

THE DRUNKEN SWARTHY OFFENDERS¹ THE IMAGE OF THE ROMA IN THE BULGARIAN PRESS IN A PRE-ELECTION CONTEXT

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Abstract

The present article focuses on the stereotypes used by 20 print media when publishing on Roma people in Bulgaria. The study answers several research questions: To what extent hate speech matters in relation to the Roma can be found in the Bulgarian press and what type of hate speech cases is replaced with implicitly negative matters? What are the main topics concerning the presence of the Roma in the national press and how are these topics distributed in the different printed media? What is the impact of the topical issues and events from the public agenda on the matters concerning the Roma minority? What are the general trends when it comes to representing the Roma during an election campaign? The research uses a triangulation between the two types of content analysis methods: a standardised matrix for quantitative analysis and open-coding of the key words and traits. An extremely negative stereotyped image is observed focused mainly on their lifestyle compared to their personal traits. The stereotypes are interrelated within a meta-story that more or less sounds like that: The drunken swarthy offenders live in illegal ghetto houses and do not pay their utility bills. They live in large family clans that fight each other depending on the interests of the big bosses.

Key words: Roma, content analysis, hate speech, press.

INTRODUCTION

Stereotypes and prejudices towards “the Gypsies” and the negative social attitudes engendered by them are some of the primary challenges facing the societal integration of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. In the last 20 years, social distance studies have shown that the Roma pertain to one of the most unwanted groups among all categories on the *Bogardus Social Distance Scale*: marriage, friends, neighbours and co-workers. Furthermore, approximately 30% of Bulgarians do not want Roma people living in the country. The only other groups commensurate to the Roma in terms of rejection are the racially different: the Vietnamese, the Chinese and people of African ancestry (Пампоров 2009). These prejudices are due to firmly held attitudes towards the Roma. They were perceived as “thievish”, “dirty”, “ignorant” and “careless” at the beginning of the transition period (Томова 1992: 302-303). Today, the Roma are perceived as “thievish”, “lazy”, “dirty”, “deceitful” and “jolly fellows” (Пампоров 2009: 139). The existence of

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strong social distances and firm stereotypes towards this minority group contribute to its spatial segregation, restricted inclusion in the labour market and reinforcement of the processes of secondary segregation in education (Томова 1992: 302-303).

The media play a uniquely important role when it comes to the strengthening or overcoming of stereotypes and prejudices towards ethnic minorities. Because of this, the Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media explicitly states two very important measures against discrimination: "... we shall not publish articles instigating or encouraging hatred, violence or any form of discrimination" and "We shall not specify race, religion, ethnicity [...] if these facts have no relevant meaning concerning the sense of the information". Furthermore, the Code pledges that journalists shall stick to "a good manner and decency" in their work. Despite this, studies on the image of the Roma in the Bulgarian press show that they are predominantly presented as generating criminal and social problems. The topic of their integration is rarely presented and in most cases it is negatively discussed (Марков 2002).

In 2009, in the context of a pre-election campaign, the Open Society Institute–Sofia implemented a project titled *For Tolerant Media*³ - the aim of which was to describe the general trends concerning the representation of the Roma in the media. Content analysis was the method of choice for researching the media environment. Content analysis (also referred to as textual analysis) is one of the most widely used methods in the Sociology of Mass Communications. Content analysis is a research technique the purpose of which is to objectify, systematise and quantify differences in the form and content of *texts*. It can be used for studying the statements of people who have a significant impact on public opinion (Weingast 1950); analysing political ideologies (Lerner, Pool, Lasswell 1952) and studying historical records – for example, the Cahiers of the Three Estates prior to the French Revolution (Markoff, Shapiro, Weitman 1975). Studying the method through which ethnically and racially different groups are represented is a classic example of content analysis of the press and electronic media (Broom and Reece 1955; Holz and Wright 1979). The need for the implementation of such a content analysis in this case is evidenced by the fact that the ethnicisation of media articles can construct the impression of the existence of inborn traits in given social groups, reinforce negative social stereotypes about them and as a result provoke the social disintegration of a substantial part of the population in a particular country.

ON METHOD

The study below aims at responding to a number of research questions: To what extent can *hate speech* in relation to the Roma be found in the Bulgarian press and what types of *hate speech* cases are replaced with implicitly negative articles? What are the main issues concerning the presence of the Roma in the national press and how are these issues distributed in the different printed media? What is the impact of topical issues and events from the public agenda on articles concerning the Roma minority? What are the general trends when it comes

³ The opinions expressed by the author of the current paper are personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Open Society Institute–Sofia.