



HAL
open science

Why are Roma people being attacked in France?

Tommaso Vitale

► **To cite this version:**

Tommaso Vitale. Why are Roma people being attacked in France?. The Conversation France, 2019. ⟨hal-02189134⟩

HAL Id: hal-02189134

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-02189134v1>

Submitted on 30 Nov 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - ShareAlike - International License

Why are Roma people being attacked in France?

[Tommaso Vitale](#) April 7, 2019 8.27pm BST



Children from a Roma community play in a camp that was attacked on March 2, 2019, in Bobigny, near Paris. Kenzo Tribouillard/AFP

Between March 25 and April 9, [25 attacks against Roma people were recorded in France](#), with 22 between March 25 and 28 alone. The attacks took place primarily in underprivileged cities and towns around Paris, including Bobigny, Clichy-sous-Bois, Montreuil, Bondy, Colombes, Montfermeil, Saint-Ouen, Champs-sur-Marne, Aulnay and Sevran. According to [initial reports](#), the attacks appear to have been organised and orchestrated by locals, often from poor and immigrant backgrounds, in areas in which Roma people also live.

The attacks followed a series of rumours spread on social media alleging

that Roma people in a “white van” were abducting children and planned to [rape them or sell their organs](#). One person told the police:

“Their children are not enough and so they are stealing children to earn even more.”

The attacks ranged from insults and other verbal abuse to beatings and raids in Roma camps and houses.

As extreme as such events are, they are anything but a new phenomena in France and other European countries. Several attacks had already been committed in 2018, particularly in the Essonne region, in the south of Paris. In March the violence intensified.

How do these rumours spread and which social mechanisms do they trigger?

The myth of the Gypsy child thief

The attacks were initially provoked by a racist rumour, stated the Voix de Roms advocacy group, which organised a peaceful protest in [Paris on March 29](#): the age-old myth of Gypsies stealing children. In [several European countries](#), adults still scold children with expressions such as “If you don’t behave, Gypsies will come and take you away”.

Literature is also nourished by such tales, as shown in Victor Hugo’s classic 1831 novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, transformed into numerous films under the title *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*: One of the central characters, La Esmeralda, was a child who was [abducted and raised by Gypsies](#).

In 2013, a similar story appeared after locals and media in Greece alleged that a young girl child found in a Roma camp must have been abducted. The media nicknamed her the [“Blonde Angel”](#) because of her hair colour, yet she turned out to be a [Roma child of Bulgarian origin](#).

Stereotypes fluctuate over time

While some stereotypes about Roma people may have died out over time, others resurface regularly and spread. They fluctuate according to the contexts and the relationships between the Roma communities and [societies in which they settle](#).

Once mobilised, such stereotypes have a [profound influence on people's imaginations and representations](#), even though their intensity might vary with the level of education of each individual.

In France, studies show that the general level of hostility against Roma communities – in which the public often groups Roma who are French citizens as well as those from Bulgaria, Romania and other countries – has [decreased slightly over the last five years](#). Yet more than half of French citizens still believe that Roma – and more specifically, migrant Roma – [do not want to integrate in France](#) and might constitute a threat.



'La Esmeralda dancing', an illustration by André Charles Voillemot, Maison de Victor Hugo, circa 1882. [Hauteville House/Wikimedia](#)



A painting by Ceija Stojka depicting Nazi persecutions against Roma people. Tommaso Vitale, Author provided

Responding to rumours

After the attacks in Paris metropolitan region, police and local authorities [quickly debunked the false rumours](#), forcefully stating that the claimed acts or threats of child abductions were completely unfounded.

The [press also reacted quickly](#) to dismantled the fake “facts”, explaining the genesis of such rumours, their “stupidity” and [the mechanisms within social networks](#) that spread them.

On March 27 the French government [denounced the violence](#), but has yet to mobilise a campaign to counter such false claims online or take broad countermeasures against these racist acts.

The absurd logic of suspicion

Despite these efforts, [suspicion remains](#) and authorities in France are on alert against any new attacks on Roma camps.

Tragically, such violent phenomena can reinforce negative stereotypes about Roma people rather than defuse them. Italy has provided some [historical examples of such mechanisms](#), with the Italian anthropologist Sabrina Tosi Cambini analysed [29 alleged cases of attempted theft of minors](#) that took place between the late 1980s and 2007.

In some of the cases, witnesses stated they “saw” the kidnappers without any certainty that they were “Gypsy women” but they were “sure” of it. Trials and legal procedures eventually identified that the culprits may actually have been individuals linked to criminal networks, or even relatives of the children. Yet the public continued to target Roma people each time there were new allegations of abductions.

Categorising people

Such phenomenon [is not due to a collective psychosis](#), but to a process of [categorising people](#) resulting in “othering” them through a stereotypical pattern.

Negative stereotypes not only come into play when individuals exercise attributive judgements and guilty attributions (for instance, an Italian man belongs to Mafia and sell drugs), but permeate the entire cognitive process and fuelling unfair generalisations (for instance, all Italians are Mafiosi and sell drugs, the author of this article included). It changes the way our memory works.

Such stereotypes also reinforces other clichés – that Roma people are under attack by locals who are themselves criminals. Many in France – and not just in far-right circles – came to the conclusion that friction between poor Roma and poor locals of immigrant origins can only lead to disorder and violence.

A more complex explanation shows at least four different types of mechanisms that enact and magnify stereotypes, creating conditions for spikes of violence.

“When there’s smoke, there’s fire”

In the view of some residents, the simple fact of the attacks proves that they must have been somehow justified, a mechanism described by the idiom “When there’s smoke, there’s fire”. The news site LCI [gathered testimony](#) of a person stating “Why would young people just go out and attack people in cars?”, implying that there must have been a justification somewhere.

From this point of view, the mere fact that a group of people devote time and energy to attacking a Roma person – which requires a measure of organisation and a network of actions – appears as a proof that the victim must have been guilty in some way, which is a typical process of [mob violence](#).

This leads to the second mechanism: “blaming the victims”, the suggestion that if Roma people have a negative image, it’s their fault. Panhandling, informal recycling, petty theft and other unglamorous activities that Roma people engage in are [used against them](#).

The blame game, and trust

In cases of child abduction rumours, the fact that the alleged victims are parents instantly mutes the suspects’ voices. The parents’ testimony, even in the absence of proof, [seems unquestionable](#), while the Roma’s



Mobilisation of local organisations is crucial to counter the negative stereotypes. [Facebook](#)

words are inaudible. This is what we call a mechanism of “presumed realism”.

The fourth mechanism is about the circulation of rumours through social networks. As explained by political scientist [Catherina Froio](#), the fact that a message is widely spread by people we know serves to legitimise and amplify its content. This [echo chamber](#) produces a mechanism of “social strengthening of beliefs”.

Personal convictions and emotions take over

The current climate of collective mistrust, conspiracy and fake news is also amplified by the crisis of legitimacy that traditional sources of information such as media and the state are undergoing. This in turn makes people rely more on emotions and “gut level” feelings, of themselves and of others.

Smartphone in hand, every member of the public is now a producer of “news”, and each of us can play an effective role in the social reinforcement of stereotypes, as Stefano Pasta showed in his work on the [spreading of racism on social media](#).

Each of us is particularly exposed to what sociologist [Christopher Bail](#) calls the “[fringe effect](#)”, in which the most extreme and radical opinions gain visibility in the public sphere. In their visibility, they seize a sense of legitimacy and redefine the contours of the debate, [shifting it ever outward toward the fringe](#).

Listening to the others

In this context, critical thinking is not enough. Roma minorities cannot be left alone to defend themselves. As scholars such as [Anna Pitoun](#), [Henriette Asséo](#) and [Grégoire Cousin](#) have stated, “the response must be political and police based”.

A good start would be for us to build institutions and cities that can truly integrate Roma communities instead of pushing them away with [spatial segregation](#). The government and media should also deploy a focused strategy to combat [anti-gypsyism](#). One way to do this and also mitigate attacks against Roma people and other minority groups is to start trusting them. Roma associations currently try to [reinforce links with locals](#) and offer a counter-narrative about who they are. And we should listen.



Roma teenagers involved in social activities in an retirement home in Italy. Stefano Pasta, Author provided