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Can Denial and Distortion of the Genocide of the Roma During World War II Affect War-Displaced Roma Communities Today?

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“The past is never the past; it is always the present and the present is always the future.”
– Yehuda Bauer, 2021

Millions of people have been dispersed across Europe and beyond since Russia’s full- scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to the UNHCR, 6,900,000 refugees from Ukraine were recorded globally by February 2025. Refugees from Ukraine are not a homogeneous group. They differ in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability status. Among them, there are members of ethnocultural minorities, indigenous communities such as Crimean Tatars, as well as migrants who had come from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, and lived in Ukraine.

Roma communities are among the largest minority groups displaced in the war and they are particularly vulnerable. It is estimated that at least one fourth of 400,000 Roma have left Ukraine, resettling in different countries across Europe and beyond, including Poland, Czech Republic, Moldova, Romania, Germany, and Hungary. Their vulnerabilities are often shaped as socio-economic as well as cultural. There is one more, less visible but crucial, aspect: denial and distortion of the genocide of the Roma during World War II known as *Samudaripen/Porajmos*. The phenomenon contributes to reinforcing embedded racist stereotypes about Roma. This can directly lead to discrimination, including in humanitarian and protection settings, and result in the Roma being excluded from services, segregated, or facing unequal treatment.

We define it as “historical distortion as a protection risk”, referring to the situations when distorted historical narratives about past atrocities continue shaping contemporary discourse, deepening vulnerability in humanitarian settings.

This brief builds on insights from activities within the *Minorities for Peace* initiative co-organized by the ‘NEVER AGAIN’ Association: discussions at the UNHCR Poland Protection meeting in March 2026, and online sessions supported by ENCATE, a network of organizations countering antisemitism and other forms of discrimination, and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). The *Minorities for Peace* initiative is minority-led and has been established to address just peace, dialogue, and minority agency in response to the ongoing war in Eastern Europe.

The number of Roma victims of the Nazi genocide is estimated at between 250,000 and 500,000. Many were murdered and many were used in forced labor, sterilized and used in medical experiments. Germany recognized its responsibility only forty years after the Second World War. Since then, various institutions and communities have acknowledged and memorialized the Roma victims in different ways, e.g. by establishing memorial days and memorial sites and conducting commemorative events. A special day has been introduced to mark the genocide of all Roma and Sinti on 2 August by the European Parliament in 2015. The IHRA, which was established in 2000 and today unites more than thirty governments, in 2007 created a special subgroup to focus on genocide of the Roma, which has been transformed into the Committee on the Genocide of the Roma. It has developed an important definition on anti-gypsism (racism against the Roma) and recommendations on teaching and learning about the persecution and genocide of the Roma. However, the memorialization process is rather complicated and generally not embedded in the collective historical consciousness of specific countries. The plight of the Roma victims and survivors and their resistance and resilience is still a peripheral topic for institutions, scholars and the general public. The process of memorialization and justice for the victims has been contested and in some countries’ contexts – neglected.

The late Romanian-Israeli scholar Michael Shafir defined three types of Holocaust denial: 1) outright denial, when the core of the genocide itself is denied 2) 'deflective' when deniers/distorters use strategies such as: the accusation of others or transfer of responsibility to others, defense and positive self-presentation, trivialization and mitigation of the seriousness of others' negative behavior and justifications 3. 'selective' negation: it does not deny the Holocaust as having taken place elsewhere, but excludes any participation of members of one's own nation or seriously minimizes it. All three types are applicable to the genocide of the Roma. As antisemitism is at the core of the denial of the Shoah, anti-Roma racism (anti-gypsism) is at the core of denial and distortion of the genocide of the Roma.

Based on the recent multi-country research conducted for the IHRA, the most common pattern is denying the racial persecution of Roma and the racial nature of the genocide while focusing on their alleged "asocial" and “criminal” behavior (a mixture of outright and deflective forms).

Other strategies of distortion include:

- “Number games”. The distorters manipulate figures of victims to distort historical truth by underestimating the numbers of victims and claiming “there were not so many victims among the Roma”, “there was no evidence”, “it was not mass murder”. At the same time, exaggerating the numbers can break trust in serious research around the topic, too.
- Distorters often negate or justify the destruction mechanisms, including concentration camps, deportations, mass shootings, or starvation.
- Universalization of all victims and not specifying or excluding Roma victims in commemoration. This reinforces competitive victimhood, comparative trivialization and the hierarchy of victims.
- The persecution of Roma was carried out not only by German occupying forces, but also by different other perpetrators, including local collaborators. In some countries, for example in Romania, the role of local collaborators in the Holocaust has been strongly contested and whitewashed. Therefore, the plight of the Roma during the Second World War has been downplayed alongside the downplaying of the role of the local perpetrators. Trauma and silence of survivors, the lateness of the recognition and inclusion of Roma victims in the memorialization contribute to the denial/distortion phenomenon.

"They are not real refugees. No Roma, no problem."

The vulnerability of the Roma is not new – the ongoing war did not create it but just reinforced the patterns of discrimination rooted in centuries of marginalization, slavery, and their persecution and genocide during the Second World War.

Roma communities face multiple risks and vulnerabilities in displacement, even though the gravity of the situation varies from country to country. They face barriers and discrimination already at the borders, problems with documents, psychological stress, a lack of access to education and medical and other services, family separations, as well as an increased risk of violence, exploitation, and trafficking. This is especially true for Roma women, children with special needs, or older people who often lack sufficient medical care. These examples reported by the Roma Women Platform ROMNI in Moldova are not isolated incidents but visibly a pattern that is rooted in racist stereotypical thinking and history of discrimination. There were also reported cases when non-Roma refugees refused to share accommodation with Roma.

During the Holocaust, under occupation and targeted extermination, some assimilated Jews survived under false identities. Among the Roma there were also cases when they had to hide their true identity to survive. Researchers at the Ukrainian Centre of Romani Studies at Kherson State University, have identified and studied similar strategy patterns in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. In response to discrimination, some Roma prefer not to disclose their ethnic identity, presenting themselves as ethnic Ukrainians or sometimes as members of other groups (while other strategies may include focusing on their actual identity or activism). There were situations when Roma were perceived not as refugees, but as economic migrants. This sometimes resulted in denial of housing or social assistance. In response to these challenges, many Roma used “strategies of invisibility”. In another example from Moldovan practice, it has been reported by ROMNI that Roma from Ukraine were denied refugee status: "They are not real refugees. No Roma, no problem.". It

shows the problem is of systemic nature, which in turn forces an adaptation strategy to avoid, rather than confront, discrimination.

Why History Matters for the Protection Sector

Different aspects of the phenomenon of denial and distortion of the genocide of the Roma reinforce stereotypes and discrimination. For example, the embedded distortion argument denying the racial persecution of Roma, presenting them as “criminal” and “asocial” contributes to the claim that they were not real victims or they were guilty for their own situation. This builds their negative image as people who do not really deserve help and empathy. It denies their characteristics as a specific group with its specific needs and risks. This can result in prejudiced attitudes and a lack of targeted support. “Invisibility” or universalization affect their access to protection, where their specific needs can be overlooked. In this way, the diversity of Roma communities, including language, lifestyle, religion, can be ignored, and as a result their specific needs cannot be taken into account. The late recognition of the genocide of the Roma and the lack of justice and compensation for victims until today affect trust of many Roma in institutions. As a result, in some cases they refuse new documents or apply for assistance. They sometimes also have a low level of trust in host communities and avoid relying on their support.

An Adequate Response to Discrimination

In this context, a more history-aware approach is needed for humanitarian organizations, protection sector workers, governments, and other institutions.

They must:

1. Take into account the history of persecution of the Roma and genocide during World War II and embedded racist stereotypes, not only frame Roma vulnerability as a social, economic, cultural, or logistic challenge.
2. Introduce mandatory training on history, experiences of marginalization, and diversity of Roma communities in terms of origin, language, religion, social status, and other aspects.
3. Address the post-genocide context and integrate the framework of “*Dealing with the Past*” (*DwP*) with its reparative measures (based on four pillars: the right to know, the right to justice, the right to reparations, and the guarantee of non-recurrence) into humanitarian policy and politics of integration, on national and EU levels, including educational curricula, public awareness campaigns, museum and memorial sites programming.
4. Adopt and apply IHRA definitions including working definitions of anti-gypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination and Holocaust distortion, methodologies, and recommendations for teaching and learning about the persecution and genocide of the Roma during the Nazi era.
5. Recognize and include Roma communities as active agents, including through mediation and other community engagement in humanitarian response and building trust between Roma communities and host communities and humanitarian workers, or between diverse Roma communities themselves.

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