

Official



Romanian and Roma Cultural Resource



Background to this resource:

Within the UK, law enforcement agencies investigating Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) deal with a high proportion of victims who are foreign nationals (75% of victims referred into the NRM in 2022 were non-British citizens) therefore there is a demand for cultural competency. Police officers who are equipped with tailored cultural resources that acknowledge and appreciate specific cultural needs are better positioned to gain the necessary trust of modern slavery victims and support them appropriately.

This resource accompanied by the webinar aims to provide an insight into the Romanian and Roma cultures and has been collated using expertise of many individuals credited below. It is important to note that cultures are not monolithic, people within a single country can have a range of experiences, attitudes and cultural practices; individuals may not conform to every generalisation about their culture. Roma reside in many countries across Europe and will adopt parts of the culture of the countries they live, as such they should not be regarded as a single group/culture.

Historical background:

Romania was formed through the dissolution of the Ottoman, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The Romanian state itself was formed in 1918, this late modernisation and institutionalisation impacts on the people, there can be a sense of living in between empires; always defending and needing to protect themselves. 46% of the Romanian population is rural (*World Bank data 2021*). Many migrants into the UK come from the rural areas which are less developed. Romanian culture is a Latin culture, coming from the Roman Empire and surrounded by Slavic countries and the lifestyle is very similar to Italian and Spanish and influences of Russia and Turkey (**see tip below**). The fall of Communism occurred in 1989 after 45 years, this left distrust of institutions following the corruption and bribery that took place in that period.

Roma people are the largest ethnic group in Europe, estimated to be between 10 – 12,000,000 people (*European Parliament Multimedia Centre*). They originated from Punjab and Rajasthan areas of India and migrated all over Eastern European countries leading a nomadic lifestyle but were forced to settle mainly in Romania. Most of their largest communities can be found in Spain, Turkey and France. Although they are more numerous in France and Spain, they continue to be most strongly associated with Romania and Bulgaria. They share a common Indo-Iranian ancestry with other communities such as the Kurds. There is an embedded discrimination against the Roma based on their 500 years enslavement within history that results in segregation and marginalisation within communities. This culminated during WW2; the Holocaust was not only against the Jewish community, but also against the Roma. Without a nation state to protect them, they have been an easy target for regimes to victimise.

TIP: Most Romanians will speak either Italian, Spanish or Portuguese too which can be useful for sourcing interpreters if there is a lack of trust in those from their home country. The Roma community speak both Romanian and Romani language. The Romani language descends from the Urdu and Pashtu languages, so it is common for Roma to be able to converse quite easily with Urdu and Pashtu speakers.

Greetings:

Being able to speak a few phrases will support initial engagement and show an interest in the culture. Formal phrases are used more for the older generations as a sign of respect.

Ce Faci? Hi, how are you?

Sunteți bine? - "Are you okay?" (formal)

Ești bine? - "Are you okay?" (informal)

Numele meu este... - "My name is..."

Cum vă numiți? - "What is your name?" (formal)

Cum te numești? - "What is your name?" (informal)

Nu trebuie să vă fie frică. - "You don't need to be scared." (formal)

Tone of voice is equally important as the words used. Ensure you speak calmly, softly, and empathetically. Be patient if the person has difficulty responding or seems distrustful initially - trust takes time to build.

Use the person's name if you know it, as it helps to create a personal connection. In Romania, names are typically used in a more formal context (i.e. with the title "Mr." or "Mrs." followed by the surname), some victims might see the formal term a sign of respect but in this sensitive situation, using the person's first name could help establish a friendly atmosphere and trust, rather than formal terminology which could indicate that you wish to keep your distance and the relationship is not going to be a friendly one.

Treat the victim with respect and acknowledge the context/experience, understanding that they have been through a traumatic situation, without using the term 'victim'. Be aware that they could well be feeling shame. If using an interpreter, ensure that they are interpreting every word you say so that this is put across not just a summary.

TIPS: Maintain open and non-threatening body language. Make sure to maintain eye contact as a sign of respect and sincerity. Romanians and Roma will often say their surname first when asked which can lead to incorrect recording on PNC. This can also cause a lot of misunderstanding and potentially be misconstrued by Police as an attempt at providing false details. Romania's Latin culture is very passionate and often results in people gesturing and raising their voices. This is also the same of the Roma Community, it should not be mistaken for signs of aggression.



Key cultural elements:

Romania

Romanian is the official language, with words borrowed from many others, reflecting Romania's diverse historical influences. The majority of Romanians are Eastern Orthodox Christians, and the church plays a significant role in society and identity. A high value is placed on family ties as a source of stability and guidance. Romanians are known for their hospitality and generosity with visitors welcomed warmly with traditional foods and drinks. Romania has a rich tradition of folk music and dance. Sport is also important; Simona Halep is a famous tennis player, Gheorghe Hagi and Nicolae Stanciu are famous football players.

Roma

Family is at the core of Roma culture, they have their own language - Romani, but they also speak the language of the countries they live in. Roma music and arts, with their unique rhythms, dance, storytelling, and crafts, are distinct and have been passed down through generations. They are known for their skills in certain trades including metalwork, woodworking and entertainment. Roma do not have their own written language, they often rely on the tradition of folklore being passed down from one generation to the next. Traditional dress for women includes colourful layered dresses, aprons and head scarfs or *diklo*, which is a sign that she is married. Despite centuries of persecution, Roma people have demonstrated remarkable resilience and an ability to adapt to different environments and circumstances. Displaying wealth can be very important, for example large houses with extravagant towers to powerful cars and jewellery. However, inside the houses they might be empty, not have running water or still be under construction but it is the outside image that is important to portray. The Roma use a caste system with each caste originating from a different trade for example musicians, flower sellers or metal workers.

TIP: Showing wealth for Roma brings respect of others within their own community and in turn, power. A culture of masculinity and misogyny is prevalent. Males may feel as though they have to assert themselves in situations where they are confronted by authority, though this rarely ever manifests into open violence against Police.



Main reasons for migration:

The main reason for migration is economic but even highly skilled Romanians migrate. Romanians can feel abandoned and rejected by their country, by politicians and in conjunction with the corruption and bribery that still exists resulting in them migrating to have a better life. Roma may leave due to poverty, in search of a better life, discrimination and social exclusion in Romania.

In the Romanian society, there is a culture of blame towards those that have migrated. Despite many sending money home, they are viewed as no longer contributing from within to Romania's development and instead making them responsible for how media portrays images of Romania being in poverty. Female migrants can be called 'whores' having considered to have sold themselves to foreigners, instead of staying home to care for their family. Media images of migrants doing inferior jobs, despite some having high qualifications or degrees has reinforced these views.

Leaving Romania to seek work elsewhere is often seen as the last resort after they have tried to solve their personal or family situation but were unable to find any other solution. This can amplify the shame the migrants are feeling, due to being unable to support their family in Romania, having to work in low skilled jobs and potentially finding themselves in situations of exploitation.

TIP: Migrants returning to Romania to visit family and friends may show off famous brands of clothing and very expensive cars as a sign of being successful in their life. They will rarely share how difficult their experiences are, for fear of being perceived as unsuccessful or as a victim.

Taboo subjects/prejudices:

Domestic abuse and alcohol consumption are not seen as issues, but how people cope with life. Domestic abuse is rife, but not talked about. Being referred to as a victim is highly sensitive; rarely seeing themselves as such. Discussing the context would be more beneficial.

The LGBTQ+ plus community can be heavily discriminated against and would rather hide their identity. Society is becoming more modernised with recent Gay Pride events however traditionalists have continued to protest.

The Communist Government ostracised anyone who was different, such as those having mental health issues and disabilities. Discrimination and a lack of support can still exist and religious communities may believe they are a punishment from God. Roma can find it difficult to talk about health issues in general, seeing health as an 'unclean subject', especially amongst males and anything gynaecological related.

A distinction between Romanians and Roma is vital, the cultures are very different and inferring that there might be any similarities between the two would be perceived as being very offensive. **TIP: Take time and care to determine cultural identity, rather than assume.**

Discrimination continues against Roma, who were slaves historically within Romania. They can be viewed as inferior and have limited access to healthcare, education and employment. This marginalisation has contributed to the formation of distinct Roma organised crime groups, seeking other means to survive and locked in a cycle of crime, unable to reintegrate into society.

TIP: Exploiters can try to shame those working in the sex industry; threats of exposing them to friends, family or religious leaders. However, labour exploitation can be viewed as a trade where money has been exchanged, potentially more than earnings at home.

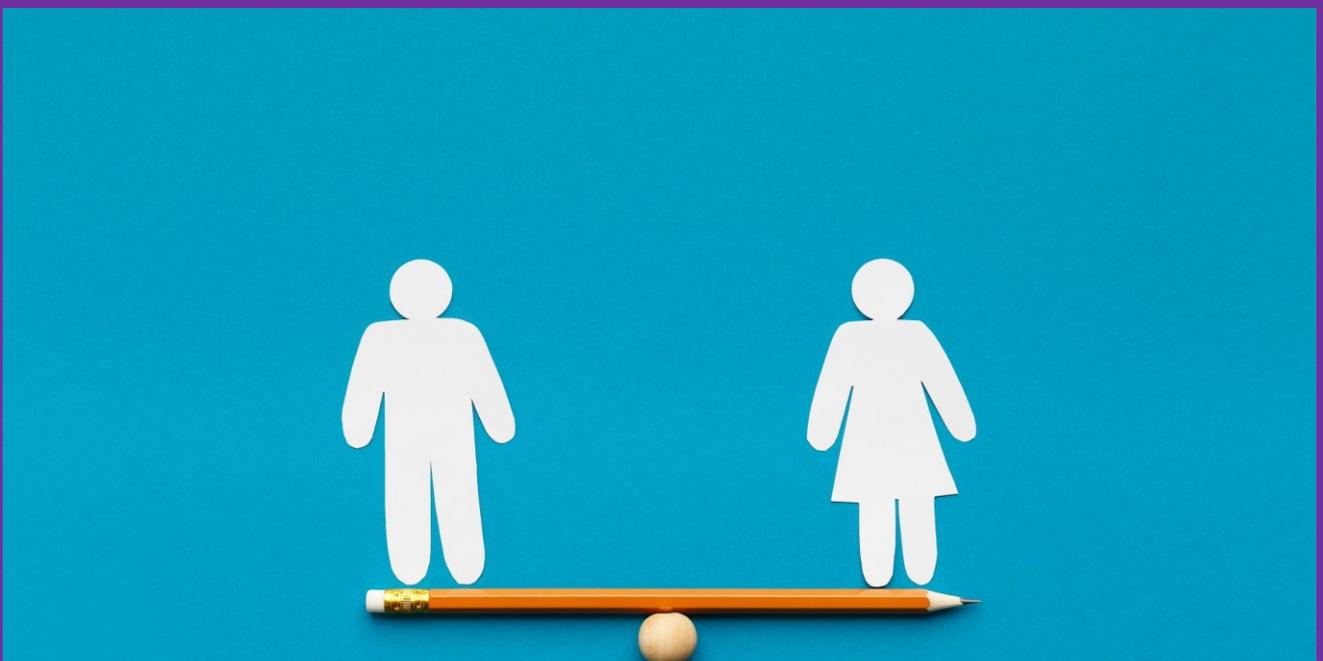
Family structure/gender dynamics:

Romanian Society can still be quite patriarchal and heavily embedded in religious values, where men are seen as the pillar of the family. In recent years, women have advocated for their rights but Romania remains very traditionalist. Professional working families in urban areas may adopt a more modern approach with men and women working and sharing household tasks. In more rural areas, traditional roles may be pronounced. Parents and children usually form the family nucleus. Married children tend to move out of the family home, but it's not uncommon for unmarried adults to live with their parents. Extended family may gather for holidays and special occasions. Grandparents can help with raising children, especially if both parents work. Once married the immediate family is often priority but she can remain in contact with her previous family, siblings and parents, especially at family celebrations.

The Roma family can be very hierarchical, it is very important that the man is the leader. There is male dominance and women are mostly illiterate, staying at home and looking after children. Girls will be prepared from an early age on how to complete household tasks. They may have close-knit, often large extended families who live close by and are influenced by religion, with a belief that the power of God has created pregnancy. Women are often required to marry as virgins, not being such will bring shame and debt upon the family due to the increased dowry owed to the groom's family.

Some castes even marry their children as young as 4 or 5 years old (but are considered illegal within Romanian Society). The girl would be sent to live with the husband as her periods start. This can lead to conflicts between authorities and Roma as the age of consent is 18. Girls can literally be sold by their families, with gold sometimes being given to the bride's family as 'payment'.

Females are often expected to marry someone within their own caste. When a male marries a non-Roma woman, she is expected to adopt the Roma lifestyle and traditions. It can be considered a violation of the code of honour for a Roma female to marry a non-Roma male, with females seen to be the guarantors of the survival of their people. Family ties and loyalty have strong importance, taking care of family members is seen as a duty. Disputes and "crimes" that occur within the caste are sometimes dealt with internally by a *Kris* or court and is led by the *Rom Baro* or Chief.



Religion:

The Orthodox Church has a strong influence on Romanian society, culture and politics, playing a significant role in community life, especially rural areas. Others may identify as Orthodox (or other religion) to authorities but not regularly attend church, this is more a way of life. Others identify as Catholics, Pentecostal, Baptist, Adventist or Jehovah witnesses and generally coexist peacefully.

TIP: the dates below could impact on victim engagement especially if victims have returned home for the festival.

Epiphany (Boboteaza) - January 7th, commemorates the baptism of Jesus, often a cross is thrown into water, and men compete to retrieve it.

Mother's Day - March 8th huge celebration of all women - Police offer flowers to female drivers.

Easter (Pasti) is an important holiday. Easter Sunday is celebrated with a midnight church service, and the sharing of lighted candles symbolising the resurrection. Painted eggs are prepared.

Saint Nicholas' Day (Sfântul Nicolae) - December 6, children clean their boots leaving them out the night before, hoping that Saint Nicholas will leave presents.

Nate - December 21, sacrifice a pig to eat afterwards (webinar case study).

Christmas (Crăciun) is a mix of Orthodox Christian rituals and local folklore. Carol singing (colinde) and Mos Craciun (Father Christmas) are major parts of the holiday.

A civil ceremony is required for a marriage to be legal. In a Christian Orthodox denomination, you are not even allowed to have the religious ceremony without the marriage certificate. This causes complications when trying to gain documentation needed later, if solely a religious ceremony has occurred within the Roma community.

Roma religious beliefs vary; either adopting the religion of the home country or not following religion at all. Weddings are a family occasion and generally not registered, with family consent seen as authority.

Food:

In December and leading towards Easter people may fast, especially in rural areas that are more religious, although vegan food is still permitted.

Romanian cuisine is diverse and hearty, dishes include "sarmale" (cabbage rolls stuffed with meat, rice and spices), cozonac (a sweet bread with walnuts, poppy seeds and Turkish delight) both may be eaten during Easter and Christmas. "Mămăligă" (a polenta-like dish) and "mititei" (grilled meat rolls) are often eaten at outside gatherings. Pork cooked in a variety of ways is also enjoyed.

Roma women may refrain from prepping food during their menstrual cycle, complying with upper and lower body separation rules.



Education/career prospects:

Education can be seen as a pathway to better job opportunities, improved social status and owning your own house. Higher education is often viewed as a mark of prestige, and professions such as doctors, or lawyers are highly respected. Roma children can be stigmatised and discriminated in schools, with Romanian parents complaining their children are in the same classes. Roma parents can view time spent in school as a threat on family time and sphere of influence, children may also be required to assist with seasonal work duties. Roma parents may withdraw children from education as they reach early teens to avoid peer influence of drug use and learning about sex.

Opportunities for women in the workforce have expanded but traditional gender roles can still influence career choices. Roma or those in rural areas that are isolated often have less access to education and can be influenced by traditional gender roles; women are often expected to focus on family responsibilities. This is however changing, especially among younger generations. Higher rates of unemployment exist within Roma; some might prioritise immediate economic needs and learning a trade over long-term goals, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Roma may prioritise family time over economic activity, opting for self-employment or work with other family.

TIP: June 2022 a new bill was passed to allow sex education, termed 'sanitary education' to be taught to students from grade 8, but only with the consent of parents. Sex education can be seen as shameful by Roma leaving females highly vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation.

A known Romanian OCG recruited young, well-educated students with clean records, unlikely to be stopped by Police, taking advantage of them being unable to find gainful employment. The OCG behaved like a corporation, with HR, logistics, team supervisors, legal and medical services, etc.



Interaction with authority:

Romanians generally respect authority but this might originate from a sense of fear. Trust in institutions can vary and distrust in politicians is largely on-going due to a history of corruption and scandal. Alternatively, respect for education tends to be high and a trusted figure is often the priest.

Roma communities have a complex relationship with authority, shaped by a history of discrimination and social exclusion, interactions can be marked by mistrust and fear. Many Roma people have experienced discrimination and violence from law enforcement. Roma tend to trust the priest, the local mayor and Roma community leaders.

TIP: Roma culture will often view interaction with Police as intrusive and discriminatory and see family as the most relevant authority.

Romanian Police have their origins in maintaining order and security during the 45 years of Communist rule that can result in submissiveness towards them. Trust in law enforcement authorities is usually low; people had to defend themselves and seek ways to survive the oppressive and restrictive laws. People relied on informal networks and friends, which led to betrayals at times and distrust in Romanian society may remain. Some Romanians hold a positive view of the police, seeing them as a necessary force for maintaining law and order. Trust however, in the police has been challenged due to instances of scandal. There may also be a distrust of NGO's after Communism, believing that politicians fuelled money and public funds to different NGOs.

Do's	Don'ts
Be respectful and patient.	Stereotype.
Offer continued reassurance their safety is of utmost concern.	Make assumptions.
Keep language simple, be aware of potential learning difficulties.	Overlook non-verbal communication.
Be empathetic of their situation.	Use victim terminology.
Explain that differences exist between the Romanian and British systems, to attempt to alleviate fear and mistrust.	Use jokes – can be taken as mocking them, taps into this complex of inferiority that is common to both Roma and Romanians.
Explain they have rights.	
Compliment their culture.	

TIP: Gather all addresses and contact details for the victim, these can be different to those on ID documents. Mobile phone numbers are also changed regularly to reduce costs.



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