

The media and the public perception of the Roma and the Sinti in Italy*

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Abstract. Although Italy is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of Roma and Sinti population, anti-gypsyism is higher than the European average. This is not due to demographic factors but to the inclusion policies adopted and the difficulties in social interaction between the Roma and the *gadjo* (non-Roma). De-segregation policies are needed. Meanwhile, anti-gypsyism has become “standardised”, meaning that it has been minced and widespread, becoming ever more pervasive and omnipresent. It has become socially acceptable and is now part of our system of values. In the “post-truth era”, Web and social media have been a crucial tool for the diversification and spreading of racist messages. The text also emphasizes the responsibility of media and politics, which continue to promote stereotypes about the Roma, strengthening the negative aspects and regarding them as a threat to the population. This attitude could be defined as a form of “organized ignorance”. Roma people are highly visible in public debate, but in fact they are always judged only on the basis of stereotypes and prejudice and never seen as individuals. No mention is ever made of the dynamic nature of the Roma’s identity or of the process of gradual transformation resulting from their secular interaction with majority society. Thinking of “the Roma” as objects and not individuals will only lead to their being trapped in the cage of an immutable culture. Here is the “paradox: we talk a lot about Roma and quite a lot of money is spent at the public level, but this does not seem to be sufficient to develop an appropriate policy that would provide opportunities for interaction and the possibility to get to know each other better. Contacts with Roma individuals are considered disreputable and the majority of people can happily do without.

Keywords: Roma and Sinti minorities; anti-gypsyism; intercultural relations; web; racism.

The 2017 Final Report of the Jo Cox Committee on hate, intolerance, xenophobia and racism, which was set up in 2016 by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, states that «anti-gypsyism is a historical topic in the Italian society and it has strengthened over the past decade» (Commissione Jo Cox, 2017, p. 90).

This is confirmed by a lot of evidence and all Roma and Sinti people living in Italy are well aware of it (Pasta & Vitale, 2017). Unfortunately, the number of negative facts that we could recall is huge and I will only mention some of the most recent. In Turin, in the night of May 7, 2018, a camper where a Roma family lived, was burned down for reasons which are still to be clarified. Some of the local residents were filming the event. Some of them were simply laughing while some others are reported to have said: «They should all have been burned». In Rome, two days later, Tobbias, a Romanian Roma who was playing his accordion on a tram was attacked by three people, forced out of the tram and beaten. Anti-gypsyism has become an everyday problem. In Milan a few weeks ago, while Madalina was walking her children to school, she was approached by a car. The driver lowered the car window and spat on the children. Moreover, a few days ago Iosif, 18 years old, did not dare to ask his employer for family allowances for his daughter because he was afraid to lose his job. He thought that his young age would reveal that he was a Roma.

Several surveys and studies confirm that anti-gypsyism is deeply rooted in the Italian society. The 2008 Eurobarometer survey showed that almost one EU citizen out of four declared that having a Roma neighbour would cause discomfort; in Italy this percentage rose to the 47% and only the 7%

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of Italians declared to be willing to have Roma friends. Those outcomes are also present in the Eurobarometer survey “Discrimination in the EU in 2012”, where, even if the 74% of the Italians believed Roma people were at risk of discrimination, only the 33% of them thought that the society could benefit from Roma integration. According to the 2015 Eurobarometer survey, the 43% of the Italians - against an European percentage of 20% - would feel uncomfortable if one of their colleagues were a Roma. The ISTAT 2011 survey shows how the 68% of respondents didn't want to have a Roma or Sinti as a neighbour. The Map of Intolerance of Vox showed that on Twitter the most used insult after “redneck” - a common insult related to people coming from southern Italy - was “gypsy”. A study published in 2015 by the Pew Research Center reported that 86% of the respondents in Italy held a negative opinion about Roma (61% about Muslims and 21% about Jews).

Although Italy is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of Roma and Sinti population¹, anti-gypsyism is higher than the European average. This difference does not depend on demographic factors, such as the actual number of the Roma population in this country, but on the inclusion policies adopted and on the opportunities of interaction and friendship between the Roma and the gadjo (Vitale & Caruso, 2011; Kende, Tropp & Lantos Nóra, 2017). What we need are de-segregation policies. It must also be emphasized the significant responsibility of media and politics.

The last ten years can be divided into two phases (Pasta, 2017a). From 2007 to 2011 five Italian Regions issued a Nomad Emergency Decree, which is a discriminatory measure also involving the fingerprinting of minors. This Decree was strongly criticized by the Jewish Community. The Emergency Decree was the consequence of a series of incidents emphasized by the media and exploited politically, such as the pogrom against a makeshift camp located at Opera, just outside Milan, sheltering 67 Roma, 37 of whom were minors or the violent mortal attack to Giovanna Reggiani in the outskirts of Rome by a Romanian man that lived in the slums but was not a Roma, or the pogrom of the Ponticelli camp, close to Naples, which was burned to the ground by people said to belong to the “Camorra”, the local mafia. The Emergency Decree includes the extra-judicial measures usually taken in the aftermath of calamities such as garbage emergency or earthquakes. This clearly shows what the Roma have been considered in the previous years : as a calamity².

At the end of 2011 the Emergency Decree was declared unlawful by the Council of State (No. 6050 as of November 11, 2011) and a few months later, at the instance of the European Commission, the new Italian Government adopted a National Inclusion Strategy which detailed the concrete policies and measures to be taken³. Regrettably, the Inclusion Strategy remains unapplied.

Regarding the perception of Roma by the Italian society, the Emergency Decree period has been characterized by a strong daily campaign by media on the “Roma question” with the purpose to criminalize the Roma and make them a target for hostile feelings.

Over the last years the Roma topic has been less debated, mainly because other irregular migrants have become a new target. However, this does not mean that anti-gypsyism has diminished. We can only say anti-gypsyism has become socially acceptable and this has now become part of our system of values.

We could even say that anti-gypsyism has become “standardised”, meaning that it has been minced and widespread, becoming ever more pervasive and omnipresent. The current situation is well represented by an episode happened in February 2017, which had a wide media echo: two

¹ There are no accurate data on the current number of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC) in Italy, but the European Commission estimates the number of 110,000 to 180,000 individuals, which represents around 0.23 to 0.25 per cent of the total population (Vitale, 2010).

² See: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/questioni-aperte/identita-e-cittadinanza/una-minoranza-italiana.php>.

³ Italian version: UNAR, *Strategia Nazionale d'Inclusione dei Rom, dei Sinti, e dei Caminanti 2012/2020. Attuazione Comunicazione Commissione Europea n. 173/2011*, Roma: 2012; English version: UNAR, *National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Communities. European Commission Communication No. 173/2011*, Roma: 2012.

employees of a supermarket in Follonica, near Grosseto, locked two Roma women in a trash bin, after having surprised them while rummaging. The video⁴, which became viral on YouTube and Facebook, shows the two employees laughing and insulting the two women. When the aggressors were fired, the Mayor of the city expressed his regret and the secretary of Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, offered them legal support and launched a boycott campaign against the supermarket. Not only locking, insulting, and frightening these women has been viewed as normal but the two people involved had no problem boasting about this with their friends online.

Besides the socio-historical problems, the primary cause of anti-gypsyism is the so called “paradox of visibility” a concept based on gender-related prejudices that, along with van Baar and Vermeersch, could be defined as “a-visibility” (Van Baar & Vermeersch, 2017). Roma people are highly visible in public debate, but in fact they are always judged only on the basis of stereotypes and prejudice and never seen as individuals.

For instance, no mention is ever made of the dynamic nature of the Roma’s identity or of the process of gradual transformation resulting from their secular interaction with majority society. Thinking of “the Roma” as objects and not individuals will only lead to their being trapped in the cage of an immutable culture.

Here is the paradox: we talk a lot about Roma and quite a lot of money is spent at the public level, but this does not seem to be sufficient to develop an appropriate policy that would provide opportunities for interaction and the possibility to get to know each other better. Contacts with Roma individuals are considered disreputable and the majority of people can happily do without. Moreover, political authorities and media continue to promote stereotypes about the Roma, strengthening the negative aspects and regarding them as a threat to the population. This attitude could be defined as a form of “organized ignorance”. The most impressive example is the absence from history books and collective consciousness of any mention to the genocide of Roma and Sinti. The term “Porrajmos” remains completely unknown, just like the name of the main concentration camps for Roma and Sinti in Italy. In this respect it is worth mentioning a multimedia guidebook, “Giving memory a future”, published some years ago by the Catholic University (Center for Research on Intercultural Relations) together with the Institute USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education and financed by IHRA, which builds memory links between past and present (Italian version: www.romsintimemory.it English version: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/>).

Media play a significant role in the criminalization of Roma. We are living in a post-truth era, namely a situation in which people are more likely to accept a statement based on their emotions rather than one based on facts. Anti-gypsyism is both a cause and a consequence of this concept.

Furthermore Web and social networks have been a crucial tool for the diversification and spreading of racist messages (Pasta, 2017b, 2018a). Traditional media maintain their influence, but local political actors, local news websites, self-produced “unofficial information” blogs, Facebook groups and even private pages on social networks are largely contributing to the spread of anti-Roma speeches. This has three main dangerous consequences and is a powerful hindering factor in preventing Roma inclusion: a) it has a direct impact in terms of daily discrimination on the lives of those targeted; b) it acts as a powerful deterrent for the administrators in charge to design and implement inclusion policies addressing Roma and Sinti; c) it gradually allows explicit racist rhetoric against Roma and Sinti, which is likely to be easily accepted by public opinion, paving the way to occasional violent drifts⁵.

⁴ The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iToARdN23go>; “Follonica, licenziati i dipendenti che imprigionarono le rom. Salvini: ‘Boicottate la Lidl’”, in *la Repubblica*, 29 aprile 2017. See also: Dotti, 2017.

⁵ Associazione 21 Luglio, *Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women at its 67th session - 03 July – 23 July 2017*, available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/ITA/INT_CEDAW_NGO_ITA_27946_E.pdf.

Besides stereotypes, media and websites are offering an ideal platform to spread hate speech, which is intended to be contagious. For example on March 2, 2015, during the television broadcast *Piazza Pulita* (which was attended by the Roma activist Dijana Pavlovic), the MEP Gianluca Buonanno accused the Roma people of being «the scum of humankind», making the word “scum” a trend topic of hate speech in social networks. The incident was followed by two legal procedures, but these violations to civil rights are seldom penalized (Naletto, 2017).

As for the press, there are a number of “pilot” procedures for anti-gypsyism opened by some professional associations. In 2016 the Professional Journalism Association of Lombardy sanctioned the editor of the daily newspaper *Libero*, Maurizio Belpietro, and the columnist Mario Giordana, director of the TV news bulletin *Tg4*, for an article criminalizing Roma people⁶. However this is an isolated case. In general, professional associations tend to avoid direct involvement.

The “Association Carta di Roma”⁷, which was created to monitor the implementation of the Code of Ethics for Professional Journalists, has frequently denounced similar situations. This occurred, for example, given the debate which followed a radio programme called *La Zanzara*. I was personally involved in this case⁸. *La Zanzara* is a mainstream broadcast by *Radio 24*, which is owned by the General Confederation of Italian Industry. The programme included a discussion about the Roma. Some of the participants in the debate, whose views were already known to the radio host, had envisaged «the total extermination of gypsies, women, men and children». Another listener had suggested to make animal food out of the gypsies, adding: «Gypsies should be enclosed in a concentration camp where they should be put in garbage trucks. Gypsies would be loaded from the front and exit at the rear as pig meal». This was followed by another listener who quoted *Mein Kampf*. The comment of the radio host was that «people can say whatever they think».

At this point I wrote an article on the *Famiglia Cristiana* magazine criticising the choice of the *Zanzara* colleagues to give space to this type of nonsense⁹. *La Zanzara*, which is one of the most popular radio programmes in Italy, reacted by insulting me gravely and launched a campaign against *Famiglia Cristiana*, encouraging the audience to phone the magazine to insult it. Some of these calls were broadcasted live on the radio for a week.

References to genocide are borderline cases but, unfortunately, they are rather frequent. However, in general, the stereotypes reported by media tend to confirm the sense of estrangement towards Roma, without ever mentioning that half of the Roma and Sinti population is Italian. With a few exceptions, the diversity of the different Roma and Sinti communities living in Italy is seldom addressed by media who, all too often, portray a negative image¹⁰.

Roma people are described to have “totally different values”, “an uncivilized way of living”, and are accused “not to care enough even about their children”. Many stereotypes emphasize their opportunistic behaviour, their deformed bodies, their negative attitude towards the minors who are neglected and ill-treated, the Roma have no sense of economy and throw money away, they steal, they are dirty, kidnap children, refuse to integrate, are lazy, indolent and unable to take serious commitments. A new stereotype has emerged in the past decade: the Roma are viewed as a privileged community receiving more resources than regular citizens. But stereotypes are not always negative. There is also a romantic image of gypsies who have long been portrayed among the most exotic peoples.

⁶ Stefano Pasta, “L’Ordine dei Giornalisti condanna Belpietro e Giordano: intento xenofobo e razzista”, in *Famiglia Cristiana.it*, 20 maggio 2016, <http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/l-ordine-dei-giornalisti-condanna-belpietro-e-giordano-intento-xenofobo-e-razzista.aspx>.

⁷ www.cartadiroma.org.

⁸ See also: Associazione Carta di Roma, 2014, pp. 6-7.

⁹ Stefano Pasta, “Zanzara shock: ‘Fare dei rom cibo per maiali’”, in *Famiglia Cristiana.it*, 21 novembre 2014, <http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/alla-zanzara-fare-dei-rom-cibo-per-maiali.aspx>.

¹⁰ See also: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/questioni-aperte/interculturale/agli-occhi-degli-altri.php>.

One of the most significant ambivalent stereotypes is associated with nomadism. The label of “nomads” is employed instrumentally to frame them as outcasts and is used by institutions to support anti-gypsyism: the message is «if they are not willing to integrate, it’s their own fault» (Pasta, 2018b).

In Milan, between 2008 and 2011, more than 500 camps were evacuated. This operation was accompanied by a strong anti-gypsy rhetoric. As an example, when the excavators started destroying the camp and people were forced from their homes, somebody said: «Aren’t they nomads ? So let them move round!».

Thus Cristina, a Romanian Roma, who migrated for economic reasons, at the age of 10 has been evacuated ten times in a year, while her cousin Samuel has changed eight schools in three years. They were not nomads from a cultural point of view but they did become nomads given the continuous evacuations. Media stereotypes argue that all Roma and Sinti live in camps, campers and slums. In reality, at least two thirds of the Roma people in Italy live in regular houses and apartments, but this reality is not accepted by the majority of Italians¹¹.

Many other prejudices have proved groundless, in particular regarding children kidnapping by Roma people. In this respect it must be said that the University of Verona made a research which found out that in 40 cases of kidnappings labelled as “Roma” not a single one was committed by a person of Roma origin.

Moreover, it is not correct to say that all Roma are poor. It is true that their conditions of life are sometimes truly dramatic, mainly due to discrimination and marginalization. I would like to recall the children who were killed when a candle, left burning to keep mice away, caught fire. However it must be said that in Italy there is a number of Roma and Sinti that are famous football players, university professors and entrepreneurs in the fields of entertainment, horse meat and safety services. This is rarely mentioned by media while great attention is given to stereotypes which are more likely to become embedded in the collective consciousness of the civil society.

Here is another example regarding the Roma being considered thieves. Last October, the European Parliament approved the motion 2017/2038 “On fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration: fighting anti-gypsyism”, in which the States are asked to «set up, within the Police forces, units educated to combat anti-gypsyism» and «encourage the recruitment of Roma people within the Police forces»¹². I wish to point out the reaction of Consap - one of the main Italian police unions - that defined the recommendation as «a delirious priority». The statement quotes: «The concept of Roma integration is a contradiction, as their culture has always been to live on the margins of society to boost their parasitism. Using a Disney metaphor, it would be like asking the Beagle Boys to protect Scrooge McDuck’s money bin»¹³.

We are well aware that such statements may become hate crimes. The Association 21 July has registered 25 hate crimes towards Roma in 2015-16¹⁴ (*Associazione 21 Luglio, 2017*). For example: on April 25, 2016, two members of the Lega Nord of Milan, on the occasion of the Liberation Day¹⁵, devastated the houses of the Italian Roma camp in Via Idro – which had been closed the previous month by the Municipality – using hammers to break down the walls, throwing stones and spreading the facts through the social networks¹⁶; on the third of April 2016, after the end of a football match, a group of hooligans attempted to attack a spontaneous Roma settlement nearby.

¹¹ See also: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/conosciamo-i-roma-e-i-sinti/chi-sono/da-dove-vengono-il-nome.php>.

¹² www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A8-2017-0294+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN.

¹³ Press release Consap available at: <https://st.ilfattoquotidiano.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Comunicato-stampa-Rom-in-Polizia-1-1.doc>.

¹⁴ 21 Luglio Association, *Submission on hate crime cases to Osce-Odihr*, Roma: 2017. Hate crimes have not always been punished or condemned.

¹⁵ It remembers the defeat of the fascist regime and the end of the II World War in Italy.

¹⁶ http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/04/25/foto/milano_via_idro-138421765/1/#1.

The inhabitants were protected by the police. On April 28, 2016, in Rome, during the night, three paper bombs targeted a spontaneous Roma settlement in the north of the town, the attackers fled the scene in a car. In general – although rarely – there are investigations that recognize the racist motivation as an aggravating factor, but it is difficult to get convictions and investigations are often filed. For instance, going back to the camp of Via Idro, the case was followed by: a) a report to UNAR¹⁷ made by a citizen; b) the lawsuit against the perpetrators by some inhabitants of the camp, presented to the local Police; c) the complaint, presented to the Public Prosecutor, by three representatives of pro-Roma associations. After two years, nothing has happened as yet.

The main problem is often the way media and politics handle social problems arising from difficult contexts. This introduces another issue which is common to proscription procedures, namely the assertion that gypsies fully deserve what they are suffering. This is not only dangerous for our society, but it might cause an increase in crime rates rather than solve the problem.

Ethnic issues are wrongly viewed as a social problem. I am referring once again to the stereotypes that portray Roma as thieves and to the social deviation experienced by young people living in the camps or in the slums. These issues are real but are linked to the social conditions and the discrimination suffered by the Roma rather than to cultural matters¹⁸.

It must not be forgotten that in the fifties the Swiss Juvenile Court Judges started a debate on the grounds that too many Italian minors were involved in penal procedures. At that time the Swiss wondered whether there could be an Italian cultural propensity to theft, an idea strengthened by many other European studies. The debate slowly died down when Italian migrants started opening pizzerias and ice-cream shops, and the Juvenile Court began dealing with new migrants.

There is loud-voiced rejection of the Roma and Sinti. It is said all too often that they are «Born for theft» as written years ago in the headlines of *Panorama*, one of the major Italian magazine¹⁹.

Yet very little is done to address this problem. For example: the data coming from the Ministry for Justice prove that the percentage of Roma minors reported to social services is higher than other ethnic groups but the percentage of young Roma actually helped by the social services is significantly lower²⁰.

In conclusion, I can't stress enough how important it is for our country to acquire the tools to continuously monitor and contain anti-gypsyism or any other form of racism. To this end, periodically repeated surveys are needed, with indicators similar to the ones adopted in France and the involvement of the National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) is essential.

Liliana Segre, an Italian senator who survived the Shoah, suggested to set up a committee addressing and supervising cases of racism, intolerance, instigation to social hatred and discrimination. This seems particularly important regarding the Roma population, if we want to build a society where both media and collective consciousness will be able to overcome antigypsy feelings, prejudice, discrimination and racial targeting. History is teaching us how dangerous all of this is.

¹⁷ UNAR is the Italian Office against Racial Discrimination.

¹⁸ ¹⁸ Pasta, Stefano, *L'inclusione delle politiche per i rom: una novità ancora da assimilare*, in «*Aggiornamenti Sociali*» 11/2017, pp. 739-748.

¹⁹ See: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/questioni-aperte/intercultura/agli-occhi-degli-altri.php>.

²⁰ For example, according to the data provided by the Ministry of Justice about the year 2006, out of 19.920 minors 2.424 Italian and foreign Roma were referred to the Offices of Minors social services, that is to say 12% of the minors referred, whereas 67% are Italian not Roma and 20% foreigners not Roma. However the Roma minors have a particularity: of those referred only 37% are taken in charge by the services (which then start a project for re-education and social reintegration), against the 54% of the foreigners and 74% of the Italians referred.

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