

Can we put an end to the dehumanization of Roma in France?

By [William Bila](#)
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To mark the occasion of International Roma day, Romea.cz opens its columns to the association La Voix des Rroms (the Voice of Roma). The president of this anti-racist association founded in 2005, William Bila, is outraged by the fate of Romani populations in French society. Dehumanization at the hands of the media and politicians is contributing to the normalization of antigypsyism: the evils are numerous but the solutions are there. Op-ed.

Since March 16th, the most vulnerable members of the Roma community (living in precarious housing) have been going through an episode of terror in the greater Paris metropolitan area. A rumor that first appeared on social networks caused a series of attacks. To date, La Voix des Rroms and its partners have identified 38 assaults: assault and battery in the street, death threats, shots near living quarters, arson, etc. The number of attacks peaked between March 25-26.

Currently, the intensity of violence has decreased, but the threat is omnipresent and the terror these men, women and children have to live with has not dissipated. The rumors going around on social media are still out of control. The last attack came to our attention on Friday, April 5th. While we try to work with our partners and allies to protect people in an emergency, some of us, our friends or relatives are directly affected by this violence.

While, on the whole, the public authorities have so far responded adequately to the demand for urgent police protection, we must point out among the incidents were also the following: plain clothes police officers entered the Roma area during the night in Bondy and hurled racist insults, and there have been refusals to intervene following requests for protection of people threatened in the middle of the night.

A degree of pre-genocidal dehumanization

We would like to salute the municipal teams who took strong and fast positions in terms of personal protection and demonstration of solidarity as in the suburbs of Saint-Denis, Ivry, or Stains as well as individuals, collectives, local associations who responded to our call for an anti-racist onslaught by multiplying acts of kindness towards the people who are being directly threatened and who are their neighbors.

At this stage, La Voix des Roms has taken part in filing civil law suits in two ongoing proceedings, targeting perpetrators of abuses. The only decision handed down to date by the court is a sentence of 18 months in prison concerning one perpetrator.

All of these steps taken are still severely insufficient. Children, women and men are still in a state of terror and their trauma will have lasting consequences on their lives. Children have massively deserted schools, to which it is already rather difficult to gain access "in normal times" for many Roma in France; the majority of women and men do not dare to leave their dwellings to work or buy groceries.

In the course of its day-to-day activities, La Voix des Roms conducts genocide prevention workshops based on educational tools developed with the Council of Europe. On the morning of March 26th, we were frightened by the feeling of moving from a mere exercise to reality. Where does the danger come from? How many victims do we have? Where is my brother, my sister, my father? Where are our friends? Who are our allies? The degree of dehumanization achieved in the representation of Roma communities during this episode is felt by us as pre-genocidal. When our humanity and basic dignity can so easily be ignored by the perpetrators as well as the silent onlookers, then our society has taken a definitive psychological step on the way toward facilitating the job of executioners of crimes against humanity. It's a cog in the mechanism of genocide. It has been observed during the extermination of Jews and Roma during the Second World War, Muslims during the Bosnian war, and Yazidis during the ongoing Syrian conflict.

A recurring absence of empathy in the media

This process of dehumanization has led to acts of violence in a certain segment of the population, but we want to bring to your attention how media practices as exemplified by news commentators and political leaders surrounding these events demonstrates a structural absence of empathy for those attacked. For example, in the "Great Decryption", an LCI broadcast on March 27, images of alleged crimes committed by individuals from Roma and Traveler communities were shown. One of our spokespersons, Anina Ciuciu, who came to the show to make a public call for a calming down of the situation, was instead asked to respond to these allegations publicly.

Stéphane Raffali, mayor (socialist party) of Ris-Orangis, arbitrarily decided on the eviction of a slum when the day before the children who live there photographed themselves carrying a sign: "We are humans". Benjamin Griveaux, spokesman for the government, during his pronouncements on the events, did not have any real words of compassion or benevolence towards the victims although such words would be welcomed.

The current events are a spectacular and particularly dangerous consequence of the normalization of antigypsyism in our society: the client of a tobacconist allows himself to insult and threaten a young woman whom he perceives as "Roma", the ex-prime minister Manuel Valls authorizes in 2013 this type of passage to the act by using such expressions from the position of his office as "ways of life in confrontation". The impunity of such racist speech expressed by a state official is being pursued since 2016 by La Voix des Roms when we filed this case to be examined at the European Court of Human Rights.

In May 2015, during the regional elections, Valérie Pécresse, who has since become president of the Île-de-France region, is filmed in the remains of a shantytown and declares, with a broom in her hand: "With this operation, sweep, you've understood, we want a clean region." In view of the upcoming elections (European, municipal), La Voix des Roms will be particularly vigilant to the electoral instrumentalization of antigypsyism and will call upon the authorities of justice in the strongest possible way when necessary.

In a sequence of world news that has followed the massacre of 22 people in India following a rumor broadcast on Whatsapp about kidnapping children in a white van in the summer of 2018, the Islamophobic killing of Christchurch, which caused 50 deaths in New Zealand, and its live broadcast on Facebook for 17 minutes on March 15, as well as the antigypsyist attacks in Ile-de-France which started a day later, private industry and public authorities have the duty to force these platforms to take responsibility for their actions: Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube, etc.

May France follow the example of Germany

That is why, in addition to prosecuting individuals according to criminal law who have incited hatred and calls to murder on social media platforms, we will begin civil proceedings against these platforms themselves by encouraging the judicial system to examine the hypothesis we formulate here: the possible responsibility of organized political groups in the production and dissemination of this criminal rumor. We remind you here, for all practical purposes, of the use of "fake news" by coalition organizations, within the framework of major political strategies, as was the case in the last American and French presidential campaigns, as well as in the campaign for Brexit, among others.

Finally, on this Monday, April 8, 2019, International Roma Day, we call on the French government to fulfill its duty and responsibility in terms of recognition of antigypsyism and the implementation of concrete and sustainable actions to combat it. While antigypsyism as a specific form of racism manifests itself in hate speech and racist aggressions from John Doe to high-level politicians, it is also spread at all levels of society and government, and constitutes a major obstacle in the access to rights of citizens (refusal of school enrollments, discrimination in employment, obstacles to access to justice etc.)

On 8 April 2016, the European Parliament adopted a resolution asking the Member States, on the one hand, to implement the European Commission Directive 2000/43 / EC on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment between persons without distinction of race or ethnic origin, in order to prevent and eliminate discrimination against Roma, and on the other hand to implement an effective plan to combat antigypsyism in the context of an integration strategy.

On January 1, 2017, the German government recognized antigypsyism as a category of its own in the context of hate crime. On 27 March 2019, following a debate in Parliament, it set up an independent commission of 11 experts, researchers and practitioners, including men and women belonging to the groups concerned by this specific racism, endowed with significant resources and an independent agenda. It also created a program called "Living Democracy" to fund a large number of initiatives across Germany to combat antigypsyism by targeting in particular the field of education.

Following the recent attacks and the ongoing threat in France that are the consequences of 20 years of normalization of antigypsyism at all levels of society, and its denial, it is high time that the French Republic, like its German neighbor, recognize the human dignity of these children, women and men targeted by this specific racial hatred. In concrete terms, this means guaranteeing in practice the rights conferred on them by the fundamental principles of the French Republic and the values of the European Union.

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