

# Hate speech against Roma in Poland: a wall of exclusion

## 1. Polish society vs. Roma communities: from stereotype to hate speech

### 1.1. Hate speech in Poland in 2014: an overview

Sixteen percent of young Poles and adults find the statement, "Gypsies are and always will be thieves" to be admissible<sup>1</sup>. While the statement is quoted in a popular song by a successful Polish band<sup>2</sup>, still, every fourth young Pole and every fifth adult hear hate speech towards Roma people very commonly – a growing and alarming phenomenon.

The Roma community – Poland's largest recognized ethnic minority – accounts for less than 0.01% of the Polish population yet experiences nearly most of the hate speech spread around the country. The most frequent place where that hate speech is encountered is the Internet (66 percent of young Poles and 27 percent of adults) and, particularly for this group, peer-to-peer contacts. Additionally, 60 percent of young Poles and 49 percent of adults heard anti-Roma statements from their friends within the last year.

Acceptance for anti-Roma hate speech is a result of common stereotypes and prejudices, present not only in Poland but also in the wider European context: "Gypsies' nomadism", music and dancing, fortune telling, traditional crafts, customs, dress, fact of being dirty, theft, underprivileged status of women and children, financial situation, education, employment, and housing. Each of these stereotypes has been thoroughly analyzed and then deconstructed in the Council of Europe's recent report on the subject<sup>3</sup>, which we used as one of our points of reference in the campaign.

### 1.2. A stereotypical image of Roma communities: online media, memes,

Valeriu Nicolae, the founder and president of the Policy Center for Roma and Minorities in Bucharest, when talking about the presence of Roma in media says that they 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 to public safety. This causes a biased portrayal of the relation of ethnicity to violence and clearly obstructs other, more important aspects such as social exclusion, hidden violence, forced segregation, environment, education, perspective, social class and other possible causes of criminal behavior. For instance, riots involving Roma are overwhelmingly presented*

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1 Michał Bilewicz et al., *Hate speech in Poland 2014: a summary of the report*. Source: [http://www.ngofund.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Mowa-nienawisci-w-Polsce-streszczenie\\_eng\\_.pdf](http://www.ngofund.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Mowa-nienawisci-w-Polsce-streszczenie_eng_.pdf). All subsequent data in this chapter are taken from the report above.

2 Bracia Figo Fagot, *Malgoś głupia*. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eRONxzzfrk>

3 Roma campaign "Dosta": *Is this a stereotype? A tool for fighting stereotypes towards Roma*. Source: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/source/documents/toolstereotypesEN.pdf>.

*in relation to ethnicity, regardless of the nature of the riots. In contrast, riots with predominantly white participants – football riots – are rarely analyzed for their ethnic or gender characteristics* <sup>4</sup>.

Nicolae's statement portrays the phenomenon of prevalent misrepresentation of Roma in the European media (including the social media), comprising also Poland. Another problem touches on representation of Roma with the use of intermediaries to speak for the Roma and about the Roma.

However, in most of the instances the ethnic and/or racial element is present at the core of the clash. This amounts to direct discrimination and hate speech, particularly on the Internet. The alarming trend stems from the lack of Romani voices present in media, rendering Roma individuals and communities objectified and often dehumanized. Moreover, due to the lack of adequate protection and/or punishment for perpetrators, such negative behavior and trend remain impunitively.

## **2. How to make a crack in the walls of hate speech? Creating a social campaign**

### **2.1. About the campaign**

Using data from the most recent report "Hate Speech in Poland 2014", „Bez murów” ("Without Walls") campaign aimed to highlight Polish society's use and acceptance of discriminatory, anti-Romani stereotypes and hate speech. As an awareness and call-to-action project, it was targeted to youth and other social media users since most of this hate speech, according to the report, occurs online. Our goal was to make them conscious of the hate speech phenomenon targeted to Roma, and sensitize the words that hurt as much as, and can escalate to, physical violence and hate crimes.

The overall concept was inspired by the common stereotype of Roma people "eating the debris" (many Polish hate memes on the Internet contain this statement) as well as the phenomenon of "ghettoization": living in areas separated by walls due to some local initiatives<sup>5</sup>. By the simple statement that hate speech builds walls, we tried to challenge Poles to clean up the "debris" of hate built up over the years and stored within their minds and public discourse, both on- and offline.

### **2.2. Going online: key techniques and turning points of campaign**

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, we launched our online campaign on Facebook. We published data and statistics from the 2014 report on hate speech as well as creative, thought-provoking memes describing the current reality in which the Roma are targeted and discriminated on a daily basis.

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<sup>4</sup> .Valeriu Nicolae, *The enemy within. Roma, the media and hate speech*. Source: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-20-nicolae-en.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Slovakia 'anti-Roma' wall in Kosice riles EU. Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23767036>

Prior to the take-off of “Bez Murów” we have also discussed options of outdoor happenings to take its place on the streets of Warsaw. Yet, having in mind reachability of project social media became an ultimate tool to reach the biggest number of audience, not only in Warsaw but also in other cities and countryside of Poland, including areas where hate attitudes towards Roma are more acute.

Next step, was to promote our campaign through cooperation with organizations of similar aims to highlight the importance of counteracting hate speech, such as the “No Hate“ Council of Europe campaign or NGO's, notably Amnesty International Cracow. We also searched for greater support and mutually promoted a wide range of campaigns and organizations dealing with various spheres of cooperation and help to Roma people. The following activity on Facebook included:

- projects: “Moda na tolerancję”, “Edukacja dla Romów”, “Międzynarodowy Dzień Romów”,
- campaigns and magazines: “Jedni z wielu”, “Dialog-Pheniben”,
- associations and foundations: “Nomada Stowarzyszenie”, “Stowarzyszenie Romów w Polsce”, “Związek Romów Polskich”.

Throughout the campaign, we published data and statistics on our memes that over the years have added to the construction of “the walls of hate” that separate Poles and exclude the Roma community and individuals.

Our goal after creating some content on the Facebook page was to expand our promotion to the public space by means of leaflets distributed in public spaces that contained general information on hate speech and statistics. To attract the public in the streets of Warsaw, we made simple street art by using chalk to create pictures with Roma symbols and promoting the slogan "Stop hate speech". The passers-by reacted mostly positively, including some who engaged in the discussion; but the action did not significantly change the visibility of the Facebook campaign (we registered the growth in the number of approximately 30 likes in three hours after the action).

In fact, the most significant turning point of the campaign consisted of buying advertisements and promotions on Facebook to reach the wider public. The result is described in detail in the next section of this report.

### **3. Feedback from Internet users: "already convinced" and "perpetual haters"**

#### **3.1. From statistics to examples of interaction**

Between June 17<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, we reached 162 total page likes, with approximately 1,500 people actively engaged in liking, commenting and sharing links as well as images (memes). Passive engagement reflected in approximate visibility of 24,500 viewings.

The organic reach from June 17<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> was generated mostly by young people aged 18-24, generally with a positive attitude towards the Roma communities in Poland. First interactions included voices of support as well as sharing information on sources of knowledge on Roma culture. We assume the positive result was due to the promotion on pro-Roma Facebook pages as well as to inviting our personal friends and supporters.

The second phase of the campaign consisted of investing in promotion of the page and the following meme on June 23<sup>rd</sup>:



This action resulted in an increase of visibility by over 20,000 views but also created a wave of hate speech on the page. We will present some examples to illustrate the problem.

Ex. 1.: A response to our meme with statistic: 49% of Polish adults have heard anti-Roma hate speech from their friends, was: "And 75% adults have heard Roma addressing swear words to Poles".



Ex.2. The financially supported and promoted meme has demonstrated common stereotypes reflected by Google search suggestions for Polish language when typing "Gypsies are...". It

included a call for tolerance. It generated the following comments:

1. "Those stereotypes are all true"
2. "Tolerate this plague? No, thanks"
3. "Tolerance is a virtue of people without their own opinion"
4. "I can write some more [offensive] Google results"

### **3.2. Conclusions**

The online campaign has reached its goal to interact with users of social media and has far exceeded our principal visibility targets. The financial boost of the posts as well as advertisements of the page resulted in introducing a broader audience to the subject. As a "side-effect," our Facebook page got a number of not only positive but also negative comments. We treat it as a reliable source of evidence that hate speech towards Roma in Poland is a real problem affecting our everyday online activity. Therefore, the Facebook "Without Walls" campaign creates a platform where different opinions and attitudes towards Roma minority clash and reformulate.

Designing, organizing, implementing, and monitoring this project was a "whole new world" for us. In a very short time we had to embark on various roles as well as embrace our creativity and public relations skills. It was rewarding to see the growing number of those who followed this project, of those who responded with support, both on- and off-line, yet the most rewarding feeling is the fact that we have made another step to prevent hate speech targeted at Roma. As Lao Tzu explains: "the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step". As of March 2015, the number of people supporting our campaign is still growing. Now, we walk together against the walls of hate.

Kasia Balas

Michael Williams

Łukasz Niparko

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