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# The Law of the Jungle. The Online Hate-speech against the Roma in Romania

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## ABSTRACT

The Roma people are the largest minority in Europe and, since centuries, have suffered discrimination and hate crimes which persist currently. This paper analyzes 4,136 comments (2016–2020) about the Roma posted on an online open-access forum. Our findings suggest that the factors influencing Romanians' hostility against the Roma are: (1) the general distrust in the Romanian administrations, (2) the feeling of threat, and (3) the in-group favoritism. The article discusses strategies such as the improvement of the citizens' trust in the public administration, pragmatic interventions bottom-up which aim to increase the social pacification, the redefinition of the political correctness, and the application of situational prevention techniques to prevent hate crimes.

## KEYWORDS




Discrimination; minority; Romanies; Gypsies; interethnic; political correctness; forum

## Introduction

This paper aims to understand the content and specificities of the online hate speech against the Roma in Romania. For fulfilling our objective, we follow a post-positivist *Grounded Theory approach* when analyzing the comments regarding the Roma which are posted in a Romanian public online forum. Before presenting the empirical strategy and findings of our research, we contextualize the past and current situation of Romania and discuss briefly the status of the Roma in this country as well as in Europe.

## Romania: past and present

Romania is an Eastern European country which in 2007 was accepted into the European Union (EU) (European Union, 2020). During the 20th century, Romania used to be a satellite state of the Soviet Union until 1958 and it stayed under the communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu until 1989 (Tismaneanu, 2003). The institutional and social problems –partly a consequence of the totalitarianism and deprivation suffered by the people during decades of communism– seem not to have been eradicated and they persist still nowadays. In this sense, this nation faces significant challenges such as the (1) public corruption and low judicial integrity, (2) citizens' distrust toward the public authorities, and (3) the lack of a long-term development strategy to address the shortage of qualified workforce, the outdated school curricula, the weak research and innovation and the strong intra-regional differences in accessing public education and healthcare (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019).

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Furthermore, 23.6% of Romania's population lives in poverty (Cuturela et al., 2018) and approximately 3.6 million Romanians (17%) live or work abroad (Camară, 2019). Another great challenge is the tension between diverse groups since the country is composed of 20 ethnic minorities which represent 10% of its population. The two main groups are the Hungarians (6.1%) and the Roma (3.1%) (Institutul național de statistică, 2011). The latter and its interactions with the non-Roma population are at the core of this article.

### ***The Roma in Europe and in Romania***

The Roma, also called *Romanies* or *Gypsies*, are not only Romania's second greater ethnic group but also Europe's largest ethnic minority, estimated at eleven million individuals in Europe and six million living in the EU (Council of Europe, 2012).<sup>1</sup> The origins of the Roma are attributed to the Indian subcontinent (Fraser, 1995/1992) and historians point that since the 13th century, the Romanies settled in the Balkans (Fraser, 1995/1992). In Romania particularly, they had been victims of slavery since the end of the Middle Ages until the 19th century (Fraser, 1995/1992). Moreover, since the Enlightenment, the Roma had been considered –at a European level– as “aliens” and “burdens to progress” (Vaan Baar, 2011). European biological determinist scientists such as Lombroso (2006/1876) studied the supposed “delinquent character” of the Roma and influenced public policies on their control (Fraser, 1995/1992). Later, during the German National Socialist regime (1933–1945), the Roma were –because of their ethnicity– executed in Germany and the occupied part of Eastern Europe. After the fall of the Nazi regime in 1945, the Romanies were massively redistributed and obliged to become sedentary in East-Europe and England (Fraser, 1995/1992). In Romania, the Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu placed them in ghettos in the most disadvantaged parts of the country (Fraser, 1995/1992). Nonetheless, under the Communist regime, the hostility toward the Romanies seemed to decrease because they become “assimilated” and obliged to abandon their nomad way of life (Powell & Lever, 2017).

Currently, many Roma, in Romania and in other EU member states, are thought to live in situations of precariousness and social exclusion (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, 2016). Interpersonal ethnic discrimination and ethnicity-based victimization are as well problems that the Roma face because of the open hostility and rejection which the non-Roma Romanians manifest toward them (Crețan & O'Brien, 2019; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). In Romania, a representative random study (N = 1,300) showed that Romanians express high intolerance toward the Roma and other groups such as homosexuals, Muslims and persons with HIV (IRES, 2019). Romania has already received warnings from the EU about its lack of initiative regarding the prosecution of hate crimes against the Roma (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, Roma-rights activists have been, for decades, denouncing the situation in which the Roma live. The well-known militant Nicolae Gheorghe (see *The Economist*, 2013) addressed this topic in academic papers (see Gheorghe & Mirga, 2013) and journalistic publications. For instance, in the newspaper *The Guardian*, Gheorghe (2010) criticized the stereotyping of the Roma and the negligence of the Romanian political leaders regarding their inclusion and well-being, situation which he argues to have been prevalent since the 1920s. Additionally, the stigmatization and

institutional discrimination of the Roma have as well been corroborated in the 2000s by the review of Mărginean et al. (2001).

Despite the current knowledge that the anti-Roma prejudice and discrimination against are prevalent and remain a great challenge for Romanian policy-makers, the content of the prejudice on the Roma –and the feelings accompanying it– have not been addressed in depth as it has been in other countries which we review in the next section. We believe that the shedding of a light on the content of these hostile attitudes and behaviors toward the Romanian Roma might contribute to the proper design of evidence-based programs to prevent Roma's discrimination and to increase the social pacification among ethnic groups in Romania. Moreover, the approach to the topic from a qualitative prism –although systematic and rigorous– might allow the discovery of nuances unidentified thus far by quantitative methods such as surveys.

## Review of literature

This section reviews the scientific knowledge regarding the anti-Roma prejudice –from the point of view of the *dominant society*– at a macro, meso and micro-level. It is nonetheless fundamental to acknowledge that the European Roma are not a homogeneous group (see for instance, Csepeli & Simon, 2004) and whilst in some contexts they are highly discriminated against, in others, they coexist rather peacefully with the non-Roma people. Therefore, although this paper addresses the prejudice toward this ethnic group, the reader should keep in mind these distinctions and not generalize the outcomes of the paper to the whole Roma population.

Using a macrosocial and longitudinal perspective, Powell and Lever (2017) discussed European Roma's stigmatization and marginalization through history and space via the prism of *territorial stigmatization* (Wacquant, 2007, 2008) and *figurational process of group stigmatization* (Elias & Scotson, 1994/1965). The authors argue that Roma's persecution must be contextualized and understood as a long-term process in which a *fluctuating power balance* has characterized the relationship between the Roma and the non-Roma. On one hand, applying Elias and Scotson (1994/1965) theory of established-outsider relations, they argue that the Roma are a *cross-border group* which has been persecuted by the non-Roma by means of *collective illusions and fear* maintained through group processes of *disidentification*. The result of the latter would be the consideration of the Romanies as *humans of a lesser value*. On the other hand, they link Wacquant's (2007, 2008) concept of *ghetto* to the situation of the Romanies in the countries where they live. According to Powell and Lever (2017), the higher internal social cohesion of the non-Roma group would have facilitated their dominance and access to resources in the disadvantage of the Roma. The dominant group would have perpetuated this situation via *gossip* regarding the Roma and maintained the boundaries between groups via *territorial stigmatization*. In consequence, the Roma would have ended spatially excluded and marginalized, with a great deal of difficulties to access public services such as health, housing, and education. Moreover, the members of the established group would avoid interacting with the Roma because of fear of judgments from the part of the other non-Roma and thereby a loss of their social status among the dominant group. Additionally, because of the stigmatization, the Roma would also adopt a self-defense strategy of avoidance. The theoretical *territorial stigmatization* of the Romanian Roma has received empirical support (Berescu, 2011; Vincze & Rat, 2013). These authors highlighted the *ghettoization* process which Romanian Roma have suffered in the last decades.

Empirical studies have additionally discovered that the Roma of several countries have been and still are the target of systemic institutional discrimination (Barker, 2017; Fekete, 2014; Miller et al., 2008; Nacu, 2010; Popoviciu & Tileagă, 2020; Pusca, 2010; Sigona, 2005). For instance, Popoviciu and Tileagă (2020) studied Romanian official documents on the Roma's inclusion (2001–2015), finding that *subtle forms of racism* appeared in the documents and, even though the word *crime* was not used, they believed that a relationship between the Romanies and their supposed criminality was implied. In Moldova, Stirbu (2015) studied the image of the Romanies vehiculated by the press, concluding that the news covered disproportionately negative news on the Roma and thereby transmitted a negative image of the Roma. In the same sense, Vidra and Fox (2014) studied the way the mainstream media spread alt-right discourses on the supposed association of the Roma with a crime, concluding that in Hungary the racism was tolerated both in society and in the media.

In the last years, scholars in social psychology have started to focus on the anti-Roma prejudice by studying the general population's attitudes, contributing to the field with interesting insights. As a way of example, Villano et al. (2017) concluded that the Italians perceived the Roma as *free* from social impositions but *criminals* and *untrustworthy*. In Hungary and Slovakia, Kende et al. (2017) surveyed students and a part of the general population (N = 1,082) and measured their anti-Roma prejudice, corroborating the existence of (1) *blatant stereotyping* of the Roma referring to criminality, laziness, and threat; (2) perceptions that the Roma get *undeserved benefits* and (3) essentialist and romanticized views on the differences between Romany and non-Roma individuals. Another interesting finding in this study was that the most negative attitudes emerged when the people did have intergroup contact with the Romanies and when these prejudices were tolerated and approved by their social context. In fact, the negative intergroup contact may also be linked to a feeling of *threat* and fight for limited resources, in the sense that the dominant population perceives that a greater amount of Roma concentrated on a particular place concurs with higher poverty levels (Mušinka et al., 2014, as cited in Kende et al., 2017).

Orosz et al. (2018) analyzed open-ended responses from a representative sample of Hungarians (N = 505) about the discussions which respondents' family and friends maintain on the Roma. A great majority –75% of the participants– described that their closest ones expressed *negative stereotypes* regarding the Roma. Criminality, laziness, poor personal hygiene, threat, and dehumanization were the most common topics discussed by the friends and family of the participants. As well, higher *modern racism* was predicted by the expression of dehumanization, threat, or violence against the Roma. The scholars discussed the possibilities to propose that the media encourage *positive stereotypes* on the Roma, such as their high commitment to their family.

## Materials and methods

### Research strategy

Following a *Grounded Theory Approach* (GT) –which we describe in the next paragraphs– data were collected from *Reddit Romania*, an open-access forum and a highly popular platform, explored as well by in other domains (see Buntain & Golbeck, 2014; Carson et al., 2015; Singer et al., 2016; Soliman et al., 2019). We chose Reddit as the field because of the

clear geographical delimitation of the community “Reddit Romania”. Networks such as Twitter or Facebook were considered at an initial stage of the research but Twitter’s global character and Facebook’s fragmentation in private groups and users with restricted accounts made them not eligible for our research. For the present article, we, therefore, collected 4,136 comments from Reddit Romania which treated issues concerning the Roma from 2016 to August 2020. Using the keywords “Roma” and “Gypsy” in Romanian (*Romi, tigan*), we collected all the public discussions from the platform. Raw data were composed of 127 main comments and of the 4,009 sub-comments in response to the main comments.

The *Grounded Theory Approach* –proposed initially by Glaser & Strauss, 2009/1967– is a useful method to be applied in unexplored domains. Its main role is to create a theory which emerges from empirical findings. With no prior positions nor hypotheses, the model is constituted bottom-up, using all types of data and applying inductive and/or iterative methods. In practice, the researcher analyzes the data, creates categories of similar content and draws up associations between these. If needed, she adds more data from different sources in an iterative process until theoretical saturation is reached. This approach is context-based and thus the *Grounded Theory Approach* is rarely used for extrapolating the results to other circumstances. Even though GT is a *young* methodology, it has been noticeable the diversity of philosophies and methodologies when applying this approach (see Ralph et al., 2015). In our research, data were collected with a GT methodology because of the iterative bottom-up process which generated the data collection. In fact, this study started as an exploration of Romanians’ claims regarding the Roma on the platform Reddit as the initial source. We started gathering pieces of information from the platform and analyzing them preliminarily into categories and we continued chronologically to collect more posts. In addition, since many comments are linked to external sources such as news, videos, or Facebook posts, we needed to take a detour and consult these sources, and in several cases others as well to be able to fully understand the context in which the initial post emerged. This process happened several times by means of an iterative process. At the end of the data collection, we collected all the posts available on the platform. The final raw material was therefore composed by the 4,136 comments which roughly meant around 132,000 words over 500 pages.

Using a software for qualitative data analysis (*NVivo*), the raw data were analyzed, and 10 final codes emerged, compiling in total 1,296 segments of content which correspond roughly to one segment-one comment although some posts were coded in more than one category since they referred to several topics. Regarding the non-selected comments, these were either short replies to the selected segments (for instance, “haha”, “OK” or insults to other users) or non-related comments referring to other topics close to the Roma but not on the Romanies per se. Chronologically, data were introduced into the software for qualitative analysis and with no prior categories, the categorization process started spontaneously. Once finished the preliminary analysis, two supplementary analyses of the data allowed the organization of the selected segments in 10 main categories of the main topics regarding the discussions (presented in the section *Description of the Sample*). A fourth reread of the raw data allowed to verify the categorization of these and to correct mistakes. This way of analyzing data has also been proposed by Charmaz (2004) in the framework of a GT approach.

## **Methodological and ethical considerations**

Due to the culturally rooted stereotypes about the Roma in Romania, we are aware that full neutrality or a *positivist approach* cannot be applied in this domain. For instance, the main objective of the article is to understand the roots of the anti-Roma prejudice to be able ultimately to contribute with insights for preventing hate speech and hate crime. This latter is a clear positioning of the researcher –framed in the rules that prevail in society and in many penal legislation. Acknowledging this aspect, we nevertheless tried to implement a *post-positivist philosophy* (see Phillips & Burbules, 2000), which was actually also implemented by the fathers of GT (Ralph et al., 2015). Therefore, we intended to describe and analyze the data as objectively as possible while aiming *reflexivity* (see Engward & Davis, 2015) about our position regarding the data, our role in the data collection and analysis, and as well the feelings which emerged during the process. Following the example of Engward and Davis (2015), who put into practice the *reflexivity model* of Alvesson and Skolberg (2009/2000), we developed our reflexivity around four aspects of our research:

### *(1) Problematizing our empirical data*

Our data were generated with no influence of the researcher because we observed the interactions which users of Reddit entertained *ex post facto*. We think that the natural observation of a sensitive topic (see Díaz Fernández, 2019), with the nonintervention and non-manipulation of the conditions, freed the data from biases such as the social desirability of the participants, for instance.

Nonetheless, it is possible that if we had included other additional sources, the data would have been even richer. We decided to focus only on Reddit because of the geographical localization problems mentioned above. One other disadvantage of the data is the lack of representativeness of the sample since most of the users of online forums seem to be young adults (due to the lack of Romanian data, check U.S. Reddit reach by age group 2019, n.d.). As well, because of the anonymous character of the forum, the presence of *trolls*<sup>2</sup> and users whose content is not serious is not uncommon. However, because of the same reason, the forums seem to be spaces of “free speech” and to provide a reliable knowledge of such a controverted topic, at least for exploratory purposes.

### *(2) Research engagement*

The raw data were analyzed as such, with no modifications of the original information. The main biases might emerge from reliability issues regarding the coding in the sense that another researcher would have coded differently than we did. Because of that, data were checked several times.

The mastery of the Romanian language might be a challenge during the data collection. In that regard, we clarify that we master Romanian as a mother tongue, which was an asset to this type of research since many users employed idioms, shortened expressions, and regionalisms which would be challenging to understand by a non-native speaker or by an automatized translation software. Therefore, all the

comments were analyzed in Romanian and for this present article the quotations were translated into English.

The feelings of the researcher might also bias the data coding process. Introspection was used in the process of becoming aware of our positioning toward our data, following recommendations of emotions-tracking during fieldwork (Emerson et al., 2011). Regarding our feelings, we consider that a desirable distance from the object of study was kept –influenced by the non-intrusive nor interactive character of the research– although we sometimes felt repulsion when analyzing the most violent comments (see *Results*). Secondly, discussions with Romanian and international colleagues on the findings of the study also helped to the maintenance of a relative *neutrality* toward the data.

### (3) *Clarification of the political-ideological context*

The main question is whether these forums have a clear ideology or if they concentrate more people from one specific political spectrum (i.e., alt-right individuals). Initial indices suggest that this is not necessarily the case – as the reader might observe in [Table 1](#) in the following section, about 13.7% of the comments about the Roma were positive and 4.9% discussed neutrally their culture and the third most recurrent topic was the *defense of the Roma*. Nonetheless, the remaining 81.4% of the content was negative, and therefore, it might be related to a more conservative cosmivision. However, the question remains whether this distribution is representative of the Romanian society. Even though we surely cannot acknowledge, we think that this distribution is not so distinct from the Romanian society because of the overlap of the forum's topics with the former studies which have signaled the generalized rejection of the Roma in Romania (IRES, 2019). Nonetheless, for avoiding unwanted generalization of our findings, in our Results section, we refer to our sample as “the users” and not as “the Romanians”.

### (4) *Representation and authority*

We did not influence the participants because of the non-intrusive data collection process. To ensure objectivity and to avoid the so-called *cherry-picking*, we present percentages of the categories discussed ([Table 1](#)) as well as a word cloud of the 40 most employed words ([Figure 1](#)). In the Results section, apart from summarizing the main categories and its most salient elements, translated fragments of comments are presented for illustration purposes.

For transparency reasons, we clarify that we come from a Romanian Roma family from Transylvania and we have lived our first 10 years of life in Romania. After moving abroad in another European country, we have kept strong links with Romania via our family members. As well, in adulthood, we have been working for the last five years as a social worker supporting Romanian sex workers and Romanian Roma homeless people. Moreover, in the past, we have studied the victimization and crime of Romanian Roma youth by a one-year field study within migrant Roma (Molnar & Aebi, 2021). These personal and professional circumstances of life allowed us to understand more in-depth



the challenges that the Roma, in Romania and abroad, face as well as the dynamics between them and the non-Roma.

**Description of the sample**

Among the main 127 posts, 73 were shares of an event broadcast in the news or on an external source like YouTube or Facebook. In second place, 37 of the main posts were a question is launched for starting a debate. Third, 14 posts were personal experiences shared with the Reddit community and last, three publications were qualified as *other* (i.e., a short comment or a meme which engendered a larger conversation). Once a main comment was posted, it emerged a cluster of sub-comments where the users gave their opinions, shared their experiences, or forwarded another external source in relation to the main post.

Figure 1 shows, through a word cloud, the distribution of the 40 most common Romanian words<sup>3</sup> employed by the users of Reddit Romania (N = 4,136), these being in English: Gypsies, Romanian, problem, many, children, the police, the world, no one, racism, the music, society, [to have] trouble, life, most of them, made, ethnicity, the work, need, continue, no more, the street, the cause, shit, problems, school, *Manele* [music attributed to the Roma], car, culture, the law, fear, fine [punishment], justice, work, normal, dumbass, otherwise, stealing, agreement, being, news, the home, write, [to be] serious, heard, [to be] right, [to have] the right, joke, time, the Gypsies, and absolute.



Figure 1. Most common 40 words in Romanian.

Table 1 illustrates the more commonly discussed topics regarding the Roma among the subsample (n = 1,296 segments) chosen for the content analysis. Next section addresses all the subjects discussed.

**Table 1.** Distribution on the codes, frequencies and percentages (n = 1,296 segments).

		No of coding references	%
1.	Criminality/deviance (-)	309	23.8
2.	Insults, disgust and violence and punitiveness (-)	254	19.6
3.	Defense of the Roma and more nuanced views (+)	177	13.7
4.	Critics of political correctness and positive discrimination (-)	147	11.3
5.	Cultural essentialism (-)	116	9.0
6.	General distrust and criticism toward Romania (=)	114	8.8
7.	Culture and history of the Roma (=)	64	4.9
8.	Tips against victimization (-)	58	4.5
9.	Group differentiation (-)	36	2.8
10.	Fear toward the Roma (-)	21	1.6
	Total	1296	

(-) negative content regarding the Roma; (=) neutral content; (+) positive content.

## Results

### Description of the most discussed topics

#### The deviance and criminality of the Roma

The users of the forum discussed in the greatest proportion the perceived deviance and criminality of the Romanies. Typically, the deliberations started when someone posted a newspaper link about a crime supposedly committed by a Roma. Even if the conversation arose in most of the cases from an external source, the rest of the users gave their opinion based on personal or vicarious experiences learned from relatives or acquaintances. Despite the lack of available statistics, users claimed that the Roma adults commit a great deal of offenses and –from their experience– the best strategy to be applied is to avoid them.

**U1:** I lived near a Gypsy neighborhood (. . .). When I met them, I didn't know anything about Gypsies, my parents didn't tell me anything bad or good about them, I formed my own opinion. I didn't do anything to them, I didn't start with prejudice on them and yet in a very short time they made me understand that I have to avoid them if I want not to be beaten, cursed or get my things stolen.

The offenses discussed are broad, from deviant behaviors or misdemeanors like *beginning* and *working illegally* to serious offenses such as *murder* or *rape*. They argue thereby that the Romanians discriminate the Roma because the latter are uncivilized and therefore, they would deserve the social exclusion.

**U2:** If 90% of the Gypsies stopped begging, stealing, killing, [and started] working legally, correctly, behaving nicely, civilized, no one would have anything against them. Nobody can stand them because 90% do robberies. Garbage. Social parasites. When they get civilized and behave like normal people, they will no longer be discriminated.

The users also complained that some Romanies impose *their law* and *terrorize* the non-Roma in villages and cities. Moreover, the ones who have lived within the Roma neighborhoods and have been victims –directly or vicariously– of a person suspected of being Romany seemed to have a more radical opinion against the Roma. Some users also shared their own victimization experience and others proposed that they should face the Roma or call the police, but the victims indicated that they felt afraid that the Roma retaliate with violence.

**U3:** Very simple answer [to the reason why U3 did not complain to the police]: because I don't want to be beaten, stabbed or spit in the face?

### ***Hate speech and punitiveness toward the Roma***

In second place, the users employed the platform mainly to mock or insult the Roma as well as to propose harsh measures against them. Regarding the mockery and the insults, in first place, sarcastic comments were expressed referring to *counter-stereotypes* such as the Roma working, the Roma as good leaders, the Roma being peaceful or the Roma not *stealing children*.

**U4:** *Manelist* [a type of music attributed to the Roma] Gypsies, the species that gave so many kings, emperors and princes.

**U5:** And if the Gypsies lead us, what?

As well, the users shared mockeries and jokes about the Roma, such as for instance, they ridiculed the lack of literacy of the Roma as well as their preference for the iron as a precious metal –a supposed consequence of their tendency for the handicraft and their selling of copper or iron. Some of the derisions were also related to the dehumanization of the Roma and their comparison with animals, such as pigs or monkeys.

**U6:** Does it seem fair to you to say that those Roma people are pigs? But what did pigs do to be so insulted?

Regarding the insults of high seriousness, some users referred to the Roma as the *cancer* of the society. Few people also expressed their hope that weapons become legal in Romania for self-defense against the Romanians. Even though it is not the rule, some comments expressed wishes such as the death, the extermination and the capital sentence to be applied to the Roma. Some of the users also expressed admiring the United States for “their exemplary” punishments.

**U7:** These violent Gypsies, thieves, crooks, those who live from the illegalities committed on the Romanian territory are a form of cancer for the society and you only respond to cancer with brutal treatments. Cancer doesn't care about you, and you should know that.

### ***Cultural essentialism and group differentiation***

Most of the users agreed with the *cultural essentialist* view of the Roma, claiming not to criticize or discriminate the latter because of their ethnicity but due to Romanians' customs, which in the view of the users, were old-fashioned and had no place in the modern 21st century.

**U8:** I think the problem is that, in Romania, we have two groups a century apart. The problem comes from there. To pretend that this is not the case is to put your head in the sand. It's easy to say: Racism is bad, and it's true, racism is bad, but I would have the same attitude toward some Romanians if they behaved uncivilized.

Furthermore, the users criticized the fact that the Roma generally do not want to work and thus they prefer to beg or to steal. Moreover, they expressed reprobation of the Roma lack of civic education and their supposed preference to living in unsanitary conditions, sending their children to beg, dropping them out of school, and obliging them to marry at a very early age.

**U9:** I am not a racist. I have nothing to do with the Roma race. I have a problem with the Gypsy culture, and by Gypsy I mean Roma and the ones who have the custom of sending their children to beg on Sunday morning, and then in the evening we see them all drunk gathered in front of the bar.

The Romanian users stressed very much that they are different from the Roma. In that sense, they felt as defamation when being confused with the Romanies, getting aggressive when a new or a post referred to Roma and Romanian interchangeably. In addition, because the foreigners often do not differentiate the Romanians from the Roma, the users blamed the Roma for spreading a bad reputation of the Romanians abroad.

**U10:** Even the Europeans see us as scandalous Gypsies, ignoring the millions of quiet and hardworking Romanians to the detriment of several hundred [Romanies].

Moreover, they also criticized an unintended effect of the *political correctness* (see next section) which, by accident, occasioned that Roma and Romanian were synonyms in French. For instance, French people would rather use the word *Romanian* instead of *Gypsy* because the first is more socially accepted.

**U11:** The French have a pejorative word: Gypsy [*Gitan*] (. . .), not used in too positive contexts. Instead, the word Romanian [*Roumain*] is often used to mean Gypsies, to make sure they don't look racist. That's the kind of euphemism that annoys me the most.

### ***The dissidence: antiracism and nuanced views***

In third place, users of the platform also defended the Roma and criticized the claims of those who generalized their negative experiences, arguing that the latter were just an excuse for being xenophobic and violent. Moreover, some of the users also highlighted that in order to affirm that crime is indeed a problem in the Roma community, clear statistics are needed. They, therefore, defended the need to be nuanced, to analyze both sides, and be critical with both the left and the right wing of the political spectrum.

**U12:** I also had bad experiences with Gypsies. I also had great experiences with the Gypsies. I also read about criminal Gypsies, as well as about Gypsies who succeed in life. As long as I don't have a clear statistic, I can't make judgments based on a sample of my personal experience. It is clear that we have a problem with the Gypsies, and that we should punch (morally, of course) both the SJWs [Social Justice Warriors] –who are great fighters but do not make a shit for these people– as well as the (neo-)fascists and alt-right –for whom, whether they have balls to recognize or not, the sure solution is their extermination or deportation.

Discussions about the problems which the Roma face emerged therefore in more neutral tones than the debates in former sections. For instance, some users highlighted the challenge of integrating Roma adults who grew up in precarious conditions and who were sent to beg or were dropped out of school while, at the same time, they were judged and discriminated by the dominant society.

**U13:** When your parents raise you in a tent and send you to beg and to steal since you are five years old, instead of sending you to school, and you live in a society that despises you for the sins of your parents (. . .), what chance do you think you can really have for integration?

The dissident users also proposed to intervene with the new generations mainly via education campaigns directed to children and adults and to abandon the ethnic

differentiation in schools so the Roma and non-Roma children study together. Moreover, the more nuanced users also criticized the romanization of those who admired the U.S.'s punitiveness. They argued that the United States was not an example to follow because of their high crime rates.

**U14:** Europe is still in its logic of “we can save everyone”, which is good. Nobody envies the U.S. for crime statistics . . .

Some of the users with neutral contributions discussed the history of the Roma as well, i.e., their Indian origins, their arrival to Romania and their slavery past in this country. They also shared recommendations of books or documentaries to consult.

### ***The political correctness and positive discrimination***

The fourth more discussed subject was the so-called political correctness as well as the public policies in favor of the Roma, in particular the inclusion programs. From the users' perspective, the origin of the political correctness started when Romania needed to provide proofs to the European institutions about its efforts to integrate the Roma into the Romanian society. In general, the users disagreed with both the political correctness and the integration programs, arguing that they are pointless since the Roma do not want to include themselves and they like to live on the outskirts. Some of the users even argued that these measures are far left-wing and naïve, coming from institutions that had little contact with the Roma.

**U15:** What the fuck is anti-Gypsyism?! The biggest promoters of anti-Gypsyism are the Gypsies themselves.

**U16:** We have this non-European minority with their own language, court system and all of that shebang, who have no intention of respecting the laws of any nation they live in. Our hands are tied by the EU, UNHRC [United Nations Human Rights Council], and utopian idealists from Western Europe. What do you do with the people whose “magnum opus” is having more than 10 children and marrying (illegally) at the age of 12? People who feel “smart” by stealing instead of creating wealth? People who don't value education.

Some users also felt that the Romanians are unfairly blamed as responsible for the lack of integration of the Roma. In that sense, they also expressed that the so-called discrimination card is too often used by the Romanies as an excuse for the lack of motivation in improving their life conditions:

**U17:** It sounds like the Romanians are evil and don't let the Gypsies become doctors, but they, so oppressed, face fate and still get what they want. But, from everyday reality, I notice the exact opposite: Romanians want Gypsies to integrate, to stop being aggressive, to stop stealing and to be serious (. . .). Who wouldn't they want all this to stop and all the Gypsies to be doctors or what else do they want? Those who hate Gypsies because they have different skin or just because they are Gypsies are in the minority, I would say.

In some users' opinion, the media and the national and international authorities have a political agenda regarding the Roma issues, and therefore they present an exaggerated positive image of the Romanies. Academia was also criticized for encouraging ideologically charged studies with the only purpose of getting funding to study topics which are perceived as politically correct.

They also expressed their disapproval of the *censoring culture* when someone expresses an idea which, when identified as racist or discriminatory, gets banned from the platform and their comment is erased. In fact, some users perceived the need for political correctness similarly to a joke, almost as a confirmation of their former ideas.

**U18:** Don't we see what crap is in the West with the political correctness? How polarized have their societies become? (...) Are we in any way responsible for the conquerors, for the settlers, for the slaveholders? Crap! We have been slaves of the Ottomans for hundreds of years. Killed, enslaved, exploited without mercy, everything you want. I'm not saying that we should play the victim's card, it would be embarrassing and unproductive. (...) No speech should be banned, it should be discussed, analyzed, condemned (if it is immoral/illegal). If you forbid to debate a topic, you do what they did before you, you will put the bone in the construction of a totalitarian or abusive regime which will censor everything that does not fit [in its agenda].

Furthermore, the users expressed that as long as their daily interactions with the Romanies are still unpleasant, they are not interested in the statistics nor the illustrations of the supposedly few Roma who succeeded in life.

**U19:** I don't need to give you a quote, because I didn't make up my mind reading a survey but because I grew up in a city full of Gypsies (...). Maybe you had other experiences. Maybe in your city the Gypsies are warm and welcoming people who share warm pies and pansies to passersby. But where I come from, you don't need to give a source to explain why you hate Gypsies.

### **General distrust in Romanian institutions**

In sixth place, the users expressed general distrust toward the Romanian public system as well as a widespread feeling of disappointment toward the administration. They claimed that, in general, many Romanian institutions are dysfunctional, for instance, the local administrations, the police, the schools, and the system for the placement of institutionalized minors. Additionally, they linked the poor functioning of these organizations with the negative situation of the Roma.

The users manifested high distrust toward the local administrations which, in their view, are highly corrupted and, because they receive funding for the Roma integration plans, they positively discriminate the Romanies and do not intervene when these commit infractions. Moreover, some users criticized the subordination of the local police to the town hall, which discriminates positively the Roma by the under-policing of their neighborhood. Furthermore, they perceive that the local administration annuls the fines applied by the police to the Romanies. Some individuals also felt that the police and the majors of the cities have illegal businesses with the Romanies.

**U21:** After 11–12 at night, you see vans patrolling, but damn, only through safe areas. (...) In the areas infested with Gypsies, damn if you ever see a van (...). The Romanian police, as an institution, is an infected abomination, interested only in making money (preferably as easily as possible, that's why it is fashionable to hide in the bushes with a radar) and to give statistics that will put them in a good light (if all the crimes were recorded, it would be seen that they do not do their job well) and then they have every interest in discouraging you from complaining or even refusing to make reports.

The context of general distrust seems to cause a feeling of being treated unfairly by the administration because of the supposed positive discrimination mentioned above. The users

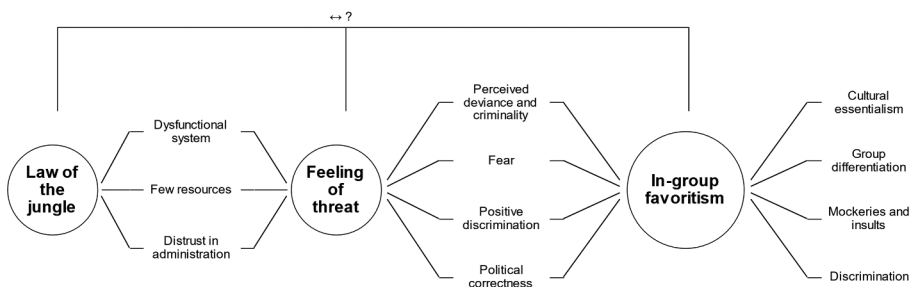
perceived as unfair that whereas the Roma get the social assistance, the Romanians, despite their precariousness, are obliged to work hard and pay their duties. Another symptom of the distrust in the administration might be found in the discussions about victimization. In this context, some users offered guidance to others about what they should do in case of being a victim of a crime committed by a Romany. The pieces of advice given were numerous such as calling the police, acting “crazy”, being violent toward the Roma, or even moving away from where the Roma live. Nevertheless, a problem which was mentioned is that, when called in the past, the police did not show up or did not want to prosecute the offenders. Many users, in that case, offered tips of the manner to succeed when dealing with problematic police officers. It was recommended, for instance, to record the assault in order to gather evidence (which will not be gathered otherwise), to send a certified letter to the police station, to contact the superior of the police agent if this latter wanted to classify the affair, to fill a complaint against the police officer, to complain directly at the prosecution office and thus overpass the police, and even to directly contact the media. It was also recommended to look for private retribution after several unanswered calls to the police, even though there were only a few users recommending this last option.

**U22:** Go directly to the ward and file a criminal complaint in rem for the crimes of threat and blackmail. You film everything every time (. . .). You bury the cops in criminal complaints until they get tired of you and solve the problem.

**U23:** Call the police. Once, twice, three times. Doesn't it work? Then you take matters into your own hands.

### The whole picture

Based on the pieces of information mentioned in the precedent section, this section intends to develop an interpretative reflection regarding the factors influencing the hostility and hate speech of Romanians regarding their Roma fellows. In our view, the hostility and hate speech that Romanians express toward the Roma might be influenced or accelerated by three interrelated factors (see [Figure 2](#)): (1) the need to survive alone with no state assistance (*the law of the jungle*); (2) the *feeling of threat* and (3) the need to favor the own group priorities (*the in-group favoritism*). However, we must clarify since the beginning that the causal direction of this model is unclear because we cannot know which one of these factors emerged the first as well as we do not know if there are other confounders which influence



**Figure 2.** Theoretical scheme of the factors accompanying the Romanians' hostility against the Roma.

the hostility toward the Roma (for publications regarding causality see Chambliss & Schutt, 2012; Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018). In the next lines, we address each of the points and their implications.

*Law of the jungle.* According to Cambridge dictionary, the law of the jungle is “the idea that people who care only about themselves will be most likely to succeed in a society or organization”. This metaphor relates to the survival of the strongest or the fittest and it is as well linked to the popular slogan “eat or be eaten”. In that sense, when the external conditions are hostile and the resources are limited, the humans seek in first place their own survival and the one of their kins. In our study, the users of Reddit Romania manifested a general feeling of distrust and disappointment toward the Romanian public system –which objectively faces serious economic challenges, among other difficulties (see Introduction). They had the sensation of being constantly tricked and treated unfairly by public servants, who in their view, ambitioned only to enrich themselves and hence not to serve the public. They also perceived the police as ineffective.

The second element relates to the *feeling of threat* which is as well related to the dysfunctionality of the system. We identified three types of threat expressed by the users of the forum: for their personal safety, for their access to resources, and for their free speech. Regarding the threat for one’s safety, the police were viewed as unsuccessful and therefore they felt unprotected if becoming a victim of a crime. Moreover, the Roma were perceived as a group with deviant and criminal tendencies which might endanger one’s safety. The generalized association of the Roma with criminality and deviance was not completely fictitious but was also based on former victimization experiences which were extrapolated to the whole ethnic group. The users felt also threatened their access to the available resources. In this context, the Roma were thought to not only get access to these via tricks and crimes, but they were also institutionally assisted by the Roma integration programs. In third place regarding the threat for their freedom of speech, they also protested about the political correctness, which does not allow them to express their authentic observations and opinions. The users expressed that these politics had created injustice and unfairly blamed the Romanians for not integrating the Roma and for being racist.

In a context of scarcity of resources and feeling of threat, the *in-group favoritism* might emerge at a quick velocity. Since the resources are scarce and one fears that they will become even scarcer and the rival group is perceived as playing unfairly, one prefers to favor one’s own group. The users viewed the Romanians and Roma as rivals and fundamentally different and homogeneous groups; the Roma being perceived as humans of a lesser value and thereby susceptible to be mocked, insulted, and discriminated against. The Romanians, on their view, would be the victims of the situation and thereby they should protect themselves.

Even though the hate speech against the Roma seemed to be socially tolerated in the platform, a small percentage of users –whom we baptized as the *Dissidence*– offered their more nuanced and neutral visions about the Roma, the Romanians, and the context around them. The Dissidence, therefore, challenged both the perception of threat and the in-group favoritism of the users. With arguments defying users’ axioms regarding the supposed generalized criminality of the Roma or the supposed threat for the freedom of speech, the dissident users also challenged the cultural essentialism, criticized the hate speech and ultimately addressed the discrimination toward the Roma.



## Discussion

### *Final considerations and further research*

This paper contributes with empirical data coming from Romania, country which has not benefited of much information coming from the point of view of those to whom the prejudice belongs; although which has in-depth studied the situation of the Roma, their victimization, and their stigmatization (see Crețan & O'Brien, 2019; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, 2016; Fraser, 1995/1992; Gheorghe & Mirga, 2013; Gheorghe, 2010; Mărginean et al., 2001). Centuries after the Enlightenment's scientists considering the Roma as *burden* to progress (Lombroso, 2006/1876; see Vaan Baar, 2011), the views of the contemporary Romanian users of Reddit seem not to substantially differ from the past. Obviously, this is not a surprising result since the especially harsh rejection to the Roma people manifested by the association of the Roma with criminality, their dehumanization, and the injustice felt by the non-Roma regarding the integration plans have already been documented by other Eastern European scholars which we reviewed in former sections (Kende et al., 2017; Orosz et al., 2018; Powell & Lever, 2017; Villano et al., 2017). Moreover, the analysis of Powell and Lever (2017) –using Wacquant's (2007, 2008) concept of *territorial stigmatization* and Elias and Scotson (1994/1965) *figurational process of group stigmatization*– seems equally applicable as a framework to the Romanian context in which the dominant group discusses *fantasies* and *gossips* about the Roma and their supposed innate or culturally determined deviant character, and in less proportion, their condition of *lesser humans*. These discussions end up in a feedback loop of justification of Roma's group and territorial stigmatization.

In our view, our most salient finding –which has been barely highlighted by other scholars thus far– is the role of Romanians' *distrust in the public institutions* as a variable which might influence or accentuate their perceptions and feelings toward the Roma. In fact, when Powell and Lever (2017) argue that the dominant group does not wish the Roma to have access to similar resources, one might infer that these latter are well established and easily accessible for the dominant group. Nonetheless, the challenges which Romania still faces seem to be as well perceived and suffered by the Romanians. Therefore, the metaphor of the *law of the jungle* seems relevant for describing the feelings of most citizens –Roma and non-Roma– living in Romania. Both groups struggle because of the problems inherent to their country and therefore being self-centered and competitive seems essential for surviving. In this context, we think that it would be interesting if further research compared the anti-Roma prejudice between Western and Eastern Europeans, considering as an important variable the trust in the administrations of each region. In addition, related to the trust in the administrations, Gheorghe (2010, p. 1) argued the following:

Romania needs a functioning public administration run by properly trained civil servants, some of whom could be Roma, who would guarantee access to public services. If the Romanian social services would work according to their own rules it would be much more beneficial –for everyone– than any specific Roma strategy could be. If they develop a new Roma strategy it might be useful for producing a few headlines, and as a bargaining chip in the Schengen deal, but it is highly unlikely that it would ever be implemented –if only because the institutional capacity to do so does not exist in Romania”.

Another interesting finding which emerges from our data is the existence of users who expressed nuanced discourses regarding the Roma and therefore defied the established consensus. Clearly, the negative content was still the protagonist but the existence of dissident voices in these forums might be a symptom of the change of mentality of the Romanian society. Nevertheless, the question whether these supporting reactions are transferable from the cyberworld to the physical world remains still open. It is however possible that, as Powell and Lever (2017) argued, the members of the established group fear themselves becoming outsiders and therefore would not defy the established representations. However, this question cannot be answered with the current data and therefore it deserves further study.

From our data, another interrogation that remains in the dark is the practical application of the Roma Integration plans by the administration and their communication strategy regarding both the Roma and the Romanian population. Our results stress that the current Roma integration plans are unpopular among the Romanian users and thereby it seems improbable to succeed in integrating the Roma in a Romanian society which rejects the mentioned plans.

Many Romanian users believed as legitimate their reasons for expressing anti-Roma prejudice and even for marginalizing the Romanies. Therefore, they also perceived the need to be *politically correct* as left-wing propaganda and hypocritical. Moreover, if socially reprimanded by the moderator of the forum or by other users, they seemed hermetic for opening their mind. Therefore, we think that it is relevant to reflect whether the political correctness is not creating unintended side effects contrary to what was intended in a first moment. As Gabor argued (1994, p. 157): “perceptions that are widely held but not discussed in polite company do not disappear; they are merely driven underground in the form of extremist groups that are genuinely racist”.

Last, one actor who seems to have an interesting role is the mass media. Scholars such as Stirbu (2015) and Vidra and Fox (2014) have already highlighted that the image vehiculated by the press about the Roma in Moldova and Hungary is mainly negative. Even though addressed marginally in this paper, the reader might have perceived that many discussions started from a content coming from the media (see *Description of the sample*). Therefore, it seems to exist a feedback loop between what the media posts and what is discussed on Reddit. Nonetheless, we do not know until which extent the content of the news shapes the prejudice of the people. Actually, when finding news which highlighted positive aspects from the Roma people or showed a successful Roma person, the users complained as well, attributing this new to a specific political agenda and not to objective content. Therefore, the question if the media could participate in the decrease of the prejudice toward the Roma needs further study.

### **Policy implications**

Solving the complex problem of Romanians’ distrust in the administration requires structural changes, such as the improvement of the welfare state. Interesting proposals have already been made in other Eastern European countries highly affected by corruption. For instance, Gerber (2000) proposed to professionalize the bureaucracy, by increasing the salaries, incentives and holding accountable the public servants for their work, and to strengthen the legal infrastructure – strategies that we, too, see necessary for improving the Romanian public system. Nonetheless, these changes are long term and take high

investment of resources as well as an overwhelming amount of coordination that goes beyond a criminologist's domain of expertise.

We believe that, for increasing the social pacification, a pragmatic solution would be the implementation of strategies at a Romanian local level, bottom-up rather than top-down (following the example of Bosáková, 2018) by taking into account both the needs of the Roma and the non-Roma from a specific place. The contact between Roma and non-Roma users seems to encourage negative feelings and not to decrease prejudice, as also stressed by other scholars (see the review of Kende et al., 2017). Therefore, perhaps public policies should discard contact alone in exchange of programs which demonstrated to have better outcomes such as the *cooperation for a higher goal* (Sherif & Sherif, 1969), or the training of volunteers with a Roma background like in the program "Living library" of Orosz et al. (2016).

Even though we believe that the political correctness is still necessary for protecting individuals from the hatred of others, it might be desirable to find a balance in which the freedom of speech is respected while the right of the others to live free of defamation, harassment, or humiliation is protected (Tschapka, 2018). Following the proposal of Tschapka (2018), in order to be more popular, the political correctness should be rather baptized *common sense* or *human decency* and as well it should encourage people to reflect upon their opinions, while focusing mostly on the content of their speech and not on the used expressions or words. Without any doubt that all forms of discrimination and hate speech harm communities and individuals, our results suggest that labeling people just as *racists* radicalize them in their beliefs.

The impact of the media in people's representations about the Roma remains unanswered. Several pieces of research from other domains have not found an effect on the media campaigns and the decrease of prejudice (Paluck, 2009; review of literature of Paluck & Green, 2009). Paluck (2009), through a one-year experiment in two fictional communities in Rwanda, found that media content indeed supposed a change of the perceptions of social norms and people's behaviors but not on their beliefs. Perhaps this finding should be considered when developing anti-prejudice campaigns in Romania and as well when evaluating them. In that sense, a more pragmatic approach targeting Romanians' perception of the social rules and their prosocial behaviors might also be more successful. By the way of an example, in criminology, the well-known *situational prevention approach* (Cornish & Clarke, 2003) has shown great effectiveness and has been applied for decreasing a great deal of offenses (see Cox, 2008; Gilmour, 2016; Hodgkinson et al., 2016). Cornish & Clarke (2003) proposed a detailed inventory of 25 evidence-based prevention techniques, among which, some would be interesting to be tested for preventing hate crimes against the Roma.

## Notes

1. These estimations have been criticized by various authors (see Surdu & Kovats, 2015), but since the validity of the official statistics is not the focus of this present paper, this aspect is not analyzed in-depth.
2. According to Cambridge dictionary: "someone who leaves an intentionally annoying or offensive message on the internet, in order to upset someone or to get attention or cause trouble".
3. Words with five letters or more. There were excluded from the analysis unrelated propositions as well as synonyms or close format of the same word.

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