



## **Social Representations of Romanian Immigrants from Tuscany in the Mass Media**

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### **Abstract**

*The Tuscany region of Italy is at the top of the preferences of Romanian immigrants. In this area, there were registered, in 2018, 84,621 Romanians representing 20.72% of the total foreign population, according to the data provided by ISTAT. Starting from the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1978), the paper attempts to investigate how Romanian immigrants are represented in the mass media in Tuscany. Mass media contributes to a great extent to the formation of a positive or negative perception towards immigrants among the indigenous population, to the crystallization of the collective and individual image regarding immigrants, and the construction of new social representations. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to establish the elements that lead to the creation of a positive or negative symbolic capital of Romanian immigrants, according to the most important online newspapers in the region. The premise from which we start is that the elements that shape the symbolic image of the Romanian immigrants from Tuscany are rather negative, as the isolated actions of some immigrants lead to stereotypes and prejudices towards the entire minority group.*

**Key words:** Immigrants; mass media; migration; social representation; symbolic capital; stereotypes and prejudices; Tuscany

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the problem of international migration is proving to be a subject of maximum interest for specialists in various fields such as sociology, economics, anthropology, political science, etc. Castles and Miller (2013) argued that we live in *an era of migration*. Migration is a humane and natural process and involves moving people from one country to another, crossing one or more international borders (Moura, 2011). In Del Re's opinion, (2017), migration is a natural desire, a dynamic force that contributes to a significant change in the lives of both migrants and societies affected by the migration process. In this directive, migration is considered to be the third basic factor involving 'changes in population structure alongside birth and mortality' (Edmonston, Michalowski, 2004, p. 455) which has important implications for the population's growth and decline, but also in the change in the socio-demographic characteristics of the countries of origin and destination.

If for P. Kok (1999; 19) migration can be defined as the crossing of the border of a "predefined spatial unit" by one or more persons, which implies the change of residence, for Zelinsky (1971) migration can be a form of *territorial mobility* or *geographical* as claimed by Shryock (1976), involving movements outside the residence community. A classic approach to migration, seen as a process of population mobility, is also analyzed by J. Szczepanski who considers migration a phenomenon consisting of "moving individuals or groups from one place to another in the social space" (1972; 402). In the conceptual universe of the Romanian sociologist Dumitru Sandu (1984; 20) migration is a *socio-demographic event* that refers to the movement of a person - individually or within a group - outside his community of residence, during a given reference period, to change the permanent residence and/or the usual place of work.

Addressing migration-related phenomena has become a challenge as a result of an increase in the number of immigrants. Host societies are increasingly becoming ethnically diverse and are also facing various consequences as a result of interethnic relations. While ethnic diversity can be seen as a contribution to communities that receive immigrants, as it can enrich cultural variety and stimulate interest in global relations, ethnocultural panoply involves complex challenges. In this direction, 'communities must deal with situations resulting from social dynamics caused by interethnic contacts, such as integration, isolation, marginalization and alienation' (Rochira, et al., 2015, p. 97).

The perception of the population of the host society plays a key role in the integration of immigrants into the community (Mannari, Rochira, 2014), especially since people have their systems of symbols that interact with aspects of their community (Nowell, Boyd, 2011) and often stereotypes and prejudices towards immigrants emerge. Research carried out in this direction attests to the fact that, instead of sharing few and general stereotypes (Lee, Fiske, 2006), people tend to promote stereotypes in distinctive and diverse representations. For example, Volpato and Durante (2008) investigated the social classification of immigrants from Italy and showed that instead of a single and global stereotypical type, there are diverse images of ethnic groups that are linked to two main dimensions (warmth and competence). The analysis of 12 ethnic groups resulted in four clusters and cluster 4 brought together Albanians, illegal immigrants, Romanians, and Gypsies in a one-off stereotype of contempt. According to the results, these groups have been awarded very low scores that deny them both their warmth and competence, and illegal immigrants have long been the subject of political and press campaigns that point to them as the main culprits for the problems in society. At the same time, Romanians became the prototype of illegal immigrants, and gypsies were perceived by Italians most negatively over time.

The perception of the indigenous population towards immigrants can also be formed according to the image that the media projects. Promoting a negative image, by referring to individual cases, can induce the development of stereotypes and prejudices towards the entire ethnic group. Moreover, Pottigrew, Zick and Wagner (2008; 239) speak out that "changes in population structure have sparked various reactions in the countries of destination, from

acceptance to prejudice, discrimination, and violence; media and government institutions continue to report discrimination against minorities in Europe." At the same time, migrants are the preferred target for prejudice and discrimination. Especially in times of crisis, immigrant workers are held responsible for the problems of host societies. But beyond that, immigration has always been seen as a problem and perceived as a threat to the population. Therefore, the premise from which we start is that the elements that shape the symbolic capital of Romanian immigrants in Tuscany are rather negative as a result of the isolated actions of some Romanian immigrants resulting in stereotypes and prejudices affecting the entire ethnic group.

## **2. Theoretical Considerations on Social Representations**

Social representations denote a way of thinking and producing public knowledge, created in the flow of social life, and interdependent with the particular context of its production (Galli, 2006). The concept of social representations was introduced by Serge Moscovici in the work *La Psychanalyse, son image, son public. Étude on social re-resistance of psychoanalysis* (1961). Moscovici defines social representations as "a specific way of understanding and communicating what we already know (...) a modality of private knowledge that has for function the development of behaviors and the communication between the individuals that are modeled in the individual/society interrelation" (1984, p. 17), therefore, social representations allow people to orient themselves in the material and social world and communicate (Moscovici, 2005; 2011). Thus, the representation of an object, person, or whatever consists not only in implantation, repeating, or reproducing but in reconstructing, retouching, and modifying the representation itself (Moscovici, 1984; 65). According to Abric (1994), social representations are 'the product of the processes of mental activity by which an individual or group reconstructs the reality they face and attribute a specific meaning' (p. 13). Social representations are seen as categories that influence the perception and processing of social information; besides, they underline the intensity of the distribution of social beliefs and knowledge. For Purkhardt (1993, p. 32) social representations "embody and define the experience of reality, determining its bouncers, its significance and its relationships".

The social character of the representations stems from the fact that the different codes of communication are borrowed from the common cultural environment of a given context, structured according to principles, values, and ideologies. Therefore, as D. Jodelet (2003) noted, it concerns 'practical thinking methods oriented towards communication, understanding, and control of the social, material and ideal environment' (apud Bergamaschi, 2011, p. 96). Representations are located at a high cognitive level, circulating in society through language and discourse. As Drya observes (apud Bergamaschi, 2011, p. 97) they constitute cultural products "that are born and developed in everyday conversations and in relation to cultural and historical circumstances". Therefore, social representations function to establish a negotiable order to our social worlds by providing a code for social interaction which is characteristic of individual and group history (Orfali, 2002; Verkuyten, 2005; Verkuyten, Steenhuis, 2005; Howarth, 2006). This code facilitates the communication process in which complex realities are interpreted and reinterpreted and ultimately constructed and reconstructed.

Migration, as a human process and the form of socio-cultural construction, involves representations, dreams, images, desires, needs, ambitions, and life projects for migrants in their individual-collective migration experience. As Patricio (1999) argued, migration must be analyzed taking into account interactions in the context in which they take place, in a global perspective, as everything is indeterminable and cannot be fully identified, even the migratory experience (Patricio, 1999). Social representations of migration and migrants are formed based on political, economic, cultural, social, and media variables. Since the late 1980s, before the outbreak of the so-called *refugee crisis*, migration has been represented in apocalyptic terms (Haas, 2008; 1305, 1317).

The social representation theory thus links cognitive elements with symbolic relations in society. This perspective is also useful in analyzing discourse on immigration in the context of the nation-state because it highlights the fact that social representations are not merely cognitive schemes but involve the symbolic structuring of society and hence the representation of different groups (and individuals as members of these groups) and their relational positioning within society. This theory is pertinent to the analysis of immigration discourse because it points to the socially shared nature of knowledge and its symbolic functions in society. Nonetheless, this theory too needs to be integrated with the specific social-historical elements that organize social and political reality in a given society, according to Triandafyllidou (2000, p. 376).

One of the first complex analyses on how the image of immigrants in the Italian media is reflected was carried out in 2002 by Fondazione Censis and was entitled *L'immagine degli immigrati e delle minoranze etniche nei media*. According to this study, the image of immigrants, whether they are men or women, children, or the elderly, is predominantly negative. This image promoted through the media ranges from the phrase *poor immigrant*, a victim of possible negative facts - such as criminal acts, discrimination, miscarriages of justice, to the violent or criminal foreigner (p. 9).

Rochira, Fasanelli, and Liguori (2015) conducted a study on immigrants from Nardò, a small village in the Lecce region of southeastern Italy working in agriculture. At the beginning of 2015, in the Lecce region, the immigrant community accounted for 2.6% of the total resident population, mainly being composed of Romanians (23.4%), Albanians (13%), and Moroccans (11%). The phenomenon of seasonal migration of rural agricultural workers in Nardò is a very complex problem due to the critical life and working conditions of the workers, despite the efforts of many volunteer organizations to provide migrants with material and legal support. Many migrants live in camps where sanitary furniture, hot and drinking water, and electricity are often not available and workers are easily becoming a target and source of profit for small criminal organizations in the local territory (p. 102). One of the co-concepts of this study is that public perception of immigrants depends to a large extent on the ability of the local community to create the right conditions for immigrants, preventing them from becoming victims of illegal organizations (p. 117).

Other studies on the phenomenon of immigration in the press were carried out by Corte (2002), Bruno (2016), Colella (2017). Bruno's analysis (2016) aims to explore the main mechanism of representation and news-media construction of the immigrant's image in Italy, highlighting that the media defined also *symbolic internal borders*, by focusing on certain themes or images of migrations.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to observe how Romanian migrants are represented in the Italian media, we propose to carry out a content analysis. Consequently, the purpose of this analysis is to highlight the ways in which the Italian media relates to the presence of Romanians in the Peninsula in terms of actions taken by Romanian migrants or actions in which they are victims.

The methodology of the research is based on the content analysis of the written press in the region of Tuscany. The subject of this analysis is the Romanian immigrants living in the region of Tuscany and the way they are presented in the main Tuscan newspapers.

#### **3.1. The research procedure**

In an attempt to capture the way the Italian press detects the Romanian presence in Tuscany, we conducted a quantitative study (using the technique of documentary analysis) of the articles that appeared in the period 2014-2020, in the pages of the newspapers *La Nazione* and *Firenze Today* to get a picture on the reflection of the mentioned problem. For this period, by

mentioning the *romeni* keyword we have identified 105 press articles that have been analyzed through the SPSS program.

The frequency of articles is also influenced by newspaper circulation and audience (see table 1)!

**Table 1.** Sampling data.

| Newspaper     | From ...   | Up to ..   | Total | Spreading      |
|---------------|------------|------------|-------|----------------|
| La Nazione    | 02.09.2014 | 24.09.2019 | 50    | Local          |
| Firenze Today | 03.02.2014 | 18.03.2020 | 55    | Local (online) |

### 3.2. The research method

Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952). Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis as, "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 14). Under Holsti's definition, the technique of content analysis is not restricted to the domain of textual analysis, but may be applied to other areas such as coding student drawings (Wheelock, Haney & Bebell, 2000), or coding of actions observed in videotaped studies (Stigler, Gonzales, Kawanaka, Knoll, & Serrano, 1999). In sociology, "content analysis is a technique of quantitative-qualitative research of verbal and non-verbal communication, to identify and describe objectively and systematically the manifest and/or latent content, to draw conclusions about the individual and society or communication itself, as a process of social interaction. In the analysis of a press article about corruption, the registration unit can be the article in its entirety, but also the theme, paragraph, phrase, sentence, or word" (Chelcea, 1985, p.79). According with Zamfir & Vlăsceanu (1998, p. 25) is "set of techniques for quantitative/qualitative research of verbal/nonverbal communication consisting in the identification and objective and systematic description of the manifest/latent content of communication to draw scientific conclusions on the personality of those who communicate, the society in which communication is carried out, as well as communication itself, as social interaction".

## 4. Results

Immigration is a complex phenomenon that has affected Italy for the past decades (Ambrosini, 1999) and as Zanfrini (2000) states: immigration has been chaotic and managed in an emergency and approximated way, despite innovations introduced with the law of 1998. Immigrants are part of the Italian social and economic structure, and their territorial and social roots show that Italy is no longer a transit country, but a definitive destination for building a new future, being a country with growing ethnic and cultural diversity.

According to statistical data provided by ISTAT, 5.255,503 million immigrants representing 8.7% of the total population, were officially reported in Italy on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2019. The largest immigrant community is represented by Romanians with 23%, followed by Albanians (8.4%) and the citizens of Morocco (8.0%). For the region of Tuscany, 417,382 immigrants were registered, ranking the region as the sixth largest Italian region in the number of immigrants, an increase of 2.2% compared to 2018. Regarding the total population, the foreign citizens in Tuscany are represented by 11.2% of whom the largest community are the Romanians (20.4%), followed by Albanians (14.9) and Chinese (13.4%). Depending on the age criterion, the highest percentage of *stranieri* falls within the range of 35-39 years (11.6%) 30-34 (11.2%), and

40-44 (10.7%) which means a young, active population in the labor market. Three of the articles analyzed address this issue.

The field of media representations (in the case explored here, relating to migratory phenomena) presents itself as a space in which different actors construct social problems. To analyze how the image of Romanian citizens is reflected in the Tuscan print media, we analyzed 105 articles for the period 2014-2020, 50 of them in *La Nazione* and 55 in *Firenze Today*. The trend is that of negative articles (89, which means 84.76%), follows the positive ones (10, i.e. 9.53%) and the neutral ones (6, i.e. 5.71%). Regarding the content (themes) of the articles studied, they all seem to provide much the same kind of information, namely: theft, robbery, aggression, conflicts with other ethnicities, escape from prison, occupation of abusively abandoned properties, begging, organized crime, theft techniques. The media "ethnicizes" crime and deviance (van Dijk, 2008; ter Wal, 2001). In these cases, as claimed by Montali et. al. (2013) the media refers to several specific ethnic groups (*Moroccans, Albanians, Romanians, Peruvians*) as the culprits responsible for the crimes. Over time, this strategy causes people to automatically associate a particular ethnic group with dangerous behavior. Bureaucratic - judicial language (*denunciati, arrestati, Operazione Starlight, Accademia criminale*) is used regarding the migration problem being defined as a threat to public order.

Articles with positive content in general concern religious aspects, the development of businesses by Romanian immigrants, the involvement of Romanians in cultural projects, the opening of a Romanian consulate in Firenze, and the establishment of international relations between the two countries. Neutral ones refer to immigrants in general, from the perspective of the demographic development of certain areas, the increase in birth rates due to the presence of immigrants in that region. At the same time, Romanian protest situations against corruption or participation in different types of elections (presidential or parliamentary) were highlighted.

A synthesis of the articles according to their content correlated with the type of article can be observed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Correlation between content and article type.

| Negative articles  | Positive articles   | Neutral articles   |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• aggression</li> <li>• illegal occupation of property</li> <li>• robbery</li> <li>• theft</li> <li>• human trafficking</li> <li>• conflict</li> <li>• escape from prison</li> <li>• organized crime</li> <li>• labor exploitation</li> <li>• rape</li> <li>• discrimination</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious Holiday</li> <li>• sports competitions</li> <li>• political participation</li> <li>• business development</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• protests</li> <li>• the crisis of agricultural workers</li> <li>• solidarity</li> <li>• film festival</li> <li>• intercultural exchanges</li> </ul> |

As Maltone (2011) stated 78% of the news about immigrants is negative and reports criminal acts, drug trafficking, thefts, crimes, prostitution, illegality, as well as situations of social degradation generated or suffered by immigrants. Also, in the case of Romanians and Albanians, most stereotypes are directed. The press tends to associate ethnic groups with crime and illegality, which leads, as the Romanian writer Mihai Butcovan argues, "to a collective condemnation of all

persons belonging to the same people or nation"<sup>2</sup>. For example, in some newspapers, immigrants are labeled as *illegal immigrants* or *hordes of barbarians* (Maltone, 2011; 9). The *immigration-social danger* paradigm is shown in the conservative and populist press, which tends to systematically portray foreigners as an element of trouble, disorder, and degradation. These newspapers tend to build an image of the Italian population as *victims of immigration, truly discriminated against* because, "immigrants invade our premises, do not follow our rules and violate our values" (p.10). Thus, the immigrant is considered the aggressor, being labeled as "invader, dirty, uncivilized, intruders in the community, while the victim is the good Italian citizen considered weak, helpless, abandoned by the institutions".

From the analysis carried out, articles with between 50 and 250 words (55 articles, i.e. 52.38%), then articles containing between 250 and 450 words (30, i.e. 28.57%), 17 articles with between 450 and 650 words (16.9%) predominate, and 3 articles ranging from 650 to 850 words (2.86%).

Photography and title are important elements to attract the readers' attention. In the case of the articles studied, the photograph of the persons involved was included in the article only in a few particular situations, namely, escape from prison (for example, in a 2017 article the title is „Le foto dei tre rumeni evasi dal carcere di Sollicciano” - the three photographs appear), the opening of a Romanian consulate in Firenze („Aperto in via del Poggio Imperiale il nuovo consolato onorario della Romania a Firenze”).

One aspect that needs to be highlighted is that in most articles (in this case, negative ones) immigrants are designated by nationality. In addition to producing dangerous stereotypes, this habit tends to regard the immigrant as a representative of a category rather than an individual with its specifics, as Maltone (2011) stated. In the written press it is customary to use nationality as the only reference to the protagonists. Sometimes, however, along with the word *romeni*, labels such as *rapinatori*, *bestie*, *ladri*, *fuggitivi*, *stranieri*, *soldati*, *gruppi criminali* appear. This labeling risks attributing an insulting value to nationality and becoming a discriminatory factor.

Some of the titles analyzed where reference is made to the nationality of immigrants are as follows:

- Sorpresi a forzare un parcometro: arrestati due romeni;
- Furto all'Apple di Terni, due romeni arrestati ritrovati in un appartamento di Arezzo;
- Rubano oggetti hi-tech per 11mila euro da Mediaworld. In manette una coppia di romeni;
- Fidanzatini romeni sorpresi a rubare;
- Operazione Starlight, altri due arresti: sgominata la banda di rumeni;
- Le foto dei tre rumeni evasi dal carcere di Sollicciano;
- Orfani rumeni addestrati per rapinare. Raid in gioielleria, presi i guerriglieri;
- Tentano di derubarla con l'abbraccio. Denunciati quattro rumeni;
- Maxi-furto: arrestati quattro rumeni residenti al campo delle Tagliate;
- Rubano gasolio da trattore in sosta in zona Pratacci ma vengono scoperti dai carabinieri: arrestati due rumeni.

It is important to mention to what extent the Romanian word appears in the analyzed titles. Thus, out of the 105 titles, the Romanian word appears 45 times. Given that most articles are negative, mentioning the nationality of immigrants who have committed various deviant acts can be dangerous. In this way, it can be induced to the public opinion that Romanian migrants are dangerous, being associated rather with negative facts, which could have negative effects on the image of the entire Romanian community. As the local population receives rather negative

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mihai Butcovan, „Butcovan, immigrazione e lingua del cuore”, the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2009 published in Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso.

information about Romanians, a wrong perception can be created about the entire Romanian community in Italy.

Regarding the gender of the persons mentioned in the articles, the majority are male and in a lower proportion of female gender, or there are mixed groups between the ages of 18 and 60 (but there are situations where minors have also been involved in certain delinquencies). It is important to note that in 2007 the National Order of Journalists created a deontological protocol, in which the media must consider a fair and in-depth treatment, both in language and in the topics addressed, regarding the immigration news. Among other things, the *Carta di Roma*<sup>3</sup> states that journalists must follow several rules including:

- stipulating a deeper knowledge of the migration phenomena;
- disproof of the stereotypes about immigration;
- systematic denunciation of acts of discrimination and racism;
- avoiding mention of nationality, religion, culture;
- valuing cultural differences.

## 5. Conclusions

The media contributes to building new social representations by producing and perpetuating stereotypes that crystallize in the individual and collective imagination (Colella, 2017). In this study, we looked at 105 press articles showing that Romanian immigrants are rather negatively represented, as a result of individual actions of some immigrants. In general, in the foreground, there are the pieces of news that highlight cases of theft, violence, begging, organized crime involving Romanian immigrants, sometimes in collaboration with people of other nationalities (Albanians, Ukrainians, Moldovans). The literature claims that immigrants are seen as a danger and in times of crisis immigrants are held responsible for the problems of the host society. Immigration has always been seen as a problem and perceived as a threat by the population. Under no circumstances can we hide the illegal situations involving some Romanian immigrants, who have been sanctioned by the Italian authorities by deprivation of freedom, but the actions of individuals at the individual level must not affect immigrants who work legally and are in good faith. Thus, associating ethnic groups with crime and illegality can lead to the assigning of wrong labels to the entire ethnic group.

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<sup>3</sup> Available online at the web address [http://www.ristretti.it/commenti/2009/aprile/pdf6/carta\\_roma.pdf](http://www.ristretti.it/commenti/2009/aprile/pdf6/carta_roma.pdf).



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