

How public policy and public discourse influences the media image of Roma



The Roma Press Centre (RPC) is an independent news agency founded in 1996 in Hungary.

Its main activities are: journalism, training of young Roma journalists, media monitoring, contributing to radio and TV productions, book publishing, preparation of media researches and civil rights activity. During its existence the Roma Press Centre has published over 4,000 Roma-related news 80% of which were printed in national daily newspapers, and 100% published on the Internet. The digital archive of the RPC contains 4,000 photos and 600 oral histories.

With our materials published in the printed and online press, we have intended to contribute to a more balanced and accurate media representation of the Roma community, to help the transmission of a more realistic Roma image through the media.

Last years in Hungary significant changes could be seen regarding both of tolerance and national frustration, which has been growing significantly. At the same time the prejudice and hate against Roma has been rising and becoming more direct.

The cause of these changes can be explained by

- increasing social distances and strengthening segregation;
- the middle class's concerns on their risk of poverty and
- the more effective communication of far-right political groups gaining ground.

However there are other explanations as well. The Roma civil rights movement as well as Roma NGO's has been almost disappeared in Hungary.

The previous achievements have been vanished; the ordinary racism as well as the ordinary discrimination in the press has been left. Incidents poisoning the life of Roma students, job-seekers and costumers have not already been mentioned.

There are almost no cases in which Roma are damaged. It is incredible that these cases could be disappeared by magic. Hence the question is that why the media is not able to find these stories or why they don't think that it would be important to publish such cases.

Some certain cultural taboos also were broken. Politicians as well as the media are using such terms on Roma which were unimaginable few years ago.

Words and topics (as criminality, fertility, parasitism) used typically by the far-right have become the part of the daily communication and mainstreamed to the public communication. What was previously heard only in far-right forums or demonstrations those are discussed today in the parliamentary public. All of the mentioned facts have basically influence the media as well.

The far-right dialogue is dangerous not only because it stigmatizes and provides simple, vulgar explanations and solutions with its aggressive mode but mainly because it makes presentable the similarly simple but encoded explanations which are also based on prejudices and stereotypes.

Beside the rhetoric of the far-right, the governmental measures and communication have also significant influences to the media image of Roma and during last political

cycles regardless of the political side these have focused basically to criminal aspects.

Comparing with the last years the most conspicuous change is that those NGOs which had significant influence to the media image of Roma, the Roma human rights organisations have been disappeared.

Before our current research we had three others, one in 2003, one in 2000, and one in 1997. Now we examined 11 media organisations including 2 national daily newspapers, 2 online presses, 2 county daily newspapers, 1 sensationalist newspaper and 4 TV channels and we were interested in how Roma are represented in them. Henceforward I would speak about the most important context of our research which is still uncompleted.

During the examined half year period mainly two topics on Roma were appeared in the press: the political conception of the majority regarding Roma (e.g. the governmental measures) and criminality. Frequency of both topics was twice than in previous years.

Of course it doesn't mean that only these cases happened – several surveys showed this kind of distortion of the media. The thing is that **the media was more rarely dealing with news in which the victims were Roma. Therefore less people was informed on them, in spite of the fact that such incidents more often happened.**

This tendency itself rather shows that the relationship between Roma and non Roma getting worse than the changes in behaviour of the media.

There are always such crimes in which Roma are implicated and which get loud media response, while other issues (like the situation of Roma in education and labour market or their health status) cannot become the focus of media attention. The press functions in this way.

It speaks for itself which news was thought extremely important by the different media organisations: **some of them (e.g. Népszabadság) showed on the same weight that news where Roma were victims like the news where Roma were offenders; while others (e.g. Magyar Nemzet) published articles two times more often on Roma offenders than Roma victims.**

Some media organisations (MN, online press) are further increasing the differences with the introduction of Roma people without any concrete designation and speaking on 'Roma criminality' in a general way. This language is based on stereotypes being rooted on racial prejudice and usually used by the far-right.

This difference of media organisations is deepening if we examine whether the prejudice or discrimination of Roma is mentioned in the articles. While the left wing newspaper (Népszabadság) and one of the biggest online press centre (Origo) mention prejudice or discrimination in 42% of their articles, the conservative newspaper being close to the Government (Magyar Nemzet) neglects this issue: totally 5 articles mentioned this symptom. The question is that if we can speak on objective preparation of news and not taking into consideration the attitudes as well their importance of the majority.

The topic of education was seemed to have the same weight during last years but it also decreased for 2011. Why we say this? The reason is that more than one third of articles on education were published in one newspaper namely in Népszabadság. This is the only press taking this issue on board; one of the most serious and deepening educational disadvantages of Roma which is the obstacle of the future consolidation and social inclusion. Other newspapers are dealing with this question only in some articles.

The employment, labor market has never been the focus of the media coverage of Roma, despite the fact, what we all know that behind the high unemployment rates is in fact there is a significant work performance. Majority of Roma finds just illegal job on the black market.

The press, however reinforces the image, which is set also by the government: Roma do not work, idly waiting for the social benefits and abuse the state social protection net, so work should be the condition to relief, and the unmotivated Roma community has to be forced to work.

There are two themes, of which the weight has been downsized since 2000: **poverty and human rights enforcement**. This is consistent with the attitudes of the majority, as well as the government's narrative: the Roma themselves are responsible for the situation.

Particularly important is the less attention paid to the human rights and the law enforcement is general, especially when severe violations of the human rights of Roma were at the forefront of media. Some examples: trial of serial murders of Roma or marching of the extreme right-wing paramilitary groups. The obvious reason is that activities of the Roma civil rights organizations are drastically narrowed in recent years, many of them completely ceased their activities. Approaches, represented by these organizations - minority rights, human rights, non-discrimination – have been shown by less weight than ever in the media despite the fact that compared to previous years would have been much more reasons for them.

There are massive differences in the appearances between Roma and majority actors in the media, which is pretty well reflects the hierarchy between the two social groups. The study included only Roma-related news. While the 'Hungarians' predominantly appeared in decision-maker roles - politicians, public service workers, lawyers - Roma has been dominantly presented as simple common man (child, man in the street, complaining housewife).

Roma experts or decision-maker hardly appear in the media: expert are invited only from the majority population, while we know that Roma experts exist, and the list of Roma experts in various fields are available in all the editorials, or they can ask us to send some...

Fortunately the tendency is suppressed, when Roma are presented as homogeneous mass, and they have spoken about the Roma in general. Obviously, it is much easier to perceive individuals, then the "generalized" picture about the community, which can contribute to stereotyping. In this area we have experienced very positive development in the media: half of Roma in the media were presented by his name. There are few, only 7% of those who were shown as a person without name and a further 9% appeared on the family level, which is still a representation level allowing empathy. Only 14% of the presentations are shown the Roma in general, without any specification (the 'Hungarian Roma', 'Gypsy', 'Roma issues', 'Gypsy crime'). This result is compared to the previous research is good news, since in 1997, the majority of presentations (60%) have been talking in general, without all specifications.

Concerning categorization, however, significant differences can be seen in different media products. Government-friendly and conservative media rarely give much room for personal appearance of the Gypsies, compared to the tabloids, or the political opposition media. The right-wing media are often show highly impersonal picture about the Roma, without asking them or even relying to their opinion. Such presentations is much lower in the 'left' and popular media coverage (NSZabi 28% RTLklub 12%, TV2 News, 25%, Blikk 14%).

About half of the Roma interviewed will appear as Roma (because they are Roma), but the other half has a different role – so this is irrespective of Roma identity. This is very important,

as the “cross-cutting categorization” (well-known term in social psychology, when a visible minority group members appear in the media independently of their ethnic attributes) is a very important ground for breaking stereotypical thinking patterns.

Roma most often (in about half of the coverage) are interviewed in questions related to minority self-government, or education, but in relation to conflicts or Roma policies only in one fourth of the articles Roma are interviewed. Only the popular media and talent-shows could offer different role for Roma. The Roma-related initiatives of the general policies, the law enforcement, local conflicts, the prejudice, the EU Presidency, and crime are the most relevant issues, where Roma most often shown (roughly half of the articles) in impersonal way, speaking generally, without asking Roma people.