

VOICES AGAINST ONLINE HATE

ROMA RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THEIR OWN WORDS



CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY



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Author: **Bernard Rorke**

Contributors: **Barbora Bešenejová** and **Milena Čuk**

Editor: **Hannah Crane**

Graphic Design: **Sophio Datishvili**

Layout: **Dzavit Berisha**

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Address: Avenue de Cortenbergh 71, 4th floor, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

E-mail: office@errc.org

www.errc.org

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IN THIS REPORT

INTRO	4
SLOVAKIA: THE ROMANTICS VS. THE HATERS	7
SNAPSHOT ON SERBIA	14
BRIEFINGS FROM BULGARIA	19
TAKING ACTION IN TURKEY	20
FINAL THOUGHTS	24

INTRO

On 8 April 2024, the ERRC held an international conference focussing on a pressing issue:

COUNTERING ONLINE ANTI-ROMA HATE SPEECH & SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRATIC VALUES.

The event in Bratislava sought to deepen dialogue between activists, experts, and policymakers on how best to combat online anti-Roma hate speech in a strategic and collaborative manner. It also provided an opportunity for the ERRC's volunteers, our **Roma Rights Defenders**, to describe their innovative actions confronting hatred and to share their insights on what's needed and who's responsible for sustainable approaches to shut down the haters.

In early 2020, the ERRC established the volunteer-led project *Challenging Digital Antigypsyism*, which aimed to challenge online hate speech against Roma through the creation of digital activist communities across several countries focused on reporting and countering hate speech on social media platforms. The main task of the volunteers in each country was to monitor and record examples of anti-Roma hate speech on online media and social networks, and to report it using the available tools on each platform.¹

The project aimed to investigate what kind of reported content is removed after being reported; how responsive different online platforms are to reports of violations of community standards; to uncover the most pervasive anti-Roma narratives; and to provide a baseline of evidence for legal challenges against online hate speech that poses a direct threat to the lives and security of Romani people in Europe.

The volunteers were driven by concerns over the prevalence of anti-Roma hate speech and a desire **to do something about it**, to develop practical and effective responses to counter online hatred and its consequences. Many of the volunteers felt that hate speech targeting Roma had been overlooked for too long, that action needed to be taken, and all were very alert to the consequences of hate left unchecked.

HOW HATE SPEECH DESTROYS AND DIVIDES

"Hate-speech can undermine the ordinary function of the political system in Turkey. The fundamental tenet of the justice system that all people are innocent until proven guilty is reversed for Roma in the public imagination by a culture of normalised hate speech. Hate speech divides people based on their identity, and this destroys the sense of unity and common purpose essential for a functioning democracy. Polarisation by extremists that silences moderate voices makes it difficult for people to engage in constructive dialogue. Worse yet, hate speech undermines trust in democratic institutions and due process. This can result in a loss of faith by citizens in their government's ability to govern effectively, and this disaffection increases the possibility of vigilante action and pogroms against targeted minorities."

**FATOS
(ROMANI GODI, TURKEY)**

¹ For more, see the earlier reports by ERRC and partners: *Challenging Digital Antigypsyism: Albania, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine* 17 May 2023. Available [here](#). *Challenging Digital Antigypsyism in the Czech Republic*. 24 January 2024. Available [here](#).

"I can tell you that some of the most worrying issues I encountered in monitoring online hate speech against Roma were the extremely violent and discriminatory level of language used, the rapid spread of hate messages and the negative impact on the targeted community. I believe that the most dangerous and damaging aspect of hate speech online is its ability to amplify and legitimise feelings of hatred and discrimination against certain groups or communities, thus fuelling intolerance and violence in society. This can lead to polarisation, marginalisation and even acts of physical violence against targeted individuals or groups. It is essential to act promptly and effectively to counter these effects and promote a safe and respectful online environment for all users."

MARIUS
(VOLUNTEER, ROMANIA)

Rather than a conventional report on the conference proceedings of the April 8 event in Bratislava, this publication **gives voice to the digital activists that made all of this happen**. It reveals their motivations and experiences in combating online anti-Roma racism as young volunteers from diverse backgrounds and different national settings, their opinions and observations on the damage done to society by hate speech, and their insights and recommendations on how to prevent more harm being done to those targeted by online antigypsyism in the future.

In addition to the conference contributions, a wider number of the activists also answered a brief set of questions. These were:

- 1** If you were to advise a new group setting out to monitor hate speech, based on your experience, **what three things would you advise** them to do at the very outset?
- 2** What were the **most shocking or most worrying** things you encountered when monitoring online anti-Roma hate? How does this affect you personally? Could you please tell me in your words what you think is most dangerous and damaging about online hate speech?
- 3** Which do you think is more important: **legal or non-legal challenges** to hate speech and why so? Or if you think they are equally important, could you explain how?
- 4** What do you think was innovative, most interesting, or exciting about your strategy and your project activities?
- 5** What three things need to be done to **make a real difference** for the future, to effectively shut down hate speech, and who's **primarily responsible**?

In their responses the volunteers stressed the need for an agreed and easily understood definition of **what counts as hate speech**; the importance of **close team-work** and a clear division of tasks and responsibilities from the very outset; as well as the importance of self-care, and the **need to avoid burn-out** when spending so much time monitoring hate-filled content. As Dániel from Slovakia put it: *“Get that ‘thick skin’ ready for all the hate speech and don’t get discouraged by the wave of hate.”* And there is no doubt that monitoring such content can take a toll, as Sanja from Serbia explained:

“The most shocking anti-Roma comments are those that are dehumanising or directly call for violence... as for personal feelings, it depends, sometimes I feel angry, sometimes helpless. because most of the time these people just go unpunished.”

**SANJA
(VOLUNTEER, SERBIA)**

As for what was most shocking and most dangerous about the online hate the volunteers encountered, it was not just the uninhibited way in which people posted extreme content, but the amount of traction such posts generated. Beyond their initial feelings of being personally *‘sad, disappointed and hurt’* when confronted with the sheer volume of revolting content, what many volunteers found worrying was the disproportionate extent to which Roma were targeted online, and how widespread and mainstream is the social acceptance of anti-Roma hatred in society, including the upper echelons of political life.

“With time, this project developed into a bigger, internationally wide network of Roma Rights Defenders, a ‘family of volunteers’ that together collect evidence of anti-Roma hate and stand up against it. We are made up of diverse volunteer groups that are diverse in terms of their professional experience, socio-economic status, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, or sexual orientation. We are convinced that building the power of communities, such as this, contributes greatly to the future development of a wider community of lawyers or activists that serve marginalised communities and can potentially bring about impactful change.”

**DIANA
(ROMANTICI, SLOVAKIA)**

All the volunteers were enthusiastic about the pro-active, anti-racist, and innovative aspects of their campaigns which combined legal challenges and broad-based civic actions to raise awareness, educate, and taking part in building broader national and international alliances of Roma and pro-Roma activists to combat not just online hate, but prejudice and racism in real life. Many found the sense that, from here on, hate would not go unpunished particularly empowering.

SLOVAKIA

THE ROMANTICS VS. THE HATERS

This team of young Roma and non-Roma from across Slovakia forged a distinct identity for themselves, adopting the moniker ROMAntici (the ROMAntics). They created profiles on social media, their own webpage, and set about documenting more than 900 hate speech comments online. These included incitement to violence, calls for genocide of Roma, and a range of hateful and dehumanising anti-Roma slurs.

THE LEGAL ROUTE

ROMAntici have achieved remarkable success in working closely with the Slovak Media Service Council to use the law to shut down haters on the internet by targeting online platforms. Since August 2022, the introduction of new, extraordinary legislation on *administrative proceedings to prevent illegal content* has meant that ROMAntici could submit first complaints to the Media Service Council, based on which the council could go on to initiate first proceedings.

This has made for a very effective partnership: to date ROMAntici have submitted more than **200 complaints** concerning hate content. The Media Service Council has acted promptly and virtually everything the ‘Romantics’ have reported has been **removed** from the internet.

When it comes to criminal law, ROMAntici target the individual authors of racist hate speech and the impact is punitive and educational. This is distinct from administrative proceedings, which have a preventative function. As Diana from ROMAntici explained, this route is by definition more complex, more lengthy, and more resource-intensive:

"ROMAntici have submitted six criminal complaints since September 2023 – we don't have any clear conclusions yet, as most of the cases are still open. Law enforcement undermine the seriousness of our complaints, dealing with them merely as administrative offences, and neglecting to investigate the hate motivation of the perpetrators. They described one such case as no more than an "angry, inappropriate reaction from behind a keyboard."

**DIANA
(ROMANTICI, SLOVAKIA)**

GOING PUBLIC

In addition to the intrinsic reactive nature of challenging online anti-Roma hate speech, ROMAntici also attach great importance to being **proactive**. They dedicate significant effort into creating social media content that is educational and entertaining; producing counternarratives that subvert racist stereotypes and promote positive images, as well as easy-to-read digests about ECtHR case law concerning far-right extremism, hate speech, and discrimination.

ROMAntici have also been active in broader civic alliances against hate, and the activists appear in print and broadcast media interviews, as well as writing their own articles, all with a view to resetting the agenda on what is and what is not acceptable to say about Roma in a democratic public sphere.

ROMANTIC PERSPECTIVES

The following are the ROMAntics' responses to the five questions posed to volunteers. The first question, drawing on the benefit of hindsight and wisdom won in action, concerned advice for new volunteer groups setting out to monitor hate speech, and asked for three key tips for novices. The ROMAntics' advice ranged from valuable tips on ensuring that considerations over avoiding burnout, and ensuring personal safety feed into setting realistic strategic goals, to making allies and complicating the understanding of how and where hate gets spread.

THREE KEY TIPS FOR STARTING OUT

For starters, I'd recommend this new group do a brief survey of which public figures are posting hate speech, and write down the keywords under which they'd find the hatred. This would make their job easier, or they could use specialised software to search for hate speech.

Secondly, they should keep track of the time they spend monitoring hate speech. This would prevent them from burning themselves out and thus also prevent them from becoming disinterested in the activity.

Lastly, I would recommend that they set up an account on a social networking site where they post regularly. I would definitely recommend TikTok, as most people on this social network are from the younger generation, which is surrounded by hate.

ZDENKO

One: Pause and take a deep breath.

Your safety and well-being come first, educate yourself on that before you start. Set healthy and realistic boundaries, and intentions. When you feel like burning out, take a break or switch it up with other activities you could engage in.

Two: Connect, connect, connect.

Understand who your team is, and then set your project strategy accordingly. Engage with different allies across communities and organisations fighting online hate and work together by sharing best practices and experiences.

Three, and most importantly: Look at the bigger picture.

Know what exactly it is you are fighting for and fighting against. Where does anti-Roma hate speech fall within the wider institutional behaviour, the systemic nature of antigypsyism, including its historical roots, and different dimensions and manifestations? What are the subtle forms of anti-Roma hate in language, reproduced public images, and bias? How does the intersectional experience of antigypsyism add to the vulnerability of Roma women and girls, young people, or members of the LGBTQI+ community? Try to look at hate or racial bias better as part of a continuum, not as a binary where someone is either racist or not.

**BARBORA
(PROJECT
COORDINATOR)**

Perceive the context of the comment in question with the overall post because the comment itself may not look that serious, but in the overall context of the post or video it is under, it can have a significant impact on people's behaviour.

Get that 'thick skin' ready for all the hate speech and don't get discouraged by the wave of hate.

Be alert to the fact that hate speech can easily be found under the same posts, just on different social networks.

DANIEL

First, pay extra attention and focus on comments that are mass incitements to violence, callings for mass liquidation, and widespread suffering of minorities (not just individual threats).

DÁVID

Second, visit and monitor profiles of proponents of extremist views who target their hate at Roma

And finally, don't just follow the 'latest' or 'most relevant comment' in the comment section, often, dangerously hateful speech is also 'hidden' down below.

Each of the Slovak activists was taken aback at the outset of the project by the volume of explicit hate content they were encountering, and the sheer level of anti-Roma hostility. **Dávid** was shocked by the ease and lack of inhibition with which people gave vent to racial hatred: *"talking about their elimination, even talking realistically and in detail about harming them."*

Zdenko recalled how, in the beginning, every single hate post came as an unpleasant surprise. More than the depth of hostility, what was shocking was the awful amount of supportive reactions and comments on hate posts. He recalled how, in the wake of a tragic accident of a young Romani child, so many people from the majority population *"managed to express hateful comments instead of sincere sympathy"*. Zdenko believes that one particularly dangerous and damaging aspect to hate speech is its rapid spread, which so easily outpaces positive comments, and prompts like-minded people to cluster in separate groups, 'echo chambers' where they support and reinforce one another's prejudices.

Likewise, **Daniel** found this multiplying factor a cause for deep concern, especially when the hate content amounts to incitement to violence against targeted others:

"I think the most dangerous thing about hate speech is when multiple people begin to identify with or even support calling to harm others – either physically or mentally – and such actions can then 'inspire' others to act illegally. The most disturbing content that I encountered in my monitoring was the complete dehumanisation, calls for the destruction of even children, and the encouragement of such views."

THE MOST SHOCKING AND MOST DANGEROUS ASPECTS OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

The most detailed response to the question came from the project coordinator **Barbora**, who shared her colleagues' concerns about the mainstreaming of anti-Roma hatred, as well as the 'breeding places' where hate accumulates, and spoke of the institutional failures to take hate speech and the harm it does with a modicum of seriousness:

The most worrying were not necessarily the individual instances of hate, but how disproportionately affected Roma online are. Moreover, how mainstream and widespread the social acceptance of anti-Roma hate is in society and even among political leaders. Whether it is calling for death or just an ethnic slur, all toxic messages have cumulative negative effects and climb on the so-called 'ladder of harm' that can move up towards bias-motivated violence such as murder, rape, assault, terrorism, violent extremism, and even genocide, if left unaddressed.

I found surprising, however, the kinds of 'breeding places' where a plethora of hate accumulates. Very often, hateful comments were not found under explicitly racist content. What widely and easily distracts and lures the masses into apathy, ridicule, and hate are messages that are concealed, presented even as "harmless fun." Daily, algorithms feed us with memes, reels, voice-overs, or images that capitalise on the traditional stereotypes of Roma that involve sensational, emotionally-charged, provocative elements of events and stories about Roma that dominate the Internet. What these visual representations do not convey, however, is the racism that people are experiencing, its structural and historical injustices, or the intersectional experiences that negatively affect Roma and add to their vulnerability.

A particular instance of a shocking or even upsetting moment for our volunteer group was when one of our volunteers received hateful racist comments on his private TikTok profile, where he bravely decided to post counter-narrative educational content. In response to this, we decided to file a criminal complaint.

It was particularly worrying to see the gaps and problems in the decisions and investigations of the executive bodies to which we have filed several criminal complaints. We found the investigators provided inadequate justifications and interpretations. Generally, there was a lack of perception of the seriousness of the impact of online hate speech on the part of the investigators.

BARBORA
(PROJECT COORDINATOR)

BY ALL MEANS NECESSARY: LEGAL AND OTHER CHALLENGES TO HATE SPEECH

In response to the question about the relative importance of legal and non-legal challenges to hate speech, the Slovak team members found both approaches of equal importance and mutually reinforcing. While Dávid found tracking haters, and recording incidents of hate speech more gripping, he thought that *“the legal side was essential for seeking justice and holding people accountable, this became necessary, especially after we reached the limits of non-legal actions. That’s why I think they go hand in hand - the law steps in when things don’t go by fair means.”*

Likewise, Zdenko stated that legal action is important to directly address those forms of hate speech that directly incite violence to prevent *“online hate speech from being translated into real actions.”* Dániel also found both approaches went hand-in-hand because he felt that without some threat of legal sanction haters will feel emboldened, anonymous behind their keyboards, and free from any consequences for their actions. *“At the same time, non-legal activities allow awareness to be spread and can be very effective in removing hateful content from the online space, for example, through reporting. I think a very effective form of non-legal activity is raising awareness – through videos, articles, and podcasts – about the impact that online hate speech has on the lives of people who have been targeted.”*

Both legal and non-legal approaches are equally important, and mutually reinforcing in the ways they have different impacts on the multiple effects that hate speech has on individuals, communities, and social cohesion as a whole. A more diversified strategy for countering online hate has also allowed us to have all volunteers participate in an equal manner while also exchanging their different skills and knowledge. Our most effective non-legal activity is, I would say, creating a social media identity on different platforms and advocating for Roma rights by posting counter-narrative and educational content, videos, ‘positive news’ about Roma achievements, and easy-to-read posts about the case law of the ECtHR regarding hate speech, racism, and extremism.

**DIANA
(PROJECT COORDINATOR)**

ALL THAT WAS INNOVATIVE

The Slovak volunteers found the style of meetings dynamic and innovative, where, as Dávid recalled, they “continuously reviewed progress, and news and then divided tasks for new challenges. I also found the team-building and meetings that alternated between the west and east of Slovakia to be important, reflecting the collaboration across the country so that everyone was closer to it.” Zdenko found the many webinars and trainings that took place during the project to have been of great value, and in terms of activities said, “of course, I also consider it innovative to create an identity and profile on social networks, namely Instagram and Facebook, where we present the non-stereotyped side of Roma.”

What was especially innovative was how actively anti-racist this project is. In order to create lasting change, this project aimed to actively challenge and dismantle racist behaviours, practices, and structures. ‘Taking power back’ for our volunteers meant becoming active rights holders and holding duty bearers such as individuals and institutions accountable by following different legal and non-legal strategies. Meaning, it is our volunteers who are the main initiators of any action taken against hate that they find online. Our volunteers are proactive in creating various online counter-narrative content, filing complaints to different state bodies, spreading awareness, and building networks.

For our Slovak group of volunteers, a very exciting part of the project was establishing collaboration with the Council for Media Services (RpMS), which, after a complex legal modification, became the new national regulator in the field of audio-visual media services. Based on our complaints, the first administrative proceedings were initiated against the YouTube and Facebook platforms, since the effective date of the legislation. Almost everything we have reported to the RpMS (and social media platforms have not removed them after our reports) has been deleted. In the long run, gathering these complaints aids the RpMS primarily in collecting evidence and cases, then fortifying its pressure tactics on social media companies, forcing them to keep their eyes open and take swifter action against hate.

**DIANA
(PROJECT COORDINATOR)**

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO SHUT DOWN ONLINE HATE SPEECH?

While there was an acknowledgement that it is impossible to completely shut down hate speech – *“Hate has always been there and always will be, which is obviously not okay.”* (Zdenko) – there was agreement that much can be done to restrict the hateful output and reduce the harm it causes. As Dávid observed, in the wake of the failed assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico, the police were able to swiftly monitor the social media accounts of those who supported the shooting and initiate criminal prosecutions against those spreading such content. As regards anti-Roma hate speech: *“This example shows us that monitoring comments on social media is possible. A task force could be set up to look into this.”* And one thing for a task force to consider is, according to Dávid, mandatory identification on social networks:

“Many people are using anonymous profiles and made-up names. Consequently, it is also difficult to track them down and identify them. If people have to go by their own names, they may change their minds about writing disgusting comments. The question would be to what extent the right to privacy or protection of personal data would be in accordance with that.”

Beyond restrictive measures, they all suggested that in order to bring about real change much work needs to be done to ‘enlighten’ society, more guidance to steer youth towards ‘forethoughtful action’ and deliberation when they are online, and more structured opportunities for real-life engagement with others that can break down stereotypes. And, according to Dániel, you’ve got to start early: *“Teaching children tolerance and mutual respect is needed from a young age in kindergartens.”* In common with most volunteers, he insisted on the importance of raising awareness and the need for more knowledge about the impact hate speech has on the lives of people targeted:

“Overall, our society needs to be more concerned about it - so that hateful behaviour itself would be considered unacceptable among people, and people would have an interest in alerting each other when they encounter hateful behaviour online.”

SNAPSHOT ON SERBIA

'ZERO TOLERANCE FOR VIOLENCE AND RACISM'

In his presentation to the Bratislava April 8 audience, National Volunteer Coordinator for Serbia, Sadik Saitović, explained that in Serbia, while much of the hate speech targeting Roma is 'spontaneous', extremist content is targeted, organised, and amplified by right-wing media channels. These channels spread anti-Roma rhetoric and tropes that stigmatise, ridicule, and incite hatred, further aggravating existing stereotypes that dehumanise Roma.

In addition to the ethnic slurs and racist humour ridiculing Roma, the Serbian group also encountered more severe anti-Roma narratives, and observed a rise in hateful and racist statements by politicians and public figures targeting Roma and other visible minorities. Sadik linked this disturbing trend to a more general rise in violence in everyday life in Serbia, itself the product of a deep social and political crisis caused by weakened and corrupted institutions, and the fact that so much violence goes unpunished. Pro-government channels, online sites, and tabloid newspapers have been accused of promoting aggressive and violent conduct, in a sphere where journalistic ethics are largely absent. In the wake of two mass shootings and a series of huge anti-government protests, the regime itself stood accused of having created a media system that not only tolerates, but actually promotes violence. As Sadik observed, *"this creates a dangerous enabling environment for hate speech to flourish."*

To illustrate this, Sadik described the action taken against the reality TV show DNK (DNA) on the TV Pink channel. Most of the vulnerable participants were Roma, and the show played on their vulnerability to ridicule them for public amusement. On top of the ridicule, the show prompted a spill-over of hateful comments on their official website and social media pages. After filing numerous complaints to official bodies, the volunteers quickly discovered that there was no online moderation policy on the official pages and beyond. Using evidence gathered by the volunteers, a complaint was sent to the regulatory body against TV Pink. The regulatory body dismissed the complaint as groundless. So, the volunteers set about making this case public on social media channels, criticising the work of the regulatory body, and in alliance with other groups and individuals continued to apply pressure and protest against gratuitously exploitative reality shows. Eventually this pressure resulted in the show DNA being taken off the air.

According to Sadik, the lesson to be learned from the TV Pink DNK episode is: *"Apply constant pressure using all legal means, and in parallel keep documenting and posting about hate speech; cooperate with other allies dedicated to human rights. Forging a wider coalition can result in making gains against hate, even in the most difficult of political environments."*

Here are the question responses from the Serbian team based on their experiences countering hate speech in a fraught and difficult political environment.

THREE KEY TIPS FOR STARTING OUT

From the outset, it is important to clearly define what hate speech is, and to set criteria for identifying it. Second, don't let any comment get under your skin and annoy you, and avoid any engagement – don't allow yourself to stoop to the level of those individuals that show hatred.

SANJA

At the beginning, it's best to have a clear division of tasks and roles, that the team defines them together, so that everyone knows and understands what is expected. It would be great if everyone presented their strengths and their skills at the outset, and from that starting point, identify and acquire whatever extra knowledge is needed that is vital for effective hate speech monitoring. For a good start, it is necessary to draw up an action plan, and set short, medium and long-term goals, make room for creative ideas and define your expectations.

MAJA

I would advise a new group to become familiar with those terms of hate speech dealing with Roma identity, as well as grasping the differences between stereotypes and prejudices. These topics would be included in one preparatory training for the beginner group. After the training, the group would test themselves. It is important that the tasks are clearly divided and assigned to different teams: one for creating content, another team for writing texts, and a team dedicated to monitoring hate speech on the Internet.

SADIK

WHAT WAS MOST WORRYING ABOUT ONLINE ANTI-ROMA HATE?

The most shocking thing is how many of them post things like "Hitler should have done a better job; Gypsies to the chambers, etc." Also, in responses and comments to articles about successful Roma, or posts that confound anti-Roma stereotypes, people still write abusive comments and insults. Often when there are more than 30 or 40 different comments that are racist and offensive in general, I realise how much hatred there is and how much even educated people, people in positions of power, publicly insult the Romani community, in such language.

MAJA

Honestly, sometimes when I report or read those comments repeatedly, they make me sad, disappointed and hurt. I often remember when they use the words "gypsies, gypsies, gypsies" and the like, it worries me how normalised it is ... Bigotry, stigmas and stereotypes are firmly attached to the G-word itself ... It is as dangerous as it is normal among the older generation, even worse among young people, who perpetrate psychological violence in schools, online and elsewhere. When they see that it is seemingly OK, 'acceptable', and without consequences, then they continue with such behaviour ... It is especially bad for young Roma, when they see how society sees them, it destroys their motivation, and creates discord.

The most shocking anti-Roma comments are those that are dehumanising or directly call for violence... as for personal feelings, it depends, sometimes I feel angry, sometimes helpless because most of the time these people just go unpunished.

SANJA

SADIK

Personally, I get very annoyed when I hear hate speech by public figures in a public space. I am impulsive but I manage to control myself. Most dangerous of all, these public figures have their followers who appreciate their every word and deed.

LEGAL OR EXTRA-LEGAL? WHATEVER WORKS TO ENSURE ZERO TOLERANCE FOR RACISM

I think both legal and non-legal challenges to hate speech are important. Personally, my favourite form of non-legal activities is the implementation of educational campaigns that include workshops and seminars, and media campaigns targeting young people. Because, I think that they have a lasting impact on changing attitudes and raising awareness about the harmfulness of hate speech. As for activities, I think we have a very good track record in removing comments that contain hate speech. And those results wouldn't have happened without a good distribution of responsibilities in the team, a well-organized database... we also try to inform people on social networks about who we are and what we do. In addition to social networks, through workshops we share our experiences with young people, which additionally contributes to raising awareness.

SANJA

Both are equally important, reacting in as many ways as possible is better, because the seriousness of hate speech is understood, and that there should be 'zero tolerance' for violence and racism. My favourite form of non-legal activity would be raising awareness and spreading knowledge about these topics, representing our community, breaking stereotypes by example and spreading announcements about these positive examples. Posts we had from our experiences on Instagram and Facebook, interesting things about Roma, 'memes' on Instagram, sharing interesting articles and publications

MAJA

Non-legal challenges are what we do, for example we opened a profile on Instagram and we reached a lot of young people. We respond to all topics that threaten Roma interests and actively interact with our followers. In extreme cases we ask for support from the legal team, but unfortunately in most of these cases the institutions do not do their job.

SADIK

WHAT'S IT GOING TO TAKE TO SHUT DOWN HATE SPEECH? AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

To make a real difference for the future, there needs to be continuous education of all social strata – through workshops, and campaigns on social networks, to raise awareness about hate speech and how to counter it. It is also important to keep the connection with other teams from other countries in terms of cooperation, sharing of experience and knowledge. Because there is always room for improvement. When it comes to shutting down hate speech, the responsibility lies with everyone – only through joint efforts can we succeed in combating hate speech.

Raising awareness on the topic of stereotypes and connecting with the majority community, interactive workshops and videos, promotion of community and common life, highlighting examples of successful Roma involved in different areas and profiles. All this can help to make change. We have discussed only working with young people, because the older generations are often too deeply-rooted in their stereotypical thinking.

We need to dedicate ourselves to that, because we cannot influence everything, we cannot expect all hate speech to be completely shut down. What's needed is more effective moderating and filtering to remove comments. Social networks such as Facebook and Instagram need to recognise that online abuse of Roma is an important issue, and to improve their responses when it comes to shutting down hate speech. They need to respond and act upon reports in a fair and appropriate way, that accords with respect for our human rights and meets their responsibilities and commitments.

SANJA

The responsibility belongs to all of us, but it would help us even more if the media saw how they influence how others see us, if social networks functioned better in that area, and if we had the support of influential people. Young people also absorb anti-Roma stereotypes at school as much as at home, so it's very important to work with teachers and professors, to spread awareness about discrimination and its consequences.

MAJA

Hate speech must be punishable by law. Online portals, and television channels, must have zero tolerance for hate speech. Every portal must have an administrator responsible for moderating comments. Social networks must sanction and ban any hate speech.

SADIK

BRIEFINGS FROM BULGARIA

Data from the Bulgarian organisation, [Equal Opportunities Initiative Association](#), from August 2021 revealed how the widespread phenomenon of hate speech, much of it online, has a negative impact on Bulgarian society, showing a steep decline in sensitivity towards online anti-Roma hatred. Diyan Dankov, a lawyer from the organisation, explained the close link between hateful rhetoric from politicians and online hate speech, evident in surges in times of political and social crises, and in many of the run-ups to the country's interminable rounds of elections.

Equal Opportunities has brought cases representing victims targeted by hate speech, and submitted many complaints against offenders; the organisation focuses on monitoring politicians, media, and prominent public figures. Diyan noted that while hate speech has long been a problem in Bulgaria, *“it has become especially aggressive in the last two decades since far right parties have come to power in the country – weaponizing hate as a way to get votes, diverting public attention from serious problems in country.”*

Equal Opportunities' Legal Incubator provides ongoing mentorship and support from experienced legal practitioners to young Romani lawyers who want to focus on human rights issues, and the opportunity to gain practical experience with professional law firms. When it comes to monitoring hate speech, Equal Opportunities has actively involved volunteers in two initiatives:

1

Training on monitoring elections

Hate speech against Roma intensifies during election campaigns and elections. The volunteers registered 225 hate speech cases in this regard and results show that hate speech against Roma increases by 10-15% during election periods.

2

Long-term hate speech monitoring over 14 months

The volunteers identified 900 cases in this time frame. Five cases were presented to competent national institutions; these were cases of hate speech statements by far-right politicians, such as presenting Roma as asocial, or as a privileged group as well as cases of individuals being victims of discrimination. Cases are still pending at time of publication.

In one such case in May 2023, [Equal Opportunities and the ERRC](#) lodged a complaint against far-right MEP Angel Dzambazki with the Bulgarian Commission for Protection Against Discrimination. The case against Dzambazki concerned a video posted to his Facebook profile in which he referred to Roma in Bulgaria as illiterate criminals and asked human rights defenders to come to see them in their *‘natural habitat.’* The video displays demographic data contrasting the increase in the Romani population to the decline in ethnic majority birth-rates, with Dzambazki warning: *“In 30 years they will be one million, if someone doesn't do something...”*. This video was viewed more than 43,000 times on Facebook alone, with an unknown number of additional views on the VMRO Party's website.

In another case, the ERRC and Equal Opportunities took action against Dzambazki's [VMRO Party](#) for a news piece on their website in August 2022 titled: *“We want a meeting with the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior to convene a Council for curbing gypsy crime.”* The publication promoted a document which was proposed to the Council of Ministers in August 2019 named: *“Concept for dealing with unsocialised Gypsy groups.”* The publication uses offensive language and expressions to make allegations of a number of crimes committed, according to them, by Romani citizens of Bulgaria. These crimes are described as *“incomprehensible to a normal human mind.”* Other dehumanising phrases such as *“uncontrolled marginal masses”* were used to incite hatred against Roma and depict the ethnic group as sub-human.

TAKING ACTION IN TURKEY

Romani activist and founder of Romani Godi, **Fatoş Kaytan**, spoke at the conference about how hate speech is divisive and corrodes the sense of common belonging essential for a functioning democracy; how extremists polarise society and effectively mute moderate voices; how hate speech undermines public trust in democratic institutions, and how disaffection can spell danger for targeted minorities:

THE REAL-WORLD IMPACTS OF ONLINE HATE

We have clear evidence of the real-world effects of online hate speech when it goes unchallenged. During the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the devastating February 2023 earthquake, the already perilous situation of Romani, Abdal and Domari communities was further aggravated by unfounded allegations of looting and other crimes spread on social media. These allegations migrated from social media to mainstream news, and this criminalisation of Roma had a visible and immediate effect on the communities in the region, who were denied resources or neglected in aid operations. Some right-wing politicians capitalised on this, targeting groups accused of such crimes and conducting online polls that called for their expulsion.

FATOŞ

Turkish volunteers shared their insights, based on their experiences in combating online hate speech against Roma, about what surprised and shocked them, how they responded as a team to counter the haters, their starter tips for any new groups that might emerge, and their recommendations for the future. For their safety, their comments will be anonymised. **Participant A** prefaced their recommendations with the comment that, prior to this project, “As a Romani citizen I realised that I did not fully understand what hate speech truly entails and how to effectively combat this phenomenon, despite struggling to learn about it for a long time.” Their three tips for starters are:

COMBATING HATE: THREE TIPS FOR START-UPS

Education and Awareness:

To combat hate speech, it is crucial to first establish education and awareness. It is essential to thoroughly educate your group about the origins, effects, and dissemination mechanisms of hate. Review relevant literature, listen to experts on the topic, and research which groups are commonly targeted by hate speech in society. By understanding the scope and complexity of the issue, you can develop effective solutions and prepare initiatives.

Empathy and Communication Skills Development:

Hate speech is often linked to prejudice and a lack of information. Therefore, it is important to develop empathy and effective communication skills. Empathy helps individuals understand different perspectives and evaluate others' emotions. Communication skills are key to establishing a healthy dialogue with those holding opposing views. You can organize role-playing, training sessions, and practical exercises to help your group members develop these skills.

Multi-Channel Hate Speech Counter-Strategy:

This strategy involves a comprehensive approach that includes social media, local media, and fieldwork. The group should actively participate in social media platforms and local media outlets, using these platforms effectively to raise awareness and inform the public. Additionally, through fieldwork, direct interaction with the community is essential, providing face-to-face communication, informing people about the effects of hate speech, and offering solutions. This strategy emphasizes being present everywhere and maintaining active communication, thereby reaching different segments of society and creating a broader impact in combating hate speech.

Participant C likewise emphasised the importance of positive communication and empathy within the team:

“When advising a new group on hate speech, I would first emphasize empathy and understanding. Secondly, I would recommend avoiding confrontational language and being open to different perspectives. Thirdly, I would encourage them to be solution-oriented and to act with the aim of making positive changes in society.”

COHESION AND INCLUSION UNDER THREAT FROM EXTREME PREJUDICE

On the question of what they found shocking in monitoring hate speech, and what they considered particularly significant or most dangerous in terms of inciteful content that can expose Romani people to real-life harm, the activists provided compelling insights, drawing from and reflecting on their direct experiences. **Participant B** wanted people in general to better understand just how hurtful and malevolent, and how excessive, the language used by those who spread hate speech is:

“When we conduct online searches, the most impactful comments are those that assert that Roma people are not human, describe them as inferior to animals, and claim they lack any sense of honour. These comments are currently expressed in public discourse, and they are alarming because every physical assault begins with rhetoric.”

Participant A was similarly shocked by the extreme prejudice and hate directed at Romani people, and found the stigmatisation and racist generalisations targeting Roma to be particularly harmful and provocative, causing them to feel less safe and more marginalised:

“Personally, encountering such hate speech is quite distressing and demoralising. Unjust attacks on my identity and cultural background can emotionally affect me, compelling me to defend myself or respond. Additionally, witnessing the spread of such hate speech and its potential to increase intolerance and discrimination in society is worrying. Therefore, combating online hate speech and striving to create a more tolerant society is important.”

The most concerning aspect of online anti-Roma hate speech, for **Participant C** was the prevalence of organised dissemination and the harms it inflicts, firstly on innocent individuals - particularly the young and vulnerable - and secondly, on society - tearing up social cohesion, and laying the groundwork for violent actions. *“Personally, this situation saddens me, and I believe that more effort is needed for society to be more tolerant and respectful. The most harmful aspect of online hate speech is that it fuels animosity and division among people, increasing societal fragmentation and hostility.”*

ENGAGED, EFFECTIVE, AND EXCITING

Across the board, activists and volunteers from each of the participating countries, agreed that both legal and extra-legal challenges are equally important and complementary. **Participant B** noted the significance of hate speech that comes out of state and public institutions, and the lack of official responses: *“When we report such hate speech to the relevant departments, they often side with their personnel, largely ignoring the hate speech we experience. This makes the legal and extra-legal challenges equally daunting in my view.”*

Across borders, many did however express a personal preference for extra-legal action. As **Participant C** put it, while legal challenges react to prohibit or restrict hate speech, *“Extra-legal activities can also create change in society and draw attention to the issue. My favourite form of extra-legal activity is demanding change through peaceful protest and civil disobedience. The most exciting aspect of my strategies and projects is their potential to bring people together and achieve social transformation. By celebrating differences and understanding one another, we can foster a greater sense of unity and solidarity within society.”*

In a similar vein, **Participant A** noted that, where legal challenges prove insufficient, individuals and organisations may opt for extra-legal initiatives to combat hate speech: *“My preferred form of extra-legal activity is conducting campaigns on online platforms to raise social awareness and promote mobilisation. For example, initiating an awareness campaign via social media or organising targeted actions can be an effective strategy in combating online hate speech. I find our comprehensive engagement across various fields to be highly effective and exciting. Our strategy involves a comprehensive approach that includes social media, local media, and fieldwork. This approach makes us innovative and effective in our fight against hate speech. It means we can reach large audiences and foster support and unity for social change.”*

On an upbeat note, reflecting on what was innovative, engaging, and exciting, **Participant B** said:

“The outputs of our work and our reporting of our findings to the authorities has been very exciting, and the data we hold is incredibly valuable. If this work serves as a foundation, future initiatives will be built upon it as a reference, and being one of the pioneers of such an endeavour is a source of pride.”

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO END HATE SPEECH?

The participants from Turkey agreed that while it may be practically impossible to eliminate hate speech, much can be done to limit its impact and reach, reduce the harm it inflicts, and to exclude it from the public sphere. While the ultimate responsibility lies with political leaders, state institutions, and media outlets to limit hate speech, individuals, groups, and communities all have a valuable role to play. Three elements were identified as vital for sustainable action to shut down hate speech:

1

Individual/Societal Awareness and Education

The first step in combating hate speech is educating individuals on what hate speech is, its consequences, and how to combat it, and raising awareness in society. Educating individuals on the harms of hate speech and training them in empathy and tolerance is crucial. Societal education campaigns, events organized in schools and community centres, and information sharing via social media and other communication channels should be employed to raise awareness in society.

2

Effective Legal Regulations and Enforcement

Appropriate legal regulations and their enforcement are highly effective in combating hate speech. Laws should identify behaviours that promote or allow the spread of hate speech and take deterrent and punitive measures against such actions.

3

Community Participation and Collaboration

One of the most important steps in combating hate speech is collaboration, which requires the participation of the entire society. Cooperation and solidarity among civil society organizations, public institutions, media outlets, businesses, and individuals are crucial. These stakeholders should identify, support, and implement strategies to combat hate speech in society.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The commitment, inventiveness, and sheer energy shown by the teams of activists is not just admirable in itself, but serves as a valuable antidote to the fatalism of so many in the face of the enormity of challenges posed by the dirty downsides of the digital revolution. One of which is the seemingly boundless trafficking of online hate; virtually instantaneous in its dissemination, and unconstrained by reason, racialised minorities have often been the most harmed and least protected. Until very recently, Roma were left out of discussions about racially targeted online hate speech. The work done by these volunteers is about setting that to rights, and the evidence they have gathered, debates they have instigated, and complaints they have lodged is intrinsically valuable in ensuring that online antigypsyism will not be side-lined. By their actions, the volunteers embodied the spirit of the Angela Davis slogan: *“In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist.”* Their testimony also provided vivid corroboration of **Viktor Kunderák’s**² description of the harms done by anti-Roma hate speech. In his panel presentation on April 8, Viktor spoke of the multiple layers and effects of hate speech:

- at the individual level, often in the context of hate crime cases involving physical violence or threats;
- at the community level, where an already stigmatised community faces even further marginalisation and collective harm;
- and the threats to social cohesion ranging from the exceptional – incitements to violence leading to riots and widespread disorder – to the more creeping, corrosive effect of persistent hate speech going unchallenged, which *“if unaddressed legitimises narratives of exclusion, othering, and stigmatisation.”*

In the face of such threats, Viktor’s notion coincided with those of the volunteers, that all means of response need to be deployed, through criminal law where possible, combined with counter-speech, public campaigning, and whatever works to pressure social media platforms to meet their obligations.

Another complication for the volunteers monitoring hate speech was the difficulty in categorising speech that was decidedly unpleasant and demeaning, but deliberately and knowingly stopped short of actionable hate speech. Even more insidiously, that hate frequently lurks in unsuspecting places, often on accounts posing as fun-filled, humorous, and animal-loving online spaces. Subtle forms of hateful speech have serious consequences: they may fall short of direct and imminent incitement to violence, but they succeed in undermining a sense of empathy and solidarity in the broader public towards Roma and other minorities, tacitly allowing the extreme to become mainstream.

² Viktor Kunderák, Department of Human Rights and Protection of Minorities, Office of the Government of the Czech Republic.

HOW EXTREMIST NARRATIVES GO MAINSTREAM

What was especially innovative was how actively anti-racist this project is. In order to create lasting change, this project aimed to actively challenge and dismantle racist behaviours, practices, and structures. 'Taking power back' for our volunteers meant becoming active rights holders and holding duty bearers such as individuals and institutions accountable by following different legal and non-legal strategies. Meaning, it is our volunteers who are the main initiators of any action taken against hate that they find online. Our volunteers are proactive in creating various online counter-narrative content, filing complaints to different state bodies, spreading awareness, and building networks.

For our Slovak group of volunteers, a very exciting part of the project was establishing collaboration with the Council for Media Services (RpMS), which, after a complex legal modification, became the new national regulator in the field of audio-visual media services. Based on our complaints, the first administrative proceedings were initiated against the YouTube and Facebook platforms, since the effective date of the legislation. Almost everything we have reported to the RpMS (and social media platforms have not removed them after our reports) has been deleted. In the long run, gathering these complaints aids the RpMS primarily in collecting evidence and cases, then fortifying its pressure tactics on social media companies, forcing them to keep their eyes open and take swifter action against hate.

**RADKA VICENOVÁ
(SLOVAK NATIONAL CENTRE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS)**

And this is precisely where awareness-raising, engaging in vigorous public debate, campaigning more widely against all forms of racism and, in the longer-term, education for critical digital literacy that cultivates what one activist described as 'forethoughtfulness' among young people in an age of instant responses, and coordinated hate, where social media algorithms (notably Facebook) were shown to disproportionately harm minorities. Long-term change to isolate hate speech requires investment in the kind of education that protects the young from the damage done by discrimination, that is explicitly anti-racist and inculcates a sense of civic responsibility to bolster youngsters' capacity for empathy and solidarity. From the volunteers, one message rings clear, for change to happen the need to '*Educate, Agitate, Organise!*' remains vitally important, same as it ever was.

By way of a conclusion and an agenda for the future on what is to be done to combat online hate speech against Roma, this succinct summing up comes from Slovak coordinator, **Barbora**:

RECOGNISING THIS IS NOT A "ROMA ISSUE" BUT A SOCIETAL ONE

Unless we understand antigypsyism as a root cause leading to the exclusion of Roma, we are only responding to effects. The social acceptance of anti-Roma hate speech needs to be made a public concern where hate speech and hate crime victim-support policies and programmes are leading the direction of policy. We need policy, which is conscious not only of race and gender, but also class, language, ability, and sexual orientation, amongst others.

REALISING OUR HUMAN RIGHTS

This means being active agents for human rights in influencing decision-making processes while holding duty-bearers accountable. Fighting the culture of impunity and apathy online means fighting it offline as well.

DECOLONISING OUR DIGITAL SPACES

Unless online algorithms and social systems are explicitly developed to account for the legacy of continuous systems of inequality and bias, racial inequality will continue to be perpetuated and aggravated. By providing resources, privileges, and digital literacy help, tech experts, companies, policymakers, and various institutional structures can address racial inequality.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

All societies, their democratic institutions at national and international levels, and their leaders have to demonstrate more responsibility and accountability to prevent, mitigate, sanction, and counter any form of hate speech against Roma in traditional and new forms of media.



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