

RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

KLÁRA BROŽOVIČOVÁ

Department of European Ethnology, Masaryk University,
Nováka Street 1, Brno, Czech Republic
E-mail address: brozovicova@phil.muni.cz



ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on discriminatory practices in online space. The work tries to refute common beliefs about equal and apolitical access to the internet. The purpose is to highlight the spreading of stereotypes in the Czech internet environment and to show how a group can be oppressed on the basis of ethnicity through cyberspace. The suitable object of analysis were the widespread stereotypes about the Roma population in the environment. For analysis were selected forums related to news portals, hobby sites, and other ordinarily available servers. The work distinguishes different types of stereotypical information and explains the mechanisms which spread the stereotypes. The work explains how racism is related to stereotypical contentions of racism and how this is supported in the discussion forums. The thesis explains how people with a racist attitude support each other in their attitude and how they legitimize their views in the discussion community. The work is written in English, so that it addresses the issue of cyber-racism in Czech discussion forums to the experts and the general public who do not speak Czech, because the environment of Czech internet forums is not available for them.

Keywords: internet, discrimination, racism, Roma, Morozov, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to show how stereotypes are used against the Roma population on Czech discussion boards. It is based on a critical analysis of posts on several discussion forums where the discussion devolved into racist charges against Roma. My aim is to cover the dissemination of racist content through cyberspace, as well as justifications of racism in the online environment, and to explain the role of stereotypes in this context. This paper does not identify a new social phenomenon, but instead takes the old, well-known issue of racism and examines it in the specific environment of the “Czech internet.” That does not, however, mean that the issue in question is only relevant for cyberspace, and this thesis also explicitly discusses spillovers from online racist discourse into “real world” Czech society.

The purpose of this thesis is to address the issues of stereotype negotiation on discussion forums and to show how stereotypes spread in this particular environment. In practical terms, this means characterizing the most common stereotypes and showing how they are presented as common knowledge. Furthermore, it is my goal to show how those posting on internet discussion boards encourage each other to share stereotyping and racist attitudes. The most important point being made here is that the internet has created public spaces which nonetheless remain closed to certain social and ethnic groups. The topic has been covered in the United States of America, but so far has not been developed in Czech social research.

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Without venturing too deeply into the turf claimed by philosophy, it should be said that entering the *terra incognita* of such a relatively recent field as the research of internet discourse is naturally risky. Methodologically, such an endeavor entails adopting concepts developed in and for an environment dominated by much less interactive media, such as television or radio, while avoiding the danger of “concept stretching.” It goes without saying that further complications arise due to the multi-paradigmatic nature of social science, which seldom grants the researchers the tools to differentiate between the real and the imagined, if such boundaries even make sense in such an unstable space as the internet. As the internet is constantly produced and reproduced through the agency of billions of actors around the world, every decision taken by the researcher can be very quickly proved incorrect by changes in the medium. Hence, there is little alternative but to rely on

Table 1. List of discussion boards used in research

Discussion board used in research	Available online
http://aktualne.centrum.cz	http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451
http://diskuse.doktorka.cz	http://diskuse.doktorka.cz/romove-zij-tu-s-nami/
http://www.chrudim.info	http://www.chrudim.info/forum/allmsg.php3?id=12862
http://vary.idnes.cz	http://vary.idnes.cz/diskuse.aspx?iddiskuse=A120201_132745_vary-zpravy_sou
http://www.lidovky.cz	http://www.lidovky.cz/cikani-kradou-pise-se-v-citance-pro-druhaky-ministerstvo-ji-proveri-11a-ln_domov.asp?c=A111107_190330_ln_domov_mev
http://www.imilovice.cz	http://www.imilovice.cz/main/forum.php?modu=list&pid=32009&action=showthread&threadid=522185&lastid=522271
	http://www.imilovice.cz/main/forum.php?modu=list&pid=32009
	http://www.imilovice.cz/main/forum.php?modu=list&pid=33461
http://www.modernizena.com	http://www.modernizena.com/diskuze/%c5%beivotn%c3%ad-styl-group9/kultura-z%c3%a1bava-forum53/vad%c3%ad-v%c3%a1m-romov%c3%a9-thread4
http://www.nakole.cz	http://www.nakole.cz/diskuse/14008-kdo-nas-ochrani-pred-cikany.html?filtr=moje
http://www.novinky.cz	http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/257925-top-09-brani-schwarzenbergovu-ironii-v-romske-otazce.html
	http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/282064-vetsina-romu-kteri-by-mohli-pracovat-si-zamestnani-nehleda.html
http://www.omlazenici.cz	http://www.omlazenici.cz/mladik-z-ustecka-40-36627-0.html
http://praha.idnes.cz	http://praha.idnes.cz/romove-obtezuj-napsal-starosta-kmeti-nevisi-bvl-jsem-jen-uprimny-rika-lei-praha-zpravy.aspx?c=A110525_1591083_praha-zpravy_ab
http://www.studenta.cz/	http://www.studenta.cz/romsky-student-komentuje-7-ne-pravd-o-cikanech-magazin/article/110
http://diskuse.tiscali.cz	http://diskuse.tiscali.cz/zpravy/clanek/nejsme-rasiste-cikani-jsou-ale-vyzirky-rika-jediny-rom-z-dehnicke-strany-108256?page=3
http://www.zpovednice.cz	http://www.zpovednice.cz/detail.php?statusik=525998
http://zpravy.idnes.cz	http://zpravy.idnes.cz/diskuse.aspx?iddiskuse=A111113_182816_liberec-zpravy_wlk
	http://zpravy.idnes.cz/diskuse.aspx?iddiskuse=A111003_1661235_liberec-zpravy_oks
http://www.mestochodov.cz	http://www.mestochodov.cz/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=36
http://www.zpovedka.cz	http://www.zpovedka.cz/000646.php
http://www.odpovedi.cz	http://www.odpovedi.cz/otazky/muze-se-v-diskusich-pouzivat-slovo-cikan

Source: Source: Own research.

“sociological imagination” and knowledge about the functioning of Czech society when making decisions regarding the structuring of the analysis.

One of the ways to mitigate the issue is by covering multiple sources, independent of each other, in the analysis. I have analyzed more than twenty internet discussion boards of Czech provenance, covering a wide range of different topics.

These particular forums were chosen based on the widespread presence of words with negative or discriminatory meanings directed towards specific groups of people. The relevance of this choice is connected with my intention to show how stereotypes and negative attributes ascribed to minorities are being generated and spread over “Czech cyberspace.” This decision was followed by an analysis utilizing Atlas.ti software coding of the content of the website discussions.

My data has been saved in a closed file that will not be altered and I consider my data to be a textual document for the purpose of my analysis. The fact that the analyzed text is originally from the internet can actually be beneficial to my research; it has been noted that in many cases online data is more valuable: “authors report that the online method had benefits in establishing better levels of rapport and disclosure than is often the case in offline methods” (Hewson, & Laurent, 2008, p. 70).

In order to decrease the risk of potential bias, I used three different internet search engines (Centrum.cz, Seznam.cz, google.com) to discover relevant discussions online. Two basic keywords were used to find relevant online boards via search engine: 1) Cikáni/ Cikán (Gypsies; Gypsy) and 2) Rom/Romové (singular Roma/plural Roma). The keywords were combined with the word “diskuse” (discussion) to rule out the articles without space for discussions. These keywords were sufficient for the search engines to find a relatively ample number of discussion forums. I am aware that my sample is representative of the internet-active populations frequenting certain forums (e.g. devoted to special interests or serving as a tool for support groups), rather than the whole universe of Czech citizens.

I believe this shortcoming is compensated for by the sheer size of the available material and the “authenticity” of the material, which is not affected by the presence of the researcher. Furthermore, there appears to be a tentative consensus in the literature that the online environment can reduce social desirability effects (Joinson, 1999; Hewson, & Laurent, 2008, p.61). Consequently, I believe my approach can lead to one-of-a-kind results that are not comparable to anything else out there, especially in terms of authenticity. My data was gathered over the period of one month in January 2012 across different discussion boards of Czech provenance and includes posts made in different time periods. However, most posts are younger than one year, due to the expiration of older content on many forums.

The core of my work will be devoted to summarizing the discovered principles of the construction of different “undesirable groups” of people in the internet environment and explaining how these constructs spread across the cyber sphere. To explore these constructs, an understanding of what the participants on the discussions are arguing for and “where they come from” is necessary. This is why I have opted for the method of discourse analysis. An important expectation here is that personal opinions do not exist only on the individual level, but are shared in wider circles and that common opinions are the basis for the

creation of online social groups.

It is important to follow how a group shares and repeats a stereotype, how individual members follow each other. It is also crucial to capture how individuals position themselves in relation to the expression of a stereotype. Do they present the story as if it happened to them or to "a friend"? Is it presented as generalizable? The expression itself might directly reveal whether a story is based on a stereotype or not (Reisigl, 2000, p.20). Nowadays, according to van Dijk's model, the discriminating group self-identifies as "elite" and shares these beliefs between its members. Van Dijk talks about so-called "elite racism," which can be analyzed through "ideological discourse analysis" (van Dijk, 1997).

The legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of a behavior is rooted in a discourse.

On the one hand, racist opinions and beliefs are produced and reproduced by means of discourse; discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimated through discourse. On the other hand, discourse serves to criticize, legitimate, and argue against racist opinions and practices, that is, to pursue antiracist strategies (Wodak, 2001, p. 372).

The legitimacy and acceptance of racist behavior is connected to a collective identity of the group, as addressed by social identity theory (Turner, 1982, pp. 15-40). Ruth Wodak talks about the necessity of reducing the social world into categories to make it understandable for the individual. It is necessary to distinguish between the members and non-members of the group (2001, p.376).

In my analysis, I would like to approach the issue of anti-Roma internet discourse through an analysis of prejudices and stereotypes, through which racism is manifested. A stereotype, in this sense, is an expression of a certain conviction or belief directed towards a social group or an individual as a member of that social group. Stereotypes are typically an element of common knowledge, shared to a high degree in a particular culture (Quasthoff, 1987, p.786). According to Quasthoff (1973), stereotypes have a generalizing character, yet reflect the experience of an individual and are heavily determined by emotions.

According to Ruth Wodak (2001), individual experience is selectively introduced into a stereotype, which in turn serves to confirm that the stereotype is true. The use of a stereotype, an ideology, using the terminology of van Dijk, is not limited to dominant groups, but is also utilized by minorities (van Dijk, 1993, p.139). A stereotype can be cognitive "knowledge," setting a kind of certainty and order within a group. If voiced, a stereotype represents the interests of a group; language is related to power and therefore a critical discursive analysis is also helpful to understand the discourse and the mechanisms of group construction – a traditional sociological question (Anthonissen, 2001).

RESULTS

Use of Stereotype as an Argumentation Technique on Public Discussion Forums

The purpose of this section is to introduce the different varieties of stereotypes about the Roma population that are used and spread on discussion fo-

rum. Stereotypes are used as an argument that is based on “true” and “proven” information. This idea has been discussed by Downing and Husband, who stress the importance of stereotypes appearing as if they are based in truth: “Rather than being pure fictions, unresponsive to any counterevidence, stereotypes are argued to have some connection with social reality, however partial and thereby distorted. As a result they gain in plausibility precisely because they appear to lock on to a kernel of self-evident truth” (Downing, & Husband, p.34). This statement is reinforced by the lack of any effort to correct stereotypes about Romani people on the Czech internet forums, which in turn leads to a situation where a stereotype is broadly accepted and even starts to “live its own life,” in the sense that it is further reinforced by arguments presented by other participants on the discussion. Stereotypes existing across the discussion forums I studied are economic or social in nature. These types are interconnected and can influence each other, as shown by Rughinis: “Field researchers distinguish between two types of discrimination affecting the Roma people: economic discrimination and ethnic discrimination. Economic discrimination occurs when unequal treatment is applied to people based on their economic situation” (2008, p. 78), while social discrimination is more openly harmful to Roma people, being based directly on their ethnicity. That those two types of discrimination are interconnected can be demonstrated by the example of the job market. Because Roma people are discriminated against on the job market, they often end up being poor, and as poor people they are discriminated against in terms of access to higher education, which in turn makes them unable to compensate for the disadvantage caused by discrimination by developing skills and competencies. These dynamics of mutual strengthening of social and economic discrimination are important for the analysis of specific stereotypes.

Table 2. Types of most common stereotypes across discussion forums

Types of most common stereotypes across discussion forums	
Type 1	Roma ethnicity is in parasitical relation with the majority
Type 2	Stereotypes by proxy
2a	conscious unemployment
2b	truancy
2c	welfare transfers
2d	co-payments to medication
2e	numerous offspring
Type 3	“Romanticized” stereotypes
3a	music, performance and dance
3b	eroticism and nomadic traditions
Type 4	Stereotype supposed low intelligence of the Romani population
Type 5	Belief that Roma are responsible for criminality

Source: Own research.

The most common stereotype in my sample, appearing across all discussion forums, is the belief that the Roma ethnicity is parasitical in relation to the majority. Around 60 percent of all arguments in my sample were based on this particular stereotype, which clearly makes it significantly popular. The belief that Roma are actively attempting to gain resources at the expense of the majority can be expressed directly or indirectly. The first post is from the server *nakole.cz*, which deals with cycling and where the discussion came to the question of “Who is going to protect us against Gypsies?” The other post is from the server of the town Karlovy Vary and is related to an article titled “A Roma Organization has obtained millions of (Czech) crowns through fraud, according to the police.” The final post is from the server *doktorka.cz* and follows up on the article “Roma live along us.” Here are some examples of the direct argumentation:

Just a technical note – if all “racists” died, they [Roma] would die as well. (Of) hunger. (That is) because no one would feed them...;-) -)” (*nakole.cz*; author: *hekynen*; 11/26/2011)¹²

If gypsies had their own state, all would perish due to laziness and dirt. They can only parasite on the majority. And there [among the majority] are always a couple of people who defend them. This is not about the color of their skin (*diskuse.doktorka.cz*; author: *Tomáš H.*, 5/14/2007).¹³

This stereotype about the parasitical nature of Roma is commonly replaced by other stereotypes, which support and clarify the beliefs of participants in the debate. Some examples of these “stereotypes by proxy” are Roma unemployment, welfare support fraud, etc. Those who use these stereotypes are not necessarily attributing purposeful parasitical behavior to the Roma ethnicity, but rather argue that Roma people tend to act in a certain way. In sum, all these partial beliefs act as pieces of puzzle that together confirm the main narrative about Romani people being parasitic. A very common proxy stereotype is based on the claim that Roma do not like to work and are unemployed by their own free will. The following snippets are from the server *aktualne.centrum.cz* and are reactions to the article “Authorities flooded with letters: Czechs please don’t discriminate against Roma children” and from the student portal *studenta.cz*, where a Roma student comments on truths and untruths about Roma.

We all have duties, but they only have rights. They flaunt their rights, but don’t fulfill their duties. [They] don’t send [their] kids to school, we who work and pay for their [child] allowances are being ambushed and robbed by them. This is never going to be solved as long as they keep getting their way. I would insist that they must fulfill their duties, go to work, send kids to school, not steal from others, only then they can ask for something... (<http://aktualne.centrum.cz>; author: *markéta IP:[89.190.46.*]*; 03/05/2010)¹⁴

The stereotype about voluntary unemployment is logically connected with the belief that the Roma population is sustained wholly through welfare transfers. These two claims form a whole, which is evident from posts that put these two stereotypes side by side.

12 Available online: <http://www.nakole.cz/diskuse/14008-kdo-nas-ochrani-pred-cikany.html> (10/11/2012).

13 Available online: <http://diskuse.doktorka.cz/romove-ziji-tu-s-nami/> (10/11/2012).

14 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/10/2012).

Gipsy families with many members, none of whom works and none of whom will ever work, will continue to be supported by a generous welfare system, which is paid for by all of us. It is also relevant to a minimal degree for some Czech families, but I am writing this only to cover everything. The future is such that fewer and fewer people will support ever greater share of professional parasites from mainly gypsy families. Unfortunately I do not see anyone willing and able to solve it (former DS¹⁵ is perhaps the only one, but also can't be trusted). I see this as another gigantic debt that we will pass on to the generation of our children (<http://aktualne.centrum.cz>; author: Míra IP:[83.208.245.*]; 3/4/2010).

The social transfers allegedly received by Roma are often put in contrast with the situation for applicants for subsidies of majority background. Envy is clearly a strong factor here, perpetuated by socially weaker citizens coming from the majority. Mentions of welfare subsidies for Roma are accompanied with narratives of misuse of welfare and/or alcoholism.

The pressure escalates on the date when welfare subsidies are due. For three days they [Roma] drink till they pass out and shout till the dusk, [or] visit by a police patrol (<http://aktualne.centrum.cz>; Marduk IP:[194.108.220.*]; 3/5/2010).¹⁶

The final argumentation pillar, which supports the stereotype about the parasitism of minority on the majority, is the belief about the assignment of social housing, which is allegedly being massively damaged by Roma inhabitants. To a lesser degree there are also reports about special benefits that Romani people enjoy and which are not generally shared with the majority, for example, the hoax about co-payments to medication (see below). Such claims are made less frequently than the previous one and are put forward mostly to supplement the more common narratives.

For example, when they jailed a gypsy, most of the time for repeated absence,¹⁷ little gypsies got a summer camp for free, which included clothing being provided for them. Or for young female gypsies, courses were organized [on] how to take care of themselves, how to do household chores... and everything was paid for, as if they were at work. Add such trivialities such as when the coal arrived, they went to the committee¹⁸ (nakole.cz; author: petr; 11/18/2011).¹⁹

Ethnic discrimination is thus often legitimized through the economic dimension—some stereotypes are directly linked with the poverty suffered by the Roma people, which is paradoxically presented as their advantage. Causality is reversed in stereotypes; social discrimination is, according to the posters, something that the discriminated against themselves embrace to secure economic gains for themselves (“they like to scream discrimination, but look at all the stuff they are getting”). Poverty is articulated in a similar way; Roma embrace low economic status, or so the posters claim, because they see it as a way to get

15 Worker's Party (Dělnická strana), an extreme right party known for anti-Roma rhetoric.

16 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/10/2012).

17 Most likely this refers to the legal obligation to work during communism. Those who did not work under the communist regime could face several weeks in jail for “parasitism”.

18 Most likely a reference to local “National Committees”, which acted as regional authorities during communism.

19 Available online: <http://www.nakole.cz/diskuse/14008-kdo-nas-ochrani-pred-cikany.html> (10/11/2012).

financial subsidies from the state. Many posters tend to center their narrative on the supposed Roma desire for securing these funds for themselves, which allegedly leads them to remain poor and embrace discrimination so they can remain “victims.” The alternative explanation of causality, in which Roma often end up in the welfare network *precisely* because they are discriminated against both socially and economically is not reflected at all in the forums. Stereotypes themselves are not self-containing units, but are interconnected in argumentation units, which have their own internal logic. The stereotype about social subsidies and low work morale is often connected with the argument that every Roma family has many children. In this respect, the stereotype about kids is directly supported by the welfare claim that Roma families are supported by welfare subsidies they get due to their numerous offspring.

Subsidies for 4 children should be the maximum. Or even better, subsidies for 2 children and more EXCLUSIVELY (emphasis by the poster) through high tax cuts for parents. And the possibility to take away their subsidies if they don't take proper care of their children. Kids can't be the way to earn money (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: Glosator IP:[147.33.54.*]; 3/5/2012).²⁰

Similar to the stereotypes about not working, Roma, especially female ones, are alleged to avoid education. In the second example, the poster even goes so far as to compare the Roma to harmful weeds which are not useful but “multiply fast.”

Parents and not the system are always responsible for proper care for children. These undereducated can only abuse the system very well. They can compute that it is better for a 14 year old kid to be pregnant than attending school. She can easily can have 8-10 kids by the time she's 30 and then she'll get decent money.. (studenta.cz; author: Pavel; 3/25/2011)²¹

Gardeners have this one experience: The more dangerous the weeds are, the faster they spread (novinky.cz; author: Miloš Homolka, Praha 9; 2/2/2012).²²

The belief in the ability of Roma to multiply excessively is so strong that posts contain even apocalyptic conspiracy theories, intended as a warning for the majority, aiming to alarm them at the quickly increasing threat posed by Roma. Posts are from news servers spravy.idnes.cz and novinky.cz, both reacting to recent political developments.

... they are not to be blamed for anything, poor ones. Were they moved here violently? Velké Hamry, Tanvald, Dolní Smržovka, Desná – in a moment it will be here just like at Šluknovský výběžek²³. The number of Roma here is indeed increasing quickly. But if the mayor and comp. can't solve it, who can? When the people want to take the matter into their own hands, the government sends riot police to ensure that no Roma will be harmed..... (zpravy.idnes.cz; author: lusil; 10/3/2011)²⁴

20 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/11/2012).

21 Available online: <http://www.studenta.cz/romsky-student-komentuje-7-ne-pravd-o-cikanech/magazin/article/110> (11/11/2012).

22 Available online: <http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/257925-top-09-brani-schwarzenbergovu-ironii-v-romske-otazce.html> (11/11/2012).

23 The names of locations where the Roma population is seen as quickly growing.

24 Available online: http://zpravy.idnes.cz/diskuse.aspx?iddiskuse=A111003_1661235_liberec-zpravy_oks (11/11/2012).

Compare the reproduction ability of some ethnic or minority groups on this planet and you'll realize that the white man will be soon hunted just like in the [movie] Planet of the Apes! (novinky.cz; author: Jiří Tichý, Ostrava; 2/2/2012)²⁵

Yet another sort of stereotype, still rather common on the Czech internet, are the traditional, historically rooted, “romanticized” stereotypes. “The romantic stereotype of Roma includes such elements as musical and dancing talent, capability of passionate love and other strong emotions, spontaneity, free and spiritual character, magical relatedness to nature, ability to enjoy themselves, etc.” (Cahn 2002, p. 219). It is clear that such thoughts are not uncommon even in contemporary society. Such stereotypes are perhaps less salient than the modern ones centered on welfare misuse, but they are nevertheless still there. These older beliefs are also portrayed as “historical facts,” portraying Roma as a homogeneous community. Among the romanticized stereotypes are those that portray Roma as specially gifted in the fields of music, performance and dance:

...of course they have a right to self-determination, they have their own language and culture (they can dance, have fun, play musical instruments, and of course they also compensate for this by NOT knowing other things [emphasis by the author] – such as how to work, become educated, and be responsible for themselves and [their] family – they'd rather put that on the shoulders of such a state that is willing to tolerate it) so I am for their full independence.. (novinky.cz; author: Antonín Stríž, from Hodonín; 2/2/2012)²⁶

Among the romanticized ideas about Roma ethnicity, two particular aspects are being emphasized: eroticism and nomadic traditions. The idea of the high mobility of Roma is connected with migrations in search of better living conditions and the need to escape places where they overstayed their welcome. The mobility of Romani people is often connected with the parasitism stereotype and the public rejection of sharing living space with Roma.

But they will eventually move on for better subsidies to the Czech Republic [written in Slovak] (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: Henri IP: [212.197.5.*], 3/4/2012).²⁷

Germans are afraid that if we don't shower gypsies [with subsidies], they will move on to their land and consume their social “funds” [quotes by the author]. (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: pepa IP:[90.178.69.*]; 3/5/2010).²⁸

According to Kligman, “Gypsies, or Roma, are simultaneously among history's most romanticized and reviled of peoples. Stereotypically racialized and eroticized as ‘other’ wherever they are located, prejudice and discrimination against Roma are currently heightened” (Kligman, 2001, p. 61). This is especially true for pseudo-historical stereotypes about the significant sexual appetite of Roma. This stereotype is naturally connected with the stereotype about Roma having many

25 Available online: <http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/257925-top-09-brani-schwarzenbergovu-ironii-v-romske-otazce.html> (11/11/2012).

26 Available online: <http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/257925-top-09-brani-schwarzenbergovu-ironii-v-romske-otazce.html> (11/11/2012).

27 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/11/2012).

28 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/11/2012).

children and, by extension, with abuse of the welfare system. The stereotype about promiscuity and high sexual activity applies to Roma regardless of their gender.

It could be said: "Excuse me, I am a well-raised girl and no one has ever seen my Romahood?" (lidovky.cz; author: R. Folwarczna; 11/8/2011)²⁹

When I walk past several houses with gypsy inhabitants, I get so many sexual proposals and in such forms that I feel like throwing up, men from 12 to 60 [years of age], exactly the same vocabulary. The women are having a good laugh of it. And try to sue a gypsy for harassment; it will be made into discrimination (doktorka.cz; author: Linda; 5/14/2007).³⁰

Another widespread stereotype is of the supposed low intelligence of the Romani population. This stereotype is based on the fact that a high percentage of Roma people have low levels of educational attainment, which is being equated with stupidity. The posters do not consider the disadvantages Roma face in the education process and take the failure of many Roma to continue with education after finishing elementary school as a sign of their low intelligence.

It's nice that one out of a thousand studies...more than 80 % don't finish the elementary ... this is not the fault of the education system school, it's the fault of the GYPSIES (studenta.cz; author: antired; 6/16/2010).³¹

How come gypsies don't engage in public money embezzlement? It's clear that gypsies don't commit "white collar" crimes massively, but only because the average member of a tribe with an IQ of 50 is limited by objective reasons, not some moral values (vary-idnes.cz; author: VSG09, 2/2/2012).³²

The last type of stereotype discussed in this paper is based on a belief that Roma are responsible for criminality to a degree that is much greater than their share in the Czech population. This argument is very widespread in the discussions. In particular, Roma are connected with "simple" crimes such as pickpocketing, threatening people with weapons such as knives, stealing base metals, vandalizing property of other people, and so forth. This "Roma criminality" is put into contrast with the criminality of higher classes to show that Roma have their specific, very direct and brutal approach to crime.

...That gypsies for the most part steal is simply a fact—the truth, in other words. What do we want to change about it? It's been like this since times immemorial and unfortunately it will continue to be like that. And to stick one's head into the sand to avoid seeing this makes no sense at all, it just reaffirms to the stealing gypsy majority that their behavior is in fact normal. It's necessary to talk and write about it—and without euphemisms and any sort of correctness. This is the only way to mitigate this unfortunate issue at least a little bit (lidovky.cz; author: J. Vacek; 2/8/2012).³³

29 Available online: http://www.lidovky.cz/cikani-kradou-pise-se-v-citance-pro-druhaky-ministerstvo-ji-proveri-11a-/ln_domov.asp?c=A111107_190330_ln_domov_mev (11/11/2012).

30 Available online: <http://diskuse.doktorka.cz/romove-ziji-tu-s-nami/> (11/11/2012).

31 Available online: <http://www.studenta.cz/romsky-student-komentuje-7-ne-pravd-o-cikanech/magazin/article/110> (11/11/2012).

32 Available online: http://vary.idnes.cz/diskuse.aspx?iddiskuse=A120201_132745_vary-zpravy_sou (11/11/2012).

33 Available online: http://www.lidovky.cz/cikani-kradou-pise-se-v-citance-pro-druhaky-ministerstvo-ji-proveri-11a-/ln_domov.asp?c=A111107_190330_ln_domov_mev (11/11/2012).

It's not that Roma can't steal, the only difference is that Roma have to steal several times a day in a crowded tram or shopping malls before Christmas and risk getting themselves caught. Meanwhile, in the government they could steal in big amounts while remaining respected citizens and they could go with other thieves for a ball every year, for example with the master thieves Bem and Svoboda³⁴. They could share the table with a great warrior against corruption, Pikova³⁵ etc.. (zpravy.idnes.cz; author: bull003@seznam.cz; 11/14/2012)³⁶

Most of the posts in the sample combine several stereotypes in a couple of lines. They are used as mutually-reinforcing facts, which create an authentic logical structure, by reinforcing and supplementing each other. Argumentation is accomplished with several stereotypes at the same time. Common combinations connect criminality with avoidance of work and fast growth of the Roma population with welfare misuses.

I don't like Gypsies. Not because they are dark, I don't mind Chinese or blacks, but it is necessary to take into account how they behave, two thirds of them don't do anything, two thirds of them sit in the jail and the allegedly decent and normal are few. And no discrimination. Just take a walk among them... (diskuse.doktorka.cz; author: Linda; 5/14/2007)³⁷

At the closing of this chapter it is necessary to stress once again that such stereotypical posts are very common and nearly every single post is based on a stereotype. In many cases, stereotypes are combined to form a believable narrative. Stereotypes are mutually reinforced and complemented and thus they create a structure of stereotypes and half-truths, which are repeated *ad nauseam* and dominate the discussion. Common stereotypes are based on the Roma's alleged laziness, misuse of welfare transfers, and preferential treatment by the legal system. Somewhat less common are stereotypes about high numbers of children, high levels of criminality, and low IQs. Relatively rare are romanticized ideas about Roma. The next chapter is devoted to strategies that posters use to persuade others that their claims are based on objective truth.

MECHANISMS OF STEREOTYPE PROMOTION ON DISCUSSION FORUMS

The spread of stereotypes through discussion forums requires that most of the participants come from the dominant group in society. At the same time, for the stereotype to work there has to be a homogenous audience with such ascribed traits as being "light skinned" and hardworking, having a stable job and clean criminal record, coming from a "normal" family, living in a clean environment in line with the societal norms. The others – Roma in this case – are framed in contrast with this baseline and the resulting constructed misfit provides the basis for legitimization of discrimination. Joe Feagin (2006) describes Western society as rationalizing oppression through a "white racial frame." The "white

34 The former and current mayor of Prague respectively.

35 Karolína Peake, politician.

36 Available online: http://zpravy.idnes.cz/diskuse.aspx?iddiskuse=A111003_1661235_liberec-zpravy_oks (11/11/2012).

37 Available online: <http://diskuse.doktorka.cz/romove-ziji-tu-s-nami/> (11/11/2012).

racial frame" is exclusive by nature; its sole purpose is to provide the basis for marginalization of the "undesirable groups." Rhodes uses this concept empirically, although in the context of American society, which is much more diverse than the Czech one. Nevertheless, there are clear parallels in the discourse: "That frame, then and now, is full of racist stereotypes (such as lazy and dumb African Americans, uncivilized Indians, white culture is civilized and superior, etc.), prejudices, and emotions that have been perpetuated by all forms of mass media since the first century of slavery..." (Rhodes, 2008, p. 76).

In the homogenous Czech society, Roma "stand out" much more, which makes them a particularly popular target. In this sense, the situation of Roma in the Czech Republic is not unlike that of Romani people in other European countries:

They are amongst the most marginalized groups in European society, historically being on the receiving end of severe racism, social and economic disadvantage, and forced population displacement. Anti Gypsy sentiment is present throughout Europe, in post-Communist countries such as Romania, in social democracies like Finland, in Britain, in France and so on. Opinion polls consistently show that they are held in lower esteem than other ethnic groups (Bancroft, 2005, p. 2).

Stereotypes are spread under the guise of truth or common sense. This is how posters on the online discussion boards use stereotypes and even strengthen them through repetition. Additionally, there are traces of conscious efforts by some posters to further reinforce belief in the truth of the stereotype among other posters. Such strategies can be divided into three groups. Firstly, they can take form of a narrative told from the perspective of someone closely related to the author of the "story." In effect, narratives detailing bad experiences of members of the majority with Roma are often told as the personal experience of a cousin, close friend, or even the poster himself. The apparent aim here is to give a very personal and emotional spin to a message to create the "if it happened to me, it could happen to you" effect on the audience. Another strategy is a comparison between experiences with Roma who are personally known to the poster with the stereotyped "average" Roma. In this case, the posters are aiming to present themselves as open-minded persons, who are not blinded by their anti-gypsy hatred but are, on the contrary, willing to treat Romani people as equals as long as they subscribe to a set of requirements defining "normal people." Naturally, the point of these narratives is nearly always that the standard of "normality" is only rarely achieved by the Roma. The final strategy is based on the use of (pseudo) scientific "facts," which are put forward to impress the audience.

An example of the first type of legitimization strategy was observed on the *zpovednice.cz* board, where the poster employed the "urban legend" about advantages for Roma in the distribution of some public goods.

So...I have AGAIN witnessed how ticket controllers do not check all the passengers. They went through the whole tram; each of the controllers went from one end of the tram to the middle. And when they ran into Roma, they looked at each other and DID NOT ASK TO SEE THEIR TICKETS?!? What's going on? It

really made me angry, because I am honest and buy monthly passes and when I forget it at home by accident, they call the police on me while Roma don't have to [have a ticket at all]? Even the homeless people get fined.... (zpovednice.cz; author: Revenais; 5/3/2011)³⁸

The reactions to this particular post often contain similar personal experiences of other posters, only the city and type of public transportation vehicle varies.

Revenais: What do you think? Do you think that you can get them to start checking [the tickets of] Roma if you complain? Do you know the line 33? It goes from Přívov in the direction of a Křižíková³⁹ someone I know works there, because there are factories in the area as well. She's never seen a controller in that bus? Why is it so? 98% of people who use that line are Roma (zpovednice.cz; author: Close your eyes; 5/3/2011).⁴⁰

I have experienced it as well and it pissed me off. But, on the other hand, I understand the controllers, I would be afraid too. Even though they chose this line of work, so they had to be ready for anything but....!!!It's really scary, a band of seventeen year old gypsies doesn't shy away from using nasty curses when talking to a controller, because she dares to want something of them, they say they can't afford a ticket... so instead she leaves, right? She doesn't want any problems... (zpovednice.cz; author: dlažební kostka; 5/3/2011)⁴¹

Some posters clearly doubt the truthfulness of these narratives, as evidenced by collective "negotiation" that is going on in the debate. There are a couple of posts which explicitly express doubt about the original story. Here is an example:

I don't use public transport much anymore, but back when I did, in Pardubice, nothing like that ever happened to me and I travelled with gypsies many times. I guess female controllers are like that, guess no man is such a weakling to be afraid to ask a gypsy for a ticket in a bus that is full of people (zpovednice.cz; author: Sichrhajka; 5/3/2011).⁴²

This type of argumentation that anchors the "truthfulness" of a stereotype in personal experience is rather weak, because it can easily be countered with the positive personal experience of other posters. Because the stereotype depends on being accepted as objective truth, the counterstrategy is very effective in making the audience realize that the issue is really much more complex than it appears when presented in a stereotyping narrative. Furthermore, the stereotypical narrative has to reach a certain quality level; it has to be captivating and entertaining for the audience to capture its imagination. For that reason, the success of this particular strategy of stereotype dissemination heavily depends on the ability of the posters, as well as the expectations of the audience.

The same thing can be said about the second type of legitimization strategy, which also depends on narratives of one's own experience. This time around, however, things can get even more personal, because the poster himself acts

38 Available online: <http://www.zpovednice.cz/detail.php?statusik=525998> (11/14/2012).

39 There's a side-street there, inhabited solely by Roma, a kind of colony

40 Available online: <http://www.zpovednice.cz/detail.php?statusik=525998> (11/14/2012).

41 Available online: <http://www.zpovednice.cz/detail.php?statusik=525998> (11/14/2012).

42 Available online: <http://www.zpovednice.cz/detail.php-?statusik=525998> (11/14/2012).

as a character in the narrative. The success of this strategy lies on the ability of the poster to clearly point out the distinction between a particular positive experience with a Roma person and an abstract claim about the ethnic characteristics of the Roma people as a whole. In other words, for this approach to work, the poster needs to distance himself from negative attitudes towards the Roma on the personal level, while maintaining the integrity of the prejudices that breed these negative attitudes. When done right, however, this strategy is much more effective than the previous one, because it cannot be simply conquered with a conflicting narrative. This particular aspect has been discussed by Rughinis:

A visible stereotype-maintenance strategy in the case of the Roma is a sub-type construction, by using the distinction between “our Roma” and the “other Roma.” Therefore, counter-stereotypical information about “our Roma” may leave the general Roma stereotype unaltered. For example, several community reports stress that respondents believe that local Roma are exceptional, because they are not violent. Personal knowledge is therefore not used to inform a stereotype; instead it is made compatible with it (Rughinis 2008, p. 71).

This strategy is very common on Czech discussion boards. The following post from the webpage studenta.cz is a good example. The posters react to an article written by a Roma student, in which the author tries to counter anti-Roma prejudices and talk about the Romani people from the perspective of a Roma.

Most people don't claim that all gypsies are bad, there are exceptions too!!! But for sure the majority are not like the exceptions!! What the Roma student wrote here seems to me like heavy propaganda and a defense of the gypsy lifestyle. It's all about people, if the gypsies felt the need to work, there would be no need to fix the welfare system, if they felt the need to get educated, we would have many tanned⁴³ directors, but nothing like that is happening even though opportunities are plentiful!! So sorry, the problem is not in the system!! But [it is] in the gypsies. Personally, I am friends with many gypsies, which I don't have a problem accepting as equals, but I won't accept as equal a person who only hides behind cheap talk about discrimination!! Czechs are certainly not racist, otherwise the first Chosen One⁴⁴ wouldn't have been gay and the second Superstar⁴⁵ wouldn't have been a gypsy!! They managed something so why shouldn't they have a right to enjoy it!! But we won't give them anything for free!! (studenta.cz; author: Hipik86; 11/19/2009)⁴⁶

Something similar can be found on the website praha.idnes.cz, where posters discuss an article about the mayor of the town Kmetiněves, who referred to Roma as being “bothersome” and was subsequently excluded from the list of candidates of the TOP 09 party for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

43 Reference to darker skin tone associated with Roma.

44 Reference to the winner of a popular, *Big Brother*-like reality show.

45 Reference to the Czech adaptation of *American Idol*.

46 Available online: <http://www.studenta.cz/romsky-student-komentuje-7-ne-pravd-o-cikanech/magazin/article/110> (11/11/2012).

I know a handful of Roma who are more well-mannered... than most of the posters below this article... (praha.idnes.cz; author: kajak v zakoně; 5/25/2011)⁴⁷

Re: I know a couple of Roma who are more well-mannered... I totally agree, but unfortunately a significant proportion of [the members of] this nationality are totally ruining their reputation (and this is true for the whole Europe). Here in Frenštát, there are a few of them and their neighbors don't even know about them. It's rather an exception [when the local Roma cause troubles]... (praha.idnes.cz; author: ingchemik; 5/25/2011)⁴⁸

The following comments originate from the server lidovky.cz, where an article was published about a second grade textbook that the chief state officer in charge of human rights, Monika Šimůnková, recommended withdrawing due to the anti-Roma content. The textbook produced under the project “Rainbow School” contained a claim that Roma steal. In the following discussion, most posters argued against withdrawal of the textbook. Here is an example of such claim:

Alright so GYPSIES DON'T STEAL! Does anyone believe this sentence? (lidovky.cz; author: Z. Lukeš; 11/14/2012)⁴⁹

Re Z. Lukeš: If there is something that is typical for a certain group, we should not be bothered by it. It is said about the English that they like cricket. Some of them probably don't like it. Some gypsies probably don't steal, but the majority creates this typical trait. But we all know that hard work, tidiness, quietness and respect for other people's property is “typical” for them (lidovky.cz; author: F. Eliáš; 2/8/2012).⁵⁰

Argumentation using an exception as proof of the truthfulness of a stereotype is very hard to counter, because it is based on the existence of some abstract reality, which cannot be disproven by empirical claims. This type of reasoning is in this way similar to the last type of legitimization argument, which is based on pretended expertise. These posts are full of “hard data” cited without source. Particularly popular are descriptions of historical events and numerical figures (e.g. percentages) from alleged statistical databases. This type of argument is not looked down on in the forums; posters do not ask for the sources of the information. The stereotype thus takes the form of trustworthy “scientific” or “official” claims, without the need to prove it in any way. Very often this strategy takes the form of historically based narratives (e.g. it was already true in the distant past that Roma act in this or that way), supported by unsourced numbers. Such a strategy contributes to Roma's historical disadvantage, because it is presented

47 Available online: http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDYQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpraha.idnes.cz%2Fdiskuse.aspx%3Fidiskuse%3DA110525_1591083_praha-zpravy_ab&ei=NuKjUITHOKqm4gSU6oHICQ&usg=AFQjCNFzfKnDFMQPKDpTeKaiDfcgRt7mhQ (11/14/2012).

48 Available online: http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDYQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpraha.idnes.cz%2Fdiskuse.aspx%3Fidiskuse%3DA110525_1591083_praha-zpravy_ab&ei=NuKjUITHOKqm4gSU6oHICQ&usg=AFQjCNFzfKnDFMQPKDpTeKaiDfcgRt7mhQ (11/14/2012).

49 Available online: http://www.lidovky.cz/cikani-kradou-pise-se-v-citance-pro-druhaky-ministerstvo-ji-proveri-11a-/ln_domov.asp?c=A111107_190330_ln_domov_mev (11/14/2012).

50 Available online: http://www.lidovky.cz/cikani-kradou-pise-se-v-citance-pro-druhaky-ministerstvo-ji-proveri-11a-/ln_domov.asp?c=A111107_190330_ln_domov_mev (11/14/2012).

as the “normal historical situation,” which creates an endless circle. “The widely held stereotype of the Roma as lazy, unclean, undereducated, habitual thieves remains intact. It often is perpetuated by the media and nationalist politicians and thus reinforces the vicious circle that has contributed to the Roma’s historical disadvantage” (Fox and Brown 2000: 145).

An example of this strategy can be found on the server *novinky.cz*, where an article was published in which the foreign affairs minister Karel Schwarzenberg was criticized by the country’s president Václav Klaus for apparently siding with another politician, Tomio Okamura, who proposed a solution to the Roma issue based on granting the Roma population independent statehood. The poster attempted to create fear by providing the following unsourced data about Roma:

The growth of the Roma population: year 1945 -10 000 Roma year 1959 -20 000 Roma year 1973 -40 000 Roma year 1987 -80 000 Roma year 2001 -160 000 Roma year 2015 -320 000 Roma. Every 14 years the number of Roma doubles!!!! The growth of the Roma population is the greatest security threat for the Czech population.

More than 12 000 Roma prisoners cost us 4 billion [Czech] crowns this year. Welfare subsidies for Roma [cost] 20 billion. Huge damages to property when they are “collecting” metals. Roma are only ones who enjoy healthcare for free. This is another hidden transfer from workers to non-workers. It’s a rule that Roma’s advocate at the court is paid by the state. Considering that the share of this ethnicity on crime is 75%, it is another huge burden for the state budget. In 14 years all these problems and costs will double. Also the risk that you will be a victim of a crime will double (*novinky.cz*; Lubomír Koutný, Brno; 2/2/2012).⁵¹

The same strategy of seemingly endless numerical figures presented as official data was chosen by a poster at *aktualne.centrum.cz*. These discussions follow up an article by Monika Horáková, who pointed out the outcry among foreign intellectuals and organizations echoing the criticism of Czech education policy by the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg. The criticism was aimed at the placement of a high share of Roma children into special schools for cognitively handicapped students at a very young age.

Approx. 3% of the population of the Czech Republic consists of Roma, 250 – 300 000 of them live here. 25% of all Roma live in Northern Bohemia, 21% of all Roma live in Northern Moravia, 47% of apartments inhabited by Roma are not equipped with flush toilets, 40m² of living space is inhabited in average by 6.9 Roma 30% of marriages in some Roma groups take place between relatives 6% of Roma women give birth for the first time between 14 and 16 years of age 19% of Roma women give birth for the first time at 16 years of age up to 4 abortions on average are undergone by one Roma woman 60% of kids placed in institutional care are of Roma nationality 22% of Roma kids fail the 1st grade, 25% of Roma children aged 6-7 are affected by mental disorders 56% of Roma don’t have even basic education, 32.7% of Roma have only basic education 8% of Roma went

51 Available online: <http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/257925-top-09-brani-schwarzenbergovu-ironii-v-romske-otazce.html> (11/14/2012).

through craft school 2.5% of Roma have high school education 0.8% of Roma have university education. 75-85% of Roma are unemployed 60% Roma are unemployed for more than three years 30% of adult Roma make a living through illegal means 60% of adult prisoners in jail are persons of Roma nationality 75% is Roma contribution to criminality (while in some localities, for example, as far as pick pocketing is concerned the number goes up to 95%). 30% of street prostitutes have Roma nationality 25% of Roma street prostitutes have their relative as a pimp (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: TEMPLÁŘ IP:[86.49.7.*]; 3/4/2010).⁵²

Similar to made up “data,” half-truths and stereotypes referring to historical facts are employed as well. This is how the posters place Roma in various historical contexts, while assigning traits associated with the alleged history of Roma/Gypsies to contemporary Romani people. A good representation of this approach is found in the reaction to an article on the previously mentioned issue titled “Authorities flooded with letters: Czechs, please don’t discriminate against Roma children” on the server aktualne.centrum.cz.

That nomadic gypsies were stealing is confirmed from historical sources as well? Are we going to rewrite the chronicles as well? This ethnicity has a great share of criminality in our country, which can be also proven. Furthermore, a large part of gypsies declare they are of Czech nationality even though they are “kalo,”⁵³ so they don’t have to feel offended because it’s not them who is being talked about. One who feels itching should scratch himself.⁵⁴ The majority should not change something that gypsies themselves should change if they feel like a homogenous ethnic group. When gypsies from the Czech Republic steal in German supermarkets, in Germany they write that Czechs, not gypsies, steal. They should protect their own rights, just like anyone else in this country and it will always be true that it is easier to change oneself than the surrounding world. I use the word gypsy and not Roma, just like them, when they talk about whites, they talk about *gadjos* and because many of them refer to themselves as gypsies. From India they brought over to Europe the stigma of “untouchables,” let’s stop taking them this way and pressure them by all means to start acting as equal citizens with all the duties that come with it. Let’s not treat them as not responsible for themselves, they have their own university educated people so if they truly belong together, they should take care of each other (lidovky.cz; author: P. Beran; 2/8/2012).⁵⁵

The following sample is a post commenting on the article about the withdrawn second grade textbook and once again trying to connect the stereotype to historical contexts, while being more specific about the history of the 20th century.

The problem of gypsies is being passed over from times immemorial through Austrian empire, 1st Republic and times of socialism. All eras have placed their

52 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/14/2012).

53 A rare anti-Roma racial slur.

54 A Czech saying implying, in this context, that Roma who declare they are of Czech rather than Roma nationality should not feel offended by anti-Roma rhetoric, because they don’t count themselves among the Romani people anyway.

55 Available online: http://www.lidovky.cz/cikani-kradou-pise-se-v-citance-pro-druhaky-ministerstvo-ji-proveri-11a/-ln_domov.asp?c=A111107_190330_ln_domov_mev (11/14/2012).

mark on it and we don't mitigate it, on the contrary many more people are angry at them because they are constantly privileged and given an advantage in comparison with other people, but they don't do anything to improve things because it suits them this way and no one is forcing them (nakole.cz; Lelek-nakole; 11/19/2011).⁵⁶

Posts on the discussion boards are evaluated collectively and whether they are true or not is established independently from their real truth value. What is important instead is that the post gets the support of other posters; this is what makes it significant and "true". For this reason posters employ tactics to make their stereotypical claims more popular in the community. The most commonly employed strategies include urban legends, contrasts of one's own personal experience with stereotypical images of Roma, with the experience being presented as an exception, and bringing pseudo-facts into the debate to support anti-Roma claims. The first two strategies rely on the captivating power of the narrative, while the last one relies on the apparent rigidity and objectivity of the data, even though they might very well be made up or misrepresented. Both the second and the third strategy rely on circular argumentation tactics. Poverty and antisocial behavior is portrayed as "normal" for Roma and all attempts at changing the situation of the Roma is labeled as doomed in advance precisely because of the "objective" nature of the Romani people. Having covered the strategies used to anchor stereotypes, the following chapter will discuss legitimization of racism through stereotypes.

LEGITIMIZATION AND SOURCES OF RACISM BASED ON STEREOTYPES DISSEMINATED THROUGH DISCUSSION FORUMS

This chapter focuses on the negotiation of a racist agenda in a discussion forum environment. In order for racist discourses to be accepted in the context of internet discussions, several conditions have to be fulfilled. There has to be a certain level of homogeneity of opinions that are not at odds with the stereotypes that are being perpetuated by the racist posters. Consensus in opinion is achieved through the repeated use of stereotyping arguments. The stereotypes themselves have to be internally consistent as well as consistent with the overarching narrative that they try to support (i.e. Roma have many kids and steal because they want money without working), which connects a number of stereotypes.

The discussion board turns into a community of regular posters over time, which strengthens the pressure on unity in opinions, pushing out everyone with dissenting views. Bancroft talks about "internal outsiders" who are excluded from society, in a similar fashion to Feagin's (2006) explanations based on the "white racial frame." The main point is that oppression occurs not only in society at large, but is also mirrored in specific environments such as internet discussion forums. In effect, a person who defends Roma on a discussion board otherwise dominated by racist views is either ignored or, more commonly, verbally

56 Available online: <http://www.nakole.cz/diskuse/14008-kdo-nas-ochrani-pred-cikany.html?filtr=moje> (11/14/2012).

attacked. Through this tactic, posters are trying to close the discussion space for posters with different opinions. Here is an example of an exchange between posters which took place on the server aktualne.centrum.cz, in connection with the already mentioned article “Office flooded with letters: Czechs, please don’t discriminate against Roma children.”

Shall I start to think about you that you’re a completely stupid person purely on the basis that you display a bad command of Czech (language), you cannot use a comma in sentences properly, and your vocabulary is very limited? I will not because I do not know you, so I will not automatically judge you... So you should stop judging Gypsies. We should give them a chance to lead a better life. The fact that we’ve given them a few houses, mostly located in bad areas, such as near water treatment plants, pig farms, etc. is not important. What is important is that we need to take them as people, not sit away from them in public transport, offer them a job, and not send their children to special schools.. I know this is not something that can be done immediately and that it can fail, but it is important that we at least try. I would rather be an idealist than a racist” (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: j IP:[62.245.69.*]; 3/5/2010).⁵⁷

You will be an idealist until you are mugged three times and somebody tries to rape your daughter in front of a store in broad daylight. Then you become a realist” (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: s.ráth IP:[85.207.161.*]; 3/5/2010).⁵⁸

An even more complicated situation arises if some of the posters accuse supporters of the Roma of being, in fact, Roma themselves. In that case, things can quickly turn nasty, as evidenced in the following discussion, where a poster attacked another poster using the word “cikorka” (chicory), which is an open racial slur. It is hard to think of any other reason why a racist poster, being otherwise cautious not to directly break the rules, would risk getting banned by openly acting against the rules, other than to chase the Roma “intruder” away. The post originates from the server studenta.cz (a forum for university students) and responds to the views set out in an article written by a Roma student.

Are you not chicory too? You react strongly anyhow. .. :-) You’re right – skin color does not affect the intellect. I believe that when a Roma child is born, it is equal in intelligence to a white child (on average). But inherent intelligence by itself is not enough, you will have to effectively use and develop it. For example, through attending a good graduate school and getting a job. When you don’t give a fuck about anything, then inherent intelligence is useless. And here I see a very strong connection to skin colors. And btw⁵⁹ - use fewer foreign words and pay more attention to spelling, Einstein :-)) (studenta.cz; author: inka; 11/20/2009)⁶⁰

Based on these traits of the environment created on the forum, the posters who want to retain their place on the board have to at least passively accept the stereotypes. This is a situation that Moskowitz responds to in the following way:

57 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/15/2012).

58 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/15/2012).

59 By the way.

60 Available online: <http://www.studenta.cz/romsky-student-komentuje-7-ne-pravd-o-cikanech/magazin/article/110> (11/12/2012).

A consequence of this is that regardless of whether we have egalitarian values, anti-stereotypic personal beliefs, and a dedication of fairness, a stereotype can still be triggered without our knowing it, simply because we “know” the stereotype. And if it is triggered without our knowing it, we can be biased by its accessibility even if we reject the stereotype” (2005, p.451).

The social group on the internet forum does not allow anyone to reject the stereotype directly. This system eventually leads to the adoption of stereotypes and consequently racist attitudes even among posters who were not necessarily racist when they joined the board. For most posters this is a passive thing, but there are always some posters willing to become active in perpetuating racism, even though they usually avoid making direct racist claims, due to the fear of retribution from the moderators of the forum. Therefore, they often begin their arguments with “I am not racist, but...” which is followed by an anti-Roma statement. The first example is from the server *doktorka.cz* and responds to an article titled “Roma – they are living alongside us.”

I do not want to be afraid to open my mouth to criticize the Gypsy population and be careful with my word, I’m not racist, I have objections to their lifestyle only and I’m desperate – where will it go from now on? (*doktorka.cz*; author: Světluš; 5/14/2007)⁶¹

The next example is very similar to the previous one in the style of argumentation. In the beginning, the author notes that she is not racist, which is followed by a stereotypical claim clearly demonstrating her racist attitude. The claim is further strengthened by stressing that the author has issues only with Roma and not with other non-white people. The following excerpt comes from the forum at the server *imilovice.cz* and is connected with the article about Roma people living in the town of Milovice.

I can assure you, I am not racist, among my colleagues and friends are Uzbeks, Africans, Indians. Ever-present Vietnamese also keep me calm. But as soon as I see a group of Roma loitering on the street, I check my purse and, if possible, I move quickly to the other side of the street (*imilovice.cz*; author: reagovat; 8/23/2011).⁶²

None of the posters cited above admit to being racist at all. The negative attitudes against Roma are expressed as a disagreement with the Roma lifestyle, understood through stereotypes. Negative expressions are defended by passing guilt to the Roma population. Most of posters claim that the culpability is on the side of Roma because of their behavior and attitude to the majority population. As a defense of the existence of racism, a number of stereotypical examples are put forward detailing the Roma behavior that the posters deem inappropriate. This argumentation uses arguments that are a bit different from the ones discussed above. The following excerpt mentions negative experiences in general and is from the server *aktualne.centrum.cz*, where there was an article about discrimination against Roma children. The second post is more specific and points to an experience with an alleged pickpocket theft.

61 Available online: <http://diskuse.doktorka.cz/romove-ziji-tu-s-nami/> (11/15/2012).

62 Available online: <http://www.imilovice.cz/main/forum.php?modul=list&pid=32009> (11/15/2012).

It bothers me, because we are constantly accused of racism, but there is no one here who would condemn a group of people based on their faith, skin color or culture, but [we are] just condemning them [Roma] due to our experiences with their actions (aktualne.centrum.cz; author: Rudolf IP:[90.180.186.*]; 3/5/2010).⁶³

The most powerful strategy discussed here is excusing racism by claiming that it is the Roma themselves who are racist and the majority are the abused and offended victims. This strategy uses the stereotype of the “low employment of Roma population.” This way of defending being racist is extreme and subversive, because it claims that Roma are unemployed deliberately and just want to hurt the majority group by burdening it with providing for them. This claim is supported by the idea that Roma elevate themselves above the majority and in fact put down the majority society. This is often supported by the frequent Roma word “Gadjo,” which is presented as a pejorative label for majority (working) people. The first excerpt is from a server for bikers, nakole.cz, in response to an article about alleged attacks on a town mayor. The second one is from the news server aktualne.centrum.cz, in relation with the article about discrimination against Roma children in the Czech Republic. The second comment reacts to the action of a moderator who deleted a post due to its racist content.

Their point of view would be different if the sole victim of their crime was not merely an inferior Gadjo... They discriminate against us through the word they use to refer to us. For them we are not people, we are not Roma. They just want to live in their fantasy in which they stand “against all” and in fact they do not understand why we give them the money, even though they are essentially not popular (nakole.cz; author: Arnošt905; 11/17/2011).⁶⁴

Fears are often played on in the online discussions and the aim of many posts is to arouse concerns about the supposed imminent threat posed by Roma. The sense of threat itself is the strongest impulse which pushes people to accept racist views. The racist point of view is then elevated to the higher moral ground, being presented as a mere “defense.” Distress is a strong emotion, so this strategy plays well to the intents of racists. In many posts, the fears are directly articulated, for example:

Could they, Gypsies, sometime in the future provide support for us Czechs? After all, we support them permanently, it makes me feel anxious!’ (doktorka.cz; author: Světluše; 5/14/2007)⁶⁵

The spread of negative stereotypes is strongly encouraged by feelings of fear and, in this way, the stereotype spreads among the majority society. Fears are aroused by stereotypes on the discussion forums and these feelings may spill beyond the actual space where the discussion takes place. The impact of stereotypes is obviously very important for the minority, in this case, the Roma population in the Czech Republic. Michal Vašečka deals with this issue in the Slovak Republic, which is culturally very close to the Czech social setting.

63 Available online: <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/zahranici/evropa/clanek.phtml?id=662451> (11/15/2012).

64 Available online: <http://www.nakole.cz/diskuse/14008-kdo-nas-ochrani-pred-cikany.html?filtr=moje> (11/15/2012).

65 Available online: <http://diskuse.doktorka.cz/romove-ziji-tu-s-nami/> (11/15/2012).

A large part of the majority population forms their attitude toward Roma under the influence of prejudices and stereotypes originating from ethnocentrism. The high degree of rejection and wide-spread prejudices directly influence the behavior of Roma, who often just fulfill the idea the majority population has of them. The tension between Roma and the majority population keeps building up, and it poses a real threat for the future of liberal-democratic politics in Slovakia (Vašečka, 2011, p.252).

The direct influence of stereotyping and the disadvantages faced by Roma because of stereotypes are discussed by Brown and Fox:

The negative stereotype is used to justify discrimination, which reinforces the generational poverty of Roma, which contributes to the high level of crime and poor living conditions among the Roma that explain the stereotype. This stereotype is also responsible for a sharp increase in violent attacks against Roma, attacks that generally were restrained by state socialist regimes. Attacks by skinheads have been particularly common in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Between 1990 and 1997, over four hundred Roma in the Czech Republic were seriously injured in racially motivated attacks, and as of April 1998, twenty-nine had been killed (2000, pp. 145-146).

Stereotypes are always put forward to arouse feelings that the legal system is on the side of minorities.

Simultaneously, stereotypes create space for discrimination and racism, and promote the misleading impression that such attitudes help resolve the situation. The spreading and sharing of stereotypes offers a comforting illusion of solidarity in a uniform social group. The posters might be afraid of Roma, but they are comforted by knowing that there are others who share their fears as well as by the existence of spaces which are free of Roma. In the discussion forums, it is never mentioned that the social problems could be the results of discrimination and not the other way around. This is a perfect example of how a stereotype works and of the previously mentioned double-edged nature of the stereotype. On the one hand, to the average member of the majority, it might look like discrimination is a rational consequence to the "facts" – which are in fact disguised stereotypes. On the other hand, the majority does not see the real impact of stereotypes for minorities and so an endless circle continues.

CONCLUSION

Cyberspace is no longer a fictional and second-grade reality for contemporary individuals, but rather a very important part of their existence. The internet creates places where people meet and where much dissemination of information and negotiation takes place. Analysis has shown that the historical assumption that the internet is an equal space cannot be maintained any longer, as argued by Evgeny Morozov. As Lisa Nakamura contends, the social space created by the internet is crucial for the creation of modern identities, often in racial and ethnic terms. Just like any public space, the internet is subject to constraints created by the actors that create it. Entry to the space is in itself constrained, because some

groups are not allowed in due to their lack of skills or computer equipment. In turn, the social spaces that are mushrooming on the internet tend to segregate members of minority ethnic groups. In the Czech situation, it is the Roma (or people who are assumed to be Roma by the majority of participants) who are being left out, or even actively pushed out if they manage to gain entry. Furthermore, this space is used to spread stereotypical information and to provoke anti-Roma passions, which leads to an increase in the general oppression of the Romani people in the Czech Republic.

Roma as a group in Czech society are constantly (and traditionally) confronted with negative stereotypes and such stereotypes are being reproduced on the Internet. The single most common anti-Roma stereotype I found among the forums that I analyzed is that they simply do not work and are in a parasitic relationship with the majority. Related to this belief are stereotypes about the causes of welfare abuse and fraud, according to which, Roma are expected to employ various tactics to obtain as much money from the state as possible. For example, they are said to have many children on purpose so that they can live off childcare subsidies. Other stereotypes include a high tendency towards criminal behavior, which is also associated with the desire to gain lots of money, or the stereotype about Roma being undereducated and lazy, which is also connected to the welfare abuse discourse. A significant aspect of stereotypical arguments is the belief that Roma act the way they act purposefully, and so the root of their negative behavior lies in their ethnic background itself. No stereotype takes into account the impact of the behavior of the majority such as racism or oppression.

In this thesis, all identified stereotypes were analyzed and subsequently divided into the following groups in order of how often they are present: The most used argument is very direct – Roma are “parasites.” Slightly less frequently the same message is put forward through proxy stereotypes (for example, conscious unemployment, unfairly low co-payments for medication, numerous offspring). The next group of stereotypes consists of traditionally rooted romantic images of the Roma lifestyle (connection with music, dance, nomadic life etc.). A special group of stereotypes is based on the supposed low intelligence of the Romani population. This particular group of stereotypes is closely associated with the previous ones, through the discourse of the alleged high criminality of Roma. The stereotypes are not found separately in discussion forums, but are mostly interlinked or directly presented in unison. An interesting finding is that stereotypes create a specific logical structure, in which the negotiation of the message takes place. The stereotypical claims support each other’s “truthfulness” as they create narratives.

The internet space is permanently a subject of negotiation, which in turn means that segregation has to be justified. This is why the posters make efforts to present stereotypes as truth. Some strategies they use have been identified in this paper: A very common tactic includes application of “urban legends,” fictions which are broadly known and have been orally passed among people similarly to a legend. Alternatively, a positive personal experience with a Roma person is presented in contrast with the imagined natural behavior of the Roma.

Finally, posters quote historical or statistical data, sometimes invented, to increase their credibility.

The next step in the negotiation of segregated space is the legitimization of the racist attitudes of the posters who want to claim the particular space for themselves. A common strategy here is a claim that the racist poster is not really racist, because he or she does not hold any grudges against other ethnic minorities, just against Roma. Another strategy is a careful exclusion of everyone who might want to challenge the racist views from the debate. Finally, a common strategy is to blame Roma themselves for the negative attitudes of the Roma towards them. This strategy in particular is very damaging to Roma, because in addition to all the negative stereotypes, they are also blamed for the negative attitudes of the majority towards them. This is how the racists make their claim that the pitiful living conditions of the Romani people are not in any way related to discrimination and negative stereotypes, which in turns furthers their legitimization agenda.

A very strong motive for the posters who are not necessarily racist themselves, but agree to share internet space with racists and even participate in their agenda, is fear. Fear is a strong emotion, which makes us particularly exploitable by those who want to spread racist messages. The racist posters spread information which is aimed to spread fear among the majority, such as material related to sharply increasing Roma criminality, high levels of Roma criminality, the lustfulness of the Roma, and the nearing collapse of the welfare system due to its inability to cope with the Roma claims. In many cases, these fears are put forward very explicitly. As a result, internet discussion boards often exist as forums for whites to voice their grievances against the "others," without any opposition. Paradoxically, the internet, which was thought to be open and free, is used to perpetuate racial hierarchy and oppression. At this point, it is important to stress that cyberspace is an integral part of social life and discrimination on the internet thusly has direct and real social impact.

The contribution of this paper is to show the mechanisms by which stereotypes are spread in the new environment created by the internet in general, and internet discussion boards in particular, which have been used to re-create the old and well-known spaces of oppression and segregation of the Romani people. Additionally, my thesis details which sorts of stereotypes appear in cyberspace and the ways racism is being perpetuated through online boards. Even though this is an analytical piece, I do not make any effort to curtail or hide some troubling moral concerns that are associated with these phenomena; there is no need to make too many normative claims to see that this is a very troubling social phenomenon. This paper is unique because it introduces the global English speaking academic and non-academic public to the specific, local Czech environment, which is not normally accessible due to language and cultural barriers. It seems, therefore, worthwhile to continue with this line of inquiry further and look into the position of other ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic, such as the Vietnamese community, which is generally associated with more positive traits than the Roma. It would also be interesting to compare the gathered data with similar

“offline material.” It would also be interesting to follow a comparative approach and see how the analyzed mechanisms work in different cultural and social environments.

REFERENCES

- Anthonissen, Ch. (2001). *On the Effectivity of Media Censorship: An Analysis of Linguistic, Paralinguistic and other Communicative Devices used to Defy Media Restrictions*. Vienna, Austria: University of Vienna.
- Bancroft, A. (2005). *Roma and Gypsy-Travelers in Europe. Modernity, Race, Space and Exclusion*. Edinburgh, UK: Ashgate.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brock, A. (2003). *Race, the Internet, and the Hurricane: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Black Identity online during the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina*. Ph.D. dissertation. New York: Carnegie University.
- Cahn, C., (Ed.) (2002). *Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality*. New York: The International Debate Education Association.
- Downing, J. D.H. and C. Housband, (2005). *Representing Race: Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*. London: SAGE.
- Essed, Ph. (1991). *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. London: SAGE.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Feagin, J. R. (2006). *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Fleck, G., & Cosima R., (Eds.). (2008). *Come Closer: Inclusion and Exclusion of Roma in Present-Day Romanian Society*. Bucharest, Bulgaria: National Agency for Roma.
- Fox, J. & Brown, B. (2000). The Roma in Postcommunist Era. In T. R. Gurr (Ed.), *Peoples Versus States: Minorities At Risk in the New Century* (pp. 143-150). Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Guillaumin, C. (1992). *Zur Bedeutung des Begriffs "Rasse"*. In: Institut für Migration und Rassismuskforschung e.V. (ed.) *Rassismus und Migration in Europa: Beiträge des Kongresses 'Migration und Rassismus in Europa'*. (1990). (pp. 77-87) Hamburg, 26. bis 30. September. Hamburg and Berlin: Argument.
- Hewson, C., & Laurent, D. (2008). *Research Design and Tools for Internet Research*. In N. F., R. Lee & G. Blank, *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods*. (pp. 58-78). London: SAGE.
- Hunt, D. (1996). Race and Racism. In: B. Turner (Ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacquard, A. (1996). Ein unwissenschaftlicher Begriff, *Unesco-Kurier*, 3,18–21.
- Joinson, A. 1999. Social Desirability, Anonymity, and Internet-Based Questionnaires. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers*, Vol. 31 (3), 433-438.
- Kahanec, M., & Zimmermann, K.F. (2011). *Ethnic Diversity in European Labor Markets: Challenges and Solutions*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kligman, G.. (2001). On the Social Construction of 'Otherness': Identifying 'the Roma' in Post-Socialist Communities. *Review of Sociology*. Vol. 7 (2), 61 – 78.
- Liégeois, J-P. (2008). *Roma in Europe*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe Publishing.
- McLuhan, M.. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet.
- Miles, R. (1994). Explaining Racism in Contemporary Europe. In A. Rattansi, & S. Westwood. (Eds), *Racism, Modernity and Identity: On the Western Front*. (pp.189-221). Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Morozov, E. (2009). *How the Net Aids Dictatorships*. [online video] New York: TEDGlobal. Retrieved 26 November, 2012. From: (http://www.ted.com/talks/evgeny_morozov_is_the_internet_what_orwell_feared.html).
- Morozov, E. (2011). *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. 1st ed. New York: Public Affairs.
- Moskowitz, G. B. (2005). *Social Cognition: Understanding Self and Others*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Nakamura, L.. (2008). *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- O'Nions, H. (2007). *Minority Rights Protection in International Law: The Roma of Europe*. London: Ashgate.
- Quasthoff, U. (1987). Linguistic Prejudice/Stereotypes. In U. Ammon, N. Dittmar, & K. Mattheier

- (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics/Soziolinguistik: An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society, Volume 1*, (pp.785-799). Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and Discrimination. Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.
- Rhodes, C.D. (2008) *Crude Ideology, Sophisticated Communication: An Analysis of Extremist Group Web Content Aimed at Youth*. Thesis. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado at Boulder.
- Turner, J. C. (1982). *Towards a cognitive redefinition of the social group*. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social identity and intergroup relations* (pp. 15-40). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1984). *Prejudice in Discourse*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Benjamins. N.A. (1993). *Elite Discourse and Racism*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- van Dijk, T.A., Ting-Toomey, S., Smitherman, G., & Troutman, D. (1997). *Discourse, Ethnicity, Culture and Racism*. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction* (pp. 144-80). London: SAGE.
- Vašečka, M. (2011). *Social and Labor Market Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Slovakia*. In M. Kahaneč, & K. F. Zimmermann (Eds.), *Ethnic Diversity in European Labor Markets: Challenges and Solutions* (pp. 247-267). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Wodak, R. 2002. *Aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis*. *Zeitschrift für Angewandte Linguistik* 36, 5-31.
- Wodak, R. & van Dijk, T.A (Eds.) 2000. *Racism at the Top: Parliamentary Discourses on Ethnic Issues in Six European States*. Klagenfurt, Austria: Drava.
- World Bank. 2008. "Report No. 46120 CZ: Czech Republic: Improving Employment Chances of the Roma." Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved 24 October, 2012. From http://siteresources.worldbank.org/ECAEXT/Resources/2585981224622402506/CZ_Roma_Employment_Full_Report.pdf.