

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN TRANSFORMING THE LIVING STANDARDS OF ROMA FAMILIES IN ROMA COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA

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**ABSTRACT: The Role of the Church in Transforming the Living Standards of Roma Families within Roma Communities in Romania.**

This article examines the role of Evangelical churches in transforming the living standards of Roma families within Roma communities in Romania. Informed by various personal experiences in the Roma communities, this study aims to understand the growing transformational phenomenon of Evangelical churches among Roma ethnic groups, which has been noticeably unfolding over the past three decades.

Using ethnographic qualitative research methods, we focus on two Evangelical churches located in the southern region of Romania, to identify their impact on the transformation of living standards for Roma families. Specifically, we aim to answer the question of how the local church contributes to the change of lifestyle for Roma families.

We explore key areas of transformation such as the lessening and eliminating of violent family situations, increased interest in education, improved living standards, and growing self-esteem of Roma women in their families and communities.

By examining the ways in which Evangelical churches have played a key role in transforming the lives of marginalized communities, our research provides insights for further policy development and highlights the importance of community-led initiatives in achieving social change.

**Keywords:** *Roma, family, education, women, transformation, evangelical, Romania.*

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## Introduction

In the context of the failure of several social programs for Roma integration, a failure highlighted by the media<sup>1</sup> as well as by the Roma researcher Iulius Rostaș<sup>2</sup>, this study appeared as a result of the observation that poverty reduction policies did not yield the expected results.

Thus, one of the motivations underlying the interest for this research was the desire to understand how some evangelical churches influenced the social transformation in Roma communities in southern and eastern Romania after 1990, as well as to assess to what extent the results obtained can be used as recommendations for other similar communities in Romania.

Despite the negative stereotypes encountered about Roma ethnics, we believed that qualitative research would help us understand why Roma communities that have evangelical churches in their midst present certain social transformations.

This article represents a part of the results and conclusions of the author's ethnographic research, using sociological tools specific to the ethnographic research method to understand the role of these churches in the mentioned communities. Evangelical churches from two Roma communities located in the southern part of Romania, in the village of Pădureni, Giurgiu County, and in the town of Boldești-Scăeni, Prahova county, were used as a case study for this article.

### 1. Definition of terms

#### What is meant by *transformation*?

An important aspect observed in literature research and ethnographic research is that the terms "transformation", "change", "social change", "mentality change" or even "emancipation" are used interchangeably by different authors or respondents during the research.

To interpret the data, other perspectives of religious transformation were analysed in which church or religion had an impact on the transformation of those communities. For example, researchers in the Balkans have shown that the introduction of religion in schools attended by Roma chil-

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1 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiEhIWvsS6o&ab\\_channel=Inpremiera](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiEhIWvsS6o&ab_channel=Inpremiera), accessed March 1, 2020.

2 Iulius Rostaș, *A Sisyphus Work: Why European Roma Policies Fail*, Bucharest, 2020.

dren, as well as their participation in Sunday schools in evangelical churches, has produced social changes in their families: in Macedonia, where the majority of the Roma population is Muslim, Ružica Cacanaska observes that faithful Roma, once converted to the minority religious community, leave their old way of life<sup>3</sup>. The Islamic Community of Macedonia considers Roma families to be a “burden” for the majority population. Roma evangelization is often followed by humanitarian aid and health education, making Roma conversion the crucial moment for the recognition of minority Christian communities. The Roma, with this transfer to minority Christian communities, are completely changing their “former lives”. *Romas are becoming new people, with a new value system and a new religious matrix*<sup>4</sup>.

Another example from the Balkan area appears in a study conducted in Slovakia by Viktoria Soltesova and Matus Pleva<sup>5</sup> within the Council of Evangelical Churches (the Council being composed of the Apostolic Church, the Church of the Baptist Union, Christians according to the Gospel, the United Methodist Church and the Christian Reformed Church). Here a dynamic of values was observed between groups of children who participate in religious education and those who do not. The research dealt with the issue of developing religiosity as part of value orientation and focused especially on children involved in evangelical religious education. Slovak researchers have noted that one of the important tasks of religious education taught in both elementary schools and evangelical churches is to develop the personal values of Roma children<sup>6</sup>.

### **What is meant by *evangelical church*?**

Another aspect that requires special attention is the Church. Both with regard to the institution of the Church, the local Church, and the Church in the biblical sense – the Body of Christ, we believe that a special

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3 Ružica Cacanaska, “Chances for change in roma confessional matrix in the Republic of Macedonia”, in *Evangelization, Conversion, Proselytism*, Yugoslav society for the scientific study of Religion, KOMREN Sociological Encounter, Punta, Niš, 2004, p.81.

4 Ružica Cacanaska, *op cit*, 17, p.86.

5 Viktoria Soltesova & Matus PLEVA, “The Influence of Religious Education on the Religiosity of Roma Children in Slovakia”, in *The official journal of the Religious Education Association*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2020.1816248>, accessed 28.02.2021.

6 Viktoria Soltesova & Matus Pleva, “The Influence of Religious Education on the Religiosity of Roma Children in Slovakia”, in *The official journal of the Religious Education Association*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2020.1816248>, accessed 28.02.2021.

approach is necessary. This special attention is necessary because of the historical relationship between the Orthodox Church and Roma communities and to identify the relationship of local evangelical churches where the majority is represented by Roma ethnics.

Even though Roma are Romanian citizens and have lived in Romania for eight centuries, we can still notice specific peculiarities of these churches that we want to analyse carefully. Bănică Mirel avoids using the terms movement, worship or church, preferring churches or religious groups and presents some characteristics of Pentecostal churches observed by him in France<sup>7</sup>. Does the Romanian researcher observe that the public presence of the Church is not a critical theoretical instrument of public correction, but an extended hand of God in Roma communities?

### Methodology

Although apparently, ecclesiology and ethnography appear to be “two disciplines from different worlds”,<sup>8</sup> British professor Paul S. Fiddes notes that ecclesiology can be deductive in method, whereas ethnography is fundamentally inductive; thus, the author reconciles the two sciences by noting that both use inductive methods<sup>9</sup>. Fiddes includes within ethnography social investigation methods such as observation, interview, analysis of how to speak in the speech of a group and survey, which are part of qualitative and quantitative research. They can bring ethnography and ecclesiology together to study the life of the church and its members<sup>10</sup>.

Due to the multidisciplinary character of the present research, which is at the intersection of ethnography and theology, based on Paul Fiddes' considerations, to obtain eloquent results from this academic approach, qualitative research and its specific tools were chosen. Thus, between September 15 and December 25, 2022, several visits were made to two evangelical Roma communities, the first being the Christ the Saviour Baptist Church (BBIM) in Pădureni Village, Giurgiu County, and the second, the Evangelical Christian Church Eben-Ezer (BCDEEE) in Boldești-Scăeni, Prahova County.

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7 Mirel Bănică, “Bafta, Devla and Haramul: studies on Roma culture and religion”, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 2019, pp.368-369.

8 Paul Fiddes, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography,” in WARD, Pete (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; First Edition, 2012, p.13

9 Paul Fiddes, *op. cit.*, p.13.

10 Paul Fiddes, *op. cit.*, pp.16-17.

In order to achieve the proposed goal, focus groups with semi-structured interviews were organized, life stories were obtained, and participatory observation sheets were made. The focus groups were compiled based on a sample of 24 people selected and distributed based on demographic characteristics, from different cults and ages: men and women aged between 13 and 75. In order to better understand the status of women among Roma communities, a gender focus group consisting of women aged between 25 and 47 was organized separately. Mixed groups of adults were attended by women and men aged 28 to 75 years. The objective of these study visits being a more complete picture of the role of the church in transforming Roma families, structured interviews were conducted with different people outside the religious community to which they belong, namely professionals from the medical and school environment and officials from the Buturugeni commune City Hall, which represents the Territorial Administrative Unit of Pădureni village and from the Boldești-Scaieni City Hall.

To investigate the possible influence of BBIM and BCWEEE on said communities regarding public hygiene matters, as well as how it collaborated with officials during the pandemic or other community health issues, two structured interviews were conducted with the human dispensary doctor and the nurse from the Buturugeni Permanence Medical Center.

Another method used on this occasion, also specific to ethnographic research, was the participatory observation sheet. The author of the study has been familiar with the community of Pădureni since 2007 and has carefully monitored the peculiarities found in residents' homes and during religious programs.

### **Data Interpretation**

In the process of interpreting the data obtained, the works of Cristian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, American theologians, and specialists in the field of social ethics, were considered. They believe that ethnography is not just a reporting of facts that the researcher discovers by researching "what is,"<sup>11</sup> through ethnographic research a much more complex perspective can be brought on what these facts mean in the lives of people in the community.

Following the recommendations made by Cristian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, the researcher of this approach tried to determine if

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11 Cristian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Cristian theology and Ethics*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011, p. 197.

there are Roma communities that have been transformed and how the local church has contributed to this transformation. To obtain adequate answers to the research question, a series of thematic codes have been created that answer the broader research question within the author's doctoral thesis, codes obtained with the help of the Nvivo software program.

### **1.1. The Social Context of the Emergence of Evangelical Christianity in the Researched Communities**

Given that the NVivo research software revealed the importance of the past as an essential element of the study, we consider that we must first pay special attention to the history of the two localities. This will help us compare with the results obtained.

#### **1.1. Conditions of Pădureni village before 1990**

Through ethnographic research, it was discovered that between 1980-1990, the population of the Roma community faced great problems of poverty, crime, health, domestic violence, and school dropout, which we will briefly list below.

##### **1.1.1. Infant mortality**

The nurse from the Permanent Medical Center has known the Roma community in Pădureni since 1970. The respondent mentioned that during that period of time, some houses were covered with plastic, they were without utilities: they had no electricity, running water and no sewerage. Mothers did not have financial resources to raise and educate their children, which is why multiple cases of infant mortality were identified in Pădureni village between 1970 and 2000. Other reasons corroborated were lack of electricity and heat in homes, with families unable to afford to heat their homes in winter due to lack of money.

##### **1.1.2. Early school leaving of Roma children**

Another problem mentioned by the Buturugeni school principal was early school leaving. The early school leaving rate in Pădureni village ranged from 10 to 14 years, which later deprived young people of the opportunity to find a job.

The situation in the village found in the National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for 2022-2027, published in the Offi-

cial Gazette<sup>12</sup>, shows, based on data from 2016, that almost 2/3 of young Roma are not in the education system or other form of education and, because of this absenteeism, they are not on the labour market either. FRA statistics from<sup>13</sup> 2016 indicate that around 8 out of 10 Roma children left school early. This situation was identified in the Roma community in Pădureni before 2015. The Pastor of Pastor BBIM attributed absenteeism or early school leaving to high poverty rate, social exclusion, poor housing conditions, discrimination, and institutional racism.

### **1.1.3. The precarious situation of Roma women**

In addition to leaving school, in the semi-structured interview, which involved women from the community, it was discovered that in their families, in childhood, girls were subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Between 1990 and 2015, Roma girls witnessed domestic violence caused by alcoholism and gambling.

During interviews conducted in Pădureni village, women confirmed that many of them were illiterate or, even if they knew the letters, could not read.

From the life history of the pastor from BBIM, I understood that the emergence of evangelical Christianity in Pădureni took place in 1993, when about ten people initially converted to the Evangelical Church Romania (BER). Twelve years after his conversion, in 2005, the pastor, along with other believers, decided to be baptized. He, his family and some believers gathered in the house, and later, in 2005, the Baptist Church in Pădureni was founded.

## **1.2. Research of the Roma community in Boldești-Scăeni, Prahova County**

### **1.2.1. Peculiarities of Boldești-Scăeni**

The second community proposed for research was the one in the town of Boldești-Scăeni, which is in Prahova County, 11 km from Ploiești. It is a city “with great history”<sup>14</sup> as mentioned in a local publication.

12 Government Decision nr. 1491/2022 for the approval of the National Strategy on Social Inclusion of Homeless People for 2022-2027 and the Action Plan for 2022-2027.

13 FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights), *Second survey on minorities and discrimination in the European Union: Roma – selected results*, [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings\\_ro.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_ro.pdf), accessed 10 December 2022.

14 [http://pbs.infoprimarie.ro/files/28081\\_Ziar.pdf](http://pbs.infoprimarie.ro/files/28081_Ziar.pdf) accessed January 31, 2023.

The first mentions date back to the time of Michael the Brave, in 1591. The two areas, Boldești and Scăeni, have formed this administrative unit since 1968. The Boldesti Extraction Scaffolding transformed the village into a city between 1930 and 1950, producing 20% of the country's oil production. The publication presents the fact that after 1989 the city of Boldești-Scăeni became a "bedroom town" for the few inhabitants, who no longer had any work. At least eight factories, plants and the oil rig have closed since 1989.

The population of the city is about 11,500 inhabitants and, according to the local deputy mayor, in Boldești-Scăeni, there are 10% Roma distributed in three different communities. During the interview with the medical mediator and local councillor for Roma issues, it was mentioned that there is still "emancipated" ethnics in the locality who do not live in Roma communities.

### **1.2.2. The situation of Roma before the establishment of the EUEBD**

In 2007, the year when the current elder of the church came to the area where BCDEEE now exists, local media<sup>15</sup> noticed the lack of interest of Roma to engage in any of the services offered by the local government. Another characteristic mentioned by those involved in the interviews was almost total school dropout after primary school, crime expressed in thefts, especially of abandoned oil wells, domestic violence, poverty, lack of running water, electricity, sewerage and basic hygienic norms.

The Roma elder originally lived in another area of the city. In 1990 he converted, becoming a member of the city's Christian Evangelical Church (CDE). In 2007 he moved with his family to the "land forgotten by time", as the suburb of Boldesti is called, where one of the Roma communities in the locality is located. In this area the establishment of the Christian Evangelical Church "Eben-Ezer" was begun. The activities initially took place in an unsanitary and cold space of 16 square meters, where several dozen children gathered. They were later encouraged to go to school, but refused because "they didn't have a sandwich," the church elder said.

Trying to understand whether the lack of a break package was the main reason for absenteeism, we analysed semi-structured interviews given

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<sup>15</sup> <https://ziarulprahova.ro/2007/02/romii-din-boldesti-scaeni-fug-de-meserie/> of February 27, 2007, accessed January 31, 2023.



by male converts and young people (the latter represented the first generation of college graduates). They mentioned that absenteeism and school dropout were the consequence of several factors: poverty (children had nothing to wear), shame (the fact that during recess they did not have a package of food, like other children), but also the mentality according to which school, especially high school or college, could not be a place where Roma can or should go.

The absence of “sandwich” during the break for Roma children in Boldesti makes sense for Roma because they have the “honor-shame culture” specific to Eastern culture. This sentiment, which is also found in the field of missiology, is first mentioned in the Bible, after original sin. The feeling of shame may be hard for Romanians or those who come from cultural spectrums such as “guilt versus innocence” or “fear versus power” to understand<sup>16</sup>. Both men between the ages of 30 and 40, as well as those in their 20s or recent graduates recalled the times when they searched their colleagues’ desks during breaks or at the end of classes for “an half of an apple or the rest of a sandwich”.

Another prevalent theme in this research was the *interest of Roma children in education*. The rate of absenteeism and school dropout among Roma children in Boldești-Scăeni, until 2007, was very high. The elder of BCDEEE Church mentioned in the movie *Rum Soul*<sup>17</sup> that in the community “there were 10-year-old children who did not go to kindergarten or school. They couldn’t read or write...”

Like the nomadic Roma (*travellers*) in Britain, who did not believe that a university library could be a place where Roma could or would be allowed to go, being reserved only for *gadjo*<sup>18</sup>, Roma families in the researched communities did not have the understanding that school could be the place where their children could receive education.

The consequences of dropping out of school from the perspective of church leaders were primarily revealed by the impossibility of obtaining an acceptable job. In this regard, the elder of the church said:

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16 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Baker Academic, 1986.

17 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiEhlWvsS6o&ab\\_channel=Inpremiera](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiEhlWvsS6o&ab_channel=Inpremiera), accessed January 10, 2023.

18 In the Romani language, *gadjo* is a term to identify anyone who is not Roma.

...“If you don't have work, you start stealing and everything from there is gone: from school. We didn't realize this: that in fact the gypsies in Boldești-Scăeni needed two types of school: the normal school, which belongs to normal education, and the school of God, which belongs to religious education.”

Other reasons for dropping out mentioned by respondents were poverty, poor housing conditions, discrimination, and institutional racism. Both young respondents and parents mentioned that they searched for the remnants of their classmates' packages, and these represented the children's daily meals. Obviously, this search in colleagues' desks produced shame. Shame is a powerful influence on dropping out of school.

## 2. The Transformation Process of the Researched Communities

### 2.1. Transforming the living environment

The topic of *raising living standards* was another crucial element (which) emerged from the analysis of this research. Both Roma members of the community, as well as Romanians living with them and local officials, noted a change in the standard of living within Roma families. One of the signals of these changes is the increase in economic level, changing the relationship between family members and changing the condition of women in the Roma community.

Socially, several changes have been identified. One of the relevant examples of this change is that people no longer engage in the same morals (e.g. theft and gambling), but have other aspirations related to education, family and social relationships.

A considerable change can be seen in terms of residence. Before the conversion of Roma, their houses were unsanitary, without utilities, without basic heating possibilities. During the research, we could see that within the Roma community in Pădureni, in 2010, there were only a few houses that had a bathroom and toilet. Currently, visiting Roma families, who are members of BBIM, it was possible to confirm what the pastor of the church mentioned: “all members of the Roma community who go to church, have a bathroom and central heating”. And within the community of Boldesti, people are proud to talk about their homes and their living conditions that are much better, and they can even help renovate the homes of other Roma and even Romanians.

Trying to understand the factors that led to the change of living environment, we found that men have well-paid jobs that allow them to change, renovate or even build new houses. According to the answers provided by those interviewed, there are still members in the Roma community who do not come to church, but they are still poor and face financial problems, juvenile delinquency, gambling, alcoholism, or domestic violence.

The family doctor mentioned in the interview that he noticed another role of the church in the Roma community in Pădureni: an improvement not only in living standards, but also in the fact that in the evangelical Roma community there are no problems of anxiety or depression. When asked how he explains this, he explained that due to the constant socialization within the evangelical community, they help each other, relate, and receive the right emotional support. This situation is not found in Romanian communities and among Roma who do not attend BBIM.

## **2.2. Transforming hygiene conditions in evangelical Roma families**

Roma families' living conditions were characterised by violence and poverty: little financial income from undeclared work was spent on drinking and gambling. Before the conversion of some members of the investigated communities to one of the two evangelical denominations, some of the houses of the people in the two communities were without the most basic hygiene or heat conditions, were made of plastic and not thermally insulated.

With the conversion of some members of the community in Pădureni, the relationship between the Roma community and the Permanent Medical Center in Buturugeni developed around 2007, when family doctors noticed a major problem in the Roma community: the tuberculosis and hepatitis epidemics. The Roma did not trust the medical staff who had to come and disinfect the wells and vaccinate the population. Under these circumstances, because the head of BBIM was respected and enjoyed the trust of the members of the community to which he belonged, he became the mediator between the Permanent Medical Center in Buturugeni and the Roma community in Pădureni. In this way, the family doctor was able to take all the necessary steps for this medical disinfection and vaccination approach, and the church building became the meeting and discussion place.

The change in living standards has brought with it an increase in the level of hygiene in Roma homes. These were reported, for example, dur-

ing the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, BBIM cooperated with officials and tried to comply with the imposed restrictions. The school principal asked the church to help the school with masks and BBMI thus became a support point for the society, providing over 20,000 masks and a disinfection tunnel for the school and for the dispensary in Buturugeni. Respecting the conditions of hygiene and social distance, the elder of the church mentioned that no known case of Covid-19 was registered among BCDEEE member Roma families.

In the past, Roma in the investigated communities were ashamed to invite foreigners into their homes. The researcher spent many summers in social projects in the village of Pădureni, sleeping in tents, using toilets and improvised showers. Now, evangelical Roma are happy to welcome guests and the first thing the researcher experienced in Pădureni, visiting Roma houses, was a tour of the house. People are proud to flaunt their living rooms with modern TVs, equipped bathrooms, or paved courtyards. And the nurse, who has known the Roma community in Pădureni since 1970, mentioned: "The gypsies, sir, are now giving lessons to Romanians! Well, see what houses the gypsies have and what cleanliness they have in the houses"!

### **2.3. The disappearance of domestic violence**

Respondents from Pădureni and Boldești mentioned that a high degree of domestic violence had been noted in the past. Due to poverty and alcoholism, quarrels and domestic aggression were normal experiences in Roma homes. In the focus group from Pădureni and Boldești, both men and women mentioned that women married very young, some at 14 or 15 years old, were assaulted and beaten by their men, exposed to verbal and sexual abuse. Children witnessed quarrels and fights between parents and, not infrequently, children were involved in these physical aggressions.

### **2.4. Changing the status of women in the evangelical Roma community**

*The status of women* in Roma communities is another theme that was revealed by NVivo. In discussion with the women from Pădureni and Boldești-Scăeni, they spoke with regret about the difficult situations they went through. In the mixed focus group, one of the participants in the interview mentioned that, in the Roma mentality, if they had girls, they should not go to school, so as not to be stolen. Shortly after their

withdrawal from school, “they were married, and the girl was to become a servant.” The respondent referred to the fact that girls, until the advent of the evangelical church, were an inferior social category, being a source of work for the in-laws’ homes. Thus, women, being married early, became cheap labour. Because of this, the share of illiteracy was higher among women.

Not only poverty or fear of girls’ theft produced abandonment, but also the Roma mentality or perspective towards school education. One of the respondents mentioned in this regard that “you think you can’t learn school and that it’s not your place at school and that the woman, the gypsy, should not go to high school because in high school she might meet who knows what Romanians and Romanians make fun of her”. The girls were thus married quickly so as not to be stolen or become victims of rape.

Aggression towards women was another phenomenon mentioned in both the gender focus group and the mixed one. The men from Pădureni and Boldești remember with regret and shame the moments when they beat their wives. The women, for their part, spoke about the situation in their families today, noting that “since our men repented, we have not been beaten, or even cursed. If he tries to raise his voice to me, I say: don’t snap at me, I’m going to the Shepherd!” Their men, compared to their parents, bring money into the house, support families, are reliable men who protect them, and they now feel respected by their husbands. Within the church, some women who would have once fallen into the category of illiteracy and functional illiteracy have overcome this situation, learning to read out of a sincere desire to read the Bible.

### **2.5. Increasing children’s interest in education**

In the researched communities, an acute lack of school education was observed after 1990, due to several factors. For example, in Boldești-Scăeni, when BCEE was founded, none of the children could read or write and dropped out of school in primary school. In Pădureni the situation was similar, the school director and the pastor of the church mentioning that between 1990 and 2005 girls dropped out of school as early as primary school, and boys went to school for at most eight years. The reasons for dropping out of school were poverty, discrimination, lack of interest in education and the Roma mentality, according to which Gypsies cannot and should not attend school and school is not a place where Roma should go.

Following the structured interview with the principal of the school in Pădureni, it was found that, although 40-50% of the students in the General School in Pădureni – where classes work from the first to the eighth grade – are Roma, school dropout has disappeared. The school principal and pastor BBIM, as well as the interviewed teenagers, offered a different perspective than the one in which Roma children found themselves in the village between 2000-2015 and which we find at national level. The school director mentioned that since 2013, both among boys and girls, until the age of 14, stay in school until the eighth grade, there is no school dropout in the educational institution in Pădureni.

In the generation of middle school students, who graduated in 2022, the entire staff group of 15 eighth grade graduates continued their studies, going on to a high school and some to a vocational school. For the first time in the history of the Roma community in Pădureni there is a high school graduate who continued her studies and is now a student at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest. The number of high school graduates as well as the number of high school graduates with baccalaureate increased. One aspect mentioned by the principal of the General School in Pădureni was that there is no longer a child in Pădureni who does not finish twelve grades at the high schools in the area or in Bucharest. Another thing I understood from the school and church management is that the winning students of the first to eighth grades of the school in Pădureni are Roma children.

In an attempt to identify the factors that led to the interest of Roma in Pădureni for education, the principal of the General School in Pădureni was asked what he noticed about this situation and mentioned two aspects: the fact that families are educated at church to encourage their children to go to school, and the help of the school after school <sup>19</sup>program offered by the Providența Foundation in Bucharest. Within this program of the Providența Foundation (an initiative of Providența Baptist Church in Bucharest) 280 children, 220 parents and 33 teachers<sup>20</sup> benefited from hot meals, educational tutoring activities, material support, social counselling, and parental education.

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19 Buturugeni commune: educational centers, <https://www.comunabuturugeni.ro/centre-de-invataman/>.

20 <https://www.unitedway.ro/padureni/>, accessed March 15, 2023.

Wanting to understand the extent of Roma interest in education, we asked the BBIM pastor and the school principal how many of these children go to BBIM. The answer of those interviewed was that “they all go to church and are part of the children’s or youth groups of the church”. In the semi-structured interview conducted in the community, all teenagers who come to church and are students between the ages of thirteen and eighteen are high school students or preparing to enter high school.

In Boldești-Scăeni, to meet the problems, BCDEEE initially tried to solve the problem by sending two faithful women every day, Monday to Thursday, with a basket of sandwiches and asked the City Hall for the school minibus to come to the asphalt-free area where the Roma community is.

Lack of funds and the need to recover educational deficiencies led BCDEEE to open an *afterschool* for community children. In this project, children could do their homework and eat.

The biblical messages, both in the formal settings of the services and in the personal discussions of the BCDEEE Elder, included phrases such as: “why do you want your children to work in green spaces” or “the children of the Lord are the head, not the tail (*Bible, Deuteronomy 28:13*)”. These Bible verses were constantly mentioned in interviews with members of the evangelical community in Boldești-Scăeni: “we do not want our children to work in green spaces and ditches” (the elder refers to the clogged ditches or sewers of the city, where Roma are called to clean, and to which the deputy mayor of the city also referred).

Another factor that influenced the change in mentality of Roma families was the personal example of the family. Since the BCDEEE leader moved to the Roma community, his children were the first to graduate from different faculties, are employed as doctors, teachers or work in the IT field.

Similar to the situation in Pădureni, an important role in developing interest in school in Boldești-Scăeni are the two afterschool projects, where over 80 Roma children are educated.

As mentioned earlier, it was noticed that the mentality of the nomadic Roma in Great Britain, also called *travellers*,<sup>21</sup> who believed that the

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21 Yaron Matras, *Romani in Britain, The Afterlife of a Language*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 162

school was an institution for *gadjo*, is also found in the Roma in Boldesti. This justifies the confusion of one of the children who once asked the elder, “Do you want us all to become doctors?” The elder of the church noted that the child became the first law school graduate in the “forgotten land” community.

## Conclusions

Following the ethnographic results of this research, we can conclude that institutional efforts of national and international forums have failed to increase the educational level among Roma communities. But in Roma communities where the local church and its leader work closely with educational institutions, the police, or medical centers, there is a social, economic, and family transformation. The interest in education observed among evangelical Roma *travellers* in the UK is found in Roma communities in the Balkans and Romania. In Boldesti we can observe a redefinition of the identity of the Roma family, both the ethnic one, where the family is important, and the human one, where the individual is aware of the new perspectives.

Following the 2011 census, Romania was considered the country with the most Roma in Europe,<sup>22</sup> a total of 621,573 people. Of these, 71,262 declared themselves Pentecostals (representing 11.48%), 8,815 Baptists, 6,793 Seventh-day Adventists, 2,973 declared themselves evangelical Christians and 871 are part of the Romanian Evangelical Church (BER). The 474,603 Roma declared Orthodox represented 76.35% of the total number of people covered by the census. Although according to the provisional data<sup>23</sup> of the 2022 census the Roma population registered a lower share compared to previous censuses, nevertheless the Council of Europe considers that there are 1.85 million Roma in Romania, (8.32%).<sup>24</sup> Taking

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22 In the 2011 census, 621,573 Roma were enumerated, of these, 474,603 declared themselves Orthodox, <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-2/>, accessed on 8 March 2021, 18:00

23 [https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com\\_presa/com\\_pdf/rpl2021\\_date\\_provizorii\\_profil\\_teritorial\\_ian\\_2023](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/rpl2021_date_provizorii_profil_teritorial_ian_2023).

24 [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu-country/romania\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu-country/romania_en)



into account these statistics, we can conclude that evangelical Roma are much more open to acknowledging their ethnic identity.

This identity is encouraged with the help of the local ruler who is no longer perceived in the traditional sense of *bulibasha*, but as a person who offers hope for a new ethics and spiritual identity.

American theologian and ethicist James Wm. McClendon argues that “the hope of ethics, for both secular and religious environments, lies in the recovery of what might also be called ethics of character.”<sup>25</sup> By “ethical characters,” the author refers to “the necessity of a theology of the person.” These leaders are assimilated by the entire community, even if some do not adhere to the “new religion”. Families are transformed, and people in new communities are redefining themselves by becoming aware of new skills and possibilities that are taking shape, being guided by church leaders.

The difference between some activists and leaders of Roma churches is that they renounce victimization. It is a model proposed by one of the largest Roma activists in Romania – Nicolae Gheorghe, who believed that “the role of Roma opinion formers is to suggest new approaches, focusing on integration rather than victimization”<sup>26</sup>.

Things are similar in Pădureni: the message of the church and, implicitly, of the pastor, was not so much an emphasis on education, but the social, economic, educational, and family results were similar to those in Boldesti.

BBIM did not exclude the educational or social emphasis of involvement in society, but the pastor’s orientation was more emphasized on daily church prayer, Bible study, and evangelism. Social paperwork, building houses for the poorest families in the community, paying for school subscriptions for high school students were secondary. Perhaps this is the reason why for now there are few people who, after graduating from high school, opt for continuing their studies. It is possible that the current generation of students wants to continue their studies and, like those in Boldesti, to use their jobs in their native community.

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25 James Wm. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, Wipf and Stock, 2002.

26 Andras Biro, “The Price of Roma Integration”, in *From Victimization to Citizen Conscience: The Path for Roma Integration*, editor Will Guy, 2011, pp.31-76.

We can conclude that the two churches in the communities researched so far represent a reference factor in the process of social transformation of Roma families in these communities. Because there are no accepted examples of ethics and leadership in Roma communities, except in traditional communities, for example those of the Gabors in Transylvania, pastors are becoming a modern form of *bulibash*. One wonders to what extent the church could be considered a modern form of *gypsy stabor* to judge and guide the young families in these communities.

It was observed that another aspect of interest in education, in the case of illiterate or functionally illiterate parishioners, was their desire to read the Bible. Within the church, people regained their self-esteem and discovered a new family identity. Respondents from different communities (one of them being a medical professional) noted that among evangelical Roma communities there are no problems of anxiety or depression. The status of women within the family and the community has changed: even though “arranged” marriages between parents are still registered, which is a common practice in the Roma environment, early marriages have disappeared, girls in the community go to high school, women are no longer physically or verbally abused and have a point of view regarding family savings or how money is spent.

A significant aspect observed in the evangelical Roma community is that the Roma regain their God-given human dignity at creation, being created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). With the regaining of the new spiritual identity, human identity acquires the original normal values offered by God.

One of the most relevant examples is the condition of women in society. Women in the evangelical Roma community are no longer cheap labour, they become persons with the right to opinion in the church and with the right to spiritual education of the Roma community. In these circumstances, it was noted that among Roma girls’ early marriages disappeared and interest in high school and even university education increased. In this way, we can talk about a regaining of human dignity<sup>27</sup> and a paradigm shift in the condition of women in society.

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27 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Plea for Human Dignity”, *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, 2016, 1, pp. 29-43.

Under these circumstances, we can see a redefinition of the church and its objectives. It no longer has an auxiliary role in society, but, as we see in history,<sup>28</sup> it is the one that gives purpose to women, protects children and establishes reference schools and medical institutions that have endured throughout the ages.

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