

Romani people in Southern Italy. Integration, social problems, life conditions

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Abstract—This paper is focused on the actual life conditions of the Romani community living in Italy, with specific focus on the communities located in the Southern Italy region of Molise. Coming, in the origins, from the Balkans, they can be regarded as “autochthonous” Roma, as they got the Italian citizenships since several generations, after reaching Molise Region between the end of the 14th Century and the beginning of the 15th Century. They are, in fact, Italian citizens since many generations.

They speak mainly the Italian language, together with the ancient Romani language, with different dialectal variations. In this respect, it has to be stressed that the Italian law on linguistic minorities (Law 482/1999), in application of art. 3 and 6 of the Italian Constitution, does not include the Romani minority. Hence, they cannot be considered as a linguistic minority, and this represents a serious obstacle to their integration as regards a cultural dignity - and consequently, existential -, as well as a series of protective measures to favor their complete integration.

Together with job exclusion, it represents today the most serious form of danger and social exclusion suffered by the Roma.

Index Terms—Romani Italian community, Roma people in Southern Italy, Roma people in Molise, Roma social problems.

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay focuses on the issues of economic, social and cultural inclusion of Roma and Sinti in Italy, with specific focus on the Italian Romani¹ community of Molise.

Roma are the largest European minority group: their number is estimated to be of about 12 million people, according to the Council of Europe (2012).

The inclusion of Roma is a priority of the inclusive growth, as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, in the context of the European anti-poverty platform. In order to respond to this important objective, over the years, Europe has tried to tackle the problem of the very low levels of social integration of this minority, by making available several resources, including: the European Social Fund, whose effectiveness has been improved by increasing the monitoring and evaluation of Roma projects; the European Regional Development Fund, which since 2009 has extended funding to housing projects for communities with extreme levels of poverty and marginalization, including Roma people; the Community Action Program in the field of Lifelong Learning; the Youth

in Action Program, the Culture Program (2007-2013), the 2008-2013 Health Program; the General Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Program, which also supported the Daphne III program, to combat violence against children, young people and women the most recent Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program (REC) program, with a specific action line dedicated to the support to national or transnational projects on non-discrimination and Roma integration.

Since 2010, following the Strategic Communication on “Socio-economic integration of Roma in Europe” - which is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth - the European Commission has strongly reiterated the need to all Member States, in cooperation with the local authorities of their countries, to promote, through specific policies and European funding programs, the social integration of the Roma minority.

With the subsequent communication “EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020”, the EU has established a Community Framework that has helped to guide the creation of national policies for Roma integration and inclusion, recommending the creation, in fact, of national strategies related to the global policies of social inclusion of Member States focusing on four pillars: access to education; access to employment; access to health care; access to accommodation.

It is a matter of fact that still today, Romani communities of the major European countries do live in depriving life conditions, and are marginalized from a socio-economic and cultural point of view.

This condition affects also the most integrated Romani groups such as the one of ancient immigration, with citizenship rights, such as the communities living in the southern part of Italy.

II. THE ROMANI COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE AND ITALY. A BRIEF HISTORY

Roma are an ethnic group living mostly in the Balkans, in Central Europe as well as in Eastern Europe. The Council of Europe (2012) estimated their number as comprised between a minimum of 6 million and a maximum of 16 million; so, with an average number of about 12 million of people living in Europe², Roma are the most numerous ethno-cultural

¹ The term “Romani” is used, in this paper, in a generic way, as it includes, as it will be seen shortly, different realities having heterogeneous denominations (Spinelli, 2012). Another term commonly used to define this population is “Gypsy”; the Italian term “zingaro” is also referred to this population, but it has a negative connotation.

² Although almost 80% of the Roma (Council of Europe, 2012) are sedentary, it is very difficult to carry out statistic researches on the real number of Roma in Europe. This population, in fact, escapes the surveys for several reasons: many Roma, being of ancient immigration, have acquired the citizenship

minority in this region of the world. The high number of Roma in Europe is due to the increase of migration flows from East to West, together with the progressive enlargement of the European Union that led millions of Roma to become communitarian citizens.

As Piasere (2004) underlined, Roma, Sinti and Travellers communities are *“A politetic category made of elements being similar in something, but different for certain aspects; the flexibility of the conceptual structure of this category allowed to historically include a quite comprehensive variety of people, with different cultural components”*.

Roma people are commonly defined with the term of *“Romani population”*. This name identifies several communities, differently named, as mentioned, depending on the country in which they use to live (Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Kalè, Manouches and Romanichals), having in common a set of specific original cultural features. The origin of the Romani population, written by the *“Gagi”*³, is wrapped in mystery. Relying mainly on oral history⁴, this population was forced to move out of their country of origin, to start a nomadism that influenced all their history. Chased away, as we will see better soon, from all the countries where they had arrived, they ended up forgetting their own origin, and only the scientific research on their language has, in recent times, succeeded to cast new light on it

About 140,000-180,000 estimated Roma people are living in Italy; the *“Italian”* Roma arrived in that country during three migration waves. A first migration wave on the 15th Century brought a population that today is sedentarily settled in several Italian regions (Spinelli, 2012). They are estimated to be about 30.000 people (Spinelli, 2012); their traditional economic activities are trade in used cars, street vendors activities, but there are also many athletes, nurses, teachers, employees.

Another group of ancient migration are the Sinti, who are mainly located in central Italy; they are also around 30,000 people. A second migratory wave, after the First World War, brought Roma groups from Eastern Europe, such as the Harvati, Kalderasha, Istrians and Slovenian Roma. Estimated to be around 7,000 people, they have been recognized as Italian citizens. On a third migratory wave, during the Sixties and the Seventies of the 19th Century, groups of Khorakhanè Roma⁵, Dasikhanè Roma⁶ and Romenian Roma, arrived in Europe according to a big emigration from the East Europe towards the most industrialized countries. Another important exodus took place since 1989, following the crashing of the common schemes in the European countries and the war in the former Yugoslavia. From 1992 to 2000, about 16,000 Roma arrived Italy, settling in different areas of the national territory.

The Romani population groups can be defined and identified according a variety of criteria; on the

basis of their geographical distribution and provenance, we find several ethnonyms:

The Roma, which come from the Balkan regions and from Central and Northern Europe.

The Sinti, who speak the Romanès or Sinto, an ancient dialect of the Romani language. They are mainly settled in North-Western Europe, in Italy, France and Germany.

The Kale (from the Hindi term *“kala”*, that means *“black”*); they are settled in Finland and Spain.

The Manouches (from the Sanskrit *“manùs”*, that means man, *“human being”*); they live mostly in France and Italy.

The Romanichals (from the Romani language, *“Children of Roma”*); they mainly live in England, Australia and North-America.

Romani people are also defined according to their prevalent and traditional working activities; on that basis, we have:

The Lautari: professional musicians from Romania and Hungary.

The Lovara: they used to breed and commerce horses.

The Kalderasa: they are from Romania and their traditional activity is copper, brass and iron working.

Finally, Romanian groups can be divided according to their religious faith; from this point of view, we can find:

The Dasikané Roma: they are orthodox and come from Serbia;

The Khorakané Roma: they are Muslims coming, as mentioned, from the Balkan regions (Fyrom, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey).

III. ROMANI COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHERN ITALY

The Romani community actually living in Molise (Italy) is part of the oldest and largest community of Italian Roma in central and southern Italy. Coming, in the origins, from the Balkans, they can be regarded as *“autochthonous”* Roma, as they got the Italian citizenships since several generations, after reaching Molise Region between the end of the 14th Century and the beginning of the 15th Century. They are Italian citizens since many generations.

They speak mainly the Italian language, together with the ancient Romani language, with different dialectal variations. In this respect, it has to be stressed that the Italian law on linguistic minorities (Law 482/1999), in application of art. 3 and 6 of the Italian Constitution, does not include the Romani minority. Hence, they cannot be considered as a linguistic minority, and this represents a serious obstacle to their integration as regards a cultural dignity - and consequently, existential -, as well as a series of protective measures to favor their complete integration.

Together with job exclusion, it represents today the most

of the countries that have welcomed them centuries earlier (as in the Italian case); in many cases, moreover, Roma have shame of declaring themselves as such. Hence, statistics on their presence must be considered as defective.

³ Gagi is the term used by Roma people to indicate the *“non-Roma”*.

⁴ Roma began to write only in the 19th Century. This fact contributed to the loss of their cultural and historical memory, together with the peculiarities of their history.

⁵ Muslims from the former Yugoslavia (Cergarija, Crna Gora, Shiftarija, Mangiuppi, Kaloperija).

⁶ Christian-orthodox Roma from Serbia (Rudari, Kanjiaria, Mrznarija, Busnarija, Bulgarija).

serious form of danger and social exclusion suffered by the Roma.

The Roma from Molise belong to the cultural area of the Roma from Abruzzo, whose cultural traits they share: the autonym "Rom abruzzesi" which some originally nomadic groups gave themselves since the beginning of the 20th Century is also extended, in fact, to the Roma of Molise (and of Northern Puglia⁷). Moreover, such groups have, in common, not only a geographical contiguity, but also strong parental constraints. The minoritarian extended family of the had its own historical residence in Contrada Macchie. Housing has multiplied over the years, so that with the formation of new family groups. There was a need for new housing. Most members of the extended family have thus obtained "public housing", owned by the IACP.

These social housing units are located in the San Giovanni districts, Fontana Vecchia, Cep.

A similar situation characterizes the living context of the majoritarian extended family, who had their first residence around the 1970s in the Sant'Antonio Abate district. They currently reside in small owned homes.

There are no particular meeting places used by this micro-population, which shares the spaces of the urban context.

The situation that most denotes the features of a partial "spatial segregation" can be seen in the location of the homes of the two main families themselves, in the above-mentioned neighborhoods.

The affluence of the Romanès cultural and linguistic sphere, as well as being witnessed by cultural traditions - including speaking an ancient language - can also be deduced from the peculiar surnames of this specific population. As with other Roma groups, this culture traditionally bases its existence on family relationships.

The society basis of this universe is constituted by the nuclear family composed of father, mother and sons, who belongs to lineages - or extended patrilinear families -, which regard to themselves as being descendants from a common male progenitor. Such extended unit consists of a householder, his sons and daughters, as well as the families of male children.

According to the data collected on-field⁸ and at the Municipal registry offices in May 2018, it is currently estimated that the people belonging to the Roma population in Campobasso amount to 236 people. Within this population, there are two main groups, which correspond to two majoritarian extended families, identified by specific surnames⁹. Although the community is characterized by a prevalent group endogamy, over the years, numerous marriages have been registered between people of non-Roma origin, so that the number of those who have a cultural belonging to the Romani universe is certainly higher of what can be deduced from the simple analysis of the Romani surnames. Furthermore, it should be noted that the traditional surnames of the two main population groups of Roma origin are sometimes transcribed, in the city registry office, with slight vocalic variations; also, this evidence must be kept in

mind, and led us to consider the number of people of Roma origin higher than the official one.

IV. EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND LIFE CONDITIONS

Currently, most adults of the two extended families are unemployed; in the past, the main work activity consisted in breeding and trading in livestock.

Currently, those who work are mainly employed in construction activities, with occupations characterized by a high degree of informality (these are activities such as mason, for which no professional or formal qualification is required) and widespread irregularity.

The unemployment condition causes many people in the Community to receive a subsidy from the State ("REI").

All young members of the Community regularly attend compulsory education; the schools attended vary according to the district of residence. The school with a greater number of pupils of Roma origin is the Istituto Comprensivo D'Ovidio, whose catchment area is the Fontana Vecchia and Sant'Antonio Abate districts.

As regards the level of schooling, it should be noted that in most cases the level of education achieved is limited to the Middle School.

Very low is the number of young people who continue on the course of study or undertake a professional training.

The condition of economic precariousness, due in turn to the widespread unemployment of members of the Community of both extended families, can be considered in part a cause of this situation, but at the same time it is an effect. In this way a true and proper "poverty trap" is nourished, which should not be considered in reference to a merely economic and working condition, but also a socio-cultural one.

CONCLUSION

This paper wanted to describe the life conditions of the contemporary Romani communities of Italy, with focus on the group of ancient immigration living in Molise, a region of Italy that belongs, from a cultural point of view, to Southern Italy.

Although this Roma community has less problems than other Romani groups living in the country – from the housing to the inclusion in the social tissue – they continue to live in difficult conditions, in particular for what concerns job exclusion and the low educational levels.

Even if our research is still in the beginnings, and will be further deepened focusing in particular on the women's life conditions, it is possible to hypothesize a relationships with their Roma origin and cultural belonging, that needs to be further investigated.

⁷ A southern region in Italy.

⁸ We thank Dr. Massimo Converso, president of the Opera Nomadi Nazioanle, for the data provided.

⁹ We refer to the study of Mancini for what concerns the surnames of the diverse Romani families in Campobasso. Due to privacy reasons, we prefer not to mention them in our paper.

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