

Political discourse perception predicts Roma stereotype endorsement

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Abstract

Current political climate in Central Europe is fostering segregation and discrimination of minority groups, which is becoming increasingly normatively appropriate in public. For this reason, it is crucial to understand the link between political rhetoric and the perception of Roma people by the majority. In this study, we aimed to assess how the perceptions of current political discourse predict the endorsement of prejudice towards the Roma. We measured the acceptance of four types of political discourse: openly hostile, promoting allyship with the Roma, paternalistic, and a form of double-talk. As expected, prejudice (blatantly negative stereotyping and belief in underserved benefits) towards the Roma was positively related to openly hostile and double-talk discourses, and negatively related to paternalistic and ally discourse. The opposite was found in the case of cultural stereotypes.

1 Introduction

Roma people remain the most segregated ethnic minority in Slovakia and are targets of widespread prejudice. Yet, we still understand little about the psychological mechanisms underlying these attitudes, since the persisting prejudice towards the Roma cannot be explained by traditional social cognitive models only. According to recent study, antigypsyism should be treated as a unique form of prejudice (Kende, Hadarics, & Láštiová, 2017), seeing that intergroup contact in this case increases rather than reduces prejudice (for intergroup contact hypothesis see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Secondly, anti-Roma attitudes tend to reflect dominant societal norms. Right-wing populist parties are gaining popularity in Central Europe by fuelling tensions between social groups. The subsequent sense of threat increases all forms of intergroup hatred.

The aim of our study was to analyse how the perception of currently dominant forms of political discourse relates to prejudice towards the Roma. Building on previous research (Kende et al., 2017), three types of anti-Roma attitudes were measured: blatant negative stereotyping, undeserved benefits, and stereotypes about cultural differences. We identified that several types of

political discourse are used when referring to the Roma (see Kóczé, & Rövid, 2017), that can be solely negative, positive, or ambivalent. We were interested to see whether and how the degree of acceptance of these discourses are associated with and predict the expression of anti-Roma prejudice.

2 Methods

Our sample consisted of 213 participants ($N_{\text{male}}=131$, $N_{\text{female}}=75$, $M_{\text{age}}=27.91$). They filled out a questionnaire measuring the acceptance of four types of statements used by politicians when referring to the Roma. The first type of discourse is openly hostile: "They [politicians] make negative statements about the Roma regarding criminality and work ethics.". The second type of discourse, triggered by the threat of recent immigration crisis¹, is a sort of a double-talk – it is positively phrased, but essentially negative: "They say that dealing with the Roma is our main problem, and in order to focus on that we should not use our financial resources on immigrants.". The third common rhetoric when it comes to the Roma is benevolent, but paternalistic discourse, which emphasizes that Roma integration efforts are dependent solely on the help offered by the majority: "They suggest that we need to help the Roma in all areas of life (housing, education, employment, health and family matters), because without our help, they cannot solve their own problems.". The fourth type of discourse communicates allyship with the Roma by encouraging the majority to advocate the rights of the Roma: ("They propose that non-Roma Slovaks should join the Roma in their struggle against discrimination."). The items measuring anti-Roma attitudes were adapted from ATRS scale (Kende, et al. 2017) consisting of three dimensions: blatant stereotyping (e.g. "The growing Roma population

¹For example, when referring to the refugees, former Prime Minister R. Fico declared that „we are unable to integrate our own Roma fellow-citizens, which we have hundreds of thousands of them. How can we then integrate the people whose traditions, religion, and way of life are completely different?“ (Pravda, 29.8. 2015)

threatens the security of society.”), undeserved benefits (e.g. “Roma people in this country are given preferential treatment in certain aspects.”) and cultural difference (e.g. “Roma people have rich artistic traditions.”). All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales (completely acceptable - completely unacceptable; completely agree - completely disagree).

3 Results

Participants showed higher acceptance of openly hostile ($M=4.20$) and double-talk statements ($M=3.90$) than the paternalistic ($M=3.56$) and allyship discourse ($M=3.66$). The statistical analysis showed both blatant stereotyping and undeserved benefits correlate positively with the acceptance of open hostility discourse ($r = .43, p < .001$; $r = .42, p < .001$, respectively) and positively, but slightly less with double-talk statements ($r = .24, p < .001$; $r = .22, p = .001$, resp.). Conversely, both types of anti-Roma prejudice showed a negative relationship with the paternalistic ($r = -.47, p < .001$; $r = -.41, p < .001$, resp.) and allyship discourse ($r = -.52, p < .001$; $r = -.51, p < .001$, resp.). We found the opposite in case of cultural difference: negative correlation with the open hostility ($r = -.31, p < .001$) and double-talk ($r = -.21, p = .002$), and positive correlation with the paternalistic ($r = .27, p < .001$) and allyship discourses ($r = .43, p < .001$).

To further explore these results, we ran separate multiple regression analyses for each dimension of prejudice as dependent variables. A significant regression equation was found in case of blatant stereotyping [$F(4,208) = 34.01, p < .001, R^2 = .40$]. Openly hostile ($\beta = .22, p < .001$), paternalistic ($\beta = -.27, p < .001$) and allyship ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$) discourses were significant predictors of blatant stereotyping, but double-talk was not ($\beta = .08, p = .188$). Similarly, the undeserved benefits were predicted by openly hostile ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), paternalistic ($\beta = -.19, p = .002$) and allyship ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$), but not by double-talk discourse ($\beta = .05, p = .409$). The overall model fit was $R^2 = .36$ [$F(4,208) = 29.62, p < .000$]. In case of cultural difference, a significant regression equation was found [$F(4,208) = 15.08, p < .000, R^2 = .23$], with only allyship ($\beta = .33, p < .001$) and openly hostile discourse ($\beta = -.14, p = .049$) as significant predictors. Double-talk and paternalistic discourses were not significant ($\beta = -.09, p = .195$; $\beta = .07, p = .306$, resp.).

4 Discussion

The aim of our research was to understand the relation between four dominant types of political discourse about the Roma on the one hand and anti-Roma attitudes on the other. As expected, our results suggested opposite patterns for the openly negative and

openly positive discourses: openly hostile and allyship for social change. Participants that showed higher acceptance of openly hostile political discourse and lower acceptance of discourse promoting allyship for social change also expressed more blatant prejudice and higher belief in the Roma receiving undeserved benefits. Interestingly, there was no difference in the direction of the relationship between paternalistic and allyship discourses, which implies that participants perceived both types of discourses as pro-Roma. Openly hostile, allyship for social change and paternalistic discourses were significant predictors of blatant stereotyping and undeserved benefits. In case of the cultural difference scale, we observed an opposite direction in all analyses. This suggests that people with higher perceived cultural recognition of Roma have lower acceptance of anti-Roma discourse, both explicit and implicit. Moreover, the cultural difference was most strongly predicted by allyship for social change discourse, meaning that accepting political statements that advocate for a pro-Roma collective action is linked to recognizing the importance of Roma cultural heritage. Overall, our results indicate that the acceptance of different forms of political discourse tends to predict the endorsement of anti-Roma attitudes. Further research should explore whether this effect persists when controlled for the preference of specific political figures that use such rhetoric. These findings show that political rhetoric may play an important role in our social cognition and how we perceive minorities.

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