

Twenty-first-Century Underground World

At the doorstep of the European Union, in the year 2006, Romania conceals a world at the lowest levels of its social and economic life, a world which is only occasionally heard of in statistics and electoral speeches. The Roma communities living in Sibiu County, out of sight, in almost inaccessible areas, include thousands of children, most of them in critical health conditions, with no possibility of access to health care, educational services, or basic hygiene conditions.

Sibiu county authorities, through eight health mediators, are monitoring 4812 Roma persons, 2535 of whom (52.68 percent) are aged between 0 and 18 years. The investigation reveals that thousands of children live in adobe huts, in holes dug in the hills, at 10 degrees below zero, wearing sandals, surviving in conditions that are unacceptable for 21st-century Romania.

To get a complete picture we travelled more than 300 km in Sibiu county, accompanied by the health mediators, to visit the Roma communities. We focused on the conditions in which Roma children live in the communities of Dumbrăveni, Bazna, Boian, Copșa Mică, Ocna Sibiului, and Sibiu.

“Power” Centers

After 1990, Sibiu became famous because the first king of the Gypsies (later known as king of the Roma) lived there. From King Ion Cioabă, one of the best known Gypsy barons, succeeded by his son Florin Cioabă, this Roma community went one step further and produced an emperor, Iulian Rădulescu, and, in more recent years, a leader of the Roma Party, Petre Duca. From their houses in Sibiu, Roma leaders are fighting for power, and the Roma Party representatives seem to have an advantage. “Through our representative in the Sibiu Prefecture we succeeded in solving some of the problems our community had, but there’s no money, there are no programs and the government doesn’t help us,” claims Petre Duca, president of the Roma Party Sibiu county branch.

King Florin Cioabă, president of the Roma’s Christian Centre, believes that position in the Prefecture is occupied by someone who does not represent the Roma community and that is why things don’t work the way they should. “In Sibiu, the counsellor for Roma problems is a Romanian, not a Roma person. His sole connection with our ethnic minority is the fact that he is a member of the Roma Party. That’s not right,” Cioabă says.

Brick Houses, Mud and Plastic-Bag Huts

Once a flourishing agricultural center, the town of Dumbrăveni is the home of one of the largest Roma communities in Sibiu county. The community is divided between those who have houses and those who don’t. Those with houses live in the town, in the Roma neighborhood, where the streets bear the names of their inhabitants’ traditional trades: Muzicanților (musicians), Fierarilor (blacksmiths), and so on. In brick houses, often with plastic bags as windowpanes, under rickety roofs, scores of families live their daily lives.

Sanitary mediator Marinela Blăjan opens the doors of houses where families with three to six children live. Most of these children go to school only because it's less profitable for their parents to keep them at home. "Children are sent to school because this is the only way their parents can get their monthly child benefit, 230 thousand lei (€6.5) for each child. But this doesn't help them very much. It's difficult. Most of them suffer from various diseases, most of them chronic." After exchanging a few words, we realize all the children attend a special school in Dumbrăveni, a school for children with special needs. Without their families' closer monitoring, without a model to follow, and after years of failure to complete their courses, these children begin to follow what seems to have become a pattern: they all end up in the special school.

The World Gone Blank from Children's Eyes

Many of the children in this area are cases for the statistics drawn up by local health units. Lacking money, the parents do not take their children to the medical office in the early stages of disease.

The Rațiu family includes four children. They are very poor and have no jobs. "Unfortunately one of the girls suffers from a serious condition which has affected her eye. She can barely see with her right eye. I think it's a cataract which needs to be operated immediately to prevent the other eye from being damaged," the health mediator briefly explains. This year, the girl abandoned school. She can no longer fend for herself. The girl's father, Petru Rațiu, talks about his daughter as if she were a lost cause: "There's nothing you can do. We have no money to go to hospital in Sibiu. We can barely get by on the child benefits. We have bills to pay, the electricity, the firewood... it's tough in winter. We can find work in summer, but in winter there's nothing we can do. I think my child is as good as lost. With no money, nobody's going to look at you."

Another family with few alternatives is the Olteanu family. Three children's schooling allowances earn their deaf-mute parents' living. Although they can speak, the children communicate with their parents and with each other by sign language. There is little talking in the Olteanu home.

February, the Roma Month

Among the brick houses in Dumbrăveni one learns the cycles of these people's lives. January is a quiet month. Children's holiday and the supplies gathered for Christmas make life easier. "In February, problems pile up and life gets more difficult. Food supplies are out, jobs are unavailable, no one needs a hand with the housework and life becomes almost impossible. That's why we call February the 'Gypsy month,'" says Marinela Blăjan, the health mediator and the Dumbrăveni Roma Party leader's daughter. This is true for all those living on the fringes of society.

Viișoara Reservation

After leaving the houses in Dumbrăveni, we make for a Roma community as a small "appendix" to the town on the way out to Viișoara commune. In Dumbrăveni, the location is known as "Up at customs." It consists of about 70 huts made of mud bricks, tree branches, and plastic sheets, sheltering more than 400 souls. Without

knowing the exact number, the health mediators estimate there are 240 children in this community. According to the extent to which the health or social protection institutions are from time to time interested in them, their number increases or decreases, but not much.

Upon entering the community, accompanied by the health mediators and two social workers, we are greeted by a small crowd. In a few minutes, dozens of children join the “delegation.” As no one enters their community, we are easily mistaken for Roma representatives and we are certain to have come from Bucharest. Why enter their world otherwise? At 10 below zero, many of the children wear plastic slippers or sandals. A shirt and a coat for the lucky ones are supposed to keep these children warm. After getting acquainted with the dozens of curious people that have come to greet us, we are invited to see the conditions in which they live. Each of us is accepted as one of them and it all gets easier.

In one of the “houses”—four adobe walls with wattle and daub—we meet a family consisting of 10 children and two adults. The cold outside does not prevent a little girl from playing barefooted, wearing only a shirt.

The Small Entrepreneur

If Roma residents can work in the fields in the summer, there are fewer options to earn money in winter. Those who learned a trade are luckier. Gheorghe, one of locals, knows how to weave wattle. We found him weaving wood sticks for a future basket. One of his children is learning the craft watching him closely.

“I don’t make a lot of money out of this. For 30 to 40 thousand lei (€1) I make one basket. But only on order, if someone wants it or takes pity on us. I don’t weave more baskets because I don’t have customers, and then they just lie here useless.” Gheorghe is proud of his craft, but no one wants to learn it. “I wanted to teach others around here how to make a basket or some wattle, but they don’t want to learn, they are lazy, they are not used to working. They’d rather stay all day long and keep starving. No one’s going to give charity any more.”

Mud—Construction Raw Material

The Roma communities from Bazna, Boian, Copșa Mică, and Dârlos also live in houses with mud walls covered with reed, bulrush, iron plates, or plastic sacks. But even the adobes are luxury houses in comparison with those dug in the ground.

Close to mines where the Romans extracted salt to be sent to Rome, within 20 km of Sibiu, lies the town of Ocna Sibiului. For decades, Roma families have been living in the Topârcea Hills, only a few hundred metres away from the downtown area of the renowned Ocna Sibiului spa resort. Their “houses,” huts dug into the hills of clay, sand, and salt provide shelter despite the very high risk of collapse. Especially during the cold season, because of water infiltration, the hut walls crack. The solution is simple: the cracks are filled with clay.

Ioan Voina was born in one of the huts in Ocna Sibiului, just like his siblings. Now 37, this man has been through the terrifying experience of being buried alive under

the earth crumbling from the hills and has seen people who lost their lives in their huts. “There’s nothing we can do. No one wants to help us. We have children and it’s hard to raise them under such circumstances.” The Ocna Sibiului huts are above town level. From this point, when it’s sunny, you can see the tall buildings of Sibiu. Only the hillsides full of huts remain invisible.

“I have three children and there are many other families like ours. Some have been living here for 60 years. Before 1900 these used to be the Hungarians’ huts. We are living here now. When they collapse, the unfortunate ones dig other huts. I’m luckier and I got help. Now I live next to the hut.”

None of those living in the Ocna Sibiului huts has much education. A few of them have attended some vocational school. Ioan Voinea is a barber. “My children go to kindergarten and school. It’s difficult, but they must have some education. We can’t find jobs, we have no money to send our children to school the way we should. My wife has no education, but the children have to study. But there is little money for clothes, notebooks, and pencils. We keep on striving.”

Most of the children in this community go to school for the allowance. “It’s not much, but without this money, it would be even harder. Unfortunately, the local authorities only visit us during the election campaigns. They make a lot of promises, bring some food, and then leave. They forget about us until the following elections.”

Condemned to Donations

Boian village, in Bazna commune. A group of adobe houses covered with reeds shelter a few dozen Roma families. Their only steady income consists of their children’s school allowances and social benefits. The Roma community’s leader, Petre Ghebeneu, claims that national and county Roma leaders are not committed to solving the serious problems the communities have to cope with.

In this context, the Roma complain that the Bazna commune authorities decided that the Roma on the welfare list contribute to the national funds for the victims of the 2005 summer floods. “People went to the mayor’s office to get their money, as little as it is. In October and in November, 400,000 lei were withdrawn from every account. Is that right?”

The mayor of Bazna, Ioan Căpâlneanu, rejects the Boian Roma’s allegations. “We collected the money for the flood victims, but we didn’t touch the Gypsies’ money. No way. We donated 30 million lei out of the local council’s money, my salary and that of the counsellors. We distributed their money in January; they all got their money. I don’t know why they are saying that.”

The allegation that the Roma received less money over two months is confirmed by Cristina Ghebeneu, the health mediator for the Roma, but evidence has to be supplied, and the Roma get no documents for the money they receive and claim they don’t sign anywhere when they collect their money.

As the money is in short supply, in the only shop the Roma have access to, the lists of foods on credit have become quite common. Some debts have run for months. People

pay on the day they receive the children's benefits or social benefits or in summer, when it's easier to earn money.

Cristina Ghebeneu, who is also a qualified nurse, believes that without considerable support, the children in the community don't stand a chance. "Fortunately, all the children here are included in vaccination programs. It's a little more difficult because they are not accustomed to the doctor, but the first steps have already been taken. But this cannot make up for their lack of food and education. Many of the Roma, although they are middle-aged or older, have never been outside their village. This is their world."

An Attempt to Politicize the Roma Communities

The Sibiu county Roma communities are divided between the influence of the Roma Party and that of the Roma Christian Centre. According to their affiliation with one group or the other, local leaders support and promote one county leader: Duca or Cioabă. However, neither is recognized as a true leader. Not even local or parliamentary elections persuade the county or national leaders to visit many of the Roma communities. "They don't care about us," say those asked about Cioabă or Duca.

The Sibiu Prefecture archives contain documents that prove the Romanian Government's involvement in politicizing the Roma communities in the 2000–2004 mandate. "With an aim to involve the members of the Roma communities in politics, **The County Office for Roma** supported the funding of certain Roma Party branches and secured office space for the future headquarters of the Social Democratic Roma Party in the following localities: Mediaş, Dumbrăveni, Valea Viilor, Brateiu, Nocrich, Miercurea Sibiului." Despite these efforts, the Roma Party did not succeed in attracting the communities' sympathy. **The Romas have failed in their attempt to join efforts due to the lack of respected leaders - unanimously accepted by the community - and of financial-material support able to generate progress.**

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Poverty: Mere Statistics in Sibiu County

In the antipoverty plan drawn up for Sibiu county, 80 percent of the Roma children abandon school. The towns and communes where this happens most frequently include Mediaş, Copşa-Mică, Dumbrăveni, Roşia Iacobenî, Moşna, Brateiu, and Apold de Jos.

According to the 2002 census, 17,658 people from Sibiu county declared they were Roma. 10,000 of them receive social benefits and heating allowance. The statistical data supplied by local councils indicate that 1,552 Roma families in Sibiu county do not own farm land, 934 families have no title to their houses, and 669 persons have problems with their identity papers.

Present statistics also indicate that the education deficiency, mainly illustrated by the high rate of illiteracy, has increased during the transition period. The low number of Roma personnel qualified for modern professions is largely due to the lack of schooling and vocational training while the traditional Roma occupations are in decline. Their participation in legal business is limited by the lack of managerial

training and experience, which makes them prone to make decisions in contradiction with the laws in force. Access to health care has decreased since the health insurance system was implemented, especially due to the fact that the majority of the Roma are unemployed.

These conditions directly resulted in the increase in children being abandoned by their parents and school abandonment, the decrease in education level and vocational training, the Roma's exclusion from the labor market, the increase in disease incidence especially among children, social and economic isolation, and increased crime rates among the Roma population.

Useless Birth Certificates

Another Roma community in which school abandonment is widespread is that of Copșa Mică, located across the River Târnava. The only way to get to this community is by crossing a bridge on top of a few shaky concrete pillars.

Twenty-one-year-old Birică has spent no time in school. According to Roma tradition he married at 16, but he has chased his wife off and is now living with his parents. "I went to school because I want to learn how to read at least, but they didn't accept me. I'm too old to learn side by side with the children." Birică seems upset that he doesn't know how to read. He knows some words in Italian and Polish, though. He has worked abroad.

Corina Dănilă, the health mediator in the area, accompanies us from one adobe to another. Among them is a single tidy house. The Roma family living there seems to be better off. There are windowpanes instead of plastic sheets, and everything is neatly arranged inside the Ciurar family's home. Five children are quietly standing in a line, from the tallest to the shortest, curiously watching us. They are aged 8 to 16, but none of them goes to school. "No child has ID papers, not even a birth certificate. They were all born in Poland while their parents worked there. Since they have no papers, they can't go to school," says Dănilă.

The mother, Maria Ciurar, looks through the drawers of an old cupboard and takes out a pile of yellowy papers. Among them is one of the children's birth certificates. "You see, they do have certificates, but no one will take them into account down at the police section. Because they're not translated into Romanian, they say. Why, I can't translate the certificates for them, can I? I don't know what to do."

Solutions from Abroad: Protestant Church Aid

Although the Romanian authorities failed to come up with effective solutions for the Roma communities, there are active groups that have managed to make important gains. Within most Roma communities in Sibiu county, representatives of various Protestant denominations, some of them from the United States, have succeeded in attracting followers precisely because of the material support they give. In Ocna Sibiului, the Roma turned to Protestantism after the church brought aid to their community. "They helped us build a house and brought us a television and a washing machine so we can now solve the problems of everybody living in the huts. They even bought me an electric haircutter and I'm happy. They only expect us to be honest.

And since they came to help us, we all have been going to the church where we feel respected, among our brethren, you know,” says Ioan Voinea.

System Blaming, No One’s Fault

The Roma county leaders are disappointed with the support the state provides Roma communities. Happy with their own endeavours to emancipate their people, these Roma leaders blame the system.

Petre Duca, president of the Sibiu county branch of the Roma Party, claims “there is absolutely no support. Whatever we are doing is useless if there’s no money. The Roma are very poor; that’s the reason for their health problems and school abandonment. Everybody is talking about improving their conditions, but nobody does anything. I know there is a lot of money from the EU, but it does not reach the communities.”

Florin Cioabă, president of the Christian Roma Centre, talks about discrimination, poverty, and failure to find solutions to real problems. “The Roma’s main problem is a social one. A majority of the Roma are faced with basic problems: clothing, footwear, food, water, etc. Roma job fairs are frequently organized, but this is just a show. Almost nobody will hire Roma people. What is worse nowadays is that during Ceaușescu’s regime, the Roma were better educated. In a few years they will be just a mass of illiterate people.”