

M3 Worksheet “The ‘Maria’ case in the media”

The scandal around ‘Maria’ began in October 2013. Various media outlets in Germany and numerous other states in Europe and beyond carried reports of a police raid on a ‘Roma camp’ in the Greek town of Farsala during which officers ‘noticed’ a small girl due to the difference in her looks from those of the couple, Eleftheria D. and Christos S., who claimed to be her parents. The reports recounted how these two individuals were then arrested and remanded in custody on suspicion of child abduction and other offences. They also informed readers and viewers that a DNA test had revealed that the girl was not the biological daughter of her supposed parents and that the couple’s papers contained inconsistencies relating to further children.

The media were quick to report the assumption of the Greek police that a ‘child trafficking ring’ was in operation. Numerous articles described how the events had inspired new hope in the parents of Madeleine McCann (‘Maddie’), a British child who had disappeared in Portugal in 2007, that they might be reunited with their daughter. Many media reports carried photographs of the two arrested adults and the girl with the intent of emphasising the perceived differences in their appearance. Adjectives frequently used to describe Maria included ‘blond’, ‘fair-skinned’ and ‘green-eyed’.

A few days after the first reports, some media claimed that Maria’s case was ‘probably not an isolated one’, backing up their assertions with reports of another case of ‘alleged child trafficking’ in Greece and of the removal of a further ‘blond girl from [a] Roma family’ in Ireland. Claims made by Kostas Giannopoulos, head of the children’s charity ‘The Smile of the Child’, which had looked after Maria after she was removed from the care of Eleftheria D. and Christos S., also served the media as proof for the supposition of widespread child abduction. Giannopoulos argued that some of the abductions were masterminded by criminal Roma syndicates with connections to Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, which targeted children of northern European parents and from Balkan countries for abduction.

In Ireland, where two children were removed from their homes, DNA tests revealed within two days of the removals that both children had in fact been taken from their biological parents. The authorities promised a thorough investigation, which led in July of 2014 to the publication of a report of almost 140 pages by Emily Logan, the then Irish Ombudsman for Children, which termed the case an instance of racial profiling. The parents of one of the children were awarded 60,000 Euro in compensation in 2015.

The ‘Maria’ case concluded some days after the initial reports with the discovery of the child’s biological mother, a Roma woman from Bulgaria, whose statement – that she had left Maria in the care of the two arrested adults because she herself was unable to look after her - was consistent with the unofficial foster parents’ account. Despite this, the couple received a custodial sentence for various offences and Maria remained in the care of the state. Media later reported that a court had removed the couple’s right to care and control of Maria in May 2014; at the same time, a request from Bulgarian authorities to take on the care of the child was refused. The child abduction case against the couple was not dropped until November 2015.

In Germany, the tone of reporting on the case changed after 5 November 2013, when the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma held a press conference at which it sharply criticised the media and accused its outlets of stigmatising and criminalising the entire Romani minority. Among the proliferation of media reports on this critique, few involved any reflection on the outlet’s own previous reporting of the case.

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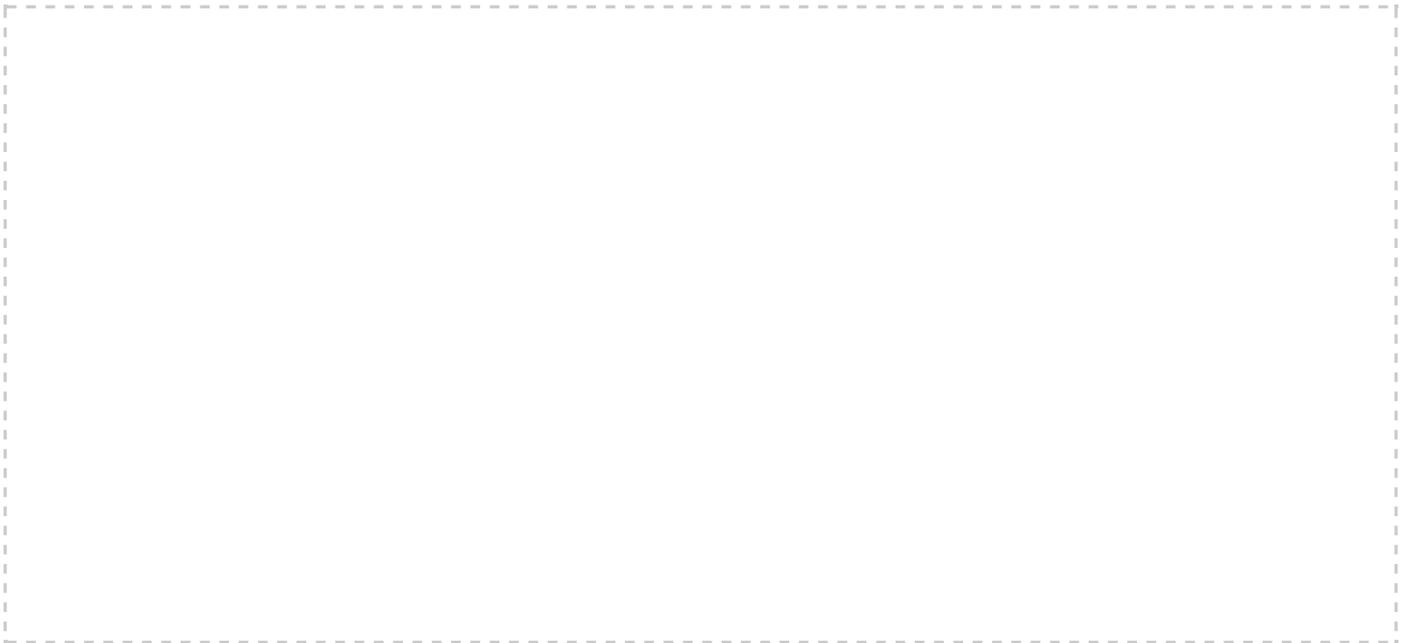
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Tasks

1. Describe what actually happened in Greece as neutrally and objectively as possible.



2. Similarly, describe what actually happened in Ireland.



If you have time, you can look online for examples of discriminatory reporting in the case. Use search terms such as 'Maria', 'Roma', 'Greece' and 'abduction'.

You will find most examples of discriminatory reporting in pieces written or made before November 2013.



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