

THE ONLINE REPUTATION OF ROMA PEOPLE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN FIVE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *The development of the online space changed radically not only the public communication and the frames of reference, but the way in which the image and the reputation of organizations is built and maintained. By using content analysis on data obtained via Google search, this paper compares the online reputation of Roma people in five European countries (Romania, France, Great Britain, Spain and Italy). The analysis has been done on the general case (Roma people, regardless of their origin) and on the specific case (Roma people of Romania). The main premise was that cultural features and personal interaction with Roma people were the most important influence factors for the online reputation of Roma people as an ethnic group, in the public spaces of the five countries considered. The results showed important differences between the values of indicators in the five countries considered, and also a difference between the general case and the specific case (Roma people of Romania). The paper also emphasized specific characteristics of the institutional communication, non-governmental communication, traditional media and independent users' practices in the five online spaces which formed the sample for analysis.*

Keywords: *online reputation, ethnic culture, comparative analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the online space had among consequences the change in objectives in public communication, and also in the way in which reputation, image and perception of organization is built in the public space. The paper aims the analysis of the online reputation of Roma people in several European countries. The analysis starts from the premise that the national cultural features and the direct experience of natives from different countries after the temporary migration of Roma people influenced the online reputation of Roma as an ethnic group in the countries from the sample.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical perspectives on reputation.

The theories which conceptualize reputation can be seen from two perspectives: the economical and the institutional perspective. The economical perspective conceives reputation as an intangible asset or a resource (economical, financial), which can contribute to the organizational performance and competitive advantage by satisfying quality standards. The institutional theories speak about reputation as being the collective recognition of a

company in the public space (Rindova *et al.*, 2005:1034-1035). Rindova *et al.* considered reputation as a double- dimensioned concept, composed from the perceived quality of services or products of organization and, on the other side, the prominence (the extent to which the company is known by the stakeholders). On their turn, Lange, Lee and Dai (2011:163-167) propose three dimensions: prominence/notoriety (to be known), the componential perspective/image (to be known for something) and the generalized favorability for the organization. The first dimension refers to the visibility level of a public actor (how well known is the actor in the public sphere). The notoriety in the public sphere would be, from this angle, an indicator of visibility and an essential condition in building reputation. The second dimension reveals reputation as a result of evaluations and judgements based on expectations about a company. By this perspective, reputation is a representation or a set of images formed in the mind of stakeholders as a consequence of interaction with the organization (Lange *et al.*, 2011:157-159). On the same direction, Rhee and Haunschild (2006:102) define reputation as a subjective evaluation of the perceived quality of the organization's products and services.

The favorable attitude towards an organization is the direct result of evaluations which reflect the attractiveness of the organization for publics. According to Charles Fombrun (1996:72), reputation is a representation of past and future actions of an organization in comparison with other organizations. This definition considers the comparative character of reputation, but also the idea of interaction, which is responsible for the construction of representations and value judgements.

2.2 Distinction between reputation, image and identity. We consider that reputation is defined in the direction initiated by Fombrun (1996:6), as an integrative concept for all the „neighbour concepts”. The perspective in which reputation is the essence of image is justified because „nowadays the publics do not receipt image on multiple dimensions any more, but only the key and visible aspects” (Cismaru, 2012a:83-95). Reputation has a comparative nature, while the image is an independent representation, a sum of organizational characteristics in the eyes of stakeholders (Cismaru, 2012a:27). The comparative feature of reputation is observed by several authors, who emphasize that reputation cannot exist independently, but only in comparison with other actors in the same field. Reputation can be earned, maintained, strengthened or reduced in time (Rhee & Valdez, 2009:146-167).

2.3 The influence of the online space’s development on reputation. The development of the online space had an impact on reputation building and maintenance process. It was observed, in scholarship, that people use more and more the online sources in order to determine the extent of trust in a public actor (Newmark, 2011:ix), and the online space offered the possibility of unlimited expansion of the online social networks (configured until recently only by personal contacts). In this way, reputation building is performed by direct contact with trusted actors and sources of information. Thus, the real life started to be influenced dramatically by these social and informational configurations in the online space, as the same author observed.

2.4 Research questions. The sample of countries for the comparative analysis of the reputation of an ethnic group was formed by Romania, France, Great Britain, Spain, Italy.

The research questions were the following:

- (RQ1) Which are the characteristics of the online reputational profiles of Roma people from Romania in each of the five countries?

- (RQ2) Which are the differences between countries in population’s attitude towards the social problem of the Roma people of Romania?

- (RQ3) Are there differences between the general case (the Roma people) and the specific case (the Roma people of Romania) in each of the five analyzed cases?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Collection of data and coding. The method applied was the system of indicators for the online reputation assessment, a system proposed by the author in 2012 (Cismaru, 2012b). The collection of data and the content analysis have been done during 20-25 of June 2013. Each online reputational profile has been built by the results displayed by Google on the first two pages, obtaining a total of 20 postings/articles for each search. The search in Google has been performed in two phases, first it was selected the Google engine visible in the specific country analyzed, (Google Romania, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, respectively). In the second phase, the search involved two types of searches: „Roma”/”gypsies”, respectively with the equivalent in the specific languages: *gypsies*, *gitans*, *gitanos*, *zingari*. By this way it was obtained the online reputational profile for the Roma people. In order to obtain the online reputational profile of the Roma people of Romania, the search was repeated by adding the expression “from Romania”. The analysis of entries has been done by using Google translation when needed. A number of 200 registration units (entries/articles) have been evaluated and included in the formulas of indicators. Each recording unit (each entry) received a favorability coefficient, as it follows: (3) intensely favorable; (2) favorable; (1) mention; (0) outside the topic, refers to other actor; (-1) slightly unfavorable; (-2) unfavorable articles; (-3) intensely unfavorable articles.

A second aspect of coding was the online rating (depending on the monthly audience of an online media source, and expressed initially through percentages). Coding of online media sources used the data of Alexa.com site and traffic.ro. The video sharing network Youtube has been coded with “10”, and the online social network Facebook has been coded with “8” as a source. Wikipedia was coded with “5”, while Twitter was coded with “2”. In case of the other countries, the audiences were evaluated subsequently, by the same method (monitoring tools). In case of local sources

(individual blogs or sites, or local newspapers), these were conventionally coded with a “1”. Finally, the audience data were converted in corresponding importance coefficients for each online media source, from 1 to 10.

3.2 Indicators. The first indicator, *Online Visibility* indicates the extent to which a public actor or group are present in the online environment. Secondly, *Online Control* refers to the proportion of the content generated directly by official sources. The third indicator, expressed also in percentages, *Balance*, shows the negative media coverage at a time, and it represents the proportion of negative input of the total number of entries. *The intensity of unfavorable coverage* indicates the climate of comments about the organizational actor and is calculated as the ratio of negative favorability coefficients and the sum of positive favorability coefficients: when above par, negative coefficients may prove to be stronger than the positive ones. *Magnitude of Sources.* Indicator shows the importance of sources who post material about the group. The indicator varies on a scale from 0 to 5, and scores below 3.5 reveal coverage by local media / with small audiences or unimportant sources, while the score above 3.5 is registered in the case of central sources with large audiences. Finally, *Ranking* refers to negative entries on the first page and it is calculated as the formula with $R = (p * i) / 10$, where p - positional coefficient (first entry – 10, last entry -1, only the first page) and i - favorability ratio. Ranking ranges between 0 and 15, but a value over 4 is considered a high one.

The online reputation coefficient (*the online reputation score*) *ORS* includes the online visibility, the online rating and the favorability and it is calculated using the formula:

$$ORS = ORSI \times V / 100, \quad [1]$$

where

$$ORSI = [\sum (i1 \times n) \times 2 + \sum (i2 \times n)] / 3 \quad [2]$$

- intermediary score; where $i1$, $i2$ - favorability factors awarded to the input on the first or second page of online reputational profile; n corresponding to online source coefficient rating (range 0-10); $V / 100$ - online visibility.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Overview of cases. Among the cases analyzed, there was a significant difference both in

terms of the general problem of the Roma people in public space, but also the general attitude towards Roma people, and especially against the Roma people from Romania. In all three cases, regardless of cultural particularities and recent reality of social contact with Roma people / Roma people from Romania, there was a high confusion between Roma-Romanian (for phonetic reasons and lack of information) and a large number of postings related to relegating this problem -posts made by more knowledgeable individual and collective actors. As a collateral observation, this confusion affects Romania’s reputation at a country level - a further argument against the adoption of the term ‘Roma’, recently legalized. On the other hand, the research has demonstrated the artificiality of the term, as the main debate in Romania is on the term “tsigan” while official information management is done on the term “Roma” (therefore the latter cannot solve the former).

4.2 The case of Romania. This case is relatively better-known and indicator values confirmed expectations: Roma people had a negative online reputation, no matter what search term is operating (ORS = -9 with the term “Roma”, ORS = -26.8 with the term “Tsigan”). As aspects of the negative attitude, the balance is moderate in the case of the first term (B = 25%), and higher in the case of the second term (60%) indicating a chronic reputational crisis. In terms of intensity, it is moderate for the first term (I = 0.35) and rather high (I = 1.8 indicating that negative entries are twice stronger than the positive ones) for the second term. In terms of ranking, it is small in the first case and relatively high with the second search term (R = 4.4) showing that adverse entries are placed on the first page, in highly visible positions, generating further online visitors and maintaining this profile in the near future. Regarding the issue’s prominence in the public space, it is moderate for the first search term (H 2) but high for the second search term (H = 4.2).

The indicators showed parallel situations: non-governmental organizations, political parties and institutions are trying to manage the problem using the term “Roma” (control C = 25%) while the real debate in the public space is on the term “Tsigan” and, even if by banning its use some large audience online publications will not belong to the second reputational profile, it does not mean that the existing negative entries will be removed in any way. Thus, it can be estimated that the level of these indicators and the extremely negative online

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reputation will be maintained in the near future (Chart 1 - low value indicators were multiplied by 10 or 100 to be represented).

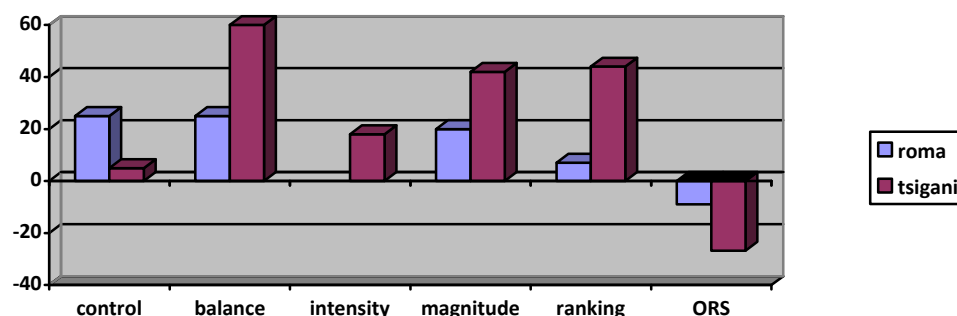


Fig.1 The difference in indicators for the general case (Roma) and specific (Tsigani)

4.3 The case of Great Britain. In this space, the Roma people issue is negatively reflected (the online reputation coefficient $ORS = -10.5$) although English institutions are trying to manage the problem in a friendly and democratic way (the characteristic way in which social issues are addressed in this country). It was noted the large number of informative entries on the official sites of the municipalities, which provide guidance information for nomadic populations and other inhabitants as well as a significant number of informative entries on forums and blogs, without attracting a large number of comments. It is also noted the controversy between important online publications such as *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail* but also the less prominent *The Sun*. Thus, *The Daily Mail* has a tabloid typical approach, promoting stereotypes and the unrealistic prospect of a mass migration of the Roma people occurring soon. The other newspapers promote an attitude related to their political orientation, as it follows: *The Independent* (left-wing) promotes tolerance, emphasizes the stereotypes and discrimination that the Roma people were subjected to throughout history because of these stereotypes and unjust measures, while *The Guardian* (right-wing) and *The Sun* have a predominantly negative attitude.

The attitude towards the Roma people from Romania is also controversial ($ORS = 5$) and the above controversy is even more intense. Right-wing newspapers emphasize the negative impact of the presence of the Roma in Romania on tourism in the UK, and the imminence increase in emigration, amid poverty in Romania. However, *The Independent* is still stronger in the controversy, holding the first position in the online reputational profile and thus generating a slight

deviation towards positive of the online reputation of Roma in Romania.

4.4 The case of France. The case of France is characterized by tolerance and the predominance of public dispute among individual users regarding the Roma as an ethnic group. Thus, it is noted the poor visibility ($V = 75\%$ for "gitans" and 70% for "gitans of Roumanie" because some entries in the reputational profile are occupied by artistic and musical bands with that name). Much of the inputs also come from artistic, cultural and historical information, which demonstrates a cultural openness and interest in this space for cultural diversity. Another feature of the French online reputational profile is the large number of entries on forums, in which they discussed the Roma / Roma from Romania. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the discussions were held both positively and negatively against Roma (there is a balance of positions and arguments) but also numerous parallels between the behavior of the Maghreb and the Romanian Roma in informal discussions.

Central newspapers had very few entries and positions on this issue; also the public institutions, NGOs or parties do not seek to have an opinion online in connection with the Roma issue. Even on the recent expulsion of the Roma from Romania, some opinions were rather critical of Sarkozy. Consequently, this issue in the French public issue is rather marginal ($H = 2.4$ for the general term and $H 2.2$ for the specific term, gitans of Roumanie). The balance is low ($B = 15\%$ for the general term, and $B = 25\%$ for the specific one). From the sample of the five selected countries, France is the most tolerant, although the online reputation of the Roma people of Romania is controversial ($ORS = 5.6$).

4.5 The case of Spain. The case of Spain stands out in several respects. First, it is the country where the Roma minority is the best integrated: the online reputation for the general case ("Gitanos") has the highest score in the sample (ORS = 24.3). The integration was achieved in a cultural direction: thus, the Spanish Roma people are perceived as dancers and promoters of distinct cultural traditions which are greatly appreciated. As with the French space, visibility is low (V = 90%) due to inputs generated by dance troupes and music bands. The number and virulence of negative inputs are low (B = 15%, I = 0.14) and these inputs are less visible on the first page (R = 1). The Roma issue is managed by NGOs, political parties and institutions which provide information in the online space (C = 20%)

However, the problem of the Roma of Romania is present through many negative connotations both on online forums and newspapers with mid-level audience. Thus, in this second case we can observe the high balance (B = 65%) indicating the large share of negative inputs, and high intensity (I = 2.3) showing that the negative views are more intense than the positive ones. Ranking is high (R = 3.4), indicating that the chronic reputational crisis will not end soon. Publications, online social networks and individual comments (in large numbers) resemble in the attitude of rejection they manifest, which leads to a negative score (ORS = -22.3). In an attempt to recover the balance, a Spanish journalist posted some films on Youtube presenting the objective situation of the Roma from Romania, projecting stereotypes and the existence of "peak" or improvement of the situation etc.

4.6 The Case of Italy. Although in Spain we could notice moderation even when rejected, in the

case of Italy the individual users' frustration and phobia are very high. A feature of the Italian reputational profile was the extremely high number of comments (hundreds) to articles. A large number of comments reflect the possibility of social unrest in the future, due to the lack of communication with the authorities. Also, in Italy one can observe a very low level of control (5% on the general case and 0% on the particular one, *Zingari of Rumania*), which demonstrates either the indifference or the inability of institutions and NGOs to communicate with the public on this issue. There is concern from some newspapers of both large audience and from online magazines, blogs and active users on social networks.

Therefore, the problem is rather important in the social space (H = 3.6 in the general case, H = 3.3 in the specific one). Ranking is higher for the general case (R = 6.9) demonstrating alongside with the reputational low coefficient (ORS = -29.3) an ongoing chronic reputational crisis. Also, the balance is negative in both cases (B = 40% if both in general and in the specific case), showing that almost half of reputational profile is full of negative entries. In addition, the intensity is moderate (I = 1 or I = 0.6) but it only refers to the tone of articles (not of the comments, which was virulent). In the specific case of Romania, both features and reputational crisis level (ORS = -27.7 for *Zingari de Rumania*) are maintained, the only difference being that extremely negative articles in the national media did not refer directly to the case of Romania and are not present in the reputational profile particularly investigated.

Table 1 and table 2 show a synthesis of the seven indicators in all the five countries, in the general case (table 1) and in the specific case (table 2).

Table 1. The online reputation of the Roma people

	V(%)	C (%)	B (%)	I (0-10)	H (1-5)	R (0-15)	ORS (-100 /+100)
1.Romania – "romi"	100	25	25	0.35	2	0.7	-9
2.Romania – "Tigani"	100	5	60	1.8	4.2	4.4	-26.8
3.Great Britain	95	30	15	0.4	3.2	3	-10.5
4.France	75	10	15	0.2	2.4	0.6	12.2
5.Spain	90	20	15	0.1	2.4	1	24.3
6. Italy	100	5	40	1	3.6	6.9	-29.3

Table 2. The online reputation of the Roma people from Romania

	V(%)	C (%)	B (%)	I (0-10)	H (1-5)	R (0-15)	ORS (-100 /+100)
1.Romania – "Tigani"	100	5	60	1.8	4.2	4.4	-26.8
2.Great Britain	100	5	25	0.5	4	3.6	5.0
3.France	70	10	25	0.7	2.2	1.6	5.6
4.Spain	90	10	65	2.3	4.1	3.4	-22.3
5. Italy	100	0	40	0.6	3.3	1.9	-27.7

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Regarding the second research question (the difference between the countries on the issue of Roma from Romania) this is shown in Chart 2, which presents the different online reputation score.

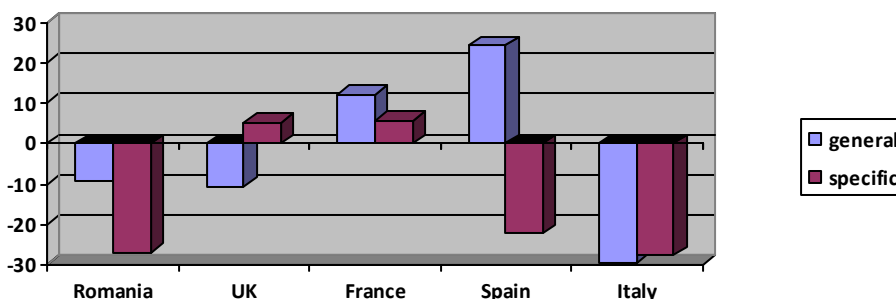


Fig.2 The online reputation score for the general and specific case (Roma from Romania)

As shown, there are large differences both between countries and between the general and the specific case. Spain presents the biggest difference between the overall score and the specific one, 50 in absolute value on ORS scale. Italy, by contrast, is the most consistent in the negative attitude. Regarding the differences between nations on Roma from Romania, it is noted that in France and Great Britain the issue is highly controversial but it is likely to turn positive with the help of institutional management and exploitation of cultural and democratic values. Meanwhile, Spain and Italy are less likely to have a positive evolution on this issue in the near future: in Spain due to the difference in attitude between the general and the specific case and in Italy due to the intensity of the

negative attitude of individual users and lack of institutional communication.

Among the cases presented, the case of Romania and Italy resemble in many regards in the report of the general -specific case and in the consistency of the negative attitude of individual users. However, Romania has a higher predominance of institutional and NGOs efforts, a greater interest to communicate and support the minority. Chart 3 supports these observations, by presenting the magnitude and ranking for each country, in order to compare the presence of this issue in the public space and the extent to which this issue is a chronic crisis in the online space or not.

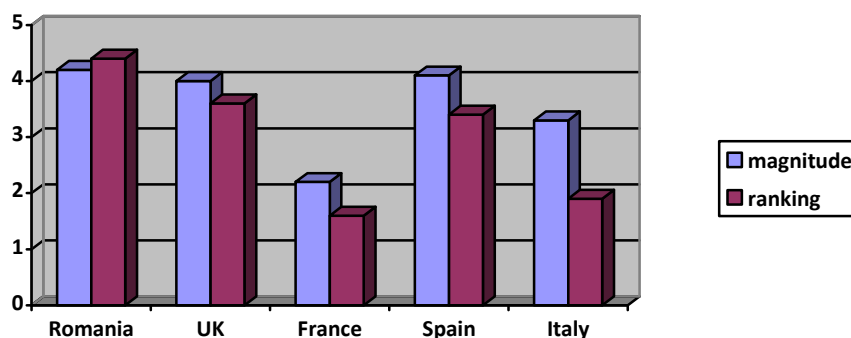


Fig.3 Comparison between magnitude and ranking in the five countries.

The graph shows that the issue of the Roma from Romania is quite severe and with the most prominent chronicity and visibility in Romania, of great importance in the United Kingdom, Spain (but moderate in Italy), and the problem has the

lowest visibility in France and Italy. At the same time, France is the country that records the lowest visibility and chronicity of the online reputational crisis in the sample of five countries (though there is a controversy at individual users).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Application of the seven indicators confirmed the initial expectation, that the online reputation of the Roma from Romania will be influenced, on the one hand, by cultural characteristics and on the other hand by the contextual features in which the majority of the population contacts this particular minority. Thus, due to national culture, France has proven to be the most tolerant country in the sample considered; on the other hand, the most negative scores are recorded in Spain and Italy, countries where migration has the highest level. Also, the indicators demonstrate both significant differences between the online reputation of the Roma in general and the Roma from Romania in particular. Each case showed particularities in corporate communication, the non-governmental environment, media communication and the individual users.

Given these differences, it is recommended that the issue of the Roma people be dealt with in the context of each country, and any government or European strategy of accommodation and integration be accompanied by a communication strategy tailored to each country in particular.

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