

# Foreword

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**Critical**  
Romani Studies

## Introduction

This thematic issue of *Critical Romani Studies* on Roma and Environmental Justice in Europe focuses on authoritarian politics, biases in residential planning, extractivism, institutional corruption, and structural inequities that produce and maintain uneven exposure to negative environmental and climate impacts as experienced by Roma.

Across Europe, numerous Romani communities live in environmentally hazardous areas with restricted access to water, sanitation, and waste removal. Their air, land, and water has been contaminated by waste dumps, railways and motorways, industrial farms, mines or abandoned industrial areas, compounded by unavailable public infrastructure or access to green zones. The uneven distribution of environmental harms and benefits significantly contribute to the inequities Romani people encounter in their health outcomes and livelihoods. They suffer from higher rates of long-term illness and their life expectancy is between 10 and 25 years less than the general population (EPHA 2018; Bloch and Quarmby 2024). This gap will further expand as vulnerable communities miss out on resources to effectively adapt or become resilient to the impacts of climate change.

A common origin shared among environmental pollution, the ongoing climate crisis, and racism can be found in the drive by modern capitalist societies to accumulate wealth. Because the rate of profit cyclically fluctuates and falls, these societies have been permanently on the move to exploit new lands, opportunities, people, and resources, and they often resort to cruel modes of creating wealth by means of extractive capitalism and white supremacy (Hage 2017). The civilised spaces of democracy, legality, and rights are connected with the racist and extractive spaces of unregulated accumulation and the maximisation of profit by exploiting natural resources and subjugated, racialised communities. However, from this perspective we may also observe a return of allegedly ungovernable, overexploited actors – nature itself (environment, climate) joined by oppressed ethnic and racialised groups re-asserting their agency in fighting the colonial domination of exploitative and extractive governance. Romani communities have a salient place in this development.

European environmental programs did not initially take interest in studying the impact of systemic discrimination and socio-economic stratification processes (Harvey 1996; Ituen and Tatu Hey 2021). However, there have been changes in the last decades in this respect. More attention is now paid to the fact that the environmental problems of developed industrial societies often rest on the shoulders of those individuals who are the most vulnerable, and race, ethnicity, and class play a part in who lives in toxic waste and flood zones, or who has access to clean drinking water. Environmental justice approaches studying the distribution of harmful exposure as well as systematic discrimination by institutions regulating the environment and public space are gaining more traction. Highlighting the conflictual, entropic, and extractive aspect of the relationship between economy, people, and nature, the field of environmental justice integrates environmental, racial, and social justice movements and responds to the development of societies producing and maintaining vulnerability and harms due to environmental degradation and limited access to public utilities (Martínez-Alier 2023).

The environmental justice movement, first developed in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, was conceptualised by Robert Bullard in his Houston Black community study on solid waste sites (Bullard 1983), while the term environmental racism was coined by Benjamin Chavis in a Warren County, North Carolina lawsuit from 1982 (Chavis 1987). Environmental justice combines approaches aimed at protecting the survival of endangered species, national parks, and unique landscapes with the challenges of rural and urban poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, exploitation of public resources, and the quality of public spaces. Sometimes referred to as environmentalism of the poor because people in specifically vulnerable situations, such as poor, indigenous, and minority groups, are often the main actors defending the environment, it concentrates on neglected urban spaces, environmental processes incorporated into social life, and responses to urbanisation and industrialisation (Martínez-Alier 2002). The environmental justice context is invoked by the premise that a clean and healthy environment and fundamental public infrastructure need to be accessible, affordable, and available to all people regardless of their ethnicity, gender, race, or socio-economic status (Laurent 2011; Pellow 2016).

Eastern European countries top the charts for industrial pollution in Europe from coal plants (Health and Environment Alliance 2017), and residents in Eastern Europe have higher chances of dying as a result of pollution than those in the western part of the continent, with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania having the highest rates of pollution-related deaths (European Environment Agency 2019). In these countries, it is Roma who often live spatially confined in residentially segregated communities in proximity to industrial zones, where no other community would be expected to live (Matoušek and Sýkora 2011; Bloch and Quarmby 2024, Torotcoi et al. 2024). Therefore, it is no surprise, as the European Environment Agency acknowledged, that environmental inequalities in Europe are linked to ethnicity, pointing out that “Roma communities in Central and Eastern Europe are often excluded from basic services and exposed to environmental pollution, with serious health consequences” (European Environment Agency 2019, 16). Existing research demonstrates that across Europe, Roma are more likely to receive fewer environmental and public health benefits while they are exposed to more of the harms (Heidigger and Wiese 2020; Torotcoi et al. 2024).

So, how do Roma encounter environmental racism? On a symbolic level, Roma have been traditionally associated with trash and pollution through concepts of racial impurity and social disorder. They are confronted by a variety of environmental risks in their daily lives such as (1) exposure to hazardous waste and chemicals through residency and/or work at contaminated sites; (2) environmental costs of industrial development such as land, water, and air pollution; (3) vulnerability to floods and other natural hazards; (4) limited access to drinking water and sanitation; (5) negligence in waste management practices; and (6) energy poverty (Steger and Filčák 2008; Harper, Steger, and Filčák 2009; Babourkova 2010; Dokupilová, Filčák, and Škobla 2020; Schwab 2023). Their disproportionate exposure to environmental harms and the lack of fundamental public infrastructure have direct health effects (Miranda 2021). One of the main factors affecting Roma's health is the poor quality of urban space and public infrastructure in their neighbourhoods: for example, segregated, unstable, insecure housing (due to frequent evictions); densely populated and inaccessible housing; little access to electricity, piped drinking and utility water supplies; no sanitation facilities in houses; and neglected waste collection (Ivanov, Kling, and Kagin 2012). Forced to reside on spatially segregated and environmentally hazardous land belonging to former industrial zones, agricultural farms, mines or the land prone to floods (that is, the worst quality land that nobody

else would bother to claim), Roma are disproportionately exposed to air, land, and water pollution (Szilvasi 2017; Bloch and Quarmby 2024).

Furthermore, indoor air pollution from open fires and the use of solid fuels remains high as Roma use coal and wood for heating and/or cooking significantly more than majority populations (Ivanov, Kling, and Kagin 2012, 27; Schwab 2023). Hence, a large share of the Romani population is exposed to health risks stemming from benzene, carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, and particulate matter. Romani women and children are particularly exposed to these health risks that cause respiratory diseases as they spend more indoors (Ivanov, Kling, and Kagin 2012; Heidigger and Wiese 2020). In short, systemic discrimination against Roma is interwoven in the exposure and distribution of environmental harms that bear serious impacts on their economic performance, health, and well-being.

Environmental justice and environmental discrimination discourses and Romani communities are mutually intertwined in Europe. The beginning of the environmental justice movement in Germany is connected to a 1985 publication of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. It examines a case in the city of Darmstadt where the mayor ordered the eviction of Romani families and banished them “to tents on the outskirts of the city, next to a garbage dump, a sewage works, rat holes, and highway feeder roads” (Ituen and Tatu Hey 2021). Furthermore, *Hudorovič and others v. Slovenia* from 2014, in which Roma from two neighbourhoods in Slovenia filed a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) alleging ethnic discrimination in their access to water, was the first ECtHR right to water case in the Court’s history (ECtHR 2020). The European Commission’s “Union of Equality: The EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation”, issued in October 2020 is the first major EU policy document that recognises environmental justice as an important area of intervention (European Commission 2020). The document introduces environmental discrimination as “long neglected reality [...] which saw marginalised communities more vulnerable to contamination and other associated health issues”. The Commission urges national governments to tackle environmental discrimination against Roma in access to water, adequate sanitation, waste collection and management services, green living areas with recreational value, while also tackling the health impacts of exposure to pollution and contamination and fighting persistent spatial segregation. The Commission has also mandated the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) to collect brand-new indicators on “[f]ighting environmental deprivation, promoting environmental justice” (European Commission 2020, FRA 2020). This is not a random fact that an environmental justice approach was highlighted in the EU Roma inclusion policy context. Roma rights advocates who built the case for this major policy opening. A joint report by the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and the European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network (ERGO) became the main reference on environmental justice featured in statements of EU commissioners and MEPs (Heidigger and Wiese 2020). The report is based on case studies produced largely by young Romani researchers for the global Atlas of Environmental Justice.

In this special issue, contributions are divided into peer-reviewed academic articles and case studies that analyse and discuss various aspects of environmental injustice experienced by Romani communities across several countries. Some articles address the systemic inequalities that confront Romani communities due to environmental injustices, such as the contributions by Sergen Gul, Adam Máčaj, and Maroš Matiaško. *Sergen Gul* investigates the impact of industrial development on Romani communities living along

the Ergene River and its tributaries in Edirne, highlighting how Turkey's modernisation policies have exacerbated inequities and degraded the environment. Through personal narratives collected from local Roma and third-generation Roma-Muslim immigrants, Gul reveals how parliamentary discrimination initiated by a settlement law has created disparities in social and political status between Romani and non-Romani populations. This has led to significant environmental injustices, particularly concerning the pollution of the Ergene River.

*Adam Máčaj* and *Maroš Matiaško* together examine the challenges of segregated Romani communities in Slovakia in their access to safe drinking water, emphasising the impacts of inadequate waste management and environmental discrimination. They also analyse international human rights standards related to the right to water, advocating for an unconditional right to water in contexts where vulnerable populations experience significant hardships.

Both articles by *Enikő Vincze* and by *Driton Berisha* and *Beatrice Lindstrom* critically explore the intersection of legal frameworks and environmental injustices that entangles Romani communities, examining how systemic discrimination impacts their access to safe living conditions and the pursuit of justice in the face of environmental racism.

*Enikő Vincze* examines the legal frameworks surrounding the right to housing and a healthy environment in Romania, highlighting a gap in protections for Romani communities in the case of the Pata Rât area of Cluj-Napoca. Using data from air quality sensors, surveys, and legal analysis, the findings reveal that Romani residents struggle with precarious and toxic living conditions, underscoring the need for policymakers to address these deficiencies through targeted recommendations.

*Driton Berisha* and *Beatrice Lindstrom* highlight the pervasive environmental racism experienced by Romani communities throughout Europe, particularly focusing on the lead poisoning of displaced Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians in UN-managed camps in Kosovo from 1999 to 2013. The article examines the victims' pursuit of justice through the UN's accountability mechanisms, analysing a landmark decision by the UN's Human Rights Advisory Panel that recognised UNMIK's responsibility for human rights violations, thereby shifting the narrative from victim-blaming to addressing anti-Romani racism as a factor in environmental injustice. Importantly, the authors emphasise the limitations of legal institutions in addressing systemic racism and the necessity for Romani communities to engage in both legal actions and advocacy efforts to achieve meaningful change.

Three articles discuss the issue of waste and recycling. *Diana Popescu-Sarry* and *Kian Mintz-Woo* analyse reactions to a *Charlie Hebdo* caricature of (non-Romani) Romanian tennis player Simona Halep as a scrap metal collector, revealing racially charged stereotypes of Roma as illicit recyclers. The authors argue that this misrepresentation undermines a moral duty to engage in recycling and calls for a more inclusive understanding of ecological citizenship to combat the ecological injustices that target Romani communities.

The article by *Jekatyerina Dunajeva*, with contributions from *Diego Marin*, examines environmental injustice through case studies of five locations in North Macedonia. In particular, the author focuses on the act of waste recycling, which, while providing essential income, exposes Roma to health risks and

pollution. Dunajeva advocates for inclusive policies that recognise the contributions of informal waste recyclers and prioritise social justice.

Finally, *Eirik Saethre's* article examines how trash-picking functions as both a livelihood and a form of exclusion among Ashkali and Romani refugees in Belgrade's informal settlements. Through ethnographic research, the paper explores how waste is not merely an economic resource but also a social and political force that relegates marginalised communities to precarious living conditions. The study highlights how scavenging materials from dumpsters structures racialised identities and sustains economic vulnerability while also illustrating the corporeal toll of this form of labour.

The case study section presents concrete examples of environmental injustice through the experience of Hungary, written by Judit Bari, and Greece, written by Georgios Tsiakalos, as well as detailing some important events in addressing issues of environmental justice, in particular a conference, written by Eva Schwab, and an exhibition, written by Lise Foisneau.

*Judit Bari's* article examines the environmental and social injustices prevalent in the Romani community in Recsk, Hungary, due to the establishment of a new andesite quarry that is situated perilously close to their homes, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and leading to serious health and safety concerns. Bari shows through a detailed examination of the case that despite regulatory approvals and a lack of proper community consultation, the quarry's operation has resulted in significant environmental damage, housing insecurity, and ongoing discrimination against the Romani population, highlighting the urgent need for legal reforms and enhanced protections for marginalised communities in the context of environmental justice.

*Georgios Tsiakalos* describes the case of the Tsairia Romani settlement in Thessaloniki, Greece, where residents resisted imminent eviction and dire living conditions exacerbated by local anti-Romani sentiment and environmental injustices. This case similarly concludes with an urgent need to address housing rights and basic services for Romani communities.

*Eva Schwab* continues with a critical summary of the "First Environmental Justice Conference" that took place in Cluj in October 2023 and was organised by the European Environmental Bureau. The conference aimed to address the intersection of environmental racism and the EU Roma Strategic Framework, highlighting the need for sustained policy integration of environmental justice into climate change initiatives. Schwab calls for a more systematic approach to situating these injustices within broader climate policies and ensuring that the unique vulnerabilities of racialised groups are effectively addressed in the EU's green transition. Finally, *Lise Foisneau* explores the work of a French photographer Valentin Merlin, who documented the life of French Travellers at the designated halting sites across France. The title of this work, "Designated Sites" refers to an expression used by French Travellers to describe the halting sites where they are forced to live by the authorities. In France, there are over 1,200 official caravan sites for French Travellers. Valentin Merlin has since 2015 travelled around the country to document those places and photographed over 230 of them.

The special issue is concluded with insightful reviews of two books contributing to environmental justice discourse in Europe. *Michal Zálešák* examines the publication "*Odpad ako sociálny problém*

*vo vylúčených rómskych osídleniach*” [Waste as a social problem in marginalised Romani settlements] published by the Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. While originally published in Slovak, this is the first time that this important research is introduced to English-language readers.

*Slobodan Stankovic* reviews the oeuvre of Joan Martínez-Alier, one of the most important actors analysing and shaping the global and European environmental justice movement and a main contributor to the Atlas of Environmental Justice. The book *Land, Water, Air and Freedom: The Making of World Movements for Environmental Justice*, published in 2023 looks into different cases of global comparative political ecology and specifically focuses on the ecological distribution of conflicts across the world.

Collectively, the contributions here – in the form of academic articles, book reviews, or case studies – are critically illuminating the persistent inequalities and injustices that Roma groups encounter, particularly in the context of environmental degradation and systemic discrimination. By analysing the intersection of environmental racism with issues such as housing policies, social protections, and others, this special issue of *Critical Romani Studies* contributes valuable insights into the structural barriers that hinder the recognition of ethnic discrimination in environmental policy frameworks. Ultimately, all contributions advocate for a more equitable and just approach to addressing the environmental challenges that disproportionately affect Roma. Moreover, this implies an urgent need for global climate actions and policies to be better oriented toward justice and to address the specific discrimination faced by marginalised communities, ensuring that no group is left behind in the transition to a sustainable future.



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