

We are writing to you to protest about the TV broadcast “Gypsy Child Thieves”, which was brought by BBC 2, last Wednesday, and which we feel has provided a very inaccurate, offensive and highly damaging account of the Roma community. We also feel that the presentation of this issue on your website, where it was presented under the allusive title “How Gypsy gangs use child thieves ” is not quite appropriate to deal with such a sensitive issue.

Though the subject of this film, which we saw on Youtube, is the alleged activities of human traffickers trafficking Romany children from Romania to the EU for the purpose of begging and stealing, the way this it is presented is such that it sheds a bad light on the entire Roma community in Europe, claiming that begging and stealing as well as the exploitation of children (and old people) for these purposes are deeply rooted within the Romany culture.

The journalist, Liviu Tipurita, has been specialising on undercover reports on organised crime, and his report on the alleged trafficking of Romany children is conceived in exactly the same way as would be a documentary on any form of organised crime involving repeated scenes where Tipurita is shown hiding and spying or driving on a high way in the pursuit of alleged criminals. The tension of the viewer is further heightened by the usage of a suggestive music and vocabulary with frequent reference to the activity of tracing and hunting.

Even if Tipurita mentions, at times, the appalling poverty of the Roma community in Romania, this “original sin” entirely disappears against the underlying accusation that Romany parents exploit their children by forcing them into criminal activities. The insistence on the children’s hardship, which is singled out against the hardship experienced by the entire community including the children’s parents, makes it seem that only the children suffer, suffer because they are exploited by members of their own community.

The most worrisome aspect, in this film, for us, is the fact that begging and thieving and child exploitation are described as an intrinsic part of the Romany culture. A seeming sign of hope, the activities of an Italian charity supporting Roma to escape poverty and to integrate into Italian society, is immediately destroyed by the allegation that keeping Roma away from crime would, at the same time, destroy their culture. We wonder, where the journalist received his information on Romany culture, a topic he claims to be an expert in.

Similarly disgusting is the scene, where Mr. Tipurita alleges that Roma sell off their young, under-aged daughters for marriage, and that the price of the bride depends on her ability or talent to steal. We do not deny the existence of the practice of child marriage within the Roma community and we do not deny that some Roma make their livelihood by stealing as other people do as well, but we think that it is entirely inappropriate and unfair if this is described as a key element of Romany culture which is even reduced to it.

BBC is certainly aware about the discussions on ethnic profiling. We notice that Mr. Tipurita’s report is entirely based on his close cooperation with the police which he accompanies on its raids. Mr. Tipurita uses police figures such as the one according to which 95 percent of children under the age of 14 arrested stealing on the streets in Spain are Romanian Roma, or that each of those kids makes about 12,000 Euros a month. We believe that Mr. Tipurita should have interviewed “neutral” sources or contrasted the view of the police by speaking to human rights activists or Roma representatives.

Mr. Tipurita “uses” Roma only to confirm his stereotypical views about Roma according to which Roma are social outcasts with an inherited propensity to crime.

Mr. Tipurita speaks about Gypsy crime, a notion, which lacks a scientific definition and is essentially rooted in popular belief and misconception about Roma. We would like to underline that such misconceptions have resulted in regular assaults against Roma and provided the basis for their extermination during WWII. We don't think that the reference to such loose concepts which lack of scientific foundation, is in line with the BBC's editorial standards.

Mr. Tipurita does not provide any scientific evidence for the underlying thesis of his report according to which the begging and stealing activities of Romany children are orchestrated by criminal networks. He concentrates on particular cases without testing whether they are representative or not. The scenes for the report seem to have been shot over several years, - at one moment, he mentioned a fact which occurred in 2007 - , which might give an entirely wrong picture regarding the frequency of the related deeds.

Mr. Tipurita gives ample space to the deputy mayor of Milano (claiming that Roma cannot integrate into "our society" and regretting Romania's entry into the EU) and a Lega Norte supporter "They are people who should be killed, but we cannot kill them," expressing their deeply rooted stereotypes about Roma and hatred. If Mr. Tipurita does not embrace their views, he nevertheless gives partial credit to them by alleging that the recent wave of anti-Gypsyism and the strengthening of neo-Fascist parties in Europe can be attributed to an increase of the activities of criminal networks among the Roma community.

We would have been pleased to provide you an even more detailed account and analysis of Mr. Tipurita's report and would have liked to receive a transcript. The report is not available on Youtube anymore, where we saw it first, and since we cannot access the BBC website from our countries, we are forced to rely on our memory for our criticism.

We, nevertheless hope that we succeeded to demonstrate that Mr. Tipurita report does not live up to the high journalistic standards the BBC claims to rely on and its public education mandate. Quite to contrary, it merely promotes and perpetuates popular stereotypes against Roma which contribute to their marginalisation and provide a legitimacy to racist attacks against them. Not surprisingly, the report caught broad interest in East European media, not only in Romania, but also in Hungary, where Roma have become the target of neo-Facist activities and attacks.

We are unable believe in the sincerity of Mr. Tipurita's apparent concern for the future and well-being of the Romany children. Since he disqualifies their bearers and stigmatises the entire Roma community as prone to criminal activities, how does he assume that the society will extend a helping hand to these children?

Whatever his motivation might have been, the outcome of his work is simply racist, and we believe that the BBC should extend an unqualified and unambiguous public apology to all Roma whose image has been insulted by this film and feature another broadcast on the issue of rampant anti-Gypsyism in Europe and its detrimental impact on the Roma community.

Sincerely,

Murat Haliti and Karin Waringo
Chachipe a.s.b.l.