

PER Field Trip for Journalists and the
Seminar "Roma In Romanian Media"
June 5-7, 2002
Bucharest and Bucharest Region
Dan Pavel, Director of PER Bucharest

The main reason for organizing a field trip to Romani rural and urban communities far away from the capital city was to familiarize journalists with the very difficult situation of this national minority in Romania. Despite governmental efforts and some international financial help, extreme poverty, lack of education and decent houses, unemployment, disease, and criminality, affect the lives of Romani individuals and groups. These current facts of life do not attract much attention from the media. They only seem to write or broadcast about the Roma if there is a violent conflict or something sensational. The organizers of the visit intended to expose journalists to a reality that is not far from their offices, but which does not often appear in media.

The need for this latest seminar and field trip, organized by the Bucharest office of the Project on Ethnic Relations, also came from the reality of low quality media coverage of Romani problems. For years, only reporters attended most of the roundtables and debates on Roma. Even if they learned how to report without bias and prejudice on interethnic issues, when their articles were printed, the titles or headlines contradicted the content of the article. When asked about discrepancies, reporters complained about how their editors substantially altered the content of their articles. In radio or TV shows, the situation was similar. In order to help editors change their attitude, PER decided to invite them to a debate, together with reporters and representatives of Romani organizations.

The field visit included several places: 1 Decembrie (*judetul*¹ Ilfov), Baneasa (judetul Giurgiu), Chirnogi (judetul Calarasi), Alexandria, Piatra, and Zimnicea (judetul Teleorman). The journalists met Roma from several communities (*vatrasi, caldarasi, rudari, ursari, argintari, spoitori*), and had the opportunity to take shots and photos of scenes from their daily life and traditional work. In some communities, the Romani individuals or groups did not even have IDs. They were non-citizens. Without birth certificates they were not able to go to school, they had no access to health care, normal workplaces, pensions, etc. In these and other communities like these, there was no electricity, no clean water, no normal life conditions. Children had neither clothes nor shoes, walking barefoot and naked, and some of the journalists were in shock on the first day, looking for excuses not to come back the second day. But most of the journalists promised to return in order to report in detail about the problems of the people and communities they visited.

The journalists who participated in the field visit (the first and second days of the program) and their editors debated several topics at the seminar on the third day:

- Are Roma from Romania discriminated against? The role of editors, press directors, owners of the media, and opinion leaders in promoting human rights, and the perpetuation of stereotypes;
- Why should we care about poverty, and in particular about the poverty of Roma? From the strategy of government to the role of civil society;
- The conspiracy of ignorance. The state and political forces' interest in hiding data and realities about Roma: not even after the 2002 census will there be enough information to know the real number of this national minority, the

¹ *Judet* is the Romanian word for "county."

degree of poverty, unemployment, housing, education, criminality, etc. What could the media do?

- Is there a Romani mafia? Realities and myths about the criminality of the majority and minorities, in particular of Roma.

The debates were full of controversy, and journalists had the opportunity to engage in arguments with representatives from Romani organizations. Most of the cases brought up by Roma or civil activists were considered by journalists to be only isolated examples, not signs of a systematic policy of discrimination. Some of the worst prejudices about Roma came out during the debate with editors and reporters. A relative degree of negative reporting about Roma was noticed, and there are still many instances of prejudiced reporting. Even if there was a lot of disagreement on several topics, participants thought that an open debate and exchange of ideas are the only ways to address the complicated issues of the Romani communities.

List of participants

- Dumitru Tinu, Director *Adevarul*, President of the Romanian Press Club
- Rodica Culcer, Director of News Department, Europa FM
- Bogdan Ficeac, Chief Editor, *Romania Libera*,
- Dan Dumitru, Director of News Department, Prima TV
- Mihaela Unchesel, Editor, Radio Romani Actualitati
- Dumitru Ioan Bidia, President of Community of Roma People
- Dan Miroiu Ion, Executive President of Community of Roma People
- Ciprian Necula, Media Coordinator, Romani CRISS
- Georgiana Ilie, Center of Independent Journalists
- Doru Dendiu, Romanian TV
- Marian Chiriac, Mediafax
- Ovidiu Banches, *Ziua*
- Olimpia Alexandru, B 1 TV
- George Vila, Europa FM
- Narcis Iordache, *Cotidianul*
- Andreea Ofiteru, *Romania Libera*
- Liliana Petrus, *Flacara*
- Catalin Chiroiu, Prima TV