

M5 Worksheet “The case of ‘Maria’ from the point of view of Roma NGOs”

Informative piece by Benjamin Ignác¹

“The case of ‘Maria’ from the point of view of Roma NGOs”

After local media reported on the case of the “blonde angel” Maria – a light-skinned, green-eyed, blonde young girl found in the custody of a dark-skinned Romani couple – the whole world suddenly became outraged and interested in this Romani family. The case of Maria is interesting both from the perspective of media communications and as a perfect illustration of how media can be used to resurrect long-forgotten stereotypes and incite hate against certain groups of people - in this case the Roma.

Maria started appearing in the media during October 2013, shortly after she was taken into state care because the authorities would not believe that a blonde-haired girl with a light complexion could be the daughter of a Romani couple with dark complexions. According to Panayiotis Pardalis, a spokesman for the charity “Smile of the Child”, which took custody of Maria, ‘it was obvious’ that she was not a Roma girl.

In 2014, the authorities conducted an investigation and found out that Maria is in fact Romani, but her biological parents live in Bulgaria. They returned Maria to the Greek Romani couple, who love the child, have raised her as their own, and did not intend to sell her, as some reports have claimed.

According to the Ukrainian Roma expert Natasha Dukatch, “international news overflowed with details of Maria’s situation, stirring up public opinion against the Roma people and awakening stereotypes from the Middle Ages. [...] From the time the story broke, international media created an evil image of the Roma couple as kidnappers and poor and despicable creatures. [...] In repeating biased information, media around the world did not fact-check the information from the local Greek press, and they never pointed out that the Roma couple was telling the truth from the start.”

Human Rights Watch reported some of the headlines in the Greek newspapers: “Roma snatch babies!” “The DNA ‘spoke’: The 4-year-old found in a Romani settlement is not a Gypsy,” “Amber Alert: Dangerous Roma circuit snatches babies!!!”.

In 2013, in a public statement, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) asked the media “to act responsibly in reporting the situation, especially as the full facts of the original case have still not been established.” The ERRC statement underlined that “irresponsible reporting could have severe, negative consequences for Roma families across Europe. If a crime has been committed in Greece, and this is still by no means clear, those who committed it should be treated as individuals, not as representatives of their ethnicity. Criminality is not related to ethnicity.”

According to Romea – a Romani news agency in the Czech Republic - “The media created panic in the Roma camps and they kept looking for blonde kids. If they knew the community at all they’d know that many Roma children are blonde. There’s a complete ignorance of Roma issues and a disinterest to learn about them. They’ve harmed an already vulnerable community and sent them further into the margins.”

The charity “Smile of the Child” received over 8,000 calls and emails from parents around the world, claiming that ‘gypsies’ had kidnapped their daughters. Three couples, one each from Greece, Britain and Ireland, insisted that Maria looked like their missing child.

The account of what happened in Greece may have prompted Irish police in different parts of the country to take two blond children, a 7-year-old girl and a 2-year-old boy, away from their Roma parents. In both unrelated cases, DNA tests showed the children indeed had been living with their real parents.

Serbian news media reported that a group of skinheads in the Serbian city of Novi Sad had tried to abduct a Roma child from in front of his house because his skin was fairer than that of his father.

In Italy, the anti-immigrant Northern League responded to news of Maria’s supposed abduction by demanding inspections of all Roma communities to check for missing children.

Not a single article even mentioned the possibility of human rights violations against the Roma couple. As they had adopted Maria illegally and had problems with their papers, no one considered their human rights. The media failed to report on this angle or even ask the question as to whether Roma have human rights. It seems that Roma people will always be guilty of alleged crimes until they are proven innocent.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, the former director of the European Roma Rights Centre, Dezideriu Gergely, said: “Imagine if the situation were reversed and the children were brown and the parents were white, would they have ever been taken away? The most dangerous consequence of the hysteria is that now we have to live in fear that our children can be removed from us on the basis of a wrong perception. No one should be profiled on the basis of their ethnicity. [...] Applying collective responsibility to the entire Roma community is unacceptable.”

In the years that followed, only a handful of media outlets and Roma NGOs kept reporting on the injustice endured by Maria and her parents. Some of the charges against the parents were dropped and Maria stayed long in state care. The world is no longer interested, so now she will become invisible once more. The only thing that will remain is the negative public perception of Roma as baby snatchers.

¹ Benjamin Ignác is the Digital Communication Manager at the European Roma Rights Centre.

Sources:

Apostolou, Nikolia: Breaking News No More: Life for Roma in Greece a Year after “Maria”. In: Romea.cz News. 27 October 2014.

<http://www.romea.cz/en/features-and-commentary/breaking-news-no-more-life-for-roma-in-greece-a-year-after-maria>

Bilefsky, Dan: Roma, Feared as Kidnappers, See Their Own Children at Risk. In: The New York Times. 25 October 2013.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/26/world/europe/for-the-roma-fears-of-kidnapping-in-europe-only-mirror-their-own.html>

Cossé, Eva: Europe: Time to Drop the Roma Myths. In: Human Rights Watch. 4 November 2013.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/04/europe-time-drop-roma-myths>

Dukach, Natasha: Media Promote Stereotypes Against Roma People, in: Fair Observer. Make sense of the world. 26 June 2015.

<https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/media-promote-stereotypes-against-roma-people-54078/>

Gökçen, Sinan: ERRC Urges Restraint and Responsible Reporting in Child Removal Cases. Budapest, 22 October 2013.

<http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=4212>

Gökçen, Sinan: Guilty until proven innocent: injustice, racism and the Roma. European Roma Rights Centre.

<http://www.errc.org/news/guilty-until-proven-innocent-injustice-racism-and-the-roma>

Jovanovic, Zelico: Maria is Roma – so now she will become invisible once more. In: The Guardian. 28 October 2013.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/28/maria-roma-invisible>

ROME: Greece: Attorney for Romani couple says they adopted girl with her mother's consent. In: Romea.cz News. 22 October 2013.

<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/greece-attorney-for-romani-couple-says-they-adopted-girl-with-her-mother-s-consent>

ROME: Some charges dropped against Romani couple in Greece who cared for Romani child from Bulgaria. In: Romea.cz News. 12. November 2015.

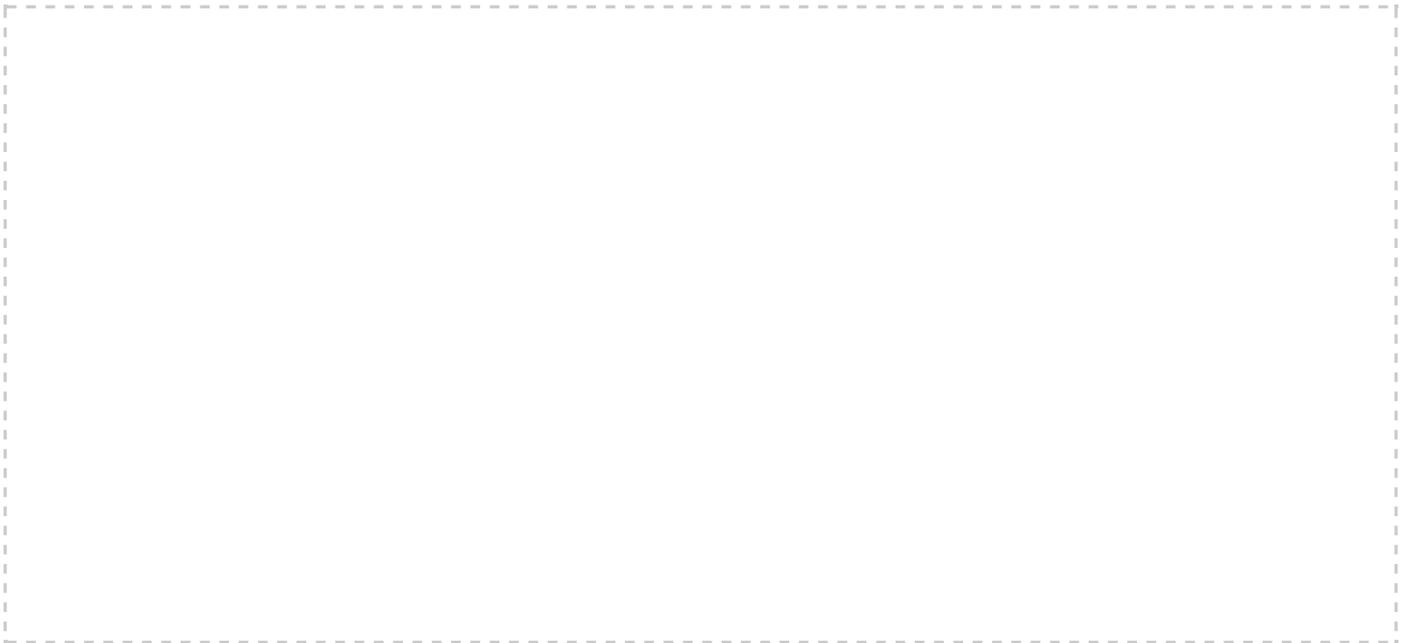
<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/some-charges-dropped-against-romani-couple-in-greece-who-cared-for-romani-child-from-bulgaria>

Tasks

1. What criticisms of media reporting on the case of 'Maria' do representatives of the Roma community raise?



2. What impact has this reporting had on the Roma community?





Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

This project has been funded with support from the European Union. The author exclusively is responsible for the publication content. The publication does not reflect the views of the European Commission and the European Commission is not responsible for usage of the data contained therein.

© 2018-2020 eduskills.plus



All contents of this website, in particular texts, pictures and graphics, are protected by copyright. Unless expressly stated otherwise, copyright is held by eduskills.plus and is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution - Non-commercial - Distribution under the same conditions 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). They may be subject to the terms of the license.

URL: https://eduskills.plus/modules/living_together/antigypsyism