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# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2016

*Economic, social and cultural rights  
and the internet*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)  
AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE (IDRC)

# Global Information Society Watch

## 2016



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## Introduction

With the information and communications technology (ICT) sector accounting for 6% of the Romanian GDP in 2016, the country ranks fourth among 28 European Union (EU) countries with regard to the ICT sector's share of GDP.<sup>1</sup> However, according to the European Commission's annual Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), Romania ranks among the last in the EU in online engagement, due to the poor integration of online services.<sup>2</sup> Has the internet levelled the playing field in the country? Has access to online spaces brought more fairness, resources and freedom to people? This report considers those left behind: Romania's digital immigrants who have a low level of digital literacy. In particular we focus on the Roma community.

Jenkins has noted that the interactive internet gives space for a participatory culture.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies on Romanian people's digital literacy have indicated that while infrastructural access to smart devices has doubled since 2013,<sup>4</sup> the quality of participation has not: the high DESI scores on connectivity for Romania are mainly due to social media use.<sup>5</sup> The "digital turn"<sup>6</sup> did not happen in every community. The rural, the poor, and the less

educated have little access to quality content and are less keen to participate in the process of shaping the internet. While looking at the darker side of the digital divide, we highlight initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between digital natives and digital immigrants. Can participatory culture of the few bring benefits for those left behind?

## Political and policy background

Despite significant progress in fighting corruption and creating transparent public institutions, Romania is still one of the most corrupt European countries.<sup>7</sup> Instead of punitive measures, experts recommend more transparency and mechanisms to prevent abuse.<sup>8</sup> Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Romania 58th out of 168 countries in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

According to an Amnesty International report on Romania (2015-2016), "Roma continued to experience discrimination, forced evictions and other human rights violations. Following the release of the US Senate report on the CIA secret detention programme, a new investigation into Romania's co-operation was opened. In April, the UN Committee against Torture reviewed Romania for the first time in 18 years."<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, a new Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens of Roma Ethnicity for 2015-2020 was adopted, highlighting infrastructural development, equal access to the labour market and education.<sup>11</sup>

Roma communities are still discriminated against by the majority and living in striking conditions of poverty. According to a National Council for Combating Discrimination document sanctioning

1 European Commission. (2016). *Country Report Romania 2016*. ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/cr2016\_romania\_en.pdf

2 Ibid.

3 Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press. [https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free\\_download/9780262513623\\_Confronting\\_the\\_Challenges.pdf](https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/9780262513623_Confronting_the_Challenges.pdf)

4 Bakó, R. K. (2016). Digital Transition: Children in a Multimodal World. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Social Analysis*, 6(1), 145-154. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307638942\\_Digital\\_Transition\\_Children\\_in\\_a\\_Multimodal\\_World](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307638942_Digital_Transition_Children_in_a_Multimodal_World)

5 European Commission. (2016). Digital Single Market. Digital Economy and Society. Romania. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/scoreboard/romania>

6 Westera, W. (2015). *The Digital Turn: How the Internet Transforms Our Existence*. [www.thedigitalturn.co.uk/TheDigitalTurn.pdf](http://www.thedigitalturn.co.uk/TheDigitalTurn.pdf)

7 Societatea Academică din România. (2016). *Raportul anual de analiză și prognoză – România 2016*. sar.org.ro/raportul-anual-de-analiza-si-prognoza-romania-2016

8 Ibid.

9 Transparency International. (2015). *Indicele de percepție a corupției. România 2015*. [https://www.transparency.org.ro/politici\\_si\\_studii/indici/ipc/2015/IPC2015\\_Prezentare\\_RO.pdf](https://www.transparency.org.ro/politici_si_studii/indici/ipc/2015/IPC2015_Prezentare_RO.pdf)

10 Amnesty International (2016). *Annual Report: Romania 2015/2016*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/romania/report-romania>

11 Agenția Națională pentru Romi. (2014). *Strategia Guvernului României de incluziune a cetățenilor aparținând minorității rome pentru perioada 2014-2020*. [www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Site2014/Strategie/Strategie\\_final\\_18-11-2014.pdf](http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Site2014/Strategie/Strategie_final_18-11-2014.pdf)

an internet café for not letting Roma people in, 82% of the Romanian population consider Roma criminals, 70.7% would segregate them from the majority of the population, 41.1% would not accept them as neighbours, and 48.6% would limit Roma population growth.<sup>12</sup> Roma people are constantly ridiculed<sup>13</sup> and stereotyped as criminals by the mainstream media: the most likely media report of a Roma person with a smartphone is that they stole it.<sup>14</sup>

Romania signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1968, and ratified it in 1976. In relation to the Roma people's status in Romania, Article 7 (just and favourable conditions of work), Article 11 (decent living conditions), Article 12 (physical/mental health) and Article 13 (proper education) have particular relevance.<sup>15</sup> In its recommendations on the social exclusion and discrimination against the Roma, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has recommended<sup>16</sup> that Romania:

- Collect disaggregated statistical data on the number of Roma living in the country and on their access to employment, social security, housing, health care and education, in order to improve their socioeconomic situation.
- Provide the Roma with personal documents, including birth certificates, which are necessary for the enjoyment of their rights.
- Address the problems faced by the Roma in accessing employment, social security, housing, health care and education.
- Address negative prejudices and stereotypes, which are among the underlying causes of the systemic discrimination and social exclusion experienced by the Roma.

## Using the internet to bridge the economic, social and cultural divide

The national strategy for the socioeconomic inclusion of Roma people does not even contain the word “internet”. However, there are some initiatives aimed at bridging the digital divides between the connected and those left behind, such as the TechCamp (December 2011). The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US Embassy in Romania and the Romanian National Library organised a two-day workshop focused on NGOs helping disadvantaged groups through improved digital literacy.<sup>17</sup> ICT experts and NGO representatives have mapped key areas of the digital divide that need attention and have planned a series of actions for bridging them:<sup>18</sup>

- How can we create an online platform for disabled persons focusing on employment opportunities?
- How do we engage with teachers to promote creativity and critical thinking in the education system (e.g., social media literacy skills)?
- How can we use new technologies to reduce the school dropout rate?
- How can we solve the lack of specialist IT teachers?
- How can we change the negative image of Roman people perpetuated in traditional and new media, including promoting good role models?
- How do we collect valid data on the Roma?
- How can we reach isolated communities (with no access to technology)?
- How to (prepare to) engage people in response to emergency situations (such as earthquakes and floods) and increase the efficiency of emergency responses.

We could retrieve no information on the implementation of these ideas. Current projects funded by the National Agency for the Roma Community – called “2016: The year of citizen participation and responsibility” – were mainly concerned with general educational issues in rural communities.<sup>19</sup>

12 Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării. (2008). *Hotărârea nr. 180 din 18 februarie 2008*. nediscriminare.ro/uploads\_ro/docManager/1386/180.pdf

13 Ceaușescu, V. (2016, 9 March). România, tot la coada Europei/Primum iar un raport cutremurător din partea “lunii civilizate”. *Cuvântul Libertății*. www.cvlpress.ro/09.03.2016/romania-tot-la-coada-europei-primim-iar-un-raport-cutremurator-din-partea-%E2%80%9Elunii-civilizate

14 Dan. (2011, 3 June). Un țigan cu telefonul descărcat, prins în timp ce încerca să fure curent dintr-un bar. *Times New Roman* (news satire site). www.timesnewroman.ro/26528

15 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx

16 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (2014). Concluding Observations. E/C.12/ROU/CO/3-5. tbineternet.ohchr.org/\_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E/C.12/ROU/CO/3-5&Lang=En, pp. 3-4.

17 Storify.com (2011). *TechCamp Goes to Bucharest, Romania!* https://storify.com/techcampglobal/techcamp-goes-to-bucharest-romania

18 TechCamp Wiki. (n.d.). *TechCamp Bucharest Folder*. wiki.techcampglobal.org/index.php?title=TechCamp\_Bucharest\_Folder

19 Agenția Națională pentru Romi (2016). *Lista proiecte admise. „Anul Participării și Responsabilizării Cetățenilor III” 2016*. www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Site2016/Proiecte/Finantari2016/Sesiunea2/Lista%20proiecte%20admise%20Sesiunea%2011%202016.pdf

Meanwhile, an ongoing international research project – “The Untold Story: An Oral History of the Roma People in Romania” – is being conducted by the Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca in partnership with the University of Iceland, with funding from the governments of Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway. It is aimed at recovering and reconstructing the histories of the Roma in Romania by collecting, preserving and interpreting their oral testimonies. As part of disseminating the research results, the project team plans to create a virtual museum in Romani, Romanian and English, build a database of testimonies, and develop educational materials. This is a good example of using ICTs for the benefit of a marginalised community.<sup>20</sup>

### How connected is Romania to the EU and to the world?

Statistical data for ICT access and use in Romania from 2015<sup>21</sup> show a marked divide between urban and rural areas according to EU standards. While more than half of Romanian households had a computer at home, the percentage in rural areas was 61.9%, compared to 72.2% in urban areas. Overall, 61% of Romanians had internet access, but the percentage rises to 66.9% in urban areas. The report also states that 71.1% of Romanian people aged 16-74 had used a computer, with the percentage of men using a computer slightly higher than that of women: 72.1% versus 68.1%. If we look at the age groups, the most vulnerable category is the elderly: 73.9% of people aged 65-74 have never used a computer, compared to 8.2% for the 16-24 year olds and 29.4% for 45-54 year olds.

Roma people are the most disconnected group in Romania when it comes to benefitting from the advantages of the information society. According to a United Nations e-government survey, only 16.5% of the Roma population could use the internet.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, another report states that 25% could neither read nor write.<sup>23</sup> Illiteracy in general,

and computer illiteracy in particular, are major obstacles in accessing the labour market for better paid and more stable jobs. The national strategy for implementing the EU digital agenda in Romania is focused on economic and cultural e-inclusion generally, and does not deal with the social marginalisation of the Roma community.<sup>24</sup>

According to the DESI, when it comes to e-government performance, Romania is lagging behind Western European countries such as frontrunner Denmark, or former Communist countries that have been able to catch up with highly developed countries, such as Estonia (see Table 1).

The UN e-government survey confirms the statistics in Table 1: despite significant progress made in online service delivery, Romania belongs to the group of countries striving to catch up with the developed world, with an e-government development index (EGDI) of 0.5611 (on a scale of 0.0270 to 0.9193), ranking it 75th out of 193 countries.<sup>25</sup> The report states: “As a composite indicator, the EGDI is used to measure the readiness and the capacity of national administrations to use ICT to deliver public services.”<sup>26</sup>

If we consider this result in a global context, it is fairly good, and above the world average score of 0.4922. If we look in more detail, however, the result is more nuanced. Romania was scored 0.4565 for online services (below the world average of 0.4623), 0.4533 for telecommunication infrastructure (above the world average of 0.3711), and achieved a significantly better result for the human capital component: 0.7736, above all regional and world averages (see Table 2). The online service component was evaluated through a global survey measuring online presence of national governmental organisations, whereas telecommunication infrastructure data were provided by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The human capital index was calculated based on data provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The data presented in Table 2 reflect Romanian governmental efforts to align itself with best practices regarding the use of ICTs for development. But to what extent can ICTs be put to work for development? The socioeconomic and cultural gap

20 EEA Grants. (2016, 20 September). Telling the Stories of Roma. [eeagrants.org/News/2016/Telling-the-stories-of-Roma](http://eeagrants.org/News/2016/Telling-the-stories-of-Roma)

21 Institutul Național de Statistică. (2015, 27 November). În anul 2015, ponderea gospodăriilor care au calculator acasă a fost de 61,9%, iar a celor care au acces la rețeaua de internet acasă a fost de 61,0%. *Comunicat de presă*, 295. [www.insse.ro/cms/files/statistici/comunicate/com\\_anuale/tic/a15/tic\\_r2015.pdf](http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/statistici/comunicate/com_anuale/tic/a15/tic_r2015.pdf)

22 As compared to 54.08% for the overall population. United Nations. (2016). *United Nations e-Government Survey 2016: E-government in Support of Sustainable Development*. <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2016>

23 Neagu, G. (2012). *Șanse de acces la educație în societatea românească contemporană*. Iași: Editura Lumen.

24 Guvernul României. (2015). *Strategia Națională privind Agenda Digitală pentru România 2020*. [www.ancom.org.ro/uploads/links\\_files/Strategia\\_nationala\\_privind\\_Agenda\\_Digitala\\_pentru\\_Romania\\_2020.pdf](http://www.ancom.org.ro/uploads/links_files/Strategia_nationala_privind_Agenda_Digitala_pentru_Romania_2020.pdf)

25 United Nations. (2016). Op. cit.

26 Ibid.

TABLE 1.					
Romanian e-government performance assessment across EU policy priorities					
Scores for 2014		EU 28+*	Denmark	Estonia	Romania
User centricity	Overall scores	73	84	89	48
	Online availability	75	87	94	51
	Usability	80	85	90	43
	Ease of use	60	69	72	41
	Speed of use	56	66	73	36
Transparent government	Overall scores	51	65	77	19
	Service delivery	41	56	78	9
	Public organisations	60	51	88	37
	Personal data	52	89	67	11
Key enablers	Overall scores	50	82	91	12
	eID	63	100	100	48
	eDocuments	57	71	94	24
	Authentic sources	46	77	93	8
	eSafe	39	71	86	0
	Single sign-on	58	100	86	14

Benchmarks: Insufficient (0–25), Moderate (26–50), Fair (51–75), Good (76–100).  
 \* EU 28+ stands for the 28 EU countries plus Norway.

Source: Table compiled based on data from: European Commission. (2015). *Romania. E-government state of play. Country Factsheets – eGovernment Benchmark Report 2015*. Brussels: Digital Single Market. Digital Economy and Society.

TABLE 2.				
Regional e-government development index (EGDI) averages				
Region	EGDI	Online service component	Telecom infrastructure	Human capital component
Africa	0.2882	0.2567	0.1724	0.4355
Americas	0.5245	0.4959	0.3844	0.6933
Asia	0.5132	0.5120	0.3730	0.6545
Europe	0.7241	0.6926	0.6438	0.8360
Oceania	0.4154	0.2966	0.2599	0.6897
World	0.4922	0.4623	0.3711	0.6433

Source: United Nations. (2016). Op. cit.

between the haves and have-nots is enormous. Disadvantaged groups like the Roma, the elderly, and those living in rural areas can hardly have their fundamental human rights to decent work, to proper living conditions and to education realised unless they are brought into the information society. An important part of social inclusion is the participation in global culture enabled by the internet.

## Conclusions

Participation is the key enabler of advancing human rights in a democratic society. The EU gives

a strong normative framework for developing a participatory culture in its member states, both in offline and online contexts, but the implementation is the task of national and sub-national governmental entities, businesses and civil society organisations.

With the rise of the network society and the ubiquity of the internet, citizen participation can be raised to the next level. Are the economic and cultural dimensions enough to provide a participatory culture through the internet? We believe they are not. The political and the social dimensions are indispensable for building a fair and just

society. Political will and proportionate measures are necessary to bridge the digital gap, whereas social measures are necessary to bring marginalised groups back from the fringes of society. Should we leave the word “internet” out of a Roma inclusion strategy? We should not. Dire poverty and discrimination are indeed painful problems for marginalised communities – and need focused attention – but ICTs can empower those left behind, and open up possibilities for employment, for citizen involvement in the world of work, and simply for entertainment and fun. Should we give food first and then computers? Yes. Meanwhile, the condescending discourse of “helping them” should be replaced with dialogue involving all stakeholders in the process of bridging economic, social and digital divides.

### Action steps

Action steps in Romania should include the following:

- Governmental and civil society organisations should be more active in providing digital literacy services for marginalised groups, such as the Roma and the elderly.
- Businesses should include a strong digital inclusion component in their corporate social responsibility programmes, targeted at digital immigrants and at Roma people in particular.
- Media representatives should raise the ethical standards of their discourse on marginalised groups, especially the Roma population.
- Good practices in the creative and enabling use of ICTs for marginalised groups should be encouraged generally.

# Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an “inventory of things” that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers’ rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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