

# A feminist perspective on the Romanian Governmental Strategy for Roma Inclusion

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**Abstract:** *In this paper I investigate how the gender dimension is configured in existing public policies regarding the Roma minority. For this purpose, I analyze from a feminist perspective The Strategy of the Romanian Government for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority for the period 2012-2020. The main question of the present paper is: How can Romanian and European policies increase the social inclusion of Roma women and improve their socio-economic status? In the first part of the paper, I argue why 'gender matters' and why public policies have an important impact on the status of men and women. Next, I draw attention to the fact that gender awareness has appeared in Romanian policies primarily because of pressure from European institutions. Therefore, feminist speech and the values of gender equality have not yet been internalized by Romanian policy makers. The Government's Strategy reflects how state institutions value men and women differently inside Roma communities and how power is unequally distributed between the two genders. For the purpose of this paper, I examine whether the interests of Roma women in Romania are represented in each one of the Strategy's directions for action: education, employment, health, housing, culture and social infrastructure. This analysis sheds light on the inability of the Romanian state to account for gender issues, particularly ones faced by Roma women.*

**Keywords:** Roma, gender, intersectionality, public policies, inclusion, multiculturalism

## *Introduction*

In recent years, the lack of inclusion of the Roma population has become more and more visible in the European public space, while the necessity for action and public policies has become more urgent.

In this context, the countries having a sizeable Roma minority population are taking different measures in order to facilitate the process of Roma social inclusion. Nevertheless, several public policies have been implemented over the last ten years in order

to increase the socio-economic status of the Roma minority. During this time, legislation to defend their basic rights has also been passed.

Specifically in the case of Roma women in Romania, the multiple forms of discrimination and social exclusion are determined by the fact that they are members of a marginalized ethnic minority and by the fact that they live in patriarchal communities. First, they are marginalized within the majority group (the Romanian society) due to their ethnic background. Second, they are marginalized by their own community due to their gender. The concept of intersectionality helps the analysis of multiple and complex inequalities and facilitates an understanding

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**Irina Ilisei**

drd. SNSPA

(irinailisei@yahoo.com)

of the "inequalities and discrimination that members of certain communities face"<sup>3</sup>. For the scope of the present paper, the concept of intersectionality broadens the possibilities of considering the specificities of and the diversity among Roma women: "on the intersection between gender and ethnicity, Roma women detach as a category with major risk of discrimination in the majority of the spheres of life"<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it is important to analyze how authorities manage to take into account the interplay between gender and ethnicity and also to consider the gender dimension when adopting policies for Roma inclusion.

According to research by the Open Society Institute, Roma women "constitute the most deprived category of the Romanian population due to the discrimination and social exclusion they experience as a result of the intersection of race, gender, and class"<sup>5</sup>. However, in many instances Romanian policies and legislation have ignored the gender dimension of the Roma minority and have not provided the proper instruments to create a non-discriminatory and equitable framework for Roma women and Roma communities<sup>6</sup>.

### ***Gender in Public Policies concerning Roma minority***

In this section, I will focus on how the gender dimension is configured in existing public policies regarding the Roma minority. The main question of this paper is: How can Romanian and European policies increase the inclusion of Roma women and improve their socio-economic status? In order to answer this question, I will analyze from a feminist perspective the Strategy of the Government of Romania for the inclusion of the Romanian citizens belonging to Roma minority for the period 2012-2020.

Starting from the premise that 'gender matters', I engage in a critique of the *Strategy* concerning the way both Roma men and women were considered in this public policy. The importance of this exercise relies on the fact that public policies have an important impact on the status of men and women and in particular upon their roles in the society: "States regulate gender relations in the labor market, polity, family and elsewhere"<sup>7</sup>. The *Strategy* reflects how gender relations in Roma communities are perceived and regulated by the Romanian state. Nevertheless, the *Strategy* reflects how state institutions value and reward men and women inside Roma communities, how power is distributed between the two genders and whether men and women benefit from equal opportunity measures concerning social inclusion.

In March 2011, the European Parliament (EP), under the Hungarian Presidency, adopted a resolution regarding the European Union Strategy for Roma integration. The resolution made by the EP came with a set of proposals and principles for a future EU strategy for Roma. One month later the European Commission presented the "European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies" in order to stress the commitment of EU member states for Roma inclusion and to guide national authorities in shaping their own strategies.

Following the directives of the European Commission, the Romanian Government began to elaborate a new strategy on Roma Inclusion. Previous strategies targeting Roma people were elaborated in 2001 and 2006. It should also be noted that the Romanian Government delayed in elaborating its new strategy for Roma, as the previous strategy for Roma had expired in 2010.

The newly published strategy for Roma inclusion shows an increased sensibility of the Romanian state for the gender dimension. "The Principle of equal opportunities and gender awareness," one of the nine general principles of *The Strategy*, refers to equality of

chances and gender awareness<sup>8</sup>. In this political policy, the Romanian Government aims to respect the principle of equal opportunity and to be sensitive to the gender dimension by raising education, qualification and employment levels for Roma women. Incorporating the gender dimension for the first time as one of the main principles of the strategy for Roma is an important step in showing an understanding of gender issues in policies targeting the Roma minority. In the previous national strategies the gender dimension was not present as one of the main principles. The policies, moreover, reflected very little gender awareness, if any at all.

But why did gender awareness appear in the latest *Governmental Strategy for Roma Inclusion*? One of the most plausible explanations is that the gender principle appeared only because of pressure from European Union authorities, "awareness of the gender dimension" being the fifth of the 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion presented by European Commission at the first Platform meeting on 24 April 2009. Accordingly, Gender appeared as one of the issues in *The Strategy* as an effect of "room-service feminism," a concept developed by Mihaela Miroiu<sup>9</sup>. This concept refers to feminist speech (by the Romanian state) that is externally inspired (especially in the context of European integration process) but stays just at the legislative level and does not arise out of any internal political program. Therefore it is relevant to analyze how the concept of "awareness of the gender dimension" is understood and adapted in the Romanian context by the policy makers at the national level.

### ***Roma women between family roles and social inclusion***

In the Romanian version of *The Strategy* that targets the Roma, the principle on gender awareness recognizes the "central role" that Roma women are playing in their families and communities, and therefore desires to increase this role: *The Strategy* "aims to increase the role of the women belonging to the Roma minority who have a central role in the families and inside the minority itself". The way that the principle on gender equality is formulated shows that the strategy aims to increase the role of women at the family and community level; however, it is not aimed at increasing their role in the society. In this way, the idea that Roma women may have a role that is also out of the frames of family or community is ignored.

Nevertheless, in the principle of *The Strategy* concerning gender awareness, it is mentioned that the role of Roma women can be emphasized by raising their level of education or occupation. Also, the role of Roma women can be strengthened by their involvement in "activities that assure the raising of the level of welfare of families, family cohesion and development of future generations". The relation between Roma women and families is strongly emphasized in this way, although there is the risk of ignoring the importance of social networks between Roma women and the majority. By considering Roma women as belonging only to their families and communities, the strategy for Roma inclusion runs the risks of excluding Roma women from other domains.

The liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin observed that most cultures are characterized by group constraints on the individual in what concerns certain life decisions<sup>10</sup>. Inside such communities, in Okin's opinion, families may impose internal restrictions that infringe on basic individual rights and liberties, restrictions that are neither visible nor contested<sup>11</sup>. Therefore the aim of the Romanian governmental strategy on Roma inclusion

to increase the role of women in the society may affect the rights and liberties of Roma as individuals. Roma women living in Romania should be treated first of all as Romanian citizens and secondly as members of the ethnic communities. Thus, the focus should be on the inclusion of Roma in Romanian society. Romania's paternalistic interpretation of the EU's proposed gender awareness is also due to the fact that gender mainstreaming has not yet taken place in Romanian policies and that Romanian policy makers have not been fully aware of the gender dimension.

Concerning gender roles in Roma families, focus group research has shown that Roma girls "are raised to be obedient and to focus on domestic activities inside the household". This domestic training is considered necessary for becoming a good wife<sup>12</sup>. The research data has shown that, as compared to the majority of women in Romania, the Roma families follow a more patriarchal model, in which the man is the breadwinner.

Comparing the results of the research among Roma women<sup>13</sup> with the results of a research representative for all women living in Romania (Gender Barometer 2010), it can be observed that among Roma women the beliefs that the man has to be the breadwinner is more widespread than among Romanian women. Thus, Roma men are the ones who have the power and are the decision makers inside most Roma families and live in more patriarchal way<sup>14</sup>.

Concerning the family relationship inside the Roma population in Romania, a significant percentage of Roma couples prefer to stay in an unmarried, consensual relationship. According to the research<sup>15</sup> 33% of Roma women in Romania are in consensual marriages. On average, Roma women enter their first marriage at the age of 17 and a half, more than 8 years younger than the average for Romanian women<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, on average they have their first child when they are 19, while the national average is 24 years old<sup>17</sup>. These data show that for Roma women family is an important social institution and that Roma women are, to a much greater extent, bounded to family life. Therefore, taking into consideration all the previous reflections, the newly published *Strategy* reinforces a number of disadvantages, as it increases rather than reduces the isolation of Roma women from the majority of Romanian society. By focusing on the role of Roma women in the family, other domains in which Roma women should be given access are disregarded, such as the education system, health care, and the labor market.

Among the many reasons why Roma women face a variety of problems, the most significant are poor education, low access to healthcare institutions, lack of information concerning birth control, early marriages, reduced opportunities in the job market and lack of civic or political participation. Another aspect that has to be considered is the coherence between, on the one hand, approaches to gender-awareness principles, and on the other, the policies implemented within different sectors of the overall strategy.

In addition, I have analyzed how the strategy produces solutions for one of the most vulnerable groups facing poverty in Romania, Roma women.<sup>18</sup> I then analyze which political measures should be taken in order to empower and socially include Roma women.

## **Education**

Education is one of the instruments that could be used in order to re-establish social equality: "good education, including university level degrees" is considered one of the two most important points that define the central tasks of any policy of social inclusion; "This

is a very demanding task, and yet it is a feasible one"<sup>19</sup>. In what concerns education, as one of the directives for action of the *Strategy*, there are no special policy proposals for Roma girls and women. Even the statistical data show an important gap in education attainment, not only between Roma women and national majority women but also between Roma women and Roma men<sup>20</sup>. *The Strategy's* principle on gender-approach awareness is thus absent in its own directive for action concerning education. This is all the more surprising, as the principle referring to gender awareness mentions the importance of education for women. What can be observed is incoherence in the strategy between the way the principles are stated and the way the principles are reflected in the different directives for action.

Education has great importance both for the empowerment of women as individuals but also for the employment of women as vectors for the development of community and families. This holds true especially in Roma communities, where women are the ones who are taking care of children and are responsible for their education. "In 76 percent of cases, the mother is the only person who maintains the relationship with the school and attends meetings organized by the school. In 15 percent of Romani families, both parents attend school meetings and the cases in which the father is the only person who maintains the relationship with the school are very rare (4 percent)"<sup>21</sup>.

Research data show that the educational attainment of a person is strongly influenced by the educational level of his or her mother. In the case of the Roma, the variable 'education of mother' has a higher impact on the educational attainment of a Roma person compared to a non-Roma person. In case of non-Roma, 79% of the subjects managed to reach a higher level of education than their respective mothers, while for Roma only 71% of the subjects reached a higher level of education<sup>22</sup>. In addition, Roma subjects who succeeded in attaining a higher level of education than the mother also managed to achieve, on average, fewer 'educational levels' than non-Roma<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, a mother's educational level has a much stronger influence on the level of educational attainment for Roma girls than for Roma boys or non-Roma girls. Only 64% of Roma girls managed to achieve a higher educational level than their mothers, compared to 77% of Roma boys and 80% of non-Roma<sup>24</sup>.

Because the low level of education of Roma mothers perpetuates poor educational attainment of Roma children, a gender approach on education is necessary to increase access to education both for the girls that are in the school system and for the women who are already out of school system. Concerning education, *The Strategy* should target especially the level of education of Roma women in order to achieve long-term higher educational achievement of the entire Roma minority.

Moreover, the policy makers of *The Strategy of Roma Inclusion* seem to be unaware of the educational gap between Roma men and Roma women. There are higher percentages of illiterate Roma women than Roma men<sup>25</sup>. Also, Roma girls are less present in formal educational institutions than boys, whether in primary, secondary or tertiary institutions<sup>26</sup>.

In the case of Roma girls, it appears a common pattern is not to complete a stage of education (primary, secondary or tertiary) once started. This pattern does not appear in the case of Roma boys, as in most cases they manage to finish a stage of education once starting it<sup>27</sup>. One reason for this situation is that education demands important costs for a family's household, and in most Roma communities there are

lower levels of education expectations for girls than for boys<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, the income variation of a household has a stronger impact on girls than on boys. A family with reduced economic possibilities will be less able to invest in a girl's education. A family living under the poverty line would have the primary goal to assure the survival of its members; only secondarily might a family have other priorities such as sending the children to school. Education may increase the status of a person and the quality of his or her life in the long run. In the short term, however, money for school supplies, extra school manuals, proper clothes, transport, and 'classroom funds' (money asked by the teachers for maintenance of the school building) are just some of the costs that parents have to cover in order to keep their children in school. But when family income is scarcely enough to provide for a decent meal, expenses for school are not affordable at all. Girls who belong to families with many children are particularly disadvantaged in these situations. In these cases the state should intervene and balance these social inequalities by offering the possibilities for both girls and boys to have the financial support to remain in educational programs. "Educational policies have to promote the access of each child to quality education, no matter his/her ethnicity or gender and socio-economic background, in order to assure a decent life"<sup>29</sup>. However, *The Strategy for Roma Inclusion* does not propose any measure to minimize the educational gap between Roma men and women.

Discrimination towards Roma women is also one of the factors limiting their access and motivation to educational achievements. Research data show that Roma women suffer from double discrimination, both as women and as Roma<sup>30</sup>. In the public space, the level of perceived discrimination toward Roma women is among the highest of any social group, matched only by handicapped women. The fear of discrimination may lead Roma women to stay inside their communities and not to enter the public space. The situation concerning discrimination in schools is not more encouraging. Roma girls perceive themselves to be much more discriminated than girls in general and even more discriminated than the Roma in general<sup>31</sup>. Perception of discrimination is one of the most important factors that decrease the motivation to attend school and is, moreover, one of the main reasons for school dropout. Discrimination in the labor market is another factor that may decrease the motivation of an individual to attend school. If one encounters job discrimination in spite of achieving a certain qualification, then even achieving that qualification might be considered unnecessary; consequently, attending school becomes even less of a priority to the individuals belonging to discriminated social groups. The discrimination towards Roma women in what concerns employment<sup>32</sup> has therefore a negative impact on their educational attainment. *The Strategy* aims to combat educational discrimination on ethnic grounds but there is no statement of a will to combat multiple forms of discrimination that arise from the intersection between gender and ethnicity.

Additionally, Roma women traditionally have very little presence in the labor market<sup>33</sup>, a fact that makes qualification and education less important inside most Roma communities, even though Roma women's low access to education increases their vulnerabilities. One possibility to improve *The Strategy* in what concerns Roma girls' access to education is to increase the role of school mediators<sup>34</sup>. School mediators have the power to show to communities and families that education is equally important for both girls and boys.

## ***Labor Market***

In what concerns the direction for action referring to the labor market, *The Strategy* takes into consideration several items necessary for Roma women to gain better access to jobs: flexible working schedule, education services and childcare. As well, *The Strategy* mentions the necessity of starting a micro-credits scheme for Roma women in order to increase entrepreneurship, job opportunities and the overall participation of Roma women in the labor market. These issues are especially important considering that the majority of Roma women are outside the official labor market (67.9% of Roma women are housewives)<sup>35</sup>.

The aim of providing greater opportunities for Roma women in order to earn their own income is indeed pertinent; however, *The Strategy* must also develop ways in which Roma women can access these opportunities. Because only 36% of the female Roma population has completed more than 8 grades<sup>36</sup>, it remains to be seen how this category of women can access micro credits or else earn the required qualifications to access the labor market. Access to the labor market has a special importance in the policies for families. Using Fraser's perspective<sup>37</sup>, Romanian society works especially on a breadwinning model, which makes women also responsible for earning income. Lack of qualification, inflexible labor schedule, and inadequate childcare systems are some reasons why Roma women are both strongly dependent on the men in their families and at a great risk of poverty.

"The existence or non-existence of a stable, paid workplace strongly influences the extension of social relations to which adult Roma are connected"<sup>38</sup> and therefore the relation between poor Roma women and the majority are almost non-existent. In most cases these relations are mediated by the leaders (Roma men), and as a result Roma women become socially isolated<sup>39</sup>.

## ***Health***

In *The Strategy*, the directive for action on health is the most comprehensive one concerning a gender approach. It has to be appreciated that the Romanian Government targets Roma women with the aim to develop campaigns for "raising awareness and informing the members of Roma communities on certain health issues"<sup>40</sup>. This is an important point, considering that Roma infant- and child-mortality is three to four times higher than the majority population, according to the Reproductive Health Survey (1999). Roma mothers are the ones responsible for caring for sick children in 75% of all cases,<sup>41</sup> and therefore health policies should have a gender dimension.

Another aim of *The Strategy* is "creating and implementing programs for health information, medical counseling and family planning, focusing on mother and child protection"<sup>42</sup>. Family planning and sex education are important issues that have to be tackled by policies, considering the abortion rate among Roma women is four times higher than for majority women: "among all the Roma women surveyed, abortion was by far the main method for controlling reproduction"<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, 36% of Roma women of a sexually active age have never used contraception<sup>44</sup>. Therefore, health policies should be made in order to facilitate access to and use of contraception methods.

Health is the only directive for action in *The Strategy* where the "uncomfortable issues" are not taboo, as it is recognized that Roma women are often placed in high-risk situa-

tions, including early marriages, domestic violence, human trafficking and high rates of abortions.

This is the first time a Romanian governmental strategy has aimed to deal with these issues. In the last improvements on the strategy on Roma, made in 2006, policymakers ignored solutions or even failed to acknowledge situations that take place inside some Roma communities, such as early marriages and teenage pregnancies<sup>45</sup>. While *The Strategy* recognizes the "taboo problems" confronting Roma women, no clear measures are proposed. The only priority that refers to all these issues states: "implementing information campaigns among Roma women concerning the risk associated to early marriage, preventing and fighting against domestic violence and trafficking of persons"<sup>46</sup>.

It has to be observed that the Romanian government aims to combat serious issues – such as early marriages, domestic violence and human trafficking – only by information campaigns. In most cases Roma women are the victims and not the perpetrator and therefore women should not be the sole targets of information campaigns. Considering that most Roma communities are patriarchal, it is not the women who take most family decisions. These campaigns should target the whole Roma community, both men and women. Secondly, campaigns alone cannot prevent such aggressions and law-breaking. State institutions should enforce the law in order to protect the citizenry.

### *Social institutions*

The fact that these severe issues are tackled only in the direction for action referring to health shows that all facets of the situation are not seen. These at-risk situations not only have a terrible effect on women's health but also are an infringement on many basic human rights. A victim of forced/early marriage, domestic violence or human trafficking will not only have her health affected but also her whole life path. State institutions responsible for the health of the population are not the only institutions responsible or capable to prevent from such vulnerable situations. Furthermore, considering that Roma women are in the most vulnerable position in Romanian society<sup>47</sup>, they are often the ones who become the victims. These "taboo" aspects were noted already in a 1999 Council of Europe Report on the situation of Roma women<sup>48</sup>. Therefore it would have been expected that in 2012 the direction for action referring to social institutions would implement approaches for combating abusive situations faced by Roma women and girls.

Moreover, there is no mention of the need to eradicate early marriages. *The Strategy* considers it necessary only to make information campaigns about the risks of early marriages. However, there is no mention that local and national institutions should apply the present legislation in order to combat such situations. The action directive referring to social institutions has as its objective "the development, by the institutions, of measures which, through the services they provide, respond to the social needs of disadvantaged categories, including the members of Roma minority in the fields of community development, child protection, justice and public order"<sup>49</sup>.

Therefore it may be concluded that in *The Strategy* there is no approach to avoid the situations in which Roma women are abused. What is most striking is that these exploitative situations may take place even inside the families. In most cases this discrepancy between the position of Roma men and women is interpreted to be a particularity of the Roma society, and the Romanian state has thus far not applied existing legislation.

Family relations are often seen as an issue of the private space, a position that has received many critiques, even from the most liberal feminist point of view: "*the personal is political*"<sup>50</sup>; "the non-intrusion of the State is a way through which the State ignores the abuses and the domestic violence. This way, the State does not protect the individual, but a collectivity which ignores individual rights"<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, when the family belongs to an ethnic group with its own practices, certain inequalities between the family members are considered more of a cultural particularity of the group and thus tolerated on the basis of the group rights. However, this perspective maintains the discrimination among group members and accepts the violations of human rights.

## Conclusions

This paper concludes that *The Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to Roma Minority for the Period 2012-2020* makes progress in considering the gender dimension. However, the newly published strategy needs to have a more sensitive approach to understanding the intersection between gender and ethnicity, and to come up with strategies adapted to the specific case of Roma women. The socio-economic realities in which Roma women are living have to be considered and the opportunities that are created have to be achievable. Moreover, and most important, the strategy on Roma inclusion should not remain under the comfortable umbrella of "cultural tolerance." In cases in which Roma women are oppressed or abused, they should benefit from the same rights as the women of the majority. Last but not least, the principal goal of *The Strategy on Roma Inclusion* should be the inclusion of Roma women and their families into the larger society, and not to isolate the women from Romanian society by recognizing only the importance of their role in the family.

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- 3 Kozce, 2009, 13.
- 4 Zamfir and Mocanu, 2008.
- 5 Surdu and Surdu 2006, 5.
- 6 Bitu and Morteau, 2010, 18.
- 7 Orloff, 1993, 303.
- 8 "The Principle of equal opportunities and gender awareness - the Government Strategy for Roma minority inclusion envisages the central role of women who play an important role within their families and minority, also by increasing their level of education and qualification, as well as their employment rate, by involving them in the education of children and other activities that ensure the increase of welfare level of families, family cohesion and development of future generations." (*The Strategy*, 2012, 15)
- 9 Miroiu, 2006, 134.
- 10 Okin, 1998, 683.

- 11 *Ibid*, 683.
- 12 Surdu and Surdu, 2006, 38.
- 13 Surdu and Surdu, 2010.
- 14 Surdu and Surdu, 2006, 41.
- 15 Surdu and Surdu, 2010.
- 16 Surdu and Surdu, 2006, 32.
- 17 *Ibid*, 33.
- 18 Iancu, 2007, 139.
- 19 Arpinte *et. al.* 2010, 49.
- 20 Surdu and Surdu, 2006.
- 21 *Ibid*, 46.
- 22 Comsa *et al* 2008, 158.
- 23 *Ibid*, 158.
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- 25 Surdu and Surdu, 2006, 46.
- 26 UNDP Report 2005, 56.
- 27 Comsa *et al*, 2008, 158.
- 28 Surdu and Surdu, 2006, 46.
- 29 Vincze, 2011, 25.
- 30 Grunberg *et al.*, 2008.
- 31 *Ibid*, 2008.
- 32 *Ibid*, 2008.
- 33 Surdu and Surdu, 2010.
- 34 School mediators represent persons who act as mediators between school and communities and families in order to prevent and correct school abandon. Also they facilitate the relations between school and parents.
- 35 Surdu and Surdu, 2006.
- 36 *Ibid*, 2006.
- 37 Fraser, 1994, 603.
- 38 Vincze and Harbula, 2011, 123.
- 39 *Ibid*, 124.
- 40 *The Strategy*, 2012, 20.
- 41 Surdu and Surdu, 2010, 53.
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- 43 Surdu and Surdu, 2006, 55.
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- 45 Bitu and Morteau, 2010.
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- 49 *The Strategy*, 2012, 22.
- 50 Hanisch, 1969.
- 51 Miroiu, 2004, 113.

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## Weblinks

- The Strategy of the Government for inclusion of Romanian citizens who belong to Roma minority 2012-2020 [http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Strategie\\_EN.pdf](http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Strategie_EN.pdf)
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