



2.4

# Roma and the 'New Religions' in Europe

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Conversions to new religious denominations are happening among Roma all over Europe. This factsheet presents the main features of Romani religious conversions and new religiosity with a close focus on the Romanian case. Placing this case within the European and global contexts shows how new religious activism is at the conjunction between forces of globalisation and the intimate experiences of personhood and community.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional ethnological accounts defined the relationship between Roma and institutional religion by a double negation. On the one hand, it was observed that Roma do not adhere to a church or religion which could be seen as of 'their own', on the other hand, their relationship with the churches and religious traditions followed by the dominant populations was criticized as being 'insincere', 'mimetic' and 'magical'. Many of these analyses reproduced stereotypical perceptions and, in the best case, focused the attention on the marginal position of Roma within the traditional churches.

More recently, Romani religiosity was approached from a different perspective focusing on the existing religious expression and practices salient within Romani communities. The study of 'new religions' among the Roma produced a significant body of literature. The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century among different Romani groups offers an entry point for my discussion. Following these lines of earlier study, I will situate Romani religious practices in their historical and social context and present the main features of recent religious activism among the Roma.

The empirical data referred to in this factsheet comes from my research among the Transylvanian Roma, but I aim at

broader conclusions, since the identified processes are not limited to Romania, but observable all over Europe or even globally. In the first part of this factsheet, I offer a historical overview of the local context of my fieldwork with an outlook to the global rise of the Pentecostalism. In the second part, based on my ethnographic fieldwork, I focus on aspects of the religious transformations of the self, issues of religious language and symbolism, and new experiences of community and empowerment.

## A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW – RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY WITHIN TRANSYLVANIA

There is a distinct tread within sociological and anthropological studies of religion focusing on the intricate relationships between political and religious institutions in order to uncover arguments about how power is distributed among humans in different societies. It has been shown that in the European tradition, state-formation and religious regimes have been intimately linked (Wolf 1991). Transylvania, as part of the Hungarian Kingdom, was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region in the medieval period. Western Christianity (Catholicism) was the dominant religion, but the Eastern Rite (Orthodoxy) was the religion of a large segment of peasantry. With the advent of Protestantism (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Unitari-

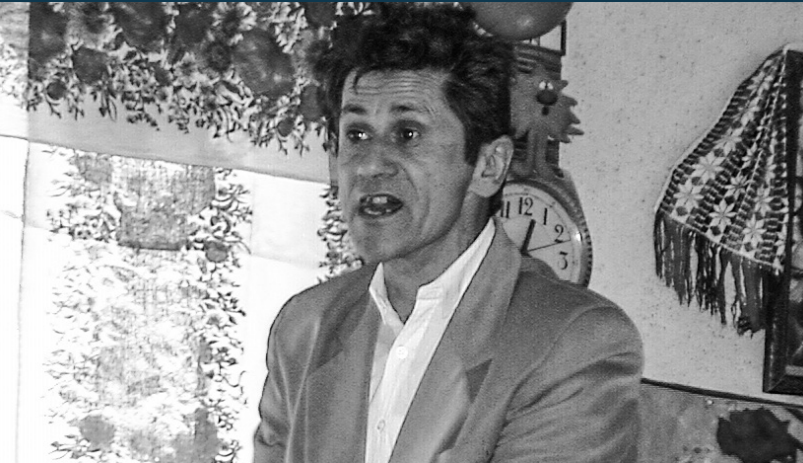
III. 1

Fragment from a Romani Pentecostal song

Do not look, do not look that I am black,  
God alone, God alone knows my heart.  
Come on brother come on sister to Jesus,  
As long as you live on the Earth.

## III. 1

Religious Service in a private home:  
Preaching from the Bible (village from Cluj Region 2004).  
Photo by László Fosztó.



## III. 2

Religious Service in a private home:  
Pentecostal sisters singing (village from Cluj region 2004)  
Photo by László Fosztó.



anism) the religious sphere became even more differentiated in the sixteenth century. In order to maintain peaceful social relations, religious tolerance was proclaimed by the Edict of Torda in 1568. In the seventeenth century, the Greek Catholic Church also emerged with the support of the Habsburg rulers. Religious and ethnic divisions never came under the hegemony of a single church, and in spite of political changes throughout the centuries, Transylvania has maintained its profile of a culturally diverse region. A particularity was the development of mono-ethnic churches (Fosztó 2006); different religious denominations historically became associated with different ethnic and national communities, so ethnicity and religious belonging largely overlap.

## CHURCHES AND THE NATION STATE

Transylvania became part of Greater Romania following World War I and the nation state-formation was characterized by government attempts to reduce the ethno-religious diversity within the unified country. A part of these attempts was to reinforce the hegemony of the Orthodox Christian and Greek Catholic Churches as *national churches*, to offer a legal frame for the 'minority denominations', such as Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans, and Unitarians, as well as for the Jewish population, the Muslims Turks and the Tatars. Smaller denominations were suppressed as '*sects*', because they were seen as subversive to the national culture. This is the period, in the early 1920s, when the first Pentecostal communities emerged in the western part of Romania. Pentecostals, along with other small denominations, suffered increased persecution by the state, which culminated during the fascist regime of Ion Antonescu (1940-44) who planned to deport to Transnistria all those believers who refused to convert to Orthodoxy (Achim 2013). Pentecostals were finally not deported, but some of the religious leaders suffered imprisonment and hard labour (Andreiescu 2012).

Following World War II, the socialist regime closely controlled the religious organizations. The Greek Catholic

Church was banned and 'merged' with the Romanian Orthodox Church; minority denominations and smaller churches were brought under close state supervision. Still, the Pentecostal movement succeeded in slowly increasing the number of followers, in particular during the second period of Romanian socialism (after 1965). During these years, conversions among Romani communities emerged and intensified. In the same period, the repressive apparatus of the Ceaușescu regime increasingly suppressed community activism among ethnic minorities branding it 'nationalist'. Some Romani leaders joined the Pentecostal movement, thus facilitating the conversions, and the Romani language started being used in services. Documents from the archive of the secret service reveal that there were 'Gypsy nationalist' requests for authorization of Romani prayer houses, as in the case of a pastor from Reșița in 1983. Authorities rejected the request and the religious leader received a prohibitive fine. This made him consider appealing to the USA Embassy in Bucharest and sending letters to Radio Free Europe denouncing violations of human rights (Marin 2017: I.360, II.89-91). In the years to follow, the Romani church assembly in Reșița continued to meet in a private home for services, a practice that continued well into the post-socialist period in many localities all over Romania.

ROMANI PENTECOSTALISM AS PART  
OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

Pentecostalism originated in the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but as I have shown in the previous section, the movement reached Romania very soon afterwards. Still, paradoxically, it only started to expand significantly during the Cold War. There are many reasons for this, but with regard to conversions among the Roma it is important to note that there were similar movements of 'awakening' in Great Britain (Ridholls 1986) and France (Laurent 2014) in the same period. The details of the historical relationships between the Western European and Eastern European Romani Pentecostalism during that

## III. 3

Baptism in water in a village in Cluj region in the early 1990es  
(copy of a photograph kept by the convert).

Photo by László Fosztó.



## III. 4

Romani Pentecostal Prayer house  
in a neighbourhood of Cluj/Kolozsvár.

Photo by László Fosztó.



period have not yet been adequately researched, but there are indications of significant exchanges. Socialist Romania has not been as isolated from the rest of the world as its political regime wanted it to appear for the population. Recent historical research has shown how small protestant churches, especially the Baptists, were at the forefront of religious human rights claims both within the country, and on the international level (Dobrincu 2012).

The religious activism of the Pentecostal Roma also needs to be viewed in this frame. Pentecostal religiosity is part of and responds to changes brought about by forces of globalisation. Anthropologists such as Thomas Csordas argued for understanding charismatic religious movements within the world-system (Csordas 1992) and Joel Robbins reviewed Pentecostalism as part of the globalisation of Christianity (Robbins 2004). It is important to note that in the case of Pentecostal conversions among the Romanian Roma it was not until regime change in 1989 that they were allowed to practice their faith freely and maintain international connections. For much of its history, this movement was characterised by the interplay between forces of religious revival and suppression attempts by the authorities. In the second part of this factsheet, I turn to the discussion of the way in which individual members of Romani communities make sense of these dynamics within their church assemblies.

#### RELIGIOUS CONVERSION, MORAL PERSONHOOD, AND COMMUNITY

It would be misleading to claim that all or even most Roma are converging to Pentecostalism or other forms of Charismatic Christianity. In fact, most Roma are still, at least nominally, members of the historical churches all over Central and Eastern Europe. What is significant is that Roma are overrepresented among those who convert, and there are numerous Romani communities where strong Pentecostal assemblies emerged during the past decades. Many of these communities are also led by Romani pastors and deacons. Thomas Acton observes

that “only within the Pentecostal stream of Christianity do we see denominations which are primarily Romani in ethnic character *and* leadership” (Acton 2014: 23). Acton argues that this is so because Pentecostals challenge ecclesiastical authority structures and deconstruct the roots of Romani exclusion. I would add that it is worth looking at what kind of constructions are replacing the deconstructed authority structures. Therefore, in the following part of this factsheet, I will look at three domains where these socio-cultural forms and their symbolic expressions are undergoing changes as the aftermath of conversion to Pentecostalism.

#### TRANSFORMING THE SELF

The demography of Pentecostalism is not based on automatically transmitting the faith within the family from parents to children, which is mostly the case in historical churches. In Pentecostalism, similarly to other evangelical churches, there is a clear emphasis on the conversion of the grown up. Conversion is achieved through an act of personal commitment and public testimony of a direct relationship with Jesus. This commitment should be followed by training the novice in the church credo and ritual, leading to baptism in water. Baptism takes place through the total submerging of the convert in water, who is then believed to emerge as a ‘born-again’ person. The past spent in sin or delusion is washed away and a new Christian awareness and moral personhood emerge. The convert is ready for receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal conversion is ideally completed by receiving Baptism with the Holy Spirit; this can take the form of ‘speaking in tongues’ (glossolalia), the ability of prophecy, faith healing or some other gift. In the whole process, the emphasis is on the individual decision to join in the faith, the inner transformation of the person, and the direct, unmediated relationship with and experience of the divine. This process is considered both transformative and empowering for the new church member.

The symbolism surrounding this emphasis is on the inner transformation and detachment from the larger



## III. 5

A cohort of converts prepared for baptism in front of the church assembly (Cluj, 2010).

Photo by László Fosztó.



## III. 6

Newly baptised man emerging from the water (Cluj, 2013).

Photo by László Fosztó.



social structure. Converts waiting for baptism are dressed completely in white, not only symbolising purity, but also leaving behind the colourful dresses and the social and ethnic categories attached to them. The opposition between 'the old' and the 'born-again' person is clearly signalled. An emphasis on the inner worth of each and every person has restorative effect on the self, encouraging the convert to overcome whatever difficulty she or he experienced in the past. This process of self-transformation can be effective in many cases of addictive behaviour (gambling, alcohol, drug use) or coping with belonging to stigmatised social categories (ethno-racial stigma, social exclusion). The transformation of self offers responses both to problems related to suffering and to those related to status.

### RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND THE COMMUNICATION OF THE FAITH

There are changes observable in the linguistic domain following conversion and these changes can form a particular new register of the Romani language. The new elements of religious language are present in all religious expressions: sermons, prayers, testimonies, prophecies, or singing. They are often present even in everyday exchanges between members of the church. Rhetorically, an opposition is constructed between the inner self symbolised by 'the heart' of the person and the outside appearance which can be 'the face' or the skin, or signals of social conditions or ethnic belonging of the convert. Meaningful relationships can only

## III. 15

### Transcript of a Romani Pentecostal song (village from Cluj region 2004)

## Cîntec 1.

Cor:

O ce şucar o ce şucar  
O Isus amaro pral  
O Isus amaro pral  
O ce şucar vaş amenge vo mulgas

! : Na dicîtu dicîtu che omi calo  
Nu mai o Del prinjanel moro slo  
Haida prala haida penyo co Isus  
Sode tu jives pe pu.

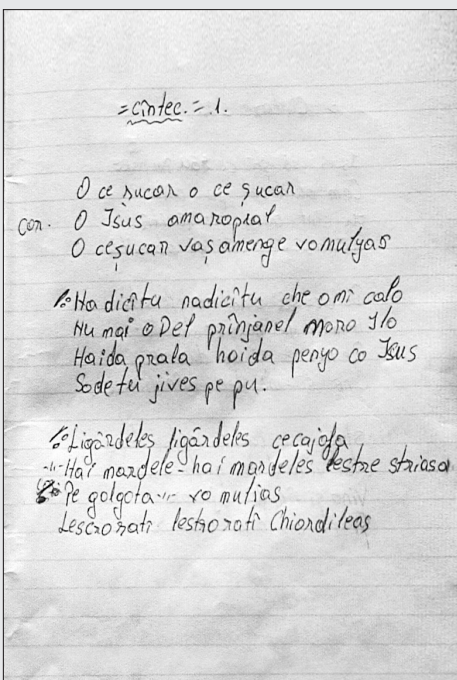
! : Liğârdeles liğârdeles ce Cajafa  
- " - Hai mardeles hai mardeles lestre striasa  
! : Pe golgota - " - vo mulias  
Lescro ratî lestro ratî chiordielas

## Song #1.

Oh, how wonderful [it is], oh, how wonderful,  
Jesus is our brother,  
Oh, how wonderful [it is], oh, how wonderful,  
He died for us!

Do not look, do not look that I am black,  
God alone, God alone knows my heart.  
Come on brother come on sister to Jesus,  
As long as you live on the Earth.

They brought him, they brought him to Caiaphas  
And they beat him, and they beat his body.  
On the Golgotha, on the Golgotha he died,  
His blood, his blood poured.



III. 5

A cohort of newly baptised converts in white, taking a photo with their pastor and deacon (Cluj, 2013).

Photo by László Fosztó.



III. 6

Newly baptised couple with family members (Cluj, 2013).

Photo by László Fosztó.



be based on the inner connection; therefore, the heart must be 'opened'. The open-heartedness is not only a requirement in the direction of the divine, but also enters the domain of relationships with fellow church members. Accordingly, the linguistic paradigm of kinship is introduced into the religious community. Membership in the church is modelled on brotherhood (and sisterhood in the case of women), kinship terms are used to refer to and address members of the assembly.

A particular speech form is not only accompanied, but also produces the transformed/born-again self: the *conversion narrative*. This is a rather ritualised form of autobiographical narrative, centred on the commitment made to Jesus, which is narrated as the turning moment in life. The behaviour and

values that characterised the person before the conversion are portrayed as senseless or sinful as opposed to life after conversion, which is filled with divine joy and saved. Conversion narratives can be part of testimonies during religious services, but they can also often be heard as part of self-presentation in other contexts (Fosztó 2009a).

The prestige of the written and printed word is salient. Even if the main features of Pentecostalism are focused on experiential and oral rituals, the role of *literacy* is important. The use of the Bible is central during services, but converts also carry it as an emblem of their faith. The collections of religious hymns are mostly in Romanian, but converts also use handwritten notebooks to write down the lyrics of songs. With the advent of smart-phones and social media, sermons

III. 15

## Fragment from a conversion narrative by a Romni in her sixties

(the narrative was recorded in 2004)

*[How it happened when you first attended a Pentecostal church?]*

*I had no idea about that church, but God told me when I was deadly ill. I was ill, they took me to the doctor and they did the analyses. They said I have leukaemia and will not live long, maybe for two or three weeks. All my family was weeping, because they knew my illness. I was talking to God all night: What will happen to me my dear God? I was talking to Him, all night long. Once a voice told me in my ear: Woman, you must go to a Romanian Pentecostal church – I had no idea what that was –, you should go there, and they will pray for you. You will get healed. When I told my family in the morning they thought I lost my mind because of the pain. But then I wanted to go very much, so they took me. I will never forget: it was January, there was a big snow, there was a storm, but I could not walk. I was lying on*

*six cushions in the bed. I could not sleep for six months. I was awake day and night, I had no sleep. I was crying. Even now the tears can be seen on that cushion. They called a car and took me to Cluj, to my sister. So she can take me to the church, where they will pray for me. Then my brother in law told me: I take you Rosa there! Or even better I bring you here one hundred Pentecostals to let them pray! He worked with them at the construction site... The next day when my brother in law came, he brought with him seven brothers from the church. There was also a child with them, he was about twelve years old, I will never forget. And they were praying over me, while I was lying in my bed. And God has worked on me.*

*[What you felt?]*

*I felt better. I was able to sleep that night. I was having some rest. This was on a Friday, and I was staying there until Tuesday. They came on Tuesday and took me to the church. My sister had to hold me, I was not able to stand. My bones were weak. There was only dust in my bones. There was no marrow in my bones, like in the bones of others. There was no calcium, no magnesium, nothing. And when we arrived there, we had to pray*



III. 5

Collective meal in the churchyard after the baptism ritual  
(Cluj, 2013)

Photo by László Fosztó.



III. 6

Pentecostal converts with Bible in hand  
(2013).

Photo by László Fosztó.



and songs are also recorded, broadcasted, and shared using online channels.

#### EXPERIENCING COMMUNITY AND EMPOWERMENT

The impact of conversion is also transformative of social relations and the community. While in the context of the service the convert can rely on an accepting and supporting audience, this is not always the case when he or she presents the born-again self in other contexts. The internal public sphere of the church community is the training ground for the convert to stand up for his or her narrative. There are other changes of the non-verbal behaviour of the converts: women start wearing headscarves and men often start dressing in suits, wearing eyeglasses or carrying their Bible in plain sight during holidays.

Still, there is a unity between linguistic and non-verbal elements underpinning the authenticity of conversion. *Sincerity*, a form of inner-driven unity of self and behaviour (Keane 2002), should be a trait of the converted self. Sincerity, modesty, and reliability are at the basis of the moral personhood of the convert. These virtues are central for the new models of community leadership as well. However, this new form of leadership always draws on and refers back to the religious community. The convert is never alone. His or her strength comes from the community. The effervescence of the community is seen as proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the church. This presence is perceived as encouraging, empowering, or even healing for all suffering, let them be bodily pains or social ills.

Gender relations are also reshaped by the conversion. Some habits of the past, like the consumption of alcohol, which is connected particularly to male sociality, are labelled sinful and therefore interrupted by adherence to the new religion. Family roles, in particular the male responsibility, is emphasised and therefore a patriarchal model of family is promoted. However, this can also be empowering for women. Strict family rules reinforce their control over organising and supervising the life of all family members. And the community comes to their

support in case they ask. Violence and enmity between males are also disapproved of as conflict resolution strategies or a source for getting respect. Other forms for proving virtue and gaining recognition are encouraged, for example models for the missionary, enterprising, or the good provider for the community and the outside world (male converts often start driving taxis, or seek employment in the service sector).

While these changes could be seen as departures from traditional forms of social organisation of the Roma, Pentecostalism also reinforces ideas about ethnic belonging and overarches the insularity of particular Romani groups. The network of churches serves as the incipient infrastructure for a religious public sphere where the circulation of information is not limited to religious topics. The ties between the converted members of the Romani communities are valuable resources for getting information about new economic opportunities, or for testing the ground if one contemplates migration. During the past decade, the Romanian Romani Pentecostal church has clearly been connected to transnational mobility. On the one hand, the dense local networks of converts facilitate the migration, on the other hand, migrants 'plant' new churches in the context of the destination countries. New assemblies were opened in many European cities and the pastors and musical performers are moving around between these churches scattered all over the European Union.

#### SUMMARY

This factsheet proposed to present the issue of new religious phenomena among the Roma, avoiding the trap of showing it as exceptional, but still highlighting its particularities. The empirical material presented comes from the case of Romani Pentecostalism in Transylvania, Romania. While Pentecostalism emerged in Romania in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not before the 1970s that it found its way to the Roma. I presented the way in which the movement is part of the global spread of Charismatic Christianity. At the same time, Romani Pentecostal leaders were blamed by the communist authorities

III. 5

Religious service in an ethnically mixed church  
(village from Cluj region 2011).

Photo by László Foszto.



III. 6

Prayer house in the Roma neighborhood of a village  
(Covasna County 2011).

Photo by László Foszto.



for promoting 'Gypsy nationalism' during the Cold War. This understanding is rooted on the one hand in the history of state-formation and the particular structure of the religious field in Romania (mono-ethnic churches), but also in the repressive attitude of the Ceaușescu regime towards ethnic and religious minorities.

However, the historical and structural explanation for the phenomena is not the full story. I also offered an overview of how Pentecostal conversions are unfolding within the community. Pentecostalism offers responses both to suffering (physical and social) and to status (stigma) problems and conversions are progressing through transformations of the self, creating a new domain of religious symbolism and adequate linguistic forms (in Romani), and having an impact on the social relations within the communities. Pentecostalism

is not just transforming the inner relations of a converted community, but also influences how community members situate themselves within the world. The movement also offers networks and possibility of mobility.

Romani Pentecostalism started to reach its potential more fully after the fall of the Romanian socialist regime. The movement expanded and new churches were opened not only within Romania but also, following the large scale westward migration of Romanians (and among them Roma), in different European cities. The new technologies of communication (in particular smartphones and social media channels) offer new potential for recording and sharing religious performances. Romani Pentecostalism remains a vibrant and multifaceted social and religious domain for the coming years.

## Further Reading on Romani Pentecostalism

There is a growing body of scholarly literature on the social and cultural processes associated with the spread of Pentecostalism and related forms of Charismatic Christianity among Romani groups. The phenomena are much more diverse than it could be presented in this factsheet. The volume *Romani Pentecostalism* edited by David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (Thurfjell and Marsh 2014) offers a good introduction to the field. Those who look for even more details will find monographs and studies from many countries all over Europe and beyond.

The topics covered and the approaches vary. Patrick Williams pioneered the anthropological understanding of the emerging Pentecostalism of French Roms (Williams 1984; Williams 1991) and Manouches (Williams 2003). Paloma Gay y Blasco published works on Evangelical conversions of the Spanish Gitanos focusing on gender (Gay y Blasco 1999; Gay y Blasco 2012), and diaspora formations (Gay y Blasco 2002). The work of David Thurfjell offers insights into Pentecostalism among the Finnish Kaale (Thurfjell 2013).

Groups living in Central and South-Eastern Europe are also well represented: Barbara Rose Lange's monograph with particular focus on music among the Hungarian Pentecostal Roma (Lange 2003), works by Tomáš Hrustič and Tatiana Podolinská about the Roma from Slovakia (Podolinská and Hrustič 2011), Štěpán Ripka on Roma in the Czech Republic (Ripka 2014; Ripka 2015), Magdalena Slavkova on Bulgarian Roma (Slavkova 2007; Slavkova 2018), and Melody Wachsmuth on conversions among Roma in Serbia and Croatia (Wachsmuth 2017).

Literature on Pentecostalism among the Romanian Romani groups includes monographs by Johannes Ries (Ries 2007) and László Foszto (Foszto 2009b), and a growing number of studies on different aspects of socio-cultural transformations (Beissinger 2011; Foszto and Kiss 2012), also including recent phenomena like migration and mobility (Bișis 2017; Lipan 2017; Rubiolo 2016; Roman 2018; Peti 2018; Voiculescu 2017). These recent studies reframe the discussion on Romani Pentecostalism within the enlarged European Union.



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