

Report on Anti-Gypsyism in European Media

Prepared by the European Roma Information Office and commissioned by the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point in preparation for the workshops on combating racism and discrimination against Roma and Sinti during the **OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on other forms of intolerance in Sevilla and Cordoba, 7-9 of June.**

Executive Report –draft version working progress

“How come whenever a Roma steals a bike that’s news? I’ve never seen an Italian, Spanish, Romanian, Bulgarian or Hungarian newspaper reporting a stolen bike by a member of the majority population.”¹

It is the belief of the author that, presently, the mass media does not just greatly influence the perception (and, in the case of Roma, rejection) of “the others,” but it also tries to respond to the “needs” of the customers they serve. The appalling results of the opinion polls in Europe (as described in Chapter on Polls and Annex 1) prove without doubt that Roma are the most hated ethnic group in Europe. The results, arguably influenced by media, provide clear indication that a significant market of readers buys and watches media products promoting negative and stereotypical images of Roma.

The idea of a report focused on Anti-Gypsyism in mass media and which looks at the two way relationship between public and media, started in November 2003 when the international press covered a Roma child marriage in Romania. The marriage of one of the daughters of Cioaba’s family attained international coverage, a level of coverage never reached in cases of blatant discrimination, police violence, or racist attacks against Roma.

Mainly copying the initial reporting of Romanian newspapers and TV stations, and then from one another, the broadcasts and articles reproduced clichés and stereotypes about Roma. International media outlets, including BBC and CNN, did nothing but reinforce the image of Roma as outsiders unable to adapt to “normal,” societal rules. This coverage was preceded and followed by opinion polls in Romania where strong anti-Romani feelings were expressed.

At the beginning of 2004, a racist campaign against Roma in the UK tabloid press seemed to respond to and play on fears brought about by the European Enlargement. We witnessed a similar campaign in 2005, close to the election in Great Britain, which seemed to fit well the electoral discourse of the politicians of all major parties.

In the opinion of the author, those incidents prove that a good part of anti-Gypsyism in the mass media is in response to existing popular anti-Roma feeling in Europe.

¹ Comment by Orhan Gajus at the OSCE side event. “Roma and Mass-Media,” Brussels, December 2004.

This report underlines trends in mass media practices and gives examples of media products from around Europe.

The half-human, half-beast portrayal of Roma is unfortunately **predominant in the European media** even in the rare cases of “sympathetic” reporting. The most frequent qualities of Roma presented in mass media are more animal-like than human. “Free spirits,” “care-free,” “happy,” and “naturally gracious” are frequent in positive articles describing Roma.

The materials on Roma in general are inadequate, fragmented, and biased, if not blatantly racist.

Most of the media in the countries covered by the study is “commercial media,” driven by market forces. As seen in the chapter on public polls, the “market” is hardly willing to receive programming that advertises tolerance and combating the social exclusion of Roma. Commercial television and newspapers (tabloids), accordingly, dominantly portray Roma negatively and stereotypically.

Roma are rarely included as members, even when they are the subject of a talk-shows or debate, and most of the time they are nothing more than objects to be reported on. As a rule, in interviews public personalities **speak for Roma or about them** without minding their opinion. Even high-level officials within the European Institution have been known to make comments lying on the verge of racism with no consultation whatsoever with Roma.

One can see another trend (especially in the case of Eastern European countries) whenever people of Roma origin or “suspected” to be of Roma origin are interviewed regarding their achievements (sports, music, political). Their ethnic origin never comes up in the discussion. The presence of successful Roma professionals is never reported in any program debating issues focused on subjects with no relation to Roma.

Even the extremely rare, politically correct and well-intentioned stories and reports on Roma convey images that conflict with information received at the conscious level. Without doubt, programmes and articles are the product of journalists’ own subjective perspectives, which include both rational and emotional convictions. Most often the news and reports are focused on Roma ghettos or neighbourhoods. The residents of the ghettos, in the majority, not only do not recognise 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 stigmatisation process.

It is very rare that a report focused on Roma encourages thought. Even in the rare positive portrayals of Roma, the journalists look at the most dramatic angles, encouraging an emotional response from their audience.

One finds a shockingly limited “cause” approach to reporting events concerning the Roma, as practically no news looks at the often invisible triggers of dramatic incidents. This is in sharp contrast to the case of the majority population, where very often violence, aggression, and vandalism is well researched--and quite often justified--for the majority population.

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 and public safety. This causes a biased portrayal of the relation of ethnicity and clearly obstructs other more important aspects as social exclusion, hidden violence, forced segregation, environment, education, perspective, social class as well as other possible causes for criminal behaviour.

Riots involving Roma are overwhelmingly presented in relation with ethnicity regardless of the nature of the riots. Riots with predominantly white participants (football/soccer riots) are rarely analysed for their ethnic or gender characteristics.

Journalists lack Romani resources and have very limited contact with Romani communities. Journalists prefer a “safe approach,” preferring to use non-Roma “specialists”--politicians and police officials--in shows around criminality within Roma communities.

The rare presence of Romani characters in mainstream movies, TV series, and radio broadcasts are, in the majority, either present negative stereotypes of Roma as cunning thieves, witches, snitches, criminals, and violent individuals, or clichés of “Romani culture” focused around music, fortune telling, bohemians, and free spirits.

No known talk show audience on a subject not related to Roma issues has included visible Roma as members. The exclusion of Roma from the audience of friendly faces allowed to laugh or clap can hardly be justified, considering that in some countries, close to 10% of the population is of Roma origin.

Roma issues are seen as “social issues,” a category not considered “journalistically prestigious” and rarely covered by the best journalists. The media approach to Roma is dominantly on the side of treating Roma as objects rather than as subjects of their story. The majority of short news items and headlines are linked with criminality and “otherness,” with a focus on problems rather than on solutions. For the most part, material or stories reported do nothing but reinforce strong negative stereotypes. The Roma victims of racist attacks receive practically no media coverage.

In exceptional cases, media interest may fall on the case where Roma are saved or helped by members of the majority group. This fulfils the positive stereotype of a tolerant and helpful majority which “helps” the domestication of a subhuman group.

Mockery of Roma’s colour, accent, speech pattern, clothes, and cultural traits is widespread (such incidents were reported in almost every country covered) and feeds into popular anti-Gypsyism. Any complaints are quickly dismissed as a proof of lack of humour and wit.

Cultural and ethnic perspectives of Roma are subject of numerous and continuous while the same trend is not to be found for the ethnic majority.

“Special programs” promoting tolerance towards Roma as well as towards Romani emancipation, language, and culture not only are broadcast at impossible hours, but can hardly

be seen as credible. In an understandable effort to balance the prevalent anti-Gypsyism, they tend to emphasise the good sides and are easily seen as biased. The public is too familiar with the down side and tends to consider such reporting false. The media responds to such broadcasting with a defensive-destructive approach, looking at the “other side” of the story and trying to find reporting flaws used to prove the entire report as false.

The main debate seen as positive is around the need to “educate the Gypsies.” It is usual in those discussions for people to use the pejorative “gypsy,” instead of the politically correct “Roma.” No report made on any TV channel in Europe has shown a Roma educating the majority in anything, Roma music included. In the rare case of Roma invited to appear in such programming, they are used either to prove the stereotypes (to confirm that they are gypsies and not Roma) or to express their disapproval for initiatives supported by other Roma groups.

A clear tendency can be found to lump Roma together as a group, rarely able to make decisions at the individual level and typically driven by hardly understandable and mainly dark forces. Reports rarely present Roma as individuals, preferring to talk about them rather than with them.

“Pity journalism” is typically the only other available alternative to the racist one, despite the fact that it is a proven reason for racism and exclusion.

Recruitment of Roma is still largely overlooked by mass media in Europe, despite the fact that recruiting minorities is known not only to improve ratings but also to influence programme content.

Many reports prove that Roma are *de facto* discriminated, especially when it comes to the employment market; no initiative of any public television network actively recruits and promotes ethnic Roma for their mainstream broadcasting. No recording of any senior Roma journalist was reported and no editorial written by a Roma was found in any of the major newspapers in the countries surveyed.

Is the conclusion of the report that media plays an increasing role in alienating the largest European ethnic minority – the Roma.

Recommendations- draft version working progress

1.OSCE

- a. A monitoring body focusing on Anti-Gypsyism is missing despite many reports proving the need for such a body. OSCE should include Anti-Gypsyism in its monitoring initiatives.
- b. Encourage states to adopt a media law or lobby the European Commission for a media Directive able to regulate the promotion of equality of opportunities and equal access to broadcasting facilities for minorities (including Roma)
- c. The OSCE- CoE Conference on Anti-Gypsyism should target specifically big media outlets for its media segment.

- d. Recommendations for the governments to adopt general laws able to prevent Anti-Gypsyism are needed. The OSCE should recommend to its European member states to adopt the European Commission's proposal for a framework directive on racism and xenophobia from December 2001, which offers a powerful device against racist media slandering and transpose it into national law.
- e. OSCE should actively promote inclusion of Roma in its structures, as the number of Roma experts is very small. Efforts in this direction, as recommended by the OSCE Action Plan to the National Governments should be taken within the organization in order to employ Roma in relevant departments especially in those dealing with monitoring and anti-discrimination.
- f. Incentives for journalist targeting pro-tolerance initiatives in mass media are needed and OSCE should take an active role in establishing such incentives (Prizes or media productions financed by OSCE combating Anti-Gypsyism)
- g. Common trainings for non-Roma journalists and Roma with an explicit target not just in training but delivery of media products should be encouraged under the OSCE.

2. Member States

- a. Specific recognition of existing Anti-Gypsyism and its major contra-effect in achieving social inclusion and stability is needed at the national level. Conferences and public debates hosted by media but also national parliaments about the effects of Anti-Gypsyism should be encouraged.
- b. OSCE's member states should urgently establish national bodies at the governmental level to design, steer, assess and monitor the initiatives, action plans or policies targeting Roma. These bodies should be responsible for monitoring the Anti-Gypsyism and design measures to combat it. Facilitating a good working relation with the Roma NGOs should be a priority for those bodies.
- c. Adoption of the International Legislation dealing with protection of minorities and slandering in mass media should be a must. The existing National Media Councils should include in their management Roma and people from other discriminated minorities.
- d. Active promoting inclusion of Roma in the relevant national ministries has to be a priority and positive measures have to be taken in order to achieve an acceptable quota of Roma paid from the budget.

3. International Organisation and NGOs

- a. Reports on Anti-Gypsyism should be a priority of those organizations dealing with monitoring
- b. Involvements of Roma in International Organizations and significant and fair collaboration with Roma NGOs are issues which need to be urgently addressed as ironically most of those organizations recommend to the national governments what they don't do themselves.
- c. Common trainings involving media and Roma together are needed and should be promoted

- d. A rethinking of the policies and strategies of the IO and NGOs is required. Coordinated holistic approaches involving all players should replace the actual chaotically and sometimes contradictory actions of those.

4. Media

- a. Active support for the development and operation of Roma ethnic managed and staffed media within the main media outlets.
- b. Promotion of recruitment and training programmes meant to guarantee and achieve the fair representation of Roma within media outlets. Public media outlets of countries with a significant Roma population should have a clear quota of Roma employed within their structure.
- c. Inclusion of Roma intellectuals in debates, talk-shows unrelated to Roma.
- d. Recognition of main broadcasters of their responsibility to produce dedicated dedicated multicultural programming targeting the negative stereotypes hold by the majority population.
- e. Develop and promote programmes able to curb anti-Gypsyism targeting the majority population
- f. Better collaboration between the mass media and Roma NGOs is needed and mixed projects should set up in place.
- g. Journalists need to be protected against undue pressures from the side of editors or publishers to distort reality in a way to produce sensational reporting using racist stereotypes as it was the case in the UK in January 2004, when tabloids embarked on a campaign against East European Roma.