

RISE UP:

RACISM, RESILIENCE, AND THE RIGHT TO MENTAL HEALTH



CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY



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INTRODUCTION

This publication was undertaken as part of the EU-funded RISE project, in which an ERRC-led consortium brought Roma activists and volunteers, known as our Roma Rights Defenders, together to foster transnational and inclusive approaches to combating anti-Roma racism. RISE volunteers were driven by concerns over the prevalence of anti-Roma hate speech and a desire to do something about it: to develop practical and effective responses to counter online hatred and its consequences. The volunteer networks engaged in anti-racist responses, campaigning, and advocacy to challenge hate speech both online and off. Alongside these interventions, the RISE project also provided legal representation to Romani victims of discrimination in seven countries.

One of the key issues raised in this publication is the psychological harm done by racism, and the particular harms done to youngsters by online hate speech targeting Roma in Europe. It then goes on to look at resilience and resistance; examining how Roma Rights Defenders find the gumption, the strength, and the passion to keep fighting on in what can be phlegmatically described as ‘inauspicious times’.

As part of the RISE projects, activists, volunteers, and coordinators generously responded to questions about:

-  what first inspired them to take up the cause of Roma rights, and what gives them hope today;
-  what values they hold precious, and how they’ve managed to remain resilient and keep the will to resist;
-  why solidarity matters, and what advice they would give to a younger generation of rebels against racism.

Volunteers from Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia also provided snapshot reports of the latest trends in online hate and abuse targeting Roma in their respective countries.

There is much research and little doubt about the destructive toll that racism takes on young bodies; that chronic discrimination causes chronic stress, that racist experiences in childhood are particularly damaging, and the long-lasting impact in terms of health and wellbeing. The ubiquity of social media as a first means of communication for the young makes those belonging to visible minorities vulnerable to hate speech almost constantly. Expert research shows that such victimisation can shatter the targeted person’s perception about themselves and their place in the world, leaving them feeling unsafe and vulnerable.

For Roma, and indeed all racialised groups across Europe, a full understanding the consequences of online hate speech is crucial, first for the mental and emotional well-being of individuals, but also on a social level to better push back against the structures, institutions, and platforms, which reproduce and amplify racist oppression:



A more nuanced understanding of the impact on different demographic groups can help to identify specific minorities or marginalised groups which are disproportionately affected by online hate speech and develop targeted interventions and policies that aim to protect the rights and well-being of all victims.¹

In addition to charting the harms caused by racism in general and online hate speech in particular, this report puts great emphasis on collective resistance and response – that vital sphere of activity where the personal becomes political in keeping hope alive – and how individual activists maintain the strength and stamina in pursuit of justice and equity. As the interviews with Roma Rights Defenders make clear, anti-racist resistance demands resilience, and solidarity is the glue that holds it all together. Their testimonies provide fascinating personal insights about from where they draw their strength and inspiration, and how much solidarity matters, for as one activist and educator put it: *“Together, we are stronger and more capable of challenging hate and building a more inclusive society.”*

As for combating online hate speech, the stakes are high. The prevalence of harmful and hateful online content poses a threat not just to the targeted individuals and communities, but according to UNESCO, a threat to the very foundations of democracy and human rights in a world where the ability to craft effective solutions and

¹ A. Dreißigacker, *et al.* ‘Online hate speech victimization: consequences for victims’ feelings of insecurity’. *Crime Sci* Vol.13, No.4 (2024). Available [here](#).

responses to the problem remains worryingly stifled. As the report noted, business models and service models create structural incentives to spread disinformation and hate speech:



“The attention economy is driven by the engagement of users, and content spreading is dependent mainly on the endorsement of those close to the user. This model creates social-validation feedback loops. Fragmentation and segmentation have reinforced strong group affiliations and isolation from diversity and contradictory perspectives. A vicious cycle ensues in which public interest criteria (pluralism, diversity, credibility, common understanding) are substituted by private and self-interested ones, which are reinforced by users’ confirmation biases.”²

Local responses to global malevolence are vital sites of resistance. The activities of Roma Rights Defenders through the RISE project marked a further iteration of the ERRC’s volunteer-led project *Challenging Digital Antigypsyism* which, over five years, had created and maintained digital activist communities across several countries to monitor, record, and report anti-Roma hate speech on online media and social networks.

² UNESCO, *Social Media 4 Peace: Local lessons for Global Practices*, 20 September 2023. Available [here](#).

RACISM AND THE DAMAGE DONE

The story we like to tell is one of resilience, creativity and commitment by the teams of volunteers in their fight against viral hate speech. It is definitely a tale worth telling, not least because it's an invaluable antidote to the fatalism of so many in the face of the filthy modern tide of online hate. It's also a tale worth telling, because it serves as a guide to collective action and empowerment, where creativity and determination get harnessed to make a difference in the public sphere so that hope trumps hate.

But we must acknowledge this is a partial tale, for beyond these activist circles building resilience from solidarity, beyond youth groups, and the range of very good, bad and mediocre inclusion projects, there is a mass of youngsters effectively denied such resources, and left exposed to anti-Roma racism and the damage it does, both online and in real life.

There remain huge numbers of Romani youth across Europe, whose segregation and exclusion from society has the dire consequence that they have fallen through the cracks in the EU's *Promise to Youth*, with its *"advancements in mental health care ... and its commitment to empowering young people and fostering a sustainable, inclusive future."* The EU has repeatedly stressed the need to mainstream the needs and aspirations of Romani children and youth: now it's time for member states, their youth ministries, and mainstream civil society networks to pay heed, take action, and marshal their abundant resources to effectively combat all forms of racism and exclusion, and 'foster an inclusive future' that leaves no youngster behind.

Racialised minorities have often been the most harmed and least protected by the relentless, and seemingly boundless, trafficking of online hatred, virtually instantaneous in its dissemination and unconstrained by reason. Children and young people need special protection and buffers from these toxic assaults for the simple reason that, as the science shows, racist experiences in childhood are particularly damaging and the impact long-lasting in terms of health and wellbeing.

The Roma Rights Defender's personal insights concerning the challenges they faced as 'newbies', when they began monitoring anti-Roma hate speech online, provides some idea of what it must be like for countless others who get targeted by hate. Volunteers who described the personal impact of monitoring online hate speech spoke of their shock at first encountering the sheer volume and vitriol of such extreme racist and dehumanising content targeting Roma, and how such attacks on their identity and culture initially left them distressed and demoralised. They recalled experiencing a sense of helplessness, prior to their collective action, that came from a realisation that *'most of the time, these people just go unpunished'*.

As part of the RISE project, the teams of activists quickly learned to overcome these 'first shocks', building resilience as they set about reporting, challenging, and countering hateful content; as well as devising campaigns and building broader alliances against racism online and offline. As the Roma rights activist and monitor for Albania, Xhenson Çela stressed that:

"Building solidarity is essential in this area of action. Allies can be anyone, any individual or entity that believes in human rights and Roma rights, and that firmly rejects and considers unacceptable hate speech, discrimination, exclusion, and other violations of democracy, the rule of law, and human dignity. What truly matters is a shared set of beliefs, goals, and a common vision for the future: A future where hatred has no place."

Xhenson

The importance of allies, attested to by all the Roma Rights Defenders involved in the project, alerts us to the plight of those outside the circles of solidarity. Youngsters without support networks find themselves isolated, intimidated, and clueless about how to fight back. Online racist hatred, whether directed at the person or group, is deeply corrosive to the individual's sense of self, and can likely cause direct and severe harm to the victim's psychological and mental health. When it comes to resistance, the message is clear and simple: what is needed is action from European and national political, educational, and cultural institutions to commit the necessary resources and support to make the solidarity and resilience experienced by Roma Rights Defenders, the rule rather than the exception for vulnerable youngsters.

It is doubtless disheartening to digest the plain fact that attempts to regulate the 'hate-sphere' will forever be playing catch-up; and effective moderating of online haters will continue to be obstructed by malevolent and monied forces. It is our misfortune to live in 'interesting times', and bear witness to the seemingly unstoppable rise of far-right nativists hell-bent on sowing discord.

A slew of recent reports has found that online hate has proven to be resilient, and has become more profitable, *"as many of the most recent innovations and trends around how money flows online have also been put to use by extremists and people pushing hate."* One of the biggest concerns to those combating online extremism is the monetisation of hate content targeting youth, a roaring trade for online haters, which has been greatly exacerbated by the rollout of generative artificial intelligence. These technological developments have created unprecedented opportunities for extremists to create and disseminate a dizzying array of vile content, from camouflaged hate memes to old-school incitement to racial hatred – and to do so at a profit.³

In terms of the spread of extremist propaganda, it has become more difficult to ignore parallels drawn with the rise of fascism in the 1930s. However, whatever the merits or otherwise of such analogies, one thing is as certain now as was then: resistance remains vital, it's going to be a long haul, and in order to prevail we've got to be resilient.

Rather than succumb to fatalism and inertia, powerful institutions, political leaders and cultural figures that genuinely wish to filter hate from our public spheres, and have yet to fully commit, need to embrace their social and political responsibilities, gird their loins, and get onside. For starters, they should pay heed to the examples set and lessons learned by a younger generation of anti-racist activists – including digital natives such as the project volunteers – on how to build alliances, create solidarity, empower others to resist and respond, and to reset the agenda to reject hate and choose love. For these endeavours, solidarity really matters – as Romani activist and RISE coordinator in Albania, Brisilda Taco put it:

"Solidarity is essential. It's about standing together, not just in words but through real actions and long-term commitment. True solidarity means sharing responsibility, supporting Roma leadership, and creating space for our full participation. My allies are both Romani and non-Romani individuals and organizations who actively support equality and justice. They are people who speak out against discrimination, amplify Romani voices, and work with us—not for us. Together, we are stronger and more capable of challenging hate and building a more inclusive society."

Brisilda

³ Jason Abbruzzese, 'For hate groups, it's a lucrative era on the internet', *NBC News*, 29 August 2025. Available [here](#).

Chronic racism, chronic stress, and ‘embodied inequality’



Despite general agreement that racism is wrong, there is little evidence of concerted initiatives to decrease its prevalence ... Considering racism as a cause of ill health is an important step in developing the research agenda and response from health services.

(Kwame McKenzie, MD)⁴

One basic starting point is the recognition that racism, online and offline, is a direct cause of illness, and that countering the impacts of racism must become a public health issue. Furthermore, as research shows, the cumulative impact of racism and discrimination is especially damaging to children and adolescents; so that is where the focus needs to be in terms of resources, interventions and support.

There is much by way of empirical research about the damage racism does to the health of those at the receiving end.⁵ According to Williams and Mohammed, in their review of the academic evidence, racism adversely affects the health of nondominant racial populations in multiple ways:

- 1** first, the policies and procedures of institutional racism reduce access to housing, quality education and employment opportunities;
- 2** second, cultural racism creates a policy environment hostile to egalitarianism, “triggering negative stereotypes and discrimination that are pathogenic and fostering health-damaging psychological responses, such as stereotype threat and internalized racism”;
- 3** and third, they point to the growing body of evidence which indicates that experiences of racial discrimination “are an important type of psychosocial stressor that can lead to adverse changes in health status and altered behavioural patterns that increase health risks.”⁶

As Olivia Campbell in a review piece on US research concerning the toll that racism takes on the body summed it up:



chronic discrimination can cause chronic stress, which has been shown to disrupt almost all of the body’s processes, leading to an increase in the risk of heart disease, anxiety, depression, and digestive, sleep, and cognitive problems.

The increase in health risks brought on by such stress is observed in minority populations across all socioeconomic levels.⁷

A 2019 UN report found, unsurprisingly, that inequality remains a key obstacle to mental health globally: “Many risk factors for poor mental health are closely associated with discrimination and inequalities in the conditions of daily life. Many risk factors are also linked to the corrosive impact of seeing life as something unfair.” The report’s author, UN Special rapporteur on health, Dr Dainius Puras, said measures to address inequality and discrimination would be “the best ‘vaccine’ against mental illness and would be much better than the excessive use of psychotropic medication which is happening.”⁸

Being on the receiving end of overt or subtle racism creates intense and constant stress, which boosts the risk of hypertension, depression, anxiety, and anger. As Dr Camara P. Jones, a leading specialist on the health impact of racism put it: “There’s a kind of stress, like you’re gunning your cardiovascular engine constantly if you’re black that results from dealing with people who are underestimating you, limiting your options.”⁹

⁴ Quoted in Samantha Gluck, ‘Racism is harmful to your mental health’, *HealthyPlace*, 9 January 2003. Available [here](#).

⁵ Olivia Campbell, ‘The Lifelong Health Toll of Schoolyard Racism’, *Pacific Standard*, 29 March 2016. Available [here](#).

⁶ David R. Williams and Selina A. Mohammed, ‘Racism and Health I: Pathways and Scientific Evidence’ *American Behavioural Scientist*, Volume 57, Issue 8, May 2013. Available [here](#).

⁷ Olivia Campbell, ‘The Lifelong Health Toll of Schoolyard Racism’, *Pacific Standard*, 29 March 2016. Available [here](#).

⁸ Mark Rice-Oxley, ‘Austerity and inequality fuelling mental illness, says top UN envoy’, *The Guardian*, 24 June 2019. Available [here](#).

⁹ Samantha Gluck, Racism is harmful to your mental health, *HealthyPlace*, 9 January 2003. Available [here](#).

Empirical research focusing on black adolescents in the USA and the relations of racial discrimination with allostatic load, (i.e. ‘the wear and tear’ on the body which accumulates as an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress) indicates that *“coping with cumulative stressors elicits a cascade of biological responses that may be functional in the short term, but over time ‘weather’ or damage the systems that regulate the body’s stress response.”* When these systems come under repeated stress, this wear and tear can take a biological toll with long-term health implications.

If stress experiences have cumulative impacts on biology over time, events that occur during times of rapid developmental transition such as childhood or adolescence are likely to have more profound effects, becoming ‘built-in’ to the youngster’s changing biology or psychology.¹⁰ While there is an abundance of research findings and policy recommendations to address the socio-economic consequences of racism, much more is needed by way of epidemiologic investigations and other public health research on what Nancy Kreiger terms ‘embodied inequality’, i.e. on the ways people embody racism, sexism and other forms of social inequality.¹¹

The available research indicates that racism contributes to initiating and sustaining a wide range of societal inequalities that combine to create inequalities in health. As Williams and Mohammed summed it up:



*We are unlikely to make significant progress in reducing the well-documented large racial disparities in health without intensive, comprehensive, and sustained initiatives to eliminate racial inequalities in a broad range of social, political, and economic indicators. We therefore need more concerted efforts to develop the science base that would enable us to effectively intervene to reduce and ultimately eliminate the pathogenic effects of racism and health.*¹²

Roma, racism, and mental health: what kind of hell?

The bulk of the research concerns the impact of racism on the health of black youngsters in the USA. Suffice to say, when it comes to young Roma in Europe, the conversation has not even begun in many of the EU’s member states. This should be a cause for alarm.

If being on the receiving end of overt or subtle racism creates intense and constant stress, which boosts the risk of depression, anxiety, and anger, what kind of hell on earth is endured by tens of thousands of Romani children in shacks, squats, and camps, vulnerable to the elements, exposed to random cruelties, and deliberate discrimination right across the well-ordered democracies that comprise this continent of plenty? How do children fare, whose communities have come under mob attack, whose homes have been firebombed, whose parents have been assaulted or murdered? What must it be like for Romani youngsters in Italy, who have grown up in abject poverty and squalor ‘under the system of the camps’, victims of a state of emergency long suspended and ruled illegitimate by the courts?¹³

Back in 2014, the ERRC drew attention to the human cost of EU-style apartheid in Italy, where authorities place Romani people in camps on remote and inaccessible sites in squalid conditions, isolated from society. In its submission to the UN Human Rights Council in 2014¹⁴, the ERRC revealed how children raised in these camps – often under guard or video surveillance – were prone to a number of severe and debilitating conditions.

The report detailed how these children were more frequently born underweight than other children, and become ill with respiratory disease in greater numbers than their Italian peers. They suffer more often from poisoning, burns, and accidents at home. There was a greater incidence of ‘diseases of poverty’, such as tuberculosis, scabies, and lice. In addition to the physical manifestations, the children exhibited high incidences of anxiety and sleep disorders, suffer from phobias, were hyperactive and had attention deficits and learning difficulties; conditions which *“are also predictive of more serious disorders in adolescence and adulthood.”*¹⁵

¹⁰ Brody GH et al. ‘Perceived discrimination among African American adolescents and allostatic load: a longitudinal analysis with buffering effects.’ *Child Development*, 85(3):989-1002. May-June 2014. Available [here](#).

¹¹ Nancy Krieger, ‘Embodying inequality: a review of concepts, measures, and methods for studying health consequences of discrimination.’ *Int journal of health services* 1999;29(2):295-352. Available [here](#).

¹² David R. Williams and Selina A. Mohammed, ‘Racism and Health I: Pathways and Scientific Evidence’ *American Behavioural Scientist*, Volume 57, Issue 8, May 2013. Available [here](#).

¹³ European Roma Rights Centre, Press Release, *End of the Road for Italy’s Illegal State of Emergency*. 2 May 2013. Available [here](#).

¹⁴ European Roma Rights Centre, *Submission UN Human Rights Council, 20th Session*, 2014. Available [here](#).

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

If, as the science tells us, the anticipation of racism is enough to trigger a stress response, there are questions that need to be answered about the mental health of young Roma. What kind of mental stress have these children endured under the constant threat of racism, when the Romani community was singled out and scapegoated, threatened and disparaged by those who govern? What will be the cumulative damage of ‘embodied inequality’ on youngsters whose lives have been blighted by hate speech, racist disparagement, and hostile media?

Everyday racism and mental distress

Beyond the atrocities, what threatens to destroy a young person’s self-esteem, what causes so much damage to their well-being, is the everyday racism: the routine segregation in schools, towns, and villages; the policies that push Roma beyond the city limits, out of sight and out of mind. This everyday racism is legitimated by bigoted political mainstream politicians who regularly disrespect Roma as the inherently criminal and permanently burdensome undeserving poor.

What must young Hungarian Roma have thought when their Prime Minister, Victor Orbán, described Roma as a historically inherited burden ‘we’ have to live with? Or when one of Orbán’s close cronies, the publicist Zsolt Bayer, could say with full impunity that many Roma were unfit for coexistence? Bayer posted online that, *“These Gypsies are animals, and they behave like animals... These animals shouldn’t be allowed to exist ... That needs to be solved - immediately and regardless of the method.”*¹⁶ It is plainly evident that such crude, antagonistic, and racist discourse has a coarsening and divisive impact on public life. What is less evident, and seemingly of little concern for policy elites, is the impact such racism has on the mental health of Romani youngsters at its receiving end.

Some sense of the impact can be garnered from the situation in Ireland, where a report published in 2023 found that racism and discrimination are the primary root causes of suicide in the Irish Traveller community. Nationally, the suicide rate among Travellers in Ireland is six times higher than that of wider society, with over 65% of Traveller suicides occurring among those aged under 30. While drugs, alcohol, depression, poverty, and financial pressures were identified as key causes of suicide, *“there was consistent reference to daily experiences of discrimination that have an impact on mental health”*. As reported in The Irish Times, structural racism was identified as underpinning Travellers’ negative experiences in housing, employment, education and healthcare and engaging with gardaí.¹⁷ According to the report: *“The impact of this daily experience of discrimination and racism is damaging to the morale of Travellers as they seek to navigate their daily lives.”*¹⁸

One striking failure of the first EU Roma Framework up to 2020, and the national strategies that comprise the ‘new improved’ Roma strategic framework up to 2030, is ignoring the impact anti-Roma racism has on the mental health and wellbeing of children and youth that comprise Europe’s largest and youngest ethnic minority population in Europe. The enormity of this omission has yet to sink in, for as Tlaleng Mofokeng, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health put it, *“The health consequences of racism and discrimination are persistent and passed from one generation to the next through the body’s ‘biological memory’ of harmful experiences.”* In short, as she asserted, *“The right to health cannot be realised in a racist world.”*¹⁹

¹⁶ ERRC News, *10 things they said about Roma in Hungary*, 27 October 2015. Available [here](#).

¹⁷ Kitty Holland, ‘Discrimination key factor in Traveller suicides, study finds’, *The Irish Times*, 22 February 2023. Available [here](#).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ United Nations, OHCHR, Special Procedures, Press release, *End racism to advance health and other human rights says UN expert*, 20 October 2022. Available [here](#).

ONLINE HATE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Scientific interest in online hate speech has grown alongside the exponential increase in this form of intimidation and, unsurprisingly, the academic consensus is that the experience of online hate has a negative effect on the mental health and well-being of both victim and observer. The ubiquity of social media makes those targeted vulnerable to hate speech almost constantly, *“an influence on insecurity feelings outside the Internet would suggest far-reaching significance of hate speech in the daily lives of those affected.”*²⁰

Hate speech is, according to the authors, strongly associated with a ‘message character’ - in that it degrades all members of a social group and suggests further victimisation; and an ‘incitement character’ - meaning that the missive and any associated call to action can be perceived as an appeal to be imitated or acted on by like-minded haters. The authors suggest that hate speech experienced online, rather than outside in the ‘real world’, could have an even higher impact on subjective vulnerability and perceived feelings of insecurity, because *“online hate speech is more spontaneous and immediate, more widespread via social media, and permanently present.”* In contrast to a verbal attack on the street which melts into air, hate speech attacks on social media don’t just go away, they can be called up again and spread far; unlike real life encounters, there is no shelter, as the victims of online hate can be reached inside their own homes.²¹

Researchers examining the ways in which Indigenous Australians respond, individually and collectively, to online racial vilification, introduced the concept of ‘shared recognition’ to describe the collective sense of anger and frustration in the face of such attacks, where trauma is understood as a consequence of colonialism and the continued subjugation and vilification of Indigenous people. Noting that the rise of social media has meant that Indigenous Australians are *“privy to sadness in unprecedented and unique ways”*, the concept of shared recognition *“refers to the ways in which we continue to internalise white domination ... and acquires meaning through the widely held understanding that colonialism is not finished business, and that indeed, its effects continue to permeate the political and social domains in Australia in ways that adversely affect the health and well-being of all Indigenous subjects.”*²²

As with other racialised minorities, such expressions of hatred are not always confined solely to online environments, and the authors reported that online expressions of intolerance can be correlated with violent actions offline. Subject to a continual barrage of hate and discrimination, the levels of distress and anguish amongst Indigenous Australians are unsurprisingly high, and survey research revealed that they suffer psychological distress at twice the rate of non-Indigenous people and are much more likely to be admitted to hospital for self-harm. According to the report, many Indigenous young people’s *“experience of growing up is impacted upon by the recent history of forced removal of children, dislocation from land and racism and the experience of inter-generational trauma.”*²³

Qualitative research commissioned by the UK regulatory body Ofcom, which explored the emotional and psychological impacts of exposure to online hate and hateful abuse on people with protected characteristics,²⁴ found that impacts tended to be more pronounced where content targeted those characteristics. The emotional and psychological impacts of hateful content included:

- **Surprise and shock** – especially where they saw or received hate where it was unexpected.
- **Anger and disappointment** – because it suggested that these views were more prevalent than they had realised; because they felt incensed by the hateful behaviour; alongside anger and frustration where hateful behaviour had evaded moderation.
- **Embarrassment and shame** – especially where the experience played out in open/public spaces where friends, family and strangers could see the exchanges or become involved.

²⁰ A. Dreißigacker, *et al.* ‘Online hate speech victimization: consequences for victims’ feelings of insecurity’. *Crime Sci* 13, 4 (2024). Available [here](#).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Bronwyn Carlson *et al.* ‘Trauma, Shared Recognition and Indigenous Resistance on Social Media’, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* Vol 21, 2017. Available [here](#).

²³ Shalailah Medhora, *“Zero out of ten”: Indigenous youth rate low levels of happiness*, *ABC Hack* 6 September 2016. Available [here](#).

²⁴ A protected characteristic is a characteristic that someone may have or be perceived to have which means they might be discriminated against. Examples of protected characteristics include gender, disability, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or whether someone is transgender.

- **Anxiety and fear** – in the abuse context, participants sometimes felt threatened and feared for their safety or felt uncertain about who was targeting them, how long it would go on for and if it might ‘flare-up’ again.
- **Hopelessness and exhaustion** – because online hate was so pervasive and taking action often didn’t lead to desired outcomes, some participants became desensitised and no longer reported hateful content.²⁵

The Ofcom report found that the factors that could make online hate content more severe included:

- **Scale and exposure** - where participants were targeted by multiple users or seeing hate from many users tended to increase severity.
- **Intensity and threat level** - where language and behaviour was particularly malicious, prolonged or threatening.
- **The inability of those targeted to take/see action** - where participants did not feel able to get the content removed and felt users doing it faced no consequences.
- **The characteristics of those being targeted** - where multiple characteristics were targeted (intersectionality), and where the characteristics targeted were things about themselves they could not hide.
- **The format and nature of the content** - where it was felt that the content had the potential to be widely shared and could normalise the views.²⁶

The experiences of the RISE project participants match closely with these report findings. Beyond their initial feelings of being personally ‘*sad, disappointed and hurt*’ when confronted with the sheer volume of revolting content, what many activists found worrying was the disproportionate extent to which Roma were targeted online, and how widespread and mainstream is the social acceptance of anti-Roma hatred in society, including the upper echelons of political life.

Activists were taken aback at the outset by the volume and the sheer hostility of explicit hate content targeting Roma; and expressed shock at the ease and lack of inhibition with which people gave vent to racial hatred: “*talking about their elimination, even talking realistically and in detail about harming them.*”

For one activist, the most concerning aspect of online anti-Roma hate speech was the prevalence of organised dissemination and the harms it inflicts, firstly on innocent individuals – particularly the young and vulnerable -, and secondly, at a societal level, “*tearing up social cohesion, and laying the groundwork for violent actions.*”²⁷

Another activist, shocked at the extremity of online anti-Roma racist prejudice, described how it made them feel less safe and more marginalised:



*Personally, encountering such hate speech is quite distressing and demoralising. Unjust attacks on my identity and cultural background can emotionally affect me, compelling me to defend myself or respond.*²⁸

²⁵ Ofcom/Traverse, *Qualitative Research into the impact of online hate – Final Report*. February 2023. Available [here](#).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ European Roma Rights Centre, *Voices against Online Hate: Roma Rights Defenders in their own Words*. 26 November 2024. Available [here](#).

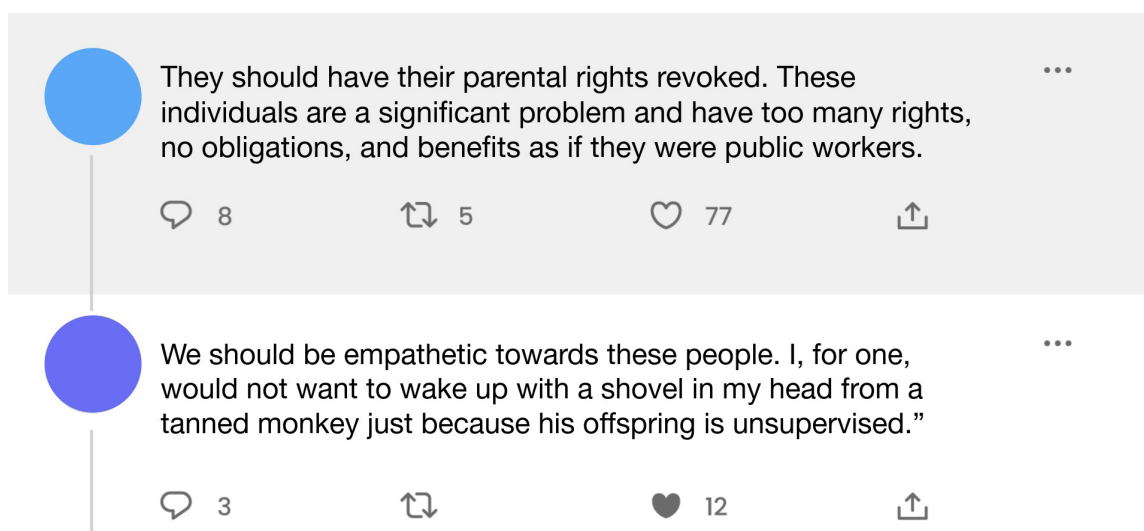
²⁸ *Ibid.*

RISE SNAPSHOT

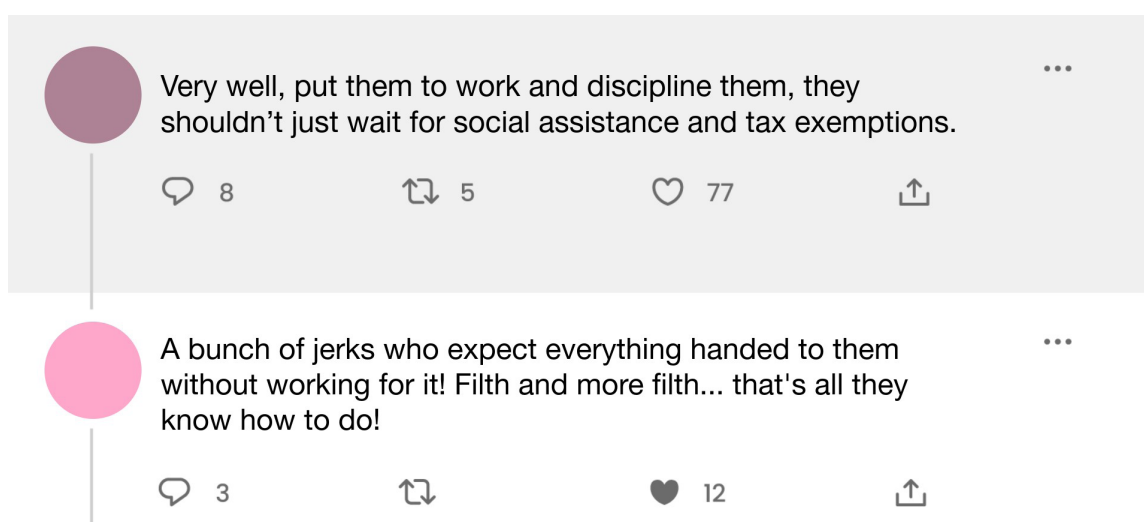
ROMANIA ONLINE: THE STATE OF HATE

In Romania, online abuse of Roma in comment threads ranged from ridicule and disparagement, to racist abuse accusing Roma of theft and other forms of criminality, to hateful and threatening references citing the ‘unfinished business’ of the World War II fascist dictator Marshall Ion Antonescu. The project volunteers pointed out that while some of the posts which ridicule Roma might not constitute hate speech, constant disparagement of Roma not only contributes to a more general desensitisation of the public towards Roma, but often paves the way for escalation: what starts in the comment threads as ridicule can lead to incitement to violence as comments pile up.

Typically, calls for stronger action to be taken by the authorities against Roma are soon followed by vulgar racist denigration. Illustrative of this are the comments following a news article²⁹ reporting on the aftermath of a three-year-old Romani child injured by a hit-and-run driver in Ivesti, which warned of the danger of ‘tempers flaring in the Romani community again’. The reader responses ran like this:



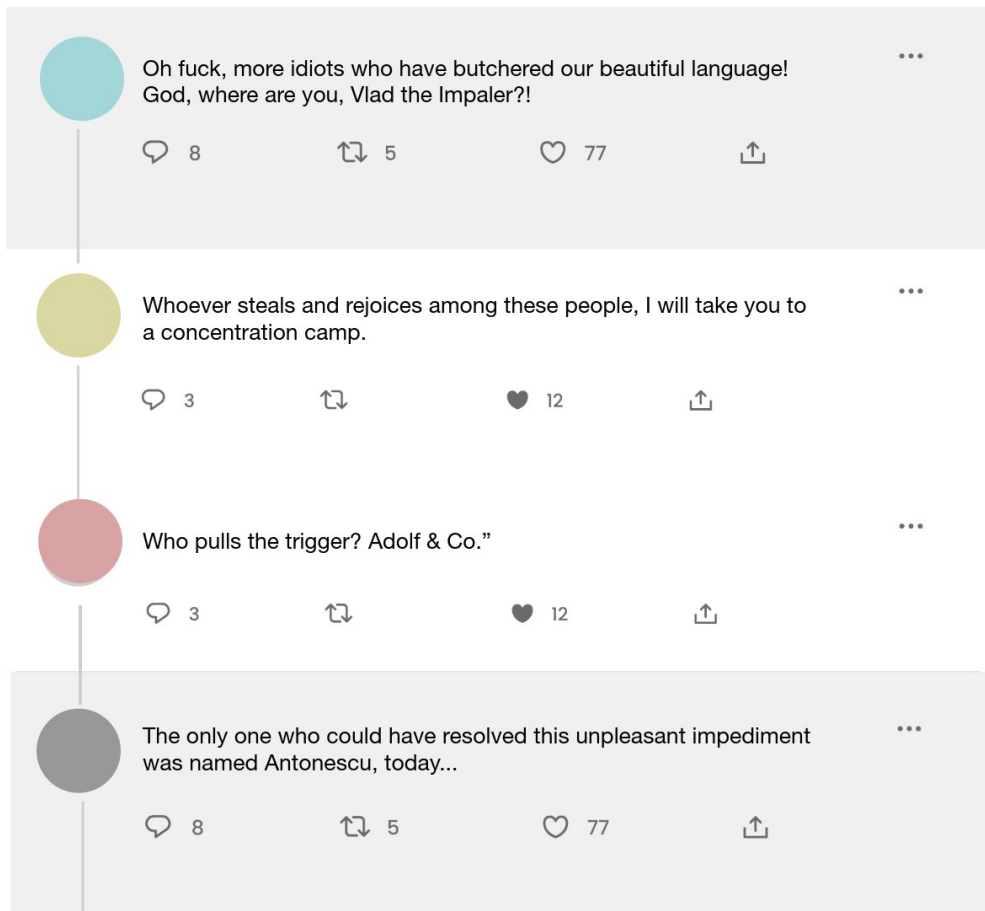
One recent example of the disparaging comments about Roma being work-shy and undeserving of social assistance are the following responses to a news report concerning the stance taken by Roma under threat of eviction from social housing by the mayor of Botosani:³⁰



²⁹ Mariana Constandache, ‘Un sofer a lovit un copil si a fugit de frica rudelor’, *Viata Libera*, 29 May 2025. Available [here](#).

³⁰ News article available [here](#).

The more extreme abuse the RISE monitors encountered included references to the '*need for more mass deportations to Transnistria*', as well as comments about '*turning Roma into soap*'. Below are typical examples of what can be found in comment threads:



Racists regularly refer to Roma as 'crows', and among the images posted were a crow hanging in a noose, and another of a crow in sniper crosshairs, with the caption, "*See how Antonescu loves you 😊😊😊*"

RISE SNAPSHOT

BULGARIA ONLINE: DEHUMANISING AND SCAPEGOATING ROMA

Bulgaria has had a long-standing problem with hate speech online and off, with Roma and LGBTIQ+ persons the main victims of public expressions of hatred and prejudice, often by high-level politicians – incitement that has been followed by physical attacks and mob violence targeting Roma.³¹ Earlier research conducted by RISE partners Equal Opportunities Initiative Association, revealed the negative and desensitising impact of widespread hate speech towards Roma, and the close link between racist rhetoric from politicians and online hate speech, evident in surges in times of political and social crises, and in many of the run-ups to the country's interminable rounds of elections.³²

“Arrogant Gypsy behaviour. There is no integration. These people will ruin our children.”

The most common themes observed in the most recent monitoring by volunteers of online anti-Roma hate speech included negative and derogatory references about Roma failures to integrate, Roma ‘privilege’, and welfare dependency, as well as more general dehumanising and hostile rhetoric and commentary. Typical of such posts, which combine disinformation and ethnic hostility was the following:



*Gypsies and Turks receive Christmas bonuses of 100 leva. People who have never paid a single lev to the state and are on social pensions, while Bulgarians who have worked and paid taxes their whole lives can go screw themselves. Try explaining to me again that the state does not belong to Peevski (leading politician and oligarch). Not the people, but the scum.*³³

Reports and commentary associating Roma with pollution and illegality and stigmatising entire neighbourhoods as dangerous and dirty, increases the risk of violent hostility by scapegoating the Roma for wider societal problems about air quality and housing, volunteers maintain. While such online commentary, purportedly expressing the ‘genuine concerns’ of citizens may fall short of hate speech, it is hateful in that it clearly targets and collectively blames Roma, and reinforces societal prejudices and racism against Roma:



There is no air in Hristo Smirnenski, but it is full of carts with Roma people, and the air is polluted! The place is full of carts with Roma people who take everything out of the bins! Well, if you don't know why this is so, let me tell you: Roma people from all over the country are flocking to the “Hr. Botev” neighbourhood, building houses on vacant lots and burning the old furniture of the capital's residents, and of course the municipality doesn't see this!

The controversy surrounding the mass eviction and destruction of dwellings that left more than 200 Roma homeless and many sleeping outdoors in Sofia's *Zaharna Fabrika*, played out on social media and led to anti-Roma protests which prompted Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, to call for immediate provision of emergency shelter and legal aid for those affected, *“and to prevent any violence against Roma.”*³⁴ The RISE monitors found that the coverage of these protests on TikTok and other platforms reinforced anti-Roma sentiment and fueled public hostility especially towards those in public housing. They warned that by dehumanising the affected families, such coverage may further ‘justify’ discriminatory policies, forced evictions, and coercive force.

³¹ The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, *ECRI Report on Bulgaria (Sixth Monitoring Cycle)*, 4 October 2022. Available [here](#).

³² Equal Opportunities Initiative Association, *Press Release: Volunteers combating online and offline hate speech against Roma*, 17 May 2022. Available [here](#).

³³ Facebook post available [here](#).

³⁴ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. *Letter: Bulgaria: Emergency shelter, access to basic services and adequate housing measures needed for Roma left homeless in Sofia*. 5 May 2025. Available [here](#).

RISE SNAPSHOT

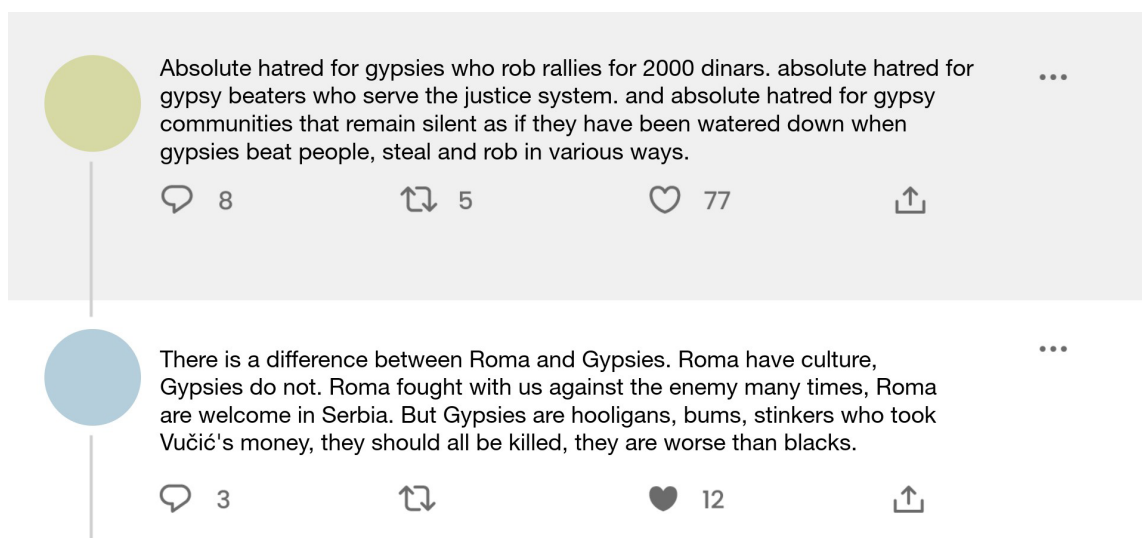
SERBIA ONLINE: UNITED IN HATE

It was noted early on by RISE monitors that while much of the hate speech targeting Roma is ‘spontaneous’, extremist content is targeted, organised, and amplified by right-wing media channels. These channels spread anti-Roma rhetoric and tropes that stigmatise, ridicule, and incite hatred, further aggravating existing stereotypes that dehumanise Roma.³⁵ The unrelenting wave of anti-regime protests sparked by the Novi Sad train station disaster which claimed 15 lives in November 2024³⁶, has prompted new variations on an old theme.

One consequence of the political crisis in Serbia, is that Roma have been denounced and threatened by elements from both sides of the conflict, and have found themselves the target of much abuse on social media.

Roma have been cajoled and pressured into participating in protests organised by the ruling party; besides being paid daily allowances to attend, many are threatened that if they don’t turn up, they will lose their benefits, or be denied their papers. When pictures showing Roma at the pro-Vučić rallies appear online on social networks, they provoke angry and hateful responses.

One favoured narrative is that because of social benefits, Roma are “*always with the government*”, and this prompts streams of comments that call for violence against Roma. Then, when Roma are pictured at anti-government protests, on the side of the students, pro-Vučić supporters make similar hate-filled threats. The RISE volunteers responded to this by producing a video showing how Roma were being manipulated, under the title: *RACISM UNITES THE WARRING SIDES!* Below are a couple of the negative reactions to the video on Instagram:



The RISE volunteers explained that whenever there is a violent incident in the streets, either during an otherwise peaceful protest or somehow connected with the students, if any Roma are involved, pro-government media and politicians make mention of, or pointedly reveal the person’s ethnic identity in statements and screenshots of such incidents.

As for the more routine, disparaging form of antigypsyism from the political elites, the volunteers cited the wide online circulation of a video from the Minister for Human and Minority Rights, Demo Beriša Berisha, who during an official visit to Čačak on 22 July 2025, made the following statement:



“Roma, as our neighbours, must understand that neither the state, nor the municipalities, nor local self-governments are ATMs. We must guide them to finish school, to engage in work, and to become useful members of society.”

³⁵ European Roma Rights Centre, *Voices against Online Hate: Roma Rights Defenders in their own Words*, 26 November 2024. Available [here](#).

³⁶ Guy Delaney, ‘Fury over Serbia station tragedy prompts first arrests’, *BBC News*, 22 November 2024. Available [here](#).

Anti-Roma Narratives: slurs, baseless accusations, and collective blame

The RISE participants characterised narratives, including slurs and baseless accusations against Roma, as ‘not only false, but dangerous’. As one RISE participant explained:

“Some of the frequent comments about Roma that our volunteers encounter on social networks are that Roma don’t want to work, that they are stealing, begging, using social welfare, have more rights than that of the majority of population and so on.”

Brejdón

Another respondent who described anti-Roma narratives as “*biased, lacking objectivity, misleading, and at times amount to outright disinformation*”, stated that while freedom of expression is a fundamental right, it is not an absolute one. They argued that it does not extend to the spread of false information, insults, defamation, or hate speech: “*Everyone is entitled to have an opinion, yes, but no one has the right to violate someone else’s dignity or safety under the guise of free speech.*” On the issue of media responsibility:

“When an agency or media platform holds the power to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of viewers, it bears a significant responsibility. Anything it publishes should be thoughtfully considered and rooted in respect for human rights, especially given its capacity to shape public opinion and influence how people think.”

Xhenson

As to the issue of the harm done by anti-Roma narratives, the volunteers interviewed for the project warned that the slurs and baseless accusations that Romani people are stealing, begging, misusing social welfare, or somehow enjoy privileges denied to the majority population, are not only false but dangerous: “*they dehumanise an entire population and justify systemic exclusion*”, and in doing so pave the way for collective blame and punishment. According to one interviewee: “*These narratives are deeply rooted in racism and ignorance. They erase our history, contributions, and humanity.*”

RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

When it comes to resilience, the testimonies of Roma and pro-Roma activists resonate with wider observers' assertions concerning the importance of sharing experiences and acting on the insights gained; on placing individual narratives of resilience into a collective context; and developing explanatory accounts that are mindful of the harmful historical, economic, social and political factors that shape the lives of racialised communities.³⁷

When it comes to resistance, making the personal political matters hugely, and it is clear from the activists' responses that solidarity is paramount. As Klaudia Veizaj, a Romani activist, educator, and advocate from Albania, put it:

“When an agency or media platform holds the power to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of viewers, it bears a significant responsibility. Anything it publishes should be thoughtfully considered and rooted in respect for human rights, especially given its capacity to shape public opinion and influence how people think.”

Klaudia

The sense of shared experiences and common purpose across borders was considered a precious asset, both in terms of individual and collective coming-to-terms with the distress caused by online hate speech, and the task of devising concrete strategies of anti-racist resistance and response. This approach is exemplified by Klaudia, who has been actively engaged in promoting Roma rights, youth participation, and fighting against antigypsyism for over a decade:

“My work has focused strongly on using non-formal education as a tool for empowerment and community resilience. In my roles I’ve contributed to building spaces for remembrance, critical reflection, and resistance to hate speech. In the context of the RISE project, I see myself as someone who works to transform pain into power, and silence into collective voice.”

Klaudia

³⁷ Joann Bryant and Peter Aggleton, ‘The Problem with Resilience: Individualisation, Reductionism and Relationality in Health Discourses on Resilience.’ *Social Health Illn*, vol 47 no 4. 5 April 2025. Available [here](#).

Resilience: collective and relational

“I believe that fighting anti-Roma hatred is not only about responding to racism, but also about creating paths toward integration, participation, and full involvement of Roma in all areas of society. Seeing more Roma actively engaged in education, public life, media, and institutions gives me the strength to continue.”

Brisilda

Resilience, understood at key moments for activists as ‘the strength to continue’, is precisely where the personal and the political intersect. The testimonies of activists transcended narrow individualist notions of resilience; when making clear from where they draw their strengths, they placed great store in solidarity – from intimate circles of family and friends to wider constellations of comrades and allies – and fortifying stamina from the shared experiences in activism, campaigning, and struggle. For younger activists, connecting with others mattered strongly when it came to carrying on, as Jelena explained:

“What motivates me is having met people who also want societal change—I am not alone in this fight. Their support shows me that everything I do is not in vain.”

Jelena

The proliferation of narratives of resilience in popular and academic literature should come with a health warning. Researchers who have examined the prominence of resilience as a regulatory ideal, have found that resilience discourse is largely understood and operationalised in neoliberal, individualistic, and reductionist terms. Resilience, as a quality demanded and promoted by public policy in an era of perpetual austerity and worsening inequality, has also emerged as a central term in popular and social media culture to mean being *“focussed on positive thinking, affirmations, and gratitude. It calls on people to be adaptable and positive, bouncing back from adversity and embracing a mind-set in which negative experiences can—and must—be reframed in upbeat terms.”*³⁸

³⁸ Joann Bryant and Peter Aggleton, ‘The Problem with Resilience: Individualisation, Reductionism and Relationality in Health Discourses on Resilience,’ *Social Health Illn*, vol 47 no 4. 5 April 2025. Available [here](#).

Through a logic of ‘personal responsabilisation’, problems of illness, disease, and social inequality becomes transformed into problems of self-care. This framing of resilience in terms of personal responsibility and action means that resilience discourse can offer little more than an *“individualised reading of empowerment, rather than an actual redistribution of power”*.³⁹

This neo-liberal ‘turn’ needs to be countered by alternative approaches to resilience. Critics do not discount the importance of individual experience for recovery and resilience, and acknowledge that biographical journey narratives and optimism about the possibility of healing seem genuinely helpful. However, one unintended consequence is that the ‘personal’ got disconnected from the ‘political’. Critics argue that the individualist concept of resilience pays insufficient attention to the harmful historical, economic, social and political factors that shape the lives of the oppressed, and insist on the necessity to strengthen and maintain the link between individual narratives and wider collective struggles, for *“it is only when the collective, structural experiences of inequality and injustice are explicitly linked to processes of emotional distress that recovery will be possible.”*⁴⁰

Beyond the narrow individualistic notions of resilience, and in common with the experience of First Nation scholars and activists, a discernible emphasis was placed by the activists on *“collective forms of resilience as values, practices and identities rather than individual attributes, which bring with them the opportunity to produce positive and meaningful social change for marginalised peoples.”*⁴¹

The emphasis on connecting the personal to the political, and cultivating collective forms of resilience resonated strongly with many young activists such as Klaudia:

“My involvement in Roma rights activism began with my lived experience as a woman growing up in Albania, where I witnessed first-hand the structural discrimination, stereotypes, and social exclusion our community faces. What started as personal frustration turned into a sense of responsibility when I realised that staying silent meant accepting injustice as the norm.”

Klaudia

What motivates and inspires?

The RISE activists’ striking accounts of what initially inspired or motivated them to become engaged, and what motivates them to ‘keep on keeping on’, provide fascinating snapshots and personal insights into what makes resilience relational, and what fuels their conviction that while it might be a long time coming, *“a change gon’ come.”*⁴² When asked about what or who first inspired them to become active in Roma rights, what was common to the interviewees, and resonates with the experience of many other Romani activists, was the opportunities to become involved in youth activities and the presence of role models in their families and communities, combined with a strong sense of pride in their own cultural identity and a personal determination to do the right thing in combating anti-Roma racism. Common to them is a motivation that is historically informed, grounded in present realities, and future-oriented in its aspirations. This was memorably encapsulated by Xhenson:

³⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁰ D. Harper and E. Speed, ‘Uncovering Recovery: The Resistible Rise of Recovery and Resilience.’ *Studies in Social Justice* 6, no. 1: 9–25. 2012. Available [here](#).

⁴¹ Joann Bryant and Peter Aggleton, ‘The Problem with Resilience: Individualisation, Reductionism and Relationality in Health Discourses on Resilience.’ *Social Health Illn*, vol 47 no 4. 5 April 2025. Available [here](#).

⁴² US Government National Archives, Documented Rights *A Change Is Gonna Come*, Lyrics Sam Cooke (1954). Available [here](#).

“This drive is also fueled by the conviction that the darkest chapters of our history, marked by stereotypes, prejudice, and systemic discrimination, must not be allowed to persist in the present, nor be carried into the future. The pursuit of a better tomorrow, one free from alienation and exclusion, is the force that fuels my activism and lifelong commitment to change.”

Xhenson

Brejdon Xhavera, currently working with *Community Reporters Albania*, an initiative that amplifies the voices of marginalised communities, aims through his activism to foster inclusion, dignity, and social change through storytelling, media, and grassroots engagement. Brejdon described how his involvement began through journalism after he reported on social injustices faced by Romani communities, and how inspiring they were:

“Over time, this reporting evolved into a deeper form of engagement—organising community media trainings, facilitating storytelling workshops, and collaborating with Romani youth to raise awareness and build leadership from within the community ... I was inspired by the resilience of Romani activists and community leaders who work tirelessly, often with limited support, to make their voices heard. I was also deeply moved by the personal stories of Romani families I met during fieldwork, which challenged stereotypes and motivated me to use my platform more responsibly and intentionally.

I believe in the power of narrative to shift perceptions and policies. Marginalized voices are often silenced or distorted in the mainstream media. My motivation comes from a desire to co-create platforms where Romani individuals, especially youth, can tell their own stories on their own terms.”

Brejdon

For Klaudia, one formative encounter that inspired her involvement took place in 2013, when she participated in *Dikh He Na Bister*⁴³:

“Visiting Auschwitz, meeting survivors, and learning about what happened to Roma during WWII was a life-changing experience for me. When I came back home, I decided to dedicate all my volunteering to raising awareness about this history ... This journey transformed my activism into a mission: to ensure that Romani history is remembered, Romani culture is celebrated, and that future generations understand and resist discrimination and hate.

Klaudia

A similar sense of mission drives Brisilda Taco, who described how being part of a youth education initiative as a 15-year-old inspired her activism:

“From that point on, I realized how important it is for us, as Roma, to speak for ourselves and take action. I started volunteering, organizing awareness campaigns, mentoring Romani youth, and coordinating projects that addressed systemic barriers our community faces. It became more than a responsibility—it became my life’s mission.”

Brisilda

As to personal inspiration, Brisilda described the steadfast support she got from her father, a respected community leader, who taught her “*the importance of standing for our rights with dignity and pride*”; and a ‘trailblazing’ activist Meleqe Rrenja, “*who dared to speak up when few others did*” and whose courage and commitment to education and activism.

“Has shown me that change is possible—especially when Romani women rise together, support each other, and claim space in society. Beyond individuals, I draw daily inspiration from my own community—from Romani mothers who carry their families with strength and love. Their everyday resistance to injustice, discrimination, and invisibility reminds me why this work matters and why I must keep going.”

Brisilda

⁴³ *Dikh He Na Bister, The Roma Genocide Remembrance Initiative*. Detail on this initiative available [here](#).

Xhenson Çela who has 15-years' experience in various capacities, including health and cultural mediator, grassroots activist, and human rights monitor, describes one significant dimension of his engagement in Roma rights as *artivism*, a fusion of art, literature, and activism: *"Over the past five years, I have organised two artistic exhibitions and published two graphic novels exploring themes such as Roma culture, identity, and the Roma genocide during World War II."*

As for motivation and inspiration, he attributes it to a deep inner sense of righteousness and resistance, and roles models from globally renowned icons such as Martin Luther King Jr, to *"Romani activists across Europe and Albania who continue to pave the way for justice, dignity, and inclusion."* The motivation to keep on, he describes as driven by a fusion of a personal 'inner instinct', and a social commitment to challenge injustice:

"Engaging in social and human rights-related activities has always felt purposeful, especially those that aim to improve society as a whole and advocate for the rights of my community within a social and political system that too often excludes and discriminates, rather than includes and treats its citizens with equality and fairness."

My motivation is also deeply rooted in the struggles and hardships that our communities have endured throughout history. It is a painful and bitter reality, one that compels those of us who have lived through similar experiences to take up the mantle of activism and social engagement, with the aim of transforming society and promoting justice, equality, and inclusion."

Xhenson

What's the drive to keep on keeping on?

There can be no doubt that, for some, the experience of activism is all too often, all-consuming, emotionally draining, and ultimately disenchanting. For many others, it is a source of inspiration, driven by a sense of mission and determination, and sustained by solidarity, such that their enthusiasm remains undimmed. The project interviewees were asked the question posed to many lifelong activists: *what motivates you to keep on doing what you do?* Their responses about what inspires them to continue fighting anti-Roma racism, were in turn nothing short of inspiring.

"What motivates me most is the impact I see on the ground—when a young Romani person tells their story publicly for the first time, or when a local authority changes its approach after being exposed to first-hand narratives. These moments prove that change is possible, and that our work matters."

Brejdón

As well as their commitment to combating anti-Roma racism, many were motivated by hope for wider substantive change with regards to Roma inclusion and participation. As Brisilda put it,

“What motivates me the most is hope—the hope that real change is possible when Roma are given equal opportunities and when our voices are heard and respected ... I believe that fighting anti-Roma hatred is not only about responding to racism, but also about creating paths toward integration, participation, and full involvement of Roma in all areas of society. Seeing more Roma actively engaged in education, public life, media, and institutions gives me the strength to continue.”

Brisilda

In terms of motivation to carry on, for the RISE activists, not only was the personal indefatigably political, but their pursuit of justice for Roma was, by extension, the pursuit of a better society:

“What motivates me is the belief in equality and justice for all people, regardless of their background. I want to help create a society where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, and where harmful stereotypes no longer divide us. Seeing the positive impact of my work on both the Romani community and the wider society inspires me to keep going. Knowing that even small steps can lead to real change keeps me committed to this important cause.”

Maja

The righteous indignation and anger at the extent to which injustice, racism and cruelty against Roma stubbornly stalk the democracies of Europe, is strikingly articulated by Xhenson who described his motivation to challenge those in privileged positions who peddle prejudice and scapegoat Roma:

“My inner instinct, is a driving force, a burning desire to challenge the anti-Roma rhetoric that fuels hatred and has the potential to incite even more extreme narratives and acts of violence. Hatred directed at Roma, through comments, prejudices, stereotypes, slurs, defamation, and other forms of expression, whether online or offline, is simply unjustifiable.”

Xhenson

Why solidarity matters

When asked about the very idea of solidarity, the responses were unequivocal in asserting its vital importance as the very 'stuff' that fuelled resilience and resistance. As Maja put it:

"Solidarity from others is incredibly important because fighting hatred and discrimination is not something anyone can do alone. When we stand together, our voices are magnified to create stronger, more effective movements for change. Building these alliances helps foster understanding, support, and lasting progress in challenging anti-Roma hatred. My allies are people and organizations who share the commitment to equality and social justice, including activists, educators, and members of both the Roma and majority communities."

Maja

Similarly, for Xhenson solidarity was deemed to be akin to a necessity, understood as something vital that transcends mere contracts and projects, an unwavering alliance he described as approximating 'a way of life':

"Building solidarity is essential in this area of action. Allies can be anyone, any individual or entity that believes in human rights and Roma rights, and that firmly rejects and considers unacceptable hate speech, discrimination, exclusion, and other violations of democracy, the rule of law, and human dignity. What truly matters is a shared set of beliefs, goals, and a common vision for the future: A future where hatred has no place."

Xhenson

Klaudia defined her allies as *"anyone who stands up for human rights, equality, and dignity whether they are Roma or non-Roma"*. This definition embraces fellow activists, educators, local and international partner organisations, as well as the many individuals who work alongside her to challenge discrimination and promote inclusion. And importantly *"I also consider my family and community as my closest allies, as their support and strength sustain me."* Just like the other activists, solidarity in the form of practical allyship is crucial in challenging hatred against Roma:

"Change cannot happen in isolation; it requires a collective effort. When people from different backgrounds come together to speak out against antigypsyism, it amplifies our voices and helps break down the barriers of ignorance and prejudice. True solidarity means not only supporting Roma causes but also actively listening, learning, and taking action alongside us to build a more just society."

Klaudia

RISE UP! ACTIVIST INSIGHTS FOR YOUNG REBELS AGAINST RACISM

When asked about lessons learned and any advice they would like to share with young Roma in particular, and the wider human rights community in general, the project interviewees were upbeat, and buoyed up by “an optimism of the will”.

For volunteer Maja, one of the most important lessons she learned was the power of resilience and believing in her own worth, and her message for young Roma, one echoed by other respondents was:

“never let prejudice define who you are or limit your dreams.”

Maja

In these less than auspicious times for human rights activism, where the long-cherished notion that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice seems increasingly strained, the RISE responses stand as testament to the virtues of a resilience that is collective and relational:

“One of the most important lessons I’ve learned is the power of resilience and believing in your own worth, no matter the obstacles you face. For young Roma, I would say: never let prejudice define who you are or limit your dreams. To the wider human rights community, I emphasize the need for patience, persistence, and listening deeply to the voices of those most affected. In challenging times, solidarity, education, and empathy remain our strongest tools to protect and advance human rights for everyone.”

Maja

Xhenson Çela, encouraged young Roma to “*stand tall and be humble at the same time.*” They should stand tall, alongside all other nations, because “*Each nation on the face of the earth, every ethnic group, or community of shared traits, has something unique and precious to offer.*” As for humility, the counterpoint to arrogance, he deemed it to be a “*precious virtue that most people appreciate, and it earns you respect*”, and he strongly encouraged “*young people, and particularly Roma, to never cease developing themselves professionally, academically, and most importantly, socially and as human beings.*”

As for reflections to share with the wider community in these unpropitious and uncertain times, Xhenson had this to say:

“The true driving force behind our actions should be openness, acceptance, and a genuine appreciation of human rights principles and values. People should make a conscious effort to look beyond the surface and recognize that there is no valid reason to use hate speech against Roma based on assumptions or misconceptions. Often, these judgments are rooted in false beliefs or overlook the complex realities—such as the case of begging, which is more a consequence of systemic poverty and the absence of anti-poverty policies than a cultural choice.”

Xhenson

Klaudia stressed that while you must accept that change takes time, young Roma should not wait for others to give them permission to speak up or claim space:

“Your voice matters, your story matters, and your presence in every room you enter has power. Another lesson is that you don’t need to be perfect to be part of the movement. You can be learning, struggling, questioning and still be making a difference. We often carry the pressure to ‘represent’ our whole community, but I’ve learned that just being true to yourself and showing up with honesty and commitment is already an act of resistance. And maybe most importantly: love yourself as you are. Our strength doesn’t come from trying to fit in, but from embracing who we are with all our history, our culture, and our beauty.”

Klaudia

To the wider human rights community, the message was clear:

“We can’t afford to treat Roma rights or any minority rights as secondary. In these challenging times, solidarity has to be more than a statement it must be a practice rooted in equity, justice, and humility. Listen to the people most affected, create space for them, and walk alongside them, not in front of them.”

Klaudia

Brisilda, advised young Roma to be loud and proud, and ‘never let anyone define your worth’:

“As young Roma, your identity is not something to hide - it's something to celebrate. Be proud of who you are, of your roots, your language, and your culture. Invest in your education, develop your skills, and always raise your voice, even when it feels difficult. You have the power to bring change - not just for yourself, but for your community and beyond.”

Brisilda

As for the lesson still to be learned by many in the wider human rights community:

“My message is clear: you cannot speak about justice and equality without including Romani voices. Real change can only happen when we are not just spoken about, but actively included in decision-making processes. Anti-Roma racism is one of the most persistent and overlooked forms of discrimination in Europe. It must be addressed with urgency, seriousness, and action. We are living in times where human rights are under threat, but I believe that through unity, courage, and collective responsibility, we can build a future that is more inclusive, equal, and just for everyone.”

Brisilda

