

Silenced voices and speaking up: A case study of Romani people in Europe



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ABSTRACT

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This paper presents the perceptions of silence in two Romani (Gypsy) cultures in Europe – Bulgaria and Finland. On the basis of field studies and two in-depth interviews, conducted in the towns of Mikkeli (Finland) and Ihtiman (Bulgaria), it outlines the attitudes of the European Roma people towards “being marginalised” and “silenced”. Silence is perceived by them in terms of “being different” and “being sometimes ashamed”. In the Romani culture there is a special relationship between “silence”, “pride” and “shame” as a specific worldview and a mechanism of constructing of both the personal and the collective ethnic identities. The paper also studies the phenomenon of self-silencing as a strategy of coping with undesirable situations that seem to disturb the mental wellbeing of two individuals. It underlines the need for raising the awareness of education within the Roma community in Europe and concludes that it is necessary to differentiate between “cultural” and “non-cultural” practices in the educational system.



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1. The Romani people in Europe and the problem of social inclusion

There has already been considerable amount of literature on the question of European Roma people and their integration in society. The social policies of the European Union aim to promote local languages and cultural diversity. However, there has been much criticism about the failure of the minority integration policies in the European Union. It is accepted in the Romani studies nowadays that people identifying themselves as “Roma” or “Gypsy” do not belong to a univocal group – there are varieties of languages and dialects, as well as different “clans” within the social group of the Gypsies. However, according to Pontrandolfo and Solimene (2020, p. 232) the semantic fields of Gypsy and Roma categories create a European imagery that becomes the prototype of the Nomadic people. Webb (2019) argues that the Roma diaspora in Great Britain has been defined in its historical context by collective memories of loss and longing for a homeland. Humphris (2018) studies the Roma families in the UK too and differentiates between the ideas of “Romanian Roma families” and “Romanian-not-Roma families”. Thus, the author argues that processes of racialization have been part of the everyday life in the country and that racialized hierarchies have been maintained. A representative opinion-poll conducted in Slovakia has discovered, too, that the image of the Roma is constructed negatively as irresponsible dependents and deviants not valuing education and incapable to take wise decisions about their lives (Miscolci et al. 2017)

While the biggest minorities of the Romani people live on the territories of Romania and Bulgaria, managing cultural policies in the other European countries has become challenging too. Agoni (2015) studies the mobility of the Romanian Roma people in Milan and concludes that nowadays they move not only because of their history long tradition of migrations, but also to evade local authorities' control and expulsions. Moreover, in studying the social policies in Italy and Spain Vrabiescu and Kalir (2017) state that the integration programs adversely result in the further discrimination of these minorities. According to the Italian and Spanish social programs Roma women fail to meet the standards of "good mothers" and because of this fact penalties are inflicted on them and their families, such as cut-offs of social benefits, withdrawal of children's custody and even expulsions to Romania. The authors claim that such policies become repressive, rather than integrative. In this relation Vermeersch (2017) states that the implementation of social policies that protect Roma communities is necessary but may not be enough and that transnational Roma activism addresses human right protection more broadly than the EU social policy. In studying the Roma community in Romania, Ionas (2017) argues, too, that the Gypsies have always been discriminated. According to the researcher, the Romanian school system has not helped the Roma children, but on the contrary – it has represented a tool of assimilation and reproduction of social stereotypes and prejudices.

There has recently been a broad discussion in Europe about the practice of Roma people to beg with children. While for the majority of individuals such an activity is unacceptable, members of the Supreme Court in Italy have defined begging as "a Roma cultural practice". Despite the claim of the experts in Roma culture that begging is not a cultural but economic practice, the law No 94/2009, introduced in Italy, according to Riggio (2016), underlines the cultural argument rather than serving to defend the rights of the children. In this relation Magazinni (2018) states that "producing a minority" as characterized by national, cultural, social or migrant characteristics relies more on political expediency than on objective analytical categories. Marushiakova and Popov (2017) argue, too, that the European Union's policies underline the necessity to re-negotiate the place of the Roma on the European continent but their failure raises the question whether it is possible to achieve a social contract in regard to Roma minorities.

Other scholars defend the same opinion. According to them the problems of integration of the Roma (Gypsies) are not related to race or ethnicity, but rather, to poverty and lack of education. Akkan et al. (2017) argue that in Turkey the Roma have not been perceived as a different ethnic or racial category, but rather as a "low social class people" and that Roma neighborhoods hold stigmatized spatial identity. According to the empirical study of Lee et. al. (2014) there are considerable mental health disparities between Roma and non-Roma children in Romania and Bulgaria. The results of the research clearly show that the Roma children experience discrimination and stigmatization that affect their mental health too. Another study conducted by Dimitrova et al. (2013) also confirms that Roma youth in Bulgaria report lower level of wellbeing than the Bulgarian youth. Most of the empirical studies have shown too that at least half of the European Roma children regularly miss classes. The Roma children are bilingual but they often have poor knowledge in writing, because of the lack of alphabet in their mother language and the poor knowledge of the written official language of their home country. Rizova et al. (2020) conclude that 99% of the Roma participants in an opinion poll, conducted in Macedonia, are unemployed and the majority of them are illiterate. Thus, the poverty, but not the ethnicity or the culture, has been perceived by the majority of the experts as the main reason for the lower level of education of the European Roma community. In addition, there is hardly any voice that fights for the rights of the less privileged Roma social group in Europe. Even in the 21st century the majority of the Gypsies still remain marginalized and stigmatized in society.

2. Silenced voices in two European Roma cultures

On the basis of field studies and two in-depth interviews, conducted in the town of Mikkeli (Finland) and in the town of Ihtiman (Bulgaria), the paper outlines the attitudes of the European Romani people towards "being marginalized" and "silenced". Why Bulgaria and Finland? Bulgaria, together with Romania, has one of the biggest Roma minorities in Europe. Moreover, the post-communist transition of the country has aggravated the economic and social situation of the Romani people, for whom survival has become the dominant social imperative during the last several decades. On the other hand, the Finnish Roma minority is one of the smallest in Europe but it has struggled to maintain their centuries-old traditions and customs. In both Bulgaria and Finland there are also strong prejudices against the Roma minorities.

In a previous empirical Bulgarian-Finnish intercultural study conducted by Petkova and Lehtonen (2005) both the Bulgarians and the Finns have been asked with which nation or ethnic group the respondents would like to make friends. Among all the nations and ethnic groups the Gypsies were the least preferred group for friendship. 40% of the Finns and only 19,5% of the Bulgarians reported that they would be happy to have as a friend a Gypsy. In the same study another question asked the respondents whether they would like to see themselves or a close relative of theirs married to members of various nationalities and ethnic groups. Only 11% Finns and 5,5% Bulgarians reported that they would be happy if they or a relative of theirs married a Gypsy (Petkova and Lehtonen 2005: 46-51).

The two questions about friendship and marriage with Romani people might seem almost identical but it is evident that among the Bulgarians and Finns there is a large number of respondents who declare readiness for a friendship with a Gypsy, but when asked about marriage, they reply negatively. This means that together with the blatant prejudices in society there are subtle biases of which the respondents are most probably unaware. In Bulgaria, as well as in Finland, the Roma people is an ethnic minority that sticks to their specific way of life, cultural traditions and customs. In the two countries the Roma communities are associated with lower education and standard of living, high unemployment and a high rate of criminality. Further on, the Roma minorities have shown certain unwillingness to adapt to the way of life of the culture of the majority in Bulgaria and Finland. Thus, the previous conducted studies clearly show that prejudices, negative stereotyping and biases against the Roma minorities still exist in Europe. In this respect Morley and Robins (1995: 21-22) state that Europeans have always constructed their collective identities on the negative principle, by denying the “other” and the different, among which “the poor” is the most predominant category. Because the majority of the Bulgarian and Finnish Roma belong to the lower social class, this fact explains both the blatant prejudices and the subtle biases that Bulgarians and Finns hold of them. This fact also means that the ethnic and cultural differences have been interpreted by some Europeans as a threat to their own culture.

The field studies and the in-depth interviews have been preferred as methods of research in the cultural practices of the Bulgarian and Finnish Roma communities. Other methods, such as empirical studies with questionnaires or poll opinions might not be suitable for social groups characterized by high level of illiteracy. Also, the method of cultural comparison allows to study simultaneously the common characteristics of the Romani people, as well as the cultural specificities of the different groups. Although the interviewer uses the ethnonym "Roma", the two interviewees, as well as their families, prefer the word "Gypsy" and identify themselves as "Gypsies", rather than as "Roma". According to them, "Gypsy" is by no means an insulting or derogative category, as some politicians or researchers' state. Moreover, the two interviewees express their embarrassment that the ethnonym “Gypsy” has not been preferred in the academic literature. This is why in this paper the ethnonyms “Gypsy” and “Roma” have been used together as synonyms.

The two interviewees live in the town of Mikkeli (Finland) and in the town of Ihtiman (Bulgaria) and both of them are social activists for the rights of the Romani people in their countries. They have been chosen for interviewees because of their active social position and the readiness to speak openly about the problems of the Gypsies. Anna, the 29-year-old Finnish volunteer, has participated in numerous European projects and forums dedicated to the Roma culture. She also teaches Roma language to young Roma children. In contrast to the other European Roma cultures, the majority of the Finnish Romani people speaks no or little Roma language and in order to promote the cultural varieties within the country, the Finnish government subsidizes the teaching in “mother tongue”. Ivan, the 38-year-old Bulgarian interviewee from Ihtiman, has received a special training as a Roma mediator. Both the Finnish and the Bulgarian informants speak about the Roma group being “discriminated” and “silenced”. Silence is perceived by them in terms of “being different” and “being sometimes ashamed”. They claim that they feel strongly discouraged about speaking up in front of the majority because of the social biases towards them.

The Roma culture in Finland is underlined by observing the centuries-old Gypsy traditions. For the Finnish Roma, traditions are unwritten law system, a duty and a way of life. Failure to comply with the traditions leads to the complete rejection of the individual by the Roma society. Firstly, the traditions are manifested in the structure of the family. It usually consists of the young couple, their children and the man's parents. It is extremely rare for young and old family members to separate, they stay together, even when they have to change places. And secondly, after marriage, it is expected that women stay at home and take care of the household. They raise the children and the men provide

the livelihood. However, there are more Roma women nowadays who go to work, but even in this case the housekeeping and the raising of the children is predominantly their responsibility.

The observing of traditions is also reflected in the adopted female clothing. The Finnish Romani women wear dresses that had been fashionable in the 17th and 18th centuries. Their costume consists of a floor-length crinoline dress that is usually black and covered with white embroidery. The dress must cover the legs to the ankles and consists of about 30 meters of pleated fabric with lace and embroidery. A solid material is placed on the waist, most often made of plastic, serving as a hoop to lift the skirt. The dress weighs from 8 to 12 kilograms and costs at least 800 Euros. Every year the Finnish government pays one dress to every Finnish Roma woman as an expression of respect for their traditions and specific way of life. However, these dresses are not worn only for special occasions, such as family celebrations or folklore festivals. The Romani women wear them in everyday life and never put other modern clothes on. According to Markkanen (2003), the traditional Gypsy dress is not just a physical object but it raises to the level of a symbol of the Gypsy ethnicity. Thus, it becomes also a sign of collective identity.

There are unwritten laws related to the Romani female clothing: if a non-Roma woman marries a Roma, she is not required to wear the crinoline dress. It is enough to wear a long skirt that covers the ankles. As the Finnish Roma interviewee says: "Dressing up in a Gypsy dress is a privilege only for Gypsies". There is another undisputed rule too: if before marriage the Roma woman puts the dress on and shows herself in public, she is doomed to wear it for lifetime. Thus, wearing the crinoline dress for the first time in fact represents an initiation of the young woman in "Gypsyhood". Anna states that, by wearing the Gypsy dress the woman becomes more Gypsy than ever before:

After I wore the Gypsy dress I would take it off only when I go to bed. Imagine how hard it is for me to carry these 10 kilos on my waist every day. Even when I'm alone, from early morning to late night, to cook, clean and tidy the house with them. But this is my destiny... Sometimes, when I'm at home alone, I take off my dress and put normal clothes on. But this is a secret that no one knows. Although I lock the doors and pull all the blinds of the windows, I'm very afraid that someone will come into the room and find me like that. I don't like these dresses so much. I tell my daughters, "Children, times are changing. We are different from your grandparents. I wear these dresses, but when you get married, you may not wear them. You have the privilege of choosing." But my kids keep telling me, "Mom, we really like your dresses. When we grow up, we want to be like you".

The traditional female costume may in some cases become a problem for the integration of the Roma women in the Scandinavian country. According to the interviewee and her family, although the Finnish state sponsors the sewing of their costumes, they are discriminated by the Finnish majority precisely because of them. The Finnish employers often refuse to hire Roma women stating that their dresses would repel their customers. For this reason, the majority of the Finnish Roma are engaged either in private businesses or work from home. Anna recounts one of her experiences at work:

Several years ago, an owner of a small shop hired me as a shop-keeper, but the shop was so small that I was constantly pushing off the goods from the shelves with my dress, so after a week I had to leave.

From this statement it is obvious that the neglect of the Finnish people is not the only reason for the difficulties in the adjustment of the Finnish Romani people. Adhering to ancient traditions and customs and emphasizing the ethnic identity might in some cases cause controversies with the modern technological and social circumstances. In the interview Anna also tells about her experiences in the capital city of Finland:

In small towns people are used to the Roma and accept us completely. However, segregation is felt in large cities. Once I took a tram in Helsinki. Although the tram was crowded, no one sat next to me. They looked at me as if I were an alien. There are Roma communities in large cities, but they remain much more isolated and misunderstood by the majority than in small settlements, where people get to know each other more easily.

At the time of the interview the oldest daughter of Anna is preparing to enter first grade at school. This fact has caused much anxiety and concern for the informant.

More than two weeks I am unable to sleep. I constantly keep pondering: how will the other children react when they see her mother in the traditional Gypsy costume? Wouldn't they start to discriminate or even torment her?

Together with the traditional costume other cultural traditions may also look “strange” for outsiders. The everyday life of the Roma is filled with cultural rituals and they have to follow a special conduct. For example, children never sit on the same sofa with their parents. They can stand upright next to them or sit one step lower. This is an important rule that has always been followed by the Finnish Gypsies. In addition, children always address their parents with the Finnish polite form of "You". Thus, in the Roma family a strong respect is shown to the elderly. According to the Finnish interviewee “the elderly has always been more valued than the young, who are considered to be "immature" and "ignorant"”.

Numerous taboos exist too. Sex and all related to it questions are forbidden to talk about. In the Romani culture the categories of “silence”, “pride” and “shame” are strongly interrelated and construct a specific worldview, as well as the sense of collective belonging. For instance, one can never talk about "having children." Moreover, women are considered "unclean" until menopause. They have to observe special rituals until the thirtieth day after the birth of a child. For thirty days they are not allowed to leave the house, nor can they touch any utensils or food in the kitchen, because they are considered "dirty". The Finnish interviewee tells how hard it has been for her during her pregnancies, as well as until the thirtieth day after each birth. Pregnancy is associated with “shame”, so the Romani women must cover up the shame. This is done with their dress, as well as with special aprons that are put on their waists. While pregnant, the Roma woman lives with her parents and she is not allowed to visit her parents-in-law. Moreover, her parents pretend to not seeing anything and never talk about “giving birth” or “pregnancy”. Thus, "shame" and "honor" become key concepts in the Finnish Roma culture and acquire special importance as main principles of face saving and regulators of morality.

In the Finnish Roma culture what is considered "dirty" and "unclean" is never discussed or even mentioned. In such a way, silence is kept on all topics related to “dirtiness”. Finnish Roma women put enormous efforts for the arrangements at home and feel "proud" of the cleanliness. Moreover, there is a special ritual in the laundry - men's and women's clothes are washed separately, as well as the clothes of the different age groups. This is because adults are considered "cleaner" than young people. Thus, the semantic opposition "pure-dirty" has not only become a main principle of the Finnish Roma culture, but it also determines the self-perceptions of the community members. This is why a considerable part of the time of the Roma women is dedicated to maintaining cleanliness and covering up the "dirtiness". The latter includes sexuality, physiological processes, pregnancy and disease. All these are associated with "shame". Here is what Anna says about the taboos that she has to observe:

When the adults are at home, I am not allowed to go to the toilet. Sometimes I have to wait for hours to go out in the yard or anywhere else. It has happened to me with tears in my eyes to ask God to help me stay alone. Another time I get in the car and I go to the town to look for a public toilet.

The taboos in the Finnish Romani culture may create real obstacles in school too. Anna tells about a relative of hers who wanted to leave high school because of the feeling of rejection:

A relative of mine who studied at school was given a task to write an essay about love. Writing about love might not be a problem for the other students in the class but for my cousin who is a Gypsy was a real problem. We have been raised up by our families knowing that it is wrong to talk about “love”, “sex” and other similar issues. Her refusal to write the essay provoked a conflict between her and the teacher. The result was that my cousin refused to go to school for two weeks. I had to take the role of a mediator between her and the school and to convince the director that she is not an “aggressor” but a normal Gypsy girl. It took me also one month to convince my cousin to continue her studies, because she had really decided to drop out of school. This is why I worry so much about my daughters too.... And in these Biology classes they also teach about sex....

The Finnish Roma culture is one of the most unique in Europe. It is traditional and patriarchic and even nowadays the Roma in Finland observe the unwritten rules of their forefathers. Following the traditional customs and observing silence on particular topics, such as sex, death, disease or dirtiness, may in certain cases create misunderstanding with members of other cultural communities and, thus, hinder the social adaptation of the Finnish Romani students in school.

Unlike the Finnish Roma community, the Bulgarian Romani people do not observe taboos or wear special costumes. Nor has there been such a univocal community as the Finnish one. It is a well-known fact in the Romani studies that the Bulgarian Roma identify themselves as Bulgarians, Turks or Gypsies. Thus, three main groups can be differentiated based on the self-perceptions of the Bulgarian

Roma. However, family clans, relations and traditions are considered very important too. Rituals have also become inseparable part of the everyday life in the Romani community. Weddings, funerals and other celebrations can continue for days and even for weeks. The Bulgarian Roma activist from the town of Ihtiman claims that the cultural differences have never been the main division point between the Bulgarians and the Gypsies but some habits of the Gypsies can really hamper their inclusion in society:

When I lived in Germany, I was working in the construction. I lived in several cities and even in different provinces but for the seven years spent there I developed some skills in construction and I learned to be organized and disciplined. When I returned to my native town, I experienced a real shock. I constructed for my family a big house in Ihtiman. But when I was building it, I hired some workers from my people, mostly relatives, neighbors and people from the neighborhood. Although I was paying them, they were not coming regularly at work. Some of them had family celebrations, others were drunken and others used to simply disappear for a couple of days. And there were some people who refused to work at all. They told me: "This is not for us." I was really shocked... I could see that the Gypsies are unorganized, they lack discipline and like to procrastinate...

The return culture shock that the interviewee has experienced has helped him to see his own community in a different light but also to rethink and re-evaluate his own life:

When I returned from Germany, I experienced not only a shock. I entered into a deep depression. I was unable to sleep and had much tension. For two years I was going to doctors and I was taking antidepressants. Well, in Germany I felt different and alien and I did not feel at home. In Bulgaria, see, I have darker skin...we feel Bulgarians and we have Bulgarian names and passports but some of the Bulgarians do not really accept us. The worst thing to experience here is when someone calls us "mangal, mangal" ... It really hurts... And when I returned from Germany, I did not feel comfortable in my community either, so for some time I stopped meeting with other Gypsies, I was avoiding them and stopped talking to them. They were coming to my house but I kept silent and I never told them how I feel.

The experienced culture shock has triggered a real identity crisis of the interviewee. Having lived in different places he has felt displaced and outrooted from his own cultural community. In this context it is important that silence has been perceived by the Bulgarian Roma informant in two ways. On the one hand, the silencing of voices is related to the pressure that the majority may sometimes exercise on cultural minorities. On the other hand, it is obvious from his speech that in his case there is self-silencing too. The phenomenon of self-silencing has been studied by some psychologists in relation to different social and cultural groups. Kaya and Cok (2021) do research in the self-silencing of young women and conclude that individuals who suppress their own voices and put the voices of the others to the fore view themselves usually as sacrifices. Other scholars observe too that there is a relationship between self-silencing and depression and they argue that self-silencing has an adverse effect on the individuals' wellbeing (Pintea and Gatea 2021).

So, self-silencing might be a strategy of survival in particular cases but it has negative consequences for individuals. One way for the Bulgarian Roma interviewee to come out of the self-isolation and self-silencing has been to attend the regular meetings of the evangelical church in his town.

I was really discouraged to speak; I was discouraged to speak to the Bulgarians and I was discouraged to speak to the Gypsies too. I was also very hesitant. I wanted to start my own business. In Germany I acquired good construction skills but I felt that I lack enough knowledge and I did not have enough education. When I was young, I dropped out from school very early and now I bitterly regret about my decision. Now I wish I had become engineer. I am thinking to return back to school, if it is available, I would like to return to evening high school. Maybe it's too late for me, I am 38 years old. But I constantly repeat to my children that they must graduate their school and that it is very important for them to get good education. But when I started attending the meetings in the evangelical church in Ihtiman, I gained more self-confidence and courage. I decided that I have to do something for the Gypsy community, I wanted to help them and I became a social activist and volunteer.

Ivan has become a mediator for the Roma community in Bulgaria. Training Roma mediators is an initiative of the European Union for improving the communication with vulnerable social minorities. There are about 200 trained health mediators in Bulgaria whose role is to raise the awareness of the

need of better health education and protection. Their role is especially important in the context of the global pandemic of Kovid-19. In Bulgaria the Roma represent the community with the lowest number of vaccinations. This fact is due to the lack of trust in the official state institutions and programs but also to the traditional neglect of health issues typical of the Roma community due to poverty. The health mediators work in the Roma neighborhoods of the big cities, as well as in small towns with considerable number of Roma population, such as Ihtiman and Sliven. In serving the Roma community as a volunteer and mediator Ivan has regained confidence in his own personal strength and capabilities:

After much struggle I realized that it is not so important whether you are German, Bulgarian or Gypsy. There are good people and there are bad people in every community. So, I decided it is important to be a good person. And I really want to contribute to the life of the Gypsies. See, in our community people do not value education. Especially some of the older people, they think it is a waste of time. And I know some young Gypsies who want to study but their family is so poor that they drop out of school. This is why I want to tell to all the Gypsies how important the education is.

3. Discussion

On the basis of the field studies and the two interviews, conducted in the towns of Mikkeli (Finland) and Ihtiman (Bulgaria), three types of silence can be outlined within the Roma communities. The first one is the silence related to the cultural taboos. The latter are underlined by the centuries-old traditions the Finnish Roma minority adheres to. Moreover, the majority of the Romani people do not question or contest the taboos, believing that their trueness and reliability had been proved by their ancestors.

In postmodern society there is a return to the ethnic traditions. The right to maintain one's own cultural traditions inevitably leads to fragmentation and differentiation within the society. In other words, in conditions of globalization and economic and political unification, the opposite process of disintegration and social fragmentation is equally strong. In adhering to their customs and maintaining their specific way of life, the Finnish Roma isolate themselves from the other social and cultural communities in Finland. Despite all the efforts of the Finnish state, the problem of their integration still remains. From the conducted interview in Finland, it is evident that there are difficulties in communication between the members of the Roma group and the Finnish majority.

It might seem surprising that in a highly developed country like Finland there are cultural minorities that have chosen to live as their ancestors had lived centuries ago. In this sense the postmodern philosophers Ahmed and Donnan (1994) view the revival of the ethnic and religious consciousness as a strong reaction against the traditions of modernism. Because the postmodern society is perceived as a counterpoint to the modern, the values that it promotes deny the former modern ideals. Materialism is replaced by spirituality, and individualism - by collectivism. In such a way, the ethnic traditions and cultural differences are embedded in postmodern society. Therefore, the rise of the ethnic consciousness should not be considered as anachronistic.

The strong sense of integration within one's own community is an important characteristic of the psychological portrait of individuals living in traditional social groups. This characteristic underlines the basic principle of life in such communities – collectivism. Individuals, such as the Finnish Roma, may in some cases even voluntarily give up their individuality and personal preferences. Within the social group everyone not only professes the same values, but shares a common way of life and has similar attitudes. This fact affects even individual characteristics, such as appearance, clothing and hairstyles. For the Finnish Romani women, the old-fashioned crinoline dress is not just a “uniform” but it functions as a sign of ethnicity and collective identity. Anna, the Finnish Roma interviewee, claims that her own life has been dictated as much by the social pressure of the community, as by her own personal choice. In this sense, the first type of silence is the silence of the taboo that is maintained and preserved as part of the cultural tradition.

The second type of silence, according to the Finnish Roma interviewee, is “the imposed silence by the elders on the younger Romani people”, which she feels is too restrictive and sometimes even oppressive. Such is for her the fact that she can never complain of being tired of wearing the traditional Finnish Roma dress, which she should always wear. She can also never oppose the elders, even when it is evident that they are not right. So, this type of silence is underlined by the inner fight of the

individual between the personal and the collective, between the individual preferences and wishes, and the unwritten laws of the community.

And the third type of silence, about which both the informants talk, is the silence of “being different” and “being sometimes even ashamed”. In this direction, silence is not perceived as shutting up or not speaking at all, but rather, as being unconfident to openly express oneself through lifestyle, attire or social communication. Moreover, the silence of “being ashamed” expresses the feeling of being underappreciated by others. From the two interviews it is also clear that both of the informants have experienced difficulties in adapting to the majority. Being socially and culturally “different” is challenging and sometimes can lead to the process of self-silencing too. The latter is expressed in the feeling of helplessness and in the conviction that one is incapable to defend their own thoughts, opinions, or rights. Although it might serve as a strategy of coping in adverse conditions, in fact it is contradictive to individual’s wellbeing. Thus, the three types of silence have become inseparable part of the lives of the Gypsies in the two European countries – Bulgaria and Finland.

And finally, from the two interviews it can be concluded that efforts are needed on both sides for overcoming the communication problems between the general public and the Roma minorities. On the one hand, the European majorities need to deepen their understanding of the cultural “other” and the different. One way to overcome the existing biases and stereotypes is through better knowledge of the cultural “other”. Simultaneously the state and the institutional programs should not just inform the public about the richness or the specificity of the minority cultures. Most of the individuals do not have close contacts with members of these minorities. In this sense close mutual encounters can contribute to better know the other and to understand their way of life and their attitudes. Thus, state policy should look for strategies to overcome segregation through establishing direct contacts between members of different communities. On the other hand, it becomes obvious that much more work is needed in the Gypsy communities too. One of the most important tasks of the Gypsy mediators and volunteers nowadays is to create the understanding how important education is for both personal improvement and social development of the Gypsy communities.

4. Conclusion

Despite the various social programs of the European Union, the integration of the Romani people in Europe is still problematic. The received data from the field studies and the interviews lead to the conclusion that it is necessary, especially in the sphere of education, to differentiate between cultural and non-cultural practices. In order the Romani children to be integrated in the educational system, they need to be better understood but not assimilated. This also means that the majority should show respect to their cultural traditions and customs, including to the taboos and to the other rituals that may seem irrelevant to members of other communities. At the same time, events, such as dropping out of school, not going regularly to classes, begging with children, etc., should not be labeled as “cultural practices”, as most often they depend on economic but not on cultural reasons. In interpreting such events as “cultural”, the state and the educational system may further silence the voices of the underprivileged. Simultaneously much more efforts should be put on raising the awareness of the need of education among the Romani people.

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