



Keeping the Memory Alive: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

Action Plan

Raising awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust



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Project partners

European Roma Information Office, Belgium - www.erionet.eu

Roma Women's Visions, France - www.regardsdefemmestsiganes.com

Federation of Roma Associations of Catalonia, Spain - www.fagic.org

Tolerance and Mutual Aid Foundation, Bulgaria - Tmaf3@hotmail.com

Roma Centre for Intercultural Dialogue, Germany - www.roma-dialog.de

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Introduction

This action plan stems from the mission of the [MemoROM project](#), led by the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) in partnership with Roma Women's Visions (France), the Federation of Roma Associations of Catalonia (Spain), the Tolerance and Mutual Aid Foundation (Bulgaria) and the Roma Centre for Intercultural Dialogue (Germany) to raise awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. By rediscovering the history of this appalling yet largely unknown tragedy, we expect to promote mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma alike.

The primary objective of the MemoROM project is to establish an [International Roma and Sinti Remembrance Network](#). This network will play a major role in raising awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust across Europe. The present action plan was developed in collaboration with the network's members and supported by recommendations highlighted during the project's national workshops.

The suffering of Roma and Sinti communities during WWII is mirrored nowadays by persistent practices of discrimination and acts of violence against these populations across Europe. Instead of decreasing, these trends are constantly increasing and show worrying perspectives for the future of the European political landscape.

Past and present prove once again to be interlinked as some local politicians express their solidarity with the Nazi genocide, deploring the incomplete extermination of Roma and Sinti communities during WWII¹. The Holocaust is unfortunately no longer a sheer relic of the past. Its shadow is visible in every signboard forbidding access to Roma in shops and restaurants, in every fire set to Roma camps, and in every Roma attacked by neo-Nazi and other extremist groups. And is made all the more evident by the 2014 European elections, showing an unprecedented rise of far-right and neo-Nazi movements across the continent². The lack of knowledge and recognition of the Roma and Sinti histories, in particular with regards to WWII, has dramatically contributed to a lack of understanding of their contemporary societal positions. This is why we believe that this action plan is essential in order to keep the memory alive and to prevent similar tragedies from happen again.

This action plan is structured around four main goals linked to the awareness-raising process of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. Each chapter includes a) a brief general introduction explaining the need of each goal; b) different sections detailing the challenges and actions to be taken, and c) a table listing concrete activities according to the relevant target and action level.

¹ E.g. In 2013 a former French deputy and mayor of the town of Cholet suggested that Adolf Hitler "maybe did not kill enough Roma" for which he was later convicted.

²: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html>

Goal 1: Getting official recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

Public recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust is crucial for raising awareness about this event among mainstream society and for achieving public support for the fight against anti-Gypsyism and discrimination. If a great change in the mind-set of the majority is to be achieved, we need to use a two sided approach, which is both bottom-up and top-down. The latter calls for the political courage of leaders to guide this transformation and underline the crucial importance of challenging contemporary forms of anti-Gypsyism and Romaphobia.

This is why we call on activists and NGOs to petition their governments in order to publicly recognise the Roma and Sinti genocide and persecution and to commemorate the 2nd of August as the International Day of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. Some initiatives are already taking place at national level. For example, in Czech Republic some memorial days connected to the Roma and Sinti Holocaust include: the transport in 1943 is commemorated on 7th of March, 13th of May and 21th of August and the liquidation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Gypsy camp in 1944 is commemorated on the 2nd of August.

Local recognition and memory preservation

Local authorities should be one of the key-actors to raise awareness of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. Within the Belgian context, a proposal was made to target municipalities (e.g. Verviers and Tournai) that have a first-hand experience of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. This plan should be extended to municipalities with similar histories across Europe.

We, therefore, call on activists to get in contact with those municipalities and organise remembrance events in cooperation with local actors (Roma and Sinti representatives, museums, libraries, book fairs, etc.).

Criminal law and sanctions

A number of member states have enacted legislation against Holocaust denial. In Belgium, the Negationism Law of 1995 makes Holocaust denial illegal and in France the Gayssot Act 1990 penalises denial of the Holocaust. In Romania, Emergency Ordinance No.31 2002 makes Holocaust denial punishable with imprisonment from six months to five years. The implementation of Holocaust denial legislation should be encouraged as it reflects official public condemnation of Holocaust denials. This could work to complement remembrance ceremonies. In the case of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust, this means criminalising the trivialization of the Holocaust and its denial, either as a whole or when referring to particular victims like Roma and Sinti. These measures, to the same extent as publicly supported remembrance events, are a clear sign of official recognition and of respect for minority rights.

Roma and remembrance events

Lack of Roma and Sinti participation in remembrance events is a key challenge if we are to foster memory bearers within these communities. Scarce involvement is mainly due to their mistrust in these kinds of events, which sometimes are believed to be a stratagem to identify and file them.

In order to tackle this challenge, we call on our network members to involve Roma testimonies/activists in remembrance events. This will help restoring a sufficient level of confidence in Roma communities towards these kinds of events. More practical issues are also to be taken into account, such as how to contact Roma participants that do not have a legal address, nor an email account, or how to assure their arrival to the event (maybe through organised transportation).

Goal 1. Getting official recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust		
Actions	Responsible	Target level
1.1 Organising remembrance events	Activists/Museums	Local/national/European
1.2 Involving the Roma communities	Activists/Cultural mediators	Local
1.3 Commemorating the 2 nd August	Activists/Local authorities	Local/national
1.4 Condemning the denial of the Holocaust	Politicians	National/European
1.5 Sanctioning the denial of the Holocaust	Politicians	National

Goal 2: Collecting historical evidence

A major challenge in raising awareness of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust is the systematic lack of written evidence. This shortage involves, for instance, the number of Roma and Sinti victims which can unfortunately only be approximately evaluated since many Roma and Sinti were not registered at the time, and preferred to move across the borders and frequently changed or hid their identity for fear of being deported. This issue gives room to detractors of Roma integration to trivialize their suffering during WWII or even to complain about their incomplete extermination.

Testimonies

Written testimonies are not only lacking because of the sheer widespread illiteracy among Roma communities or the fear to express their memories publicly, but also because of cultural taboos existing in several of these communities. The most resilient one is the so-called “death-taboo” according to which it is improper to talk about dead people, especially when concerning relatives.



Therefore, we call on activists to collect the memories of the few survivors still alive, as well as from their family members, through the help of experienced cultural mediators in order to overcome

potential taboos. The role of mediators is even more important because they can help Roma and Sinti survivors to overcome their fears to express openly and publicly what they went through during and after the war. This might encourage them to put words on what they have seen and lived and to give invaluable testimonies.

One further challenge in the field of testimonies is the reliability of survivors. Apart from the fact that many of them are by now dead, the ones remaining are often very old and sometimes ill. Their memory is not always precise and can on the contrary lead to unintentional falsified realities. Moreover, the veracity and credibility of survivor's testimonies can also be distorted by the fact that testimonies are personal enactments of their pasts, rather than true mirrors of what they went through.

In order to avoid unreliable testimonies, historians should be called on to examine the information. As bearer of this kind of expertise, this group of academics would appear to be the best placed to achieve this work.

Historical archives

Historical archives, that are to be found mainly within local communities, are too often left abandoned. No systematic research work has been done in order to investigate the documents and disseminate their contents publicly and within scholarly circles; still archives do exist and are now largely available to the public.

Manipulation of archives is a further element hindering a deep and truth-oriented investigation. This issue seems to be more relevant to Eastern European countries. The manipulation involves both the erasing of names and their modification. Thus historians would also be much needed when it comes to investigating local and national archives, as well as to scrutinise the historical evidence of the Roma and Sinti genocide in order to avoid its manipulation.

Truth commissions

The "truth" is key to a shared collective memory and to pacific relations between communities and the state. In order to achieve this, proposals were made in order to set up a truth commission whose focus would be to investigate past crimes committed against Roma and Sinti in the context of the Holocaust and to spread more accurate accounts of their histories and memories. Therefore, we call on activists to petition their parliaments, which often hold the required power, to create an ad-hoc committee or to confer such a mission to existing committees.

Goal 2. Collecting historical evidence		
Actions	Responsible	Target level
2.1 Collect and sift testimonies	Historians/Academics	Local
2.2 Research and sift the archives	Historians/Academics	Local
2.3 Establish truth commissions	Parliaments	National

Goal 3: Teaching the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

The educational field is crucial in the fight to raise awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. In fact this historical event and its contexts are often not included in school curricula. This may be due to a lack of teaching materials, a lack of space in the curriculum for teachers to bring up the topic, difficulties in changing books and/or curricula themselves, and the unwillingness of some teachers to address the persecution of Roma and Sinti during and since the Second World War. For these reasons, among number of similar others, teaching about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust has been seriously hindered and therefore resulted in the widespread lack of knowledge of this tragedy.

Inclusive education

An inclusive history education is crucial to develop accurate accounts of the past and to foster critical thinking and cultural dialogue among students. This can be bettered through:

- a) The promotion of a transnational learning of the Holocaust that goes beyond traditional national narratives on memory.
- b) A widespread dissemination of existing texts on the Roma and Sinti genocide among society and their translation into national languages as well as their inclusion into school curriculums.

Teaching minorities' histories and Roma history in particular, should already be a point of attention in school curricula as they represent the largest European minority. A broader analysis of how minorities feature in national curricula would also avoid only talking about Roma through the prism of the Holocaust and would enable a better understanding and acceptance of their culture and traditions. In this respect, the link between history and civic education is an interesting connection to make. Indeed, discrimination against the Roma, the state of human rights in the EU, etc. are relevant topics for civic classes, which can be supported by a multi-perspective learning and an inclusive learning on Roma history, in particular on the Holocaust.

Innovative education

The inclusion of specific modules about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust inside school curricula could prove to be more productive if they were accompanied by innovative tools. Indeed, ordinary frontal teaching could result in students' lack of interest and hence a dangerous trivialisation of the issue.

We call on teachers to try and adopt innovative methods for teaching about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust, for example including testimonials of survivors³ and informative videos that might be available⁴. Activists should bridge the gap between Roma testimonies and the schools and design (new) educational material on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust with the help of relevant academics⁵. However, teachers themselves should be accompanied, supported, as well as trained in order to improve their ability to integrate this issue in their teaching in an innovative way. This might be done, for instance, through the provision of teaching manuals (such as <http://www.romasintigenocide.eu/en/teacher>) or through trainings that aim at familiarising them with this type of innovative tools. More generally, existing resources about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust should be mainstreamed into the schools and classrooms.

Authentic/alternative education

Moreover, taught stories should not only adopt the perspective of "victims", but also strive to include information about the resistance of Roma and non-Roma against the national socialist and fascist regimes, including the regimes that collaborated with them, showing that resistance and individual action is important and can have a positive impact even if it is on a smaller scale. Exclusive victimisation is counterproductive insofar as it deprives Roma and Sinti individuals of their human agency. The adoption of multiple historical perspectives would indeed be a way to provide a complex and nuanced picture on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust by comparing these communities in different countries, presenting victims but also members of the resistance. More generally, teachers should provide alternative accounts when teaching the Roma and Sinti Holocaust to students.

Working committee on knowledge about minorities

As much as deep historical investigations, inclusive history education is crucial to a shared and truth-oriented memory. At the political level, our call is for governments to set up an interdisciplinary body of experts working in a committee on *minorities' knowledge* and inclusive history within the Ministry

³ <http://www.romasinti.eu/#/home>; <http://www.erionet.eu/videos.htm#RitaPrigmore>;
<http://www.erionet.eu/videos.htm#ZoniWeisz>

⁴ <http://www.erionet.eu/videos.htm#Theuntoldstory>; <http://www.erionet.eu/videos.htm#HuubanBaar>;
<http://www.erionet.eu/videos.htm#PatrickDesbois>

⁵ A practice developed by the NGO Romea in Prague in 2004 is of particular interest when it comes to the innovative teaching of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. Using the internet as an educational tool to fight against stereotypes affecting Roma communities, the organisation tries to contribute to a better understanding of Roma history, culture and socio-economic situation. All the materials provided in the website developed by Romea can then be used in school curricula.

of Education and Research. The work of the committee should be spread and integrated in school curricula afterwards.

Goal 3. Teaching the Roma and Sinti Holocaust			
	Actions	Responsible	Target level
3.1	Increase transnational learning on Holocaust, going beyond national narratives on memory	Teachers	Local/schools
3.2	Disseminate and translate texts on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust	Activists	Local /schools
3.3	Plan visits to memorials and concentration camps	Teachers/Museums	Local/schools
3.4	Design innovative teaching material	Teachers/Researchers	Local/schools
3.5	Establish a working committee on minorities' knowledge	Education Ministry	National

Goal 4: Building alliances

Fighting for minority rights cannot be done without strong alliances in the broader society. This is all the more true when the minority largely lacks a comprehensive and solid organisation of its own.

More specifically, alliances are required to raise awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust as these populations, unlike Jewish communities, lacked a strong structure and recognition after WWII for denouncing this tragedy and obtaining both public acknowledgment and some form of compensation from national authorities. This element is due to the little number of Roma and Sinti that survived, to the high fragmentation of these communities, to the denial of their status as victims of genocide, as well as to a general mistrust in non-Roma authorities.

Alliances against competition of suffering

Moreover, comprehensive alliances help defeat practices of “competition of suffering” with other victim groups, that is, the insane quantitative and qualitative competition between different minorities’ sorrows, stemming from the fear of one’s own grief being underrated. This approach hinders a strong perpetuation of the collective memory against the Holocaust and, therefore, represents a major challenge to be addressed.

Alliances against stereotypes and for adequate media coverage

Other segments of civil society can represent both a danger and an opportunity as this is the case concerning the media with which it is therefore important to build alliances. Media discourses about Roma and Sinti are all too often biased, partial and problem-oriented. Yet, the media are crucial when we want to convey positive images of Roma and to raise awareness about an unknown event among the general public. Action must therefore follow a dual-track approach. On the one hand, inaccurate or biased information has to be systematically reported, denounced and countered with accurate accounts. On the other hand, media interest has to be fostered. Indeed, a key challenge concerning media coverage is the general lacking of interest in positive experiences or in remembrance events. Not only are Roma and Sinti Holocaust remembrance events quite rare, but their media coverage is often all but inexistent. This dramatically contributes to the lack of awareness about the genocide within mainstream society.

Counteraction must be programmed, namely by addressing press releases and summaries to the local newspapers when organising remembrance activities, or by mobilising renowned personalities to deliver ad-hoc statements.

Goal 4. Building alliances			
	Actions	Responsible	Target level
4.1	Network with other Holocaust victims	Activists	National/European
4.2	Issue press releases on remembrance events	Activists	Local/media/European
4.3	Network with Roma-friendly journalists	Activists/journalists	Local/media