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ON THE NECESSITY
OF COOPERATION AND COMMUNICATION

"True freedom for a group will only be achieved
when they are in control of their own image."

Orhan Galjus

Every research, focused on interethnic (national) relations, should primarily start from the degree to which there is an expressed readiness for cooperation and communication among the examined groups. No administrative measure can, on its own, have any noticeable effect if not preceded by willingness and resolution to change the existing state, not only within or between the given groups, but also in the society on the whole. This is, in short, one of the conclusions of the three studies, or, rather, reports on the research projects carried out with the support of the PER in some Central and Eastern European countries.

The institution itself, Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts in the countries that went through the collapse of Communism. In some regions on the territory of Central and Eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union, the PER launched its programs in order to examine, in a neutral and objective way, the nature of the main conflicting issues.

Far from being a potential "burning issue", the position of the Roma in the examined regions still does not appear encouraging regarding the achieved degree of cooperation and communication. Historically speaking, it still bears the traces of many centuries of misunderstanding, prejudice, antagonism and discrimination on the part of the majority groups toward the Roma; the situation has, naturally, become even more delicate in view of the current social, political, economic and other changes that the given countries are going through at the moment. Hence the need to pay special attention to the Roma and the problems they are facing in the transition period (especially, for instance, in Hungary, in which they form the largest minority group), as well as to specific issues that every society pretending to cherish its modern, multicultural and democratic orientation, has to deal with with utmost seriousness.

One of the research studies that confirm the so-much-needed seriousness is "The Media and the Roma in Contemporary Europe: Facts and Fictions".[1] Prepared as a report

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[1] "The Media and the Roma in Contemporary Europe: Facts and Fictions", Prague, Czech Republic, September, 1996

on the research, conducted during the Conference held in Prague in September 1996, it represents an indispensable, referential introduction study for every detailed and more comprehensive research of the given issues. The report is prepared by Ian Hancock who defines the research objectives as a survey of the contemporary situation of the Roma in its historical context primarily through the public opinion about them.

The public images of the Roma are partly inhereted, though, they are partly a legacy from the 18th century onwards, of literature and academic papers that contributed to their fixation in the public mind. They were even more strengthened in the 20th century due to mass media or even film industry. Though there are slight differences in the media-created images, they still share one common characteristic, as stressed in the report: none of it originated from a Romani source or involved cooperation with the Roma themselves; in fact, most of them appeared without Roma even being aware of them. And all of them finally merged to produce a well-known "Gypsy" stereotype which fundamentally differs from the real population.

The media-created stereotype finds its way easily into people's minds; therefore, it is not only the cause of misconceptions and lack of proper information concerning the Romani reality, it is also the source of anti-Roma violence and discrimination. Or, better to say, it is the source of violence against the Gypsies ("anti-Gypsism") concerning the fact that misunderstanding, intolerance, discrimination and violence are primarily directed against the Roma as given by the stereotype, not against the Roma as they are - the Roma who are, for so many of us, still completely unknown.

The Prague research report, in that sense, gives guidelines for learning more about the Roma, especially, about racism and prejudice, identity problem, history and culture of the Roma while, at the same time, stressing that education and communication, regarding the majority and minority groups, represent necessary prerequisites for withering away and overcoming of the popular Romani stereotype.

Special responsibility, in that sense, is that of mass media. In another research, supported by the PER, the emphasis is on "Images and Issues" or "Coverage of the Roma in the Mass Media in Romania"[2]. This study is also a report on the workshop held in Sinaia, Romania, in 1997; the workshop gathered together an impressive number of the leading Romanian journalists, foreign reporters and guests. The report was prepared by Jennifer Tanaka who stressed an important role and influence of the media upon the formation of the public attitudes toward the minorities, especially during profound transformations that the Central and Eastern European countries are undergoing at the moment.

Starting from a very-well known role of the mass media in shaping perceptions, attitudes and concepts, the journalists at the workshop explored the causes of the discrepancy between the media and those represented by the media, especially in the case of the Roma, as members of the group with which it is necessary to set up open and honest communication. The basic assumption stressed that the media view of the Roma is false and that it directly encourages discrimination and violence. Therefore, it seems indispensable to try to find answers to a set of questions, starting from responsibility for

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[2] Images and Issues: Coverage of the Roma in the Mass Media in Romania", Sinaia, Romania, June, 1997

this negative media-created image, through the need to establish an "ethic code" in the general attitude towards the minorities, to the problems emerging in the contacts between the majority and minority media.

Trying to find answers to the above-mentioned questions, the Romanian journalists and scientists pointed out that the Roma have most often been represented with negative attributes, while the non-Roma are mostly given in positive context. This polarity is even made sharper by a clear demarcation line between "us" and "them"; therefore, though the public is somewhat inclined to criticize the society for its inability to absorb its minorities, still the greatest criticism is that of the lack of inability to integrate on the part of the Roma. This type of the media attitude towards the minority is called "interpretative scheme" by which the majority behavior, regardless of its inappropriateness, is dealt with understanding and compassion, while the behavior of the Roma tends to be characterized as shameful and intolerant. The scheme is to be recognized in various, written or oral, forms of communication, starting from police reports to radio or television reports. Hence, any attempt to improve the media attitude should assume a set of corrective measures, starting from revising the reports to the establishment of the Roma news agency that would also solve the problem of accessibility of the Romani communities.

One of the most challenging, brave and experimental measures is the so-called "Hungarian solution", namely, the attempt made by the Hungarian state to introduce administrative measures in order to ensure the equality of its minority groups. In the study "Self-government in Hungary: The Gypsy/Romani Experience and Prospects for the Future"[3], prepared in the research workshop held in May, 1997, in Budapest, the "pros" and "cons" were discussed concerning the established Hungarian system of self-government for national and ethnic minorities. The report author Peter Priadka, aware of enormous problems emerging while realizing the minority self-government concept, stresses, in his introductory remarks, the need for questioning the principles as well as the legal framework for regulation of the self-government system, its achievements and shortcomings, as well as the willingness on the part of the Roma themselves to cooperate with official state organs and institutions.

What is the essence of the "Hungarian solution"? In short, it comes to the constitutionally guaranteed minority status to the groups that satisfy certain prerequisites; thus, they are given the possibility to exert their rights as if having an autonomy status. "The exertion of the rights" implies the foundation of self-government institutions, local and national, in the form of elected bodies that, at the local level, cooperate with the municipalities, while, at the national level, they cooperate with legislative and executive organs. The state is, on its part, obliged to provide for premises, budget and other prerequisites needed for the self-government functioning. Thus established model still implies a lot of problems in practice. It is not easy to realize it due to numerous administrative and financial difficulties; at the same time, there is no sufficient trained staff among the Roma themselves to provide for proper functioning of the established institutions.

Though it is still in its early phase, the Hungarian model itself, as can be seen in its

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[3] "Self-Government in Hungary: The Gypsy-Romani Experience and Prospects for the Future", Budapest, Hungary, May, 1997

first applications, represents a challenge that has to be systematically examined and, possibly, applied with respect to specific social conditions. Even if there are no facilities or resources to carry it out at the moment, it is of great importance and benefit to study and rely on other countries' experience in their treatment of the minorities, especially if we have in mind that the Romani position in Yugoslavia is not more encouraging comparing to other countries. Thus, not only interethnic cooperation and communication would be fostered in our country, but, moreover, the need would be stressed for with other majority cultures for the sake of finding the best possible solutions for the problematic positions of the minorities.[*]

Dragana R. Mašović