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The enemy within

Roma, the media and hate speech

Despite European Union legislation on the subject, Europe's Roma remain the victim of discrimination and abuse, as much in the media as in society at large. In Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, not to mention Italy, it is the media that more often than not instigate the witch hunts.

In its first number of 2009, the weekly *Academia Catavencu*, one of the most respected publications in Romania, published the article "Gypsiness comes eating". In what can only be seen as a grotesque mockery of the Romani Holocaust, the article imagines a screenplay with some of the most famous Roma musicians in Romania in the roles of Hitler, Goering and Eva Braun, shamelessly adopting the popular stereotypes of unwashed, animal-like and thievery-prone Roma.

The most popular Romanian TV news station, Realitatea TV, continues to present profoundly negative and stereotypical images of Roma as a background to any discussion directly or indirectly related to Roma. This stimulates the desired Pavlovian reflex among its audience; postings on Realitatea TV's website — over 1000 in March 2009 — have been calling for the annihilation of Roma.

There is nothing new in all this: the treatment or image of Roma issues in the media in most of the former communist states is similar. In Hungary, for instance, anti-Semitic articles in the media are fairly regular, but with the exception of the gay community, no other group is treated in this way so consistently and blatantly as the Roma. On 8 February, Romanian handball player Marian Cozma was stabbed to death in an attack outside a nightclub in Veszprem in Hungary. At the memorial for Cozma there were cries of "Death to Gypsies". The incident was followed by numerous anti-Roma demonstrations across Hungary. Reporting on the murder, journalist Zsolt Bayer wrote in the daily *Magyar Hirlap* about "members of the Gypsy community who have given up on coexistence and humanity" and described Roma criminals as "not human beings, but animals".

On 23 February, a Roma man and his five-year-old son were shot dead in an attack on a family home in Hungary, and two children were injured when the house was set on fire. The attack in Tatárszentgyörgy, a village 40 miles southeast of Budapest, is the latest in a series of attacks on Roma houses involving firebombs and firearms, in which seven people have died over the past year. In striking contrast to this, but with no apparent effect, both Hungarian and Romanian governments have strongly condemned any form of racism.

But it is in Romania that anti-Gypsyism and anti-Roma hate speech in the media is most extreme and persistent. From time to time there are rants against Hungarians and Jews but on a very much lower scale and, again unlike the Roma, who are subjected to this treatment regardless of the quality or otherwise of the medium, only exceptionally in mainstream newspapers. Neither Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, nor the passage in that year of anti-racist legislation by the EU, has changed anything.

On 19 April 2007, more than six years after the initial proposal, the EU adopted the Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia (FDRX). The proposed law, which must be implemented in 2009, makes incitement to racism an EU-wide crime punishable by a period of one to three years imprisonment. The FDRX covers public incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin, as well as the public condoning, denial or "gross trivialization" of crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Some countries make an effort to clean up their act before admission to the EU and subsequently lapse once entry is achieved. The EU appears to do little to follow up on its own terms and conditions of entry. In Romania, the EU accession process played an important role in bringing the Roma issue onto the public agenda. Even if extrinsic and discontinuous, EU pressure led to efforts towards curbing racism and raising awareness regarding strident discrimination and sometimes blatant hate speech targeting Roma. Developments were slow and unequal, impeded both by formal acceptance of the EU requirements and language, and limited overall public support for anti-racism campaigns. This was compounded by the very limited progress made in increasing the capacity and motivation of legislators to react to hate-speech and racism.

One direct result of EU pressure was the establishment of the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD). This was intended to act as the guardian of non-discrimination in Romania with power to sanction acts of discrimination, but has yet to prove itself by strengthening its capacity to carry out research and identify hidden discrimination, its effects and ways to combat it. Overall, on the evidence to date, the NCCD seems unaffected by the fact that Romania is now part of the EU.

On 24 November 2008, one of the biggest circulation non-tabloid newspapers in Romania, *Adevarul*, published in its section on the Spanish Press an article signed by Roxana Pall under the title "The map of the gypsy Romanian thieves from Madrid's metro".¹ The article quoted the security company that produced the map to the effect that "the majority of those stealing in the metro are Roma (Gypsies) of Romanian citizenship". The original article in *El Pais*,² on which the article in *Adevarul* was based, made no use whatsoever of the term "Roma" or "Gypsies" but referred only to "Romanians".

The Gypsies are coming like wolves, they're multiplying like sheep. The first to leave will be international companies. There won't be anyone to sell their new shit to and they'll move away to somewhere with less Gypsies and more money. Who's going to buy soap for soft and tender white skin? Dirty Gyppos?

The difference between Gypsies and cattle is that cattle are subject to veterinary control. Livestock can't behave like Gypsies, but the reverse is allowed. Bovine rights and

freedoms have been under serious pressure for years, and during that time the Gypsy woman has given birth to twins again and she's as bloody-minded as a cow yet again.

The above are to be found in articles by Kalin Rumenov, the recipient of the 2008 Bulgarian *Chernorizetz Hrabur* [Young Journalist] Prize. Similar articles were regularly published in the national newspaper *Novinar*, which made no effort to distance itself from his views or to publish any balancing material to counter Rumenov. The Bulgarian Press Ethics Commission did not consider this to be a problem worthy of their attention.

Similar articles can be found in Romania where the attitude of radio and TV is no different from that of the printed press. The following excerpt, published on 30 August 2007, is from an article in the magazine *Cultura* (Culture) published by the Romanian Cultural Foundation.

The social problem created by Roma is not from yesterday or today, it has been present since the Europeans first had contact with this ethnic group [...] Everywhere, the gypsies managed to inculcate an almost complete lack of trust and to build an image of professional criminals. Nobody loves the gypsies (with the extraordinary exception of those who have never had contact with them) [...] the gypsies have only their own law, and their respect for the other is either equal to zero, or depends on immediate interest or individual friendships [...]

According to its director Augustin Buzura, a member of the Romanian Academy, this foundation functions as part of Romanian "cultural diplomacy". Eugen Simion, former president of the Romanian Academy, is also one of the main contributors to *Cultura*.

And another, published in the newspaper *Flacara Iasului* on 27 and 28 September 2007:

Gypsies [...] "those disgusting beings" with "filthy and lewd women" dragging their "broods that shit on themselves" [...] "a living proof we come from monkeys", "hysterical", "cunning", "treacherous", "societal abortions" [...] "those gypsies multiply like rabbits (my apologies to rabbits) only to get their stinky dirty paws on the welfare of some poor children [...] the gypsies steal, are rapists"

The excerpts from two articles in *Flacara Iasului* are signed by two members of the Romanian Writers Union, one of whom is the spokesperson for the museum of literature.

The materials quoted above on Roma in Romania and Bulgaria are inadequate, fragmented and biased, if not blatantly racist. Most of the media in these countries is commercial media, driven by market forces; they have little appetite or will to produce programming that promotes tolerance and combats the social exclusion of Roma. On the contrary, commercial television and tabloid newspapers overwhelmingly portray Roma in a negative light and reproduce racist stereotypes.

Even in the rare positive portrayals of Roma, journalists look at the most dramatic angles, encouraging an emotional response from their audience. This

approach is often counter-productive since people tend to see those portrayed as exceptions and automatically different from the "typical" Roma. It is clear that programmes and articles are the products of journalists' own subjective perspectives, which include both rational and emotional convictions. Considering the anti-Gypsyism ingrained in society, it is almost impossible to avoid extremes since the majority of the news and reports are focused on Roma ghettos or neighbourhoods. The residents of the ghettos not only may not recognize themselves in the image reflected back to them by the media, but consider it — in an abrasive dissonance with the opinion of the journalists — a disservice that helps to further the stigmatization process.

One finds a shockingly limited causal approach to reporting events concerning the Roma, as practically no news looks at the context of events, the frequently invisible triggers of dramatic incidents. This is in sharp contrast to reports that cover the majority population, where very often the causes of violence, aggression and vandalism are well researched and quite often found to justify the behaviour in question.

In general, the Roma are subjects of "media crisis" reporting, which brings fast and often impulsive solutions. The clear focus of most reporting is on criminality, violence, and immigration as a threat to public safety. This causes a biased portrayal of the relation of ethnicity to violence and clearly obstructs other, more important aspects such as social exclusion, hidden violence, forced segregation, environment, education, perspective, social class and other possible causes of criminal behaviour. For instance, riots involving Roma are overwhelmingly presented in relation to ethnicity, regardless of the nature of the riots. In contrast, riots with predominantly white participants — football riots — are rarely analyzed for their ethnic or gender characteristics.

Roma in the Italian media

It is worth looking in some depth at the way the Romanian media exploited the Italian media coverage of recent incidents there involving Roma.

- On 11 May 2008, four Molotov cocktails were thrown into Romani/Gypsy camps in Milan and Novara.
- On 13 May, assailants burned the Ponticelli Romani settlement in Naples to the ground, causing the approximately 800 residents to flee while Italians stood by and cheered. On the day of the arson attacks on the Ponticelli settlement, RAI television showed Italians in the area screaming, "Roma out". This was broadcast before the police were alerted to the riot. Further arson attacks on the Ponticelli settlement undertaken by locals continued into the week of 26–30 May with evident impunity.
- On 25 May, a Sinti girl in Brescia was stopped from going to school by some non-Romani children yelling "dirty Gypsy, dirty kidnapper".
- On 9 June, Italian media reported that a settlement of around 100 Romanian Roma in Catania, Sicily had been attacked and burned to the ground. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni reportedly downplayed the attacks, stating: "As for vigilante attacks on immigrants, that is what happens when Gypsies steal babies, or when Romanians commit sexual violence."
- On 25 June, Maroni, a member of the extremist party Lega Nord, announced the intention of the Italian government to have a "census" of all "nomads" in

Italy.

– On 28 June, Maroni revealed a plan for fingerprinting all Roma residents in camps, including children, insisting that this plan is a solution to inadequate housing problems and rising crime rates in Italy.

– February 2009, saw a repetition of earlier events when a number of violent incidents in Italy triggered a further outburst of racist and hate speech in the Italian media and from politicians targeting Romanians in general and Romanians of Roma origins specifically.

The Italian government has been blasted for the idea of fingerprinting Roma children by UNICEF, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, and parallels were drawn with the census of the Jews conducted by the fascist regime of Mussolini in 1938.

In an act of complete disregard for the grim historical echoes prompted by mob violence, camp clearances, arbitrary arrest and deportations, ethnic profiling and the fingerprinting of Romani children, Franco Frattini, a former vice-president of the European Commission responsible for "Justice, Freedom and Security", and now Italian foreign minister, chose the occasion to defend the emergency measures and present himself as the saviour of Romani children. In an interview with the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, he said: "Hundreds of [Roma] children have asked us to fingerprint them so that we could give them temporary papers [...] these children must be protected. By giving them papers, I am actually saving them."³

The absence of articles in the Romanian mass media about the declarations of the two Italian ministers is remarkable; they opted instead for articles blaming the Roma with headlines such as: "We don't want the Gypsies in our country"⁴ and "Italy hates us".⁵

History seems to be repeating itself. On 4 February 2005, two Roma women were accused in Lecco, Italy of trying to steal a child. Both declared they were begging, with no intention whatsoever of kidnapping. In order to avoid being sentenced, both followed the advice of their lawyer and pleaded guilty; as a result, they were sentenced to eight months and ten days in jail. As expected, the sentence was suspended. Their lawyer acknowledged publicly that the women told him they never tried to kidnap a child but they agree to follow his advice in order to avoid prosecution for begging.

Subsequently, however, "*Giu le mani dai nostri bambini*" ("Take your hands off our children") posters with a picture of a Roma were spread all around Lombardia — strong reminders of a previous campaign in 2001 that utilized posters with "*Cacciamo gli zingari*" ("Let's kick out Gypsies") and "*Via gli zingari dalla citta*" ("Gypsies out of the city"). Demonstrations against the "shameful" decision took place in Lecco.

Maroni, then the minister of employment, asked the judge who suspended the sentence to consider changing her job and had strong words for the Roma. Then, too, the Romanian media had a field day. On 12 February 2005, the daily *Evenimentul Zilei* published the article, "Romanian gypsies at the core of a national scandal in Italy."⁶ In a comment, one reader said, "Europe will have no peace until this disgusting, inferior species of hominids disappears."⁷ Calls for the burning of the Roma camps near Milan ("100 litres of gas will be enough to solve the problem"⁸) or for the "hanging of the gypsies"⁹ are also to

be found in the thread of comments on the article.

The Bulgarian media at the time was no different. In a press conference on 10 August 2004, Konstantin Trenchev, leader of the Podkrepa Professional Union in Bulgaria, called on the government to liberalize gun control laws. He stated that Bulgarians needed guns to protect themselves from Roma criminals. Trenchev made public his opposition to tolerance of Roma, claiming they are an antisocial and criminal community. He accused Roma women of being prostitutes and of selling their children. Armed civilian groups were considered a viable solution to protect "innocent citizens" from Roma criminals. At the time, his opinions were widely disseminated by the Bulgarian media; today the Bulgarian media continues overwhelmingly to present Roma either as criminals or prostitutes.

Massive "popular support" for anti-gypsyism in Romania and Bulgaria continues to guarantee a receptive audience and a warped justification for blatantly racist articles and broadcasts in the media. A good number of journalists continue to seem unaware of or unconcerned by the consequences of their actions, in what amounts to the cultivation of xenophobia and incitement to ethnic hatred. There appears to be a substantial consensus in much of the print and broadcast media that Roma are to be represented not just as pariahs but as the enemy within. The mass media seems to accept and promote a dangerous Roma-citizen dichotomy, and in the process risks transforming itself into a vehicle for the promotion of ethnically motivated violence. It has happened many times before and we seem to have learned nothing from it.

Charting a way forward

So what can be done? Advocates of the development of a separate media for minorities, including the Roma, miss the point: what we should be doing is ensuring that Roma are included within the mainstream media at all levels — reporters, presenters, editors, and so on. To date, however, there is not a single anchor of Roma origin in Romania.

We need a long-term, pan-European strategy that addresses racism through all available instruments, including early education. Thus far, Roma inclusion has been treated simplistically or superficially. The focus of EU funding and member states' efforts was and is on education for children and the creation of employment. Within the EU, "equality of opportunity" is often used to justify the profound inequality of outcomes for Roma. Financing programmes focused on rapid and often low-quality employment for Roma is a cheap but unsuccessful method of dealing with social exclusion. The EU and its member states invest small amounts in comparison to the size and complexity of the problem, amounts that are supposed to be returned through taxes paid from the wages of those employed.

This approach does not take into account existing exclusionary forces faced by Roma, and pays no attention to structures and policies that create deprivation, or to institutions and individuals responsible for exclusion or inclusion. Despite being well intentioned, in the long term these types of programmes enforce prejudice and accentuate exclusion. Employing Roma in menial jobs strengthens anti-gypsyism.

The existing legal framework focused on identical treatment not only has serious problems with implementation, but does not address the much more

important issue of reducing existing gaps and preventing discrimination. As long as social inclusion policies do not specifically and distinctly address indirect discrimination and the existing gaps in accessing opportunities, these policies cannot lead to inclusion but rather to assimilation. Often, identical treatment in the case of Roma and non-Roma results in inequality or fosters disadvantage.

Besides being a distinct form of racism, anti-gypsyism means unequal access to rights and to opportunities. It translates into incomplete citizenship, participation and recognition, and into lower self-esteem. Roma face a system of social opportunities mediated by an extreme social stigma linked to being a Roma. This results in high discrepancies related to much lower opportunities available for Roma compared to non-Roma citizens: because of the prevailing social exclusion, similarly educated Roma and non-Roma citizens have different opportunities to climb up the social and professional ladder. This is clearly visible within the Romanian media. A minimum precondition of an inclusive policy or inclusive society is that attaining equality should rest on the principle of addressing differences differently.

¹ See:

<http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/harta-hotilor-tigani-romani-din-metroul-de-la-madrid-revista-presei-spaniole.html>

² See:

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/madrid/cartera/peligra/estacion/elpeuespmad/20081124elpmad_1/Tes

³ See: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1001042.html>

⁴ In an interview with the extreme right Italian politician Alessandra Mussolini published on 2 November 2007 by *Cotidianul*.

⁵ *Adevarul* 2nd of November 2007

⁶ See: http://www.expres.ro/investigatii/?news_id=178812&print=1

⁷ See: <http://www.expres.ro/comments/showtext.php?id=496683>

⁸ See: <http://www.expres.ro/comments/showtext.php?id=496721>

⁹ See: <http://www.expres.ro/comments/showtext.php?id=496753>

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