

ROMAPHOBIA – EUROPE'S 'ACCEPTABLE RACISM'

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All over Europe majority populations have very strong preconceived and contradictory notions of Roma. If we are poor it is because we do not want to work; if we are rich it is because we steal. Negative stereotypes have given the Roma identity in Europe the worst social stigma. In many Eastern European 'democracies' they are repeated every single day to saturation point in newspapers and on television and the radio.

Under National Socialism in Germany consensus among the (otherwise strongly divided) people was created by identifying an internal enemy who was threatening the German people. Jewish people and Roma, many of them living in Germany for generations were stigmatised as 'outsiders', isolated from the remaining society and later exterminated.

While Jewish people have experienced a partial rehabilitation Roma continue to be the scapegoats. Society chooses to ignore the persistence of racism against Roma. It may seem inappropriate to compare the pervasive contemporary racism against Roma with the Nazi extermination project, but the constant reference to racial attributes (Roma as genetically predetermined to crime) and their alienation from the majority society (Roma as 'the others' against whom people need to protect themselves) harks back to that era.

Dr Robert Ritter, the moral author of the Nazi genocide against Sinti, Roma and Jews considered that people of mixed Romani and non-Romani (Aryan) blood had an inherited predisposition towards criminality. These were the first targeted for extermination.

An obsession about preventing Roma from polluting the White *Volkskoerper* is nothing new but the extent of it and similarities with Nazi propaganda are striking. Differences — whether 'cultural', 'religious', 'economical' or 'racial' — have been used too many times to explain the extermination of hundreds of millions of people.

Europe has played a major role, not just in wiping out entire civilizations in the name of those differences, but also in finding very sophisticated arguments to justify it. The mass media has been instrumental in building widespread acceptance of horrendous acts, presenting them as 'divinely inspired', 'heroic', 'educational' or, more bluntly, 'necessary'.

The twentieth century began with atrocities in Africa and Asia perpetrated by the European colonial powers and carefully pictured by a majority of the mass media as acts of good will towards the 'savages'.

The first legislated forms of racism in twentieth century Europe came about in the 1930s, when Nazi-owned media took its role seriously and was the main factor in achieving a national unity around Germany's racial policies. In this way, the extermination of those identified as 'parasites' (Jews, Roma, Sinti and Slavs) became accepted by the most 'educated' European nation.

Racism, however, didn't die with Adolf Hitler and the collapse of the Third Reich. The last of the colonial wars in the 1950s kept it strong, as the most 'advanced' European nations carried on with atrocities in the name of differences, often invoking 'national interests' and the need to 'civilize' the 'dark continent'. The majority of mass media backed up the often genocidal actions of national governments.

Most recently, the mass media played a fundamental role in the human disasters in Rwanda and former-Yugoslavia. A Nazi type of 'necessary' transcendent national unity, justifying the extermination of entire ethnic groups, was promoted by media outlets in both countries.

These are the most easily recognizable forms of racism, but they are not alone. Racism has evolved and Europe is now fostering 'mellow' forms of racism, customized for its second or third rate citizens.

Talk about 'cultural differences' undermining the 'better values' held by the majority is mainstream and regarded as innocent, almost liberal. Terms like 'truth', 'objectivity', 'necessities of a market-driven economy', and 'the right to be different', are now used to cover up and sometimes even give a shell of respectability to racism. Racist irony and humour are still permissible and widespread in the media, despite the historical fact they were used many times before as a reliable way to build up ethnic hatred.

Anti-Romaism, Romaphobia or anti-Gypsyism, is rampant both in its old and new versions. A majority of the European population makes no effort to hide their belief in strong negative stereotypes.

A survey of European media, conducted by On-line/More Colour in the Media¹ demonstrated that "[i]n terms of groups with different national or ethnic origin, Sinti and Roma/Travellers are the group most often portrayed negatively - in almost one third of the cases, but they do represent a very small group in the sample (i.e. 14 mentions in total). The portrayal of Roma was neutral only half of the time; other groups were portrayed neutrally more often."

Europe is still in denial of the Roma Holocaust, which wiped out over 95% of the Roma in Austria and Germany. In November 2001 a poll conducted in Romania², (the country with the largest number of Roma) showed that 99% of Romanians thought Roma deserved the least respect among all ethnic minorities. The top three descriptions of Roma population by those polled were as 'thieves', 'dirty' and 'lazy'. Only one in 25 of those interviewed was willing to consider Roma as equal-status citizens.

The media took the results of this poll as 'normal', and even the very few pro-tolerance, leftist newspapers justified it on the basis of the 'obvious differences in values' between the two communities.

In August 2004, a leader of a popular labour union in Bulgaria (with the second highest Roma population in Europe) proposed the creation of paramilitary groups to fight against Gypsy gangs. The majority of Bulgarian media, including the leftist newspapers, responded favourably to the idea.

In 1993 the then Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, still the most popular politician in Slovakia, demanded welfare cuts to Romany mothers in order to curtail "the reproduction of socially unadaptable and mentally retarded people". He considered Roma as "anti-social, mentally backward, inassimilable and socially unacceptable". The Slovak press either ignored or saluted his statement.

On 21 July 1995, 17-year-old Mario Goral was beaten, then burned alive at the site of a Gypsy pogrom in World War II. He died of his burns ten days later. On 23 August, Jan Slota of the Slovak National Party had no problem declaring on Slovak National Radio: "I love roast meat Gypsy-style very much, but I'd prefer more meat and less Gypsies".

Again nothing happened.

Anti-Gypsyism is an electoral bonanza across almost the entire political spectrum. The media, well aware that racism sells, happily receives and promotes racist speech from political parties of the left, centre and right.

¹ See www.multicultural.net

² See www.mmt.ro/Cercetari/Bare%202001.pdf

In 1998, under pressure from the tabloids, the UK Government re-imposed visa restrictions on Slovakia in order to prevent Romani asylum seekers from having their case heard in the UK. Only three years later, again under similar pressure, the UK government adopted a 'special' border policy, singling out persons belonging to seven named groups - Kurds, Roma, Albanians, Tamils, Pontic Greeks, Somalis and Afghans - for 'special' measures. Roma and Kurds, however, do not hold passports stating their ethnicity. This measure is still in place.

In keeping with its tradition, the UK government doesn't offer any training to customs officials in Romani culture and language and few people are aware that the UK government has actually developed a way to physically identify Roma. Despite a complete lack of logical or scientific basis, custom officials in one of the most developed countries in the world (but with an appalling record of human rights abuses) can decide who is or is not Roma.

Should we let Gypsies invade England?

This was the title of a telephone poll in January 2004 which attracted almost 20,000 people willing to pay premium rates to tell *The Daily Express* that they were not going to put up with the 'gyppos'. The poll was part of a larger media campaign in the British press led by tabloids that lasted for several months. The government responded by starting talks about measures to restrict access for Roma to the UK.

Let me repeat that: The government RESPONDED by looking for ways to RESTRICT the 'invasion'. They did not condemn the blatant racism, but LOOKED for ways to legitimize it. The tabloids were writing 'Victory' the very next day.

Replace the word 'Gypsy' with the similarly pejorative 'nigger'. Just imagine the worldwide reaction if the British government was looking at ways to prevent an 'invasion' of African-Americans, and that Colin Powell, for instance, was stopped by an overly zealous custom officer from entering the country.

There are hundreds of racist articles in the mainstream European press every day. Those against Roma do not even disguise their hate speech. In autumn 2003, a violent clash between Roma and Romanians – the worst such incident in Romania in 10 years – was presented by media as the 'War of the Gypsies'. A month later, 100 interviews in the town where the conflict occurred showed that all the interviewees thought the conflict was between two gangs of Roma Mafiosi. 'Victory' again.

To an outsider it must seem quite strange that the prevalent 'Romaphobia' all over Europe is downplayed by international institutions. Despite many reports by such institutions indicating that Roma are the largest yet most discriminated against ethnic minority in Europe, the only real effort seems to be to find more or less sophisticated reasons to justify Romaphobia. And the press continues to enforce negative stereotypes about Roma.

There are some efforts by the media to combat anti-Gypsyism, but they are far out-weighted by the 'economically motivated' efforts to dehumanize and alienate at least 10 million European Roma every day.

Freedom of speech should be the core of inclusive democracies, not the basis for defending racism and building up hate. When will we stop using freedom of speech to build up a Europe of hate?

It is very easy to say that none of what has happened is our fault. Seeking to avoid responsibility is built into the education system in a Europe unable to deal with its genocidal past. But whatever is happening now *is* our fault because we didn't try or manage to avoid the logical results of tens of thousands of hate campaigns against the 'others'.

I am frequently told by people about their Roma friends or their childhood spent around Roma - trying to claim 'knowledge' of the Roma and to justify the stereotypes they continue to believe. In central and eastern Europe at least six million Roma live side by side with the majority population. Every single one of them knows how to say 'thank you' in the official

language of their country. How many non-Roma know how to say 'thank you' in Romani? Almost none. The fixation that Roma are different and evil has become the norm if not a political necessity.

It's 'Nais tuke', by the way.