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## “If we want to do something for the Roma in Vorarlberg, we have to work with them in Romania”

### Interview with Erika Geser-Engleitner

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Vorarlberg is Austria's most remote but also most prosperous federation state (excluding Vienna) where locals are used to their peaceful, conservative, well-tested ways. But in 2015, unexpectedly, they were seeing, for the first time, homeless people begging in their neat streets who started making tents in forests, under bridges and in churchyards. It soon became clear that these newcomers travelled all the way from Romania and that they were actually the Roma. The authorities reacted by forbidding begging and by intensifying police control but the measures turned out ineffective, and eventually the government of Vorarlberg realised something more inclusive needed to be done about the unfortunate situation. They asked the University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg for help and engaged a researcher there to find more about the Roma. The researcher's name was Erika Geser-Engleitner, and after doing her research, she came up with a solution, a programme that she entitled »Professional Training Programme for Practitioners for Social Services for Disadvantaged Communities«.



Photo: Erika Geser-Engleitner's personal archive.

*Can you explain more about the problem that you were charged to find a solution for?*

Three years ago, it was the first time in our local history that we had baggers in the streets in Vorarlberg. It was a new phenomenon. We had “normal” homeless

people, but they were Austrians. And then, from one day to another, the situation changed: we had some 200 people, especially from Romania, who lived in our streets and forests, built their tents there and begged for money in our streets. This phenomenon is typical for cities, not for agricultural areas like Vorarlberg. Our inhabitants were not used to such pictures. We are not used to having poor people in our streets. Our social institutions and our government came to me and asked me if I could do a field research to get to know these people: why are they here, what do they want and so on. For me it was a really interesting project. In this group of people, they are normally Roma and Sinti people, not ethnic Romanians. I got a young woman and a young man, native speakers from Romania, who did a field research for our government. One of the results was that the Roma people were really poor and desperate for some income. Some people in Vorarlberg even thought there was a system of crime behind them, that clan leaders sent these people to European countries. The question arose: how to deal with these people?

*How many people are we talking about?*

There were 200 Roma people, but now their number arose to around 300 and has been stable: there are as many people here as they can get income.

Based on our research project about what do they want, our government said that we have to do something. But instead of working with them here in Vorarlberg, they prefer to finance some structure in Romania because it's not sustainable to make structure here, as "they can't speak the language and it's not our culture", our government say. So they wanted a sustainable project in Romania. They talked to me as a researcher and asked me what should we do, and together we developed a programme. They said: "We want to finance a programme in Romania for those people to get education in some way. It should be a programme with education."

*Are we talking about a prevention programme?*

Yes.

*To prevent them from coming here?*

That was the idea from our government. We designed a programme for social workers in Romania.

*Are the Roma still in Vorarlberg?*

Yes.

*Where do they live?*

In the forest, under bridges, near railway stations, behind waste disposal units...

*In Bregenzer Wald (wealthy rural Alpine region off Bregenz)?*

No, that's not interesting for them, because people there don't like to give them money. They need city structures to survive.

Now I want to tell you more about our project. We have a partner in Romania, Concordia, an organisation run by a priest from Vorarlberg, who works in Romania with young people from the street. At the beginning Concordia was a religious organisation, now it's a non-profit one. The head of Concordia is located in Vienna. They get 60% of the money from fund-raising and 40% from governments from different countries. We thought it would be a good idea to improve the practical competences of social workers in Romania. First I studied the system in Romania. I talked with a lot of universities and non-profit organisations and they told me that social work in Romania differs considerably from the one in Austria, as is the case in many other former Eastern Block countries. In Romania, social work is more administrative. In contrast to Austria, little time is used for social diagnostics. The involvement of the clients in the anamnesis and the development of action strategies is rather unusual. The professional identity, communication and interaction with the clients are different. We thought it would be a good idea to discuss with Concordia, because I'm not the kind of person to say: "I know what you have to do". Concordia has been in Romania for more than 20 years, so they know the country and their Roma very well. Concordia confirmed that Romanian social workers really work behind their tables, in a very administrative way. So we designed an education programme for them to develop practical skills.



Photo: Concordia România archive.

The programme has three parts with five modules. Three times Concordia can offer it. One course has five modules. Now we are already in module 4, so we are more experienced. According to the evaluation – I'm the evaluator of the programme – the project is great.

There are five modules and in the first term, a social worker from Vorarlberg teaches in Romania.

*In English?*

No, in German. In Bucharest. And we have Romanian translators. It's a very interesting way to teach and at first we were very sceptical if it would work or not, but the evaluation results show that it works very well. Because they are really interested in how social work works here in Vorarlberg, and what are the differences with Romania, what's the thinking behind our acting. They are like sponges and try to get as much as they can. And that's very interesting for our teachers, too. Our teachers are not professional teachers, only practitioners. People in Bucharest have enough theory, a very high level of theory in fact, but no practice. They need practical skills. My colleague Bernhard Gut is now there, he's the leader of the programme. I selected him as he's our best practitioner, a really experienced social worker. He designed a curriculum and chose the teachers. He took the best ones from Vorarlberg in different age fields. So we have young, old lecturers, and different topics in those modules. Now we are in module 4. In the first course we collect the best students and in the next course they become teachers in Romania. It's called "Train the Trainer". So it's only one course taught in German, the next one is in Romanian. Bernhard is like their coach. For me it's very important that the programme is sustainable and it's not over once the finances from Vorarlberg stop.

*It looks like a gradual transfer of knowledge from Vorarlberg to Romania.*

That's it.



Photo: Concordia România archive.

*And once you teach the students, they will teach their own students.*

Yes, but not at a university. Only in this organisation, which is a part of Concordia, called Concordia Academy. Because it's absolutely not common in Romania to have further education for social workers. You study at a university, but then you'll never have to do anything in the field. That's usual. But it can't work. Here in Austria it's very common to have courses on a permanent basis. So we want to develop a sort of further education. Concordia Academy was very interested in this. This is the first step. The next one is module 5. And afterwards the exams with ECTS to get a degree. And afterwards the second course starts.

*How is this related to the Roma population?*

They are the poorest in Romania. And they have no chance of getting a normal job. They live on the lowest level. They have a horrible living situation, normally without water, they live overcrowded and the only persons who work with them are social workers. This was the idea: if we want to do something for the Roma people, we have to work with them in Romania. The education level of the Roma is very low. Women who came to Vorarlberg, didn't have one single year of school. They are absolute illiterates. So it's very important for them to get education. And social workers in Romania can work with the families to motivate them to bring children to school. First you have to ask why they don't want to bring children to school. The answer is very easy: their parents are normally abroad, in the streets of European cities to get money, and their children are at home with their old grandparents who need to cook and clean the house and watch over young children, and therefore children don't go to school. Their grandparents are not really interested in their school education because they don't see the point in it. For them it's better that children do something more "useful", like collecting bottles, plastic materials, the lowest level of work.

The most important thing is that children get some education at school, as much as they can. We want to work with social workers in Romania because they are also a part of the discriminatory social system, and they don't like Roma people, too. They say the Roma people don't want to get a job and that they don't want to change their life. But that's not true. The truth is that they have less chances to do it. Romania is a country with huge corruption and in my interviews with the Roma people I'm told that you need to pay 300 Euros to get a job at a garbage collection centre. So you have to pay to get the lowest job! That's absolutely common and usual. You need to understand the whole system, and we can't change the situation in Romania. What we can do is to contribute our small part in working with social workers, so they can increase their knowledge and practical skills in working with families. That's our project in Romania now and one of our planned targets is that our practitioners that we send to Bucharest, learn very much from Romania, and they can use this knowledge to work with the Roma people here in Vorarlberg. Based on

evaluation of our programme, I can see that they learn very much about their thinking, about their culture, and they need to understand it to work with the Roma here in Vorarlberg. It's a great programme, the participants, students love it. I do a very strict and intensive evaluation to find out what we need to change in it. I think we will be successful.

*If I understand you correctly, the Roma people from Romania came here and you wanted to find a solution about what to do with them, and your solution is to send professionals to Romania who teach Romanian social workers. This is a very future-oriented approach.*

Designing this project was my idea and Bernhard's. At the beginning I was not sure if I'm on the right path. I discussed it with non-profit organisations in Romania and when I asked them if I'm doing things right, they said: "Yes, we need this programme very much, but we don't have money for our employees, for our social workers to get this knowledge." And that will be my next step: in September I'll invite the leaders of non-profit organisations from Romania who sent participants to our first course. And I'll discuss with them how can we find a system so that different organisations can send people to this Academy in the future and how they can improve their financial situation because the first three courses were financed by the state of Vorarlberg. It can only work if the organisations are really convinced. Well educated social workers are needed. If I have them, they work with families and the costs for all social systems can be reduced and the situation for the really poor may be slightly improved.

*It's a huge problem, particularly in Romania. The percentage of the Roma is quite high there.*

There are around two million Roma in Romania.



Photo: Concordia România archive.

*I heard from Bulgaria that some Roma people there don't even exist officially.*

Yes, that's a problem. Sometimes they have no birth certificates and official statistics can't be done.

*What do you think will happen to the Roma people who will stay in Vorarlberg?*

In cooperation with non-profit organisations in Vorarlberg we engaged two social field workers who work with the people. We started it one and a half year ago and in the meantime they have known personally each Roma here in Vorarlberg. This is very good because if I know you and if I can talk to you, then I can find out what's your problem, where you're staying, how much money do you earn by begging. It's very important for our region to get into verbal contact, to offer them medical empowerment, if they're ill. Our two social field workers are our most important part of the system here. The Roma live really under bridges. There are a lot of women begging, but men too. They also work illegally in the kitchens of hotels, in construction field. Women are normally begging. Begging is forbidden only in some areas. European human rights commission say forbidding begging is not OK. So we have baggers and we're going to have them in the future, that's for sure. But now the inhabitants are more used to them and know better how to handle them. At the beginning they were shocked, couldn't understand that we have such poor people living in the streets.

*Do Roma people learn German?*

Yes. They're really good in learning languages. Most of them can't read and write, but it's important for them to see and listen to things as they live a dangerous life in the streets. If you don't have a home, you're really vulnerable, therefore they need to learn very quickly the language to say thank you if they get money. They learn German. Some of them have children with them, normally it's forbidden for them to beg. The first families are sending their children to schools in Vorarlberg, but our schools don't want to teach them, because the kids are not able to speak German. And the schools say: »Oh, we don't know about tomorrow, maybe they'll be leaving«. But children have the right to go to school if they're old enough, and their parents want their children to go to Austrian schools, but they need an address to do so. Only if you have an address, you're allowed to go to school. The lawyers say that's not true, you don't need an address. As you see we don't have only one way of handling this problem. Some people would prefer the Roma to go back to Romania. I think that in the future we will have Roma people here because they need income. And our people here have money and the Roma get money and will stay here.

*Are they concentrated in Dornbirn?*

No. They're stretched all over the Upper Rhine Valley (Rheintal), from Feldkirch to Bregenz, in the areas with more inhabitants.

*Did you visit Romania?*

Yes. I studied sociology at the universities of Vienna and Linz. It was normal for us to travel and do research. Five years ago, we went to Transylvania and explored ethnic Germans who lived in Romania. That's my background. In this way I got to know a little bit about the country. The next trip was to Albania and I did a research on blood revenge. That's my hobby: to travel to, and get to know, different countries. In my next project I want to go with my Master students abroad and do a qualitative and quantitative research project in foreign countries. I want to go with a small group of intercultural social work students abroad, for example to Romania, where they have to collect data, talk to different people and answer a question, for example, how is it to be a young man in Romania, what's my daily life. Or what's my situation if I'm unemployed, or if I work in agriculture. It's a field research. Then I want to come back with them to the university and do all the calculations. It's a new project that I need to develop.

I think it would be a good idea for our young people in Western European countries to get to know better the Eastern European countries, because our young people are very concentrated on London and Germany, on rich parts of Europe. It's not easy to send our students to former Communist countries, the majority is simply not interested. But if we forget our poorer parts of Europe, if we don't bring people together, the situation won't change in these countries, and we need these countries.