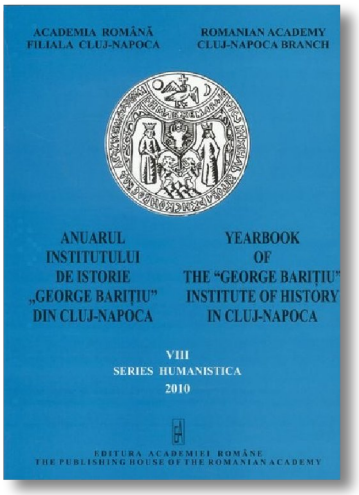

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"IF I'D HAVE A JOB, IT WOULD HELP ME, BUT..." SOCIALLY EXCLUDED PEOPLE FROM RURAL AREAS AND THE NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract. *The new information technologies are seen by the specialists as important means of alleviating the effects of social exclusion in the rural areas of Romania and to reduce the developmental gaps with the city. We conducted interviews in the collectives considered to be in social exclusion situation or at risk of social exclusion asking representative persons about their knowledge and attitudes towards the opportunities that these technologies would give them. Results are discussed in the context of the perpetuation of the social exclusion in the rural areas of Romania.*

Key words: *social exclusion, new information and communication technologies, transition, rural sociology, interview research*.

Beginning with the nineties, social exclusion was recognized as one of the most important concepts at European level. Social exclusion is multidimensional, taking into consideration all the aspects of the deprivation: economical, social, political and cultural. It describes the process by which individuals or groups are excluded from the participation in society, as a consequence of low income and restricted access to work, social services and benefits, and also to other aspects of cultural and community life[1]. The emergence of this concept is linked with the necessity of addressing the new problems caused by fundamental changes in the nature of society linked with transition from industrial to post-industrial society[2]. As Rob Atkinson, one of the architects of the concept recognized:

[1] David G. Mayes, Jos Berghman, Robert Salais, *Social Exclusion and European Policy*, Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2001; Matt Barnes, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe*, Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2002.

[2] Rob Atkinson, *Combating Social Exclusion in Europe: The New Urban Policy Challenge*, "Urban Studies", vol. 37 (5-6), 2000.

An. Inst. de Ist. „G. Barițiu" din Cluj-Napoca, Series Humanistica, tom. VIII, 2010, p. 21–30

> *"European Commission has played a key role in developing and popularizing the idea of social exclusion which was deemed to pose a threat to the European social model."*[3]

One of the main targets in fighting social exclusion was the rural population in Europe. Indeed, this population was affected by changes on an unprecedented scale. Within the context of post-industrialization, the developments linked with globalization (such as the signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade – *GATT*) and with regionalization (EU construction and enlargement) dramatically changed the rural areas. Significant changes include, although are not limited to the declining importance of agriculture, concomitant with an increase in the service sector; the ageing of the population that increased the dependency ratio; an important part of the population engaged in migration; there was also an alteration of social relationships[4]. These developments raised considerable problems linked with social exclusion in the rural area throughout all Europe.

The new information and communication technologies (*ICT*) were recognized as potential sources in dealing with social exclusion and at-risk-of-social exclusion, giving the capacity of ICT to provide an efficient communication adapted to the needs of those excluded or at risk of exclusion. However, the new ICT induced a new kind of social exclusion – of those that do not have access to computers and the Internet[5] – called *e-exclusion*. (In USA for example, The Clinton administration *via* National Telecommunications and Information Administration, recognized that the digital divide must be tackled at institutional and global level[6].) The rural areas are at increased risk of e-exclusion giving a combination of factors such as underdevelopment of technological infrastructure (the set of material means dedicated to the management and transmission of information), lack of public programmes and also the lack of people's ability to use ICTs and take benefit from them. Many programmes using ICT tools were designed in fields such as telemedicine, distance education and e-commerce, offering solutions for alleviating social exclusion in rural areas[7]. The success of such programmes is, however, dependent on the level of knowledge and attitudes of the beneficiaries of these interventions.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 1037.

[4] Mark Shucksmith, Pollyanna Chapman, *Rural Development and Social Inclusion*, "Sociologia Ruralis", vol. 38 (2), 1998.

[5] *** *Falling Through the Net: A Survey of The "Have Nots" in Rural and Urban America*, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U. S. Department of Commerce, www.ntia.doc.gov/ ntiahome/fallingthru.html

[6] Alfonso Molina, *The Digital Divide: The Need for a Global E-Inclusion Movement*, "Technology Analysis & Strategic Management", Routledge, vol. 15 (1), 2003.

[7] Heather E. Hudson, *From Rural Village to Global Village: Telecommunications for Development in the Information Age*, N. J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006.

Giving the transition to market economy, rural areas of Romania were dramatically affected by the above mentioned processes. Furthermore, the acute social exclusion in this area is aggravated by e-exclusion. Our paper investigates these issues (and also the knowledge and attitudes towards ICT) in the rural areas of Bihor County by using as primary data the opinions of the socially excluded from that region. Some of the research questions were: which media use these people for getting informed? How do these people get informed on the types of social help available? How familiar are they with ICT and what is their opinion view about their uses? Do they think these technologies can help to solve the people needs?

The research was realized within the framework of TRIN2 project "Transnational Resources E-Inclusion Network in Rural Area"[8], financed by the European Community. The fieldwork was commissioned by Carpathian Foundation, partner in this project, to the University of Oradea, Department of Sociology and Social Work. The fieldwork took place in June-July 2006 in seven villages of Bihor County. The research included six individual interviews, usually realized at the domicile of the respondents, and two discussion groups that took place at the County Hall. The territorial distribution of the individual interviews was much larger than that of the groups of discussion. Totally, people from seven rural localities were included in the study: Avram Iancu, Cetariu, Criştioru [Criʃtioru] de Jos, Gepiu, Hidişelul [Hidiʃelul] de Sus, Nojorid, and Sîniob. A special importance was given to the ethnic identity of the respondents, both Hungarian and Rroma (Gypsies in the politically incorrect versions) socially excluded people (or at risk of social exclusion) being interviewed. Participants at the interviews were selected as representative for each of the typical cases of the most socially excluded: Roma, disabled, unemployed, aged, young people, and members of the families with many children.

The interviewed in the discussion groups were people from Gepiu. First group, which we will name "main group", comprises six persons in situation of social exclusion or in risk-of-social exclusion, while the second group includes six Rroma people. The inclusion of the Rroma people, as a separate group, was justified by the characteristics of their situation: they have the deepest social exclusion from all spheres of economic, cultural and social life. Specificities of the rural Rroma communities forced us to solicit community leaders to select the appropriate persons for the group discussion. For reasons that we can only speculate (the patriarchal organization in Rroma society or the busy schedule of the housekeeping Rroma women with children) all the Rroma that showed up were males. However, in order to avoid further biases we rejected the presence of the local leader at the meeting. Individual interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes, while the group interviews took between 2 and 3 hours. Excepting the discussion with the Rroma,

[8] For more details see the project website: http://www.xarxaneta.org/trin2/

all group interviews were moderated by a consultant. In the Rroma group, the consultant teamed up with a Rroma representative in moderating the conversation.

As general situation of the area (emphasized by the interviewees) was mentioned that men usually hold low qualified and low paid jobs while women primarily are employed in housekeeping. The legal marriages are predominant among the Romanians, while the cohabitation is the most common strategy for Rroma people. Most of the respondents have positive relationships with the community, but some of the Rroma blame the Romanian majority of discriminating them against. Most of the respondents receive some kind of social benefits[9]: a small amount for each child (about 7 EUR), pensions for disabled or age retired (not above 50 EUR), salaries for a caretaker of a disabled member of the family (around 75 EUR/month) and a means-test monetary state provided in benefit for the poor which is around 40-60 EUR/family. Few of them receive salaries from daily labor, and only one a regular salary, not over 100 EUR. They have low work expectations, giving the lack of instruction, repeated failures to get a job and the high cost of commuting.

The nuclear family is predominant, but three or four generations living in a household are not unusual. The quality of dwellings is low in terms of space, comfort and utilities. The most extreme cases are those of Rroma from Gepiu, living in single roomed mud houses with no endowment, not even electricity or drinking water. With levels of instruction below the Romanian average, they usually graduated the compulsory 8 grades or vocational school. Only the young aspire to improve their educational status. For the Rroma, the situation is rather extreme, a half of them having no formal education, and some of their children are not admitted in school for not having identity papers.

When asked to outline the urgent needs of the communities, they gave the following answers: a new family physician, jobs for poor people, eradicating corruption in the local administration, a subsidized crèche, and provision of houses for young families. The personal needs reported by the subjects are: to have money, a job, the accomplishment of the children, availability of electricity in their houses, and decent housing conditions. For the Rroma community it was a difficult task separating the community and the personal needs. They referred to: connection to electricity, drinkable water in community, sewerage, improvement of houses or provision of houses, jobs and other financial relief, and improvement of the roads.

*
* *

Media used to access information depends on the available media and on the information needs. The television is the most generally available electronic media and was most frequently cited as used as source of information, with radio and

[9] They are related to the minimum income. As special remarks, Roma subjects reported city hall's abuses in the distribution of social aid.

newspapers much seldom mentioned. As other sources of information are missing, and even television is not always available (since several of the homes of our interviewees are not connected to the power grid) people rely heavily on informal networks to share relevant news and knowledge on important issues. Indeed, in the rural area the interpersonal communication and other traditional means of transporting messages of public interest are still very important.

Q. Where you look for information that you need daily?
A. Now, speaking with others… If someone dies the church bell is ringing…
Q. This is the radio of the village…
A. Yes, the radio of the village, the church bell… But people speak about what's happens, you see… Here someone died, here this or that happened, it was an accident…[10]

"From the neighbors... Where I could go now, if I cannot walk, I stay all days here, outside, on the street, and they come, they come, and we're talking…"[11]

Here we can notice another facet of exclusion, from public information. Important information on laws, rights, administrative procedures and regulations are not directly accessible to them as they are not able to access and process the raw information and, on the other hand, their trustworthy connections within the administration are weak. Their own opinion leaders, on which they rely to access the most relevant information, are not always entirely competent to digest the information for their audience. Regarding this topic, the circumstances of main group of the discussion or of the individually interviewed and of the Roma population are somehow different. Rroma people rely heavily on their leaders and organizations that support Rroma emancipation for accessing the valuable administrative and legal information. Instead, the most needy from the Romanians are less organized but have better outside linkages, are better connected (have children working in administration, better educated, living in cities etc.).

On the top of agenda of people when consuming media are the news and the entertainment, but sometimes both are intertwined in the news programs.

"I like the politics, I always liked… and events, what happens in the country… crimes or other kind…"[12]

"Popular music, that's what I like, the weather [bulletins]…"[13]

Some of the interviewees make reference in their answers to the information about their occupations.

[10] Man, 15 years old.
[11] Man, 25 years old.
[12] Man, 68 years old.
[13] Man, 25 years old.

"Well, we look for what happens in the country… and for us, from the mountain, not a good area for the agriculture, what possibilities they give us…"[14]

Also religious affiliation plays a role in the selection of the themes of interest, as neo-protestant reject the entertainment promoted by conventional media hence they limit their interest to news.

Most of the people from the main group of discussion and also from those individually interviewed have subscription to a fixed telephone network but very few have currently mobile phones. They are called at home but they admit that this happens rather rarely. Most of the interactions are face-to-face, people visiting each other or mediated through acquaintances.

Q. But [how you communicate] with the rest of family?
A. By mobile phone, my wife sometimes call them, communicate together, or we go and visit each other (he laughs), because they are not so far…[15]

Some of the subjects consider a fixed telephone to cover their needs as they are mostly at home – it is the case of housewives. Others cannot afford a mobile phone though they admit that it can be useful in their work – the chimney sweeper is visited at home by possible customers! People from the younger generation have mobile phones more often which they use to keep in touch with friends and mates but they also borrow to their older relatives in state of emergency. People in the Rroma community of Gepiu are in a much worse situation. As there is no electricity in most of the colony nor proper papers and property documents, subscriptions to fixed phone networks are excluded. Rroma can communicate outside the community only using mobile phones and prepaid cards which are, apparently paradoxical, more frequent here.

Most of those who receive social help are firstly informed by the neighbors and relatives about the availability of such help. After that they visit the social department of the local council in order to receive the detailed information and to proceed with filling forms. To give information about all these is the role of the welfare officer from the city hall, and this is done only by face-to-face interaction. There is no evidence that the potential beneficiaries of the social help would consult documents, in electronic forms or not.

Q. How you are informed about these things [social help]? By who are you informed?
A. Why, Mrs. Welfare officer, she explained to us, how many days you must work [in order to receive the help]… and Mr. Mayor also instruct me, and from the law…
Q. And other persons gave you information about the social help?

[14] Man, 44 years old.
[15] Man, 44 years old.

A. That's what we asked for, we need no other, cause' once Mrs. Welfare officer and Mr. Mayor explained to us, why ask from others, because they know everything.[16]

In Gepiu, the excluded people get informed about the welfare available mainly through television, printed press and though local informal network. Local officials responsible of welfare are seen as rather opaque, not ready to share information and unreliable. People in the panels displayed an active information searching behavior and assessed – especially the Rroma – that the quality of information they have is rather poor.

It is important to note that neither computer nor Internet is high on the agenda of the excluded people from our group discussions and interviews (excepting a respondent, 14 years old). None of the excluded persons or of the persons at risk of social exclusion which is above 30 years have ever used a computer or have been educated in the use of computer. Among the youngest interviewed, a high school student, wasn't neither educated to use the computer, as the school had only one computer. He admits being able to do very basic operations with a PC, ability that he had acquired playing on friend's computer. One of the men from the main group has at home a PC, bought for the use of his two children. It is a second-hand device which he has never used. Another individually interviewed bought a personal computer for their children, using the governmental subsidy of 200 EUR. A third interviewed received a second-hand computer from a relative who worked abroad. It is relevant that for most of the interviewees the computers are mainly entertainment tools, whose primary use for gaming or listen to music. Only the younger persons reported also the use of the computer and Internet for a help with homework.

The excluded people's contact with IT is usually mediated through the younger generations primarily and though their contacts with aid workers – local or foreigners. Several members of the main group have children or younger relatives that are much more computer literate, using computers in their professional activity or in their schooling. In this respect we could speculate about a *generational rejection of innovation*, where older people rejects the contact with the newer technology considering it reserved for the younger people and holding other domains as relevant for them.

Q. Would you like to have Internet at home?
A: What would I do? I would talk, I would search for ideas...Especially when I'll be in the high school I will need a computer, because I am going to learn architecture, I will have to make projects, to do this and that, I will have to search a lot, it won't be easy.[17]

[16] Man, 44 years old.
[17] Man, 15 years old.

Q. But you were never interested in this (computers, Internet)?
A: Well, a little bit but... I am not sure, rather for the music... I like music a lot, I like music a lot whereas others are always playing games.[18]

Q. Do you think the net could be helpful for you?
A. Why... a lot.
Q. What for?
A. For the kids.
Q. What would the kids do with the net?
A. My daughter would like to learn informatics. She wants to do a lot of things.[19]

The Internet is also merely a topic of rumors. As in the case of computers, the needy people we have discussed with find difficult to relate to IT as they hold the topic of very low relevance for them. However when digging deep in their memories they can find interesting aspects on the usefulness of Internet. A respondent remembers amazed that one neighbor could talk for free to her daughter in USA *via* Internet. Our subjects accept that IT (computers and internet) can be useful, but have difficult time trying to be more concise regarding the ways in which could use by themselves. On both the members of the main ethnic group and the Roma subject this acceptance seems to be a reflection of social desirability. However, computers and internet have been, so far, apparently, of no use for most of our subjects.

Mobile phones were mentioned as necessary in cases of emergencies. In this case, having a phone is if utmost importance. Interestingly, Rroma, Romanian and Hungarian interviewees referred to phone as necessary to first call the ambulance. While in the case of persons having severely impaired persons in the household this is understandable, for the Rroma this situation reflects their poor health status, the low quality of local health care and the difficulties poor people from the villages confront when traveling, for example to medical treatment in the city. In other words calling the ambulance is a solution for the sick poor when they are excluded from local infrastructure and public services.

Little ideas were produced by the excluded people on the use of IT for helping them. Helped by the moderator or the interviewer, both the people from the main group and those individually interviewed expressed their amazement that computers and Internet are worth more than the music and games. Assisted by the moderator, they have agreed that computers and internet could be used to access markets (to sell and buy thing on the net), access information on laws, welfare benefits etc., communicate with other people and communities or even for finding

[18] Man, 38 years old.
[19] Woman, 40 years old.

jobs. But even when they gave positive assessments of the role of computer in their lives, the perspective of using these instruments is too far from them. It is like those are on another planet:

Q. But, from what you saw, these technologies can help you in some way?
A. If I'd have a job, it would help me, but... if I stay home… very little… no… I wouldn't need them…[20]

However, in order that these uses of IT to become reality several needs have to be covered: a) many of the extreme poor do not have electricity – not to mention computers, b) families need computers and computer literacy, c) excluded people have to be educated on the benefits of IT to surpass the cultural barrier that hinder their contact with modern technology.

The excluded people or those who are at the risk of social exclusion do not have a clear idea of the way the new information technologies would help people in general to meet their needs, other than the strict need of communication or getting help in case of incidents or disease (like calling the police, the ambulance of the fire-fighters). There are some references also to the availability of information on the jobs on the Internet, but there is no clear image on how this can happen.

Q. What would the kids do with the net?
A. My daughter would like to learn informatics. She wants to do a lot of things.[21]

Even when they seem to perceive the need of their instruction, they invoked the chronic lack of time.

Most of the interviewed agree that, in order that the socially excluded or those at risk of social exclusion to use ICT to solve their problems, there is the need for such equipment exists. Computers are easier to buy for the children, using for example the Governmental program that subsidize with 200 EUR each student suffering from economic deprivation, and one of the interviewees complains the fact that their children cannot benefit of it because they are not enrolled in the school. However, the respondents having a computer in the household seldom perceive the need to be instructed on the use of it or to connect to the Internet. There seem to be a general representation that computers and Internet are for their children, not for them.

Q. In which way could be the computer used?
A. For example for the children, with all their homework, if you haven't got the Internet you cannot get them…[22]

[20] Man, 44 years old.
[21] Woman, 40 years old.

In this paper we were interested in the way the socially excluded from rural areas in Bihor County use the new information technologies and their opinions towards them. We found that the media used to access information by the excluded persons are mostly the television. As important information on laws, rights, administrative procedures and regulations are not directly accessible to them, in a process that can be called *exclusion from public information;* people rely heavily on informal networks to share relevant news and knowledge on important issues. Rroma people are somehow different, because they have a greater confidence in their leaders and organizations that support their emancipation.

People consume mostly news and the entertainment. They sometimes communicate with family and friends by telephone (only by mobile phone in the Rroma community of Gepiu where is no electricity available). Most of the interactions, nevertheless, are face-to-face, people visiting each other, or mediated through acquaintances. They get informed on the types of social help by informal network and by the welfare officer from the city hall, only in a face-to-face interaction. The Rroma from Gepiu also look for information at television. Mobile phones were mentioned as necessary in cases of emergencies. Neither computer nor Internet is high on the agenda of the excluded people. Their contact with ICT is usually mediated through the younger generations primarily and by their contacts with the aid workers. They accept that these new instruments can be useful, but cannot be more concise regarding the ways in which could use them.

Assisted by the moderator, the excluded people agreed that computers and internet could be used to access markets, finding jobs, access information on laws, welfare etc., and communicate with other people and communities. However, they don't imagine themselves using these instruments. In order to use ICT, they mentioned the needs of the availability of electricity in their houses, of a personal computer and of IT literacy. The excluded or those who are at the risk of social exclusion do not have a clear idea of the way the new information technologies would help people in general to meet their needs, other than the strict need of communication or getting help in case of incidents or disease. They stress that in order to use ICT to solve their problems, such equipment should exists. However, those owning a computer in the household rarely perceive the need to be instructed on the use of it or to connect to the Internet.

The individual or group interviews are important in order to discover the large variety of facts and attitudes linked with the social exclusion and e-exclusion in rural areas. What must be reminded, nevertheless, is that the interview is a qualitative research technique. Thus, the research findings are not statistically representative for the situations, opinions and attitude or the whole of the rural population in Bihor County, and also for the assessments given by the experts. However, the results of this study are of real value for preparing further researches in this field.

[22] Woman, 44 years old.