

## Experiencing Everyday Prejudice and Discrimination in Central and Eastern Europe: the target's perspective on-the-ground and in the online sphere

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### Abstract

The European Union has long been active in the fight against discrimination and in promoting equal opportunities, and with the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 came new, far-reaching powers to take action to combat discrimination based on sex, ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. However, while establishing a set of laws against discrimination is an essential step, it is well known that laws themselves are not enough, normative change needs to occur to eliminate such actions. The COVID-19 epidemic has dealt a heavy blow to populations and health systems across the world. At the same time, it has also highlighted continued cases of prejudice and discrimination across Europe, even for groups not normally targets of discrimination such as citizens and migrants of Asian descent. Indeed, prejudice and discrimination are common themes even to this day. This paper looks at prejudice and discrimination on-the-ground in Central and Eastern Europe and online, and especially highlights the target's perspective — taken from in-depth interviews conducted between April and December 2020 — to further inform practice and policy.

### Introduction

*"I was on the tram, on my way home. I'm a mechanical engineer and my work is great here, Prague is great. But that time [February 2020], there was an elderly person who wanted to sit. There was a free seat beside me, but he did not want to sit beside me. He made me stand up and called me "Chinese" and "virus". No one helped me, in fact, a group of teenagers came closer to us and I was afraid they would push me out of the tram. I just left on the next stop." (Manuel, 38, Filipino mechanical engineer in Prague)*

In January 2020, during the period of growing awareness of the public health emergency COVID-19, a wave of anti-Asian racism made itself felt in Europe and globally. With no differentiating between Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Koreans, Filipinos or others of Asian physical appearance, reports started pouring in of incidences of xenophobia and physical violence, including individuals being barred from entering groceries or pushed out of public transportation (Chuang 2020; Geisser 2020); online violence (Ziems et al. 2020); as well as blanket institutional violence, such as the case of Rome's Santa Cecilia Conservatory suspending all "oriental students"; as well as hotels across the continent closing their doors to nationals from East and Southeast Asia, again, no matter the actual nationality or

exposure to COVID-19.<sup>23</sup> During this time, anti-Asian racism, anti-immigrant hate, and xenophobia went hand in hand.

In the online sphere, the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus [“I am not a virus”] was coined by the French Asian community on Twitter in response to a spate of racially motivated attacks in the country. This online campaign was quickly adopted by communities in the UK, Germany, Italy, and in Spain, and appeared across various platforms including Twitter, but also Instagram, Facebook, and others. In parallel to this, anti-Semitic conspiracy myths regarding COVID-19 flooded the internet. Those, who were already previous targets of hate, had to face even more instances of everyday prejudice and discrimination — new iterations of an old hatred.

While COVID-19 shined a spotlight on these events, unfortunately incidences of “group-focused enmity” or GFE (Zick/Küpper/Heitmeyer 2010) have been occurring continuously since before 2020. Spanning elements of xenophobia, ethnic racism, anti-Semitism, Muslim hostility, sexism, homophobia, as well as the devaluation of disabled and homeless persons (Ibid.), GFE is a particularly useful framework for examining prejudice and discrimination. Even prior to the emergence of COVID-related xenophobia, prejudice and discrimination against vulnerable groups, in-person or online, as well as institutionally have been insidiously present in all societies and continue to cause damage, both to individuals and to communities.

This article looks at the phenomenon of prejudice and discrimination in Europe, focusing on the online sphere and on-the-ground incidents from the target’s perspective in Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The article unpacks direct discrimination (i.e. discrimination that was directly addressed at individuals due to their ethnic origin, nationality, gender identity, disability, socio-economic status, or other); institutional discrimination (i.e. inability to open a bank account due to nationality, limited access to housing, or similar); as well as cases of harassment (i.e. unwanted behavior which is offensive or which intimidates or humiliates) tantamount to violence. This is presented through a review of current research on the phenomenon supported by in-depth interviews with self-identified targets of discrimination.

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<sup>23</sup> See for example journalistic coverage from the Washington Post on the Santa Cecilia incident which was widely condemned by the music community <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/31/top-european-music-school-suspended-students-east-asia-over-coronavirus-concerns-amid-rising-discrimination/>, checked 01/13/2021.

Specific note on terminology: in the literature, “victim”, “survivor”, and “target” are used. All have long histories and frameworks attached to them, and for the sake of this article the target perspective is used mainly in alignment with stressing the source of the actions as well as the agency of the respondents. That said, during the data gathering phase, it was important to ask the interviewee if they had a preference. For some, “victim” may be applicable particularly when referring to cases of harassment or assault, whereas “survivor” may be more appropriate after a period of healing. Ultimately, it is down to an individual preference and we did not oblige any respondent to identify with a specific term.

## Overview of prejudice and discrimination in the EU and in CEE

Prominently highlighted on the EUROPA website, “the European Union is based on a strong commitment to promoting and protecting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law”<sup>24</sup>. Having human rights at the core of a multicultural Europe, “united in diversity”, is not only essential for the protection of vulnerable groups but forms the cornerstone of a healthy democratic union. However, even though it has been seventy years since the European Convention on Human Rights was signed in Rome, challenges continue to appear, and particularly rear their heads during times of crisis.

Europe has historically been diverse, and this diversity has only grown with the advent of open borders, ease of travel, and indeed, though recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender social movements. Whereas a welcome development for many, for others such as populist and extremist groups, such changes are in direct opposition to their fundamental beliefs of cultural purity and traditional gender norms.

At this point, it is useful to refer to the concept of "group-focused enmity" (Zick/Küpper/Heitmeyer 2010), which encompasses stereotypes and disparaging attitudes towards those who are supposedly 'different'. This includes xenophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, sexist, homophobic and transphobic attitudes as well as the devaluation and exclusion of other social groups such as homeless, long-term unemployed and disabled people.

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<sup>24</sup> [https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/human-rights\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/human-rights_en), checked 01/10/2021.

Within the context of the European Union, the *Community Action Programme against Discrimination* is a useful framework to see how the EU encouraged concrete measures in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities across all grounds of discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

The Community Action Programme was implemented between 2001 and 2006 and focused on specific grounds of discrimination: namely, based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, and sexual orientation.<sup>26</sup> Discrimination based on nationality has always been prohibited. The European Commission protects citizen and resident rights through the various directives as below:

Directive 2000/43/EC against discrimination on the grounds of racial and ethnic origin (Directive 2000/43/EC), in the workplace on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (2000/78/EC), on the grounds of age, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief outside the workplace (COM(2008)462), and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (2006/54/EC) or in the access to and supply of goods and services (2004/113/EC).

This European Commission's 2019 Eurobarometer opinion survey shows that European majorities are only somehow aware of on-going discrimination towards several target groups in their country, and that sensitivity to discrimination also varies from country to country. Across Europe, the majority are aware of discrimination against Roma (61%) and on the basis of ethnic origin and skin color (59%). At the same time, the individual readiness to discriminate against specific target groups has decreased in recent years. Nowadays, more people would accept for their child to have a romantic relationship with a black person, Roma, Muslim, or with someone of the same sex.

Across Europe, research shows that attitudes on some topics reflect a sharp East-West divide. On issues like sexual orientation and the role of women in society, opinions differ sharply between West and East, with Western Europeans expressing much more accepting attitudes (Pew Research Center Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Question 31; for a short overview see also Küpper/Váradi in this issue).

Perhaps surveys are not needed: many clearly recall the divisive October 2018 referendum in Romania regarding the definition of the family in the Romanian Constitution and Poland's recent anti-abortion law. The Romanian referendum was launched by the *Coaliția pentru Familie* (the Coalition for Family) after gathering three million signatures in 2015 — substantially more than the 500,000 required. The referendum failed as the turnout was only 21.1% but it was close to the required 30% (see for example,

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<sup>25</sup> Council Decision 2000/750/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a Community Action Programme to combat discrimination (2001 to 2006).

<sup>26</sup> The Community Action Programme against Discrimination was replaced by the PROGRESS Community Programme from January 2007.

Gherasim-Proca 2018; Margarit 2019). In October of 2020, the new Polish Constitutional Tribunal, decided to ban abortion even in cases of fetal defects. Already having some of the strictest abortion laws in Europe, this development in Poland triggered mass protests even with the on-going pandemic (for more on the history of abortion legislation in Poland, see Szelewa 2016; Chełstowska 2011).

### On-the-ground and online incidences in Central and Eastern Europe: the target's perspective

Statistical reports are rich in information and therefore not only valuable to see trends over the years, as in the Eurobarometer case, but are also essential to understand the overall trends and narratives in terms of prejudice and discrimination in Europe as a whole and in Central and Eastern Europe in particular. However, because the experiences of targets of discrimination are so personal and so varied, these are not easily translatable from quantitative data. It is therefore important for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to take into account lived experiences and to as much as possible empower individuals to speak for themselves, in support of other data gathered such as surveys and other statistical reports. Indeed, involving vulnerable groups is essential to make national- and European-level and local policies and practices more effective and better tailored to needs on the ground.

Qualitative data-gathering with vulnerable groups presents a unique challenge. Trust-building is key when discussing sensitive topics such as discrimination because of nationality or ethnic origin, or violence due to sexual orientation. Indeed, care is required not only in making sure that interviewee identities are protected but that interviews abide by the 'do no harm' principle. It is known that interviews — by journalists, activists, or even researchers — can stigmatize, shame, and be psychologically harmful if done poorly. Therefore, all measures were taken to ensure the protection of interviewees, with full informed consent and respect for their boundaries.<sup>27</sup>

Interviews started in April 2020, mainly looking at cases within Romania and Hungary, and were expanded to include the wider CEE region between September and December 2020. Considering the variety of possible responses and the sensitivity of the topics at hand, an interview kit with open-ended questions was utilized, which allowed interviewees to use their own terms and direct their response at their convenience.

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<sup>27</sup> Ethical standards and research integrity were made key priorities in the design of this research. Dr. Dy has extensive field experience in ethnographic research involving victims of sexual trafficking (on-going), vulnerable migrants including irregular migrants in France and the BENELUX region (Dy 2020), and women who have experienced unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion in the Philippines (Dy 2019).

passport nationalities <sup>28</sup>	countries of residence	length of residency	age	gender <sup>29</sup>	disability
1 American 1 Burundian 3 Chinese 1 French 1 Hungarian 1 Korean 1 Malay 1 Polish 4 Romanian 5 Philippine 1 Vietnamese	Bulgaria Czech Republic Estonia Hungary Poland Romania Slovenia United Kingdom and Portugal <sup>30</sup>	The length of residency varied between respondents, some are CEE citizens and others are foreign-born with residency periods between a few months (i.e. students) to a few years.	Majority of the inter_views were between the ages of 18 and 59, with the exception of two who were 60+	12 cisgender 1 non-binary 2 transgender 1 transsexual 4 no response	None of those interviewed identified as having a disability

Table 1 Targets of discrimination interviewed between April and December 2020

Due to COVID-19, all interviews were done by phone or video conference and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes long. Except for the Romanian case, interviewees were selected through chain-referral sampling.

Gathering qualitative data on prejudice and discrimination is a time- and labor-intensive task, and it was not possible within the scope of this research to comprehensively cover all possible accounts. However, the goal of this paper was not regarding quantity but rather to hear the voices of actual

<sup>28</sup> It is important to remember that passport nationality does not necessarily reflect ethnic origin, residency status in the EU, or length of stay (indicated in a separate column); however, as an empirical base point, it was useful to collect this data as a means of identification. The possibility of dual nationality was taken into consideration, however none of the respondents of the study fit into this category.

<sup>29</sup> As self-identified by the interviewees.

<sup>30</sup> One respondent was already resident in Portugal at the time of the interview but referred to incidents in Slovenia for the discussion. Another respondent was in a similar situation, having relocated to the United Kingdom in 2018 but referring to events that transpired in Romania.

individuals from or living in the CEE region and juxtapose their lived experiences with available research on on-site and online incidents and Eurobarometer data.

## How targeted persons experience everyday prejudice and discrimination on the ground

*Discrimination due to ethnic origin* is the most prevalent across the EU and within this field, *discrimination against Roma* is considered the most widespread as indicated by 61% of respondents of the latest Eurobarometer survey (European Commission 2019).<sup>31</sup> Indeed, from the literature it is clear that Roma are one of the most persecuted ethnic minority groups in Europe today. Although Roma everywhere in Europe face continuing difficulties, their current situation in Central and Eastern Europe is an especially precarious one (Project on Ethnic Relations 1997). In terms of numbers, “researchers and international organizations have compiled widely divergent figures, even for countries where a good amount of research on Roma has been done” (Druker, 1997: 22). As Margaret Brearley writes, European Roma have endured “forced evictions from homes; expulsions from villages and towns (often with the support of local Mayors); physical assault and murder by skinheads, policemen, neighbors; exclusion from public places; widespread legal discrimination; unduly harsh prison sentences and extortionate fines for petty offences; and endemic racial abuse.” (1996: 3).

It is important to remember that anti-Roma sentiment is not only limited to the realm of extremists but affects everyday encounters, as Vano, a Roma construction worker in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) narrates:

*“I came with a friend to work in Cluj-Napoca. We had rented an apartment — everything was done by phone, so it was alright. By phone no one can see who you are! But when we arrived, the landlord would not let us in. They saw our faces and our skin: we were Roma. It did not matter that we came to the city to work, or that they had agreed to rent the apartment to us. Because we were Roma, we were unwanted. We had nowhere to stay and we asked for help. We are lucky to have found people in Cluj that helped us.”*

Upon asking whether they would file a case against the discriminatory landlord:

*“No, even the police would laugh at us if they even let us in. The problem is everywhere, even with the police.”*  
(Vano and Loni, Roma construction workers, Romania)

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<sup>31</sup> There can be no comparison to the 2015 survey for this category as ‘skin color’, ‘age’, and ‘being intersex’ were new categories added to the 2019 iteration.

It is difficult to imagine what else Vano and Loni could have done to be integrated into society. Skilled, employed, fluent in Romanian, trusting that a modern, university city like Cluj-Napoca would offer a welcome difficult to find elsewhere in Eastern Europe — but it was not the case. Assisted by a church group and an NGO in Cluj, they found alternative permanent accommodation and did not file any case against the discriminatory practice they encountered.

The death of George Floyd in the United States, who suffocated under the knee of a police officer in June 2020 — not the first such case of excessive violence against members of the black American community — triggered massive response globally. Anti-discrimination rallies were held in Warsaw and other cities, in solidarity with the American movement and also to highlight problem of racism and police brutality in their own countries.

*With regard to Anti-Semitism*, in the latest FRA Report on Jewish peoples' experiences presents staggering statistics (EU FRA 2018): over one third of all respondents reported experiencing some form of harassment in the five years before the survey, and similar to many other vulnerable groups, 79% of the respondents who reported experiencing antisemitic harassment did not report the incident to the police or to any other organization.

*Discrimination due to gender* is also prevalent in Europe, and as mentioned earlier in the article, is of particular concern in Central and Eastern Europe (Verloo 2007; Takács 2015; Paternotte/Kuhar 2018). Violence and hate crimes targeting the LGBTQI+ community<sup>32</sup> are especially prevalent in Eastern Europe and there have been several attacks on community members during Eastern European Gay Pride events (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017). In recent years, regression has been seen within several countries, for example in Bulgaria, where the legal instruments allowing trans people to change their name and gender on legal documents has been revoked (European Court of Human Rights 2017).

There are very few statistics on *hate crimes experienced by trans people*. The 2009 report “Transphobic Hate Crime in the European Union” by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) Europe and Press for Change was the first quantitative report, stating that 79% of respondents had experienced some form of harassment in public ranging from transphobic comments to physical or sexual abuse. The report also stated that trans people are three times more likely to experience a transphobic hate incident or hate crime than lesbians or gay men (Turner/Whittle/Combs 2009: 1).

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<sup>32</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) and other identities, including two spirited, questioning, pansexual/omnisexual, asexual, ally, are included.



*“I grew up transgender in Poland. Maybe this already says enough... when I was young, kids didn’t play with me, I was a freak. I was sent to boarding school, the best school in Poland, because [my family] wanted me to go to medicine, but even there I was a freak. Even my parents did not accept me. My mother wanted a daughter, but I am a boy... I jumped out the window when I was 17 and broke my spine. It was then that my mother realized that it was me or nothing... my grandparents helped, and my uncle, they told my parents: accept him or lose him.”*

A difficult conversation, Alex narrated his struggles growing up transgender in a small town in Poland. The most difficult aspect was that his parents did not accept him, and throughout his life tried to change him “back into a girl” — with no success. These attempts eventually resulted in a turning point, where Alex attempted suicide and nearly succeeded. Notably, while his parents were averse to accepting him, his grandmother, uncles, and aunts were supportive, and eventually generated acceptance.

*“I started the transition process, sponsored by my uncle. I always carry all my certificates — doctor’s, psychologist’s, sexologist’s, all of them — but still it is not enough. When there is a ticket inspection on the bus for example, they see my card and they see my name [which in Poland, indicates male or female] and even with all my documents they give me a ticket. I must go all the way to the main office to explain that it is my card, and that I should not have to pay for a ticket. It happens maybe once a month.” (Alex, nurse, Poland)*

According to a OSCE-led survey on Violence Against Women in South Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe more than two thirds (70%) of women have experienced some form of violence addressed to them as women (sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence or non-partner violence including psychological, physical or sexual violence) since the age of 15 (OSCE 2019). Nearly every other woman (45%) has experienced sexual harassment offline or via the internet. Due to societal norms and lack of trust in the police, women do not report most incidents to the police and they rarely seek support from other institutions. Migrant women and other vulnerable groups including Roma and members of ethnic minorities are far less likely to report cases of harassment or violence (Freedman 2016; Lazaridis 2001; see also Fresnoza-Flot/Ricordeau 2017).

*“He would strangle me and slap me. He would take away my phone so I could not take photos. He told me he is friends with the police so they would not believe me. Without photos they will certainly not believe me. He threatened to divorce me, and if he divorces me, he will take our son. I am unemployed, I have no home, I don’t speak [the local language] ... The embassy will not help me. I’m scared. I want to leave but I cannot leave, I*

*don't know where to go. Please help me.” (Anna, wife and mother, age, nationality, and location concealed for protection<sup>33</sup>)*

Children — even children who are EU citizens by birth — are targets and such discrimination received at a young age can have lasting effects on social integration, and identification as European citizens (Analitis et al. 2009). Marites, a Filipina married to a Romanian citizen narrates her experience in the early days of COVID:

*“It was my child who was bullied... he is half-Romanian and half-Filipino. He's quite fair-skinned but does look strongly Filipino. He's being bullied in school. They call him China, Jackie Chan, coronavirus... at the playground they don't play with him, neither at the spinning ride nor at the slide. Sometimes he is violently pushed away. I feel so bad for him; he isn't even Chinese!” (Marites, wife and mother, resident in Bucharest, Romania)*

As a further consequence of COVID-19, we have also observed that migrants have been targeted by discriminatory practices across the CEE. Similar stories have emerged from Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria of illegal firing practices such as the one narrated below:

*“It was a few months into this year, and we were asked to sign an addition to our contracts. We thought it was just regarding additional safety measures we had to take for COVID, but we discovered we signed our own resignation letters. It was in [national language] so we did not know — we trusted. More than ten of us were out of a job, but not the [local staff] only us migrants.” (Nestor, HORECA worker, age, nationality, and location concealed for protection)*

The group of migrants had ‘legally’ resigned, the paperwork had been filed correctly by their employer, and therefore had no legal recourse. The attention of organizations such as the International Organization for Migration was drawn to such unethical practices, but limited action was possible after the fact. Instead, it was fellow migrant groups who mobilized to raise funds to provide support in the form of weekly food deliveries to those who were out of employment and stuck in the country due to COVID flight restrictions. As of writing this article, no long-term solution has yet been found.

It is important to note that incidents do not have to be particularly violent or cause physical harm to result in injury: “I had never experienced racism before,” narrates Camille, a young student from Korea

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<sup>33</sup> Anna (not her real name) was put in contact with representatives from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) who would be able to assist her further. The IOM offered to assist Anna's repatriation; however, her infant child would have to remain. Under European legislation, where parental authority is exercised jointly by both parents, the other parent's consent is required in order to remove a child to another Member State or abroad. Even in the case of divorce, the parents have joint parental authority, unless otherwise decided by the court, a situation where many women find themselves ‘trapped’ post-dissolution of marriage but with minor children. Anna has decided to remain in Europe and is being assisted by the IOM to learn the local language, access childcare services, and find employment and alternative housing.

who was studying on exchange in Slovenia, “then one evening in February I was walking home to my dormitory and two teenage guys were in front of me and shouted *Ching Chong Ching* — you know, like Chinese — and I was so affected. I had to tell all my friends, my boyfriend, I couldn’t leave the whole day next day. And after that incident I was hyperaware of the difference between me and the majority in Slovenia.”

Camille narrated how she is petite, even for Korean standards, with dark hair, whereas the majority in Slovenia are tall and blonde — indeed, statistically some of the tallest people in the world. It had never been something she noticed ‘negatively’ until that nighttime incident. Following it however, she developed anxiety on public transportation and enclosed spaces and left Slovenia as soon as her semester was over.

It may be easy to overlook such incidents as of less importance; but the effect on an individual’s life is palpable. It is not for outsiders to decide the ‘impact’ on targets of prejudice or discrimination but acknowledge that each individual is impacted in different ways and to different degrees. It is also important to remember that whereas ‘in-person’ incidents are jarring, there is also a rising case of online violence and the targets remain largely the same.

### How targeted persons experience Hate Speech on the Internet

The popularity of social media has continued to grow across Europe and globally, and platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram draw a lot of interest across people from different backgrounds and cultures (Statista 2020), but also in the enterprise sectors (Eurostat 2020). Such online platforms offer individuals the opportunity to share thoughts, feelings, and opinions with others on the platform and open a space for discussions. While the diversity of different backgrounds in a borderless online world provides a great opportunity to get to know various cultures and points of view, a significant number of individuals tend to use aggressive language against others who do not share their beliefs. Eighty percent of the respondents of the FRA survey on Anti-Semitism reported coming across such statements online (EU FRA 2018).

‘Hate speech’ is defined as any form of communication that ridicules or insults either an individual or a group based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, political orientation, or other categories (Council of Europe 1997). For some people hate speech casts a pall over their lived experience of the Internet: the bits of cyberspace they inhabit, the posts they see and the messages they receive. For these Internet users, even if it is a minority of people, it would not be an exaggeration to speak of the current Internet epoch—following the Internet of Content, the Internet of Services, the Internet of People and the Internet of Things—as being the Internet of Hate. (Brown 2020: 6)

A difficulty with hate speech, unlike in-person discrimination, is that there is a certain difficulty to gauge the tone of the situation. Due to the variety of languages and constantly evolving slang, it is often difficult to obtain an accurate identification of such content. The online communication on social media platforms is, indeed, more complex with the usage of memes, emojis, and abbreviations; and it is difficult to control and filter all the content on such platforms due to the enormous number of messages, posts, and comments. In addition, the power of anonymity may lead to the lack of respect and tolerance which in turn leads to problematic behavior and statements online.

*“I work with the Roma community in [city in Romania] and my dream is for the next generation to know that they are treasured by God. As a Roma myself, I want us to live without shame or guilt and even be proud that we are Roma. It is not an easy task. I work with the youth a few hours a week, but you know, they are online the rest of the time. This means that any work that I do must compete with traditional media — which only tells the story of the problems in Roma communities, never the positive initiatives — or social media where there is so much hatred against people like me.” (Roxana, Roma advocate and NGO worker, Romania)*

Roxana and her NGO have continuously worked promoting the rights of Roma, including educational programs and anti-violence and violence prevention programs with great success; however, acknowledge that while technology has greatly benefited them, the challenges of online hate speech are serious ones. She shares that sometimes progress from weeks of leadership training can be set back by a confrontation online, and that it is difficult to protect youth in the online sphere.

Direct communication platforms such as Twitter are particularly fertile ground for hate speech as they allow unfettered open interchange but also the power of anonymity. Responding to this, in July 2019, Twitter expanded their rules against hateful conduct to include “language that dehumanizes others on the basis of religion or caste”; in March 2020, to include “language that dehumanizes on the basis of age, disability, or disease”; and in December 2020, to “prohibit language that dehumanizes people on the basis of race, ethnicity, or national origin”.

These steps to limiting hate speech are imperative as the HateLab study revealed that an increase in hate speech on social media leads to more crimes against minorities in the physical world (Cardiff University, 2019). The research revealed that the number of antagonistic tweets regarding race, ethnicity, or religion made from one location increased, so did the number of hate crimes, including harassment, violence, and criminal damage.

However, studies on online hate are limited largely because reporting a hate crime committed virtually is often considered ‘less than’ one committed directly, and in addition few people are aware of the avenues that can be taken to report such incidents. Indeed, in a large-scale quantitative study following

the #MeToo movement<sup>34</sup>, Khatua, Cambria, and Khatua (2018) highlighted the lack of statistics of crimes committed online, therefore constraining the possibility of data-driven policy.

## Conclusion

As it emerges from this study, discrimination and harassment are felt both on-the-ground and online, triggered by crises such as COVID-19 but in actuality are present all throughout. Vulnerable groups — individuals with differing ethnic origins, religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation — experience different levels of harassment and discrimination, sometimes affecting their livelihoods or their lives.

Within Central and Eastern Europe, statistics show that Roma and members of the LGBTQI+ community are particularly victimized; however, it is important to underscore that all vulnerable groups are potential targets, and even so-called small incidents of discrimination can cause lasting psychological effects. Targets often have little recourse to official mechanisms and it is clear from the témoignages gathered during this research that in addition to this, even with the presence of anti-discrimination laws, societal norms are an additional barrier to seeking assistance.

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<sup>34</sup> The #MeToo movement was an online social movement that went viral in 2017, and highlighted rampant sexual and gender-based violence globally. One of the achievements of the movement was visibly demonstrating the sheer number of women and girls who have survived sexual harassment and violence, especially in the workplace. For more information, see: <https://metoomvmt.org/>

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