



GEORGE'S STORY

GAY ROMA



AT THE INTERSECTION OF MULTIPLE WORLDS

Life stories of Roma and Roma LGBTQ people

In a society that sanctions individual differences and attaches harmful labels too easily to those who do not conform to the majority, Roma and LGBTQ people often navigate with difficulty various areas of life. More often than not, they are harshly judged or marginalized, and in the public space, they are rather invisible, many of them choosing not to reveal their identities in an attempt to protect themselves.

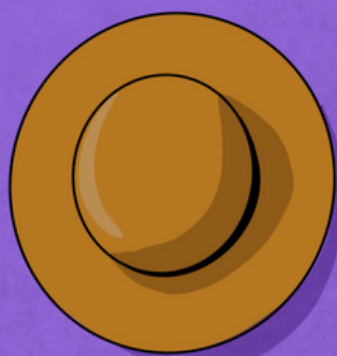
We believe in the power of personal stories to overcome prejudice, simplistic labelling and even discrimination. That is why we are sharing the life stories of five Roma people, including four LGBTQ people from all over the country, with very different life experiences, different levels of education and professions, and different personalities. These are stories about personal quests and self-discovery, happiness and personal victories, about trauma and healing, difficulties and love stories. Their protagonists are **Adina**, a Roma woman; **Dora**, a non-binary Hungarian Roma person; **George**, a gay Roma man; **Izabella**, a lesbian Roma woman and **Daniel**, a gay Roma man. To stay true to their authentic voices, their stories are presented in the form of interviews with small changes in order: their names were changed to protect the identity of the interviewees, the details that could lead to the identification of the interviewees were removed, and some of the answers were edited for brevity and clarity.

The answers in these interviews reflect exclusively the opinions of the interviewees, and are not the official point of view of the Centre for Legal Resources (CLR), nor of the partners involved in this project.

This material is part of the "[INTERSECT - Changing the narrative of discrimination](#)" project, coordinated by the Centre for Legal Resources (CLR), in partnership with the Equality and Human Rights Action Centre (ACTEDO), MozaiQ LGBT Association and the Civic Union of Roma Youth in Romania (UCTRR).

GIVE US SOME DETAILS ABOUT YOURSELF: WHAT DO YOU DO, WHERE DID YOU GROW UP, WHERE DO YOU LIVE AT THE MOMENT?

I was born and raised in Bucharest and currently I`m working for the Government, but I also have over 20 years of experience in the field of Roma and LGBT civic activism. In the last few years I have decided to dedicate myself to public service, to working in an institution where I could apply those Roma inclusion policies that I had been monitoring when working with a watchdog organization. Now I`m on the other side of the fence, where I`m trying to apply the advice that I was giving when working in the civic area through the different means available for activists in the non-governmental sector. Ever since college, I`ve come into contact with the field of human rights, with activism, with this social change incentive. I`ve also worked in the for-profit sector, but I didn`t really like it. After that, I started working in the non-governmental sector by holding trainings, and then I ran multiple programs from various positions, from project manager, to consultant, expert on diverse topics, culminating with the position of consultant on public policies regarding inclusion. At the same time, I`ve built experience in the area of the LGBT activism, but I stepped down because I told myself that when you`re working for the Government it can become a bit more complicated to also stay active in the civil society. So I stayed on just as a trainer, facilitator etc. I wear a lot of hats, so it`s difficult for me to make a comprehensive presentation about my career path and educational background. I have two Master`s degrees, as well as a doctoral degree. So it`s a really diverse range of interests.



ARE YOU A PART OF ANY MINORITY GROUP? HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY?

Yes, I`m part of multiple minority groups, this is where my interest in intersectionality comes from. I identify as a cis, gay, atheist, Roma man with left-wing political views, middle-class aspirations, higher education and a certain preoccupation with minorities rights. That`s basically the profile that describes me. From the get-go I`m part of three minority groups, ethnic, sexual and not belonging to a religion.

HOW WAS YOUR COMING OUT EXPERIENCE?

It was gradual. During my college years I was working for a magazine and on the same floor as ours the ACCEPT Association* was being "born". From that moment I`ve been in touch with the human rights field. I`ve known since I was little that I was not like the others, but I didn`t really know how to explain it. I knew that I had feelings of attraction to boys and non-attraction to girls, to my female colleagues, but as a teenager you`re not really aware of these feelings. However, in college I had my first relationship with a female colleague, relationship that has opened my eyes in regards to me letting go of societal expectations, because there was no hint of attraction, just a friendly one. Probably all our classmates thought we were a couple and we let them believe it, but in the meantime I had totally opposite interests. After I completed my undergraduate studies, I entered my first long-term relationship, 12 years long, and during that relationship I had my coming out. It was a gradual process.

* Well-known LGBTQ non-governmental organisation. More information at www.acceptromania.ro



We had a small circle of heterosexual friends who knew we were a couple. They didn't ask, we didn't need to tell. Until 2000-2001, homosexuality was still a crime, even though there was a moratorium regarding this law. From talking with people older than us, the ones that lived through the harassments and persecutions of the communist regime, we learned that they were taken to the police station, investigated, forced to inform on others, these are some experiences I didn't personally have, because I turned 18 only after the Revolution and that's the age when you were mainly preoccupied with school, you weren't really in contact with that world. But I know of some cases when young people were kicked out of their houses and left on the street, even people the same age as me. On different occasions, I found out about young people that weren't as lucky as me, young people that were kicked out of their homes, that turned homeless, situations that put your health at risk. I can say that I had a safe circle. I can't call myself privileged, just a more fortunate case than others.

The moment I publicly occupied a leading position in an organization, I had a discussion with my then-partner, I took a deep breath in and told myself `Okay, I'm owning it, from this point on I can come out`. And it wasn't like beating a drum down the street, but more of a gradual coming out; while I was familiarizing myself with the legislation, I was learning how to fight certain homophobic things with legal aspects, and by doing that you become more sure of yourself and are more likely to confront the ones with homophobic or racist beliefs. By knowing your rights and with adequate exercise, you become more confident and are more likely to take ownership of your coming out experience.

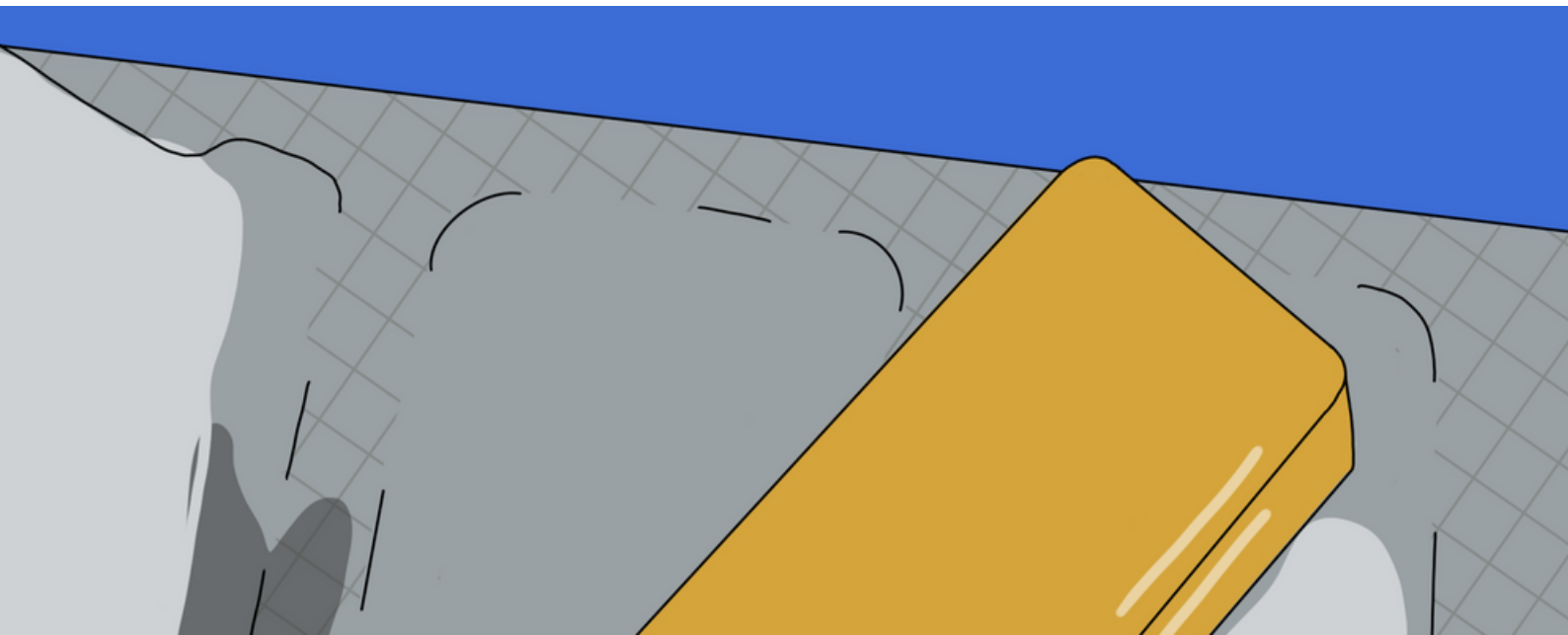
WHAT WAS YOUR PARENTS` AND FAMILY`S REACTION?

My family's reaction didn't coincide with my coming out, because while I was in college they found certain magazines and after that there wasn't a need for any conversation. I grew up with my mother and grandmother, I didn't really come into contact with my father. Since they had a more conservative viewpoint, they were in denial and I don't think they accepted this story. But they didn't kick me out either...

I didn't suffer any psychological abuse of any kind. I don't know if they understood, because we didn't really discuss this topic. We are not talking about this subject now either (my mother and I, as my grandmother died), because I've put up a barrier. This one time, I introduced her to my former partner. I can't say she had an unpleasant reaction, but neither a pleasant one. It's kind of an unexplored situation.

DID YOU EXPERIENCE SITUATIONS WHEN YOU WERE MISTREATED, DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BASED ON YOUR ETHNICITY OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

As a Roma ethnic, I can't say that I had these experiences, except when I was seated [in school] in the second-to-last desk (considering the last one was empty) with one of my female classmates who had darker skin. I was darker-skinned too when I was a child, but as I was growing up I became more light-skinned. They saw that we were darker-skinned and seated us at the same desk, a thing that didn't bother me in the slightest as she used to bring Cavit [hard to find vitamins] at school, because her father worked at a medicine factory. And during classes we used to eat a tablet of Cavit each under our desk.



So I didn't have any traumatic experience. I lived in several worker neighbourhoods, where we were socially mixed, I had Roma classmates, friends. In all of comrade's [Ceaușescu's] speeches, in all the news, the papers there was talk about equal rights, a left democratic value I resonate with. There was the renowned phrase "regardless of nationality..." and other criteria. These were some Communist Party slogans through which they were trying to promote egalitarianism that we were all equal in rights, that we were the New Man, concept developed during the communist period...



I can say that I have more issues with the ultra-orthodox Christians, those who hear you are an atheist or agnostic and... Since I was a child, I didn't get caught in this fairy-tale I just went to church with my grandmother and that was my only experience. Otherwise, I had a funny attitude towards Christians. Even back then I was interested in what was called dialectical and scientific materialism. The fact that I studied sciences determined me to project the world and the surrounding reality through a scientific lens. Currently I have colleagues with whom I try to have a conversation, but it usually ends up really badly. And at those moments I notice the looks; I notice how they look for support in each other, to gang up on me. I'm the supreme evil, the atheist who doesn't understand. For me, I find these situations amusing rather than letting them affect me. Maybe they affect me at a superficial level, but with time I became wiser. It's hard to make someone understand something they are not willing to understand.

Maybe I didn't experience discrimination also because, ethnically speaking, I'm not what you might call visibly Roma. As I was saying, as the years passed I became more light-skinned. Maybe I've been navigating society more easily, without the need of explaining myself or being questioned. I even had an experience when I went to accounting, as I was about to go abroad through a program run by the company that I was working for, a program regarding Roma people and the woman that was in charge of logistics told me 'Oh no, but I hope you're not... Roma'. And I replied 'Yes, I am' and she said 'Oh no, but I can't believe it... I'm sorry'. I told her 'Why are you sorry, there's nothing to be sorry about'. So I don't know how representative I am for this discussion. I think that for us, the ones not identified by other people as visibly Roma and apparent gay people, it is much easier to go unnoticed, as long as your identity identifier is not on display publicly. As I used to be an activist, I had to speak from the perspective of both a Roma person, as well as of a gay man, I was also in charge of a non-governmental Roma organization, I used to extensively work on programs for Roma people and everyone knew I was Roma.

I've certainly found myself in situations where I felt uncomfortable, but I never experienced something like physical abuse. There's a major difference. From a very young age I've made it my purpose to never give others the satisfaction... Maybe this self-defence mechanism is related to my childhood and I haven't been aware of it until now. So I haven't really experienced discrimination, but the instances that happened, they were light; I was able to get over them, they didn't leave a mark.

DO YOU HAVE FRIENDS OR ACQUAINTANCES THAT HAVE EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION?


What was it related to?

Yes, unfortunately yes. I have this really good friend, who moved to Italy and has had some issues with the police ever since he was still in Romania. He's Roma, gay and sort of flamboyant, in the way that he likes to wear [traditional] Roma women skirts. He is not questioning his gender identity, but he likes to stand out in a... not necessarily gender-fluid way, but in a role-play kind of way, not even in a transvestite kind of way... it's hard for me to explain.

He's not trans, it's just a fluidity, he's playing with his gender expression. And one night he was coming back from a party, where they were cross-dressing, there were also some Roma trans girls there as well. He was wearing one of those Roma florist apron and on the way home he stopped to get a shawarma. There were some 'bad' people there who saw he was darker-skinned, they saw he was wearing a skirt and started harassing him, he obviously reacted, most likely he was also tipsy, and things escalated quickly. Those people called the cops, they came and took him to the police station where they beat him. Initially he was in shock, but he tried to move on, he even went to therapy during that time. At first he wanted to press charges, but later changed his mind. We had spoken to Romani CRISS** to help him press charges, but he was afraid of the possible repercussions. He's also been dealing with some health issues, but he preferred not to press charges and tried to get over the incident. However, it left a mark, and his health issues worsened afterwards.

** Well-known roma rights non-governmental organisation. More information at www.romanicriss.org.





Some of our female friends, many of those being Roma trans women, have experienced police brutality. They've been beaten, and are victims of hate-speech. Most often, as a result of the discrimination and exclusion they face, trans women are pushed towards sex work or something in this area. And because of that, they usually become victims. If they are also Roma, then this involves the racist and intersectionality aspects, poverty... I know about these kinds of situations and have heard many stories over the course of time. Besides that, the trauma of coping with it can often be terror-like. Imagine going to your parents and telling them you have a different identity, even though your parents can see for themselves that you're not conforming to the socially accepted gender norms. The parents are the first people to notice, but they don't know how [to react] or if they're prepared. I think for them (most of the ones I know are trans girls), the experience is much more traumatizing than for the gay men or lesbian women. When we talk about a trans woman, a trans man, for the antiquated [Romanian] mentality, these things are harder to digest. Unexposed to diversity for 50 years...look at what we're dealing with now. After 30 years we are still talking about stuff like these.

But it's not just about the police. I know of a case where a person lost his job twice because he was visibly gay and didn't hide it. Yet, he didn't press charges. There are people that know the legislation, that know what their rights are, but because of the fear of being exposed, in the media included, or in various circles, don't want to take things further. After all, this is a human rights issue.

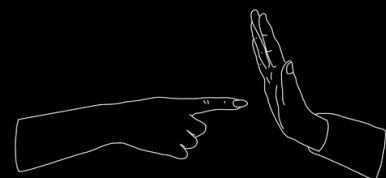
WHAT SOLUTIONS DO YOU SEE FOR DEALING WITH THE DISCRIMINATION OF ROMA PEOPLE/ LGBTQ PEOPLE IN ROMANIA?

It's a process. That's what we have been saying since 2005 when we organised the first Pride. We were aware that it would come as a shock, but it was a necessary one. And it shows. After this much time, society has slightly changed, it's been exposed to some issues. It's hard to come up with any estimation though, because the religious intolerance is on the rise. Religious fundamentalism is part of what's fuelling these stories. Religion, unfortunately, plays a negative role when it comes to rights... not just LGBT rights, but also women rights (who are taught to 'turn the other cheek', to be 'obedient', to fulfil their 'true destiny of being a housewife', as is the societal norm imposed by the religion).



I think people have had more exposure to it, they've travelled abroad. The cyber-hate is flourishing, but, on the flip side, we need to do more to normalize and put forward a different kind of discourse, a sanctioning one. It's not enough to see a racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic or any kind of hateful comment and to just hit the Angry Emoji reaction, but you need to have an actual reaction, a written one, where you state 'This is a misogynistic comment', 'This is anti-Semitic negationism'. I mean you have to challenge the ones that generate these kinds of hate speeches and the ones that propagate them, because if these kinds of challenging discourses don't exist, the extremist one is normalized. I've even seen this kind of behaviour when it comes to highly educated and knowledgeable people, that prefer to not get involved in these conversations. And this is exactly what we need in our society: debating and confrontation of ideas. Well, in our country the confrontation of ideas is associated with pitchforks and torches and throwing an axe at someone else's head, other's skull, to make them understand what the religious fundamentalist has said, but that's another story.

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GEORGE \ \ GAY ROMA

This is just the starting point, we should be more present, more active and more solidary as minorities. You know, there is homophobia present in the Roma community and racism vice versa. And not only that...there is the internalized misogyny present in some women. We understand how the mechanisms are fuelled, the patriarchal discourse and so on. Let`s be aware and try to actively fight them.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT
HOW THE ROMA AND LGBTQ PEOPLE
ARE BEING PRESENTED
WITHIN THE PUBLIC SPACE?
WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD
CHANGE REGARDING HOW PEOPLE
PERCEIVE THESE MINORITIES?**

It`s about stereotypes and prejudice. What should change? First of all, it`s about the lack of exposure. Having stereotypes and prejudice is normal, they theoretically make our life easier. Just don`t bring that to the public space or my private space and start harassing me with your prejudices. The prejudice is the stereotype put to work. As long as you treat me differently based on a supposition, it`s obvious that you don`t know me. The solution would be a better exposure to these kinds of personalities or situations, which would lead to dismantling the stereotypes that minorities face. And two: education, education, education, a thousand times education, as there is a lot of work to be done here, unfortunately.

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