

Policy paper

NATIONAL ROMA COALITION IN SLOVAKIA



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In the context of the fight against antigypsyism, language and public discourse also need to be addressed. In this respect, it is necessary to look at linguistic manuals that still contain expressions that are not compatible with the language of the struggle against antigypsyism. Short Dictionary of the Slovak Language states the following:

gypsy(in the ethnic sense of Gypsy):

1. a member of a society. Gypsy: a. group of Indian origin living a sometimes still vagabond life, more recently Roma: Wallachian gypsies; a gypsy: black, tanned like a gypsy.
2. mn. gypsies vernacular. gypsy band
 - joke. The gypsies are winning in his belly, the nails are hammering in his belly from hunger; gypsy (in the ethnic sense of gypsy) f.;
 - gypsy adj. and adl.: c. language, gypsy. A camp; a gypsy band;
 - figurative. expressive: gypsy life wandering; gypsy blood restless, violent temper; gypsy roast meat roasted touchingly: to speak gypsy;
 - gypsy - diminutive. expr. (in the ethnic sense of Gypsy);
 - Gypsy, f. diminutive expressive (in the ethnic sense of Gypsy)

The historical origin of the word is related to the ethnic group and has a predominantly negative to pejorative meaning. Roma began to arrive in Europe from India as early as the late 11th century. The Roma themselves were incorrectly referred to by the indigenous population as Egyptians - Egypciens, short for Gypsies. However, the most common variant of the ethnic name used throughout Europe comes from the Greek Atsinganos, Atsinkanos, which was the vernacular version of the word Atinganoi, or Gypsies in Slovakia. The European population was initially lenient towards the Gypsy nomads, accepting them as the repentant Christian pilgrims they claimed to be. After 1427, when the Archbishop of Paris excommunicated them from the Church because of their unchristian behaviour, the attitude of the population towards them changed radically. In Western Europe, harsh anti-Roman legislation and persecution began to take effect. The Roma were branded as thieves, swindlers and sorcerers.





In Bohemia and throughout the Romano-German Empire, for example, there was considerable persecution of the Roma, culminating in the so-called General Patent of Emperor Charles VI of 1721, which ordered all Roma, including children, to be put to the sword or hanged from the gallows. The persecution of the Roma reached its greatest proportions during World War II and resulted in deportations to concentration camps. It was the Nazis who consistently used the term 'gypsy' because of the clearly negative connotations associated with it. It was not only because of the pejorative meaning of the word 'Gypsy' and the horrors of World War II that in 1971, Roma representatives from 14 countries at the First World Roma Congress called for the universal use of the term 'Roma' to refer to this ethnic group. In Slovakia, the Roma were recognised as a national minority in 1991, and the dictionary of the contemporary Slovak language should therefore also respond to these facts. The term Rom/Roma has replaced the widespread exoetonym Cigán/Cigáni, which is perceived by Roma as pejorative. During the 1990s, Roma in Slovakia experienced persecution by the skinhead movement, which in some cases led to brutal murders. An example is the first racial murder in the modern history of Slovakia in 1995 in Žiar nad Hronom, when eighteen-year-old Mário Goral died after a brutal attack by skinheads. Last but not least, we must mention the fact that, thanks to the policy of intolerance, a political party, the People's Party Our Slovakia, has entered the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the chairman of which, Marián Kotleba, has been legally convicted of promoting neo-Nazism, and a former member, Milan Mazurek, who is today the founder of the Republika party, has been convicted of making racist statements about the Roma.

In connection with the above, we would like to refer to the definition of anti-Roma racism, which is part of the Concept for Combating Radicalisation and Extremism until 2024 and the Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma until 2030. Anti-Roma racism is defined as a type of racist classification of Roma, through which they are stigmatised as 'gypsies', in order to construct a false 'justification' and 'legitimisation' for the dehumanisation of Roma, their discrimination, exploitation and the possibility of perpetrating violence against them.

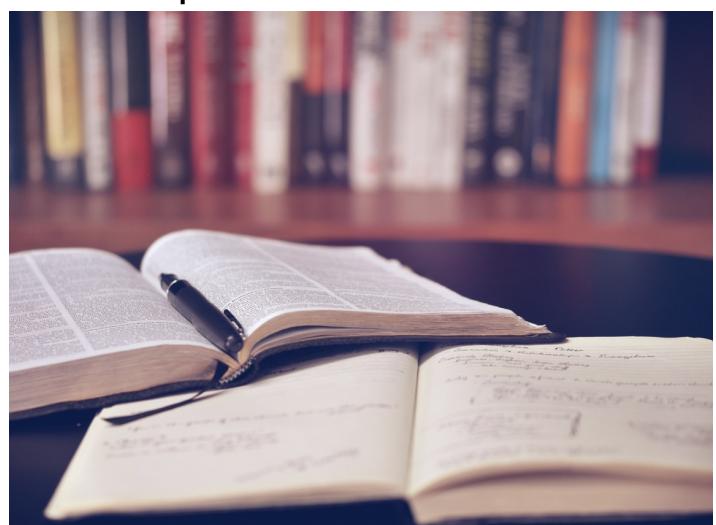


Anti-Roma racism creates non-existent, misleading and negative "descriptions", "qualities" and "characteristics" (the so-called "profile") of the "Gypsy/Gypsy", the basis of which:

1. a supposedly "common form" of physical appearance;
2. are homogenizing ageneralizing social, mental and character "traits" (antisociality, criminality, high birth rate, lack of hygiene, poverty, superstitiousness, primitiveness, tribal kinship, crookedness, nomadism, music in the blood, promiscuity, etc.);
3. the essentialization of this "common form" of physical appearance and the above social, mental and character "traits" for the entire ethnic group of Roma.

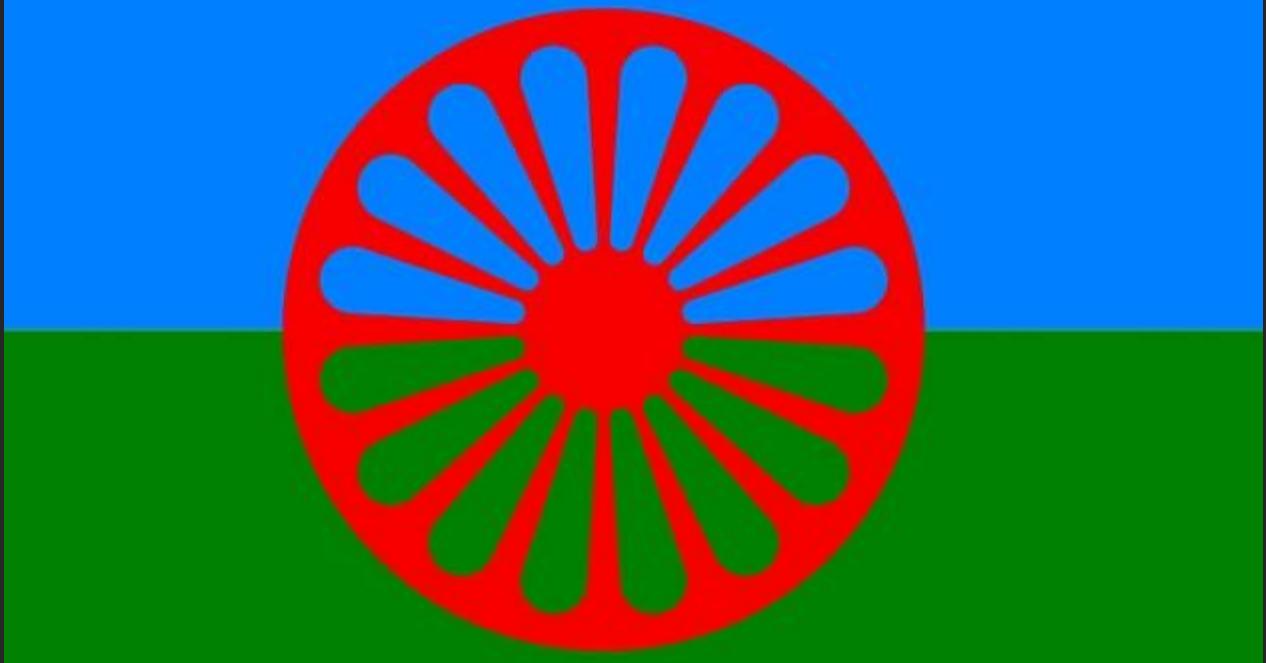
Thus, anti-Roma racism is not based on real life and negative personal experiences, it is not a consequence of Roma life, but uses historical forms of discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes and considers the "common form" of physical appearance and the above social, mental and character "qualities" as "essential" (i.e. "innate") for every Roma. This means that even if some of the above 'descriptions', 'qualities' and 'characteristics' could be applied to a member of the majority (e.g. criminality + low hygiene + poverty), the social situation of this member of the majority would not be understood as an 'essential' ('innate') characteristic of him/her, as is the case for Roma in antigypsy/anti-Roma racism. For this reason, anti-Roma racism is a type of racist categorization that claims that Roma collectively share a "distinct racial essence" that is not affected by any form of socialization, upbringing and education, nor by social, societal and financial measures. Anti-Roma racism attributes to the Roma an irreversible "biological (racial) destiny" from which there is no escape, while claiming that the Roma are incapable of integrating into society precisely because of these "basic (innate) characteristics".

We also point to the fact that expressions from lexicographical manuals of the Slovak language are used in court disputes. An example is the decision of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic in 2014 in the case of the election leaflets of the People's Party Our Slovakia from Banská Bystrica, which contained the text: "(...) with your trust we can certainly (among other things) resist the unfair favouritism not only of gypsy parasites" and the court ruled that this text does not fulfil the factual essence of the crime of defamation of the nation, race and convictions.



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The court's decision states: "The Supreme Court found from the current lexicographic manuals of the Slovak language (Short Dictionary of the Slovak Language, Rules of Slovak Spelling), which were approved by the measure of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic No. MK 1501/2008-10/5088 as works currently codifying the state language, that the Slovak language distinguishes the meaning of the nouns 'cigáň' and 'cigán' and that these nouns, together with the adjective 'cigánsky', are among the word forms commonly used in the current form of the codified state language." (...) "In this lexicographical guide, the adjective 'cigánsky' is also mentioned, with specific word phrases (cigánska kapela, cigánsky jazyk, cigánska pečienka, etc.) given as examples of its use in the Slovak language. The current form of the codified state language thus allows members of this ethnic group to be referred to by two terms: 'Roma' and 'Gypsy'. From the point of view of their linguistic meaning, these are identical terms, while the term 'Roma' was used in the Slovak language only in the period following the social changes in 1989, alongside the term 'Gypsy', used both by the majority population and by members of the Roma - Gypsy ethnic group themselves (e.g. the musical group Cigánski diabli, the film and musical Cigáni idú do neba, the film Cigán by M. Sulík, etc.)."

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights issued an opinion on this decision, which reads: "The reasoning of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic is, in our opinion, an exemplary example of abstraction from context, easily ascertainable objective facts and the merits of the case. The Court has engaged in a sometimes bizarre linguistic-grammatical analysis of the words Gypsy, Gypsy and Gypsy, which results in a defence of the indefensible. It did not analyse the whole of the incriminated statement, the interconnectedness of its parts ("gypsy parasites"), nor its objective effects in the form of defamation of an ethnic group. In its grammatical analysis, the court somehow missed the fact that the entire public activities of the chairman of the People's Party Our Slovakia, Marian Kotleba, and the organisations he founded and of which he is a member are objectively known facts, sufficiently documenting his real intentions."

The aforementioned Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2030 has as one of its priority objectives the reduction of prejudices and stereotypes about Roma, and this is also closely related to the terms used in public space. We, Roma men and women, are part of Slovak society, in which the principles of tolerance and mutual respect should apply. And mutual respect also derives from the means of expression that we use as a society. We believe that defining the term 'gypsy' (in the ethnic sense of 'Gypsy') is currently unacceptable, so we ask you to remove it from all codification manuals of the Slovak language.



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