

ANTIGYPSYISM IN PUBLIC DISCOURSES AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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ANTI-ROMA INCITEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF ELECTIONS - A CASE STUDY: BADALONA 2010/11 (CATALONIA, SPAIN)

INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a critical analysis of the election campaign led by the People's Party (Partido Popular) in Badalona, 2010/11 (Catalonia, Spain). This campaign started with a very controversial racist case at the beginning of April 2010, when Xavier García Albiol (leader of the local party) distributed around 15,000 leaflets associating Roma immigrants with criminality. The leaflets were distributed in neighborhoods such as Llefià, La Salut and Sant Roc, where a significant number of Roma immigrants live. The leaflets contained keywords such as 'insecurity', 'crime' and 'vandalism' accompanied by the question 'is your neighborhood safe?' together with the slogan 'we do not want Romanians'. In the next months, the same anti-Roma message was spread by the People's Party in several political meetings. In May 2011, the People's Party ended the campaign by launching a video-spot that claimed "firm punishment for those who do not adapt".

To analyze the electoral campaign I have reviewed different sources: leaflets, posters, video-spots and media coverage including radio, newspapers and TV programs. On the other hand, to analyze the reactions to the campaign, I have reviewed different reports from Roma organizations and I have conducted six semi-structured interviews with key Catalan activists from Kali Zor, FAGIC (Federation of Roma Associations in Catalonia), Union Romani, Fundación Secretariado Gitano, SOS Racisme and Romane Sikovne.

The paper is organized in six parts: The first section gives an overview on racism against Roma immigrants in Western Europe between 2008/11. The second part presents the case of anti-Roma incitement led by the People's Party in Badalona during the election campaign 2010/11. The third section offers an analysis of this campaign and its results. The fourth section provides an assessment of the social, judiciary and political reactions to the campaign of the People's Party. In the last two sections, the paper draws some conclusions and sets out specific recommendations for combating racist incitement against Roma, especially when such practice is embedded in political discourses.

1. ANTI-ROMA POLICIES IN WESTERN EUROPE

Since 2004, with the enlargement process of the European Union¹, Roma immigrants from Eastern Europe have been regarded as a threat for the social peace and public safety by Western European societies. Such a perception of the Roma as a threat has been strategically created², not only by far-right parties, but also by moderate right-wing and left-wing parties³. In addition, the media re-created the old myth around the Roma being 'nomads', fostering the collective perception of the Roma as a people incapable to adapt to a 'civic sedentary' life style. Between 2008 and 2011, countries such as France and Italy deployed special anti-Roma measures including police surveillance and forced evictions.⁴ In this regard, prestigious non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International⁵ and the European Roma Rights Center⁶ have denounced repressive policies of persecution and expulsion of Roma in these two countries.

On 31 May 2008, under the government of *Il Popolo della Libertà*, the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared the state of emergency enabling an operation called 'emergenza Rom'. Thus, he enabled the commissioners of Rome, Milan and Naples to elaborate an ethnic census in order to expel the Roma out of Italy. In addition, the Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni implemented a special census for Roma immigrants, in order to register all those older than 14 years, including the submission of fingerprint data. This practice was immediately condemned by a European Parliament resolution on 10 July 2008:

*"[...] collecting fingerprints of Roma would clearly constitute an act of direct discrimination based on race and ethnic origin, prohibited by Article 14 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms."*⁷

On 19 August 2010, under the government of *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* and the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, France started an aggressive case of anti-Roma harassment. The Prime Minister Brice Hortefeux ordered the deportation of 700 Romanian and Bulgarian Roma. In response to such a massive deportation of people from the same ethnic background, on 13 September 2010, the European Commissioner for Justice and Fundamental Rights, Viviane Reding, made a public statement against Sarkozy's government for its violation of fundamental rights such as the freedom of movement and the freedom of residence.

On 19 September 2013, under François Hollande's presidency, the new French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, declared to Radio France Internationale: "deportation is the only solution... We are not here to welcome these people. It is not our task to solve the misery of the world".⁸ In the same interview, Valls argued that integration of Roma immigrants is not feasible as "this population has a lifestyle extremely different from ours".⁹ As a response to this statement, Amnesty International published a report on 25 September

¹ On 1 May 2004, eight Central and Eastern European countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), plus two Mediterranean countries (Malta and Cyprus) were able to join the European Union. Romania and Bulgaria, although were deemed initially as not fully ready by the Commission to join in 2004, acceded nevertheless on 1 January 2007.

² To deepen the analysis of mediatization of Roma migration I recommend the following article: Milena Doytcheva (2014) Roma migrants in the public arena: between media coverage and politicization. *HAL, Laboratory of Excellence TEPSIS*.

³ On this topic I recommend, Picker, Giovanni (2010): Left-Wing Progress? Neo-nationalism and the case of Romany migrants in Italy, in Michael Stewart, *The Gypsy "menace". Populism and the new anti-gypsy politics*. Budapest: CEU Press. 81-94.

⁴ On the meaning of 'Romaphobia' in this context I recommend, Van Baar, Hub (2011): Europe's Romaphobia: Problematisation, Securitization, Nomadization, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (29): 203-212.

⁵ Aministía Internacional (2012): *Human Rights here, Roma Rights now. A wake-up call to the European Union*.

⁶ European Roma Rights Centre (2013): France: New Census Shows Forced Evictions of Roma on the Rise.

⁷ The European Parliament resolution can be accessed at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008%200361+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

⁸ *FranceInter*, 23/09/2013.

⁹ *FranceInter*, 23/09/2013.

according to which, only in Paris, in less than a year Roma people suffered more than 10,000 forced evictions.¹⁰ In response to this report, the European Commission's spokesman, Olivier Bailly, stated that these facts reveal a lack of respect for the rights of free movement and residence within the EU.

These cases show the limits of the European Union as a community of values based on the respect for fundamental rights and human dignity. These cases also show that anti-Roma policies are not a matter of right-wing or left-wing parties, anti-Roma policies have been in fact a structural practice all across the political spectrum. The anti-Roma policies described above highlight a core contradiction between a formal and a real citizenship: *de facto*, the Roma migrants were denied their fundamental rights on the basis of ethnic discrimination.

2. ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN IN BADALONA 2010/11

On 22 May 2011, the People's Party won the local elections in Badalona being the most voted party in 28 districts out of 34.¹¹ This victory was mainly driven by an aggressive anti-Roma campaign. In comparison, four years earlier the People's Party lost the local elections, being the most voted party only in two districts. In the following section I will explain how the anti-Roma campaign was built and deployed in different stages.

In April 2010, at the beginning of the election campaign, Roma immigrants living in Badalona faced an intense case of incitement: 15,000 leaflets were distributed particularly in districts with high population of Romanian Roma such as Llefà, La Salut and Sant Roc. On the front page of the leaflet, pictures of Roma immigrants were composed with slogans such as 'insecurity', 'crime', 'dirtiness' and 'vandalism', accompanied by the question: 'is your neighborhood safe?' One of the images shows also a wall painting that states: 'We do not want Romanians'. On the back of the leaflets appeared slogans such as 'Against insecurity', 'For dignity', '+ security' accompanied by a portrait of Xavier García Albiol, the leader of the local People's Party, saying:

"I am only two town councilors away from winning the mayoral election. If I am the mayor in 2011, I promise that you will be able to walk around this quarter without being harassed or docketed. Those who want to live in Badalona have to adapt to our laws and customs. We can and we will do it."



► N°1 – Leaflet of Xavier García Albiol, People's Party: "Is your neighbourhood safe?"

¹⁰ Amnesty International, 09/25/2013.

¹¹ Badalona is the third most populous city of Catalonia, with 222,074 inhabitants according to the last census.



► N°2 – ‘+Security’ Leaflet of Xavier García Albiol, People’s Party

A few days after the distribution of leaflets, Albiol stated in the radio:

“The Romanian-Roma came here to commit crimes and this community is creating many problems in the most populous quarters of the city... the Romanian-Roma community does not want to be integrated into majority society, so integration policies do not succeed with them. What we have to do is to implement a firm police persecution, in order to put them in jail or to make them return to where they came from.”¹²

At that time France was facing the opposition of the European Union due to the mass deportations of Roma. Building upon this momentum, Albiol gave a speech in Trafalgar Square, Badalona, on 19 September 2010:

“Here we have no Roma camps like in France, here the situation is even worse, the Roma are scattered throughout our neighborhoods annoying and frightening the neighbors.”¹³

Distancing himself from the extreme-right ideology, Albiol refused any accusation of being xenophobic:

“I do not pursue anyone for belonging to any particular religion, ethnicity or nationality, but I do not want immigrants who came to my city to steal, commit crimes and make life miserable to others.”¹⁴

During the first-half of the campaign, Albiol was very careful of addressing people's ethnic affiliation but behavior. However, when elections were approaching he increasingly turned to a radical rhetoric very close to extreme-right positions. In this regard, in January 2011, the People’s Party launched a slogan that was exactly as the one used by the extreme-right party *Plataforma per Catalunya*. As we can see below, the two slogans contain the same message: “People from home are first” (“Primer els de casa”).

¹² *Libertad Digital*, 04.25.2010.

¹³ *Parainmigrantes.info*, 09.22.2010.

¹⁴ *Badalona TV*, 07/05/2010.



► N°3-4 – Leaflet of Xavier García Albiol, People’s Party, and of the extreme-right party Plataforma per Catalunya with the same slogan “People from home are first”

In the last month of the campaign, Albiol promised “to increase police persecution of those who either commit crimes or perform anti-social behavior”.¹⁵ To reinforce this message, he launched a video clip¹⁶ claiming for “firm policies and control of those who do not adapt; firm punishment of those who commit fraud on social benefits; firm punishment of those who commit crimes. Many think of it. I say it loud: straight-talking”.

► N°5 – Video Clip of Xavier García Albiol: “Many think of it. I say it loud: straight-talking”

**MUCHOS
LO PIENSAN.
YO LO DIGO.**
➔ **ALBIOL** ALCALDE



During the whole campaign, the People's Party portrayed Roma migrants as uncivilized persons incapable of adapting to basic rules of civic coexistence. The campaign systematically used rhetoric techniques of cultural othering. Roma migrants were represented as the ‘radical other’: a cultural group driven by principles that work against the values and lifestyle of the local majority. Thus, the whole campaign characterized the Roma as inherently deviant people: dirty, lazy, noisy and thieves by culture.

¹⁵ *El País*, 04/05/2011.

¹⁶ Here I linked the video: Xavier García Albiol PP Badalona Elecciones 2011
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkZbwilbJvM>

3. ANALYSIS









In the first years of the EU economic crisis (2008 to 2011), anti-Roma policies became a powerful tool to gain votes in Western European countries. In this context, a study¹⁷ realized by FAES¹⁸ analyzed the political gains of adopting neo-nationalist stances in times of crisis.

Based on examinations of the campaigns of *Lega Nord* and *Il Popolo della Libertà* (in Italy) or *Front National* and *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (in France), this study highlighted the electoral potential of neo-nationalist rhetoric in times of crisis. Titled *Where are the voters?* (*¿Dónde están los votantes?*), the study aimed to explain how the emergent social discontent at the beginning of the EU economic crisis should be addressed in electoral campaigns. This study showed that in times of economic prosperity immigration is not perceived as a social problem by the vast majority of society. Nevertheless, the study concluded that in times of economic crisis a critical mass tend to associate immigration with national unemployment and the weakening of the welfare state. Therefore, it is strategic to channel political discontent and hunger towards immigrants in times of elections, in order to make a political gain and distract the attention from other structural problems.

The FAES report sustains that in times of economic crisis left-wing voters are the most discontent electorate: “an electorate showing their distrust towards leftist political elites, who are regarded as very distant and detached from their problems in moments of difficulty.”¹⁹ Based on this diagnosis, the study explains the success of the use of neo-nationalist discourse and policies in countries such as France and Italy. The underlying logic is that in times of economic crisis, the national labour market and the welfare state are under pressure, and national citizens claim for their priority to access public jobs and public benefits over foreigner. In this context, some political parties portray foreigners as a national threat, not merely economically, but also ethically and morally. Thus, immigrants are represented like pathogenic elements working against the safety of the country.

During the election campaign in Badalona 2010/11, the People's Party carefully deployed all the principles described by the FAES report. As a result, the party won the elections being the most voted party in 28 out of 34 districts.

► Table: Election results 2011 and 2007

PARTIES		VOTERS		COUNCILORS		COUNCILORS		VOTERS		PARTIES	
	P.P.	26.890	33,42%	11		7		16.203	21,86%	PP	
	PSC-PM	21.778	27,06%	9		9		21.352	28,81%	PSC-PM	
	CiU	10.091	12,54%	4		5		12.199	16,46%	CIU	
	ICV	7.184	8,93%	3		5		10.954	14,78%	ICV	
2011						2007					

¹⁷ Informe FAES 2009: *¿Dónde están los votantes?* [Ana Capilla y Jorge Sainz],

http://www.fundacionfaes.org/file_upload/publication/pdf/20130423211548donde-estan-los-votantes.pdf

¹⁸ FAES is the Foundation for Social Studies and Analysis linked to the People's Party. It is a private non-profit organisation that works in the sphere of ideas and political proposals.

¹⁹ FAES, op.cit. pag.13.

4. SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND JUDICIARY REACTIONS

On 26 April 2010, the International Romani Union (based in Barcelona) published a manifesto accusing Albiol of violating article 510 of the Spanish Penal code that prohibits discrimination, hatred or violence against groups or associations based on their ethnic, race or national affiliation. The IRU manifesto claimed that:

“Mr. García Albiol has done nothing new by spreading incitement against Romanian Roma immigrants... his message is underpinned by the same racist and xenophobic logic used by Jean-Marie Le Pen. By spreading a racist discourse, the French Front National has taken over Marseille, where socialists and communists have always won, but in times of economic recession and rising unemployment, the extreme right has found a fantastic opportunity in it.”²⁰

Two days later, on 28 April 2010, the Spanish Council for the Elimination of Racial or Ethnic Discrimination²¹ published a letter stating the following:

“We want to express our rejection to Xavier Albiol’s behavior... This sort of discourse leads to activate prejudices, social rejection and discrimination towards the Romanian Roma. Such statements are inadmissible especially when they come from a person who hold or aspire to hold any public office... We encourage public and private institutions to take legal actions, in order to repair the damage and to discourage this kind of behavior in the future.”²²

Despite such public statements, both organizations did not take any legal action, neither against Albiol nor against the People’s Party. But by the end of April, SOS Racisme and the Catalanian Federation of Gitanos Associations (FAGIC) denounced Albiol for incitement and hatred. In October 2010, the special prosecutor of hate crimes and discrimination accepted the case. The whole process took more than three years.

On 20 June 2012, FAGIC announced that they would no longer continue as part of the complainants due to the fatigue caused by the long process and the increasing tensions with the People’s Party. Nevertheless, SOS Racisme decided to continue as the only complainant on its own. On 20 November 2013, Albiol was interrogated in the trial. Eventually, on 11 December 2013, the Criminal Court 18 of Barcelona acquitted him. During the whole trial the People’s Party never considered the expulsion of Albiol. On the contrary, he was promoted as party candidate for the next Catalanian elections, on 27 September 2015.

²⁰ *Nevipens Romani*, 26.05.2010.

²¹ This is an official advisory body linked to the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, in charge of providing assistance to victims of discrimination, conduct studies and reports on this subject and promote measures to promote equal treatment. This is the institutional webpage:
<http://www.msssi.gob.es/ssi/igualdadOportunidades/noDiscriminacion/consejo.htm>

²² *Nevipens Romani*, 03.05.2010

5. CONCLUSIONS

In general, this paper has aimed to demonstrate how anti-Roma racism has been politically instrumentalized in Western Europe against the legal and moral foundations of the European Union. In particular, regarding the analysis of the campaign of anti-Roma incitement led by the People's Party in Badalona in 2010/11, I want to remark how anti-Roma racism is not only politically instrumentalized, but is also deeply rooted in society. This has been shown in the paper through the analysis of three types of reactions to the People's Party campaign:

1. Social reaction: after the racist campaign against Roma migrants, the population of Badalona did not sanction the People's Party, but voted for it in most of the constituencies of the city, being the most voted party in 28 out of 34 districts.
2. Judiciary reaction: Mr. Ignasi de Ramon, the Magistrate Judge of the criminal court number 18 of Barcelona, acquitted Albiol from the violation of articles 510.1 and 510.2 of the Spanish penal code: discrimination, hatred or violence against groups or associations based on ethnic, racial or national origin.
3. Political reaction: the People's Party never considered sanctions against Albiol. Instead, he was promoted to candidate for the presidency of Catalonia in the next regional elections.

These reactions show the prevalent antigypsyism²³ and the lack of empathy towards the Roma people, as a result of a political strategy that consists of othering the Roma. According to the Council of Europe's description of Roma related issues, this sort of populist propaganda often incites acts of violence.²⁴ Indeed, it is scientifically proved that populist discourses that target specific minorities, in many cases lead to pogroms and other forms of violence whose victims are mainly women and children.²⁵ Therefore, in such cases where the safety of a person or a community is in risk, I think that the right to peoples' safety should have priority over the right of freedom of expression.

²³ This article uses the following definition of 'antigypsyism': antigypsyism is a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanization and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among other things, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatization and the most blatant kind of discrimination. Antigypsyism is a specific nature of racism directed towards Roma, on a par with anti-Semitism: *a)* it is persistent both historically and geographically (permanent and not decreasing); *b)* it is systematic (accepted by virtually all the community); *c)* it is often accompanied by acts of violence. Definition offered by the Council of Europe (2012): *Describing glossary of terms related to Roma issues*, page 12. On the meaning of 'antigypsyism', I recommend the reference paper by the Alliance against Antigypsyism (2016): *Antigypsyism – a reference paper*. http://antigypsyism.eu/?page_id=17

²⁴ Council of Europe (2012): *Describing glossary of terms related to Roma issues*.

²⁵ European Humanist Federation (2013): *The European Union and the Challenge of populism and extremism*.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has demonstrated how Roma migrants became the target group of a hate speech strategy during the election campaign led by the People's Party in Badalona, 2010/11; with no consequences for those responsible of it, neither at the political level nor at the judiciary level. Next I will outline three recommendations to combat and prevent such a case at three levels:

- **Social level:** In order to engage civil society to fight anti-Roma incitement a strong, long-term cultural and awareness-raising strategy is needed. Beyond the implementation of punishment measures for those who commit racist actions against Roma, it urges to bridge the gap of knowledge and distrust between majority society and the Roma people, which is often filled with prejudices and stereotypes. The different cases of anti-Roma policies and discourses presented in this paper are not isolated; indeed, they are connected through a politically designed, systemic ideology. The violation of Roma rights is widely acceptable and legitimated by a deeply rooted antigypsyism embedded in state institutions. To fight against antigypsyism, the EU member states need to deploy a coordinated cultural strategy by using different power tools and infrastructures such as: schools, media, universities, research institutes, museums and festivals.
- **Judicial level:** It is necessary to generate a strong judicial commitment with zero tolerance towards racist incitements that link ethnicity, race or nationality to criminality. Crimes are not committed by cultures, nationalities, races or ethnicities but by individuals. For this purpose, any reference to the link between nationality, ethnicity and criminality in the public debate must be penalized. The punishment must have a bigger penalty when political leaders use hate speech, as their words have bigger impact on society than the words of ordinary citizens.
- **Political level:** The stance of political parties is highly important; their ethical code of conduct should include a clear reference to zero tolerance with racism. Political parties have full responsibility to eradicate any kind of racist discourses from within, and to sanction those members who spread out racist comments. Furthermore, the electorate should take a strong stand against racist policies or discourses.

These three levels are interrelated, thus, the actions taken in one level will affect the others. In this regard, it should be highlighted that antigypsyism, as a specific type of racism, is deeply rooted in European societies and deployed in a systemic manner. Therefore, only a strong awareness-raising and educational plan devoted to deconstruct the myth of the Roma as the 'eternal others', would allow us to reconstruct empathy and solidarity between the Roma minority and majority society.

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