

## campaign report

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# civic engagement to combat extremist messages and symbols in public spaces across Timișoara

### 1. National context

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The discussion around extremist symbols in Romania's public space must be placed within a broader legal and social context. Since 2002, Romania has had legislation prohibiting fascist, racist, and xenophobic organizations, symbols, and activities through Emergency Ordinance No. 31/2002. This framework was later strengthened by Law No. 217/2015 and Law No. 241/2025, commonly referred to in public discourse as the "anti-Legionary law," initiated by Member of Parliament Silviu Vexler.

The media has repeatedly reported on the controversies surrounding this law in 2025 and on the challenges associated with its implementation. In the context of debates on the anti-Legionary legislation, the discussion is not only a legal one but also concerns public memory and a clear distancing from Romania's extremist past. These debates take place against the backdrop of a visible rise in nationalist and extremist rhetoric across Europe, while international organizations monitoring antisemitism and far-right extremism have reported an increase in hate-motivated incidents in recent years. In this context, the presence of extremist symbols in public spaces is not an isolated

phenomenon but part of a broader social climate in which radical discourse is finding new forms of expression.

The use of coded symbols and graphic references instead of explicit statements is a phenomenon particularly visible in public spaces. While the direct promotion of fascist ideologies is prohibited by law, in practice there are signs, numbers, abbreviations, and reinterpreted symbols that convey the same ideas while remaining more difficult to identify and legally classify. This grey area creates challenges for authorities in terms of legal enforcement and highlights the need for better documentation and public awareness of such symbols. These signs condense complex ideological messages into simple visual forms that are easy to reproduce and readily recognizable to those who share the same beliefs—a phenomenon often described as a "dog whistle." Without historical context, a number or symbol may appear to be nothing more than a mysterious code. For members of the communities targeted by extremist ideologies, however, the same symbol can be perceived as a threat.

## 2. The Timișoara context

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Timișoara is officially promoted as a multicultural and multiethnic city. One example is the Visit Timișoara platform, which highlights the city's historical firsts and cultural diversity (<https://visit-timisoara.com/ro/premiere/>). The city is presented as a space of coexistence between Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, and Jewish communities, and as a place closely associated with the spirit of the 1989 Revolution. While this identity is genuine, its coexistence with episodes of antisemitism and xenophobia makes an honest examination of both the past and the present necessary.

For example, in 1938, Timișoara was the site of a bombing attack against the Jewish Theatre during a performance by the artist Sidi Tal at the Municipal Theatre of Timișoara (<https://teatrul-evreiesc.com.ro/spectacol/sidy-thal/>). This event formed part of a broader climate of interwar antisemitism. In the post-1989 period, the far-right organization Noua Dreaptă was also active in Timișoara. One example from the early 2000s involved documented radical and discriminatory positions directed at the Roma community, including messages promoting degrading and eugenic measures against Roma women. These episodes demonstrate that xenophobic ideas are not merely part of a distant past.

In recent years, the debate surrounding urban memory has returned to public attention. Articles published by Adevărul (<https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/timisoara/ce-controverse-adeuce-legea-antilegionara-petre-1643714.html>) and Scena9 (<https://www.scena9.ro/article/strazi-timisoara-extremism-legionari-petitie-primarie-memorie-goga-gyr>) discuss streets named after public figures (artists, politicians, and intellectuals) associated with the Legionary

Movement or extremist ideologies, highlighting the difficulties involved in managing historical memory within urban spaces.

More specifically, in Timișoara there is a petition launched in 2023 ([https://www.petitiononline.com/pentru\\_o\\_cultur\\_a\\_memoriei\\_democratice\\_in\\_spatiul\\_public\\_din\\_timioara](https://www.petitiononline.com/pentru_o_cultur_a_memoriei_democratice_in_spatiul_public_din_timioara)) calling for the removal of street names commemorating historical figures who had ties to the Legionary Movement. This initiative was preceded by public opposition in 2014 to the local authorities' decision to name a street after Petre Țuțea ([https://debanat.ro/2015/08/la-timisoara-strada-petre-tutea-ramane-strada-petre-tutea-video\\_124822.html](https://debanat.ro/2015/08/la-timisoara-strada-petre-tutea-ramane-strada-petre-tutea-video_124822.html)), following the adoption of Law 217/2015.

These situations are not merely administrative details but indicators of how collective memory is constructed and which values are made visible in public space. The proposal to rename streets is ultimately concerned with changing the way we perceive and commemorate public figures. Rather than celebrating only fame, talent, or professional achievements, it seeks to bring moral character and integrity into the conversation, emphasizing the balance between the artist and the individual—that is, who these people are in both their personal and professional lives, not only what they created. This is not an initiative aimed at cancelling individuals or promoting “cancel culture,” but rather at fostering a culture in which people are commemorated not only for what they accomplished, but also for who they were and how they conducted themselves.

Within this context, the presence or continued display of Nazi, fascist, and Legionary symbols on buildings throughout the city stands in direct tension with Timișoara's identity and branding as an open, multicultural city.

### 3. Simboluri și mesaje în spații publice: graffiti

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Graffiti is a complex form of urban expression. It can serve as art, social commentary, or critical intervention. In Timișoara, there are street artists and festival initiatives—such as the PLAI Festival (<https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/timis/cel-mai-mare-graffiti-realizat-pe-o-cladire-istorica-din-romania-se-afla-la-timisoara-video.html>) and the Codru Festival ([https://stiridetimisoara.ro/o-noua-murala-de-la-codru-festival-45-metri-patrati-de-culoare-si-metafora\\_54596.html](https://stiridetimisoara.ro/o-noua-murala-de-la-codru-festival-45-metri-patrati-de-culoare-si-metafora_54596.html))—that bring colour, creativity, and meaningful messages into public space. The issue is therefore not graffiti as a form of expression or art, but rather the content of certain messages.

Nazi symbols, Legionary insignia, and coded extremist slogans can be found both on the walls of abandoned buildings and on occupied residential properties throughout the city. Some have remained visible for years without being removed, while others appear in waves during periods of heightened political or social tension, such as the 2024–2025 electoral cycle, when Romania experienced a broader increase in extremist messaging, events, and rhetoric (<https://romania.fes.de/ro/e/extrema-dreapta-in-2025-intre-combatere-si-normalizare.html>).

Messages of this kind occupy public space in a highly visible manner and can contribute to the normalization of extremist discourse. They create the impression of an invisible community marking its territory, while the absence of a prompt response may convey the idea that such messages are tolerated. For this reason, monitoring and removing them is not merely a matter of urban aesthetics, but also one of symbolic safety and of maintaining consistency with the values the city seeks to promote.

These messages do not emerge in isolation; they both reflect and reinforce existing social tensions. As a result, addressing them requires a coordinated response involving public authorities, civil society organizations, and the broader urban community. Such symbols are not harmless relics of the past but representations of ideologies that have led to discrimination, violence, and death. Their repeated presence in public space may indicate a degree of tolerance toward them and/or an insufficient institutional capacity to respond effectively.

#### 4. Civic engagement campaign

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Within this context, in 2023 we launched a civic engagement campaign that encouraged both residents and visitors of Timișoara to report locations and photographs of potentially illegal symbols and messages, or to use the Municipality of Timișoara's online reporting platform directly to submit complaints (<https://sesizari.primariatm.ro/>).

The campaign, For a Safe City, implemented by Identity.Education, aimed to identify and report symbols and messages inciting hatred and discrimination in public spaces, in accordance with Law No. 217/2015. For documentation and accurate identification, we relied on the Guide to Far-Right Codes, Symbols, and Signs in Romania, authored by Adina Babeș and Ana Bărbulescu and published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) (<https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/14104>).

In a letter sent to the Municipality of Timișoara in 2025, together with the Intercultural Institute of Timișoara and the LOGS Association, we highlighted that, according to our monitoring, the number of reports submitted between January and March 2025 had increased significantly compared to 2024. During 2024, we submitted a total of 10 reports, while in the first months of 2025 alone we had already submitted 6 reports. This indicates both an intensification of the phenomenon and an increase in civic vigilance during a period that coincided with the 2024–2025 electoral cycle and a broader rise in extremist messaging in both online and physical public spaces.

In the same letter, we identified three areas for improvement that could make the reporting and removal process more effective: greater clarity within the reporting platform regarding the submission of

such complaints; improved traceability and communication throughout the resolution process; and clearer allocation of responsibilities depending on the location of the symbol, the type of property involved, and other relevant criteria.

As a direct result of this advocacy effort, the Municipality validated a dedicated reporting subcategory on its platform under the “Public Order” section, entitled “Graffiti / Vandalism / Discriminatory Messages.” This change facilitates clearer case classification and internal routing to the responsible department, while also sending a strong message to platform users that discriminatory messages are not tolerated.

From the moment the dedicated “Graffiti / Vandalism / Discriminatory Messages” subcategory became available on the platform (17 July 2025) until the end of 2025, 17 reports were submitted through this option. Prior to the creation of the subcategory, individuals submitting complaints selected whichever category they considered most appropriate, after which the Municipality redirected the case internally to the competent department. As a result, no unified or comprehensive statistic exists regarding the total number of reports submitted before 17 July 2025, since those reports were distributed across multiple administrative structures.

Even after the introduction of the dedicated subcategory, reports are not necessarily recorded exclusively under that classification in the final statistics. They are assigned for resolution according to the location of the symbol and the type of property involved (public property, private property, historic monument, etc.), with each department following its own internal workflow and procedural requirements.

As a result, in the internal records of the local administration, these cases may appear under the departments that ultimately manage them rather than exclusively under the reporting subcategory through which they were initially submitted. The Municipality has indicated that it is working on the development of an automated reporting mechanism that would enable clearer and more centralized monitoring of this type of issue in the future.

Reports from the Municipality of Timișoara show a steady increase in the number of complaints concerning this type of content in public spaces. In 2023, four reports were submitted by two complainants. In 2024, the number rose to 15 reports submitted by seven complainants, and in 2025 it reached 55 reports submitted by 32 complainants. During the same period, Identity.Education submitted a total of 27 reports. When these local quantitative data are considered alongside qualitative information gathered from the community, it becomes evident that the issue is becoming increasingly visible and relevant to city residents, indicating both an intensification of the phenomenon and a growing level of civic engagement among individual complainants in response.

Another important issue that has been addressed concerns traceability and communication with complainants throughout the reporting and case-management process within the local administration. In practice, the handling of reports varies depending on the institution or department responsible for resolving the case, which may result in different registration numbers being assigned at subsequent stages. When reports are redirected to another institution, that institution is required to generate a new registration number and continue communication with the complainant. However, cases have been identified in which a report was closed on the Municipality's platform without clearly communicating the redirection process or the newly assigned registration number. This made it difficult for complainants to track the progress of their case and,

in some instances, resulted in duplicate reports. These observations highlighted the need for greater transparency and clarity in both interinstitutional communication and communication with citizens.

Beyond the administrative dimension, the cases identified point to the need for improved communication and a clearer reporting pathway, enabling citizens to follow the progress of a case through to its resolution. At present, the Municipality of Timișoara can ensure communication and traceability within its own structures and, to some extent, with subordinated institutions such as the Local Police, which, although they have legal personality, operate under the Municipality's administrative coordination and are subject to the general legal framework governing petitions (Government Ordinance 27/2002).

Under the current system, reports are closed on the platform with responses that include information regarding their redirection to other entities whenever applicable. It is important to note that the Local Police and the County Police Inspectorate operate under different institutional procedures, and in certain situations reports may be transferred from one institution to the other depending on the specific area of competence involved.

To improve clarity and consistency, there is a need to develop a common procedure that ensures continuity of communication and traceability not only within the Municipality but also in relation to the institutions to which reports are redirected.

An important issue that remains unresolved concerns the clarification of responsibilities depending on the location of the symbol. It is not always evident who is responsible for removing a hate-inciting message: a private property owner, a homeowners' association, the Municipality through its departments or contracted service providers, or another public institution. In the case of historic buildings and monuments, the situation can become even more complex, as additional permits or special procedures may be required.

This situation highlights potential gaps between the national legislative framework, which prohibits the promotion of fascist symbols and ideologies, and the practical mechanisms available for intervention at the local level. While the law establishes the prohibition itself, it does not sufficiently detail the operational responsibilities related to the physical removal of such messages from public spaces. As a result, effective enforcement depends on cooperation between public authorities and property owners, as well as on the development of clear local procedures. We believe that both a better harmonization of administrative practice at the local level and a broader discussion on strengthening the local regulatory framework are necessary to ensure that responses to such situations are timely, coherent, and predictable.

Beyond the actual removal of extremist messages, we consider it essential to incorporate a clear educational component into the public response to this phenomenon. Applying the law solely through punitive measures—such as requiring removal within a specific timeframe or imposing fines—is not sufficient. Public awareness and education are needed so that property owners, homeowners' associations, and the wider community understand not only their legal obligations but also the social impact of these symbols. Based on our experience during the campaign, many individuals remain hesitant to act due to financial considerations, uncertainty regarding responsibility, or a lack of awareness about the meaning of the symbols themselves. In these situations, the threat of a fine is often not perceived as a constructive solution.

For this reason, a balanced approach should include educational materials, local awareness campaigns, clear guidance on the steps that should be taken, and the active encouragement of citizens to report or remove such messages. The objective is not merely compliance with the law, but the development of a culture of responsibility and solidarity at the

neighbourhood and city level, in which responding to hate-inciting messages becomes a natural and collectively embraced practice.

Groups and individuals who support and promote discriminatory messages and use fascist, Nazi, or Legionary symbols have not disappeared from history or from society. These symbols continue to represent movements and ideologies that have never entirely vanished and remain relevant today, particularly in a context where references to extremist ideologies are reappearing in public discourse and public spaces, despite being associated with historical movements that were prohibited precisely because of their violent and discriminatory nature.

Without a clear and consistent response, the presence of such symbols cannot be regarded as neutral or merely decorative. Instead, there is a risk that they become increasingly socially acceptable and more visible in public spaces, thereby contributing to the normalization of extremist ideas and creating a less safe environment for communities targeted by discrimination.

**Instead of a conclusion: this campaign remains ongoing, as illegal messages continue to appear in public spaces throughout Timișoara, including on residential buildings and in parks.**

**The reporting process is straightforward. Anyone can submit a complaint through the public platform [sesizari.primariatm.ro](https://sesizari.primariatm.ro) by selecting the category “Public Order” and the subcategory “Graffiti / Discriminatory Messages / Vandalism”, specifying the type of illegal symbol involved, its exact location, and attaching a photograph. Alternatively, Identity.Education can submit the report on behalf of community members if we receive a photograph and the precise location of the symbol.**

**In Oradea, this model has already been adopted through the work of the Ark Association ([https://www.instagram.com/p/C6bhuWwNTr0/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C6bhuWwNTr0/?img_index=1)). We hope that similar initiatives will be replicated in other cities, both in terms of civic engagement and, more importantly, through the active involvement of local authorities.**

**At the same time, we remain in direct contact with the Municipality of Timișoara and continue to maintain open channels of communication and dialogue in support of this initiative. Together, we are working to improve internal processes and intervention mechanisms while also addressing discriminatory phenomena and hate messages in public spaces. Our shared objective is to contribute to a city that is safer, more inclusive, and more supportive of all its residents.**