Deliverable 2.1

Final Report on the Findings of the Qualitative Study

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Background

The issue of systemic discrimination of the Roma minority in Bulgarian has been consistently brought to the forefront of policy change aspirations. Roma people have persistently been subjected to systemic exclusion and everyday acts of violence, motivated by ethnic hate (Council of Europe, 2020:11). The racist public and political discourses in Bulgaria have persistently been criticised by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and identified as one of the main drivers of persisting anti-Roma and racist attitudes in the country (Council of Europe, 2014:15-16). Most recently, the report of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe from her visit to Bulgaria in November 2019 attested to the persisting seriousness of racism and discrimination against minority groups in Bulgaria, manifested through hate crimes and the prevalence of hate speech, especially against the Roma community (Council of Europe, 2020:4). Research, previously conducted by the CSD and ARC Fund[1] has indicated that, not only is hate speech and hostility against Roma people the most popular and commonly accepted form of exclusion from public and civil life, but it also provokes the most active engagement and participation from social media users.

Hate speech has become engraved in the daily lives of Bulgarian content consumers. It has been encountered in mainstream media channels, as well as on social media (Daskalova, 2015:2). Hate speech has been normalised through its frequent use by social media users, political commentators, experts, and even renowned and perceived as impartial journalists and news anchors (Daskalova, 2015:2). Research has demonstrated that news discourses in traditional print and TV media have sustained and perpetuated the trend of structural exclusion of the Roma minority (Bahar, 2018). More elaborate content analysis has demonstrated that Roma people in Bulgarian media have been categorised and portrayed in a predominantly negative light (Indzhov, 2012). The media focus in printed periodicals has crafted the image of Bulgarian Roma around the notion of "otherness", which relies on the myths of Roma criminality, of the primitive inherent nature of Roma people, the assertion, that Roma people drain the national and EU resources, and the evil satanisation of particular members of the Roma minority (Indzhov, 2012:25-30). Roma people have steadily remained "in the spotlight" of media attention, despite the introduction of a more imminent (in the last decade) threat in the face of refugees (Spasov, 2017: 13). Roma people remain the most negatively represented minority group in Bulgaria (Spasov, 2017:13).

Those identified negative media tendencies in the portrayal of the Roma minority in Bulgaria and their uncovered correlation with the discriminatory attitudes and practices are coupled with extremely low levels of perceived discrimination by Bulgarian Roma people[2] (EU-MIDIS II:29). Roma people in Bulgaria appear far less likely to either report cases of experienced discrimination, or identify certain behaviours as discriminatory towards them (EU-MIDIS II:49). This tendency could stem from Roma people's established

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[1] These conclusions are outlined in an unpublished report, written by the CSD. The report has been developed for the purposes of the YouthRightOn project, funded by the European Commission's Internal Security Fund of Directorate-General Migration and home affairs. The report is based upon the findings of a mixed method study of Bulgarian youths' attitudes and media consumption habits in relation to trends of radicalisation. These conclusions draw upon data, gathered through desk research, a quantitative study (employing a detailed questionnaire) and a qualitative study (employing focus groups).

[2] Bulgarian Roma attest for the lowest number of experienced discrimination rated "based on ethnic origin" among EU countries with only 19%. In comparison, the highest established rates were in Portugal (61%), Greece (41%), and Croatia (42%).

belief that "nothing would happen or change as a result of reporting a discrimination incident"[3], which indicates a systemic level of mistrust in the social cohesion and respect for human and civil rights. On the other hand, this tendency illustrates the structural misconception of how to define and persecute hate crimes in Bulgaria (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). Furthermore, it could indicate that Roma people themselves need to be further educated on how to identify and tackle discriminatory and hostile media and online practices against ethnic minorities. The CARE FOR TRUTH project tackles this particular objective through training and educating key change players, activists, educators and advocates from the Roma communities. The aspirations for a multiplier effect of spreading awareness and Roma empowerment is foundational to the broader structural process of tackling discrimination and anti-Roma attitudes and rhetoric.

The following report contributes to this goal by analysing Roma people's perceptions of the media and online environment's influence over their experiences of living in Bulgaria. The report consists of three distinct sections. Firstly, a literature review outlines the main concepts and definitions, which are employed for the purposes of analysing media anti-Roma hostility in Bulgaria. Secondly, a discussion of results from a desk research centres on the main channels, approaches and narratives, which manifest antigypsyism in Bulgarian media. Lastly, an analysis of data, gathered through focus groups with representatives of the Bulgarian Roma communities, systematises the trends of fake news and anti-Roma media and online disinformation's influence on Roma people's perception and attitudes towards integration and autosegregation.

Methodology and analytical framework

This report aims to identify the most prominent channels and narratives for the spread of anti-Roma hostility in traditional and social media in Bulgaria. When established, those narratives and channels' characteristics are examined in detail. The final effort of the report is to outline the ways in which anti-Roma hostility reaches and affects members of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. The report deals with data, gathered through a qualitative study consisting of two stages. Firstly, desk research was conducted in order to establish the most prominent channels for anti-Roma hostility online. The desk research consisted of two distinct stages. The first stage included an observational study of online and media channels for spread of anti-Roma hostility and identified the specific approaches for representation and disinformation about the Roma communities. The second stage included a discourse analysis of media and online materials (articles, videos, and Facebook posts) and outlined the most prominent anti-Roma media narratives.

Secondly, 11 focus groups with representatives of the Roma community from 10 different locations in Bulgaria were conducted in July and August of 2020. The respondents included in the focus group discussions comprised activists, Roma mediators, Roma leaders, Roma youths, students from mixed and segregated schools, and educators. 11 online focus groups were conducted with respondents of different background, status, sub-groups and religion were conducted with respondents from Lom, Montana, Septemvriitsi, Novi Pazar, Plovdiv, Sliven, Yambol, Vidin, Sofia, and Razlog. The selection of respondents aimed to reflect the diversity among Roma people in Bulgaria in terms of different levels of education, gender, age, different ethno-cultural subgroups and preferred self-identification (as Roma, Turkish, etc.), language, religion, income and social status, different levels of integration into the macro society or marginalisation. The focus

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[3] 66% of Bulgarian Roma refer to this argument in justification of not reporting an incident of discrimination while applying for a job (EU-MIDIS II:49).

groups were conducted online, due to the inability to organise in-person gatherings with multiple people in various sites during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each focus group discussion lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. The sizes of the focus groups varied – with the smallest consisting of four respondents and the largest – of 11 respondents. Altogether, 80 representatives of the Roma communities participated in the focus groups, conducted for the CARE FOR TRUTH project.

The qualitative study aims to address three main research questions and their accompanying sub-questions, which will be analytically answered in this report:

1. **What are the main characteristics of the effective channels for anti-Roma disinformation?**
    1.1.   Are there different types of anti-Roma attitudes, associated with certain channels for spread of hostile narratives?
    1.2.   What channels and forms of anti-Roma hostility reach the members of the Roma community and how are they perceived?
2. **What is the impact of anti-Roma narratives on the Roma communities?**
    2.1.   How are hostile narratives constructed and what are the most popular topics, myths and media images, which are employed for the purpose of the establishing the anti-Roma attitudes and prejudice?
    2.2.   What components of the hostile narratives effectively reach the Roma communities?
    2.3.   How are the "traditionally Roma-related" topics, problems, myths and images established and what is their influence on Roma people's perceptions, emotions and self-esteem?
3. **What is the link between anti-Roma disinformation and the Roma community's attitudes toward integration and auto-segregation?**
    3.1.   How do anti-Roma narratives, based on disinformation and fake news depict the processes of integration and auto-segregation?
    3.2.   How does anti-Roma hostile language affect the Roma communities' perceptions of "the majority"?
    3.3.   How do members of the Roma community understand the processes of integration and auto-segregation, based on their perceptions of their own part in these processes?
    3.4.   What is the link between the media representation of the processes of integration and the realisation of the tendencies for auto-segregation in the Roma communities?

Concepts and definitions

The study analyses the main components and specificities of media-disseminated anti-Roma hostility in Bulgaria. The topic is approached through the framework of structural antigypsyism, which consists not solely of individual acts of prejudice, but also includes institutionalised and/or covertly internalised beliefs of Roma people's inferiority to ethnic Bulgarians. This framework is implemented through the main definitions of the key concepts and notions of antigypsyism, media hostility, hate speech, fake news, and disinformation. These have been identified through a literature review of hostility-related and antigypsyism literature and adapted to reflect the Bulgarian context. This report adopts five key definitions and concepts: antigypsyism, media hostility, hate speech, fake news, and disinformation.

Antigypsyism

This report adopts the working definition of antigypsyism, developed by the Alliance against antigypsyism, which defines the concept as "a historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism against social groups, identified under the stigma "gypsy" or other related terms, and incorporates 1) a homogenizing and essentializing perception and description of these groups; 2) The attribution of specific characteristics to them and 3) discriminating social constructs and violent practices that emerge against that background, which have a degrading and ostracizing effect, and which reproduce structural disadvantages" (Bulgarian Alliance Against Antigypsyism, 2017:5).

Thus, manifestations of antigypsyism include, but are not limited to, hate crimes, ethnically based violence, hate speech, as well as more covert casual practices of using derogatory terms, offensive language and stigmatising practices. Antigypsyism is not solely a personal prejudice. It is systemic interdependence of institutional exclusion and the practices, which legitimise and normalise it in the everyday life and perceptions of society.

Media hostility

Ethnic hostility has traditionally been defined along the lines of economic, cultural and moral competition between differently racialised groups. For example, Tolsma defines it broadly as "the set of unfavourable evaluative responses, either cognitive (thoughts), affective (feelings) or behavioural (action), to members of ethnic outgroups" (Tolsma, 2009:13).

Drawing upon the above-mentioned definitions of antigypsyism and ethnic hostility, and their entanglement into institutional structures and individual attitudes, this study defines media hostility as a manifestation of negative narratives, based upon hostile myths and images of Roma people. Media hostility is one of the observable manifestations of antigypsyism, as it perpetuates ethnic hostilities, through the normalisation of ethnic exclusion, discrimination and prejudice by narrating the finer (and rougher) inter-group distinctions between the majority and the minority into reality. Hostile media narratives reaffirm hostile everyday attitudes and bind them to an overarching ideology of ethnic distinction. Media hostility utilises the classic "us vs them" narrative of the relationship between the Roma minority and the majority of ethnic Bulgarians, where both juxtapositions are painted in extremes – one is entirely good and righteous and the other – entirely bad and evil.

The manifestations of media hostility against Roma people include publicly disseminated hate speech and fake news targeting the Roma minority and leading to general disinformation among both the majority and among the minority groups. Media hostility further includes subtler manifestations of prejudice (Tolsma, 2009:148) and systemic antigypsyism, including degrading, ridiculing, and offensive language, which might be normalised to serve the purpose of perpetuating ethnic distinctions and intolerance.

Hate speech

Hate speech has broadly been recognised as one of the constructing elements of hostility and systemic exclusion and subsequently adopted in most Western countries' legal frameworks (Baider and Kopitowska, 2018:1). The most common definition of hate speech, which has been employed in analysing this phenomenon in practice, comes from the Council of Europe and defines the notion as „all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed through aggressive nationalism and

ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin" (Council of Europe, 1997: Rec. No. R 97).

In defining hate speech and identifying its manifestations, we need to also account for the contextual specificities of this phenomenon across EU states. Due to the universal nature of hatred, which "has been used as an instrument to consolidate ingroup cohesion/allegiance and promote outgroup disgust/distance among various social groups of any size" (Baider and Kopitowska, 2018:2), this study considers anti-Roma hostility as a specific manifestation of hate speech, which pertains to the everyday normalisation and spread of antigypsyism.

Fake news and disinformation

As a relatively new notion, "fake news" has been contextually defined in order to address researchers' analytical frameworks and by this point, no dominating definition has emerged in academic theory. A typological analytical paper, dissecting the notion of fake news, executed by Tandoc et al. (2017), has identified various forms and definitions of fake news, utilised by scholars to address their diverse manifestations. These range from news satire to intentional misleading of the audiences through fabrication (Tandoc Jr. et al, 2017). For the purposes of this study, fake news is defined through the prism of disinformation. Building upon Wardle's definition of disinformation as "the deliberate creation and sharing of information, known to be false" (Wardle, 2017), we can define "fake news" in a manner, which takes into account the specific contextual factors, pertaining to the institutional spread and legitimation of antigypsyism. For the purposes of retaining sensitivity toward the subject matter of ethnic discrimination and taking into account the specificities of social media spread of far-right narratives among youths in Bulgaria[4], this report defines fake news as any misleading information, inciting and drawing upon existing social and political prejudices, which has been publicly disseminated. Thus, by 1) removing the intentional nature (Tandoc, Jr., et al., 2017) of previous definitions of fake news and disinformation and by 2) removing the necessity for legitimate media sources of production, this study remains sensitive to any publicly available information, which has a misleading effect on the audiences and consumers, and has certain degrees of identifiable falseness.

Manifestations of fake news, defined along those lines, would include any false information, which has been disseminated by media outlets (regardless of whether the intent of the article was to cause disinformation, or if it was a result of journalistic negligence) and any false information, which has intentionally or just carelessly been shared or created by social media groups and users.

Hate speech, fake news, and disinformation are analysed by this report as a constituting element of anti-Roma media hostility and the following sections delve deeper into this process' specificities, manifestations and channels for dissemination.

DESK RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following part of this report discusses the main findings of a conducted desk research on the topic of anti-Roma media hostility. The desk research includes two main components. Firstly, an observational study of the most prominent channels and approaches for spread of anti-Roma disinformation and fake news was

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[4] As established by the findings of CSD and ARC Fund's study during the YouthRightOn project.

conducted. Secondly, a discourse analysis of media materials and online content outlines the most popular anti-Roma public narratives in Bulgaria.

1. Observational study of online channels for dissemination of anti-Roma media and online hostility

Drawing upon CSD's methodological insights based on previous research, an observational study of the manifestations and dissemination of Bulgarian online anti-Roma hostile narratives was conducted. The main goals of this study were to map and assess ways in which anti-Roma hostile narratives are manifested on the internet and to identify certain trends related to the most prominent messages, messengers and communication forms. The study is especially oriented toward identifying the channels of dissemination of hostile anti-Roma narratives and the means for construction of the most popular topics, myths and media images of Roma in Bulgaria.

1.1.   Selected channels for observation of anti-Roma media and online hostility

The online media channels, observed for the time period between 2010 and 2020 are selected, based on the following criteria:

1) Popularity of the online channel – the selected media channels for observation and subsequent discourse analysis are identified through the Similarweb platform, which produces monthly ranking of the most viewed websites in Bulgaria, based upon the popularity of websites. The selected media channels include social networks and news websites.
2) Variety of formats – the selected units of observation and analysis are aimed at representing a diverse selection of media formats (text, videos, and images) and a diverse selection of communication forms (informative content – news and articles, as well as entertainment content – satire shows and memes).
3) Reputation of the source – some news outlets with a reputation of well-executed journalism and reporting are included, as well as other news websites, which are infamous in their sensationalist and often misleading content.
4) Levels of aggressiveness of propagated anti-Roma narratives – the selected sources include some news coverage, which might be categorised as "restrained and objective", as well as some Facebook groups and local media channels, which were included solely because they represent more extreme views against the Roma.

Thus, the observed channels for online dissemination of anti-Roma hostility include Facebook, Blitz.bg, 24chasa.bg, NovaTV, plovdiv24.bg, rodopi24.com, and zapernik.com.

Facebook was selected as the most popular platform for information exchange and online communication in Bulgaria, based upon the ranking of Similarweb for May, 2020 (see. Figure 1).

Figure 1. Most popular websites in Bulgaria, May 2020.

After the observation of the social media (Facebook) content of anti-Roma hostility, some specific channels and key messengers of anti-Roma narratives on Facebook were distinguished. They include radical Facebooks groups and forums, Entertainment related Facebook groups and forums, and political actors. In the analysis, conducted for the purposes of the current qualitative study, Facebook content, which has been observed includes original postings, shared online articles and comments from users.

Blitz.bg is selected for an object of observation, due to the website's uncontested dominance in the News and Media category of popular websites[5] (see. Figure 1). It is the only news website, appearing in the top 10 of most visited websites in Bulgaria. Blitz.bg is also representative of a news website with a bad reputation, as it is infamous for its misrepresentation and misinformation practices (Spassov, 2017). As a news website with information-based content, the units of analysis, uncovered in Blitz.bg are news articles in written format, as well as the accompanying images, which visualise the narratives.

24chasa.bg is the first "highly reputable" media outlet, which appears in the ranking of popular websites (see. Figure 2). It is the online platform of one of the biggest informational periodicals in Bulgaria and has been selected for the observational study as representative of "serious" journalism and reporting. The examined units are news articles in text and images.

Figure 2. Most popular news and media websites in Bulgaria, May 2020.

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[5] Although the website abv.bg appears ahead of Blitz.bg in the ranking and is classified as a "News and media" website, there is a reason to believe that news dissemination is not the main purpose for users to visit this website, as it is the largest e-mail domain in the country. Due to this ambiguity of the purposes and practices of use, abv.bg is not treated as a news website and has subsequently been excluded from the study.

18	fakti.bg	News and Media	-6
19	alo.bg	E commerce and Shopping > Classifieds	+12
20	24chasa.bg	News and Media	+2
21	sinoptik.bg	Science and Education > Weather	+11
22	emag.bg	E commerce and Shopping > Marketplace	+4
23	twitter.com	Computers Electronics and Technology > Social Networks and Online Communities	-7
24	vesti.bg	News and Media	+1
25	nova.bg	Arts and Entertainment > TV Movies and Streaming	-6
26	jobs.bg	Jobs and Career > Jobs and Employment	+10

Source: Similarweb. Available online at: https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/bulgaria

Nova TV's show "Gospodari na Efira" has been selected for an object of the observation as a representation of the most popular satire content in Bulgaria. The Roma-related narratives, employed in the show, have been accessed through archived videos, still available on YouTube. Analysing the content of "Gospodari na Efira" videos on YouTube allows the study to incorporate an intersection of two very popular online media channels – Nova TV (whose online streaming platform ranks the highest among national TV networks, according to Similarweb) and YouTube (which is the second most utilised peer-to-peer online platform in Bulgaria). Analysing YouTube videos also allows the study to include a variety of formats in the online media observation, thus assessing text, images and video. It further improves the representation of communication formats, which now include informative content (news) and leisure content (satire shows and memes).

Another benefit of approaching Nova TV as a successful online channel of narrative dissemination through its intersection with a media platform, like YouTube, is that this approach allows us to analyse the longevity of the anti-Roma content. While the observation of news media content in this qualitative study goes as far as 2011, some of the still popular "Gospodari na Efira" videos on YouTube date from 2008. However, we should keep in mind, that because of the specific search engine in YouTube, its content does not have an "expiration date". This creates 1) the opportunity for our qualitative study to assess whether any growth in media representation has been noted for the last decade, and 2) a higher chance for those particular anti-Roma narratives to remain in the public memory for a longer time, thus affecting social and media anti-Roma hostility more persistently.

The websites plovdiv24.bg, rodopi24.com and zapernik.com emerged as particularly active and "aggressive" disseminators of anti-Roma hostility online, during our observation of Facebook activity. They have been included in the observational study as representative of regional media and news online platforms, which demonstrate outstanding levels of anti-Roma hostilities.

The identification of content, regarding the Roma community, in the above described online platforms and media channels, was executed through a key word search. The searched words were "Roma" and "Gypsies". Based upon the conducted observation of media and social media materials, some trends as to the specific manner of dissemination of anti-Roma narratives have emerged. Those are systematised and their manifestation related to their specific channel for dissemination in the following sections of this report.

Facebook represents an outstanding "channel" for spread of anti-Roma media and online hostility. On the one hand, it is the most popular medium for information dissemination in Bulgaria (see Figure 1). On the other hand, although it is a channel (in the general sense of the word), it is not a monolithic space. Facebook is a platform for sharing content, which has a vast informational role on people's perceptions. Because it is the most important communication channel in Bulgaria, and because of the diversity of content it provides (including in terms of anti-Roma hostility), special attention needs to be paid to the variety of content on Facebook. Each specific content is linked to its particular role in the media and online coverage of Roma-related topics and attitudes. This study has outlined content forms, pertaining to the media and online debate on Roma people and its influence on the public perceptions of Roma people, antigypsyism and integration in Bulgaria. Those content forms are radical Facebook groups and forums, political party Facebook platforms, entertainment-related Facebook groups and forums, and the online pro-integration activism space.

Radical Facebook groups and forums as drivers of antigypsyism - The most popular unifying discourse of anti-Roma groups of people revolves around "liberalism" and its threat to the nation state[6]. However, liberalism is perceived to be the driving force of excessive tolerance and acceptance of minorities, who are perceived as an evil threat to the pure Bulgarian nation. Those broader ideological roots of antigypsyism allow for an easier route to exposure to far-right narratives and their linkages to the economic and moral damnation of minorities. YouthRightOn established a strong correlation between the passive exposure to far-right narratives online and young people's readiness to become involved in anti-Roma activities in real life[7].

Table 1. Facebook pages sharing radical anti-Roma ideas.

Facebook page	Number of followers	Link
Bulgaria above all IYI (България над всичко IYI)	18 523	https://www.facebook.com/България-над-всичко-Y--342428375777573
Knives out !!! (На нож !!!)	7 068	https://www.facebook.com/groups/562996350397736/?post_id=1930303867000304
Bulgaria above all (България над всичко)	6 632	https://www.facebook.com/България-Над-Всичко-275851049116718/
Български национализъм (Bulgarian nationalism)	3 783	https://www.facebook.com/BGnational

Facebook page	Number of followers	Link
Ending social benefits for uneducated Roma (За спиране на помощите за деца на цигани без образование)	Retracted before the finalisation of this report	https://www.facebook.com/SPIRANE.POMOSHTITE.ZA.CIGANI.BEzOBRAZOVANIE/

The most popular narratives in the discussions against Roma people and against the ideologically constructed Gypsy-ness[8] mimic the media disseminated themes of Roma criminality, Roma amorality, and the parasite-like manners of Roma citizenship (discussed in detail in part 2 of the analysis of desk research findings).

Political party Facebook platforms, spreading hostile narratives - Vazrazhdane (ПП Възраждане) and IMRO's leaders Krassimir Karakachanov[9] and Angel Dzhambazki, and Ataka's leader Volen Siderov are the main political actors, from which hostile ethnic perceptions emanate in Bulgaria. The main ideological narratives, spread by political actors, centre on the processes of the Bulgarian national revival – linking the idea of the domination of traditional Bulgarian values to the concepts of proper enactment of citizenship and adherence to morality. Most notably, Krassimir Karakachanov and Angel Dzhambazki present on Facebook their political initiatives, aimed against the Roma minority (especially for popularisation of VMRO's concept against gypsyisation of Bulgaria (Klub na svobodnite jeni, 2019)).

Those political actors are exceptionally versatile in the channels, which they utilise, in order to spread their views and arguments. Most notably, they use their platforms, granted by Facebook, to easily access like-minded audiences. However, because most of them are also politically represented (members of Parliament, Ministers or local government officials), their opinions and statements are often covered by traditional and online media channels. This versatility of dissemination channel usage allows for even more radical views and statements to reach not only like-minded passionately involved in far-right narratives individuals, but also for those views to permeate mainstream channels of information. These are key messengers, as they mobilise the most popular myths, ideas and narratives of exclusion and anti-Roma hostility for the purpose of incorporating them into political agendas. Both of these political parties are active and represented in government (VMRO is a part of the ruling coalition on a national level), while Volen Siderov is a member of the capital's municipal governance structure.

A notable example of anti-Roma hostility has also come from Tsvetelin Kunchev (Actualno.com, 2020) - the leader of the EUROROMA political formation, which claims to represent Bulgarian Roma interests. The statements made by Kunchev include ethnically charged slurs and illustrate the inter-group tensions and prejudice among Roma people (Actualno.com, 2020). Kunchev's behaviour further symbolises the attempt

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[8] Here and in any future references the term "Gypsy-ness" is used to indicate the generalised perception of the "typically Roma" behaviours and traits. "Gypsy-ness" is approached through its ideologised meaning, which has been created and supported by public narratives and attitudes. With the term "gypsy-ness" we mark the stereotypical perceptions against the Roma community, rather than the actual experiences and realities of the Roma people in Bulgaria.

[9] See for example Krassimir Karakachanov's "Concept for policy changes in the integration of the Gypsy (Roma) ethnos in Bulgaria and measures for their realization".

to create space for Roma proximity to Bulgarian-ness[10], by portraying some Roma as worthy in contrast to others, to whom established stigmatisation applies.

The radical Facebook groups and far-right political platforms (see. table 1. above) are easily identifiable as representing a more extreme manifestation of anti-Roma hostility. Contents (including information from posts and comments from users) of those extreme internet channels for spread and creation of anti-Roma disinformation and hostile narratives often include hate speech and sometimes call for radical ideological views and/or civil actions. They are, however, not entirely normalised and do not represent the overwhelming dominant attitudes. There are some data to suggest, that radically racist and hateful ideas are only accepted and defended by a small portion of the Bulgarian population. According to a survey, conducted by Alpha research (Alpha research, 2020:3) in December 2019 and January 2020, 21.6% of Bulgarians openly declare to hate Roma people. Although this number is high (Roma are the most hated ethnos in Bulgaria, followed by Bulgarian Turks with a more than four times lower score) (Alpha research, 2020:3), it illustrates the tendency, that the manifestation of anti-Roma hostility is more covert, institutional, and achieved through systemised manners, rather than through personal explicit hate and prejudice.

Explicit hatred and call for radical action (which can be found of closed Facebook groups and political actor's postings – especially in the comments section) should be considered marginal manifestations of the attitudes of extreme far-right groups, individuals, and political nationalist populists. However, the legitimation of anti-Roma disinformation (both in media and online platforms like Facebook) and hostility is not reliant solely upon those narratives. The more covert, but still hostile, narratives, which perpetuate myths, degrading images and discriminatory practices play an important role in reasserting and reaffirming the structural forms of racism (Bonilla Silva, 2006) and aspects of the Bulgarian institutional antigypsyism. Anti-Roma hostility is the most popular discriminatory attitude among Bulgarian youth and social media consumers[11]. These covert narratives and approaches are also represented on Facebook – most notably through entertainment-related groups and forums.

Entertainment-related Facebook groups and forums as 'normalisers' of anti-Roma hostility - The observation of Facebook groups, engaging in Roma-related topics, has established another tendency: there is an overwhelming representation of humorous Facebook pages, mocking the "Gypsy-ness" of Bulgarian Roma. Although not as radical, as the previously discussed Facebook communication forms, the entertainment-related Facebook groups and forms also contribute to the general environment of antigypsyism. Their role is mainly in the covert manifestations of antigypsyism in media and online. Thus, they serve as normalisers of anti-Roma hostility, by injecting those attitudes in "normal" communication spaces.

Table 2. Facebook pages sharing mockery of Roma people and Communities.

Facebook page	Number of followers	Link
Laughs, Jokes and Anecdotes (Смях, шеги и вицове)	156 065	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2756063454618709/?ref=search
Laugh to tears (Смях до сълзи)	40 503	https://www.facebook.com/smeshkii/
Laughs.bg (смях.бг)	35 001	https://www.facebook.com/smiah.bg/?tn-str=k*F
The Gypsy Idiocy (Простотията Циганска)	15 422	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1866054980172645/
Laugh to the break point Club (Клуб смях до скъсване)	133	https://www.facebook.com/КЛУБ-СМЯХ-ДО-Скъсване-100383708288010/?ref=search&__tn__=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARDl0Y570xBMokFLWe2cYzB_4nzMjk8UYEuVIvwtQLBdV5GfhipxcJLg9SVqWWwNl50h4mgfDdrIvv_p

It is worth noting, that out of the four distinguished Facebook pages, only one declares itself as solely focused on strictly Roma-related content – the "The Gypsy Idiocy" Facebook page. A common place among all mentioned groups is the practice of operating with "borrowed content" – videos and jokes, which have been produced and compiled by other outlets (mostly mainstream media), but are shared and exchanged among the members of the Facebook groups. Therefore, the role of the Facebook page is not in the production of original content per se, rather it serves a more bonding and community-building purpose. It unites the community of the consumers of such content, excluding both its creators, and the subjects of the topic.

The most popular source of "funny videos" ridiculing the Roma community and its members are the compilation videos, produced by the popular TV show Gospodari na Efira" (Господари на ефира) and then reposted by Facebook users and groups (see for example a Facebook post by Laughs.bg from 08.04.2014. (Smyah.bg, 2014), or the shared publication of Dupe TV in "The Roma Idiocy" Facebook group on the 21.04.2020 (Dupe TV, 2020)). The TV show has been off the air since 2019. However, the content produced throughout its decade-long history on TV is still popular on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. This content is regularly reposted and shared through Facebook users, who elongate their public life and presence. The narratives employed by both the leisure content providing Facebook pages and the YouTube videos of Gospodari na Efira compilations centre on established and popularised narratives of ridicule and dehumanisation of the Roma community and its members.

The online pro-integration activism space as a counterpoint of anti-Roma narratives -Although the media and social climate is overwhelmingly one of normalised antigypsyism, some recent trends and activism tendencies have gained inertia recently. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement, in 2020 a Bulgarian spin-off of the popular anti-racist manifestations took part in Sofia. The protests were, on the one hand, in support of the African-American community in the US (as many protesters were foreigners, living in Bulgaria), but on the other hand, it was utilised by Bulgarian activist and the Roma communities to shed light to the local context-specific manifestations of the global issues of discrimination and police violence (Vadisavljevic, 2020). In particular, the exclusion of Roma people from participation in the institutional and economic life of the country, was equated to the issues of systemic racism in the US and the UK.

This issue has found a pathway into the public life and debate and currently platforms and online spaces in support of the Roma community have emerged online. Examples of those are the online platforms of The Roma Standing Conference and websites like Marginalia.bg. These media outlets have been popularised and brought into public discussion by intellectuals (mostly journalists and University professors), thus attempting to evoke a broader debate and to challenge the mainstream views of normalised antigypsyism (see. for example, Marginalia, 2020). Those early steps form a necessary ground for a public forum, which shifts the public opinion away from unproblematised anti-Roma attitudes and beliefs in Bulgaria. These platforms and online pro-integration spaces are mostly popularised through their respective Facebook groups and personal profiles – media share all of their articles on Facebook and rely on intellectuals, who spread their ideas and contribute with original commentary through Facebook postings. This practice "opens up" the debate to an audience, which is not necessarily subscribed to anti-integrational narratives, but still uses Facebook as a main channel for information.

In order for those voices of pro-integration efforts to be sustained and grounded into a social climate, which has matured enough to transform them into legislative and policy action, a media approach of acceptance and cultural tolerance needs to be fostered. An early example of an activist initiative, which aims to 1) educate the Roma community on their cultural heritage and roots and 2) to introduce the friendly socially accepted face of the Roma community to the broader public in Bulgaria, is the Diko Yordanov's YouTube channel. As a young Roma activist, he creates and shares online videos about the Roma language and the Roma identity in an easily accessible manner of communication.

1.2. Channel specific approaches for spreading anti-Roma disinformation

Each channel for spreading of anti-Roma narratives consists of a unique combination of a message, messenger and communication form. Online forums and content vary. On the one hand, discussion-based approaches, use comments and shared articles thus to reaffirm and normalise anti-Roma views (in some cases contributing to youth radicalisation). On the other hand, "leisure" outlets, rely upon humour and sarcasm to incorporate Roma hostility into consumers' daily lives. Mainstream media, as a key messenger, relies on fake news, disinformation and stereotypical images, as key communication forms, to normalise anti-Roma hostility. This goal is achieved through popular narratives, which have been tested through time. In cases of social crises (regardless of whether the crisis consists of a national health emergency or a localised ethnic conflict) mainstream media outlets utilise already constructed and developed myths and stereotypes against Roma people to spread the message that Roma people are not susceptible to integration into the Bulgarian society.

This practice leads to the stigmatisation of the Roma ethnic group and is subsequently easily appropriated for political and sensational purposes. Despite their specificities, all manifestations of anti-Roma narratives comprise the complex process of establishing an environment of media hostility against Roma people and Gypsy-ness. Simultaneously, they construct identifying images of Roma people and specific traits of Gypsy-ness, which permeate the public domain and the mainstream attitude toward minority groups. The identified channel specific approaches, which have been illuminated through desk research and online media observation include: the fake news and stigmatisation, produced by online news media websites; misleading visualisations, employed by news media outlets; the falsely represented expertise in online news media; humour and sarcasm, weaponised by Facebook groups and forums; and the one-dimensional image of Roma

people in the public domain as a whole. These are discussed in more detail in the following segment of this report.

1.2.1. Online news media websites as producers of fake news and stigmatisation

Fake news and anti-Roma disinformation in Bulgaria follow an unusual pattern of presentation in mainstream media. The conducted observation of online media outlets has established an interesting trend of Bulgarian anti-Roma content dissemination. Unlike traditional mechanisms for intentional spread of fake news or disinformation, which rely on specifically designed websites and engines (Tandoc, Jr. et al., 2018:4), Bulgarian anti-Roma disinformation and hostility has been incorporated within traditional media narratives and storylines. Fake news, which have been subsequently disproven, have been published even in reputable periodicals' online platforms and outlets (see. for example, Aleksieva, 2020).

One plausible explanation of this deviation from the normative behaviour of fake news, could be the already established negative or hostile attitude of Bulgarian audiences against Roma people. Information, which fits into a pattern of negative perception is more likely to appear real to both journalists, who are competing for speedy updates and are therefore willing to compromise fact-checking for the benefit of sensationalism, and audiences, who are more inclined to believe (and consume) information, which fits easily into their already established worldview.

Therefore, the success of fake news stories, regarding the Roma, could be explained by the systemic and popular, deeply rooted hostility toward Roma people.

1.2.2. News articles' visualisation as a component of fake news and hostile narratives

Fake news, however, is a complex phenomenon, which aims to build a perception in the reader's head. This is why, fake news relies on various means of communication and impression-building: text, assertions, and visuals. The images, attached to the news article are an essential component of the tactics to easily, quickly and successfully present a point. Even shorter articles, comprised by fewer than five sentences, make a lasting impression, if they are accompanied by a memorable image or video. Visuals are a component of the essence of fake news. The fake news, published by sensationalist websites often reuse staple images of Roma people protesting, of a group of men beating up another man, or of other stereotypical scenes, which have nothing to do with the actual occurrence, which the article is reporting (see. for example, Blitz, 2020). This misleading practice further enhances the assertion of violence, urgency and state of emergency of news, regarding Roma people, or Roma communities. Universalising the images of all Roma people is also a prime example of prejudicial media coverage, which stems from and reaffirms a systemically normalised anti-Roma hostility.

Another popular approach for visualisation of Roma-related articles, especially those, covering Roma criminality, includes the publication of actual pictures of the accused or suspected perpetrators (taken from free access personal social media sites) or of mug shots (see. for example, Percheva, 2020). This practice deprives Roma people of their privacy and is even observed when the suspects are under the legal age of consent. Not only does this practice violate human rights, but it also serves a more covert purpose of linking concrete Roma faces to the abstract image of criminality and moral depravity. Thus, a specific type of moral and civil criminality adopts the face of Roma and Gypsy-ness in a manner, which intricately links the two together.

Social media have severely enhanced the power and popularisation potential of fake news, not only through its speedy manner of creating and disseminating information, but also through their facilitation of a "morphing" form of information and news construction by experts, journalists and regular consumers (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018:3).

1.2.3. The faking of expertise in online media websites and utilisation of public figure commentaries as diagnostic analysis about the state of Roma integration

Another prominent practice of misinforming audiences about Roma is the publication of online media articles on the Roma topic, in the form of a public figure commentary. Most often, publically recognisable personalities and celebrities express their opinion on matters, regarding Roma people and receive a high level of public engagement. For example, a painter known by the name of Papa Jean, shares his observations of one of the escalated clashes between Roma and ethnic Bulgarians in Assenovgrad (Blitz, 2017j). Rather than treating him as an ordinary eyewitness, Blitz.bg weaponizes the artist's recognisability as a tool for establishing his point of view as truthful and more reliable.

As celebrity faces are recognisable, audiences tend to trust their opinions. However, their higher public status creates an illusion of a more informed and valuable opinion, although they never possess expertise on integration and Roma-related topics. The peculiar case of celebrity and public figure commentaries on the topic of Roma people inhabits an ambiguous space in the hierarchy of opinions. It creates the false pretence of expertise on the topic, solely because public figures are experts in communication. This approach blurs the boundaries of expertise, because public figures tend to share personal stories and approach the topic of Roma integration as ordinary citizens. This effect is enhanced by the lack of actual expert opinions dealing with the topic of integration and Roma-related matters in news media websites.

1.2.4. Humour as a code of unity and exclusion in Facebook groups and forums

The "leisure uses[12]" of Facebook, although rarely inciting direct action, influence the perception of users in implicit ways. Most importantly, the consumption of "a socially accepted" entertaining content could be defined as a mechanism for soft influence over the users' perceptions and beliefs, achieved through the "normalisation" of the provided content.

A common place in all of the narratives of ridicule is the position of superiority of those who are laughing upon those, who are being laughed at. For example, Roma people's culture has been an object of mockery. Facebook users (and TV shows and comedians) often ridicule (perceived as) typically Roma cultural practices and behaviours. Examples include how Roma people choose to name their children (especially of those names are more "western-like" sounding, like Versace) (Bonetti1378, 2011), how Roma people choose to spell their children's names and even questioning Roma parents' popular knowledge and right to name their children after fashion designers (Bonetti1378, 2011) (for example). Thus, a casual everyday occurrence (such as a young couple naming their child after a famous celebrity, or a TV show character) is perceived as ridiculous, because of the ethnic origin of the parents. Through humour and sarcasm Roma culture is presented as inferior to ethnic Bulgarian-ness.

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[12] By "leisure uses" we refer to the consumption of content, which is purely aimed at entertaining the online user and could be considered "light content" – one that does not incite any sort of action, does not earnestly declare itself as serving an ideological purpose, and does not declare itself as factual or informative.

The narratives of ridicule are not only a prime example of discriminatory dehumanisation of the members of the Roma community. They also continue to perpetuate and recreate a culture of establishing the "normality" of the amused spectators over the "amorality" of the subjects of the joke. These leisure practices of cultural ridicule establish a hierarchy of moral and cultural positions. The ones, who assess (the ethnic Bulgarians) are in a more elite position in relation to the ones, who are being assessed (the Roma). The Roma are the object of discussion and are thus deprived of their agency and participation in the very narratives which employ their own quotes, words, and bodies. Thus, Roma people are not only deprived of their own voices in a narrative, which exploits their literal voices, they are also deprived of their human status by being reduced to an image, a video, or a quote.

Humour and sarcasm are used as tools for mainstreaming and reaffirming the already established dominating narratives about Roma people's inherent cultural and moral inferiority. It plays with already deeply rooted ideas and prejudice (such as Roma people's illiteracy and inability to conduct moral labour), without overtly naming and explicating the discriminatory assumptions. The "leisure" content of ridiculing Roma people and their cultural and practical reality does come from a place of superiority of those who observe from a safe distance through the mediated lens of online narratives. Such leisure discriminatory narratives are hostile and lead to disinformation. Disinformation is achieved not particularly through presenting false facts (although such might be presented) or seeking to misinform and mislead. The disinformation, which stems from narratives, which exaggerate and stress the inherent ethnic polarisation in the country, is based upon re-establishing the norms of normality and falsely portraying them as juxtaposed to everything inherently Roma. Thus, such narratives are also hostile, although not directly inciting violence, hatred and discrimination. Such narratives of ridicule are harmful and contribute to structural antigypsyism in Bulgaria.

1.2.5. The generalised Gypsy-ness and the one-dimensional depiction of Roma people in the public domain

The general media image of Gypsy-ness is constructed by a complex multi-layered interdependence of specific "typically Roma" images, myths and clichés. These "fit" well together into a general narrative of Roma people's inferiority to Bulgarians and their civil and moral degradation. All observed myths about Roma people in Bulgaria (elaborated in more detail in part 2 of the analysis of desk research findings) fit into their portrayal as "lesser than". This image is central to the narrative, that the integration of Roma people in Bulgaria is impossible. The difference of Roma people is not only defined as an exotic juxtaposition to Bulgarian-ness. It is described as inherently inferior. The central image of interiority is specified through demonstrated manifestations of Roma people as "lesser than". These descriptions (employing myths, images and clichés) serve as a peripheral justification and construct a seemingly "tangible" image of Roma people's inferiority. Ideological Gypsy-ness is constructed through methodical crafting of the specific examples of stories, regarding Roma people. Roma people's image in the media is built around the notion of inferiority, while at the same time, the notion of "inferiority" is re-built and re-defined around the portrayed practices of Roma people.

Paradoxically, Roma people, who have been the subject of news articles, are deprived of a character complexity. They are defined in their totality through the single act, which brought them media attention. This one-dimensional image of Roma in the media allows for Roma people to be perceived as Roma first, and

rarely as people. In assessing the importance of anti-Roma narratives in perpetuating and reaffirming the dominating ideology of Roma inferiority in societal terms, we focus on defining the characteristics of dominating anti-Roma discourses, we delve into analysing their content, participants and processes of interaction.

2. Discourse analysis of anti-Roma narratives, myths, and images in the media and online

The hostile narratives against Roma people in Bulgaria follow a steady trajectory of peaks and lows – both dependent upon one another in order to sustain and produce an overwhelming normalisation of structural antigypsyism and of the individual prejudices, needed to sustain it. The narratives of presenting Roma as "different from normality", as "the other" rely upon the normalisation of an unproblematised mythologised image of generalizable "Gypsy-ness".

The following section provides a description of the most prominent hostile anti-Roma public narratives in Bulgaria. Those narratives are heavily employed by media and online channels in order to perpetuate the stereotypical images of Roma people. The most explicated anti-Roma narratives, which have been identified through the desk research component of the CARE FOR TRUTH qualitative study are: "Roma people are criminals and deserve harsh punishments", "Roma people deserve to be excluded from society, as they cannot fit into social norms of public decency", "Roma people are morally unfit to be Bulgarian citizens", "Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer", "The integration of Roma people in Bulgaria is impossible". Each one of these narratives is associated with a negative image of Roma people, which is utilised by the media to normalise Bulgarian hostility against ethnic minorities. Those images fit into established anti-Roma myths, which serve the purpose of perpetuating anti-Roma hostile narratives both in media discourses and in the everyday perceptions of Bulgarians.

2.1. Narrative: "Roma people are criminals and deserve harsh punishments"

This narrative is mainly based upon the portrayed inherent criminality of Roma people. Media coverage contributes to the construction of this idea, through the use of the image of Gypsy-ness as criminality and the myth of the inherent opposition between state authority and Roma people.

2.1.1. The image of Gypsy-ness as criminality

The most popular topic for media stories, relating to Roma people, is the topic of Roma criminality. It is the most strongly opposed and most widely recognised image of the Roma community online[13]. A common place among media news channels (Indzhov, 2012:25) and online topics of discussion[14] are crimes, committed by Roma people. Most often, those relate to theft, drug dealing, looting, and conducting schemes of illegal economic activity (see for example, Blitz, 2017b). However, special attention is paid to more heavy crimes, where media outlets traditionally exaggerate and describe the crimes in vivid detail as "brutal", "slaughter" (Blitz, 2017d) and inhumane. The suspected Roma perpetrators are easily defined as "murderers" (Blitz, 2017d), "coloured thugs" (Blitz, 2017d), "paedophiles" (Percheva, 2020) even when underage. The presumption of innocence is usually disregarded and the "court of moral opinion" is quick to rule against

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[13] As observed during the research for the purposes of this study.

[14] As established by the conclusions of the study, conducted by the CSD and ARC Fund for the purposes of the YouthRightOn project.

suspected Roma criminals (including journalists, as well as readers, who express their opinion in the comments section).

This practice of hefty stigmatisation and reversal of the rule of law into a media practice of pronouncing Roma people guilty, until proven innocent has led to the publication of fake news. Some of them have been reluctantly refuted by the same media outlets, which produced and popularised them[15].

Bulgarian media coverage links criminal practices not solely to the particular Roma people, who have been convicted or suspected of concrete acts of interest. It links criminality as a trait of a "universalised" image of Gypsy-ness. This phenomenon is achieved through articles about non-Bulgarian Roma's crimes, for example (Blitz, 2017e), conducted in other places around the world. Those articles are indicative of the sensationalist nature of Roma-related topics' coverage by Bulgarian media. Roma crimes are a topic of interest and are easily accepted and informationally "digestible" by the Bulgarian audience, for whom it has been normalised and incorporated into the everyday reality. The criminalisation of the image of Roma people further serves the purpose of "universalising" the inherent Gypsy-ness, which is presented as observable and present everywhere in the world. Those implicit linkages and interdependencies are a mechanism of referring to the scientific racism against Roma people in a more "politically acceptable" manner (Bonilla Silva, 2016:77). Thus, Roma people are portrayed as inherently inferior to Bulgarians and other majority groups, without explicitly being called out as such. The media-represented global linkage of Roma people and Gypsy-ness is also utilised for adding multiple layers of criminality to the depiction of Roma people through the demonstrated practice of its "internationalisation".

Media publications often narrate stories about Bulgarian Roma, who have been reported to commit crimes or behave "inappropriately" abroad (Blitz, 2017i). These Roma people are narrated to stain the image of Bulgarians in a global context. Thus, the layers of Roma criminality include two types of crimes: a legal crime (of which the article informs, these are often thefts, murders, fraud) and a deeper moral crime against the image of Bulgaria abroad. The narratives of distinction between Bulgarians and Roma further enhance the acceptability and normalisation of hostility against Roma people, who are not only embarrassing their own image, but also the image of Bulgarians by association ("Look at how they are representing us" (Blitz, 2017i)). In this case, the narrative is intentionally phrased in terms of "them" vs "us" as a means to separate the Bulgarians from the compromised morality of Bulgarian Roma. Thus, Bulgarian-ness is opposed to Gypsy-ness both linguistically and representatively.

2.1.2. The myth of the opposition between state authority and the Roma

Roma people's otherness is most successfully demonstrated through oppositions. One of the most popular images of opposition, which is often ascribed to Roma people and Roma communities is the opposition between Roma and State authority. Publications, covering Roma people's encounters with police are weaponised to portray Roma as the enemy and a juxtaposition of the police and state authorities.

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[15] A notable example of this phenomenon are a series of three articles, published by the online outlet Blitz.bg within one day (14th of July 2017). The first published article stated "A signal to Blitz: Another outrage, Roma brutally beat up a bus driver in Peshtera". The following two articles, published within hours refute this statement through a coverage of a governmental official's statement, that the report was "false and aimed at provocation" and a coverage of the authorities' taking up of an investigation. The media approach toward refuting fake news is subtle and implicit, often presented as a continuation story, rather than a disclaimer.

Media coverage of police encounters with Roma people are hardly impartial. Roma people are presented as "caught red handed" (Blitz, 2017k) in illegal trade, as hooligans, who refuse arrests and "jump" (Blitz, 2017f) police officers, as "beastlike crowd" (Blitz, 2018a), as perpetrators of "unbelievable" (Blitz, 2016) acts against police vehicles. At the same time, while reporting cases of police brutality against Roma people, the victims are still described in terms, which diminish not only their victimisation by police, but also their human status, through titles such as "Roma from the Sliven neighbourhood roared as one: police shoot bullets at us, they came with riffles" (Blitz, 2017h). Describing Roma people's complaints as roars is a mechanism for implying their proximity to animalism, rather than to humanity. This approach has previously been categorised as "social death" (Cacho, 2012:4).

The most popular approach for portraying the opposition of Roma people against state authority are articles about the demolition of houses in predominantly Roma areas (see. for example, 24chasa, 2019). Media interest spikes as the homes of Roma families are pronounced illegal and families are left homeless. However, the media focus is rarely on the fates of Roma people, whose houses have been demolished. The central theme of such articles is the rightful and orderly conduct of local authorities. In the name of gentrification and improvement of the visible urban landscape, Roma houses and Roma people's ghettoised manner of living in poverty is perceived through the eyes of the bystander, rather than through the eyes of the victims of economic marginalisation and criminalised existence.

The narratives of Roma people's opposition to authority further transpire through articles, narrating clashes between Roma people and other authority figures, such as medical workers, school principals and administrators (see. for example, Blitz 2017a). These narratives depict Roma people as "hooligans", "drunkards" and "wildlings" (Blitz, 2017a). These semantic approaches contribute to the attachment of moral depravity to the already achieved criminality of Roma people's image.

2.2. Narrative: "Roma people deserve to be excluded from society, as they cannot fit into social norms of public decency"

The narrative of impossible Roma integration into the Bulgarian society is supported by the continuous reassertion of Roma people's inherent inferiority and inability to fit into social norms. This narrative draws mostly upon the image of Roma people as illiterate and upon the myth of the inferiority of Roma bodies.

2.2.1. The image of Roma illiteracy

The main object of ridicule of Roma people is crafted around the demonstration of Roma people's illiteracy and inability to express themselves, while interviewed by media. Especially intense focus is put on any mispronunciations. Mispronunciations and misspeaking are ridiculed to a degree as to not only diminish the content of the information, which the Roma interviewee is trying to convey, but also to dismiss any further attempt for voicing of opinions in a Roma accent. Thus, Roma people, who are interviewed are not only deprived of their opinion (which is disregarded by the sarcastic approaches of creating "light" content of the topic of Roma voting rights and practices, for example see Gospodari na efira (2017a)) and denied access to "serious" public discussions, but they are also deprived of their voices. The Roma voices and the Roma accent is appropriated, in order to be employed solely for the purposes of humour and satire.

The practice of mocking Roma mispronunciations and misspeaking is so deeply rooted in humorous anecdotes that, as a result, traditionally any statement made in a Roma voice and accent is deprived of

meaning, content and context. In order for Roma to reclaim their voices and opinions, steps need to be taken in the direction of providing a more extensive public participation of opinions, phrased, voiced and argued by Roma people. The narratives of mocking the portrayed Roma illiteracy also serve the purpose of presenting Roma opinions as invalid, due to their inherent illogicality.

2.2.2. The myth of the inferiority of Roma bodies – the images of the Welfare queen and the Charmant Lady

The image of Roma women is constructed as a complex intersection of illiteracy and „unwoman-ness". That intersection is manifested in posts and videos mocking Roma women's perceived inability to keep track of all of their children (see. for example, smyah.bg, 2014). The ridicule of a Roma woman's inability to name all of her children plays to the complexity of her portrayed illiteracy (in inability to count) and her disregard to the "most sacred" role of the "true woman" (Wilks, 2005:570) – to devote herself to motherhood. When it comes to the role of the mother in media depictions of Roma women – it is narrated as a contrast to the "divine feminine" role of a nurturer and care provider (based upon the "mythic idealisation of the maternal" (Rabaka, 2003:41)) and depicted as an economic act of securing the means for access to welfare[16]. The mockery of illiteracy intersecting with inadequate performance of the role of the mother is manifested in media stories about Roma mothers, who were not able to explain the modus operandi of the measles vaccine while taking her children to a doctor's appointment to receive them. Thus, Roma women in media are deprived of the natural morality of "womanhood" and instead are reduced to selfish economically motivated "welfare queens"[17], utilising their children as tools for personal gain.

The inappropriate enactment of gender roles by Roma people (mostly by Roma women) is used as a media tool for portraying the inherent inadequacy and failure to conform to the established order of performing and realising moral roles. An example for this media practice is a video (Gospodari na efira, 2017b), aimed at ridiculing the gender identity and mannerisms of a member of the Roma community, while commenting the police's intrusion into the community. The sarcasm-fuelled joke in the video centres on the appearance of the Roma representative, mocking their attire, garments, accessories and "tolerance toward the policeman's rights to call for backup" (Gospodari na efira, 2017b). The title of the video available online (as an excerpt from the popular "Gospodari na efira" TV show) states "The most Charmant[18] Lady of Stolipinovo describes a clash between Roma and police" (Gospodari na efira, 2017b). The mere act of phrasing the title around the narrator, rather than around the issue at hand (police enforcement of rules in Roma communities), demonstrates the sensationalist manner of reporting of Roma issues. Police brutality is not perceived as newsworthy, but the gender identity of a Roma person is. The story in the video centres on the politics of the body (Butler and Butler, 1997) – the literal "non-straightened" body of the particular member of the Roma community and the tainted ethno-national body. This Roma person's illegitimacy and meaninglessness are portrayed through the assertion of their "inappropriate body". The importance of the personal bodies and the Roma body (as related to Gypsy-ness in general) is refuted through the intersection

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[16] As Bulgarian social benefits are awarded as a fixed amount of monthly contributions per child.

[17] The term "welfare queen" has been previously used to depict the notion of discrimination against African-American women, whose sole source of income is from social benefit and welfare (see. Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

[18] „Charmant" is traditionally used as an adjective describing excessively extravagant, bald, shiny, and overall prominently "Roma women style" of flashy clothing. The adjective "charmant" is exclusively used in characterisation of "Romaness" or in defining something or someone in proximity to Roma-ness, thus reducing its value.

of ethnic and gender "abnormality" (deviation from the dominating universality of the pure national heterosexual male body (Butler and Butler, 1997)), which, according to the Gospodari na efira, is a more pressing issue, than the potential police brutality (to which the "Charmant Lady" is attempting to attest).

The Charmant Lady and the Welfare queen are the mythologised media images of Roma people's inability to conform to gender roles. Femininity and Woman-ness is either improperly performed, or inappropriately performed by the refuted bodies of Roma-ness and Roma femininity. The dominating narrative of "impropriety" of the Roma bodies and gender performances contributes to the moral and cultural boundaries. Their media representation and practical application reaffirms the nationally accepted practices of exclusion of Roma people as a constituent of institutional and cultural antigypsyism. The hostile media narratives, although not practically based upon fake news, construe a practise of disinformation, as they pertain to the mythologised image of cultural otherness of Roma people. This narrative fits into the broader discourse of polarisation with regard to Roma people's inability to properly adjust all dominantly established identity markers.

2.3.   Narrative: "Roma people are morally unfit to be Bulgarian citizens"

Depicting Roma people's otherness benefits from the narratives of moral opposition between Bulgarians and Roma. Even, when the acts of Roma people are not illegal, the media coverage still classifies them as inappropriate and unacceptable by presenting them as immoral and therefore not belonging to the pure national body. The linkage between Roma immorality and the inappropriate enactment of a Bulgarian nationality is narrated through stories of Roma people's disrespect to symbols and artefacts of national importance and emblems of humanity and spirituality. Roma have been depicted as "godless demolishers" (Blitz, 2017c) of graves (despite there being no proof or reliable evidence of the real perpetrators of a criminal act, consisting of a broken gravestone); as "preposterous occupiers" (Blitz, 2017m) of public spaces like city fountains for having children bathe in them; as "extremely disrespectful to the Bulgarian anthem" (Blitz, 2017l) for sitting during its sounding on a football game; and as "vengeful vandals" for "occupying a Blagoevgrad lake" (Blitz, 2017g) by having a picnic by the lakeside.

The image of Roma occupation of public spaces reaffirms their media portrayal as thieves, who take what does not belong to them. Thus, the following narrative is shaped: not only do they shamelessly steal from the moral and public property of Bulgarians, but they do so at the expense of Bulgarians, who cannot manage to take advantage of what has been claimed by Roma people. The ideological narrative, illustrated by these examples, centres around depicting Roma people as vigilantes, who not only steal property, but also rob Bulgarians of their most sacred moral and symbolic property (national artefacts). The narrative of Roma people's immorality plays a role of depicting Roma people as villains and Bulgarians as victims on both material and symbolic levels. This narrative draws upon the inherent de-humanisation of Rome people, achieved by media through the image of Roma people as barbaric non-humans and through the myth that Roma bodies are public property.

2.3.1.   The image of Roma as barbaric non-humans

Media narratives of Roma people's otherness depend on not only presenting Roma people as different from Bulgarians, but also on presenting Roma people as evil. Thus, Roma people easily fit into the role of the villain, while Bulgarians are portrayed as long-suffering victims of ethnic clashes, both physical and ideological. The image of Roma people as evil utilises not just their perceived inherent criminality and moral

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depravity, but also their depiction as non-humans. The dehumanisation of Roma people by media narratives relies upon semantics. Roma are often described as wild herds (Blitz, 2018), uncontrollably roaming around public spaces. Special attention is paid to marginal stories like "a barbaric eating of pelicans" (24chasa, 2020c), pollution, an inhumane treatment of animals.

A closer look into all of those stories uncovers a tendency of depicting Roma people's mechanisms for coping with poverty as immoral and inhumane. The image of poverty is often utilised to depict Bulgarians as victims of circumstances, especially suffering from inefficient state support in the form of social benefits, which have been used up by Roma people. Whereas, Roma poverty is perceived as something, which Roma people have brought upon themselves by refusing to work or obtain a proper education. Thus, there is a media perception of a right and a wrong way to experience and suffer from poverty. In itself, poverty could be (perceived by media as) a virtue (virtuous social malady) or a sin. And the deciding factors for whether a certain individual belongs to one group or the other are drawn along ethnic lines. Roma poverty is villainised, whereas Bulgarian poverty is sanctified.

The inhumane image of Roma people is also narrated through their own (perceived) inability to care for one another and protect human lives within ethnic boundaries. The stories of Roma on Roma crimes and murders emphasise the act of murder and the role of the murderer, rather than the image and story of the victim (who are both Roma) (see. for example, Blitz, 2018b). Roma people are depicted as incapable to care for their own kind, which contributes to the insertion of the idea, that Roma are inhuman and in fact their own biggest foe.

2.3.2. The myth of Roma bodies as public property

The de-humanisation of Roma people legitimises the implicit practice of media treatment of Roma people, as if their bodies are public property. Although in present times bold claims such as "Roma do not own their bodies" would probably only be present in extreme far-right platforms (if even there), the subtle acts of utilising imagery of Roma people (and especially of Roma women) for amusement and ridicule, demonstrate the attitude toward ownership and disregard of personal space and privacy. The free sharing of images and videos of Roma women either dancing (see. for example, Muzika, 2020) or in overly sexualised poses and barely clothed bodies and images of the faces of Roma children is indicative of the attitude toward regarding Roma bodies as "public property".

Objectification, alongside dehumanisation and demonisation are the most popular tools for accentuation of the distinctions between the "us" and "them" group, thus serving the purposes of consolidating the unity of the inter-group, reasserting the boundaries against the outgroup through intimidation and denigration, and promoting ethno-violence (Baider and Kopitowska, 2018:2).

2.4.   Narrative: "Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer"

The distinction between "us" and "them" is further fused with influence through the portrayal of "them" as the "evil wrong doer" and us as the "innocent victim". The distinctions between "us" and "them" are elevated to the level of juxtapositions through the assignment of power dynamics and a narrative with a villain and a hero. This process is supported by the media narrative, that Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer. The Bulgarian ethnicity is portrayed as the innocent victim and hero, because they

have survived the inherent social and political injustice, brought upon them by the Roma. The Roma are portrayed as evil villains with the help of the media image of Roma as political sell-outs and the myth that Roma people are parasites to public funding.

2.4.1. The image of Roma as political sell-outs

The image of Roma people, as political sell-outs encompasses the belief, that Roma people traditionally sell their votes to the political party, which outbids the others in the wake of elections. This image is usually established through media coverage, showing Roma people, who come out of polling sections and seem to not know what they had just voted for or what the elections were about (Gospodari na efira, 2017a). Thus, media narratives portray Roma people as an ignorant and not politically involved mass, which however ends up "stealing" the power of democracy away from informed and misrepresented Bulgarian voters. That myth is further enhanced by articles, claiming that Roma people use their political right of vote as an exchange tool for simple benefits or fast loan coverage. The image of Roma people as "votes for hire" (Ekip Plovdiv24.bg, 2014) is further enhanced by articles, portraying Roma people as paid participants in civil protests (Zapernik.com, 2019), for which they hold no genuine sentiment. Such examples play into the idea, that corruption and improper democracy are assisted by the less educated, less civically involved masses of Roma people, who sell their democratic rights for money and personal short-term benefits. Thus, Roma people are portrayed by media not as citizens, rather as fake and unworthy beneficiaries of civil rights, who willingly participate in perpetuating the established corrupt practices in Bulgaria.

Portraying Roma people as political sell-outs serves a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it villainises Roma people by creating the myth, that they steal democracy away from Bulgarians. On the other hand, this image portrays Roma people as incapable of practicing their legally granted rights in a proper manner and thus juxtaposes Gypsy-ness to the rightfulness of civic duty. The media image, established through the narrative of Roma people in elections, draws upon both civic and legal boundaries in defining the "otherness" of Roma people.

2.4.2. The myth that Roma people are parasites to public funding

Apart from being depicted as moral parasites, who take advantage of public spaces, Roma people have been consistently perceived as social parasites, taking advantage of available civil rights. Most notably, the narrative of taking advantage of social benefits, instead of working to support themselves, has become one of the key arguments in defence of the myth that Roma people are social parasites. The parasite-like manner of existence of Roma people is narrated through news articles, reporting occasions of Roma beggars (see. for example, 24chasa, 2020a), Roma taking advantage of EU funding (Blitz, 2017o) and most metaphorically through Roma people looting garbage cans (Blitz, 2017n), while driving around in a vehicle, which is perceived to be above their legal means of purchase.

The image of Roma people as parasites fits into a popular online narrative of Roma people abusing their rights and misinterpreting their rightful place in society, for which Bulgarians have to pay the cost. Roma people are not only perceived as economic non-contributors to the well-being of the country, but they are blamed for taking advantage of the achievements of tax-paying Bulgarians, by "draining" the social security funding. Furthermore, Roma people's reproductive practices are perceived as an attempt to overcome their "minority" status, by some day outnumbering members of the Bulgarian ethnic community.

3. Summary of the findings of the desk research

The conclusions from the conducted desk research identified some key trends to the dissemination and influence of fake news and disinformation about the Roma community in Bulgaria:

- Anti-Roma media hostility cannot be limited to openly declared hate speech and fake news. The perpetuation of stereotypical images and harmful, prejudicial narratives about the Roma are also a prominent component of the hostile media environment in Bulgaria.
- Although differently, both "renowned" and "leisure" channel for communication and information contribute to the media hostility against Roma people and communities in Bulgaria.
- The most prominent characteristics of the channels for anti-Roma disinformation cannot be generalised. On the one hand, mainstream media employs anti-Roma messages and stereotype-based narratives in their general representation of Roma-related topics. On the other hand, the most aggressive platforms and channels for anti-Roma hostility employ various tactics for misinformation and misrepresentation. The most popular specificities of these explicitly anti-Roma content producers are: **fake news and stigmatisation, non-relevant visualisations, the faking of expertise of public figures, humour and sarcasm, and the one-dimensional representation of Roma people and gypsy-ness.**
- Hostile media narratives against Roma people in Bulgaria are constructed of myths and prejudicial images, which are exploited for the popularisation of broader ideologised narratives of antigypsyism. The identified prejudicial narratives, discussed in detail in this report are: **"Roma people are criminals and deserve harsh punishments", "Roma people deserve to be excluded from society, as they cannot fit into social norms of public decency", "Roma people are morally unfit to be Bulgarian citizens", "Roma people are the evil, from which Bulgarians suffer", "The integration of Roma people in Bulgaria is impossible".**
- The explicit media/public discussion of integration are ambiguous. There are examples of polar opposites in the public discourses: intellectuals, who lobby for an attitudinal shift toward tolerance, and intellectuals, who oppose integration, by describing it as means for achieving the oppression of the majority.
- The implied notion of integration in media discourses draws upon the popularisation of anti-Roma discourses and the developed negative images and myths. The media picture of integration is one of implied opposition to integration, which is illustrated as impossible, due to the inherently non-integrational nature of Roma people.

The desk research, consisting of literature review and discourse analysis of observed media narratives, leads to the conclusion, that anti-Roma media hostility has two manifestations. On the one hand, there is explicitly discriminatory content, which often includes hate speech and anti-Roma propaganda. On the other hand, there is an implicit use of negative stereotypical images and myths, which perpetuate the normalisation of anti-Roma attitudes.

FOCUS GROUPS FINDINGS

The subsequent sections of this report draw conclusions from qualitative data, obtained through the conduct of 11 focus groups with health mediators, Roma activists, Roma leaders, students, youth, and educators from 10 different locations in Bulgaria.

The analysis of the data, gathered through the focus group discussions aims at assessing the Roma communities' perceptions and experiences of media, fake news and disinformation. The following sections of this report outline the most important conclusion, which defines the relationship (practical and

ideological) between the Roma communities and the media (with a special focus on the media and social media's tendencies of Roma hostility).

The analysis of the key conclusions about Roma communities' perceptions and experiences of the media and media hostility are utilised to gather and present insight into 1) the key practices and uses of media by Roma people, 2) the effects of fake news and disinformation on the Roma communities, and 3) to highlight possible future actions, which hold the promise of being successfully implemented for the purposes to counter misinformation and anti-Roma misrepresentations in media and online. Those main conclusions provide the basis of seven recommendations toward the content and prospective objectives of the methodological and practical manuals for the training of Roma activists in Bulgaria.

1. Main information channels, used by the Roma communities

The most popular information channels among our respondents include various sources of information. Interestingly, respondents mentioned social media platforms, national TV outlets, online sources of leisure content, as well as some highly renowned media channels, which employ complex political analyses and represent an alternative to the easily digestible "yellow websites"[19].

1.1. Social media and Facebook

Firstly, and most importantly, Facebook seems to be the dominating source of information:

"I don't even watch TV anymore – I am not eve interested in the news any more, I am tired of watching the news. People are mostly informed by Facebook, where else do you think? Some of our people may not even know how to read but they are more active than anyone else on Facebook."

Health mediator, Yambol

Facebook stood out as the most popular source of information among our respondents from the Roma community, regardless of age: the students and youths mentioned Facebook as a main channel for spread of news and information, as much as more mature and established members of the Roma communities.

Age came out as a defining factor in an important distinction in the practices of consumption of social media online content by our respondents. Younger respondents (especially students or activists, who were fresh out of school and currently in university) seemed to be significantly more aware about the possibility that untrue information might be available on Facebook and disguised as reputable.

"If I want to learn more about something I read on Facebook, I just google it. Google has all the information and I can compare different news."

Student, Lom

Because they had been exposed to information, which was later recognised as fake, some of our respondents[20] realised that Facebook is not necessarily a news source, rather a platform providing access to multiple sources. Some of our respondents were aware, that some of the information on Facebook might be true, but some might not. This is why they had developed personal 'fake news detection systems[21]'.

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[19] "Yellow websites" is a term used by one of our respondents – a Roma leader in Razlog. He used this self-made term in order to relate the currently popular websites in Bulgaria. The most important specificities of "yellow websites", to which the respondent referred included short and easy to read articles, big titles and questionable information.

[20] As already mentioned, younger respondents were far more critical of the content of the "newsfeed" on Facebook. Most of our respondents were activists and health mediators – a highly educated and digitally literate target group, who were very aware of fake news, the processes of disinformation and of the mechanisms of "alternative sources of information". However, they are also frontline practitioners, who work with the broader Roma communities, so they were also able to provide some insight into the practices and media consumption habits of "ordinary Roma people", with whom they work. This conclusion about the awareness of the existence of fake information online is based upon the results of the focus group, as well as on the insight shared by our respondents about "the practices of the Roma communities in general".

[21] This is not a direct quote from a respondent, rather an analytical definition of the authors of this report.

"I pay attention at whoever is sharing an article. The fake news websites are just different – and I pay them no mind."

<div align="right">Social worker, Novi pazar</div>

Respondents shared that they were alerted by 1) non-reputable sources of the information shared, 2) news article titles, which obviously aimed to shock their readers 3) news coming out of pop-ups and banners of other websites.

Notably, our respondents in Razlog and Montana mentioned a Facebook group for members of the respective local communities in their towns, as one of the most active producers of Roma-related news. Respondents in both of those towns acknowledged, that regular Facebook users were free to post content in those Facebook groups and the attitude of the local people was predominantly anti-Roma.

"There is this website "Noticed in Montana[22]" where they constantly discuss Roma people. Roma are guilty of everything. I left this website, because they just constantly criticise Roma people."

<div align="right">Activist, Montana</div>

Respondents in both of those towns appeared to be hurt and distressed by such news and by the practice of making public certain traits of their own communities and perhaps people they even knew. The media hostility, which is realised somewhat vaguely by national channels and address a faceless "Gypsy-ness", is considered by Roma people as general normality. However, being hit "close to home" by local outlets seems to represent a more concrete and more personal attack on Roma people and therefore took its emotional toll on our respondents.

"Facebook is very influential on people's opinion now overall, not just on our communities. Facebook became a part of our routines – everything and everyone uses Facebook."

<div align="right">Educator, Plovdiv</div>

1.2. Nationally disseminated TV outlets

Facebook as a medium (both shared links of news media outlets, as well as users' groups and posts) is revered by Roma people[23] in Bulgaria because of its perceived authenticity in comparison to the big national TV outlets. Although they come second in popularity, the big TV news outlets like the National Bulgarian TV, bTV and Nova do not necessarily enjoy the trust of Roma communities.

"These are paid-for media channels and everybody knows who owns them. The free media now is social media – look at how it has opened our eyes."

<div align="right">Activist, Novi pazar</div>

Big media outlets are largely distrusted by the Roma communities and perceived as dishonest, perceived as corrupt or in service of big political interests, or they are ignored by Roma people altogether. The video content, which Roma people mentioned to have used was accessed through YouTube and was of a recreational, rather than informative nature:

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[22] The respondent does refer to a "website" and this is a direct translation of her actual words. However, "Noticed in Montana" is not a website, rather a Facebook page of big popularity. This "mistake" further hints to the inability of some of the representatives of the Roma community to distinguish between different sources of information, which are disseminated through the same channel or through the same medium. The internet is seen as a monolithic information space.

[23] The data demonstrate that this tendency is not only applicable to Roma communities, but is true of the entire country's population.

"I mainly watch all types of videos on YouTube – mostly self-development videos. I read such articles on Google as well."

Activist, Razlog

1.3. Analytical and highly reputable sources

Alternative examples of news media, which were also mentioned (very rarely) by our respondents as possible channels for communication, included some smaller TV stations or particular websites, disseminating popular knowledge or leisure content. A notable exception to this trend was provided by a student in Sliven, who seemed to be well informed of the media environment in Bulgaria and provided some examples of media outlets, known for their political analysis and in-depth journalism:

"I guess it depends what media channels you use for information. If you take a look at NovaTV, bTV, about two months ago, during the peak [of the pandemic], when the measures were stricter, there were different news reports, which of course presented the Roma communities extremely unfavourably. (…) When it comes to media sources, which I suppose everyone should read, and which are ethical and highly objective, those would be Deutsche Welle, Free Europe, Capital, Dnevnik, Bivol and may be one or two more. I suppose, those exact media sources, which I use, they are quite objective and there is not the attitude of PIK, Bradva, and the rest. These are the cool and ethical media, which do not ethnicise any issues."

Youth, Sliven

However, these sources, however reputable, are not popular among Roma communities, due to trivial reasons, such as 1) the high language they employ in their articles, 2) the complex issues they discuss, and 3) their non-sensationalist approach to facts.

"The question of how many Roma people use those sources is on point. If I had to guess, it would be less than 1%."

Roma leader, Sliven

These results indicate, that the most appropriate channels for challenging anti-Roma fake news and disinformation among the Roma communities, would mainly be online channels, including platforms, which share leisure content or popular knowledge (rather than only information and news media outlets) in an easily accessible manner.

1.4. Health Mediators as the most reputable source of information

In all of the Roma communities, included in this study, respondents pointed out the health mediators' importance and key role in spreading news, informing the communities, and challenging disinformation. Health mediators serve a crucial role in connecting the Roma communities to the outside world, to the state and local institutions and to any and all figures of authority (which tend to be distrusted by people in the communities):

"We are like a small local municipality. (…) I joke that the only thing we do not do yet is issue passports."

Health mediator, Novi Pazar

Furthermore, the methods of communication, utilised by health mediators are very personal and exemplify the individual approach, where every single member of the community feels listened to, cared for and appreciated. For example, our health mediator respondents shared numerous stories of personally helping people, who were being discriminated against, but once represented by a mediator, were quickly better received by administrators in official institutions.

Health mediators are recognisable and highly revered figures in Roma communities. They often contribute to the creation of knowledge and dissemination of information. In many places they have replaced the media

as distributers of trustworthy information and have learned to digest and present complex information from the source directly to concerned citizens:

"Most of the information, shared on Facebook by some random sites, is just a lie that aims to intimidate people and make them even more afraid. The best source of information [with regard to coronavirus] is the website of the Ministry of Health. We mainly inform people through brochures."

Health mediator, Lom

Health mediators employ potent approaches in their communication with members of the community, as well as with institutions. Their unique positionality allows them to navigate both of these social spheres and to mediate the relationship and communication between them. Thus, health mediators are uniquely well suited to identify and challenge fake news and the effects of disinformation and panic among Roma communities. Most of our health mediator respondents shared that they have had to challenge anti-Roma disinformation among Roma people, as well as among members of the ethnic majority of Bulgarians, because of the "in-between space", which they occupy.

Most importantly, health mediators are equipped to challenge disinformation and change the opinion of people in the Roma communities through their personal actions, arguments and reputation. These encounters have been successful purely because health mediators are highly reputable and trusted members of the Roma communities. Most notably this tendency has been illustrated by an activist in Montana through her short answer to the question "If you were to receive conflicting information on a certain topic, where Facebook says one thing, and [the health mediator in your community] says another, who do you trust?":

"The health mediator! I trust her, because she is my friend!"

Activist, Montana

The most efficient channels of communication and information among Roma communities are those, which support the non-linear model of communication. With all of their weaknesses, social media platforms allow for bigger agency of the audience – this seems to be a deciding factor for Roma people. Mostly, members of the Roma communities need to be able to personally assess the origin of the information, which reaches them. The more personalised models of communication are more successful and popular among Roma people. This is why Facebook is the most popular channel for information and the health mediators (judged by their personality) are the most trusted source of information.

National and big media outlets are (somewhat) popular mostly because of their accessibility. Those could be utilised for an awareness building campaign aimed at the ethnic majority, rather than the Roma minority, which does not feel represented or properly illustrated by neither one of the mainstream media channels.

Highly reputable news sources would be difficult to popularise among members of the Roma community, as their language and subjects are not accessible and appropriate to the literacy level in Roma communities. However, information gathered from those sources, could be used and disseminated in a more reader-friendly manner through popular platforms by influencers, activists, and representatives.

Future digital literacy building campaigns and approaches should utilise social media as the main channel for reaching and informing Roma people. Any sort of community action, involving Roma people and aiming their empowerment or citizenship, would have no potential, unless it heavily incorporates Roma mediators and activists. They are the most appropriate target for popularisers, multipliers, educators, influencers or any other type of community energisers.

2. Media hostility – the Roma community's perspectives

One of the initial goals of our focus group discussions was to probe for our respondents' awareness about disinformation, fake news and media hostility. The guide, which was applied to the discussions, allowed for those issues to be grasped in their interrelation with other meaningful aspects of the experiences of the Roma minority in Bulgaria. Overwhelmingly, our respondents, who in many cases were frontline practitioners during a health crisis and were dealing with the most vulnerable people in the country, perceived the anti-Roma sentiments of the media in Bulgaria as just another aspect of a generally discriminative society:

"This is how it is almost everywhere – if there is an ethnic minority group or something of this sort, the mass of the locals in society will be prejudicial against them. There is a climate of discrimination. (…) Media is an almost vital factor for the ethnic tension in our country. But I don't think they foster hate, because if they were to do it, it would be very scary."

Activist, Lom

The media hostility against the Roma community was mostly considered by our respondents to be something normal, or at least in line with the general attitude of society. Therefore, our respondents did not necessarily acknowledge the vital consequences, which media representations have on the forming of public opinion. Rather, the "media problem" (although diagnosed and noted as such) was generally perceived as just another manifestation of the discriminative nature of the Bulgarian society. However, all of our respondents agreed that the media environment in Bulgaria is hostile against minority groups, and especially against the Roma minority. Our respondents believed that efforts to change those tendencies would only be a step in the right direction.

2.1. Popular understandings of fake news and disinformation among Roma people

The most frequent definition of fake news and disinformation, employed by our respondents, was exhaustive and practical in its simplicity:

"Fake news means distortion of the truth."

Youth, Sofia

When confronted with the direct question "What do you think "fake news" means?" most respondents had an idea about such a phenomenon. They often provided their own explanations (such as the one cited above), which defined fake news and disinformation. However, it was a little bit more challenging for respondents to think of examples of fake news, which they had themselves "fallen for" or believed in.

"To me fake news is also when they advertise a certain product for a particular price and then it turns out that they sell you something of way lower quality. I have fallen for that sham."

Health mediator, Lom

This demonstrates our respondents understanding that any lie, disseminated through publicly accessible channels, was fake news. But they could rarely think of examples of fake news. This is a meaningful conclusion, combined with the result that most (if not all) of the respondents could provide an example of hostile media articles, which perpetuated anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudicial narratives. Coupled, those two results demonstrate, that there is a disparity between Roma people's understanding of what can be categorised as fake news, on the one hand, and the "normality" of anti-Roma media hostility in Bulgaria, on the other.

This study, however, detected the respondents' high sensitivity and very firm grasp on both the effects of and the manifestations of particular disinformation campaigns and media hostility. These stories and notions, however, seemed to be considered as more relevant to other Roma people and Roma communities,

rather than to the respondents themselves. Most popularly, fake news was perceived as something, in which mostly illiterate people could possibly believe. Prejudicial narratives and hostile anti-Roma myths and images were considered to be something, in which only non-Roma people could believe.

2.2. Distinction between fake news and disinformation

It is worth noting, that our respondents were highly informed and active citizens – mostly including activists, educators and mediators. These figures in the Roma communities demonstrate a higher level of reflexion, education, critical thinking and digital and media literacy. This quality of theirs is most appropriately demonstrable by some of our respondents' high sensitivity toward the distinction between fake news as a unit of information and disinformation as a wider process of creating false perceptions and opinions, based upon myths and questionable ideas.

"Let's not call everything fake news, let's try to call this disinformation. There were fake documents on blanks of the Ministry of Health, during the spread of COVID-19, and those brochures said that the virus was fake. This is organised disinformation, which follows all of the rules of propaganda, aiming to misinform the population in order to cause a problem. (…) As a result of fake news, one becomes disinformed. One [fake news] is an object, while the other [disinformation] is a result. (…) Fake news does not have such severe consequences. When it is a disinformation campaign and is intentionally used to propagate, it harms the population. Intentional propaganda through disinformation is used to attack a certain group of people with those "facts" through a sequence of action, which work in a certain direction, in order to stigmatise and demonise some fractions of the population."

Activist, Lom

Our respondents, however, were keenly aware, that such levels of infirmity and grasp of complicated issues in society and media, although accessible to them, was still not common knowledge among the vast majority of the Roma communities, with whom mediators, activists and educators worked on a daily basis.

Based upon the insight, which was shared by mediators and activist, and upon the above discussed conclusions of this study, we can discern fake news from disinformation in a more systematic manner. Fake news is one of the components of the hostile anti-Roma media environment in Bulgaria. Disinformation (the process of influencing people's belief, which are based upon questionable or unfounded information) is one of the main effects of the hostile media environment. Fake news is one of the key tools, utilised (intentionally or unintentionally) to achieve the effects of disinformation. For the purpose of the following analysis, disinformation is perceived as a social process of subscribing to false beliefs and views of reality, while fake news is the specific units (examples) of false or misleading media and social media stories.

This analysis uses this distinction in the subsequent sections of this report and acknowledges, that simply fighting fake news would not be a sufficient approach in challenging the broader processes of disinformation in the Roma communities and in the Bulgarian society as a whole. However, challenging anti-Roma hostility in media and popular online channels (in its complex manifestations and diverse means for popularisation) is still considered to be the post potent approach to challenging disinformation and the anti-Roma social sentiments in Bulgaria.

3. Types of disinformation and fake news, which affect the Roma communities

A key distinction, which came up during the analysis of the conducted focus groups was with regard to the intended recipient of fake news and disinformation. The disinformation tendencies, which concern the Roma communities in Bulgaria can be hereby analytically categorised in two main groups: disinformation *about* the Roma communities and disinformation *among* the Roma communities.

On the one hand, respondents testified to a trend of successful disinformation campaigns, which were exceptionally popular among members of the Roma communities and led to real-life consequences. Such types of media/online media hostility can be defined as disinformation *among* the Roma communities. The specifics of the disinformation *among* the Roma communities are that this manifestation of media hostility 1) is disseminated among at the Roma community, 2) is addressing subjects, which are relevant to the Roma communities, but includes wrongful information, which aims to provoke certain action, and 3) influences Roma people's actions and perceptions of the real world.

On the other hand, respondents acknowledged the negative media influence of the stereotypical and prejudicial depiction of Roma people in mainstream Bulgarian media. Such types of media hostility can be defined as disinformation *about* the Roma communities. The specifics of the disinformation *about* the Roma communities are that this manifestation of media hostility 1) is aimed at the majority group in society, which is to subscribe to the normalised negative attitude toward Roma people (as discussed in the previous sections of this report in detail), 2) employs stereotypes, myths, and typically-Roma topics and narratives (as discussed in detail in previous sections of this report) and 3) influence Roma people's perception on how they are received by the dominating segments of society.

4. Successful fake news and disinformation campaigns *among*[24] the Roma communities – what are they and how to tackle their influence?

The two main factors for successful disinformation campaigns, which our respondents managed to acknowledge, on the basis of their constant daily work with Roma communities, are the wide-spread illiteracy of Roma people and the flawed relationship between Roma people and public authority (including media).

'The bad thing about the Roma communities is that there is no need for someone to check how accurate the information is. It's enough to spread the rumour and then everything starts (…) Because, you know our people – a lot of them are illiterate.'

Activist, Sliven

Firstly, people who are less educated, less prone to critical thinking are also less likely to seek background information on issues and therefore question the legitimacy of the news they read. Less educated people are less likely to also be digitally literate and more gullible, especially on topics which are highly emotionally charged. A critical audience, with resources for background and fact checking is believed by our respondents to be the most potent counteraction of fake news and deliberate disinformation campaigns. In order for disinformation among the Roma communities to be challenged, some steps need to be taken to address illiteracy and digital exclusion of Roma people.

Secondly, there is an overwhelming sense among our respondents (and their observations on other members of Roma communities) that the negative public opinion about this ethnic group fuels (or is fuelled by) the overwhelming negative attitudes of the governmental agencies and of society as a whole. Interestingly, the distrust in government and official authority is coupled with a naivety in news, spread by Facebook (probably because those are perceived as more authentic). As an illustration of the importance of Roma people's distrust in public authority, this report will now focus on the specificities of four successful disinformation campaigns: the COVID-19 related conspiracy theories, the National Strategy for the Child related conspiracy theories, the Bill Gates conspiracy and the vaccination conspiracies.

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[24] An important clarification needs to be made, with regard to the spread and nature of these disinformation campaigns. Roma communities were not the only "victims" of either one of the popular conspiracy theories, which were widely disseminated mostly on social media platforms like Facebook. Members of the Bulgarian ethnic community also believed the fake news about "COVID-19 as a sham" and the National Strategy for the Child.

4.1. "COVID-19 is fake!" – The distrust in authority and prevalence of personal experiences

In March 2020, Bulgaria became one of the first countries to impose strict lockdown, as early as March 13th. Strict measures were imposed on a national level. Bulgarians were ordered to shelter in place, with the small exception of leaving their homes for grocery and pharmacological shopping. Checkpoints were installed at the exits of towns and cities in order to ensure that no one is travelling out of town unnecessarily.

The coronavirus pandemic hit the Roma community particularly hard, due to the closure of the cities. In almost every town and city in Bulgaria, the Roma are segregated into neighbourhoods specifically designated for them, which are popularly called 'ghettos' by the media (see. for example, Dzhambazki.com, 2008). During the coronavirus lockdown, rumours surfaced around the spread of COVID-19 by the Roma communities – news media reported how the Roma are not complying with the pandemic measures and were leaving their homes, which supposedly dramatically helped the spread of the virus (see. for example, 24chasa.bg, 2020b). This lead to the government making the decision to restrict the entry and exits of the "ghettos" in some of the cities where the spread of COVID-19 was perceived to be too high. Media outlets attributed this decision to Roma people's incompliance with the legal measures (see. for example, Nova.bg, 2020).

The distribution of COVID-19 related fake news, concerning Roma communities, was twofold. On the one hand, media outlets claimed that Roma people were responsible for the spread of COVID-19 (Petrov, 2020). On the other hand, disinformation about the existence and nature of the virus was being distributed among members of the Roma communities.

Fake news on the verge of conspiracy theories started spreading among the Roma community, that the virus does not exist and that it was a way to keep them segregated and closed off:

> „Roma people were told that there is no virus and that everything was an elaborate plan to keep them confined in the neighbourhood."

> Youth, Sliven

Overwhelmingly, our respondents testified to the fact that Roma people did not believe that a dangerous virus truly was out there. There are two main reasons for Roma people's distrust in the news media and official governmental information. Firstly, Roma people have suffered from the anti-pandemic measures more severely, than they have suffered from the health-related issues of the pandemic itself. The predominantly Roma neighbourhoods were subjected to stricter measures, in comparison to other spaces in the country. Roma people were not allowed to leave their respective neighbourhoods (whereas other segments of the population were confined within the boundaries of their hometowns and cities). These confinements resulted, among other things, in loss of employment (as Roma people were not allowed to go to their workplace, if it was outside of their respective neighbourhoods). Simultaneously, the victims of the COVID-19 virus were not as visible (where any occurred) and not as overwhelmingly distributed, as the authorities might have claimed. The anti-pandemic measures had more tangible negative consequences to the everyday reality and perceptions of Roma people, compared to the actual disease itself[25].

The desire to come up with an interpretation (or to subscribe to one) that makes more sense with regard to Roma people's lived reality and their personal experience emerged. By believing in the conspiracy theory

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[25] Among our respondents, it was solely the health mediators, who had faced the virus and its real dimensions face-to-face. The more popular opinion, among Roma people was that the virus story was a sham, mostly because they had not seen it with their own eyes. Furthermore, the health mediators shared, that their biggest challenge in working with the Roma communities during the pandemic was to convince people, that the threat was actually real and that (most of the) measures were necessary (excluding the health mediators in Montana, who were also forced to take on the duties of paramedics and medical personnel, who were afraid to enter the Roma neighbourhoods and "out-sourced" the duties of initial checks and communication with potential COVID-19 patients).

that the virus was a sham, Roma people were making sense of the world through facts through a combination of wishful thinking and making sense of their own reality.

"It's easier to believe in something made up, because [Roma people in my community] didn't want [the ghettos in Yambol] to be closed"

Health mediator, Yambol

In order for people to be able to come up with alternative (to the officially provided) explanations to their current reality, there must be 1) a disparity between the official version and the lived experience and 2) a space for re-interpretation of facts. The space for re-interpretation of official facts emerges, when there is an overwhelming belief that the official interpretation might not be truthful and is therefore not entirely trustworthy. Bulgarian media (and the official authorities as a whole) have a complex relationship with the Roma communities. As discussed in previous sections of this report, media outlets rarely address the interests of the Roma community favourably and usually perpetuate the overwhelming hostility toward this particular ethnic group. These tendencies are not overlooked by Roma people.

"We, the Roma are accused of all sorts of things (…) and this is why they say – everything spreads because of the Roma and their neighbourhoods (…) Regardless of what has happened, if someone has done something and he is Roma, they will always highlight that."

Activist, Montana

This flawed relationship between the Roma communities and the official authorities and media create an overwhelming atmosphere of mutual distrust. The distrust in government and official media outlets creates more space for acceptance of alternative stories and a more enhanced vulnerability to the belief that 'alternative facts' can exist and be as reliable as official facts, supported by data and expertise. The authority of facts and expertise is undermined by the inherent distrust in the presumption that the government and the media are acting with the Roma community's best interest in mind. This phenomenon of the flawed relationship between the Roma community and authority and media representation paves the way for efficiency and popularity of fake news and the success of disinformation. The Roma communities' susceptibility to distribution and fake news on the issue of COVID-19 finds its roots in the mass media portrayal of the Roma – that they are responsible for everything bad in society which now, in the eyes of our respondents has been extended to coronavirus. The consequences of these narratives materialise in Roma people's adherence to alternative sources of information and figures of authority.

4.2. "The National Strategy for the Child aims to kidnap children for Norwegian gay couples" – Emotional topics and irrational fears

The abovementioned example of wide-spread disinformation among Roma communities is not unprecedented. In fact, it could be interpreted as another manifestation of Roma people's distrust in official authority and information sources. The conspiracy theories about the government intentionally acting in a manner, which excludes and discriminates against Roma people in Bulgaria were introduced as early as 2019. In 2019, the Roma community was hit by one of the biggest cases of disinformation and spread of fake news[26] that Bulgaria had seen. It all stemmed from the created National Strategy for the Child (2019-2030). It was drafted in 2018 and suggested amendments in the laws in favour of child abuse prevention and extended child protection, building upon the previous Strategy (National Strategy for the Child, 2008-2018).

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[26] The "wide-spread" nature of this news was illuminated by our respondents' response to the questions about fake news – the initial example, which they were always ready to point out, was the case with the National Strategy for the Child.

A disinformation campaign (supported by those in favour of a more 'traditional family', including one of the governmentally represented parties, IMRO[27] (News.bg., 2019)), which gained popularity on Facebook in 2018/2019. According to the fake news, the new National Strategy for the Child was co-funded by Norway and was promoting amendments to the law, which would allow for the state and social services to take away children from their families 'based on the Norwegian model of child protection' (Ditchev, 2019). In its essence, the fake news narrative claimed that children could be taken away from their parents for trivial reasons (such as not buying a toy, for example) and then forcefully adopted by Norwegian same-sex couples[28].

This disinformation campaign led to a wide-spread fear that children will be taken away from their parents, especially from Roma parents who have little to no resources for counter-reaction. The fear-induced panic escalated in places like Sliven, where Roma people quickly picked their children from school before the end of the school day, so that they could keep them safely away from the authorities (who they believed were out to practically kidnap children with little or no explanation).

"I don't know how, but the news came to our neighbourhood and reached people's attention, that some people came and took kids away, without the parents' knowledge. (…) People just heard that their children would be taken away and panic ensued. That's what any parent would do, I would do that, so would you, if you hear that you might lose your child. So people just ran to the [predominantly Roma] schools and took their kids home."

Activist, Sliven

Our respondents from Sliven further elaborated, that Roma people's fear of losing their children was also fuelled by a video, which had previously been circulating among members of the community. In this video, a man explains that their children will be taken away from them and given to Dutch families for no apparent reason (Actualno.com, 2019). Graphic details of actual scenes of a child being taken away were also included.

"This all came from the media. Foreign media disseminating videos of children, who were taken away from their parents. The mother is crying, the child is having a tantrum, the police and the social services are just claiming the child, without consulting the parent. And our people, whatever they see on TV and on social media, think is going to happen to them as well."

Activist, Sliven

Fortunately, the biggest consequence of this disinformation was that Roma missed a few days of school. However, this occurrence illuminated some troubling trends, regarding the relationship between Roma people on the one hand, and governmental authorities and media, on the other. Some of our respondents used this opportunity to draw conclusions about the nature of this relationship:

"There was an idea to test how quickly the community can be mobilised. (…) It was a good experiment, which showed that people aren't rational; it's easy to manipulate people's emotions."

Student, Sliven

This disinformation campaign was seemingly successful for a while, as parents from other cities like Karnobat, Yambol and Assenovgrad were thrown into panic and started withdrawing their children from school. This escalated and resulted in a strong police presence in the Roma neighbourhoods. Some of our

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[27] As a result of this fake news campaign, the National Strategy for the Child was withdrawn with no further explanations (https://www.eurochild.org/news/news-details/article/bulgarias-national-strategy-for-the-child-2019-2030-withdrawn-following-disinformation-campaigns/?no_cache=1).

[28] Needless to say, that this interpretation of the text of the proposed new Strategy is not truthful and has no basis in facts or the actual legal adjustments proposed.

respondents even saw an organised political act, behind this occurrence. According to Roma activists, this whole campaign was fabricated so that 1) the tensions in the already segregated and marginalised Roma neighbourhoods can be exacerbated, leading to even more negative opinions about the Roma; and 2) that the Roma could withdraw their children from school, thus aiding the ongoing narrative of Roma illiteracy and the idea that the Roma do not let their children attend school.

Regardless of whether this was organised group political action (intentional disinformation), or just an unfortunate chain of coincidences (fake news leading to serious consequences), this exceptional occurrence managed to draw upon already existent characteristics of the Roma communities' vulnerabilities toward fake news and disinformation. Just like in the case with COVID-19 disinformation, the false information lead to actual consequences because it was coupled with distrust in authority and because the fake stories resembled a reality, which seemed to more accurately depict the lived experiences of Roma people[29].

4.3. "It was for the better!" – Can fake news campaigns be a positive thing?

Social services perceived as the enemy, from whom Roma parents need to protect themselves, is not a new notion. The juxtaposition between authorities and the Roma community (exacerbated by media representations as demonstrated in section V.1.2. of this report) has always been central to the lives and livelihoods of the most marginalised and excluded members of society. This trend is illustrated by a story about overcoming fake fears through cleverly applied "positive fake news":

"I would like to share a fake news story, which [my colleague] and I came up with. It really was fake, but it was for the better. It must have been in 2006, when we started working as health mediators. We had a meeting with all of the general practitioners, who practice in Lom. So they explained that in [one of the predominantly Roma] neighbourhood all of the mothers have refused to bring their children in for vaccines. So we go out to speak to the mothers and they basically explain to us, that they will not vaccinate their children, because vaccines are bad for children – they make them sick, paralised, etc. We go back the second day – we speak to them for hours, they still refuse to vaccinate their children. So [my colleague] and I are sitting in our office, wondering how to solve this issue. Because if a child is not vaccinated, some illnesses and diseases will begin to spread and so forth. So the two of us decide to basically go back to the neighbourhood and just lie to the people. Just create some fake news. So we go back to the neighbourhood and tell people: Listen here, people, if you do not go vaccinate your children by Friday, your doctors will send a note to the social services and you will no longer be able to get any sort of benefits. (…) A few days later we get calls from the general practitioners asking us: What did you guys do? There is a queue in front of our offices – we cannot manage the flow of mothers bringing their children for vaccination. So sometimes, may be, fake news might have a positive outcome."

<div align="right">Health mediator, Lom</div>

This example demonstrates, that knowing the specificities of "believable fake stories" could be employed not only to educate people and foster their critical thinking, so that they no longer fall victim to disinformation. Knowledge about the finer details in believable "fake stories" could be applied to counter other fake stories. However, it is important to note, that once again, a key component of a successful "fake news campaign" is the reliance on the flawed relationship between Roma communities and figures of authority.

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[29] On the one hand, this reality refers to Roma people's familiarity with cases of children taken away from their families. Our respondents in Sliven testified that there have been exceptional cases, when social services have taken children away from their parents, due to neglect or other such reasons. On the other hand, there is an overwhelming feeling that Roma children are not safe outside of their homes. Respondents in Sliven told stories of Roma children, who were bullied and/or physically harmed by older kids, committing actual hate crimes, based upon ethnic hatred. Regardless of whether those stories are true, they are imprinted in the local Roma people's memories and perceptions of the world, which they inhabit. More specifically, a world, where Roma children are not entirely safe, unless they are at home with their parents.

4.4.   "Bill Gates is spying on us!" – The fear of an invisible enemy

The fear that some foreign influence is tampering with vaccines and making children sick is not new. Furthermore, this negative sentiment against vaccines (Popovski, 2018) has been exacerbated by the COVID-19-related conspiracy theories. The foreign or unknown enemy is a serious threat which has been hard to tackle by the health mediators among our respondents.

Our respondents mentioned the fake news, surrounding the conspiracy theory about the origin of the COVID-19 virus. More particularly, the fake news campaign claims, that the virus is artificially created by the software mogul Bill Gates (Mileva, 2020), who will then get involved in the development of a vaccine, through which tracking devices will be implanted into non-suspecting citizens. This conspiracy theory is not exclusively disseminated in Bulgaria, but exceptionally popular among Bulgarian Facebook users (Newsroom, 2020).

„Our biggest challenge currently is that people no longer believe in the vaccines. They think that something bad is going to get transfused into their children's blood. (…) We now need to explain to people, that the regular vaccines have nothing to do with the COVID. (…) This did come with the coronavirus. People now think that some chips will be injected into them. You know how Facebook is, there are all sorts of nonsense. And this is a problem, because some people believe in those things."

Health mediator, Vidin

This examples provides an illustration of another variation of mistrusted authority. Here, however, the far-away evil conspirators are perceived to be acting on a global level. The idea that Bill Gates is trying to control the entire planet illustrates the notion that people have really lost control over their lives and have no rational explanation as to why things are going unexplainably bad for them.

Based upon the identified popular cases of widespread fake news and disinformation campaigns, we could draw the conclusion that in order for 'alternative representations of the truth' to be acceptable to the Roma communities, those representations need to 1) draw upon existing real-life experiences and perceptions and 2) to exploit the flawed relationship between figures of authority (including official media) and the Roma community. Roma people's inherent distrust in the government and news. These two vital conditions make Roma people especially susceptible to such conspiracy-theory-based fake news.

Fake news stories, which have accounted for a wide disinformation trend among Roma communities, incorporate the following components:

- The sense of an imminent threat (albeit real or perceived) to some of the fundamentally valued components of their actual everyday reality – for example, that they will lose their children to social services (as the perceived threat, which was falsely interjected by the disinformation campaign, surrounding the National Strategy for the Child), that they will lose their freedom of movement and travel, or their livelihoods and the connection to the real world (like the actual threat of the disproportionately heavy anti-pandemic measures, imposed upon Roma communities in some towns in Bulgaria).
- The image of a far-away and unfamiliar enemy – Bill Gates, the social services, Norwegian same-sex couples.
- A storytelling comprehensively matching Roma people's lived reality of opposition between Roma communities and the authorities/media.
- A story which has been previously disseminated but is now activated to serve the purposes of disinformation. Preferably and emotionally charged one – like the videos of children, who were taken away from their parents.

The most important factors, contributing to the Roma communities' vulnerabilities, which our respondents had identified were the high levels of illiteracy in Roma communities, the limited channels for information, which are at the disposal of Roma people and the low levels of infirmity and media and digital literacy. In order to improve Roma people's resilience to disinformation and fake news campaigns, aimed particularly at them these vulnerabilities need to be adequately addressed. The most appropriate resource for the achievement of this goal are the Roma activists and mediators, who can efficiently work from within the communities and spread the established knowledge and good practices.

5. Media approaches for spreading disinformation *about* the Roma communities, which reach members of these communities

Our respondents had some observations as to the characteristics of media hostility in Bulgaria. They noted that anti-Roma hostility contributed to the general disinformation of non-Roma people, through the practices of perpetuating harmful anti-Roma narratives. There was a general sense among our respondents, that mainstream media and the popular public opinion was anti-Roma. This emotional internalisation of the normalised anti-Roma hostility in media (and in society) established Roma people's sense of a general discriminatory media environment in Bulgaria. Thus, Roma people felt, that the media in the country were not working for them and with their best interest at heart. Rather, media and their messages were perceived as something, which hindered any effort of the Roma community to shift the negative images and myths, which lead to antigypsyism and discriminatory practices.

"Sometimes media blow things out of proportion and try to constantly highlight what the Roma community is supposedly like – they call us dirty, thievish, etc. Why do they not show the good side of the community?"

Mediator, Novi pazar

Most notably, our respondents had identified the media myths of Roma criminality; of the presented parasite-like nature of Roma people, living on benefits; of Roma people's inherent inferiority, which leads to the villainisation and moral depravity of the ethnic community (discussed in detail in section V of this report).

Our respondents from Roma communities described media hostility, the practices of fake news and disinformation as one of the mechanisms for exclusion of the minority groups from public life and debate. Furthermore, our respondents identified four tactics, which media channels employ in making those prejudicial arguments. These include ethnicisation of issues, intentional misleading, sensationalism, and intentional deprivation of Roma people from their voices.

5.1. The ethnicisation of issues

What our respondents referred to as "ethnicisation" of certain issues, consists of the journalistic practice of highlighting the Roma ethnic background, while reporting negative news. Most popularly, our respondents pointed out, that Roma criminality was of high media interest and perpetrators' Roma origins were constantly linked to their crimes. This practice of equating criminality to Gypsy-ness and to particular Roma people has been previously discussed by this report as contributing to the narrative of "Roma people as criminals, who deserve harsh punishments" (part 2 of the analysis of desk research findings).

"[Only when Roma people have perpetrated a crime] does the issue get ethniciesed. Nobody raises their voice over Bulgarians conducting crimes. Nobody would ever say "A Bulgarian beat up an elderly woman". This is just not the practice of informing the public. Whereas, if a Roma person had done it, nobody would miss highlighting that!"

Roma leader, Sliven

Our respondents identified a practice of "ethnicisation" of problems, which directly diagnoses the social condition behind all of the media narratives, treating Roma people as "lesser than" and "inherently different" from the ethnic Bulgarians.

5.2. Intentional misleading, due to corruption of the media

Popularly, Roma people's distrust in media transpired in Roma people's perceptions of how media served the purposes of disinformation – through corruption of the particular media outlets, which intentionally mislead people:

"Media could challenge people's perceptions. They could serve to confuse, to create false ideas. The media owners are at fault here. Mostly, the owners of the big media, which are known to represent private corporate interests and merely mention what suits them, rather than tell the truth. (…) People who own media are more resourceful than bank owners, because they can enslave two billion people on Earth, as we can see."

Activist, Septemvriitsi

This grand explanation of the inherently flawed nature of Bulgarian media is based in the generally negative opinion of Roma communities about Bulgarian media. None of our respondents had positive examples of mainstream media ever apologising or refuting false or negative statements, which they had previously made.

5.3. Sensationalism, based upon established prejudice

Fake news and disinformation are perceived as another example of how societal structures work for the benefit of the majority and achieve the goal of excluding the minority. This perception is further supported by examples of what our respondents called "sensationalism" and refers to a practice of capturing the audience's attention through the recreation of already widely spread prejudices and perceptions:

"In all honesty, I witness a lot of problems, which do not necessarily involve members of the Roma ethnic community, which are being ignored. (…) For the sake of making a sensation, especially in social media, in order to gain more followers, all of the titles sound like "A gypsy did so-and-so.""

Roma leader, Sliven

Some of our respondents mentioned that anti-Roma disinformation and fake news about the Roma community were often used as a political strategy to disperse public attention, which should otherwise have been focused on a political scandal or a story. This rationalisation of the anti-Roma hostility of Bulgarian media is based upon our respondents' often expressed belief, that Roma people are a "convenient villain and sacrificial lamb". Our respondents believed, that media outlets took advantage of the already existing perceptions, that Roma people should be blamed for economic and moral downfalls. Therefore, such news was convenient and "easily digestible" by the majority ethnic Bulgarian audience. Because of the public consensus, news of the evilness and faults of Roma people was popularly accepted in an instant – because it provided the comfort of reaffirmation of already existent beliefs.

According to our respondents, this easily achievable agreeable audience's comfort was utilised by media as a divergence strategy. Whenever news stories emerged about high level corruption or white-collar crime, the perceived as corrupt media would protect their "patrons" and shift the media attention back to the convenient villains – the Roma communities.

The topic of Roma criminality especially is perceived by our respondents as exploited for the purposes of distraction:

"When there is a problem with [a certain politician or a very connected businessman], whenever a news story breaks about them, all of a sudden the media start to shift their gaze to the Roma problems: who killed whom, who stole what, who did what. The attention is immediately being shifted."

Social worker, Novi pazar

5.4. Intentional deprivation of Roma people from their voices

The one-sided reporting of Roma-related issues and topics has also been registered by our respondents. Roma activists have noted that there has not been a proper representation of the diversity and variety of Roma people in media, with regard to their varying levels of literacy and education.

"I have personally witnessed reporters, who have come to Roma communities and refused to interview me. Instead, they intentionally sought out people, who were not articulate in Bulgarian and could not properly speak to the issues at hand."

Youth, Sofia

Thus, media deprive Roma people of their voices by depriving them Roma community of diverse representation, in order to perpetuate the prejudice and already established images of Roma people as illiterate and uneducated people (see. part 2.2 of the analysis of desk research findings of this report). Challenging the systemic issues of antigypsyism through an opposition of media hostility would require inclusion of Roma voices. Particularly those, which have been persistently left out of media representation and coverage – the more educated and literate members of the Roma communities. Neither one of our respondents felt like they were represented by popular media outlets, nor did they feel like mainstream media targeted Roma communities as an important component of their audiences.

6. Emotionally charged aspects of Antigypsyism – real life discrimination and media hostility as internalised factors for Roma self-perception

Some respondents shared stories about discrimination and prejudice, they have encountered in real life, while others had relevant online experiences to share with regard to online discrimination and public hostility. All of our respondents had experienced discrimination and faced challenges to their social and economic lives, which stemmed from their ethnic background and how it was perceived by others.

6.1. Direct Antigypsyism and covert microaggressions

Some respondents were emotionally hurt and had had to challenge classic myths like the perceived parasite-like nature of Roma people (living off social benefits). Challenging those perceptions in real life required an argument of universalisation of the human needs. The common exaggeration of ethnic issues had to be replaced by a reiteration of the similarities between humans and the citizens of the same country:

"I really don't understand why [ethnic Bulgarians] blame Roma people for living off social benefits. As if anyone wants to live at the verge of existence. I ask them, what do you think people enjoy about living with [the amount of benefits] per month. Can you survive with that much money?"

Mediator, Montana

Simultaneously, some manifestations of discrimination were perceived by respondents as components of normality and were not confronted. Some of our respondents did not challenge subtle signs of discrimination, but were keenly aware of such microagressions against them:

"They never say [that they think we should not get high grades, because we are Roma], but they look at us funny. I sense these kinds of things."

<div align="right">Student, Lom</div>

Perhaps the most classic example of real life prejudice (mentioned by our respondents), which had also crossed into the online realm, was the statement "You are not like the rest of them". Our respondents testified, that was the most common response to their attempts to challenge prejudice. Our respondents told stories about attempting to oppose the generalisations of anti-Roma myths in conversations with members of the majority of ethnic Bulgarians. Our respondents' strategy consisted of providing a counterexample of the prejudicial stories, by demonstrating themselves as educated, literate, non-criminal and highly productive members of society. In response, Roma people's arguments were refuted with the mere statement "You are not like the rest of them" – thus reclaiming the authority over the production of dominating truth and painting our respondents as an exception, rather than as a representation. Treating our respondents as "exceptions from the general rule" allowed ethnic Bulgarians to retain their prejudicial attitudes toward Roma people and to reconcile them with the tangible proof of their falseness (in the face of our respondents).

"We always tell people, that it isn't just us! There are so many people, who have found their footing and are doing excellent in their occupations and knowledge, thus helping the community as well."

<div align="right">Youth, Sofia</div>

The subjects, stories, and mental frames employed in discrimination online and in real life shared an exceptional level of similarity. Thus, the established practices and experiences of our respondents, who have personally managed prejudicial and discriminatory conversations (characteristic of the Bulgarian normality), could be a valuable source of knowledge for possible scenarios and responses to "classic anti-integrational" arguments. This study has found, that regardless of the medium (online, in media, or in real life), inter-personal discriminatory (anti-integrational) statements are oriented around the same sentiment – "Gypsy-ness is inherently bad and lesser than". The approaches for challenging the negative representation of Roma people online and in media could draw upon the proposed mitigation strategies, which our respondents had identified as potentially effective in representing the other side in arguments and discussions:

- Sharing facts - referring to both historical accomplishments, and to current success stories about Roma people's contributions to society;
- Providing positive personal examples – telling the stories and showing the faces of successful Roma people;
- Demonstrating expertise and knowledge to challenge prejudice, as well as fake news about the Roma – disproving disinformation through factual counteraction, by referring to official and reputable sources, which negate false claims and prejudicial assumptions.

Those identified mitigation strategies could be used in activism, advocacy and in the development of media/online publications, which contribute to the knowledge about Roma communities and Roma culture. This contribution to knowledge is a necessity in order to 1) create spaces, where Roma people could feel safe and supported and obtain more self-esteem in embracing ethnic background and 2) it challenges the normalisation of antigypsyism, which is often utilised for sensationalism and reaffirmation of "common sense" among members of the ethnic majority.

6.2. The debate about integration – intergroup tensions among Roma people

Binging up the topic of integration during our focus group discussions with respondents demonstrated an inter-group tension within the Roma communities. This tension stemmed mostly from the socio-economic

diversity within Roma communities, which, according to our respondents, strongly correlated to the prospects of successful integration of particular individuals.

Integration was mostly perceived by our respondents as an individual action – any person can be integrated, if they were to achieve a certain status in society and become what some of our respondents have referred to as "a valuable member of the community and society". Most popularly, an integrated person was described as someone who was educated, put together and independent. Knowledge, status and employment were considered as the most important traits of an "integrated person".

While all of our respondents agreed, that enough effort on behalf of any individual could and would potentially lead to successful integration, the points of dispute centered around the people, whom our respondents called "marginals". Those people ("marginals") were mostly given as an example of the practices of autosegregation. Our respondents defined "marginal" as Roma people, who refused to interact with anyone else in society, except for their immediate family members and/or direct community members. Some of our respondents shared stories about such people, who "represented the worst in the Roma communities". Some of our mediator respondents even explained about their personal failed attempts to help and influence people, who refused to take care of themselves:

"As much as you try, if a person doesn't want to help themselves or to integrate themselves, nobody can integrate them!"

Mediator, Razlog

Challenging this perspective were other mediator respondents, who believed that anyone can be helped if they were provided with enough attention and tools to "dig themselves out" of a difficult situation. However, this side of the debate believed, that society and the state have not been dedicating enough effort in supporting (marginal and not) people's attempts at integration, which were further hindered by personal prejudice of individuals:

"The other issue, which is again a consequence of discrimination – how many people are ready to accept those, who are willing to integrate themselves? Myself, and others like me, who are educated and ready to be integrated are just waiting for someone to lend a helping hand. But this doesn't happen because of our darker complexion."

Mediator, Novi pazar

The disagreement among our respondents mainly stemmed from the idea, that integration is an individual responsibility of a person. Integration was not perceived as a social or a communal process. This allowed our respondents to notice differences between themselves and others, who did not have such high individual resources and qualities. However, it appeared that the word "integration" was a source of divide. Most of our respondents opposed the term itself, as it had already been exhausted by media and had received a negative connotation. "Integration" was commonly considered to be a talking point, exploited by those, who were opposing it or was now perceived as a bad thing, bordering with assimilation:

"Integration is not the correct word. It should be socialisation. These people have been here for so many years, how are you going to integrate them? They just need to be lead out of this capsule, this marginalised environment"

Social worker, Novi pazar

This debate around integration was also heavily influenced by Roma people's perception of the influence of the disinformation *about* the Roma community. Because of the media practice to portray integration as impossible due to Roma people's inherently non-integratable nature, our respondents (Roma people

themselves) believed that integration is solely a task to be achieved by Roma people themselves and solely an issue and responsibility of the Roma communities. This impression was fuelled by the perpetuated media images and myths, which our respondents thought to be true for those "marginal people", who refused to integrate themselves. This is why our study can conclude, that the internalisation of media hostility by Roma people has led to inherent fears that those stereotypes might actually be true (about certain members of the Roma community). This is why Roma people were quick to distance themselves from such "marginal" people and fault them for their own unsuccessful integration.

However, this study has demonstrated, that tackling disinformation and media hostility requires challenging the effects which those processes have *on* the Roma community and on society and other ethnic groups *about* the Roma community. Thus, any strategies, aiming to challenge the effects of fake news and disinformation need to address both the disinformation *about* the Roma communities and the disinformation *among* the Roma communities. This is how antigypsyism can be challenged and tackled by Roma people and for Roma people.

7. Summary of the findings of the focus groups

The main conclusions from the analysis of the data, obtained through conducted focus groups identified some key trends, which can be either challenged or utilised in the attempt to tackle fake news and anti-Roma disinformation in media and online:

- In order for the general media hostility and anti-Roma disinformation to be overcome, efforts need to be taken to address the results of disinformation both in Roma communities and among members of the majority of Bulgarians.
- **The popular media and online information channels, used by Roma people are Facebook, YouTube, Google.** To a lower extent, Roma people also inform themselves through nationally disseminated TV networks, as well as some highly reputable analytical media channels. However, mainstream media channels are perceived mostly negatively, as they are not considered to be working in the interest of the Roma communities.
- The most reputable channel of information, knowledge and life guidance among Roma people are the health mediators. They realise the linkage between institutions and Roma community, they have the most influence in refuting fake news and supporting members of the Roma communities.
- There are two distinct types of media hostility toward the Roma community. On the one hand, there is disinformation *among* **the Roma communities**, and on the other hand, there is media disinformation *about* **the Roma communities**. Both types have different types of effect on Roma people. Disinformation *a*mong the Roma communities mostly affects Roma people's actions and fears of real life occurrences. Disinformation *about* the Roma communities mostly affect Roma people's self-esteem, emotional well-being and their perceptions of their own place in society.
- Fake news and disinformation have an ambiguous relationship with the Roma communities. In order to challenge media hostility and antigypsyism, both types of disinformation need to be tackled.
- Fake news and disinformation *among* the Roma communities achieve their goal of spreading panic and causing irrational fears and actions, through playing with Roma people's emotions and relying upon their general distrust in official authority's good intentions.
- All previously identified anti-Roma hostile media narratives reach Roma communities. Furthermore, Roma people have developed a sense of some tactics, used by mainstream media in order to perpetuate these narratives and their accompanying negative images and anti-Roma myths. Those tactics are **"ethnicisation" of issues, intentional misleading, sensationalism, political strategies and intentional deprivation of Roma people from their voices.**

- Media hostility appears to have a complex effect on Roma people's perception of the processes of integration and particularly Roma people's responsibility in achieving those processes. On the one hand, due to media narratives, Roma people perceive integration as a personal and individual action, which is to either be achieved on one's own, or not. On the other hand, autosegregation is perceived as a harmful (also individual) practice of perpetuating marginality and exclusion. Integration and autosegregation are perceived as the two opposites. Autosegregation is largely perceived by Roma people as the only important obstacle to integration.

1. **Providing members of the Roma community with access to more quality sources of information** could establish Roma people's individual agency in information consumption, thus improving the available information environment for Roma people in Bulgaria. Some possible sources of quality information to popularize among Roma people could include:

   - Reputable or "ethical" media sources, including include quality Bulgarian journalism online platforms (like Bivol, Free Europe, and Marginalia), official and governmental websites (like the websites of the Ministry of Health, which disseminates relevant information regularly), and Roma NGO websites (like the Roma Standing Conference website).
   - Specially created "pro-Roma safe spaces" online, which disseminate content and information, relevant to the Roma communities. A "pro-Roma safe space" could be a Facebook group for Roma people, where activists and community leaders engage in conversation with ordinary members of the Roma communities. There, the members of the Roma communities with higher levels of infirmity and civil activity can spread their knowledge and insight, thus serving as informants for the broader communities.
   - Health mediators, Roma leaders and Roma activists themselves are a highly potent channel for information among the members of the Roma community. The method of "word of mouth" could be used for reliable, quick and truthful information exchange, if the highly informed members of the community are the main messengers in this process.

2. **Negating the basic stereotypes about Roma people in public discussions and debates** could support a shift in the public perception about Roma people and could challenge the ethnic majority's prejudicial attitudes. The basic anti-Roma stereotypes, which need to be publicly negated include the image of Roma people as criminals, the image of Roma people as illiterate, the image of Roma people as barbaric and non-human, and the image of Roma people as social parasites, who live off social security benefits. Those stereotypes could be refuted publicly online (in comments sections on Facebook and/or news websites), as well as in in-person communication (in conversations) by:

   - Sharing of positive stories about Roma people. These could be real-life examples of successful and impressive Roma people.
   - Relying on official facts and knowledge. These could be unemployment statistics, research findings, legal documents, etc.
   - Sharing historical facts about Roma people's achievements and contributions. These could be stories about sporting accomplishments, success stories of Bulgarian Roma people abroad, etc.

3. **Granting Roma people the opportunity to see more "people like themselves" in popular and mainstream media,** will improve the media representation of Roma communities, thus healing the hostile relationship between mainstream media and Roma people in Bulgaria. Some initial steps in the direction of securing better representation of Roma people in Bulgarian media might include:

   - Seeking cooperation from media outlets in increased reporting of issues and topics, which are of high priority to the Roma communities. These include social benefit distribution, education-based restrictions to voting rights, school segregation, etc.

- Seeking allies among journalists, influencers, intellectuals. Some of their contributions could include providing access to mainstream media channels for Roma representatives, investigation of Roma-related issues, contribution to the wider public's knowledge about the Roma communities.

4. **Educating members of the Roma communities on the main components of anti-Roma media hostility** in Bulgaria would be a foundational first step in fostering critical thinking on the topics of media an information dissemination. These initial efforts will then pave the way to building the Roma communities' media and digital literacy. The Roma communities could benefit from more detailed education on:
   - Fake news and how to recognize them - Some of the most outstanding and easily identifiable traits of fake news are the flashy titles, simple language and panic-inducing subjects.
   - Conspiracy theories and how to recognize them – the most successful disinformation campaigns in Bulgaria were based upon well-narrated conspiracies. Some of the key elements of the successful conspiracy theories include the sense of an imminent threat, a depiction of a strange and far-away enemy, compelling story-telling which explains the most pressing real issues of the Roma communities, and e repetitive use of symbols and stories for long periods of time.
   - Anti-Roma myths and prejudicial beliefs in media – the basic anti-Roma myths, which need to be familiar to the members of Roma communities, because they are constantly spread by media channels include the myth of the opposition between state authority and the Roma communities, the myth of the inferiority of Roma bodies, the myth of Roma as public property, the myth that Roma people are political sell-outs.

5. **Accumulating online content "for the Roma by the Roma"** could contribute to the build-up of online content, relevant to the Roma communities and thus improve the media and online environment for Roma people in Bulgaria. This content needs to be created by Roma people as they are the most trusted and most capable "spreaders of knowledge" among Roma communities and about the Roma communities. This content needs to be addressed at Roma communities so that it fosters the feeling that a media space for Roma people does exist. Some possible means for fostering the creation of online content "for the Roma from the Roma could include:
   - The utilisation of online pro-Roma safe spaces for spread of relevant information in an accessible manner (by sharing short resumes of important news stories in Roma languages and with less complex vocabulary).
   - The creation and dissemination of unique content about culture and history of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. These materials could be shared with mainstream media, or they could be as simple as Facebook posts, short videos, or comments.
   - The increased online visibility of active members of the Roma communities (like activists and health mediators), so that they themselves can work as online and offline channels for reliable information and quality pro-Roma content.

6. **Reframing the public discussions of "typically Roma" topics** could be a productive approach to fostering more public support for practical equality and for the issues of integration. Some semantic

and tactical amendments initially by activists (and hopefully later adopted by the wider public), which would be useful in achieving this shift include:

- Referring to the issues of integration as issues of "social inclusion", "equality" and/or "socialisation" to replace the word "integration, which has obtained a negative connotation in the Bulgarian context.
- Referring to "social inclusion of individuals in need", rather than to "social inclusion of Roma people" in order to discern between different Roma people.
- Incorporating Roma perspectives on societal issues and problems, in order to avoid the confinement of Roma people within the boundaries of a limited number of topics, which permeate the public space as "typically Roma topics" and only serve to recreate prejudice and clichés.

7. **Improving Roma people's emotional grasp on their identity and their sense of the practical and ideological place they hold in society** could be essential initial steps to overcoming the psychosocial consequences of anti-Roma media and online hostility. The emotional well-being of Roma people could benefit from:

- Introducing the online "pro-Roma safe spaces" as a channel for emotional support and sharing of stories about the Roma experience in Bulgaria. They can also serve as spaces for emotional support and discussion among members of the Roma communities.
- Forming a (virtual or practical) support network of Roma health mediators, Roma leaders, and Roma activists and other members of the Roma communities from around the country. This network could be used to foster the exchange of knowledge and guidance among members, if it is designed to include Roma people from different backgrounds in order to challenge inter-Roma stereotypes and exclusion.

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