Making the Invisible Visible – Roma in the Programme of European Capitals of Culture: From Marseille 2013 to Timișoara 2023

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CRS Critical Romani Studies

Abstract

The programme of Timișoara – European Capital of Culture 2023 included a component on "Deconstructing Stereotypes and Overcoming Marginalization of Roma Communities in Timișoara and Europe", initiated and coordinated by the Intercultural Institute of Timișoara. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the key features of this component and its background, with the first initiative of this kind, that was part of Marseille-Provence European Capital of Culture 2013. It argues that the way in which cultural and educational activities, aimed at overcoming stereotypes about Roma, are framed, designed, and implemented can, in terms of outcomes, result in big differences. Approaches used to challenge stereotypes in the programme of Timișoara – European Capital of Culture, counter-stereotype exposure, and eliciting empathy and perspective-taking are discussed here.

Introduction

Since 1985, the European Commission has awarded the annual title "European Capital of Culture" to over 60 cities in the EU and beyond. Overall, the European Capitals of Culture initiative has two general objectives: (1) to protect and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe, to highlight common features, to increase the sense of belonging to a common cultural space among citizens, and (2) to stimulate the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities. The title European Capital of Culture is not a recognition of the value of a city's cultural heritage or cultural life but rather supports its commitment to improvements at various levels such as urban regeneration through culture, developing the international profile of the cities, improving the image of the city in the eyes of its own inhabitants, developing cultural provision, or promoting it as a tourist destination. While acknowledged at the EU level, European Capitals of Culture are also endorsed by national ministries of culture. However, local authorities play a key role and are supposed to involve relevant local stakeholders to define specific and operational objectives based on the local context, opportunities and needs, as well as a programme of activities that will contribute to achieving the general objectives mentioned above, defined at European level (Garcia and Cox 2013; European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2014; European Commission 2018).

European Capitals of Culture have, in general, explicit aims related to local and European cultural diversity. Timişoara won the competition to be a European Capital of Culture with a complex proposal which included a component entitled "Invisible/Visible – Deconstructing Stereotypes and Overcoming Marginalization of Roma Communities in Timişoara and Europe", initiated and coordinated by the Intercultural Institute of Timişoara. The title is particularly relevant to the local context. It is aligned with the branding of Timişoara 2023, which used light as a metaphor, with the tagline "Shine your light! Light up your city!" with all its component titles somehow related to the idea of light. It is also relevant locally, as Timişoara is a city that prides itself on cherishing its traditional cultural diversity, while often avoiding recognition of Roma as part of this diversity, alongside significant tensions related, especially, to a small group of Roma, whose criminal activities chimed with the racism and discrimination levelled against Roma in general.

Timişoara is not the first European Capital of Culture to include a focus on Roma in its programme. Kosice, in 2013, and Plovdiv, in 2019, also included activities on this topic, albeit limited, in both cases, to their respective "Roma ghettos" (EC 2015, 2019). Therefore, in both these cases, most of the activities consisted in bringing cultural activities to the largest Roma-majority neighbourhoods. However, Timişoara's approach on this matter is more linked to the case of the European Capital of Culture Marseille-Provence 2013. Indeed, despite the fact that its component on Roma is not mentioned in the review of 30 years of European Capitals of Culture (EC 2020), and the only mentions of Roma refer to Kosice and Plovdiv, Marseille proposed a series of remarkable activities that are similar in many ways to the ones included in the programme in Timişoara.

This analysis relies on the programme documents publicly available for both cities and on the views of the authors of the Timişoara one, but does not include, for practical reasons related to unavailable data, the perspectives of other relevant stakeholders, both Roma and non-Roma, as well as the perceptions of

participants and of the general public, Roma and non-Roma. However, it can provide a useful reference for the kind of reflection that public or non-governmental entities may have when attempting to spotlight aspects concerning intercultural perceptions and relations and anti-Roma racism. It argues that, in order to actually obtain the positive outcomes intended, initiative design is essential. It describes several ways in which the programme in Timişoara and, to some extent, the one in Marseille, took into account two of the most powerful strategies to change individual and collective negative perceptions towards groups that are targets of racism, exposure to counter-stereotypical examples and empathy and perspective-taking (Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015; Lai et al. 2016; Paluck et al. 2021).

1. Marseille 2013 – Timişoara 2023: Similarities and Differences

The Intercultural Institute of Timişoara did not design its programme by copying ideas from Marseille. The design was based on two aspects: on the one hand, an analysis of local context, needs, and opportunities, done by and also involving Roma organisations from the region, and, on the other, a set of principles and general aims that the organisation has been promoting for a long time. However, the programme in Timişoara turned out to be quite similar in content to what Marseille had implemented ten years earlier, but with some differences also worth highlighting.

Both programmes included local activities, as well as activities with a European dimension. In the case of Marseille, the European dimension was provided by the connection of regional authorities with the Council of Europe, while in Timişoara, the Intercultural Institute, besides involving some of its European partners engendered for this purpose, with the support of the Council of Europe and cooperation with the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). Local activities included exhibitions, performances, and community-based activities in both cities. However, most local activities in Marseille targeted non-Romani participants and were aimed at encouraging them to discover the reality, background, and diversity of Roma, while in Timişoara, there was a balance between activities targeting non-Roma and activities dedicated to local Roma, focused on empowerment, removing barriers to accessing cultural provision in the city, and participation in a variety of cultural activities with an intercultural dimension. Both cities had a focus on overcoming stereotypes about Roma. In the case of Marseille, this concern was explicitly outlined in the brochure edited on that occasion by Jean-Pierre Liégeois, a Council of Europe expert who played a leading role in establishing the Roma programme of Marseille 2013 and in engaging the Council of Europe (Liégeois 2013). In the case of Timişoara, the focus on deconstructing stereotypes is found in the title of the Romani-focused component and was a key concern throughout its design which was led by the Intercultural Institute.

The way the programmes of the two European Capitals of Culture addressed Roma stereotypes differed. In Marseille, there was a mixture of events presenting Roma from stereotypical and counter-stereotypical perspectives, while in Timişoara there was more overt and explicit transversal attention to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

2. Can Cultural Activities Challenge Deeply-rooted Stereotypes?

Indeed, one of the starting points in the design of the Roma component of Timişoara 2023 was acknowledgement of the great impact that negative stereotypes about Roma have and the importance of addressing them through cultural activities included in the European Capital of Culture programme; however, this does not mean that positive outcomes are guaranteed. On the contrary, there is evidence that well-intentioned efforts to overcome the negative impact of stereotypes can actually lead to unintended negative consequences, reinforcing stereotypes and worsening intercultural perceptions and relations (Legault et al. 2011; Dover, Kaiser, and Major 2019).

Research also proves that both explicit and implicit stereotypes are malleable, and that certain processes can improve individual ability to moderate and control stereotypic responses (Blair et al. 2001), as well as positive outcomes obtained at the collective level. While evidence provided by social psychology and related fields is still weak and insufficient, revealing that most interventions can change expressed attitudes and behaviours to a certain degree, there are certain approaches that have a stronger positive impact, especially if they are embedded in a broader, multi-faceted programme, such as that provided by a European Capital of Culture, which combines cultural events and activities, public communication, and education (Paluck et al. 2021).

Two of the strategies that proved more effective will be discussed further, as they were key transversal features of the Roma component of Timişoara 2023: counter-stereotype exposure and empathy, linked to perspective-taking. A review of studies on prejudice reduction published between 2007 and 2019, performed by Paluck et al. (2021) reveals that, despite methodological shortcomings, there is valid evidence that these two strategies are some of those with the highest impact. Moreover, these approaches are compatible with interventions connected to cultural activities that are proven to have a good potential for larger-scale impact (Murrar and Brauer 2018).

3. Counter-stereotypical Exposure

Exposure to cases and situations that contradict a stereotype is one of the most effective strategies if measures are taken to avoid perception of the counter-stereotypical example as an exception. The Marseille 2013 programme included both activities that challenge and activities that confirm Roma stereotypes. For example, non-Roma were invited to join a "Roma circus" activity, "accompanied by Gypsy music, bewitching and wild", but there was also "an interdisciplinary theatrical creation, in which five actors and five Romani musicians will intertwine the stories of refugees living in Europe with excerpts from Homer's *Odyssey*" (the quotes are from the agenda of the Marseille events).

The team in Timişoara aimed to enhance the visibility of messages that challenge Roma stereotypes. For example, the performances by the self-declared "Roma feminist" theatre "Giuvlipen" presented a different image of Romani women from the stereotypical ones. By focusing on the future, they also challenged

the common association of Roma with traditions and the past. Santino Spinelli was introduced to the Timişoara public as both a Romani musician, combining tradition with innovation, and as a Romani academic, poet, and activist. Several of the contributions by ERIAC to the process, including a modern art exhibition or a concert by a Romani rock band, also generated perceptions of Roma that challenge common stereotypes, in line with many other ERIAC initiatives.

Another section of the programme that can also be seen as promoting a counter-stereotypical image of Roma was academic. An international conference on "Racism and Romani Studies", organized by ERIAC, in partnership with the Intercultural Institute and West University of Timişoara, brought together Romani scholars from different countries, alongside non-Romani colleagues. In addition, the Intercultural Institute also organized, in cooperation with West University, a national academic workshop, bringing together young Romani and non-Romani scholars from across Romania to exchange interdisciplinary approaches and the common transdisciplinary challenges and ethical principles that guide their current and future research.

In all these cases, as shown in media analysis by the Intercultural Institute of Timişoara, the use of mainstream and social media, as well as of wide-reaching public communication structures created for Timişoara 2023, including a dedicated website, newsletter, and consistent social media presence, allowed for counter-stereotypical examples to reach a much larger audience than those involved directly, or connected in some way with the events or with the institutions where they took place.

4. Empathy and Perspective-taking

Another Timişoara programme worth emphasising is the one on empathy and perspective-taking as a way to overcome stereotypes and prejudices against Roma. These viewpoints, that is the capacity to see things from the perspective of others and understand what they could think or feel (Eisenberg 2003), are proven to significantly foster the capacity to counter automatic tendencies to rely on stereotypes when thinking about a group or when interacting with its members. Experimental studies prove that, by encouraging individuals to experience the thoughts or emotions of another person, perspective-taking leads to more favourable attitudes toward that particular person, that also extend toward members of that person's group (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Paluck et al. 2021).

Stimulating empathy was visible to some extent in the Marseille 2013 programme, especially through photo exhibitions and film presentations, such as a documentary on the story of a Romanian Roma moving back and forth between Romania and France. Such events were also present at Timişoara 2023, but some additional approaches were added.

One was the use of Forum Theatre, in cooperation with two experienced international partners, Théatre de l'opprimé, from Paris, and Kuringa, from Berlin. Forum Theatre sessions were built by mixed groups of Roma and non-Roma young people, presenting scenes of racism, violence and discrimination faced by Roma. They were presented to different audiences, especially to young people, enabling an exploration of intervention alternatives. This is not only consistent with general research evidence, but also with

research revealing that seeing things from the perspective of Roma can provide crucial insights, that avoid evaluations of situations and behaviours based on prejudice, as well as inefficient policies and presumed support measures (Rus and Nestian-Sandu 2014; Rostas 2019).

Another example of this category was an exhibition on the Roma Holocaust, based on consultations with two domestic Romani organizations, Nevo Parudimos and Romane Rodimata, and the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma from Heidelberg, with contributions by two Romani scholars, Adrian-Nicolae Furtuna and Bogdan Chiriac. The exhibition opened and was shown initially at West University of Timișoara, then travelled to several high schools. Therefore, hundreds of high school and university students were able to develop a critical understanding of this tragic historical event and show empathy and perspective-taking by relating to the personal stories of victims, survivors, as well as bystanders and rescuers, demonstrated during the accompanying educational activities. A key feature of the exhibition was that it presented personal stories of Roma, not just as victims, but by emphasising a variety of affiliations, connections, and contexts involved. Selected testimonials of Romani women and men, parents, children, soldiers, members of local communities, and so forth, were shared alongside examples of people who supported Romani deportations, as well as supportive measures from members of the majority who requested that their Romani neighbours be left alone.

Conclusions: What Actually Works to Overcome Stereotypes at a Collective Level?

The activities related to Roma in the European Capital of Culture programme, seem to be implicitly good ones. They would be even better if their declared aim was to deconstruct stereotypes and challenge the dominantly negative perceptions of Roma, rooted in racism. However, as argued above, the way activities, supposed to reach these aims, are designed can make a big difference in terms of outcomes. Taking a colour-blind approach that denies differences or ignores the prevalence of negative stereotypes can lead to superficial, ineffective measures, that risk enforcing apparently positive stereotypes, enhancing covert racism and justifying current power unbalances (Apfelbaum, Norton, and Summer 2012). Conversely, if too much emphasis is put on denouncing and exposing the prevalence of negative stereotypes, significant risks can arise. Increasing awareness of stereotyping in the hope of motivating individuals to resist and challenge it, risks normalising it, paradoxically undermining the desired effect. People that are more aware of the prevalence of negative stereotypes, tend to express them more in their views and behaviours (Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015). Moreover, giving explicit messages to people to suppress stereotypes results in stereotype rebound, and when such messages are public, denouncing widespread racism, they risk generating defensive reactions and majority backlash.

Having an intentional strategy to expose the public to carefully selected counter-stereotypical messages and stimulate the manifestation of empathy through a capacity to understand the perspective of members of a group that is target of racism and discrimination, as is the case with Roma, is proven to have a better chance of successfully promoting positive change. The avoidance of how widespread are stereotypes and prejudices reduces the risk of normalising them, and not collectively blaming the majority reduces

the risk of resistance and backlash from them. Stimulating empathy and perspective-taking generated simultaneously a critical understanding of the structural background of inequalities and injustices, and a sense of increased personal responsibility, combined with a commitment to the values of equality, equity, cultural diversity, dignity and human rights. By tackling these through cultural activities, a perception of directive, moralising messaging is side-stepped, stimulating reflection and responsibility instead.

There is solid research evidence that interventions of this kind work better when they are part of a larger framework with high public visibility (Paluck et al. 2021). The European Capitals of Culture offer such an enabling context and should be further used in a similar way as the examples of Marseille 2013 and, especially, Timișoara 2023 show.

A key challenge that these initiatives also have to face concerns visible outcomes. Measuring in a systematic way the actual impact on public perceptions is difficult and unreliable. People may be affected positively but remain unaware of that effect, or the impact can be delayed and manifest sometime after exposure to the trigger of perception change (Lai et al. 2016). Therefore, the most reasonable step is not to allocate resources for extensive statistic studies aimed at measuring the impact of such initiatives but rather to pay close attention to checking ex-ante to what extent intended activities reproduce stereotypes or challenge them in a way that seems more likely to minimise unintended negative consequences and produce actual change.

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