



Romanians in the Italian Newspapers: Image, Reality and Media Impact

Elena DUMITRU

University "Sapienza", Rome
Department of History, Culture and Religions
ilonadumitru@hotmail.com

Abstract. This paper aims to analyse the image of Romanians in Italy, as seen in the mass media of the Peninsula. The interest is concentrated on the impact of Romania's accession to the European Union on January 1st 2007 on the Italian society and on the image created by the mass media during the successive years – we refer to several Italian newspapers with a wide national distribution: *Corriere della Sera* (liberal), *La Repubblica* (progressive orientation), *Il Giornale* (right-wing), *Il Manifesto* (left-wing) – in order to highlight the social dynamics and human relations. We will analyse the measure in which the articles published in newspapers are concerned with cases of “black chronicle” – especially the rape in the Caffarella Park in Rome – to increase the sensationalism in presenting criminal cases with Romanian actors, causing an exaggerated debate, in general, regarding the presence of foreigners in Italy and, in particular, of the Romanian community. At the same time, attention will be focused on the reaction of the Romanian citizens in Italy and of the Romanian and Italian authorities, concerning the events that have been topics of discussion in the newspapers.

Keywords: immigrants, foreigners, mass media

The 1st of January 2007 represents the date when Romania officially adheres to the European Union, which subsequently led to a growing presence of Romanians in the West and, of course, in Italy. In early 2007, *Caritas Italiana* (Pittau, Ricci, Sliij (eds.) 2008: 90) estimated that Romanians in Italy represented the largest group of foreigners, with over one million people. This massive

presence on Italian territory, to which the echo of the mass media was added, that presented news and events of “black chronicle” involving Romanians, helped to spread a sense of fear among the Italian population of a generalised “invasion” and, therefore, a state of hatred and rejection of foreigners. Romania’s entry in the EU, which should have been a recognition and an acknowledgment of the progress made by Romania, at economic, cultural and social level, became a serious problem of social integration because “the Romanians acquired a negative perception, that, years ago, the Moroccans and Albanians used to have” (idem. 2008: 5), a situation aggravated by the difficulties of Roma integration, because most of the “people coming from Romania are Roma” (ibid.).

Therefore, the year 2007, which seemed “to be initiated under the auspices of enthusiasm, at least in a country like Italy where the first arrivals were Magrebian, Romanians and other foreigners, confirming once again that immigrants are already a structured part of the Italian society” (Confederația Caritas România and Caritas Italiana 2010: 50) represents the point when the population and the media began to express their concern about the control of the new community, perceived as a disturbing factor of safety and, therefore, of the equilibrium at social level and on the labour market (cf. Caritas Italiana 2008: 24-31).

In this complex and delicate situation, the Romanian community in Italy received special attention from the public and the media, opening to controversy and debate. The criminal cases have been emphasised, without mentioning the positive aspects of the Romanian presence, from cultural, social and economic point of view, and, especially, their contribution to the Italian production system, knowing that in Italy the immigrants cover two thirds of workforce necessity, Romanians providing an important contribution in this regard.

The mass media, therefore, did not focus on the positive contribution of the Romanian community. They used the figures attesting the growing number of Romanians in Italy to cause concern for and even fear of newcomers.

In the Italian newspapers of the year 2007, Romanians were the protagonists of most of the extremely serious crimes of rape, in an endless succession of alarming news, culminating with the murder of Giovanna Reggiani, at the end of October 2007, by “Romulus Nicolae Mailat, the 24 years old Romanian, accused of homicide”¹ (Corriere della Sera, November 1st, 2007). The suspect is therefore called “the 24 years old Romanian arrested and charged with voluntary manslaughter” and the fact that he belongs to the Roma community appears in the article that contains certain statements of other Roma living in the same camp set up illegally (the news is taken over by the Romanian press, Mediafax generally using the information that appears in the Italian newspapers).

¹ http://www.corriere.it/cronache/07_novembre_01/rom_accusato_omicidio.shtml

From this moment, a real general “hysteria” followed and Romanians were considered, almost without exception, to belong to a nation of criminals to be “sent back to their country”. Despite the balanced and rational statements of a part of the population and of the personalities of public life – President Giorgio Napolitano, Pope Benedict XVI –, who stressed that the Romanians are not a danger, the tension continues, fuelled by the interest of the mass media for this kind of subjects, capable of ensuring the attention of the public and, therefore, a firm “rating”.

Two years after the “Mailat case”, according to an article of the Dire² news agency, there is an increase in the cases of racism, the Romanians being the most concerned in this regard: “Increase of racism cases presented by the mass media, especially physical violence against Romanian citizens. In 2007 there were 119 cases, 124 in 2008 and 76 in the first three and a half months of this year³, with a total of 319 episodes of this kind. Press monitoring is an integral part of the White Book on racism, realised by the Lunaria association, with the support of the members of the Green Party of the European Parliament and presented in Rome.”⁴ (Author’s translation)

The image of the Romanians, somewhat rehabilitated during those years, still maintains the “shadows” of the past. 2009 is the year of “relapse” because, exactly on Valentine’s Day, on February 14th, a 14 years old girl is raped in the Caffarella Park in Rome. Will culprits or scapegoats be searched for? The mass media describes the investigation. As on other occasions, it is noted that the media has no hesitation in immediately disclosing the national membership of the defendants. Repeating the fact that they were Romanians could not have changed the situation in any way. A rape remains an abominable crime, regardless of the nationality of the aggressor. National identity should not be an instrument for the press to cause new phobias, but it should be considered an element of identification, similar to height, sex, colour of the eyes, hair colour, etc.

The reverse situation is also interesting, when a drunken Italian driver kills a Romanian woman. This time the title chosen by the newspaper (“*A man driving drunk hits and kills a Romanian*”) does not express the media tendency to emphasise the nationality of the aggressor, fact observed by the journalist Edmondo Berselli who writes: “Strange story. The other day an Italian from Turin, who was found positive to the alcohol test, hit and killed a 37-year-old Romanian woman [...] After 48 hours no protests and no complaints could be heard regarding the fact that Italians could be prone to crime, delinquency, alcoholism or drug [...] But if a

² http://www.officinagenitori.org/php/content_art.php?id_content=2345

³ Reference to 2009 – editor's note.

⁴ http://www.officinagenitori.org/php/content_art.php?id_content=2345

Romanian (drunk or not) would have hit an Italian, could you imagine the chorus?" ("La Repubblica", December 10, 2007).

"The guilty ones are Romanians" becomes a *leit motif* for the Italian press also regarding the rape in Caffarella. "Corriere della Sera" on February 17, 2009 publishes an article with the title "The Caffarella rape, two Romanians arrested", recounting how the youngest of the assaulters, Alexandru Isztoika Loyos, was recognised by the victim and her boyfriend. Regarding the older accomplice, Karol Racz – who planned to flee to Spain, the newspaper adding this alarming and alarmist information – was captured in Livorno, thanks to Loyos's indications. The article notes that during the whole operation the collaboration with the Romanian police was decisive.

The newspapers describe in detail the stories of the two Romanians, their relationship with the Roma camps, their previous crimes in Romania and Italy, focusing on the efficiency of the security forces, the superintendent Giuseppe Caruso saying proudly: "It was a street work of pure investigation and intuition, without technical means. A work of real policemen". For this work the President of the Senate, Renato Schifani, and the President of the Chamber, Gianfranco Fini, expressed their gratitude and admiration.

In conclusion, although the article contains detailed information on the two accused Romanians, it can be seen that the interest is focused rather on the forces of order and on the authorities involved, intending to bring a "tribute" to those responsible for public safety and therefore, attempting to (re)add credibility to state institutions.

A similar tone is adopted by the newspaper "La Repubblica" in an article that appeared on the 18th of February 2009, reiterating that the two "are Romanians: already having been identified two weeks ago in the Primavalle district after another rape" and adding some details to the description of one of the accused, details that are far from helping the investigations, but amplifying the negative image of Karol Racz, presented as "short, dark, 36-year-old, face of a pugilist".

On February 17, 2009 "Il Giornale", brings the article entitled "Rape in Caffarella, a Romanian captured in Primavalle". As in the case of the other newspapers, the reference to the nationality is maintained, while the supposed aggressor is indicated only by his initials, L.I., while Karol Racz is not mentioned. A different piece of information is on the actions of the police, that does not confirm the capture of the aggressor, but speaks about the continuation of the investigations in collaboration with a team of policemen from Bucharest.

"Il Manifesto" (February 16, 2009): "Rape, violence has no nation", adopts a critical tone. The left-wing newspaper uses once again the occasion to refer to the debates about immigration and security to condemn the government's intentions and actions.

The impetus of the mass media in search of subjects of sensation, of crimes that seem to be committed only by Romanians, as crime was not part of the whole society, is tempered by a “coup de théâtre”. Nearly a month after the unfortunate event, the DNA tests prove to be incompatible with the samples taken from the two men and the investigations seem to be reversed, the new evidence being taken into consideration. But the two remain in custody (being accused of other crimes), Karol Racz (accused of another rape on the 21st of January, the new DNA tests showing that he was once again innocent) is the one who, through his lawyer, declares his innocence, claiming that Loyos accused him only to protect two other Romanians.

At the same time, La Russa, the defense minister himself, calls for calm and correctness, claiming that, without incriminating evidence, Racz should be released.

Investigations are therefore repeated, this time the authorities are much more cautious in making statements. On the 20th of March 2009, two other Romanians, Gavrilă Oltean and Ionuț Alexandru are arrested. They recognise the rape and receive their sentences of 11 years and four months and six years respectively. Moreover, Gavrilă’s punishment is a combination of two crimes of rape, seven years and four months for the rape in Caffarella Park and four years for the rape of a 22-year-old young woman in July 2008.

The element that had an important emotional impact, especially after Racz was released from prison, was his destiny, the Romanian being called “the pugilist” only to enhance the idea of force and violence which he could have exercised in Caffarella Park. Racz is certainly not a model of civic behavior, but he is for sure not the beast described in the newspapers. His image is transformed from the aggressor to a victim, the public being extremely sensitive to the story of an innocent man who stayed in prison for a month, being accused of serious offences.

In this context, on 24th of April 2009, the TV program “Porta a Porta” on the national broadcast RAI 1 had a decisive effect. It was presented by the famous journalist Bruno Vespa, in which Racz had the opportunity to tell his touching and sometimes pathetic story in a simple way, with tears in his eyes. He was accompanied by his lawyer, Lorenzo La Marca, who said that initially they had fought against everybody, the declarations of his client being later confirmed by the DNA test and that they finally found justice. Besides Racz, the mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno was also invited to the talk show, who greeted the Romanian shaking his hands in front of the cameras.

Racz’s statements, made with the help of a translator, rendered his whole life story, starting from his childhood in an orphanage in Romania, his work as a baker in a monastery and his inclination to become a monk. He claimed that he had not committed crimes in his country, as mass media had spread. Racz spoke without anger, without underlining that he had been the victim of injustice, insisting on his desire to remain in Italy, to work and have a normal life.

As mentioned before, this programme had a particularly strong impact in the following days, when there were several job offers for Racz, fact which was emphasised by the press, which was accusing the Romanian with a “pugilist face” of rape only a month before. According to the information from “Porta a Porta”, a famous restaurant owner in Rome offered Racz a job as a confectioner. Another offer came from a land owner who decided to help him having seen him on television: “I thought it was unfair, he was in prison as an innocent man, I would be happy to hire him. The same thing happened to me a few years ago, I was the victim of an error of justice and got in prison.”⁵

The change of attitude of the media, in this case, is radical and it is closely related to the desire to maintain credibility. It may also suggest a kind of remorse for a situation out of control caused also by the unjustified exaggerations of the mass media that scared the population and seemed to forget – as it has frequently occurred lately – that journalism means, among other things, measure and decency. Even if initially there is a well-intentioned desire of providing information, the news often becomes excessive because of the tendency to transform it into a “sensational” event. The reaction in the newspapers was immediate: “La Repubblica” dedicated a large space to Racz’s innocence, “Il Messaggero” apologised in the front page of the March 25, 2009 edition and “Corriere della Sera”, in an article signed by Aldo Grasso, underlined that Racz “known as the pugilist face, was the victim of an error of justice, with an infamous accusation. But his main fault was of physiognomic character and as such, suitable for television: with a Romanian, nomadic, Roma face, the confectioner could only be the rapist from Caffarella. A perfect scapegoat, created by the circumstances, by the rush to find someone to blame. [...] Bruno Vespa has not conducted a TV program, but a public ceremony officiated in order to erase the guilt that we feel (or should feel) and to restore the image (dignity) of the victim. [...] One can have a pugilist face, a flat nose, dark gypsy look, but he is not necessarily a criminal”, added the journalist with bitter irony.

Through the dynamics of deeds, Racz’s case proved the power of the media on people, how crucial the media’s influence is on public opinion which, despite the denials, continues to perceive Racz as a potential threat. This is evidenced by the reaction of some women, employees of the restaurant where he was about to start work, who threatened to resign because they did not want to work with a Romanian accused of rape. Subsequently, the offer for employment was therefore withdrawn.

Issues of this nature are complex, as well as their causes. This article can not give a complete picture and exhaustive explanation of such a varied phenomenon. However, it can be claimed with certainty that the media has highlighted in a

⁵ <http://geniv.forumcommunity.net/?t=25758868>

“programmatic” way and with an excessive frequency the negative cases in which Romanians and Roma from Romania were involved, news of this kind appearing almost daily (especially in 2007 and 2009). This practice diminished in 2010 and 2011, but the tendency to publish negative news about the crimes committed by Romanians still continues, instead of highlighting the courageous acts of Romanians who did not hesitate to help Italians in danger (one case reported on April 11, 2011 by the online newspaper “Corriere di Ragusa”⁶ which reported that two young men, an Italian and a Romanian, saved an old man from a fire).

Another factor that influenced the course of events refers to the fact that “no special attention was paid to prepare the local population to welcome and accept immigrants, to create effective systems to receive and integrate them through a careful policy of mediation” (Motta and Ricci 2011: 6). It should also be underlined that the involvement of Romania’s diplomatic representatives in Italy to clarify some aspects regarding the Romanian community – including the level of mass media – was inconsistent, while the commitment of the Italian authorities involved in managing the numerous immigration issues made concrete results, so, at least regarding the EU citizens and, implicitly, Romanians, specific procedures have been simplified for those who want to live in Italy **legally**. The 2007 wave of insecurity caused by the media (Caritas Migrantes 2010: 213) – as the sociologist Ivo Diamanti considers – seems to be just a memory, a fact confirmed by the decrease of the number of people who believe that crime has increased (from 88% in 2007 to 76.7% in 2009) and the decrease of the percentage of those who believe that immigrants are a public danger (37.4% in 2009 compared to the record percentage of 50.7% in October 2007, but higher than the minimum record of 32.5% in September 2003).⁷

Based on these data, we can make the difference between true, concrete delinquency demonstrated by figures and the delinquency presented by the mass media, in a survey being demonstrated that those who “fear more are people who watch television, especially the news on TG1, TG5 and the show Studio Aperto” (Caritas/ Migrantes 2010: 215). This opinion was confirmed by the news on TG1 on April 11, 2011 which contained some information published just one day before during the midnight news and announced a new crime committed by four drunken Romanians. The press can exaggerate the news and repeatedly publish the story, but apart from this propensity, the condemnation of such horrible acts, as an Italian, but mostly as a Romanian living in Italy and as a law-abiding citizen, is inevitable and necessary.

⁶ <http://www.corrierediragusa.it/articoli/cronache/ragusa/13078-anziano-tenta-il-suicidio-col-gas-provoca-incendio-dell-abitazine-in-via-pozzallo-e-rimane-ustionato.html>

⁷ Cf. Caritas/ Migrantes, *Immigrazione, Dossier Statistico 2010, XX Rapporto*, Pomezia, 2010, 212-220.

References

Caritas Italiana

Franco Pittau, Antonio Ricci, Alessandro Slij (eds.) 2008. *Romania, Immigrazione e lavoro in Italia, Statistiche, problemi e prospettive* [Romania, Immigration and work in Italy. Statistics, problems and perspectives.] Roma: Edizioni Idos.

Confedereația Caritas România și Caritas Italiana

Românii din Italia, între respingere și acceptare. [Romanians in Italy, between Rejection and Acceptance] 2010, Roma: Editura Idos.

Caritas/Migrantes

Immigrazione, Dossier Statistico 2009, XIX Rapporto. [Immigration, Statistic Dossier 2009, XX Report], 2009, Pomezia: Edizioni Idos; *Immigrazione, Dossier Statistico 2010, XX Rapporto.* [Immigration, Statistic Dossier 2010, XX Report], 2010, Pomezia: Edizioni Idos.

Caritas di Roma

Osservatorio romano sulle migrazioni, Quarto Rapporto 2007. [Roman Observatory on Migrations, Fourth Report 2007]. 2008, Roma: Edizioni Idos

Motta, Giovanna and Ricci, Antonio. 2011. *Emigrazione e società.* [Emigration and Society]. Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura

Newspapers

La Repubblica, 10. 12. 2007;

Il Manifesto, 16. 02. 2009;

Corriere della Sera, 17. 02. 2009;

Il Giornale, 17. 02. 2009;

La Repubblica, 18. 02. 2009;

La Repubblica, 25. 03. 2009;

Il Messaggero, 25. 03. 2009;

Corriere della Sera, 25. 03. 2009

Web sources

http://www.corriere.it/cronache/07_novembre_01/rom_accusato_omicidio.shtml

http://www.officinagenitori.org/php/content_art.php?id_content=2345

<http://www.tgcom.mediaset.it/cronaca/articoli/articolo443311.shtml>

<http://www.tgcom.mediaset.it/cronaca/articoli/articolo462159.shtml>

<http://www.tgcom.mediaset.it/cronaca/articoli/articolo445156.shtml>

<http://www.dissapore.com/forum/filippo-la-mantia-non-assume-karol-racz-giusto-o-sbagliato/>

http://www.lavitapubblica.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=222:i-romeni-in-italia&catid=35:internazionale&Itemid=56

<http://geniv.forumcommunity.net/?t=25758868>

http://www.funize.com/Il_Messaggero/2009/3/25

http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2009/marzo/25/spettacolo_diventa_risarcimento_co_9_090325027.shtml

<http://www.corrierediragusa.it/articoli/cronache/ragusa/13078-anziano-tenta-il-suicidio-col-gas-provoca-incendio-dell-abitazine-in-via-pozzallo-e-rimane-ustionato.html>

<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2011/04/10/difende-il-figlio-e-il-branco-lo-uccide-a-calci-e-pugni/103492/>