



## Addressing online antigypsyism and advocacy points to be taken as ways forward

Online Hate speech has been steadily on the rise during the past decade, especially during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic. Making it appearance known at the highest level of the public administration of some Member States, where transformation into policy is just one step away. The liberal stance that was built towards hate speech on basic assumptions that the state and the major society would uphold their democratic standards and values under all circumstances, and distance themselves from hate speakers, has proven to be wrong as many different societal and minority groups continue to be targets of hate speech.

According to the Fundamental Rights Agency, 1 in 3 Roma are victims of harassment and 20% of non-Roma would not like to have a Roma colleague. As identified in the EC Communication 'Midterm review of the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies' (2017), antigypsyism goes beyond the legal notion of discrimination. In essence, antigypsyism is the root cause of exclusion of Roma people. It has many different dimensions and manifestations, including hate-speech in public, media, and political narratives, expressed stereotypes, hate-crime, discrimination in school, employment, health and housing and structural antigypsyism.

The mid-term review showed very little progress and highlighted the importance of focusing on antigypsyism in the next Framework. It confirmed that fighting antigypsyism by targeting majority society is a pre-condition for the success of any Roma inclusion intervention. Also, the EP adopted a report on the 'Fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration in the EU: fighting anti-Gypsyism' in 2017, highlighting persistent antigypsyism across Europe, despite the efforts undertaken under the EU Roma Framework and the EU legislative framework against discrimination, hate speech and hate crime.

Hate speech as a manifestation of antigypsyism needs particular attention because of its multiplier effect: it influences public opinion, fuels tension, and paves the way for discrimination and hate crimes. Online media plays a particular role in spreading and inciting hate speech. It strengthens stereotypes, uses offensive language, denies, or trivializes antigypsyism. Through social media hate speech reaches millions of people and allows perpetrators to anonymously incite hatred and violence.

ERGO network therefore through the PECAO project supported and funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) and Google.Org Impact Challenge on Safety addresses the need to better counter antigypsyist hate speech online. This includes more specifically:

- Need to better recognise antigypsyist hate speech: As 'the most accepted form of racism', subtle antigypsyist hate speech often remains undetected and is therefore not reported and deleted.
- Need to better report antigypsyist hate speech: There is little awareness of existing institutional structures and tools to protect citizens from hate speech.
- Need to better monitor hate speech in order to better understand the problem and support the development of policies to counter hate speech.

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- Need to develop better policies that recognise antigypsyism as bias motivation and tackle institutional antigypsyism.

According to recent academic literature, counter-speech is crucial in the fight against racism and other forms of intolerance. Counter-speech should be backed up also by action: official policy on social inclusion, such as education, awareness-raising, and social programs to level economic and other inequalities. Besides, counteraction is also recommended: strengthening the institutional system to combat hate speech.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, a roundtable was organized as part of ERGO's effort to tackle and address antigypsyist online hate speech through the project PECAO supported by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) and Google.Org Impact Challenge on Safety. The event aimed to foster a debate which would lead to identifying positive solutions, policy proposals, as well as advocacy points relevant for further addressing the new challenges arisen during the current pandemic that present new obstacles for a better inclusion of Roma in society.

Participants of the roundtable were discussing, sharing their observations, opinions and reflections on the phenomena of antigypsyism.

Important points were made such as the complicated form of online antigypsyism as the 'haters' do not use the term Roma but some hybrid terms that all society acknowledges as Roma. This requires IT companies to have knowledge of this terms, or in other words the IT companies must keep up with the different forms of online antigypsyism.

While Google tackles hate speech, including Antigypsyism, very seriously, however the hate speech can evolve rapidly, for example coded language, slurs. Google collaborates with communities so they can keep up with this evolution of hate speech. The collaboration between CSO and Google has a huge importance in order to tackle online hate speech efficiently. This collaboration must continue as to have more success in tackling antigypsyism.

There is huge importance that not just Roma CSO are tackling this issue, but different institutions that can work together. Moreover, creating and discussing counter-narratives is essential for better understanding Roma identity and the causes of antigypsyism.

Creating and maintaining the law framework, especially with the Code of conduct that many IT platforms signed and pledged to follow is important. Any kind of hate speech should be criminalized; however it requires better acknowledgement from both CSO and IT platforms. Mechanism must be in place in the IT platforms environment where the victim (or a third person) can notify the IT platform about the hate speech incident. This mechanism must be able to take down the content if it is considered as hate speech. However, CSO's and IT platforms must collaborate closely as their collaboration was not close in the past.

Living in the times of Covid-19, the online antigypsyism is becoming normalized for the whole society and not just the right-wing supporters. Laws are important, but prevention should be more highlighted.

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Therefore, creating a space for Roma where they can create content for counter-narratives is important, because finding quality content on Roma is hard. Another weak link in Antigypsyism is the data collection as this will show the dimensions of hate speech.

Comprehensive legislation in European level is ongoing, however it is remarkably like the Code of Conduct that was signed in 2016. Funding of hate speech projects will be funded in the future, on a yearly basis. The use of artificial intelligence to detect hate speech before it is posted is being developed, however this might be tricky as the language is evolving as well and the AI models must adapt. On the other hand, people must be present as they will need to finalize the decision. Brining us, to the importance of filing complaints, however for some countries this is not easy, so more advocacy work is needed in this field.

The main reason of Roma exclusion is antigypsism and in today's world online antigypsism has become more widespread, however with its own distinct features. One of the distinct feature is the use of hybrid terms that refer to Roma, and that is why the more developed IT platforms need to be updated of the different forms of antigypsism. This requires a close collaboration between CSO's and IT platforms. In other words, the forms of antigypsism is evolving and changing and IT companies need to get continuous input from Roma and pro-Roma CSO.

Collaboration between CSO and IT platforms is crucial and there should be mutual learning and recommendations input. This also needs to be reflected in a form of cooperation between institutions, media and CSO's, where opportunities for spreading counter-narratives are supported, a distinctive law framework is created to criminalize hate speech and effective mechanisms are put in place that would involve CSO's in the development of AI models and software in order to avoid further discrimination of marginalized groups in online places.

Teaching Roma activists and Roma about filling complaints and reporting hate speech is also important, as data collection should show the other dimensions of antigypsism and ways forward, and possible advocacy activities asking for better policies or media self-regulations combating hate speech will only be measurable in the long-term. In this regard we can expect:

- Higher awareness of journalists' ethic commissions on the prevalence and impact of antigypsyist hate speech online, leading to improved self-regulation guidelines.
- Higher awareness of national equality bodies and other relevant state institutions on the prevalence and impact of antigypsyist hate speech online, leading to better programmes targeting antigypsism.
- Stronger adherence by IT companies to the Code of Conduct on countering online hate speech.
- Better data collection on hate crime and hate speech disaggregated by ethnicity and gender to allow analysis of trends by member states.
- Stronger condemnation of antigypsyist hate speech in the public discourse.
- More positive narratives promoted by young people online to counter antigypsyist hate speech.

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