STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICES TOWARDS THE ROMA IN THE MEDIA[1]

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Abstract

The paper presents a theoretical-empirical study on a problem concerning the role of the press to support and reproduce racism in social structures. Special attention is paid to the latent participation of the liberal newspapers in the systemic stigmatisation of the Roma. The factors favouring stigmatisation and social exclusion of the ethnically different and especially the Roma have been explored. Content and discursive analyses results regarding publications on the Roma in several national dailies (Ataka, Dnevnik, Dnes.bg, Klassa, Monitor, Novinar) for the period August 2010 – February 2011 are presented. The analysis is based on the primary topics of the publications reflecting negative stereotypes, prejudices and social distances towards the Roma: the Roma as a "threat to the nation", as "social parasites", as a "demographic threat", as "criminal offenders".

Key words: Roma, stereotypes, prejudices, hate speech, press.

Several essential characteristics serve as a historically sustainable basis for the systematic stigmatising, social marginalisation, and discrimination of persons and groups. These are gender and sexual orientation; racial, ethnic and religious diversities; physical and mental health; physical appearance; as well as some forms of behaviour, rejected as especially unwanted and defined as criminal or deviant.

Attitudes towards the stigmatised have changed considerably in the course of European history. These changes, assessed as the "humanisation of society" - stages of the development of the democratic process and of the application of the principle of justice and fairness in social practices - became particularly visible during the post WW2 period. The shock to humankind from the millions of innocent victims of the 20th century wars and especially the genocide perpetrated against Jews and others labelled as "racially inferior people"[3] arose strong scientific interest and induced

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[3] I have in mind not only the Roma but also the Slavs. During the past two decades, international interest in the mass annihilation of Roma during WW2 considerably increased and a series of profound and serious research projects on their destiny in different countries appeared. Yet now this is to be conducted with respect to the Slavic peoples as well. The reason lying behind this "oblivion" is both political and ideological: all of them after WW2 fell beyond "The Iron Curtain", were considered as "part of the forces of evil" and their suffering and victimisation during the war did not attract the deserved attention, empathy, scientific interest and funding by the West European researchers. Within the socialist camp, on the other hand, the paradigm was for "the self-sacrifice and heroism of the Great Soviet Union", while, for political reasons, the fate of Poles, Serbs, Czechs, Ukrainians etc. during this period has been neglected and passed over in silence.

significant political changes connected to the understanding of race, ethnicity and religion as systemic categories for social exclusion, dehumanisation and the various forms of discrimination against large groups of people. The de-colonisation struggles of many African and Asian peoples as well as the powerful movement for the recognition of the rights of African-Americans in the United States also intensified sensitivity towards this type of diversity. This led to the development of international and national anti-discriminatory and anti-racist legislation and towards the drafting of special social policies for overcoming the implications of inequality, based on racial, ethnic, or religious diversities.

For decades, Bulgaria was left aside from the theoretical re-consideration of diversity in its specific forms: racial, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, etc., as well as from the attempts to seek political and social solutions for the gradual overcoming of the related implications and consequences of century-long stigmatisation and social exclusion. Paradoxically, this lagging behind has been connected with pretences of the materialisation of a "scientifically-grounded political leadership", based upon "the supremacy of Marxism-Leninism" in the socialist countries. While in the West Marxism inspired theoretical research and political movements for the protection of the rights of racial and ethnic groups, in CEE the dogma of socialism for "the fading significance of ethnicity and nation"[4] in practice marginalised these issues as a topic of scientific interest and as a field for social activism, different from party/government policy.

As a result, at present in Bulgaria (and in all post-socialist countries) many real problems exist with regard to acceptance of, and attitudes towards, diversity. Discernible among the citizens of the post-socialist countries is a greater degree of conflict related to the different manifestations of nationalism, a more totalistic rejection of "the different" and an underdeveloped sensitivity to the consequences of stigmatisation and exclusion and towards the problems of the stigmatised.

FACTORS FACILITATING THE PROCESSES OF MARGINALISATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The social status of a person or group has always depended at their ethnicity. The modern era enhanced the role of ethnicity as a factor of social groups' marginalisation and exclusion. The national model of the Bulgarians significantly differs from the one of the West Europeans. Like the other Balkan peoples[5] fighting

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[4] Initially, it was utopically expected that the national, ethnic, and religious diversities would be dulled abruptly and gradually lose their significance as a result of the extinction of class exploitation and "the liberation of nations", without any special efforts or political actions, just as a result of the "automatism" of the social processes. At a later stage, after the second half of the 1950's, the active policy for "national construction" in the former socialist countries manifested increasing attempts at assimilation or getting rid of the ethnic minorities, which, in some cases, took on sinister dimensions, as for example the expulsion of the Germans from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, the "change of names" of the Bulgarian Turks and Muslims in Bulgaria or the attempts to assimilate the Hungarians in Romania, the stigmatising of Jews in the Soviet Union, etc.

[5] The same is valid for the Central European countries as well, which have gained their independence after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.