

The Impacts of Internationalisation on Roma Civil Society in Romania

Ion Goracel

Abstract

At the end of 1989, Communism collapsed in all of Central and East European countries, marking a point of no return in processes of democratisation. Post-1989 in Romania, civil society played an important role in strengthening the emerging democracy, mainly in promoting good governance and empowering different categories of citizens (Studies, no date). Within this context of general enthusiasm and hope was the opportunity for Roma civil society organisations to start their own processes of development. Consequently, a number of Roma associations were set up, either to promote Roma culture or to promote the interests of Roma communities. In this essay I will speak about how internationalisation impacts the process of development of Roma civil society in Romania.

Keywords: internationalization, change, civil society, Roma civil society, development

1. Introduction

After 1989, Romania experienced massive structural political, monetary, social and security changes, which denoted the move from a comrade communism to a vote based system and from a controlled and heavy centralised economy to a market economy. Among the significant players during the time spent changing Romanian society were a number of NGOs, associations and foundations, which have consistently developed in the course of recent years.

During the 1990s, market fundamentalism shaped Romania's economic policies and promoted a dichotomous state-market model where the state plays an increasingly small part in public service provision and where market exchanges support profit-driven economic activities (Hansmann, 1996). This neo-liberal model was mainstreamed throughout all former communist countries, leading to drastic decisions related to privatisation, public service provision and welfare systems. Due to the privatisation and restructuring of the economic system, organisations that previously depended on the communist agro-industrial system went into decline. For example, labour unions have recorded a sharp drop in membership, and cooperatives have descended from the economic mainstream to the edge of the economic system with their membership also drastically declining, rendering them almost invisible as economic and social actors.

However, alongside this decline there was a rise in other civil society organisations set up to support Romania's burgeoning democracy. As in all nations from East and Central Europe, civil society NGOs

assume an essential part in strengthening democracy, bringing into a general space the voices and interests of the nation's subjects sorted out formally or casually in affiliations and establishments, worker's parties, shared guide affiliations, religious or political associations, and social developments.

2. Civil Society in Romania

NGOs disseminate advanced creative modalities and ways to deal with changes in public systems, keeping in mind the end goal is to build their adequacy and effectiveness. They have also played an active role in urging public authorities to adopt participatory decision-making with regard to public resource allocation. Moreover, NGOs have been instrumental in promoting new legislative initiatives and reviewing legislative frameworks as well as advocating a broad accession of new private actors to the public sphere.

In the last almost 27 years of democracy and market economy, NGOs have played an active role in promoting good governance and democratisation in Romanian society, and they have actively promoted the empowerment of different categories of citizens while representing their interests as well as those of communities and society at large.

Starting in 1996 (Ionescu and Cace, 2006), common society associations entered another stage described by institutional strengthening and development. The huge support that the NGO sector received from various global help programs produced the area's character and united its systematisation and administrative capacities.

In the most recent decade, there has been a huge expansion in the number of NGOs strongly involved in the administrative areas of Romanian education and welfare. More specifically, there has also been a development of NGOs specifically working on supporting Roma communities.

3. Roma civil society in Romania

Building the leadership of Roma civil society in Romania was a result of the fact that most of the Roma NGOs were established by people who wanted to contribute to change for their community or on issues of importance for Roma. This process can be seen in couple of phases/stages:

- First generation of leadership from the 1990s up until early 2000s, built around visionary and charismatic leaders like Nicolae Gheorghe. In this period most of the people who established an NGO, did not have a strategic vision, they were driven mainly by their inner desire to bring changes in their Roma community.
- Second generation from early 2000's to today consists of young people that grew up around the first generation of leaders. Their motivation to establish and work in Roma civil society was a mixture of energy for the cause and personal drivers within their development as Roma professionals. Most of them took the opportunities for further study targeted at developing new Roma leaders. These include different trainings courses for leadership and management (e.g. Complex Program Training for Young Roma; Pakiv International Leadership and Management

Program), and after that they came back to contribute to their communities. At this moment this new generation are leading the most active NGOs (e.g. Romani CRISS, Sastipen, Resource Center for Roma Communities, Amare Romentza) in the country and some of them left the country for leading positions in international NGOs/institutions (e.g. European Roma Rights Center, Open Society Institute, Roma Education Fund)

Roma civil society has been very much influenced by changes of funding environment over the years. The first shifting point was in 2001 when PHARE (Poland Hungary Aid For Restructuring The Economy) precession funds became available. The positive side to this was that this change led the organisations to professionalise their activity and led to substantial growth in the sector. The second shifting point was in 2007 when EU funds became available which means that Roma NGOs had to change their focus from advocacy to being service providers. All these changes in the funding environment, especially the last one, seriously affected the ability of civil society to carry its main function of representing the interests of the communities they serve. For several years, NGOs needed to adapt to a new setting with less of a variety of donors and predominant funding from public funds like the ESF (Opera *et al.*, 2014), the EEA Grants and the Swiss funds.

4. Conclusion

From the very beginning of its creation in early 1990s, Roma civil society from Romania has been continuously the subject of adaption. Every decade, Roma civil society was shaped according to the settings and tendencies on the environment (especially political and funding environment) (Institutul National Democrat (NDI), 2009) and this was very much shaped by national and international agendas (EU accession) (Ionescu and Cace, 2006). At the same time, Roma NGOs had to address the multiple and complex needs of their constituencies, which made their task to be not only complex but often challenging and demanding (Evaluare, 2014). This type of task requires strong capacities from Roma civil society leadership to have a forward vision, to consult with and to be able to mobilise communities, to make decision makers more accountable and at the same time to fundraise from diverse sources without compromising the ethos of what these NGOs represent.

Bibliography

- Evaluare, R. D. E. (2014) 'LOT 3: Evaluare ad-hoc a intervenției POSDRU privind populația Roma', p. 135.
- Institutul National Democrat (NDI) (2009) *Evaluarea bariereleor participării politice a romilor din România*. Available at: <https://www.mendeley.com/viewer/?fileId=050af035-58ec-250f-3952-650441cce150&documentId=1a8aa1aa-19f2-3517-bcbe-5dd30373fde7> (Accessed: 4 August 2017).
- Ionescu, M. and Cace, S. (2006) *Politici publice pentru romi. Evoluții și perspective*.

CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND EQUITY RESEARCH (CHEER)

School of Education and Social Work | University of Sussex | Essex House | Brighton BN1 9RH | United Kingdom
www.sussex.ac.uk/cheer

- Opera, P. *et al.* (2014) 'Programul operațional sectorial dezvoltarea resurselor umane 2007 - 2013 raportul anual de implementare 2014'.
- Studies, E. S. (no date) *ERSTE Stiftung Studies*.