

GENESIS AND DYNAMICS OF A GEO-DEMOGRAPHIC SINGULARITY. A CASE STUDY - THE GIPSY COMMUNITY OF TOFLEA (BRĂHĂȘEȘTI COMMUNE, GALAȚI COUNTY)¹

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Abstract: During the last two decades Romania has experienced one of the most serious demographic crises in its history. But regardless of this context, certain communities manage to preserve their demographic vitality at the local level in close connection to their cultural and social features. It is the case of Brăhășești commune in Galați County, known for the large gipsy community living in Toflea, one of its component villages. Its recent demographic evolution extending over the last decades points out its strong differentiation within the county. Being characterized by tendencies which are opposed to the general ones, this community manages not only to keep its exceptional demographic potential but also to produce, by means of migration, a real dissemination in a relatively vast space comprising the whole south-eastern part of Moldavia. The main conclusion of the research is that this community has become not only the main population reservoir of the whole north-western part of Galați county but also the principal source of serious social problems as a consequence of the dimension of certain specific phenomena.

Key words: demographic singularity, gypsies, dynamics, cultural features, territorial distribution

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INTRODUCTION

The present study, part of a larger project meant to identify the genesis and effects of the multiple differentiations existing in the Moldavian rural space, is intended to advance a diachronic analysis of the way in which a community (the gypsies of Toflea-Brăhășești in our case) manifests its personality at the demographic level. The way in which cultural peculiarities bring about demographic cleavages is apparently simple, being triggered by various socio-cultural or economic phenomena such as: marginalization, identity withdrawal, discrimination etc. In this direction, the case of gipsy communities is exemplary, any place that records a considerable concentration

¹ This study refers to western part of historical Moldavia, part of Romania (8 counties of the North-East of this country). For disambiguation, in the text was used also the term Western Moldavia.

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of people belonging to this minority experiencing a significant demographic differential. This finds expression in the preservation of a more traditionalist demographic behaviour and the manifestation of certain life quality deficiencies (smaller values of life expectancy at birth, higher rates of infant mortality, specific evolutions of the morbidity rate etc). Generally regarded as a delicate matter, the gypsy-like special nature cannot be compared, at least within the Romanian space, to that of other (ethnic or religious) communities. Neither can it be generalized as long as gypsy collectivities find themselves in diverse stages of social and economic modernization, integration, assimilation etc.

At this point of the analysis the term „*geo-demographic singularity*” needs to be accurately defined. It designates the situation in which a component of a territorial (geographical) demographic system records an evolution that is singular, exceptional to the general trends that take place within that subsystem. Such a singularity can represent the starting point of a new tendency which, by diffusion, can conquer larger and larger areas. As a matter of fact, all demographic phenomena score a more or less singular manifestation at the beginning. However, in the present case, this singularity is doubled by a series of social, cultural and economic features which completely differentiate the analysed community both from the territorial-administrative and physical geographical systems it is integrated into.

The case study we carried out focuses on the largest community of this type in Moldavia, lying in a peripheral, relatively isolated area in the southern part of Tutova Hills, a geographical region that shelters some other similar communities, too, communities which are inserted in a system of settlements traditionally dominated by the small peasant property². This geographical area is known by its profoundly rural nature and scarcity of subsistential resources, elements that triggered a massive participation in the internal migratory flows of the communist period.

Nowadays, Brăhăşeşti commune, situated in the extreme north of Galaţi county, comprises four villages: two bigger ones (Brăhăşeşti and Toflea) and two smaller ones (Corcioveni and Cosiţeni). The gypsy community of Toflea (counting two thirds of the total commune population of about 8,900 inhabitants) represents the main object of our research but, for statistical reasons, we shall make use of the information on the commune as a whole, its geo-demographic specificity being deeply marked by it. The first remark to make is that the self identification with the gypsies is of absolutely recent date, the census of 2002 being the first to massively record this affiliation.

While the other villages of the commune derive from old free holder's communities gradually integrated in feudal structures, Toflea village is relatively recent, the first documentary mention being that recorded in the first catagraphy of Moldavia³, drawn up in the year 1803, which speaks of „*the tax-payers in Toflea hermitage*” (Codrescu, 1886). The forest area covering the higher part of Nicoreşti Piedmont, still well afforested nowadays, used to accommodate more hermitages and monasteries, some of them still existing today (such as Buciumeni, Sihastru etc). Without forming a proper locality, the monastic settlement experienced an expanding evolution, being marked on the Russian map of 1828 as a hamlet with 5 up to 20 houses near which, on the present precincts of the village, to the south-east, there was another hamlet, bigger than the former (comprising 36 houses), called Rufeşti. The first modern census in Moldavia, carried on in 1859 - 1860, revealed a number of 1,242 inhabitants for Toflea village (2,995 inhabitants for the whole commune), a spectacular leap for only several decades, whose explanation resides in the fact that, during the period of time between the two censuses, a numerous collectivity of gypsies settled down in the area. By 1948 (for nearly a century), the demographic evolution (as much as we can infer from exploring the population dynamics) was not very much different from that of the

² The most well-known communities are those in Băcioi (Corbasca commune, Bacău county) and Homocea commune (Vrancea county), during the interwar period both of them being included (just like Toflea-Brăhăşeşti) into Nicoreşti “plasa”, Tecuci county. As a matter of fact, that “plasa” was recorded by certain scientific papers of the time (Obreja, 1943) to have the greatest percentage of gypsies in Moldavia (the word “plasa” refers to a former Romanian territorial administrative unit ranking below “county” and above “commune”).

³ In Romanian it is called „*Condica Liuzilor*”, representing a sort of tax-payers' registry book.

neighbouring settlements, being relatively slow: 1,513 inhabitants in 1912 (out of the 3,484 people of the commune); 1,914 inhabitants in 1941 (out of the 4,444 people living in the whole commune). Instead, the post war evolution was subject to a continuous tendency of singularization in comparison to the general specificities of the rural environment of the county (figure 1).

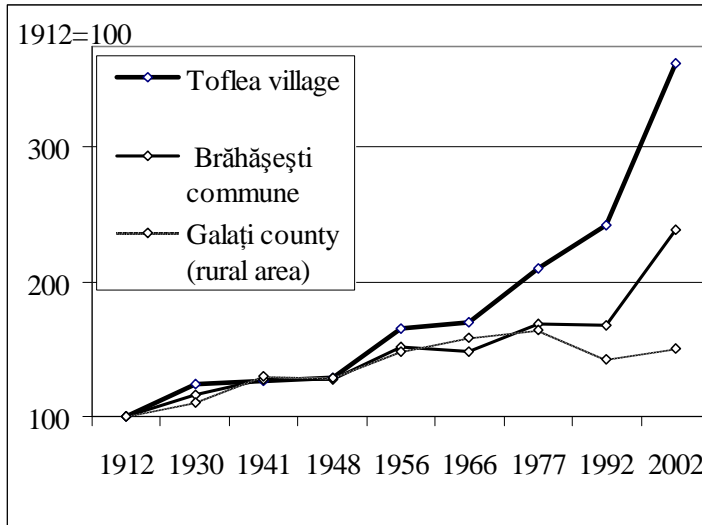


Figure 1. Comparative analysis of the number of inhabitants according to the censuses carried out from 1912 to 2002 (Source: The censuses taken between 1912 - 2002 in Romania)

This tendency became more and more conspicuous with every intercensus period until 1977, when the direction changed the other way round: while the rural environment passed through a demographic decline (an evolution which was quite normal from the perspective of the consequences of the rural exodus), Toflea village experienced a contrary development, materialized in a stronger and stronger tendency of explosive demographic increase. The population grew from only 2,504 inhabitants in 1956 to 3,667 in 1992 and 5,479 in 2002 census. This means that from 1941 to 2002 (that is six decades) this village faced a threefold increase of its total population despite the combined influences of the last world war, the drought in 1946 - 1947 (which worked havoc in the area) and the rural exodus which massively involved the population of this commune (only from 1966 to 1989 the migratory balance recorded a deficit of 2,366 inhabitants, the annual average rate being of -1.9%, clearly superior to the national one). The more and more prominent growth after 1990 can also be ascribed to the massive rural return, the migratory balance rising to 1,540 people between 1990 - 2002, subsequently reaching a relative equilibrium between arrivals and departures. In this way a significant part of the previous exodus managed to be counteracted in a relatively short period of time. This significant return can hardly be explained taking into consideration the more than precarious natural offer and the extremely high subsistential density of the area (3,053 ha out of the 4,361 ha of the commune have an agricultural use - arable lands, pastures etc, causing a level of about 300 inhabitants / 100 hectares of agricultural land). The spectacular withdrawal of a significant part of the people who had formerly left their birth locality can also be granted extra explanations which refer to: the previous dispersion connected to the traditional practices of gypsy communities, the destructuring of a life style based on the peddling of the products resulted from specific handcraft activities (producing or repairing metal containers), the adherence to the Pentecostal cult of an important part of the population after the year 2001 (586 followers in 2002, more than 1,000 at the present according to official estimations), all of them superposed on the effects of transition.

Interesting and contradictory at the same time, this evolution can arouse a special interest in the context of the discordance with the major social and economic evolutions experienced all over the country after 1990.

BRĂHĂȘEȘTI COMMUNE AND THE GEO-DEMOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES IN GALAȚI COUNTY DURING THE LAST TWO DECADES

A first analysis meant to highlight the extreme specificity of the case study was performed on the components of the natural balance at the level of the basic administrative units of Galați county.

The collected official information was processed in typological classifications with the help of Statlab program, using the birth, mortality and general fertility indicators of the feminine population. We kept 6 types of evolution of the components of the natural balance which emphasize the existence of a general tendency of strong decrease of the fertility indicators in all the administrative units of the county except one: Brăhășești commune, which clearly stands out, forming a special singular type.

Having a birth rate which initially complied with the general decline trend installed after 1990 but which rapidly recovered to values sometimes exceeding 30‰ towards the middle of the 90's and with a generally decreasing mortality rate with constant values of less than 10‰, this commune definitely diverges from the others. After the year 2000 the phenomenon has strengthened under the circumstances in which the whole county has been facing a speeding decline triggered by the effects of the international migration of the labour force. The drawn up classification partially emphasizes the influence of the presence of the gypsy communities which enforce a certain resistance to the decline tendency of births in those areas where they hold a considerable share (of at least 5% of the total population).

The urban centres and the peri-urban area of Galați also stand out due to a perceptibly different behaviour characterized by a permanent low level of both indicators which finds expression in a natural balance close to 0 and a recent timid recovery tendency of birth values. There can also be noticed a convergent evolution of birth rates, once more with the exception of Brăhășești commune: the noteworthy differences at the beginning of the period gradually vanish after the year 2000. However, this does not stand true in the case of the evolution of the mortality rate, which experienced a contrasting manifestation: the rapidly rising tendency of the 90's was followed by a quasi-stagnation (at high values) resulting in a profoundly negative natural balance in compliance with a gradient going from the west to the north-east of the county, already caught in the trap of an irreversible devitalisation. Nevertheless certain localities represent exceptions to this evolution: Tecuci and Galați municipalities- due to a still favourable population structure; the peri-urban areas and the commune that represents the object of the present case study - Brăhășești (figures 2 and 3). Its extreme vitality, undoubtedly imputable to the strong gypsy community living in Toflea, can bear the following explanations:

- the end of the birth decline in the middle of the 90's is the result of a complex combination between the rural return, the preservation of some numerically significant contingents of young feminine population and the resistance derived from a traditionalist demographic behaviour generally specific to gypsy communities, especially to compact ones;

- the relative isolation of the commune cannot be taken into account as long as people who practise certain activities are predisposed to an intense mobility on large areas (itinerant commerce, collecting reusable materials);

- the relative absence of a completely modernized behaviour pattern can also be called forth, the Romanian population itself in the area later entering the more advanced phases of transition (however it crossed them very rapidly as it is proved by the analysis of the evolution of the feminine population fertility).

This hypothesis is also taken into account by certain studies financed by the European Commission which certify the existence of a dephased, divergent demographic pattern of the gypsy communities in Europe (Gabriella Fésüs et al., 2008, p.13-14);

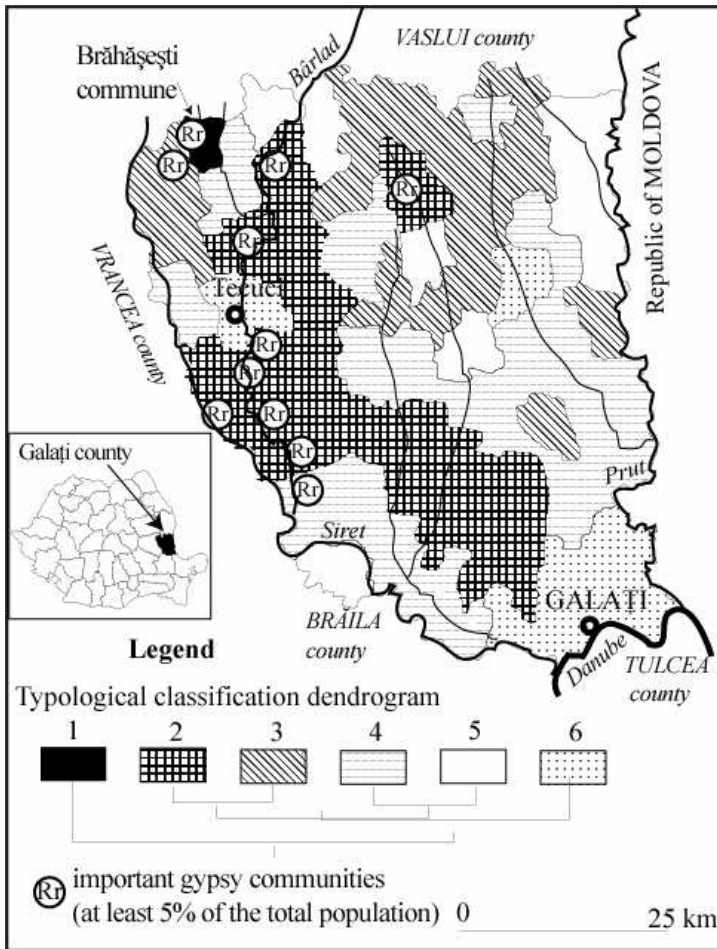


Figure 2. Typology of the evolution of the natural balance components between 1990 - 2009
(Source: according of *Anuarul Statistic al județului Galați*, 2010, Database „Tempo Online” of INS, Bucarest, found in sept.2010)

- after the 2000 year the increase of the number of Pentecostal followers has brought about additional consequences. Known for its moral rigour in respect of family values, this cult was introduced in the gypsy community of Toflea in 1992, gradually gaining numerous supporters. The field surveys point out that generally Pentecostal families are considerably more numerous without necessarily belonging to more disfavoured categories. As a matter of fact, the commune as a whole is not included in the category of the least developed communes in Galați county, these ones being preferably situated in its north-eastern part (Sandu, 1999, p. 208);

- the lack of progress in the direction of the social and cultural integration of the gypsy community;

- the majority of the population is practically semi-literate, school abandonment is significant (especially after the primary level of education more than half of the pupils gradually give up attending secondary studies) in opposition to a minority attending high schools in Tecuci and especially universities. Social contrasts get deeper and deeper: we deal, on the one hand, with a pick involved in various (not necessarily illicit) businesses and displaying an ostentatious life style and, on the other hand, with a majority which is practically deprived of any means of subsistence in the context of the quasi-absence of agricultural lands and of a weak propensity for agricultural work. This situation is also due to the fact that most families have never been put in

possession of land by virtue of the semi-nomadic character of their life style. The most part of the population can be definitely included into the category of vulnerable communities which have a high degree of social risk (Guran and Turnock, 2000, p. 139 - 150).

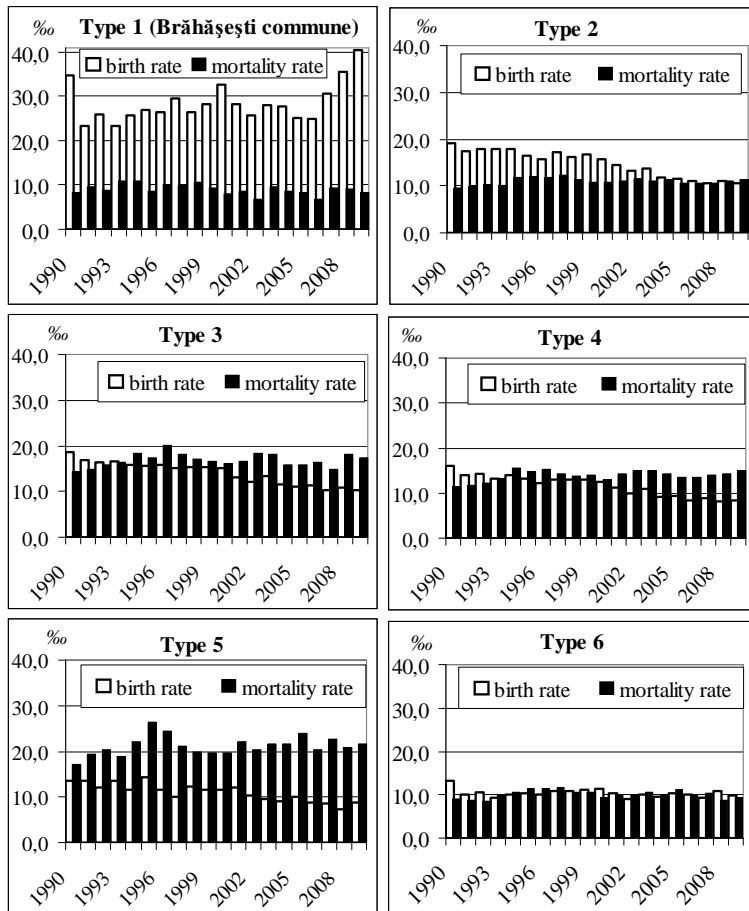


Figure 3. Profile of the types of evolution of the natural balance components (Source: according of Anuarul Statistic al județului Galați, 2010)

Another point that needs to be cleared up is whether this strong personalization of Brăhășești commune is also due to its extremely favourable structure by age groups in comparison to most communes in the county which were subject to a much stronger migration of the young population during the last decades of the communist period.

For this purpose we also analysed the evolution of the feminine population’s (aged 15 - 49) general fertility rate during the same period of time. The specific statistical information was corroborated with the results of the population censuses of 1992 and 2002. In order to avoid the variability of the dynamics of this indicator, which is sometimes subject to circumstantial tendencies, the analysis made use of the averages of the four periods of the last two decades. We observed the importance of the existence of the gypsy community to the evolution of this indicator by comparing Brăhășești commune to the average of a group made up of 9 communes in which this minority holds a significant share (at least 5% of the total population according to the census of 2002) and to the average of the other 44 communes of the county, thus acknowledging the high originality degree of the demographic evolution of Brăhășești commune (figure 4).

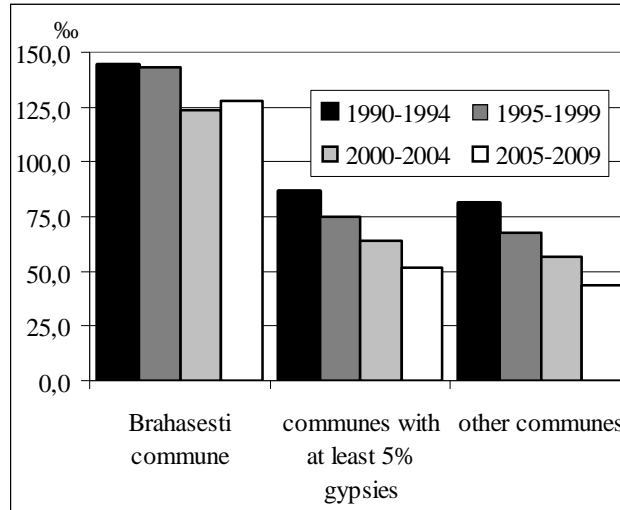


Figure 4. Evolution of the fertility of the feminine population (aged 15 - 49) from 1990 to 2009
(Source: according of Anuarul Statistic al județului Galați, 2010)

While all over the whole county this indicator records a continuous decline (stronger in the case of those communes that do not have important gypsy minorities), the commune that represents the object of the present study stands out by two distinct stages delimited by an attempt at rowing up to the general trend of the rural environment of the county (around the years 1999 - 2000). The last decade even faces a light recovery (especially after the year 2005) up to values that have been exceedingly rare in Romania for a long period of time (125 - 130 %). This situation can also be ascribed to the numerous generation born at the beginning of the 90's, superposed on an extremely favourable structure by age groups, in the context of preserving a high marriages rate and a small average age at first marriage, a phenomenon which is typical of gypsy communities on the whole. The analysis by age groups of the fertility rate could highlight a possible tendency of continuation of the transitory processes that seemed to be ongoing, slowly but surely until the year 1990, as the evolution of the young population's share shows (the population aged 0 - 14): 39.1% in 1966, 38.3% in 1977, and 29.7% in 1992. In the year 2002 this indicator is significantly higher (32.9%), the structure by age groups being even more favourable than during the previous period. The keeping of a high fertility rate is certainly connected to the „*rejuvenation*” of demographic structures but also to the absence or precarity of adjustment to the national and regional demographic pattern, in contrast with the conclusions advanced by certain authors, which stand true only at a regional or zonal scale but not at the local one (Trebici and Ghinoiu, 1986, p. 117). The performed summary surveys point out a certain tendency of considerable decrease of the family size within the young generation (aged 20 - 30 years) in close connection to their educational level. We can state that this community is still ruled by mentalities which are typical of a traditional demographic regime, at least from the perspective of the importance and values they attach to the phenomenon of birth, the transition to a more advanced demographic pattern usually assuming a price meant to provide the young generation's education and professional formation (according to the ideas set forth by Bacci, 2003, p. 217).

The investigation of Brăhășești commune within the framework of the whole county reveals that during the last two decades it has become the main „*reservoir*” of rural population. Its share in the evolution of the county demographic balance has considerably increased (figure 5). Thus, while from 1990 to 1995 it provided 4% of the total number of rural live-births, after the year 2004 it has constantly exceeded the value of 7% (and even that of 12% in the year 2009) in the context in which the decline of births has worsened in most county communes. Its share in the

total number of the rural population has remained relatively constant all throughout this period (about 3%) due to the considerable migratory flow it has generated as an expression of its undeniable demographic pressure.

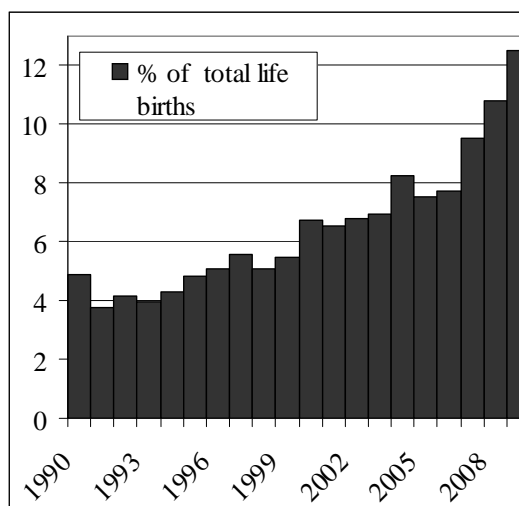


Figure 5. Evolution of Brăhășești commune's share in the total number of live-births in the rural environment of Galați County, between 1990 - 2009

(Source: according of Anuarul Statistic al județului Galați, 2010)

Beyond this apparent paradox, we must accept the idea that this community will play the role of a population supplier not only for the areas situated in its close vicinity but also for the others. The qualitative analysis resulted from direct field observation correlated with statistical information certifies the shaping in time of a diffusion area of this population which has brought its contribution either to the repopulation of some boroughs which had been left by Jew people (as it is the case of Ivești, Galați county, where the community that came into being in this manner already represents more than one fourth of the locality population, or of Podu Turcului - but here in a smaller number), or to the setting up of some new communities within settlements in which gypsies had not previously existed (Munteni, Umbrărești - Deal, Liești etc, getting to shares of 5 - 15% of the total population), or joining small contingents of gypsies, often at relatively large distances, as it is the case of Grajduri and Lunca Cetățuii communes in Iași county (figure 6).

Brăhășești village represents a particular case - the actual territorial fusion with Toflea supplied it with a significant flow of population, so that the gypsies' percentage as recorded by the census of 2002 exceeded 13%, the value being certainly underestimated. This quantitative contribution also reflects itself in a higher illiteracy rate in comparison to the other villages of comparative size in the area: 10.1% in opposition to 2 - 3% in Țepu, Gohor, Buciumeni etc. This value is undoubtedly imputable to the gypsy population which represents 35.3% of the total population of Toflea, this percentage being comparable to that of a neighbouring commune lying in Vrancea county Homocea, which holds an important partially assimilated gypsy community. This melting tendency experienced by Brăhășești can gradually project itself into an inversion of the ethnic ratios as a consequence of the proliferation of the gypsy community.

Their diffusion area has also included a series of sedentary gypsy communities (such as those in the communes of Ghidigeni - Gefu and Tălpigi villages, Movileni and Barcea - Podoleni village) with whom they have developed family relationships, many times established in the urban centres of the region. However their level is low because of the fact that Toflea gypsies preserve a certain specific identity which makes them be regarded as a distinct category in the area.

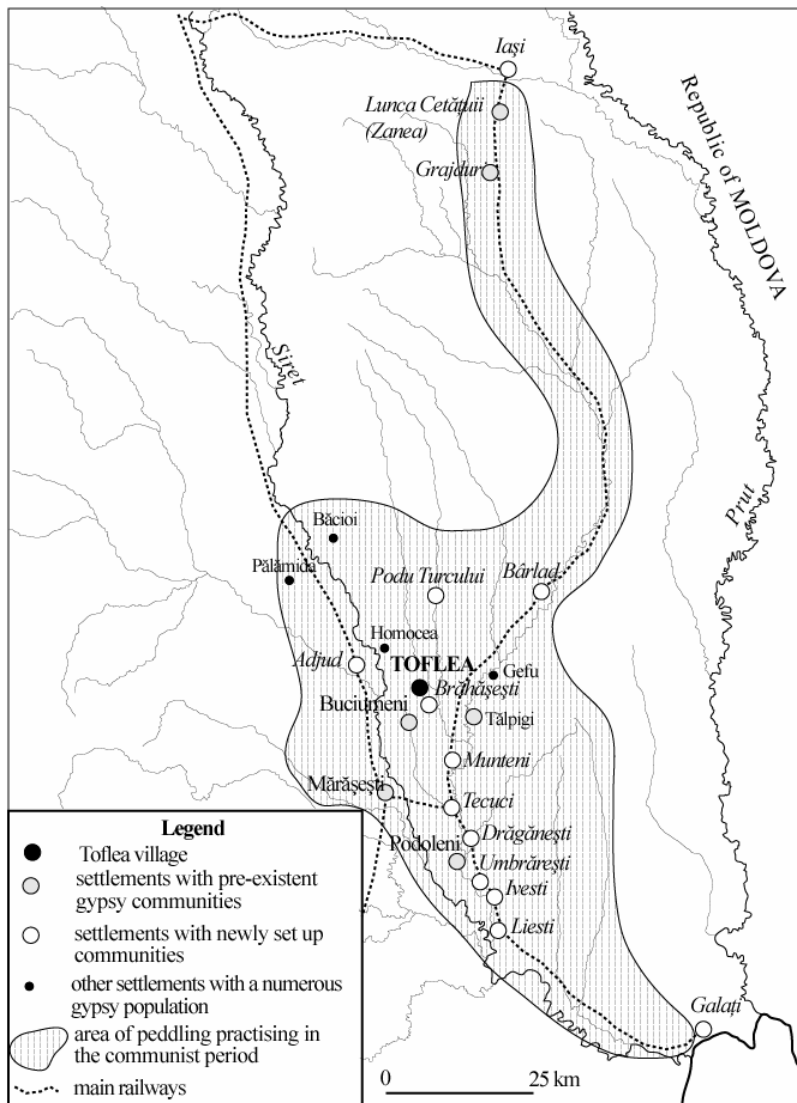


Figure 6. Dispersion of Toflea population and its connections to other gypsy communities in the South-Eastern part of Moldavia

(Source: censuses taken in 1930, 1992 and 2002 in Romania)

Another favourite destination is represented by the neighbouring towns: first and foremost Tecuci but also Mărășești and Adjud - towns that play the role of railway junction stations; Bârlad and especially Galați - the county capital city. The affiliation of a part of the population to the Pentecostal cult has recently allowed relationships with similar communities in Transylvania. Their main diffusion area practically overlaps the space within which they used to traditionally practice an itinerant commerce and carry out services in the field of repairing various containers and installations of domestic use (especially alembics). This activity has greatly narrowed after 1990, gypsies being replaced by numerous private firms that deal with collecting recyclable materials, this situation being favoured by the destructing of the industrial activities in the nearby

towns and by the restriction of rail activities in Tecuci, Mărășești and Adjud. They have also established privileged (many times illegal) relationships with the iron and steel works in Galați, recycling activities getting them in touch with other active gypsy communities in the area. In certain cases, the accumulation of a significant financial capital allowed them to develop commercial activities (more than 33 officially registered commercial associations according to the information provided by Brăhășești mayoralty) or even to get involved in privatising certain industrial or service-carrying out units. This latest tendency has shaped a new point of attraction: the capital city of the country, which houses societies set up by some of the most flourishing entrepreneurs in the village. However these outliving strategies prove to be precarious as a consequence of the impossibility of breaking free from the spiral of a chronic underdevelopment. The deepening of the intracommunity discrepancies superposed on the population explosive increase are susceptible of „*feeding*” both the internal tensions and the pressures derived from the relationships they develop with the population in the neighbouring villages.

Any summary prevision drawn up by extrapolation of the present tendencies inevitably leads to the preservation of an extremely important increasing potential, at least for the next two decades, in spite of the population erosion which has been triggered by permanent migration. The overpopulation critical threshold has been undoubtedly surpassed if we dwell on the subsistential density, the community of Toflea disposing of only about 500 hectares of agricultural land (according to field estimations) under the circumstances in which just a small part of the inhabitants own agricultural lands and practice agriculture.

If, against all reasons, the population migration were stopped, the number of inhabitants of Brăhășești commune would increase at least with 60% by the year 2030 in the context of the preservation of the present increase rate which, as shown by means of the analysis of the general fertility rate, does not show signs of decline. The migration process is not liable to erode the exceptional demographic vitality as long as it deals with a family, collective rather than individual migration. This ensures a surplus of originality to this commune and especially to the gypsy community in Toflea which dominates it from the demographic point of view.

CONCLUSION

The analysis we carried out by means of direct observation and processing the information provided by specialized institutions, prove the strong originality of the demographic evolution of the investigated commune, an evolution which is practically fully opposed to the general tendencies experienced by the Romanian society. Whether at the local level it can be regarded as singular, it is possible that similar situations exist at the national level, too. In the eastern part of the country, the commune of Slobozia Bradului situated in Vrancea county, at the north of Râmnicu Sărat, has recorded, up to a certain point, an almost identical evolution; a similar tendency is also typical of certain gypsy communities in Bacău, Suceava and Iași counties. Some of them are generally smaller and do not induce effects which resemble those of our case study, quite often finding themselves in a more advanced integration stage. Certain studies point out a strong correlation between the integration level and the demographic evolution of gypsy communities - it is the case of an ample research on the gypsies in Slovakia published by Potančoková et al. 2008. Thus, the socio-economic specificity of these communities is doubled by a geo-demographic specificity illustrated by distinct spatial and reproductive behaviours that scientists have quite rarely approached (Costachie et al., 2010).

However the present investigation also highlights another reality: although touched by the demographic crisis Romania still needs, strictly at the local level, denatalist demographic policies which are specific to developing countries. Any delay in the enforcement of some measures able to aim at modernizing the demographic behaviour of such communities can contribute to the sharpening of certain serious social problems such as those pictured by a valuation report drawn up by the World Bank, which bears testimony to the very strong correlation that exists between illiteracy and poverty within the gypsy communities in East Europe and particularly in Romania

(Revenga et al., 2002, p. 13 - 14). The actual integration of such communities as the one investigated by us also implies an adjustment to the exigencies of a contemporary society as regards the management of human resources.

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