

ETHNIC AFFILIATION, A PROBLEM IN ASSESSING THE GYPSY (ROMA) POPULATION IN THE 2002 CENSUS. CASE-STUDY – OLTENIA, ROMANIA

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Key-words: Gypsy population, population census, ethnic group, Romanians, Oltenia.

L'affiliation ethnique – un problème dans l'évaluation de la population tzigane (roma) dans le recensement de 2002. Étude de cas – Olténie, Roumanie. Déclarer son affiliation ethnique représente un des plus importants problèmes de l'évaluation numérique de la population tzigane, tel que cela ressort dans la statistique officielle de la Roumanie, dès le recensement de 1956, situation perpétuée jusqu'à nos jours. L'appartenance ethnique représente une des évaluations les plus difficiles dans le cas des tziganes, tenant compte du contexte historique, politique ou social, spécifique aux différentes périodes. Les recensements de la population n'ont pas réussi de surprendre le nombre de la population tzigane, puisque les membres de cette ethnie choisissent souvent de ne pas décliner leur ethnie et leur langue. Cette attitude pouvait être considérée, à première vue, le résultat de l'ignorance de l'existence d'une statistique ou de la présence de certaines formes de discrimination perçue par la population concernée. En réalité, la situation a pour raison une complexité de facteurs qui dépendent directement ou indirectement de l'ethnique en cause. Ces facteurs n'ont pas pu être éliminés en totalité pour ne plus produire des inadvertances en ce qui concerne la correction des données des recensements.

The factors that make the Gypsy eschew declaring their ethnicity are numerous, the most important ones being of a historical, but also of a social and cultural nature.

Historical factors. A “Gypsy problem” exists since 1940, when considered to be an unresolved issue for Romanian society, part of the Gypsy population was deported in Transnistria. The moment of deportation, and the experiences told by survivors have stuck in the collective memory, making Gypsy shun from declaring their ethnic origin for fear of such situations possibly recurring.

Social factors. A negative exogenous perception has made the Gypsy feel themselves stigmatized and associated exclusively with antisocial behaviour, hence they have developed kind of self-defense attitude, which explains why they refrain from avowing their ethnic origin.

Cultural factors involve typical characteristics of this ethnic group, mainly customs, traditions, language or costume which, in the case of certain Gypsy population segments, has suffered drastic changes, also losing their cultural identity, and their national language. It is the case of the rudari (handcrafters of wooden household articles), *tismănari* (formerly dwellers of the Tismana Depression, the name currently designating assimilated Gypsy, who have lost their identity values), part of the fiddlers and the blacksmiths who no longer see themselves as Gypsy, declaring instead to be Romanians.

“I haven't written <declared> myself a Gypsy because I'm afraid of the government, what if they give another law and send us all to the Bug-camp” (male, 70 years old, Iancu Jianu, Olt County).

Some of the answers obtained in an interview conducted during field surveys are illustrative of the factors previously mentioned. Here they are:

“At the census I haven't declared to be a Gypsy, but the people from the “Gypsy Party” came and I've declared to them that I am one” (female, 33 years old, Gârla Mare, Mehedinți County).

“I can't declare to be a Gypsy, I don't know their language, we don't have the same customs, we are “tismănari”, we are not Gypsy” (female, 41 years old, Strejești, Olt County).

“At the last census I didn't say that I am a Gypsy because I was afraid that they were going to put it on my Identity Card or my passport and I won't be able to get a job or travel abroad anymore” (male, 47 years old, Scoarța, Gorj County).

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"I'm Romanian, I don't say that I'm Gypsy, if they were to put it in our Identity Card, my children would suffer, and have to endure all sorts of dirty words at school and all their lives" (female, 28 years old, Bârca, Vâlcea County)

"I didn't declare to be a Rroma, I am part of the "rudari" guild; I don't speak Romani and I don't mix up with Gypsies" (male, 25 years old, Laloșu, Vâlcea County).

In view of the above, it is impossible to have an exact statistics of the Gypsy population; the more so as one's ethnic affiliation rests entirely with the individual's own option, it is entirely one's own responsibility.

The inaccuracy of available data has made the authorities undertake a series of actions to correct the situation; the severest measures were taken by the Gypsy Party itself, because obtaining funds for the integration of the Gypsy population meant proving that a Gypsy community did exist. Thus, numerous Gypsy had not declared their ethnic origin at the 1992 census, but they did in 2002.

The efforts to register the Gypsy as forming a numerous community and thus become eligible to receiving funds and participate in some projects, made some Romanians declare themselves of Gypsy origin in exchange for financial benefits, a situation found in two communities of our study-areas, namely Strejești, Olt County and Bâlteni, Gorj County.

At Strejești, six people declared that they had been put on the lists of the Gypsy Party; it was easy to do it as this community consisted of *tismănari*, that is Gypsy who have not maintained any identity features, do not speak the Romani language, moreover, inter-ethnic marriages are a widely used practice.

As respondents themselves admitted, their actions had economic justifications, namely dissatisfaction with the social benefits they received.

"I'm Romanian, but I'm very poor, that's why I declared to be a Gypsy, so that I could receive benefits" (female, 70 years old, Strejești, Olt County).

"I'm not Gypsy, but I don't have a wife or children, I'm alone and I'm very poor, and the money I have are not enough, so that's why I am on the Gypsy lists and I receive food and even money for firewood" (male, 53 years old, Strejești, Olt County).

"I don't have any means to sustain myself and my three children, I don't have a husband, and if I'm on the Gypsy lists I have only to gain from it, they even gave me building materials to fix up my house" (female, 36 years old, Strejești, Olt County).

A similar situation in the Gypsy community of Bâlteni formed of bricklayers and fiddlers; in this case, part of the extremely poor Gypsy (ten people), most of them single or without any family, occupied part of an apartment belonging to the mayoralty. In the same building there live also of four Romanians who declared themselves Gypsy, motivated by their extremely precarious material condition.

"I declared to be a Gypsy to receive some social benefits, I'm poor and I live here in a room with no door and windows" (male, 56 years old, Bâlteni, Gorj County).

"I declared to be a Gypsy because the Romanians are not helping me with anything; the Gypsy gave me furniture and food" (female, 44 years old, Bâlteni, Gorj County).

"I'm Romanian, but I declared to be a Gypsy; when the people from the Gypsy Party came, I heard that they would give us social benefits and that's true, they are really helping me" (male, 60 years old, Bâlteni, Gorj County).

Such situations include an extremely poor category of people led to this option in order to obtain social benefits. However, we found only ten cases in this study, the situation being far from generalized. Therefore, it appears that evaluating a population members based on ethnic criteria is one of the most difficult tasks, because the accuracy of available data is questionable.

This explains why there are significant discrepancies between the number of Gypsy officially registered in the 2002 census and those produced by the representatives for Gypsy affairs at County Prefectures, unofficial statistics reporting far more numerous Gypsy ethnics.

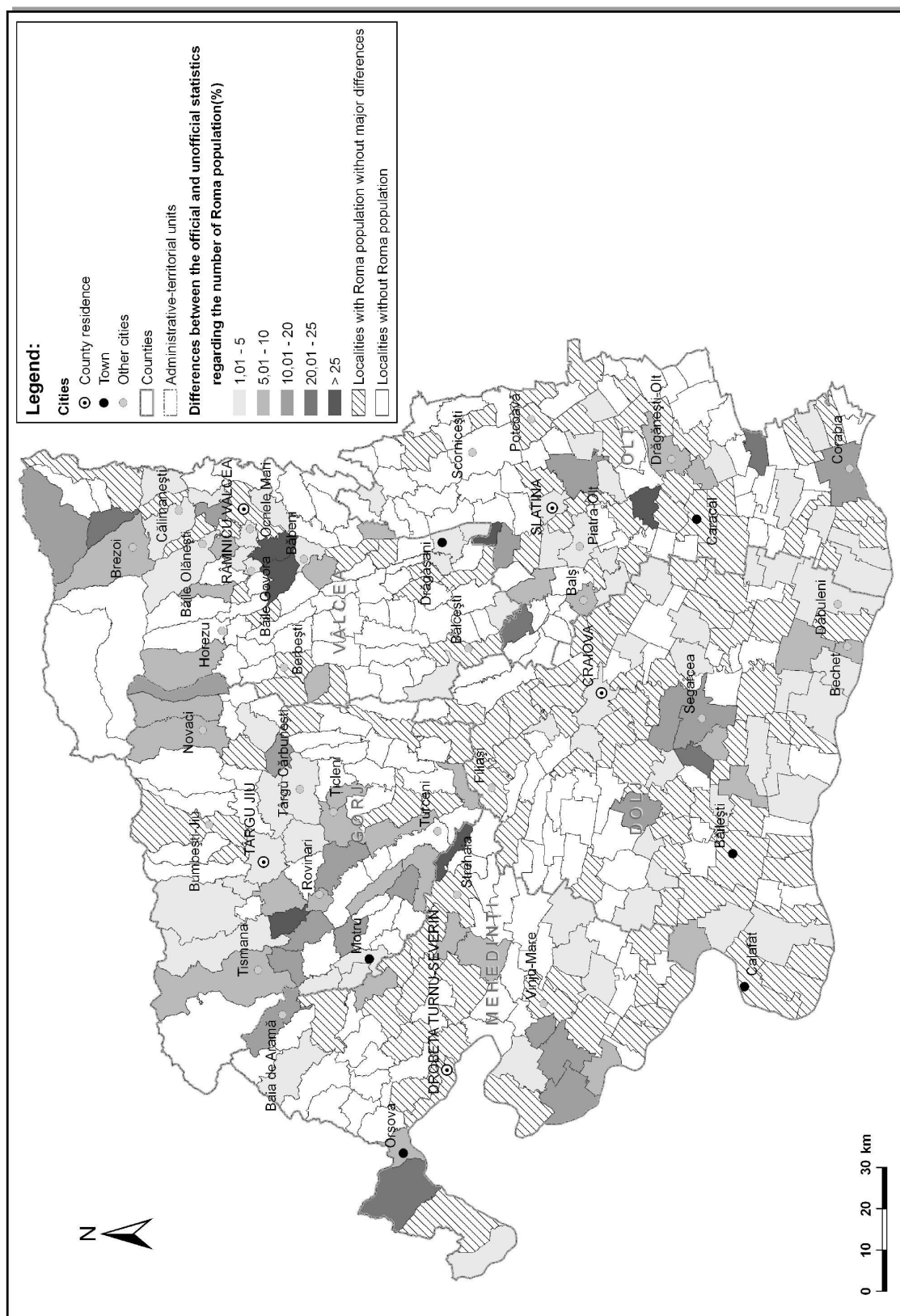


Fig. 1. – Differences between official and unofficial statistics regarding the number of Roma population in Oltenia

Very high differences, of over 25.01%, between the 2002 census data and the statistics issued by the representatives of the Gypsy population in County Prefectures, show the following settlements in Gypsy communities: Telești (Gorj), Frâncești (Vâlcea), Fălcoiu, Grădinari (Olt) and Grozești (Mehedinți) (Fig. 1).

In the first three cases, a significant proportion of people are bricklayers, basically Gypsy who have lost identity values, so that the factors behind the refusal to avow ethnical affiliation are primarily of a social and cultural nature. In the case of the Grozești Gypsy a population formed of *rudari*, it is cultural factors that prevail.

High differences (15.01 and 25%), exist in the communities of Lipovu, Sălcuța (Dolj), Iancu Jianu, Scărișoara, Strejești (Olt), Bolboși, Călnic, Godinești, Polovragi (Gorj), Baia de Aramă, Eșelnița (Mehedinți), and Mihăești (Vâlcea). This is due, on the one hand, to the presence of a large proportion of *rudari* and *tismănari* groups that are only partly assimilated, their members' specific behaviour being that of the Romanians; on the other hand, it is the authorities' failure to motivate them to declare ethnical affiliation and eliminate the "Bug-camp fear" which lives on in the collective memory.

Significant differences (10.01–15%) register the Gypsy communities of Segarcea, Calopăr (Dolj), Corabia, Brebeni (Olt), Albeni, Bâlteni, Mătășari, Polovragi, (Golj), Gogoșu, Jiana, Vânjuleț (Mehedinți), and Căineni (Vâlcea).

Moderate differences between official and unofficial statistics (5.01–10%) register the Gypsy communities in Dolj County (Cerăt, Cetate, Sălcuța, and Urzicuța); Olt County (Balș, Drăgănești Olt, Morunglav, and Stoenesti), Gorj County (Rovinari, Novaci, Tismana, Țicleni, Baia de Fier, Bălești, Bărbătești, Borăscu, Plopșoru, and Țânțăreni), Mehedinți County (Orșova, Florești, Gruia, Tâmba, and Voloiaș) and Vâlcea County (Brezoi, Păușești Măglași, Șirineasa, Sinești, and Vaideeni).

Gypsy communities in which differences between official (2002 census) and unofficial statistics are low (1.01–5%) live in Dolj County (Craiova, Dăbuleni, Almăj, Amărăștii de Jos, Amărăștii de Sus, Bistreț, Bârca, Bratovoiești, Breasta, Caraula, Castranova, Coșoveni, Gighera, Gângiova, Goicea, Maglavit, Ostroveni, Plenița, Poiana Mare, Radovan, Siliștea Crucii, Teslui and Vârtoș); Olt County (Slatina, Piatra Olt, Brastavățu, Găneasa, Gostavățu, Grojdibodu, Ianca, Pârscoveni, Schitu, Sâmburești, Tia Mare, Șerbănești, Vădăstrița, Voineasa and Coteana); Gorj County (Târgu Jiu, Târgu Cărbunești, Motru, Cătunele, Dănești, Glogova, Lelești, Peștișani, Prigoria, Runcu and Scoarța); Mehedinți County (Bălăcița, Devesel, Isverna, Pungina and Vlădaia); and Vâlcea County (Drăgășani, Băile Govora, Băbeni, Băile Olănești, Călimănești, Ocnele Mari, Bunești, Dăești, Budești, Ghioroiu, Laloșu, Berislăvești and Sutești).

The other communities register *insignificant differences* (0–1%). Some communities do not appear in the official 2002 census data, but register significant high numbers in unofficial statistics.

Settlements that do not appear on the Gypsy population map of the 2002 census are Gostavățu, Grojdibodu, Morunglav, Scărișoara, Schitu, Șerbănești, and Vadaștrița (Olt), Albeni, Bărbătești, Bolboși, Borăscu, Cătunele, Glogova, Lelești, Negomir, Plopșoru, Polovragi, and Prigoria (Gorj), Florești, Voloiaș, and Grozești (Mehedinți), Ghioroiu, Sinești, Berislăvești, Perișani, and Sutești (Vâlcea).

In the communities studied in terms of the proportion held by each particular group the *rudari* are seen to be in the majority, with the exception of those from Ghioroiu who are blacksmiths; from Gostavățu, Grojdibodu and Schitu who are *ursari* (whose occupation is to tame and train bears to perform in public places), and from Morunglav, most of whom are fiddlers.

As previously shown, the assimilated populations, of *rudari*, *tismănari*, and blacksmiths having lost their cultural identity, would explain why they do not identify themselves with the ethnic group they belong to.

In the case of the *ursari*, refraining from mentioning their true ethnicity began after members of this particular Gypsy clan given up their traditional occupation and turned to other trades, like farriery

and ironmongery. Living among blacksmiths, from whom they learned the trade, made them lose their national language and characteristic Gypsy behaviours; besides, mixed marriages with members of the rudari and tismănari communities also played an important role and contributed to this stance.

The low level of education, specific to this ethnic group, makes them little informed, so that the Gypsy society does hardly realize the importance of accurate statistical data. Therefore, statistical inaccuracies are not entirely the result of loss of cultural values, but also the perception that Gypsy inhabitants are discriminated.

The ethnical affiliation is difficult to assess, because declaring one's ethnicity is the exclusive option of the target population and historical, social and cultural factors tend to be decisive in this respect.

Solutions to correctly assess the Gypsy population means efforts to increase its responsibility by involving people of the same ethnicity, preferably from the same communities in the census process, following the model used in education (school mediators), or sanitary education (sanitary mediators) in order to increase the level of confidence in the authorities and thus obtain reliable answers to the question of ethnic affiliation.

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Received April 12, 2010

