Яe-ACT

Remember and ACT!

Analytical paper on debunking myths of online antigypsyism

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About the project

Analysis of hate data collected by members of the International Network Against Cyber Hate, INACH, in Europe has shown that there are strong and documented links between current online hate phenomena and hate-slurs, prejudices and practices that have been propagated in the Third Reich.

To transform these worrisome findings into effective warnings, especially since remembrance and knowledge on the Holocaust and its horrors are fading, the project Remember and ACT! (Re-ACT) is putting a special focus on researching how "old" concepts of antisemitism and antigypsyism are being re-enacted by concerted hate campaigns and where they originated from. Starting from there, Re-ACT will develop, collect, and provide educational materials and tools for the prevention of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance.

These self-generated sets of information plus a curated collection of high-quality educational materials will build the foundation for the establishment of an online prevention-hub at INACH.

Introduction

The aim of this analytical paper is to clarify the mechanisms that help to over and over again recycle old stereotypes, half-truths and myths about the largest minority on the European continent - the Roma[1]. The paper attempts to explain the principles on which they revive entrenched anti-Roma attitudes and what new forms of the same recurring xenophobic thinking in modern forms exist throughout the internet and social networks.

Contrary to the available information, it can be very difficult to disprove deep-rooted ideas. This is due to the fact that people do not always think rationally, because opinions and ideas about the world and the relationships in it are influenced by emotions and many other factors, such as the influence of the new media, etc.

Here the authors will try to uncover the connection between the old concepts of anti-Roma views and prejudices and their revival in the online space, where they took a "new breath".

"Racism directed towards Roma is deeply rooted in Europe; it is persistent both historically and geographically; in many countries, it is systematic and accepted by virtually the whole society and is often accompanied by acts of violence."[2]

The available data prove that the Roma, at least when the authors talk about the European countries, are among the most disadvantaged minority ethnic groups, particularly in education and health, and also face discrimination, prejudice, hostility and its online forms.[3] The centuries-old history of the Roma on the European continent is also a history of prejudice and condemnation, persecution based on collective guilt and the gradual exclusion of people on the margins of societies. Today, in addition to

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[1] The term "Roma" is used to refer to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom). This term covers various groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

[2] Council of Europe in Thematic report on combating anti-Gypsyism, hate speech and hate crime against Roma. 2013. p. 17. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/16800890fb (last accessed 14.9.2020)

[3] Council of Europe in Thematic report on combating anti-Gypsyism, hate speech and hate crime against Roma. 2013. p. 9. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/16800890fb (last accessed 14.9.2020)

the persisting offline forms of specific hatred and prejudice against the Roma, people also encounter an online version of attacks on the Roma, which is often more visible, blatant, but also more traceable form of entrenched anti-Roma attitudes.

The bearers of anti-Roma sentiment are far from being only supporters of far-right groups and adherents of neo-Nazi ideology. Hate speech against Roma on the Internet is spread and shared by people from the "mainstream", anti-Roma attitudes are shared across social strata and states and form part of a "shared identity" and a popular "lightning rod" for disparate social problems in a substantial part of the population in many European countries. The Roma, like Jews or currently refugees and sexual minorities, for example, are a grateful scapegoat in their desire to find the identifiable cause of various crises in society.

In terms of the total population of the EU member states most Roma live in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. However, it is not only in these countries that it is possible to record widespread hate speech on the Internet (and not only there) led by both individuals and organized groups and political entities. The Internet space is generally flooded with expressions of intolerance and hatred (even against many other marginalized groups), while a silent majority does not participate in discussions on the Internet and does not show attackers or victims disapproval of such expressions.

The neglect of such manifestations subsequently leads to a further deepening of marginalization and withdrawal from the public discussion space, as well as to the normalization of anti-Roma attitudes and stereotypes.

Awareness-raising on antigypsyism and the activation of people against this phenomenon are thus becoming increasingly urgent, especially through social networks, which today have a major impact on the formation of ideas about the world and the relationships within it.

In this analytical report, the authors would like to present the main historical and current anti-Roma attitudes, especially in their online mutation, to show the connection

between them. If their "roots" can be revealed, there is a good chance that the authors will also provide readers with a tool to break down current attitudes and negative stereotypes, which are not justified today.

This report presents several examples of online antigypsyism that is flooding the Internet, especially in European countries. These examples, selected from many others, are intended to illustrate the phenomenon of modern antigypsyism.

Powerful cocktail: Old patterns of thinking, stereotypes and antigypsyism

According to the Alliance against Antigypsyism, current antigypsyism has deep historical roots that flow from "processes of social construction and projection that are prevalent elements of the development of European 'civilisation'"[4].

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention, at least briefly, to the historical context and processes that accompanied the arrival and settlement of Roma groups on their journey through Europe. This need is even more urgent when, with a few exceptions (e.g. Spain), the history of the Roma is not a compulsory part of the primary or secondary school curriculum. At most, these topics appear in the form of "project lessons", where Romani history and culture are presented to students as something exotic.

Ignorance of key moments in Roma history, which has been an integral part of European history for almost a thousand years, has resulted in an easier inclination for non-Roma to think and generalize about the Roma. In the same way, the Roma themselves in the institutionalized education system only rarely learn something about their rich and turbulent history.

The first mention of the Roma in Europe (the territory of the former Byzantine Empire) comes from 1068[5]. Since their arrival in Europe, the Roma have been shrouded in a number of myths, both because of their appearance and cultural customs, which were unusual for a large part of Europe at the time.

The Roma have traditionally engaged in many crafts, the production and sale of blacksmith's, basketry, boiler-making and other handicraft products. They were also excellent musicians, acrobats, and entertained people by showing off trained bears or

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[4] Alliance against Antigypsyism, 2017. Antigypsyism - A Reference Paper. p. 7. Available at https://abv.a52.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Antigypsyism-reference-paper-16.06.2017.pdf (last accessed 10.09.2020)
[5] Achim, Viorel. The Roma in Romanian History. 2004, p. 11

snakes and divining by hand - which in Christian Europe was associated with dark forces and the devil.

As with the Jews, the Roma were commonly demonized due to their different appearance, traditions, and language. In Christian Europe, the most obvious was the likeness of devils and devilish creatures.

Non-compliance with Christian principles led to the excommunication of the Roma from the Church by the Archbishop of Paris in 1427. In 1492 - after the expulsion of the Arabs from Spain - the Roma were expelled along with the Jews. It has gradually become common practice throughout almost the whole of Europe.

The Church declared the Roma heretics and identified them with the heretical sect called "Athinganoi" (a common meaning in Greek for "(the) untouchables"). This name has been adopted to describe the Roma and in a slightly modified forms can be found today in many languages: Cikán (Czech), Cigán (Slovak), Zigeuner (German), Zingara (Italian), Tsigane (French), Cigány (Hungarian), Gypsy (English), Cygan (Polish), Gitano (Spanish), Cigano (Portuguese), etc.

This name has been a derogatory meaning from the very beginning, and that is why many Roma rightly perceive it as an insult. In Slovakia and in some parts of the Czech Republic, the word "gypsying" is used in the sense of lying or hanging out.

In addition, in medieval Central Europe, the Roma were often confused, for example, with Turkish spies and the vanguard of Turkish and Mongol invaders.[6]

In the years 1496–1498, the Assembly of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation gradually resolved that the Roma should be expelled and persecuted. Their presence in the cities had to be reported under the threat of a fine. Everyone caught was facing the death penalty; it was later declared that whoever killed a "gypsy" would not commit

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[6] Achim, Viorel. The Roma in Romanian History. 2004, p. 30

murder or be punished. In the 16th century, anti-Roma repression intensified, and Roma began to be expelled from most European countries. The tightening of repression and expulsion was related, among other things, to the development of the social and economic structure of these countries and their further closure to foreign producers - potential competitors.

Uncertainty of the unknown and human imagination have turned many similar legends into powerful negative prejudices over time, as well as a number of romanticizing stereotypes about the Roma as an unfettered element.

The approach to the Roma in previous centuries can be illustrated by a remark made by the German author and journalist Frank Arnau in his book "Jenseits der Gesetze". The list of game caught during the hunt by a French duke in the early 18th century included, in addition to various game species, "one killed Gypsy girl with a small infant".[7]

The Roma have also been commonly used as slaves for centuries and across Europe.
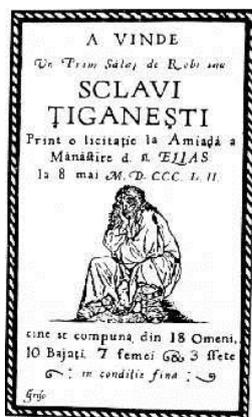
"For sale, a prime lot of Gypsy slaves, to be sold by auction at the Monastery of St.Elias, 8 May 1852, consisting of 18 men, 10 boys, 7 women and 3 girls: in fine condition." (From Ian Hancock, The Pariah Syndrome, 1987.)

The rejection and repressive approach towards the Roma culminated in World War II and the genocide of the Roma population, which was the result of the dehumanization of the Roma and the perverted ideology of the superiority of one race over others. The

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[7] Arnau, Frank. Jenseits der Gesetze, 1966

fact that the Roma still have to demand a dignified recognition of this historical fact[8] illustrates the blindness of the majority non-Roma society.

However, the suppression of Roma human rights did not end with the Second World War. In the countries of the socialist bloc, there was a mass effort for the forced assimilation of Roma, a ban on the use of the Romani language, the removal of children for re-education, the segregation of Romani pupils in schools and the forced sterilization of Romani women.[9]

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[8] Berkyová Renata. Lety after the Romani genocide, Part Three: The 1990s pave the way to a price tag of half a billion crowns http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/lety-after-the-romani-genocide-part-three-the-1990s-pave-the-way-to-a-price-tag-of-half-a-billion-crowns (last accessed 09.09.2020)

[9] Ryšavý Zdeněk, ČTK. ROMEA to Czech President: Romani life in communist Czechoslovakia included forced assimilation, forced sterilization of women, segregated education http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/romea-to-czech-president-romani-life-in-communist-czechoslovakia-included-forced-assimilation-forced-sterilization-of-women (last accessed 09.09.2020)

How can hate stereotypes survive today?

Even today in the 21st century, it is not possible to weaken the phenomenon called Antigypsyism, which, on the contrary, strengthens in the environment of the Internet and social networks. It is therefore crucial to find an answer to the question of how it is possible that, despite demonstrable historical facts and cases of clear violations of Roma human rights, it is the Roma who are to blame for anti-Roma attitudes because of their "lifestyle" and "inability to integrate into proper society".

Stereotype as well as prejudice are a common part of our lives. They make it easier to find your way around the world and make decisions. At the same time, however, it is based on the simplification and generalization of phenomena, either on the basis of one's own experience or - much more often - indirectly. As early as 1922, the American journalist Walter Lippmann showed in his book Public Opinion that we do not perceive the external world for the most part directly, but rather through images of the world transmitted through education, authority and the media in the process of socialization and enculturation. "*For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.*"[10]

Stereotypes are a kind of culturally and historically determined patterns of thinking. However, if one prejudices and attributes certain character traits to another without really knowing them, solely on the basis of their appearance or supposed or real belonging to a group, it is very likely that one can make a fatal judgment. Stereotypes tend to be a source of simplistic, generalizing and unverifiable judgments and, more generally, "represent the power relations, tensions and conflicts behind them"[11].

Stereotypical thinking has the features of a prejudiced or pre-formed perception of the world and supports its distinction into the privileged category "we" and the second

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[10] Lippmann, Walter Public opinion. 1922, p. 81
[11] Jirák; Köpplová. Masová média. 2009, p. 299

category "they" - in this case the Roma. "We - non-Roma" identify with a "decent, morally correct" community through shared attitudes, self-esteem, and expectations.

Stereotypes are a tool for social exclusion and classification of those who are "different from us", who are "they" - and thus become the object of stereotypical thinking. In retrospect, such a dichotomous division acts as a self-affirmation, a legitimization of power and a sense of the "normalcy" of one's own group.

People define the world through what society and the culture into which they were born have already prepared for us. Thus, direct experience does not play a primary role in the creation and internalization of stereotypes. Stereotypes tend to be "inherited" among people - in the sense of maintaining tradition and sharing across generations.

Stereotypes are also very resistant to opposing attitudes and facts, which deny and contradict the reasons for the existence of a particular stereotype. Moreover, when the stereotype is very entrenched, the facts that support it attract our attention and people omit conflicting information.

Of course, the world of media and social networks is not immune to these social processes either. On the contrary - with the help of internet platforms and discussion forums, old biases and stereotypes are being strengthened. "*Especially where the audience does not have their own experience with a group, it is very likely that they will consider as 'reality' what others 'think' about that group, or what the media and ubiquitous social networks offer about it. Thus, with the support of the media, different groups are stereotyped and stereotypes are created.*"[12]

Minorities therefore enter the field of vision of the majority society, especially at the moment when they become a threat or for some reason a peculiarity. The normal daily

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[12] Ibid, p. 299

unproblematic functioning of members of the Roma minority is not an attractive topic for the media and content consumers on social networks.

In other words, when the media and social networks predominantly show members of the Roma minority in stereotypically negative roles - such as aggressive perpetrators of theft, unreliable employees, apartment destroyers, beggars, problematic elements refusing to work and integrate into a proper society - media and internet participate to strengthen the construct of the image of social reality, which the recipients of media content may equally consider to be an image of reality.

Current trends: Is hatred "cool"? The most common hoaxes and misinformation about the Roma

Hatred on the Internet is no less harmful, and its illegal forms are no less illegal just because they are spread through the virtual paths of social networks and other Internet platforms. On the contrary - due to the speed and range with which cyberspace spreads, it can cause more serious interventions outside of this environment and result in more far-reaching silencing of dissent.

An important element in hate posts, troll comments and shared memes on social networks is an element of irony, ridicule, and humiliation.[13]. This form of "humorous racism" is, of course, particularly appealing to young consumers of Internet content.[14]

This phenomenom is significantly manifested in the most pronounced topics we can trace in connection with the Roma in the shared content on social networks and other Internet platforms.

The most common depictions and descriptions of Roma across European countries are specific "Roma crime and theft"-attributes, like abuse of the social system and benefits, anti-systemic behavior (nomadism, unemployment, low education), child abductions (legends about children abducted by "gypsies" are common in Great Britain and France, for example), frequent births due to higher social benefits and allowances and high birth rates, inability to socially adapt etc.

These concepts strongly correspond to that used by the Nazis in connection with the Roma in Nazi propaganda materials.

It was only one step from words to adopt repressive laws, such as the Law on the Defense against hereditary tainted descendants (Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken

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[13] Greene, Viveca S. "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies." Studies in American Humor, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 31–69. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031. Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.

[14] Schwarzenegger, Christian & Wagner, Anna. (2018). Can it be hate if it is fun? Discursive ensembles of hatred and laughter in extreme right satire on Facebook. Studies in Communication and Media . 7. P. 481.

Nachwuchses) entered into force in Germany on 14 July 1933, that permit the forced sterilization of Roma women, the mentally and physically disabled, African-Germans, and others considered "inferior" or "unfit.

A popular strip shared on social networks - the Roma as one of the five "problems" of society and Adolf Hitler as the one who brought the "solution".

Forced sterilizations, as mentioned above, also occurred during the communist era in the Soviet republics. It was no longer about "racial purity", but about violent social engineering in the form of reducing the number of offspring in Romani families and the Romani population in general.

The belief that the Roma are "non-integratable" and that they – „by their own behavior" - get out of society, are „second-class" or downright „inferior citizens" and are perceived as a „threat to order and a burden on society", is a legacy of the times even before the onset of Nazism. They are often likened to lazy parasites that suck out a "decent majority".

Výsledky šesti století integrace: Ničení majetku, krádeže a násilí. Viníkem je vždy poškozený. Budeme na "cikánskou otázku" brzy vzpomínat jako na odpolední čajíček?

"Where can i get social benefits here?"
(Photo in the article *"Results of six centuries of integration: Destruction of property, theft and violence. The culprit is always the injured party. Will we soon remember the "Gypsy question" as an afternoon tea party?"*)[15]

At the same time it is not unusual to see very contradictory and paradoxical stereotypes of connection with the Roma. For example, the Roma are often portrayed as dirty illiterates, but also as skilled experts in paragraphs when it comes to orienting themselves in the complex mess of the social system.

An interesting opinion is brought by a political scientist Aidan McGarry whose research focuses on the political voice of minority and marginalised communities, particularly Roma across Central and Eastern Europe but also LGBTIQ communities.. He argues that „Romaphobia" is a legacy of the establishment of a nation and state in Europe. According to him, the Roma are perceived as a deviant "non-territorial" group that has no roots of its own. They are an element that is supposed to threaten the order and ideal of the nation-state, and the Roma are therefore denied equality in civil rights. This strengthened the perception of the Roma as people who do not belong to the nation.

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[15] The article is available on the disinformation website „www.protiproud.cz" of Petr Hájek, who worked as a spokesman for the former President of the Czech Republic Václav Klaus and as a deputy head of the Office of the President of the Republic for Communication and Culture.

PROTIPROUD
KONTRAREVOLUČNÍ MAGAZÍN PETRA HÁJKA

Cikáni jako nástroj rozvratu: Sorosova zbraň proti politickým odpůrcům? Lze kočovný národ v Evropě asimilovat? Nepomáhá ani Cikánská univerzita. Kam jdou všechny miliardy? Dále na cestě zločinu. V Evropě žádná změna

Gypsies as a tool of disruption: Soros' weapon against political opponents? Can a nomadic nation in Europe be assimilated? The Gypsy University doesn't help either. Where do all the billions go? Further on the path of crime. No change in Europe[16]

McGarry argues that "*the key to understanding why Roma are marginalised across Europe lies in our conception of territory and space as well as in processes of identity construction and maintenance. This identity work includes European state nationalism as well as articulations of Roma identity and, importantly, the negative ascription of Roma identity by the majority. One example of the latter's is the stereotype of Roma as itinerant 'nomads' who have no home or fixed roots; this serves to justify their exclusion today because Roma are not regarded as 'one of us'*"[17]

An often-shared meme of a Romani woman on social networks, including Facebook, which combines two themes - a nomadic way of life and theft.

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[16] It is another example from Petr Hájek's disinformation website www.protiproud.cz, here even in connection with George Soros, who is also the target of anti-Semitic attacks.
[17] McGarry, Aidan. Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Form of Racism. 2017, p. 7

Another often recurring motive for the current variants of shared hoaxes (false distorting messages) on the Internet and social networks is that Roma families get preferntial treatment by the authorities than other citizens. One of the most shared hoaxes of this type in Central Europe, especially in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, contains information that the Roma receive free medicines in pharmacies and household equipment (furniture, refrigerators, etc.), or generally higher social benefits.

In spring of 2020, for example, the hoax that the Roma in the Covid-19 quarantine received free alcohol and food from the state for free on Slovak social networks was widely shared.[18]

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[18] Rómovia v karanténe dostali od štátu zadarmo alkohol a potraviny. Je to hoax, ktorý zdieľali tisícky ľudí (dated 11.05.2020). Available on https://www.webnoviny.sk/romovia-v-karantene-dostali-zadarmo-alkohol-a-potraviny-hoax-zdielali-tisicky-ludi/ (last accessed 13.09.2020)

Conclusion

The above-described distorted and degraded image of a heterogeneous group of people as a negatively perceived homogeneous ethnic group obviously significantly affects the members of this group, their self-confidence and self-concept, as well as trust in society and its institutions.[19].

To better understand the current hateful attitude towards the Roma and its effects, it is important to define antigypsyism, which has been provided by the Alliance against Anti-Gypsyism. Crucial is the turn of thought, consisting in the recognition that Antigypsyism inverts cause and effect. "*Antigypsyism is not a 'minority issue'. It is a phenomenon of our societies, which has its origin in how the social majority view and treat those whom they consider 'gypsies'. To combat antigypsyism, our attention needs to shift to mainstream societies, while raising the voices of those who are dramatically affected by antigypsyism, but also usually silenced by it.*"[20]

In their paper „Combatting Antigypsyism", the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) argues that drivers of antigypsyism are very complex. FRA states that racism and xenophobia are key factors, and at the same time adds that distrust, contempt for the poor and the entrenched social construct associated with the "Gypsy" brand are also among them.[21]

Antigypsyism in the Internet environment - as the authors have shown in a few examples out of many - takes the form of inadequate generalization (collective guilt), trivialization, irony, humiliation and ridicule, reproduction of racist expressions. And as follows from the above information and historical context,

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[19] More information on the psychological phenomenons called "the labeling theory" can be found in the works of the authors: Howard S. Becker, Charles Lemert or Kai T. Erikson; and "internalized racism" see, for example, Karen D. Pyke or Robin Nicole Johnson.

[20] Alliance against Antigypsyism, 2017. Antigypsyism - A Reference Paper. p. 3. Available at https://abv.a52.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Antigypsyism-reference-paper-16.06.2017.pdf (last accessed 10.09.2020)

[21] Combatting Antigypsyism, Expert reports building on forward-looking aspects of the evaluation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, 2020. p. 17. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/post2020_eu_roma_in_antigypsyism.pdf (last accessed 14.9.2020)

social tolerance and acceptance of anti-Roma attitudes are very common in various societies and their bearers often do not even perceive them as racist, degrading or dangerous. The usual phrase that can ilustrate it and can be easily encountered in online discussions and comments under Roma-related content is: *I'm not a racist, but I hate gypsies*.

„*Antigypsyism is the norm rather than the exception in public discourse.*"[22] In addition, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that „*Most countries do not explicitly recognise antigypsyism in state policies, legislation or state documents*"[23].

Tracing the specific topics with which Roma are most often connected in the Internet space - in what form and using what terms and visuals - makes it possible to understand in what indefensible contexts the majority society perceives and "sees" Roma today.

"I am not racist, but ..."
When will we finally debunk the absurdity of this sentence?

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[22] Alliance against Antigypsyism, 2017. Antigypsyism - A Reference Paper. Available at https://abv.a52.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Antigypsyism-reference-paper-16.06.2017.pdf (last accessed 10.09.2020). p. 3

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Resources

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