

The Roma struggle from protests to political liberation

July 27, 2021

RACE & RESISTANCE

AUTHOR

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Anti-Roma racism remains pervasive across Europe. It is time to develop a common political agenda for the unification and collective liberation of the Roma.

The recent death of Stanislav Tomáš, a Roma man from Teplice, Czech Republic, has sparked demonstrations across many European countries. On June 19, a police officer knelt on Tomáš' neck while detaining him, leading to his death soon after. Despite the international solidarity among European Roma this case has encouraged, we still have a long way to go in mobilizing politically against all racially motivated anti-Roma violence. Moreover, when it comes to the struggle against anti-Roma racism — or antigypsyism — we are still lacking the solidarity of the leftist social and political movements in Europe. Why can white Europeans see and denounce oppression in Chiapas or Palestine, but not the oppression against Roma that is taking place within their own communities?

Roma in Europe have long suffered from police brutality. This is not a matter of unfortunate behavior, or bad apples, but rather goes to the heart

of the police's role as the "guardians" of the European societies as they are imagined by the ruling elites. Roma are victims of permanent state terror, yet, there is little discussion around the issue of police brutality as a result of structural racism. Scant attention has been paid to understanding and discussing that police brutality is *just* the cruelest face of anti-Roma racism — the issue is far more complex.

The death of Stanislav Tomáš is not an isolated case. It is tightly rooted to structural anti-Roma racism, ingrained in the core of European countries and their notions of "secure societies." For centuries, white anxiety for security has manifested itself in various forms: from urban and school segregations to police violence to mass incarceration and political dehumanization.

Our people are very much aware of the situation they face and their daily experiences with the white world. As Kale Amenge (Roma for

Ourselves), an independent and autonomous anti-racist Roma political organization that works for the collective emancipation of Roma and the building of Roma political autonomy, we demand the right to live as Roma on our own terms, not how someone else wants us to be.

Are we able to secure a safe space for Roma in Europe, where we will not be persecuted from the supermarket to the political arena, facing deportations and the forced sterilization of Roma women? Are we able to secure a safe space where we will be able to be respected on our own terms of living?

THE NORMALIZATION OF ANTI-ROMA VIOLENCE

The fact that the Roma community in Europe is still being systematically oppressed, 80 years after the Porajmos — the Romani Holocaust by Nazi Germany — and many are seen and treated as foreigners within their own countries, shows how little political attention has been paid to the Roma struggle. The dominant narrative of the Nazi Holocaust only really includes the Jewish experience — excluding, among others, Sinti, Roma, the disabled, LGBTQ, communists and other anti-fascists. The Roma are facing the extreme consequences of anti-Roma racism — the death of Stanislav Tomáš and an ongoing eviction threat of several Roma families in Pata Rât of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, are just the latest examples. The legitimized violence against our bodies and a brutal denial of human dignity continues.

The ongoing denial of anti-Roma racism within academia, anti-discrimination policies and the media is precisely what has created the urge for self-justification and a need to constantly prove that we, as a people, as a culture, are not responsible for our own suffering. We are not the problem, as many have tried to argue. The problem is whiteness as a structural racial order in which Roma are seen as posing a threat to the social order.

It is within this context that anti-Roma racism appears as a regulating tactic to control, observe and discipline the Roma body. To offer an example, in 2018, Matteo Salvini, who was Italy's Minister of Interior at the time, announced that Italy planned

to kick out all foreign-born Roma, but lamented, “unfortunately we will have to keep the Italian Roma because we can't expel them.”

Of course, such racist speeches and practices are not exclusive only to the right-wing parties; the normalization of violence against Roma today is also the result of the failure of parties, organizations and movements on the left to fight against it. At the same time, white feminist movements have adopted the role of “white saviors” who need to “rescue” Roma women from the so-called “Roma patriarchy.”

All these historical narratives and current political practices have become embedded in the ideology of white supremacy — the political violence of the European countries against us never ended with the adoption of human rights charters nor with the EU Roma National Integration Strategies. In fact, in those EU Roma National Integration Strategies the notion of antigypsyism is hardly discussed, which leads towards the naturalization of racism within those public policies and specific “Roma issue” initiatives carried out in the European context.

Consequently, there is a marginalization of anti-racism — excluding anti-Roma racism as a central concern in terms of the Roma situation — which contributes to an understanding and conceptualization of antigypsyism as the consequence of the “Roma lifestyle.” Thus, our “different” culture, traditions and ways of living as Roma are blamed for the racism we face. In short, anti-Roma racism has mainly been approached as a cultural rather than a political problem.

As a whole, these policy frameworks for Roma stand in opposition to a genuine anti-racist project. As Cayetano Fernandez, a researcher and organizer with Kale Amenge, has defined it: “Anti-Gypsyism is a race-based system of domination that has historical roots in modernity and that obeys the construction of the European white man as the model of humanity, thus dehumanizing all others.” As a result, the idea of danger has been historically embedded in the definition of Roma people as fundamentally uncivilized, untrustworthy and “ungovernable.” Therefore, the only possible way of dealing with Roma is through violence.

This violence is justified because on the one hand, it is done in the name of “securing” the white populace — both in practical and metaphysical terms — and on the other, it is done in the name of saving the Roma from themselves, from their barbarian behavior. This image of Roma as a threat to both white identity and people is an outcome of the historical colonial production of the “Gypsy Other” as white imaginary fiction. In his article, “The Roma Collective Memory and the Epistemological Limits of Western Historiography,” Fernandez argues that the history that has been created about the Roma people is a white construct which has primarily produced an ontological search for, and legitimation of, white identity. In short, anti-Roma violence is justified because it is done in the name of “order” and “public security.”

QUESTIONING THE WHITE POLITICAL AGENDA

We are witnessing how Roma ghettos from Tres mil viviendas in Spain to Teplice in Czech Republic have become modern open-air prisons where Roma bodies are controlled, observed, brutally abused and killed. The categorization of those spaces as racialized — and for that reason — “dangerous” neighborhoods that must be under permanent vigilance has provoked an intense police presence, as well as several cases of police brutality.

Roma ghettos are always perceived as synonymous with crime, hence the violence is permanent and exceptional. The ghettos are the places where Roma are denied humanity and dignity, while white lives continue to be secured based on the constant and continual dehumanization of us Roma. For many years, I have been investigating and working on the politics of structural and everyday antigypsyism, cases of police brutality and its traumatic effects on Roma Europe and no matter where I go, the Roma people tell me one

As Roma movements, we have focused on creating projects to include Roma in the education system, but we have failed to question the system that we seek to include Roma in and to take into account the daily and cultural violence Roma face in this system. Mindful of this, I completely understand those Roma parents who decide not to let their children go into an educational system that treats their children as non-worthy. Maybe, instead we should focus on creating secure spaces for our children, where they will not only feel safe, but more importantly, they will feel worthy and accepted.

So, how did Roma become the killable body? To answer this question, we must look at the historical construction of the imaginary “Gypsy,” the criminal, the drug-addict, the “unruly Roma.” These are the bodies that are considered non-human and who bring disorder to the imagined “civilized Europe,” the functioning of which is based on law and order. The construction of the Roma body as a threat to the white order has produced policies and narratives of criminality and state sovereignty that justify the need for surveillance and control of Roma “ghettos” — through CCTV systems, police violence and mass incarceration.

Through the historical construction of the Roma as a threat to the white order, violence against us has become normalized and justified. Indeed, the killable body is not just the dead body; it is the body that faces daily violence, the body that is seen and treated as non-worthy, the body that is fated to live under dehumanized conditions. It is the body that is killed again when it is refused justice by system. The Roma body is seen as posing a political threat to law and social order, transforming the notion of “naturally prompt to criminality” to a “public enemy” of the state. In summary, the killable body is the body that is *constantly* violated, both symbolically and physically. And yet, without pressure from a coherent anti-racist Roma political



For years, many of us have been trying to speak about this political violence, but we cannot wait any longer. While I completely encourage and support all the protests that have recently taken place, I am also calling on the people to finally start to not only question the system, but to go further and organize towards a political agenda based on the needs of our people. We need to propose an agenda for structural changes and not just cosmetic ones — an agenda that will not seek individual benefits but will actually put our collective needs first. A transformative agenda means applying measures that will finally bring structural changes to the established white order.

Of course, Roma in Europe are not alone in their fight against structural racism. We, the racialized people (Black, Muslim, migrants, refugees, etc.) share the same political enemy in the states and their institutions — and our political power lies in our alliances against them. We must come together and understand that only together we can destroy the figure of the White Man that was created as a symbol of humanity. Far from trying to continue in the role of white savior within such a struggle, white people should use their privileges and fight against whiteness — especially in those spaces that

Black Power movement, Stokely Carmichael, in his speech at University of California, Berkeley. There, he said: “And the question is, can we find white people who are gonna have the courage to go into white communities and start organizing them?”

As Kale Amenge, we urgently call for the establishment of a common unified political agenda against antigypsyism, an agenda that will truly represent and defend the political interests of our people, based on political honesty and unity, without getting caught up in the networks set up by the racist state itself. An agenda that will be based on political autonomy and coherency.

We have created an agenda that allows us to tackle the following issues produced by the supposedly-democratic system: the 12-Point Program of Kale Amenge for the political liberation of the Roma people.

1 **End the ghettos, build up communities**

The ghetto is a way to lock our people up and plunge them into violence, dispossession and poverty. In spite of this, our people survive with dignity alongside other sister communities on the periphery of modern cities. We denounce the racist

engineering that leads to the ghetto as a device for confining racialized communities.

1 Stop police violence

We denounce the detention, surveillance and police aggression based on the so-called “ethnic” profiles that affect our people profoundly. The police detain, assault and humiliate our people on a daily basis, just as they do with our brothers and sisters in other communities. In this regard, we, the members of Kale Amenge, urge that every case of police brutality against our people is considered an act of racist ideology whose objective is none other than to discipline and control us within the existing racist order.

1 An end to school segregation

Throughout Europe, young Roma are confined to schools and other educational institutions in which they receive the message that they are inferior, that their “culture” is problematic. They receive a deficient education and are inoculated with the idea that they should be integrated, while at the same time they are denied this possibility, destroying their self-esteem and value. We urgently call for the creation and direction of our own spaces for community education, where our children can feel proud of who they are.

1 Against racism at work

Since the onset of capitalism, our families have been forced to abandon their traditional trades and to sell their labor force as wage-earners and docile instruments of industrial society. At the same time, governments are consciously hindering areas of work such as the flea market in order to favor big business by pushing hundreds of artisans and small entrepreneurs into poverty. If a Roma person wants to access the conventional labor market, he or she will be discriminated against on the basis of his or her surname, physical features and worldview.

1 End judicial harassment

European states do not have any significant studies on the reality of racism in the criminal justice system, but its existence is an open secret. For example, the over-representation of Roma people and other racialized communities in Spanish

prisons suggests a proportionally stricter, harsher and unfair treatment based on race. Within prisons, Roma prisoners are treated in a denigrating way. Such is the case of our brother, Manuel Fernández Jiménez, who died in a Spanish prison under suspicious circumstances in 2017. We call for an urgent end to legal racism.

1 No to anti-Roma social policies

Through the industry of non-governmental organizations, social workers and assistants, Roma families are blackmailed, manipulated and forced to establish relations of dependence with the state that mistreats and depoliticizes them. We do not doubt that in this area there are honest people, but we refer to power structures that have to be dismantled and that go beyond the good will of respectful individuals. We define anti-Roma racism as a problem of the states and not as a problem of the Roma, therefore our fight must be political.

1 Anti-Roma racism destroys physical and psychological health

Medical studies confirm it: on average, Roma people die up to 15 years younger than white people. Racism affects not only the ethical fiber of a society, it affects the mental and physical health of racialized communities. Racism takes the lives of racialized people, subjecting them to high levels of anxiety, frustration, depression, despair and uncertainty.

1 Stop anti-Roma and racist media and gypsylogists

The Roma people do not need any more biased studies on their identity by academics to justify European programs or departments of ethnic studies. The Roma people do not need shows, morbid or exotic entertainment programs that profit from the public scorn and social humiliation of our people. The Roma people need to confront anti-Roma racism. Often, gypsylogism (a term used to define the academic knowledge production on the Roma developed from a white perspective) has become a tool of control and power.

The dominant conceptualization of anti-Roma racism as a cultural descriptor, rather than a set of

political relations, has meant that the current image of Roma is the contemporary heir to the Roma identity that was historically manufactured by academics, “experts” and bureaucrats.

So, if you have an interest in our people, we urge you to focus your interest on analyzing the relation between our people and the state. We, the members of Kale Amenge, call on the importance of centering our own experiences with the *gadjo* world in our fight against anti-Roma racism.

1 Stop racist deportations

Anti-Roma racism is most violently expressed in the implementation of the anti-migration policies established by a large number of European governments, regardless of their political orientation. These policies destroyed our families, condemn us to poverty and make us vulnerable to attacks from the most reactionary elements of European society.

1 Remain vigilant against political instrumentalization

All political parties show a false interest in our people. Wherever the Roma population is seen as key to electoral outcomes, they all seek the Roma vote through dishonest, racist and patronizing campaigns. At the same time, all political parties are interested in instrumentalizing and using some members of our community as mascots. We do not settle for crumbs or carrots. We negotiate, but we do not give in. Kale Amenge denounces the “colorism” and political instrumentalization of our people and appeals to the need to build an autonomous political struggle.

1 Recognition, reparation and restoration

To recognize our history is not only to recognize Flamenco and the cultural contribution of the Roma people, but to make visible — at the institutional, educational and social levels — the attempts of extermination that have been carried out against Roma people over the past five centuries. Moreover, it is to recognize that these crimes are instrumental to the privilege that white people experience today and the situation of

disadvantage and social exclusion that our people suffer. This necessarily implies initiating a policy of historical reparation and compensation that, beyond mere recognition, begins to generate the conditions that allow the structural difference that benefits the descendants of the executioners to be ended and that compensates the descendants of the victims of this history, which for us is still present.

1 Autonomy, community and political honesty — the path of Roma emancipation

We demand an end to the usurpation of the Roma political space, hijacked by integrationist organizations incapable of confronting state racism. We call for the collective construction of a Roma political subject that truly represents and defends the political interests of our people, based on political honesty and unity, without falling into the available narrow channels set up by the racist state itself.

A COLLECTIVE REBIRTH OF THE ROMA CONSCIOUSNESS

These twelve points together aim to represent a turning point in the character of the political demands of the Roma people against a racist society. We do not perceive ourselves as the protagonists of something new, but as part of the collective rebirth of the Roma consciousness that clearly rediscovers its greatest and only enemy: anti-Roma racism. At the same time, we do not fight this battle alone, rather, alongside other racialized communities in the fight against racism, an institutional matter that involves collectively questioning specific power relations.

We are speaking of a nation that has more than 14 million people in Europe, so we have the numbers, but the question is how do we shift these numbers into political power? How do we create an autonomous international political agenda that will aim to unify the international struggle into one Roma struggle?

Can we, as an international Roma movement, finally come together and start to rethink concepts and strategies such as “integration” and shift our

agenda onto the importance of self-representation, self-organization and, more importantly, to autonomy? It is more than clear that Europe is not experiencing a “Roma problem” but rather a problem of white supremacy and whiteness. In

other words, the problem of Europe is its own obsession with white purity and dominance. Can we finally as an international movement change the terms of discussions and confront a political problem with a political agenda?

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Source URL — <https://roarmag.org/essays/roma-protest-political-agenda/>

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