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Racism, intolerance and violence against Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area

Anja Reuss, Central Council of German Sinti and Roma

Antigypsyism in all its manifestations is not only a problem of Eastern and South-eastern Europe, it is a pan-European problem and it is deeply rooted in our societies. This also becomes apparent when we look at the opinion polls in which the hostility to Roma and Sinti climb up to 60%; higher than hostility towards any other group (such as Muslims, refugees or Jews). Most worrisome is that antigypsyism is far more socially accepted than other form of racism. There is neither a political nor social outcry when attacks on Roma happen or antigypsyist hate speech is delivered, there are no protest in the streets demanding the end of violence and hatred against Roma and Sinti, there are also hardly any expressions of solidarity with Romani victims and affected Romani communities.

Also in Germany, racist attacks and crimes against Roma and Sinti remain in the dark. I will give you a few recent examples for this.

2016 a terror attack in Munich took place in which a German shot dead 9 people out of racist motives. Five of the teenagers killed came from Roma and Sinti families, one was even the great-grandson of Holocaust survivors and lost six of his family members in Auschwitz. Since the perpetrator was German and the victims non-white and mainly migrants, this terror attack was classified by German state authorities and law enforcement as a rampage and not as a terror attack. But also the fact that most of the victims were Roma and Sinti remains unknown to this day in the German public and political discourse. The fact that the attack now is classified as racially motivated is the result of an expert opinion which concludes that the offender specifically invited migrants

and persons that he considered non-Germans to the scene (including the Roma and Sinti who were later killed). But even this report does not point to the Romani identity of those killed.

Our observation is that when Roma and Sinti are victims, this is never a reason to specifically mention this, nor a cause for societal outrage. What would it have looked like if Jews (particularly descendants of Shoah survivors) had been the victims of such an attack?

Another case occurred shortly before New Year's Eve last year in Plauen, a small town in the southern part of Saxony. Not far from Chemnitz, which has attracted international attention due to the racist attacks and protest in August / September.

At night, a German committed an arson attack on an apartment building in which mainly Slovak Roma lived. The building went up in flames. The neighbours did not help. Only two young men who passed by with their car saved people from the flames. They saw desperate people screaming, holding their babies and toddlers out of the windows. 22 people were injured that night; 4 of them with severe burn injuries, including children. The bystanders not only hindered rescue and fire workers from saving people and extinguishing the fire. They also shouted "Heil Hitler" and "Let the people burn". Again, there was no public outcry. The local authorities and law enforcement neither investigated the racist motive of the arson attack nor prosecuted the incitement of the bystanders and their call for murder. A few weeks later the Romani families again became victims of another arson attack in the apartment building where they moved to. Totally terrified, many of the Romani families left Plauen and went back to Slovakia. In July, the regional prosecutor's office stopped the trial of attempted murder in 42 cases for no apparent reason. The attorney of the Romani victims filed objections. One is

left with the suspicion that when minorities such as Roma and Sinti become victims of crimes, even in Germany, justice and the rule of law does not apply.

This is not acceptable! The state and its institutions as well as civil society must act now and decisively tackle antigypsyism. Hatred and violence against Roma and Sinti can no longer be tolerated.

We have to gain Roma and Sinti's trust in the state under the rule of law and help them access legal aid and justice. Unfortunately to this day state authorities mostly fail and fall short in bringing justice to Roma and Sinti. But it is the fundamental duty of the state to protect all its citizens and also to bring crimes against Roma and Sinti to justice.

An important first step would be that state authorities acknowledge their century-long history of persecution and criminalisation of Roma and Sinti, which causes a deeply entrenched mistrust towards the police and state institutions. Antigypsyist prejudices are deeply rooted in the police and need to be dismantled. Roma and Sinti hardly turn to the police to report or file complaints on attacks motivated by antigypsyism. Because the police are considered to be part of the problem that meant special registration, persecution, deportation and imprisonment – during Nazi times even murder.

It is proven that the police collect and stores data on the basis of ethnicity. The narrative of a so-called "gypsy threat" offers an easy way to explain crimes as an "ethnic problem" and supports the desire of the police to collect more data about Roma and Sinti, such as the notorious practice of constructing family trees, tracing family relations genealogically and using them in criminal investigations. This is not only highly problematic in light of the historical context, but also inconsistent with the rule of law. Nevertheless, until now the use of such genealogical data has not been adequately disputed in police and

political circles. It is therefore no wonder that Roma and Sinti have little trust in police and law enforcement.

However, it is a good step forward that the definition of political motivated crimes in Germany also recognizes the point of view of those affected and created a sub-category antigypsyism to record political motivated crimes against Roma and Sinti (into force since January 2017). But this category will have little effect when used by the police if there is no comprehensive understanding of what antigypsyism means.

The police play a major part in the antigypsyist views of the society. Studies show that antigypsyist patterns still guide police work and shape public and political discourse. The narrative of a “specific gypsy threat” still forms the ideological basis for how the mainstream society thinks about Roma and Sinti.

Even though state authorities have been put under pressure by civil society and Roma and Sinti self-organisations, there is still a lack of self-control in police institutions. Until now there has been no office or ombudsperson that has taken up the task of controlling police compliance with own standards on non-discrimination.

However, in recent years we have seen a development in the right direction, which is mainly due to the good advocacy work of Roma and Sinti self-organizations. Antigypsyism as the root cause of discrimination and exclusion has become the agreed-upon language in the EU and is an important result of more than 30 years of civil rights work of Roma and Sinti self-organizations.

One of the mile stones that need to be mentioned here is the European Parliament’s 2017 report highlighting the negative impact of antigypsyism on the equal social and political participation of Roma and Sinti in Europe. It calls upon the European Commission and EU Member States to put the fight against

antigypsyism at the forefront of efforts for the social and economic inclusion of Roma. The resolution also calls upon the EU and Member States to establish on a European, as well as a national level, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to acknowledge the persecution, exclusion and disownment of Roma throughout the centuries and to document these in an official white paper. In this regard, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma highly welcomes the decision of the German governmental coalition to establish an expert commission on antigypsyism.