

# HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMA

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## Report: Hate Speech and discrimination against Roma

**Aim:** This report aims to raise awareness towards the ethnic group of Roma that is threatened with hate speech and violence over history and in current affairs in the pandemic. It covers the historical context of the issue of discrimination against Roma, the new relevance through the increase of online hate speech through social media, as well as the latest happenings and accusations against Roma people in the Covid-19 pandemic. The issue is especially European, thus the focus of this report will be on hate speech against Roma in Europe.

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## 1) History of discrimination against Roma



Romani flag created in 1933 and accepted at the 1971 World Romani Congress.

Roma people have lived in Europe since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, their discrimination has sadly an equally long tradition throughout history, having its cruel peak in the Roma Genocide made by the German Nazis throughout World War II. There is still no accurate data accessible for how many Roma were victims of the Nazis and exposed to their inhumane methods. Whereas the Jewish Holocaust was processed and many people are aware of it, the genocide of the Roma people stays most of the time in the background. It is estimated that 25% of the Roma people were murdered, which is considered to be between 200.000 and 500.000 people. Under them were around 3.000 Roma children alone who were killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz II<sup>1</sup>. The Roma Genocide Remembrance Day on August 2 focuses on remembering the mass extermination of Roma people in the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau<sup>2</sup>. However, the suffering of Roma communities did not end with the defeating of the Nazis. But firstly, this report is looking at the efforts made by Roma communities to unify and raise awareness of

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2020), "Roma still victims of hate crimes, decades after mass killings, says UN expert", <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/roma-still-victims-hate-crimes-decades-after-mass-killings-says-un-expert>, published on 30/07/2020.

<sup>2</sup> <http://blog.nohatespeechmovement.org/2-august-roma-genocide-remembrance-initiative/>, last accessed on 09/04/2021.

their issue. In 1971, the first World Roma Congress was held near to London. It was seen as a push for unity and for a common ethnic identity of the Roma people. The goals were to improve civil rights as well as the access to education, the preservation of Roma culture, and the recognition as an Indian national minority, since the Roma are of Indian native origin<sup>3</sup>. This year, we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first World Roma Congress and take it as an occasion to raise awareness of the historical suffering and the new issues the Roma face through social media and the pandemic. Following the introduction of the World Roma Congress, the first International Roma Day was invented in 1990 as a special day in the year to celebrate the culture of Roma and to continue the fight against discrimination Roma people are facing<sup>4</sup>.

Going back to the history of discrimination against the Roma people, the breakdown of the Cold War and the fall of communism created a new struggling time for Roma. The transition towards democracy and a capitalist system was followed by the rise of ethnic awareness and nationalist thoughts. Roma and Sinti were claimed as scapegoats and were excluded in nationalist agendas. The bitter consequences were the losses of their livelihoods. Additionally, the early 1990s were marked by hate crimes against Roma and Sinti in the East-European countries. However, they could not find safe refuge in Western countries, since they were also met with discrimination and violent acts against them there<sup>5</sup>. Sadly, that situation did not improve for the Roma people over the years. It even changed to a more organized use of hate speech through the establishment of extreme right movements and parties. Therefore, discrimination increased in various European countries. There was little progress since the 1990s to protect the Roma community more, sometimes it even went backwards. Although international human rights prohibit any form of racial discrimination, it is the most common type of human rights violation against Roma people<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, for a long time over several decades, there were no efforts made to eliminate discrimination and hate speech against Roma. Instead, a long time of suffering is part of the Roma history. Only in the early 2000s, the first efforts were made to address and acknowledge the problem. However, Roma face almost no representation in political or administrative functions, thus, making it even harder to fight

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<sup>3</sup> Pandea, Ruxandra (2014), "2 August – Roma Genocide Remembrance Initiative", 30 July 2014, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1089232>, last accessed on 09/04/2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Mirga, Andrzej (2009), "The Extreme Right and Roma and Sinti in Europe: A New Phase in the Use of Hate Speech and Violence?", Roma Rights Journal, Vol. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International (2010), "Left out – Violations of the rights of Roma in Europe", AI Index: EUR 01/021/2010, London: Amnesty International Publications, 5–6.

against structural discrimination<sup>7</sup>. In general, Roma people are exposed over the years to discrimination at the housing market, the access to education and healthcare, finding a job, and law enforcement<sup>8</sup>. The last point includes the spread of disproportionate use of violence against Roma across Europe<sup>9</sup>. Already in 2013, a research paper was telling about the struggle to implement actually working laws against hate speech in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, European Union survey found out in 2016 that around 80% of Roma have to live below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold in their respective country. Furthermore, one third of Roma live without the access to tap water and often they face hunger. Regarding education, the survey stated that half of Roma children do not go to school<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, not much is done in the fight against discrimination and the protection of Roma people from bad living circumstances. There is no policy that aims to end discrimination and promote inclusion for Roma specifically<sup>12</sup>.

## 2) Relevance: New issue through social media



<sup>7</sup> Renzi, Laura (2010), "Roma People in Europe: A Long History of Discrimination", Amnesty International Italy, Social Watch, 40-43.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenfield, Erica (2018), "Combating Discrimination against the Roma in Europe: Why Current Strategies Aren't Working and What Can Be Done".

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Belavusau, U. (2013), "Anti-Roma Hate Speech in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland", in: Goodwin, M. & De Hert, P. (Eds.), *European Roma Integration Efforts – A Snapshot* (pp. 141-181), Brussels University Press.

<sup>11</sup> European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights, "Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Roma – Selected findings", 29 November 2016, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey-roma-selected-findings>.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenfield, Erica (2018), "Combating Discrimination against the Roma in Europe: Why Current Strategies Aren't Working and What Can Be Done"; Renzi, Laura (2010), "Roma People in Europe: A Long History of Discrimination", Amnesty International Italy, Social Watch, 40-43.

Photo by promesaartstudio/Adobe Stock, Source: <https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/linking-hate-speech-online-and-hate-crime.html>, last accessed 22/04/2021.

The upcoming of new technologies and the age of digitalization did not only bring advantages like a better and easier connection worldwide. On the contrary, a lot of minority and marginalized groups suffer from hate speech and other forms of discrimination that got a new platform with the uprising of social media. That is because in virtual settings, people can connect to other people who are thinking likewise easier and are more open to share their views than in an offline setting<sup>13</sup>. Thus, a network or so-called bubble can be created where no exchange with other opinions or fact checking takes place. Within these bubbles, hate speech can be created or reproduced. A narrative between ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ or ‘the others’ outside of the bubble can lead to a polarization. Victims from this polarization are much of the time ethnic minorities, like Roma. As Roma are the biggest ethnic minority group in Europe<sup>14</sup>, they are often a target of online discrimination. Scholars explain how social media platforms make the phenomenon of discrimination even more complex through the encouragement on the various websites to share thoughts and connect with like-minded people<sup>15</sup>.

Roma communities are often affected by online hate speech. Negative stereotypes, they encounter not only online but also through main media, are the presumption that Roma people are criminal, lazy, immoral, illiterate, and resist themselves to integrate in the various societies<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, it is assumed that Roma people voluntarily choose to live from the state on social benefits<sup>17</sup>. A report about 2020 of Fernand de Vareennes, who was appointed as UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues by the Human Rights Council in June 2017, was published this April, stating that online hate speech is a serious issue, Roma and Sinti are confronted with. It not only violated international human rights but can also produce physical violence against Roma and Sinti. The report even mentions that hate speech on social media of

<sup>13</sup> Rorke, Bernhard (2015), “FREE TO HATE? ANTI-GYPSYISM IN 21ST CENTURY EUROPE”, 21 December 2015, European Roma Rights Centre, <http://www.errc.org/news/free-to-hate-anti-gypsyism-in-21st-century-europe>, last accessed 23/04/2021.

<sup>14</sup> Mills, Yasmin (2019), “Roma people: 10 ways Europe’s biggest minority faces discrimination”, 8 April 2019, Reuters.com, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-roma-rights-idUSKCN1RK01Y>, last accessed 23/04/2021.

<sup>15</sup> Uzochukwu, C. E., & Okafor, E. G. (2019) “Social media, hate speech and conflict: Interplay of influences”, *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews*, 9(1), 144-158; Banks, J. (2010), “Regulating hate speech online”, *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 24(3), 233-239.

<sup>16</sup> Breazu, P., & Machin, D. (2019), “Racism toward the Roma through the affordances of Facebook: bonding, laughter and spite”, *Discourse & Society*, 30(4), 376-394; Catalano, T. (2018) “The use of zingari/ nomadi/ rom in Italian crime discourse”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 22(1), 123-142; Crețu, G. (2014) “Roma minority in Romania and its media representation”, *Sfera Politicii*, 22, 112-120.

<sup>17</sup> Stăiculescu, A. R., & Gherasim, M. (2013), “Roma representation in the media”, *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice*, 5, 947-955.



right extremist groups led to violence and murders in Europe in the last year. Furthermore, Varennes calls for strengthened measures to fight hate speech and discrimination against Roma and for an effective monitoring system of these measures<sup>18</sup>.

In Romania, where the largest population of Roma live<sup>19</sup>, the Roma communities are also greatly affected by hate speech. Discriminatory stereotypes are deeply embedded in the public imaginary of Romania. Accordingly, it is very hard to change and get rid of discrimination in the Romanian society<sup>20</sup>. Thus, Romania took some effort to undermine discrimination and passed a law specifically against anti-Roma hate speech in January 2021. The law states that anti-Roma behavior could be sentenced with up to ten years of prison, taking also online hate speech into account<sup>21</sup>. More awareness raising is also happening on international terrain. On 10th and 11th March 2021, there was an international conference about online hate speech against Roma, organized by the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAN). It said that Roma and Sinti are disproportionately affected by hate speech in Europe and the rest of the world, both in traditional media as well as online in social media. Therefore, Roma and Sinti are victimized through misinformation and the missing representation, as well as hateful and discriminatory discourses<sup>22</sup>.

Concluding, social media is besides media and societal racism an additional source of hate speech and discrimination against Roma people. Some efforts have been made, but the topic has to be taken more into public and political awareness to protect Roma people not just from online hate speech but also from its potential outcome of physical harm.

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<sup>18</sup> UN News (2021), "Hate speech and violence still rising against Roma despite recognition gains, says rights expert", 7 April 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1089232>, last accessed on 23/04/2021.

<sup>19</sup> Dunlop, T. (2018), "No homeland, no hope – Europe's Roma are back in the firing line" 25 June 2018, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/25/europe-roma-matteo-salvini-ethnic-minority>, last accessed 23/04/2021.

<sup>20</sup> Buturoiu, Dana R.; Corbu, Nicoleta (2020), "Exposure to Hate Speech in the Digital Age. Effects on Stereotypes About Roma People", Journal of Media Research, Vol 13, Issue 2(37), 5-26.

<sup>21</sup> Euronews (2021), "Romania to introduce law against anti-Roma hate speech", <https://www.euronews.com/2021/01/06/romania-to-introduce-law-against-anti-roma-hate-speech>, published on 06/01/2021.

<sup>22</sup> ERIAC (2021), "INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: "Hate speech and Antigypsyism in the Media", <https://eriac.org/international-conference-hate-speech-and-antigypsyism-in-the-media/>, last accessed on 09/04/2021.



### 3) Increasing of hate speech due to the pandemic



Source: <http://www.errc.org/press-releases/errc-releases-report-on-roma-rights-violations-during-lockdown-in-europe>, last accessed on 22/04/2021.

As the pandemic worsened human rights situations all over the world, going from several issues like the set back of women rights, the danger of increasing, undocumented home violence against children, the failure to provide protection to refugees and migrants or the focus of the media on the pandemic in general, leaving human rights issues behind. In this unpredictable setting with the spread of the virus that does not halt in front of borders and societal groups, especially minorities faced more vulnerability than they already did before. The challenges for Roma communities are more severe due to the pandemic. As it is still lasting on, Roma people are suffering from more exclusion in Europe due to the pandemic<sup>23</sup>. They already experienced marginalization before, in every living situation such as education, employment, or poor living

<sup>23</sup> European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights (2016, "Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Roma – Selected findings", 29 November 2016, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey-roma-selected-findings>).

conditions because of poverty<sup>24</sup>. The pandemic only increased these long-lasting disparities. Through movement restrictions in every country due to the fight against the virus, many Roma were not able to work. Moreover, working illegally lead to the restriction of social benefits<sup>25</sup>. Roma also faced a higher health risk through the virus, since living in substandard and overcrowded houses is common in Roma communities but extremely risky in times of a pandemic. Living in segregated areas without a good access to healthcare services leads them more vulnerable to Covid-19 as well<sup>26</sup>. Adding to this, the lack of internet access and technological advices disables Roma children to participate in online education<sup>27</sup>.

Connected to the previous issue of hate speech rising through social media, the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to this as well. The discrimination took new dimensions, in which Roma and Sinti were scapegoated for spreading the virus. The hate and intolerance did not only come from individual people but also from public authorities and was thus, even politicized. Even more shocking, they even experienced physical violence because of these false accusations<sup>28</sup>. In a monitoring report from the OSCE, carried out in eleven European countries, the increasing discrimination against Roma was examined. Hence, the hate speech against Roma increased in 2020 over 30% in media, especially in the beginning of the pandemic in March and April 2020. It also continued to play a big role during the whole year of 2020. Misinformation about Roma regarding their role in the pandemic was spread over the entire course of the pandemic<sup>29</sup>. Covid-19 was used as “a license to unleash racism against stigmatized groups”<sup>30</sup>. Roma were and still are faced with discrimination not only through right extremists but also through police abuses and Covid-19 restrictions for Roma from entering cities. This is a returning issue, since Roma communities were blamed throughout history for spreading diseases<sup>31</sup>. In an online conference with the topic “A Conversation about Roma Human Rights in Europe” at the

<sup>24</sup> EC, OSCE (2021), “Enable Roma communities to recover from the pandemic, say human rights heads”, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/enable-roma-communities-recover-pandemic-say-human-rights-heads>, published on 08/04/2021.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kühlbrandt, C.; Footman, K.; Rechel, B.; McKee, M. (2014) “An examination of Roma health insurance status in Central and Eastern Europe”, *European Journal of Public Health* 24(5): 707–712. DOI: 10.1093/eurpub/cku004.

<sup>27</sup> European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights (2016), “Coronavirus pandemic in the EU – impact on Roma and Travellers - Bulletin 5”, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/covid19-rights-impact-september-1>, published on 29/09/2020.

<sup>28</sup> UN News (2021), “Hate speech and violence still rising against Roma despite recognition gains, says rights expert”, 7 April 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1089232>, last accessed on 23/04/2021.

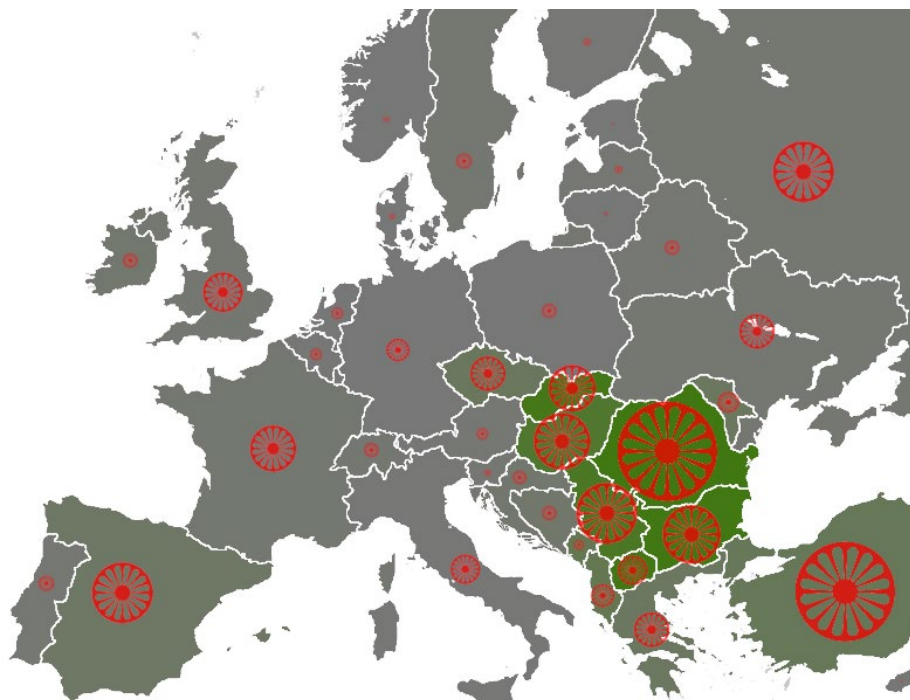
<sup>29</sup> OSCE (2020), “Roma and Sinti in the Media: 2020 Monitoring”, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/roma-sinti-monitoring-infographic>, published on 17/12/2020.

<sup>30</sup> Matache, Margareta & Bhabha, Jaqueline (2020), “Anti-Roma Racism is Spiraling during COVID-19 Pandemic”, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7348427/>, published in June 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Columbia University in New York on the International Roma day on April 8, 2021, the rise of discrimination against Roma was highlighted in the pandemic. It was claimed that in some places, discriminatory measures were imposed by the police because of assumptions that Roma would not stick to sanitary rules. The discrimination of Roma due to Covid-19 was called a “hunt of Roma people”<sup>32</sup>. The experts in this conference urged for justice and reconciliation and called the racist emergence in the pandemic as a pushback after successes which were already made to improve the situation of Roma people<sup>33</sup>. This pandemic led to the tremendous conclusion that Roma are still victims of racism and hate speech after decades of mass killings throughout history<sup>34</sup>.

#### 4) Roma in Europe



Distribution of the Romani people in Europe (2007 Council of Europe "average estimates", totalling 9.8 million). The size of the wheel symbols reflects absolute population size.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani\\_diaspora#cite\\_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_diaspora#cite_note-1), last accessed 22/04/2021.

As can be seen on the map, the biggest Roma communities live in Eastern Europe, led by Romania. Nevertheless, Roma people can be found in every European country. Thus, the topic of discrimination against Roma became also a subject in the affairs of the European Union. In

<sup>32</sup> The Harriman Institute at Columbia University (2021), “A Conversation about Roma Human Rights in Europe”, 8 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNs0FkqLGk>, last accessed on 09/04/2021.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> UNHCR (2020), “Roma still victims of hate crimes, decades after mass killings, says UN expert”, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/roma-still-victims-hate-crimes-decades-after-mass-killings-says-un-expert>, published on 30/07/2020.

March 2021, the European Council affirmed the fight of discrimination against Roma. It urged all the EU member states to take action to combat discrimination against Roma people and to work towards their inclusion in all important areas like employment, health, education and housing. Therefore, the European Council suggested that member states should adopt national strategies within their broader social policies to improve the situation of Roma communities in their countries. They are urged to communicate those strategies to the European Commission by September 2021<sup>35</sup>. Already in September 2020, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies with the aim to fight negative attitudes towards Roma people in Europe. It called for the combination of a rights-based approach with the socio-economic aspects to end discrimination against Roma and improve their living conditions. Furthermore, it called for equal participation of Roma people in decision-making processes. Accordingly, the European Commission should establish inclusive mechanisms to guarantee the participation of Roma<sup>36</sup>.

There is also the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) that was founded in 1996 with the aim to combat racism and human rights abuses against Roma through research and policy development, strategic litigation, human rights education and advocacy. It provides Roma people with tools to combat discrimination and work towards equal participation in justice, education, health care, housing and public services<sup>37</sup>. The ERRC releases reports regularly. Thus, a report over the situation of Roma in the pandemic was published as well, highlighting the devastating and vulnerable living conditions of Roma in times of a pandemic. The report called for the European states to act and provided recommendations, such as the suggestion for states to create post-pandemic recovery plans that take into account the rights and dignity of Roma in Europe<sup>38</sup>.

Ending, the situation of Roma in Europe and all over the world deserves and needs more awareness. Although progress was made in the last years, Roma people are still disproportionally affected by hate speech and discrimination and they suffer from bad living

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<sup>35</sup> European Council (2021), "Council reaffirms commitment to combat discrimination against Roma", <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/12/council-reaffirms-commitment-to-combat-discrimination-against-roma/>, published on 12/03/2021.

<sup>36</sup> European Parliament (2020), "European Parliament resolution of 17 September 2020 on the implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies: combating negative attitudes towards people with Romani background in Europe", 17 September 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0229\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0229_EN.html); last accessed on 22/04/2021.

<sup>37</sup> ERRC, [Overview - European Roma Rights Centre \(errc.org\)](https://errc.org/), last accessed on 23/04/2021.

<sup>38</sup> ERRC (2020), "ERRC RELEASES REPORT ON ROMA RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING LOCKDOWN IN EUROPE", 9 September 2020, [ERRC Releases Report on Roma Rights Violations During Lockdown in Europe - European Roma Rights Centre](https://errc.org/errc-releases-report-on-roma-rights-violations-during-lockdown-in-europe/), last accessed on 23/04/2021.

conditions. Especially with the rise of social media and the pandemic, this issue amplified again. However, Roma people have the right to live with dignity and without harassment such as all other people in the world. Thus, it is necessary to raise awareness, combat racism against Roma people and work on improving the living situation of Roma in general.

5)

**Concluding remarks:** The international community, especially the European, needs to give larger attention to the issue of discrimination against Roma. Particularly through the pandemic, hate speech and violence increased through false accusations and racist stereotypes. Social media platforms make it even easier to share and distribute such claims. Together, the increasing discrimination of Roma people through the pandemic and social media make it urgent to address the issue and find ways to protect and help Roma people.

**Proposal for affirmative action:**

- Monitoring & collecting more data about hate speech against Roma
- Raising awareness in a public discourse with condemning of discrimination, also in Social Media
- Supporting of victims & enable access to justice
- Implementation of institutional and policy frameworks in the EU to fight discrimination
- Addressing and fighting structural discrimination through improving the housing and employment situation, education, and health standards for Roma people
- Empowering the participation of Roma in all forms of political and societal environment

# HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMA



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