

The war against poor (Roma) in populist discourses and practices in Romania ¹

Enikő Vincze

This paper offers an insight into the war against poor (Roma) in populist discourses and practices in Romania, while demonstrating how populism, in this case, is intersected with racism. In a first step, the paper outlines the general poverty-related context of Romania through some statistical data, and afterwards it sketches three cases that illustrate extreme ways in which populism targets poor Roma. Next, in two chapters, the article elaborates on some interpretations about (a) how poor Roma are dispossessed of their homes, citizenship and humanity, and (b) how are the poor blamed and racialized. As a conclusion, the paper drafts on some of the theoretical directions that might be useful for the analysis of the war against poor (Roma).

Poverty and blaming the poor – general context

According to EUROSTAT, among the EU member states Romania knows the highest rates in terms of the population under the risk of poverty (40.3%), including in-work-poverty (17.3%; a percentage that is even higher, of 50.7%, in the case of those working part-time), and it knows the one of the highest rates of inequality between the incomes of the most rich .and the incomes of the poorest (6.2%). Romania is among the states of whose population knows to a large extent severe housing deprivations (26.9%), while 54.9% of the population lives in overcrowded homes (a percentage that is even higher in the case of those under the risk of poverty, 65%). Romania is

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among the states that allocates the less percentage of its GDP to social protection: 17.58% compared to the EU27 of 29.36%.

During the times of crises, Romania used one of the most severe set of austerity measures, while, mostly since 2010, its political leaders were preaching on the death of the social state, and on the guiltiness of the poor for being poor. The term “socially assisted” quickly became associated with derogatory and pejorative meanings, and reinforced the already appealing anti-communist attitudes sustaining meritocracy and the naturalness of inequalities. Claiming that the poor and the “socially assisted” threaten the economic security of the country, or blaming the victims, the governors arrived to the conclusion that solutions for economic crises should consists of cutting the benefits of these “parasitic” elements, which supposedly put a burden on the “weak state” and on the whole population (“the good Romanians”) who want to work and manage to be competitive on the labor market.

Local authorities’ actions and discourses – steps towards a racist populism

Having in my mind the context from above, in this paper I am using the term “populist” in order to name the publicly expressed convictions and practices that promise to defend “people” (the “civilized Romanians”) against “dangerous others” (poor Roma) who are supposedly threatening the former. Through these speeches and actions, politicians and governors who are framing and performing them, constitute themselves as defenders of “The people”, while constructing the latter as subject of their worthy intervention. In particular, I am referring here to three cases of forced evictions in Romania (happened in the cities of Cluj-Napoca, Baia Mare, and Eforie Sud in the past four years), respectively to the declarations and actions of the mayors of these cities by which they administered the eviction of poor Roma communities from their settlements and justified their interventions.

If one listens to the statements of the respective mayors, he/she may observe how they constructed the “people” whom they served by differentiating between two, hierarchically arranged categories, one from within and the other from the outside of “The people”:

In December 2010, the mayor of Cluj Napoca (Sorin Apostu) who orchestrated the eviction of 76 families (their vast majority Roma) from a centrally placed urban space

(Coastei street) affirmed: *“the eviction from Coastei street was made due to the fact that the way of life generated a lot of controversies for the inhabitants of the area and for the companies from the area and for everything that the city meant – later they were moved in a zone from Pata Rât.”* Despite of prior petitions against evictions and residential segregation, all the families living on Coastei street were evicted, their homes were instantly demolished, and they were relocated nearby the city’s toxic landfill, into improper homes sharply isolated from the city, by this increasing the number of the inhabitants of that area to 1500.

In the spring of 2012, the mayor of Baia Mare (Cătălin Cherecheș), who put on his electoral agenda the demolition of Craica (a neighborhood of poor housing inhabited mostly by Roma) and won the local elections with more than 80%, argued for his actions by stating: *“the poverty pockets of the city, where since 20 years there were only improper constructions, and where there was no water, sewerage, or electricity, had to be eradicated because they created discomfort to those who lived in the housing districts of the municipality.”* About half of the houses were demolished, and 60 families were relocated into the buildings of a former chemical company. After the municipality was criticized by human rights organizations, the mayor started talking about his plans for integrating Roma, and for looking for alternative territories where the remaining families of Craica, and other poor families from other areas of Baia Mare might be relocated.

In October 2013, the mayor of Eforie (Ovidiu Brăiloiu) demolished the homes of circa 100 ethnic Roma persons leaving them homeless, by affirming: *“by winter they will go to the landfill. I am not sending them anywhere, they will go on their own. We do what we need to do: we drain the zone, we clean, and we remove the garbage from there. You know how it is: when the butchery closes, the dog stays there for a few more days, but eventually it has to go away.”* After a couple of days, when the mayor was criticized by human rights organizations, he allowed some of the children left homeless to move into a disposed building without any utilities.

Dispossessed of homes, citizenship and humanity

These three cases, which are completed by several others in Romania, respectively the related public discourses might be placed on a scale of classifications that evolved from defining the relocated ones as people who generated “controversies” and created “discomfort”, to comparing them to street dogs. We could see: supposedly their lifestyle, the fact that their neighborhood lacked elements of a civilized housing, and the increased amount of garbage around, but most importantly the assumption that all these factors disturbed the others, “the normal people and companies”, justified their eviction, demolition and relocation administered by local authorities. In this way, without any proper interventions against poverty, the latter ended up championing a war against the poor by which they supported both real estate interests and their own political and economic capital.

These are cases in which authorities justified their actions by referring to the need of “slum clearance”, or “urban generation”, or “urban development programs”. But their attempt to rationalize went even further: they, as elected representatives of the cities, put one against the other “The people” who deserved being served by the local governance and those who were not worthy of this. Even more, they sanctioned the distinction between those who merited belonging to the city, and those who did not. In addition, while legitimizing the housing and territorial exclusion of the latter, they even excluded them from humanity or peoplehood by associating them with trash, by relocating them to polluted areas that endangered their health and life, and by comparing them to animals. In none of these cases, “urban regeneration” meant the improvement of housing conditions of the dwellers of these areas in a way that they could support them living a proper human life while remaining there and become integrated into the desired urban landscape. But in each of these cases, the way in which and where they were relocated or left homeless increased their material deprivations, territorial separation and cultural stigmatizations, strongly damaging their human dignity and social relations. This is a strong evidence of the fact that these poor people are not imagined by decision-makers (and by the mainstream population) as being part of the urban space that needs to be regenerated and developed, but they are at the most tolerated on the margins, or on territories that are tried to be made invisible or non-existent and, as such, do not require or deserve administrative attention or socio-economic development. Simply put: by these measures, public authorities construct a physical and symbolic bond

between people regarded as non-humans and spaces regarded as non-territories (such as landfill, chemical deposits, water treatment plants or other toxic environments).

The arguments of local authorities for performing evictions, demolitions and relocations, were also referring to the illegality of the respective human settlements. In some cases this meant that people were let to stay informally there since ages and now this consensus was disrupted unilaterally by authorities. And in other cases it meant that people renting their homes on those areas, were evicted together with the informally settled and/or those who did not possess legal documents of any kinds, being pushed together, as “the group that deserve such treatment”, out of their status of citizenship. In each of these cases, relocation meant that people’s access to resources of a life defined by our society as normal for a citizen belonging to a member state of the European Union, or their access to the means of living accepted as legal in the same world, became even more restricted. Consequently, their effective access to citizenship rights or to fundamental human rights including the right to life was dramatically hampered.

Dispossessed of their houses, of their citizenship rights and even of their humanity evicted people continued living in their home countries and cities as undocumented immigrants do live in a foreign country or as refugees live during times of war. Or they tried going abroad, in the economically more promising member states of the European Union, where they continued to experience the fact that they were unwanted, they were non-citizens, they were non-humans, and on this base they continued being subjected to evictions and deportations across countries.

Blaming and racializing the poor

The briefly discussed cases are not atypical – one may find many similar instances across borders and continents in which the urban gentrification process is undergoing by the means of excluding the poor from inner city areas or from areas whose real estate value increases. In the case of the mentioned Romanian cities, all this is happening in the larger context of post-socialist changes and of the current neoliberal practices supported, among others, by the state. Racism (as “cultural justification”) underlies these administrative actions, trying to explain, why are poor Roma deserving inhuman treatment (why can they be evicted during winter time, why people might be left homeless, why do they deserve to be relocated near the landfill).

Pushing out from the city those people whose presence in the town is considered as disturbing or embarrassing, equals with trying to deny or make invisible the fact that the last decades of socio-economic changes produced conditions and situations that failed being handled by public authorities, and/or by public policies. The latter proved to be unsuccessful in implementing remedies for the inequalities produced by market economy, and by a public administration totally neglecting the visions and practices of a cohesive and inclusive development that could have avoided the formation of poverty pockets or the creation of a social class of precariousness dispossessed not only of material resources, but also of human dignity. In front of these institutional inabilities, authorities try justifying their actions by an urban imaginary which is in tone with the desires of the mainstream population: this is about nurturing the ideal of a civilized, European city inhabited by highly skilled professionals where nobody is “socially assisted”. But how can be this imaginary sustained by the working poor or by people benefiting of social allowances and services? This is the point where this logic requires the appeal towards an inferior class of people, or more properly said, of an inferior class of non-humans, who threaten the formation of a desired territory of “our own” inhabited by the desired community (by “us”) composed of people who deserve belonging to it.

In addressing the situation of the communities subjected to such actions of local authorities, there are always confusing associations made between “Roma” and “people living in poverty”, while the appeal to ethnicity is for the most of the times ambiguous on any sides. Asked about their ethnicity, majority of people living in the targeted disadvantaged residential areas assume Roma identity, while – in their effort to make themselves acceptable and “integrable” – they are trying to hide this, proving that they want to be “like Romanians” (which does not only mean claiming citizenship rights, but it is also about the self-denial of their own language, music or different forms of traditions that might recall in one’s eyes or ears their marginalized status). On the one hand, the public imaginary of the city predominantly defines the areas where they are relocated as “Gypsyhoods” (*țigănie*), while the mainstream society and/or the authorities try denying that inhabitants of these zones became inhabitants because they were excluded by different means from other spaces due to the way in which their ethnic background was perceived.

People undergoing such experiences, are displaced from other locative spaces by several factors and mechanisms among them socio-economic (lost of jobs and homes), urban regeneration-

related consequences and administrative measures. At the same time they witness that this displacement and their dispossession of basic human rights is justified by cultural “arguments” about “Gypsyess” and its “natural” belonging to the landfills or other toxic and segregated environments. The stigma attached to the place is associated to people inhabiting it, and cynically both of them are considered “deserving” their precarious condition, and up to all this, people are inferiorized and essentialized both as poor and as Roma, while their juxtaposition is also naturalized. In this context, racism is instrumental about justifying, and in this sense producing today’s inequalities: Roma are not conceived as dignified “ethnic other”, but as “inferior race” acting by the means of “culture of poverty”. Unfortunately, the promised post-1990 Romanian democratization did not bring to Roma the opportunity to participate as equals or as dignified ethno-cultural minorities on societal life, including governance, whereas marketization and privatization affected negatively their socio-economic status, and – in the name of inclusion – they were subjected by different political forces as maneuverable masses of voters. This is why my conviction is that politics and policies addressing Roma at different levels should combine the perspective of just redistribution with that of cultural recognition and political representation/participation.

Conclusions – theoretical frames of interpreting the war against poor (Roma)

Looking for explanations about the war against poor (Roma) in a post-socialist context, in a first step one should not forget that poverty is not only an economic, but also a social phenomenon that should be understood by analyzing the contextual factors, which explain why some people experience these conditions and vulnerabilities while others do not. Eventually, poverty should not be used as the ultimate explanation of the occurrence and maintenance of deprived conditions, because it is generated at its turn by the larger socio-economic and political system. That is why, the endeavor of “eradicating poverty pockets”, or urban regeneration programs that clean slums in the inner city areas and relocate them to the margins cannot “lift out” people from poverty, because they do not generate transformative processes, on the contrary, they contribute to the reification of the system that produced them.

Moreover, looking on the war against poor, one should observe how poverty is also a cultural process, by which poor are blamed and stigmatized for being poor and are constructed as individually being responsible for their poor condition. Plus, he/she should note that the way in which poverty is culturally framed prevents proper anti-poverty measures to be implemented. On the other hand, life lived under poor and humiliating conditions for a long period of time, and most importantly within segregated areas, generates everyday practices that inter-generationally create a cultural order that constrains the individuals to “choose” some patterns of accommodation to the given conditions and disables them from opting for others.

The briefly presented cases of forced evictions and residential segregation, are illustrating instances in which poverty and social exclusion are acting both as causes and as consequences of territorial and housing exclusion, while exclusion leads to poverty and vice versa. Most importantly, one needs to make a difference between being poor and being excluded, since the latter are not only poor (whom might be considered by the system as being worthy of social benefits and services supporting them to overcome their condition), but they are excluded from the realm of citizens and even that of humans (so they do not even count or exist).

Following Nancy Fraser’s three dimensional approach towards forms of subordination, injustices and social movements, one may more easily understand how, in the case of poor Roma, three factors are acting simultaneously in the process of their exclusion: class inequalities that are excluding them from resources distributed across the society; status hierarchies that lead to their cultural misrecognition and racial inferiorization; and political exclusion, which makes that they do not count as members of the political body and they do not participate on the negotiations regarding who should benefit of just redistribution and of reciprocal recognition. “Those who are marginalized or subordinated can still participate with others in social interaction, although they cannot do so as peers. Those who are excluded, by contrast, are not even in the game,”² – this is exactly the case of poor Roma, who, by the populist means of political discourses and administrative actions are not only discredited as citizens and as humans, but are also

² Nancy Fraser: *Identity, Exclusion, and Critique. A Response to Four Critics*. European Journal of Political Theory. 2007 6: 305-338.

transformed into the dangerous racial other than threatens the “normal mainstream”. And in a way, these populist ideas are reflecting a true potential: the creation of such a precariat or excluded class might have a transformative potential that endangers not “the people”, but the system which creates such forms of injustices, however only if they manage to occupy a position on the stage of political representation and participation.