia Poporului Romesc* – published in Rupea.

It is worth noting that the Roma community in interwar Romania, especially when compared to other minorities in the country at the time (such as the German, Hungarian, or the Jewish minority) presented itself as a heterogeneous group, lacking a linguistic, religious, national cohesion. This also meant that potential members were difficult to organise, being part of diverse Roma groups, some no longer speaking the language of their parents, and others no longer assuming their Roma origin. From the point of view of organising dispersed communities and creating a shared sense of Roma belonging, this created inevitable challenges for Roma leaders of the time.

It was in this context that new Roma leaders emerged, including those mentioned above, whose visions for the future of the Roma community proved complex and sometimes conflicting. Their ideas and goals would be disseminated in various forms: from the organisation of small and large group gatherings and publications in mainstream media to the establishment of Roma organisations' own newspapers. In fact, the activity of Roma leaders and Roma organisations during the interwar period is evident in the existence of six Roma led newspapers, which would become the main means of

disseminating the aims and goals of the civic emancipation movement in the country: *Glasul Romilor* (The Voice of the Roma), *Timpul* (The Time), *Țara Noastră* (Our Country) – Special Edition for Roma in Romania, *O Rom* (The Roma), *Neamul Țigănesc* (The Gypsy Nation) and *Foaia poporului romesc* (Paper of the Roma people). At the same time, this movement was driven by key individuals, who would become pivotal in the shaping of the movement in the country, all fighting for the representation of the Roma community in Romania.

All these dynamics and shifts will be explored throughout the portraits presented in this chapter. However, what can undoubtedly be seen, even from a necessarily brief look at the historical, social and political contexts which shaped the Roma civic emancipation movement in interwar Romania, is that this process was both complex and connected to the broader historical context at the time. At the same time, some key elements are worth mentioning, such as the struggle for legitimacy among Roma leaders, the tensions between the centre (i.e., Bucharest) and the country's key regions (primarily Transylvania and Oltenia), the best means of mobilising and attracting the Roma individuals to join the Roma movement and the need to collaborate with different state authorities. As such, the Roma portraits selected for the purpose of this chapter help contour these broader dynamics, relationships and shifts in the Roma civic emancipation movement itself.

Therefore, in the individual portraits authored by Petre Matei and Raluca Bianca Roman, this chapter will outline, based on available archival and media materials (including, but not limited to, the Roma periodicals mentioned above), some of the key protagonists of the Roma movement in the country during the interwar period: specifically, Lazăr Naftanailă, Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu, Gheorghe A. Lăzurică, Gheorghe Niculescu and Constantin Nicolăescu-Ploșor. These portraits are by no means exhaustive. In fact, as will be evident throughout this chapter, other individuals have also played a role in the Roma civic emancipation movement in Romania. For instance, Apostol Matei's name often comes up in the work of Roma organisations in Romania, including as the first Vice-President of the General Union of Roma in Romania, when G. A. Lăzurică was still its president. Marin I. Simion, on the other hand, was the leader of the Oltenia section of the Roma movement, and a self-titled "voievod" of Roma in Oltenia, while Aurel Th. Manolescu-Dolj was the editor of the Roma newspaper *Timpul* , published in Craiova. Nevertheless, in the absence of extended information on most of these individuals, the selection of the portraits presented in this chapter helps us contour the key dynamics, movements, alliances and conflicts occurring within the Roma civic emancipation movement of the interwar period, while nevertheless leaving the space open for further analysis and research to be conducted on the matter in the future.

Alongside this, in a section authored by Ion Duminica, the role of women within the Roma civic emancipation movement in Romania will be explored through the fragmentary portraits (based on available materials from the interwar Romanian press) of two Roma women: Florica Constantinescu and Marta Lăzurică. While little is known about the role of Roma women in the shaping of the Roma movement in the country, snippets

of their presence and influence within different organisations can be found both in the articles written within Roma periodicals of the time and in archival materials pertaining to the establishment of Roma organisations; and the role of women within them. Through the available material, therefore, fragmentary portraits of the work and role of Roma women within the Roma emancipation movement can be introduced, with further research undoubtedly necessary in the future.