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European media and anti-Gypsy stereotypes

Strasbourg, 07/07/2011 - Anti-Gypsy stereotypes continue to be spread and perpetuated in a several media across Europe. The media has an important role to play in countering prejudices – but a number of journals and broadcast media have not lived up to their responsibility when it comes to Roma and Travellers. They have contributed to xenophobia through biased reporting and cheap sensationalism, says Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, in his latest [Human Rights Comment](#) published today. It is time to promote ethical journalism and codes of conduct to end the all-negative portrayal of Roma in the media.

Awareness of Roma culture or of the challenges Roma face in societies across Europe is sadly limited. Many Roma, who are the largest ethnic minority in Europe, live in conditions of extreme marginalisation, often victims of racism and discrimination. They have virtually no political representation. The fact that Roma and Travellers are entitled to enjoy the same human rights as others is often forgotten.

Anti-Gypsyism is exploited by extremist groups in several European countries and the media sometimes contribute to this dangerous trend. The consequences can be fatal. For example, the cold-blooded murder of six Roma, including a 5-year-old child, in Hungary in 2008/9 was committed in an atmosphere fuelled by hate speech.

Anti-Roma rhetoric across Europe

Even media reporting which does not include outright hate speech can perpetuate stereotypes by, for example, only reporting on Roma and Travellers in the context of social problems and crime, promoting stereotypes such as that of the Roma as living perpetually outside the law, or describing the Roma as responsible for their own exclusion, because they have chosen to be different.

Systematic [monitoring of Romanian media](#) shows that it is the media which often instigate witch hunts against Roma. Another example comes from Bulgaria where hate-filled articles comparing the Roma to “cattle”, “sheep” and “wolves” have been published.

A third example is Italy, where the virulent anti-Roma language and negative stereotypes used by the media have provided a constant back drop to, and supported popular acceptance of, the intensified evictions and expulsions of the last few years.

Ethics and codes of conduct

It is a basic ethical principle that a whole group should not be blamed for what some of its members might have done. The widespread stigmatising of all Roma – the overwhelming majority of whom are not in conflict with the law – shows a great need for self-regulation and ethical journalism. Training for journalists, for example as provided by the Council of Europe [Dosta! Campaign](#), can help to improve reporting.

There are several [media outlets that serve the Roma community](#), and there are Networks for Roma journalists who want to empower each other. But there are few Roma who work within or are consulted by mainstream media, which leaves the Roma perspective unknown to the majority. Through so called Twinning Projects of the European Commission more Roma journalists can find their way into mainstream media, and non-Roma journalists can

build contacts in the Roma communities so that instead of only seeking problems they are better equipped to find explanations and solutions.

The way forward

Media has great power in shaping our image of the world – and with that comes great responsibility. Today the media too often fail to live up to this responsibility.

Spreading anti-Roma prejudices contributes to perpetuating the social exclusion of Roma and Travellers and becomes a major obstacle to the enjoyment of their human rights. Though reporters and editors should not be megaphones for particular interests, they can contribute to a fairer society through genuine professionalism.

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The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent, non-judicial institution within the Council of Europe, mandated to promote awareness of, and respect for, human rights in the 47 member states of the Organisation. Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the present Commissioner, Mr Thomas Hammarberg, took up his function on 1 April 2006