VARIA

Trust and cooperation in the public sphere: why Roma people should not be excluded?[1]

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Abstract. *The recent political developments in Romania and other Central and East European countries, marked by rising populism and political extremism, shed light on the essential issue of building a free, tolerant and inclusive public sphere, which is willing to let arguments to be decisive instead of power, status, race or wealth. The current tendencies of socially excluding Roma, indiscriminately taken by populists for unjustified social burden and intolerable racial difference, are a warning for more radical political action that could undermine on the long-run the effort to set up a democratic public space. Excluding from start an entire minority would only encourage future exclusions based on ideology, ethnicity or religion, according to the narrow definition populists use to give to the concept of 'people'.*

Keywords: *social trust, ethnic trust, cooperation, Roma, exclusion, public sphere*

Introduction

Facing nowadays increasing discrimination and numerous acts of exclusion, Roma people have to fight the very cause of those attitudes and actions against them, namely the widespread prejudices and stereotypes they are faced with. As shown by social psychology studies, ongoing prejudices and stereotypes lead to discrimination and exclusion and have a profound impact upon the future social behavior of the citizens[1]. From this perspective, Roma should be acknowledged as victims rather than be blamed for the social situation they are confronted with. At the same time, the deeply entrenched mechanism of social exclusion and discrimination has to be unraveled in order to fully understand not only the current situation that Roma people are facing, but the great danger they also face in the context of general social discontent and frustration in the Roma community.

Numerous signs of regression are to be witnessed today when looking at the respect of the rights of these people and the general attitude in many European countries vis-à-vis the Roma, especially related to raising populism that uses Roma distinctiveness to gain popular support on immigration issues[2]. This is not only a serious cause of concern for those people who care about minority rights, but also for those who support democracy in general. Different social, ethnic, religious and racial groups are not only becoming specific targets of the populists who want to exclude them with a narrow, conservative, ethno-nationalist definition of the 'people', but populists may also prepare the ground for more radical actions. In that case, the minority groups are not the only ones to suffer from this demise of democracy, the absence of rule of law will also affect ordinary citizen[3]. In many cases, harsh populism may foster political extremism and can ultimately turn into radical authoritarianism[4].

This article intends to explore the basic mechanism for social integration and successful coope-ration between groups, which is social trust. Social trust, as one of the important element for coope-ration, can be undermined by other social attitudes and values. In our case, the ethnic trust in Roma, which is a particular type of social trust, can be seriously undermined by various types of negative stereotypes and prejudices against Roma people.

Low trust, in general, largely inhi-bits cooperation and, finally, under-mines the growth of a public demo-cratic sphere. That is the reason why populism based on anti-Roma attitudes can be harmful not only for this particular group, but it may eventually turn against the rights of all citizens and seriously undermine the functioning of the public sphere. Yet the growth of a public space is essential is the post-Communist settings, when after decades of terror and exclusion one would expect to see citizens engage in public matters and decide for themselves and for the community. While before 1989 people were forced to live in their own narrow private spaces and to leave the public space to the ideo-logical control of the Communist party, they now have the chance to rebuild a functional public sphere that provides all people with the same citizen rights. Excluding Roma from those newly created societies in Central and Eastern Europe would be not only unfair to them but it leads to an incomplete consolidation of the public sphere itself. In the end, excluding Roma from the definition of the people, as populists do, would prepare the ground for many other ideologically and poli-tically determined acts of exclusion and definitively undermine liberal democracy.

Public sphere, cooperation and trust

Defining the public sphere in short entails to focus on the common

interest, which is the very foundation of the community. According to Habermas[5], the public sphere is the environment where public political reasoning is accepted, where the individual can speak freely and where the arguments are not influenced by any political or social power. It makes it possible for everyone to express him/herself regardless of any constraints on time, resources, participation or themes. It is the space created by the discursive interactions between private people willing to let arguments, not status or authority or tradition, be decisive[6]. The public sphere not only enables autonomous opinion formation but also empowers the citizens to influence the decision-makers; it is a medium for political justification, for putting the decision-makers to account, as well as for political initiative, for mobilizing political support[7]. In other words, it is a precondition for democracy and self-government.

Building a public space would require that people, engaging in this space, express the willingness to defend and pursue the collective interest. The concept of common interest may be discovered as early as the Greek idea of *polis,* but the definition of the modern idea of common interest and public sphere originates in the French Revolution. Based on Rousseau's seminal writings, the Jacobins defined the state as the source of societal cohesion and the ultimate institution

of the public sphere. After the French Revolution, the public sphere underwent a structural transformation that favored the development of intermediary organizations situated between family solidarity and state bureaucracy, namely the non-governmental organizations which are providing assistance and support for the people[8]. Two centuries after the French Revolution, the emerging paradigm of a decentralized and mixed economy of welfare, favored by the functional and structural transformation of the public sphere, serves as a strong corrective to the Jacobin assumption that the state is the only institution of the public sphere[9]. In the new paradigm, the common interest is expressed by the willingness to cooperate and the desire to refrain from egoism. The two aspects are embedded in the more recent theory of social capital that largely emphasizes trust as an essential asset for cooperation. Though there are a number of definitions for social capital, it could be seen as a tight relationship between norms, ways of cooperation and the engagement in the public sphere. In fact, social trust, reciprocity and altruism are ingredients of cooperation. And cooperation is a prerequisite for political action by the way of shared resources – petitions, protests, boycotts and even street fights. It enables individuals to form groups, define common interest and, consequently, influence the political system. A society that achieves to set up interactional

practices is able to create conditions for cooperation and engagement in the public sphere[10].

A growing sociological literature focused recently on this relationship between norms and ways of coope-ration, on the one hand, and the engagement in the public sphere, on the other hand[11]. Trust is considered important because it facilitates communication, the pursuit of common goals and plays an essential role in solving problems raised by the collective action. Putnam turns trust into the very basis of any cooperation between individuals[12]. Fukuyama defines trust as the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior based on norms commonly shared by the members of that community. Those norms can deal with profound value questions like the nature of God or justice, but they also encompass secular norms like professional standards and codes of behavior[13]. For Yamagishi and Yamagishi, trust is an expectation of others' benign behavior under circumstances where people do not have control over others, where they do not know each other. By contrast, assurance occurs in relationships where people do have control over others, for example where people know each other and are mutually committed[14]. That difference might explain the levels of generalized trust and cooperativeness between different kinds of societies[15].

Social trust and ethnic trust

Central and East European societies face serious difficulties in consolidating a public sphere after decades of Communist rule. One would expect today to see citizens from those countries engage in public sphere and decide for themselves and for the community. People are now free to participate but they seem to refuse to engage in public life more seriously than just voting[16]. This reluctance to publi-cally engage poses the questions what type of motivations and resources are needed for full participation. In fact, people participate in politics because they can, because they want to or because they were asked to[17]. There are many reasons for the low level of public engagement, for instance the social shock endured during the transformation period in Central and Eastern Europe, the erosion and collapse of the social safety net and the rise of permanent unemploy-ment[18], the persistence of a wide range of social or personal networks from Communist times, which are specific to atomized societies, and are a response to the organisational failure and the corruption of the existing institutions[19]. The main reason, however, for the low level of public engagement is distrust. There is first and foremost a great distrust in the political system as a whole. People feel that is useless to get engaged as long as they feel powerless when confronted with

political institutions that are seen as rigged against ordinary citizens and generally run by corrupt and irresponsible officials. Yet there is a more profound lack of trust, i.e. social trust. Citizens in Central and Eastern European countries display less trust in other people than citizens of West European countries generally do[20]. Gabriel Bădescu discovered that the mean proportion of trustworthy persons is higher in the consolidated West European democracies than in the former communist countries[21].

How can one explain the difference between the two sets of countries, even when we use the same question pertaining to social trust? It is possible that people who answer to the same question ('generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?') but understand the question differently? A plausible explanation is given by Bădescu[22], who focuses on the plausible definition of 'people'. In fact, the definition of 'people' plays a crucial role in defining the community and the cooperation context. Whereas we speak of social trust when we mean generalized trust, we should better speak of ethnic trust. As Uslaner and Conley unraveled different effects of generalized and particularized trust in the case of US communities[23], it could well be that the definition of 'others' really make the difference between the Western and Eastern

European countries and not necessarily the degree of consolidation of democracy. In ethnically heterogeneous societies, it matters who one identifies as being 'the other people', as one could fully trust an unknown person from one's own ethnic group, but deeply distrust an unknown person from the 'out-group'.

The distinction made between social trust and ethnic trust sheds new light on the relationship between ethnicity, nationhood and citizenship when it comes to discuss the situation that Roma people are faced with in Central and Eastern Europe. Focusing on the Romanian case, we can analyze how deep the exclusion mechanisms work against Roma and we can discuss what should be done in order to foster economic, social and political integration. These social exclusion mechanisms are based on stereotypes and prejudices and directly affect social trust when it comes to dealing with Roma people. The exclusion is so profound that it can be detected not only in the settings of social interaction but in more general, symbolic and impersonal settings such as the feeling of belonging and the definition of the nation.

Negative prejudices and trust

The image that Roma people bear is rather negative. Unfairly treated for centuries, they find themselves now at the very margins of society.

By using survey data collected during the last two decades the sociologists can now unravel the negative stereotypes and prejudices affecting Roma. The Ethnic Relations Barometer in Romania (BARE)[24] shows that the common prejudices expressed by ethnic Romanians as well as ethnic Hungarians vis-à-vis ethnic Roma are deeply negative, widespread and highly frequent. Roma people are perceived by the members of these two largest ethnic groups in Romania as dirty (18%), backward (12.8%), thieves (20.9%), slothful (16.1%)[25]. It is not surprising to find that the greatest social distance is expressed vis-à-vis Roma people. They are not welcomed, neither in other groups' families, classrooms and neighborhoods, nor in localities and even counties. Two fifths of ethnic Romanian and ethnic Hungarian responded clearly that they are even opposed to their very presence in Romania, though they are Romanian citizens by birth.

Negative stereotypes and prejudices are in fact currently emphasized when it comes to defining the boundaries of the nation. From a social point of view, Roma people continue to be depicted by ethnic Romanians as part of a largely different community, with a peculiar set of different norms (including salient habits that seem outrageous and that are overemphasized, e. g. the marriage of Roma children by their parents, the propensity for violent conflicts and the persistence

of unlawful parallel traditional judicial institutions). Thus, they appear as a people impossible to socially integrate. The mass-media justify this claim by comparing the failed Roma integration policies in Romania with the alleged failure of Muslims' integration policies in Western democracies. From the cultural point of view, Roma are also excluded from the definition of the Romanian nation and, therefore, are not entitled to the Romanian citizenship in the views of Romanian nationalists. Defining language as another requirement for citizenship[26], Romanians tend to exclude ethnic minorities from the definition of the titular nation of Romania, which is still defined in article 1 of the constitution as a "National State"[27]. Almost a fifth of the respondents (18.8%) of a specially designed survey on intolerance and discrimination clearly stated that Roma are not part of the Romanian nation[28]. Furthermore, from the political point of view, Roma have no support from the existing Romanian political parties. Whereas other smaller ethnic groups, such as the ethnic Hungarians, benefit from their own ethnic parties, Roma have not yet managed to successfully create their own party and remain at the mercy of irresponsive Romanian political parties to represent them. Thus, they have no direct influence on parliamentary and governmental policies. By contrast, a very small ethnic party representing the German

community managed to get the electoral support of ethnic Romanian voters and to win numerous mandated at the local level in Sibiu county and Sibiu city[29].

In this context of negative prejudices and political exclusion, it is not surprising that only 0.8% of ethnic Romanians and almost no ethnic Hungarian (0.1%) stated in the 2000 BARE survey that Roma people are trustworthy. As mentioned earlier, there is a direct impact of distrust on cooperation. Cooperation could be more broadly defined as social integration or more narrowly as personal, individual interaction, but the results are all the same. The social capital theory largely emphasizes the virtues of cooperation in different social and interpersonal settings. People who participate in voluntary organizations, for example, develop a series of habits of cooperation that help them to overcome prejudices. The interaction between people with different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds may foster the habits of cooperation outside the voluntary organization they are involved in. People active in voluntary associations might thus form organized civic action groups (lobbies as well as pressure groups) to influence ordinary citizens and to control politicians in office[30]. Organized groups in civil society could force politicians to be more responsible, responsive and efficient by promising political support or by threatening with its withdrawal. In fact, the good

citizen is interested in common issues and is able to overcome narrow individual interest in order to be part of collective endeavors[31]. The individuals who are active in the civil society, who are more trusting, tolerant and participatory, are those with the greatest potential of forming the essence of democratic attitudes that might disseminate over time throughout society[32]. In conclusion, the various associative venues of civil society might contribute to the development of the individuals (developing, forming, enhancing, and supporting capacities for self-governance), consolidate the public sphere (constituting the social infrastructure of public spheres that provides information, develops agendas, tests ideas, represents various views and provides a voice), and influence representative institutions (supporting and enhancing institutions of democratic governance by providing political representation, enabling pressure and resistance if needed, organizing collective actions and serving as alternative venues for governance)[33].

Roma in contemporary post-Communist society: cooperation and integration

What we can learn from the social capital theory regarding our issue? It seems that successful integration, as well as collective, political and cultural cooperation relay on the effects of numerous small-scale individual interactions that

take place in voluntary groups. Yet ethnic Romanians and ethnic Hungarians, the members of the two largest ethnic groups in Romania, seem to avoid personal contact with Roma people. The social distance that Roma people face today is growing fast, since Romanians reject more and more any social relationships with Roma people within their families, friends and colleagues and neighborhoods. Surveys show that numerous citizens are in favor of political actions taken by extremists, for instance the harsh measures which have been undertaken by nationalist mayors in some towns and villages leading to the abrupt isolation and even to the eviction of ethnic Roma from those localities. Though mostly already living at the outskirts of localities, especially in rural areas, many Roma communities have been forced to live totally apart[34].

Ethnic and social distrust prevents voluntary participation and cooperation. Therefore, the challenge that post-Communist societies face today is both to increase cooperation and to decrease ethnic and social distrust, and it has to be done in a social context marked by severe economic difficulties. In fact, distrust is what undermines small-scale cooperation. Since distrust is largely fuelled by negative prejudices, post-Communist societies have to vigorously fight those prejudices and stereotypes that affect Roma. With policies promoting inclusive education and limiting

ethnic and racial discrimination governments in Central and Eastern Europe could make serious steps forward in promoting cooperation.

Mechanisms for promoting mutual trust and cooperation can be formal and informal. On the one hand, formal education could be the opportunity for children and young people to overcome ethnic barriers set by the different groups regarding values and practices in families or neighborhoods, for example. Ethnic interaction and the sharing of different cultural values can be part of the school curriculum and after-school activities. It will foster better understanding of specific differences and lead to the recognition of common human values. However civic education in schools is not enough when it comes to rehabilitating the dignity of a whole group, who has not the cultural historical privilege of being a dominant nation like the Hungarians were for centuries. Even in the case of Romanian-Hungarian relations, the negative prejudices on both sides could be more successfully fought by allowing the school curriculum to discuss other peoples' cultural values, for instance by inviting poets, writers or musicians of those particular groups. This could help to rebalance the Communist policy of ethnic Romanian cultural domination before 1989,[35] which had such a negative impact on ethnic trust in early post-Communist period[36].

On the other hand, informal mechanisms for promoting coope-

ration between different groups through voluntary organizations are to be promoted as well. Assessed by de Tocqueville as having important civic functions, voluntary organizations, even with small-scale cooperation platforms, are schools of democracy. Through voluntary cooperation, one can learn trust, tolerance, reciprocity, altruism and even optimism[37]. Voluntary associations can teach the public ethic of condemning socially inappropriate behaviors, be it provoked by either peer pressure or a free-riding attitude[38] or based on racial prejudices. All these inappropriate behaviors have in common the disrespect of people and the disregard of the possible consequences of such acts for other people. Measures of cooperation intensity and trust show that, with no other influence, trust and other socially valuable skills can be learned by socializing in voluntary organizations[39]. It is thus possible to publically encourage interactions in voluntary associations between people with different social and ethnic background, in this case between ethnic Roma and non-ethnic Roma. This can be made through public and private financing, despite the criticism regarding the questionable efficiency of financing specifically aimed targets, like Roma or non-Roma NGOs. Trust, cooperation, tolerance and other valuable skills learned during this socializing process are essential, as they are expected to spill over the edge of the small-scale cooperation settings and consolidate at the societal level. A handful of civic activists can offer the best example for a successful cooperation based on trust and not legitimized by social segregation and ethnic discrimination.

Unfortunately, there still are cases recorded by Human Rights organizations of severe and unfair treatment of ethnic Roma by schools, police stations and other public institutions[40]: For instance, Roma children sitting in separate remote desks in classrooms, ethnic Roma beaten and unfairly treated by police officers for various small crimes or officially suspected of various crimes purely on the basis of their ethnicity, ethnic Roma who lack medical care for basically the same ethnic reasons. Although one should acknowledge the limited number of those unfair treatments, they are still the result of social prejudices against Roma. Segregation, exclusion and mistreatment are altogether salient effects of widespread negative stereotypes and prejudices that prevent not only cooperation but human compassion as also observed during the time of Nazi mass killings[41]. In Romania, exacerbated, negative prejudices that turned into open hatred have even led to violent ethnic clashes and bloodshed[42]. Fighting those prejudices in the public sphere, for example, could stop fuelling and legitimizing subsequent violent actions. Enforcing anti-discrimination legal actions in the public sphere is a necessary step towards a public

space free of prejudice. As mentioned in the ENAR Shadow Report in 2008, special anti-discrimination measures have to be enforced in mass-media, education, public administration and the health care system, while sanctions should be applied no matter whom they concern[43].

The need for decreasing ethnic and social distrust and increasing cooperation between individuals and groups is more important than ever before, because social integration and cooperation are threatened by the rise of populist movements in Eastern and Central Europe. Populists who are seeking mass support by their political activities may in fact prepare the ground for more radical action by the extremist movements on the rise. Fighting ethnic prejudices through education and supporting voluntary cooperation between Roma and other ethnicities in voluntary organizations could enhance ethnic tolerance and democracy in a future peaceful society free from outrageous populist attacks. The populists identify local minorities, especially Roma people, as the true 'enemies' of modernizing society, and contrast them with the virtuous and homogeneous 'people' that has to be defended against enemies' menaces[44]. In Romania, for example, alongside external enemies (especially foreign bankers and gas suppliers) that constantly plot against the virtuous Romanian people, ethnic Roma have become scapegoats not only for internal but

also for external political failures, including the failed accession to the Schengen Treaty[45]. The danger raised by populists is that prejudices and xenophobic rhetoric can prepare the ground for more radical actions, which are supported by many Romanian extremist citizens. In fact, 20.2% of the respondents to our survey clearly stated that Roma should be forced to live apart because they cannot integrate into the Romanian society; 15.1% say that access to public spaces (restaurants, bars and discotheques) should be prohibited for Roma people; 21.1% agree that citizens from towns and villages should decide whether Roma can settle there; 23.6% stated that the Romanian state should take decisive measures to stop Roma population from growing, while no less than 37.5% openly state that Roma should be prohibited from crossing national borders, because they are an embarrassment for real Romanian citizens and cause too much trouble[46]. It is not difficult to imagine that public support for radical, xenophobic and racist movements can transgress the limit from pure rhetoric to decisive action.

Conclusion

The perspective of this paper offers an enquiry into the basic mechanism of social integration and of successful cooperation between groups, which is social trust. By emphasizing the distinction between

social (generalized) trust and ethnic trust we can better understand the barriers that civic cooperation has to overcome in a multiethnic post-Communist society. Cooperation is, generally speaking, the key for effective pressure on the political establishment. Voluntary associations could become in Romania schools of democracy. Civic activists might become good examples for the society and even play the role of opinion leaders[47]. They might be the first to not only promote trust, dialogue and cooperation on a larger scale but also to help to generate political resources that citizens need in order to control political elites. Finally, civic activists might become politically active and help to bring about the rebirth of a public sphere: a space of freedom, dialogue, equity and equality. But this difficult process of rebuilding a public sphere after decades of totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be completed without the full integration of the various social groups, regardless of language, religion or race. Keeping Roma apart and separating them with concrete or symbolic walls would ultimately undermine any such efforts, since democracy cannot function for only part of the people. Excluding a particular group of citizens from the political body of the nation will affect democracy, and opens a dangerous path. Any other group could be excluded at any given moment as well[48]. Labeling Roma people as enemies is gladly taken up by any anti-democratic, xenophobic and authoritarian movement that exists in all societies. The next step then might be not only the elimination of Roma but the elimination of any other 'enemy' of such movements, thus leading to the abolition of democracy altogether.

Note

1   A previous version of this article was presented to the conference "European policies and Roma", Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies, Luxembourg, 3-4 October 2011. The author wishes to thank for valuable comments and suggestions the participants to the conference.

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44 The Romanian president Traian Băsescu was summoned to the national Anti-Discrimination Council in May 2007 after a public argument in which he insulted a young woman reporter by calling her a 'filthy Gypsy'. He was summoned again in September 2011 for insulting people with disabilities.

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46 The Romanian president Băsescu clearly identified Roma, who supposedly started to steal from buses in Finland and thus provoked the angry opposition of the Finnish government in the European Council, as the worst enemies who have to be blamed for the failure of

Romania joining in 2011 the EU Schengen area of free movement of citizens.

[47] 'Intolerance, discrimination and authoritarianism in the public opinion', survey conducted in Romania in 2003.

[48] Gabriel Bădescu, Paul E. Sum, Eric M. Uslaner, "Civic Society Development…", p. 340.

[49] See the controversial definition and practice of ethnic democracy in Israel and Latvia: Sammy Smooha, "The model of ethnic democracy. Israel as a Jewish and democratic state", *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2002, pp. 475-503; Priit Järve, "Language battles in the Baltic States: 1998-2002", in *Ethnicity and Language Politics in Transition Countries*, Farimah Daftary, François Grin (eds.), Open Society Institute, Budapest, 2003, pp. 73-106.

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