

Right-wing campaign against Roma spreads across Europe

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Two recent incidents involving children illustrate the promotion of anti-Roma prejudice across Europe.

A Roma couple in Greece was charged with abducting a six-year-old young girl, who was discovered at the couple's house by police during a raid in search of weapons and drugs at a Roma camp in the town of Farsala in central Greece.

The girl caught the attention of the police because of her blonde hair and green eyes, which set her apart from the couple and their other children. The couple have been remanded in custody pending a trial and the girl has been taken into care by the Athens-based "The Smile of the Child" orphanage.

So far, no concrete evidence has been presented to support the child abduction charge, apart from a DNA test that has confirmed that the little girl who answers to the name Maria is not related to the Roma couple. Reports have emerged that the couple had other children in their care who were not biologically related.

The couple denied the charge of abduction.

In an interview with Star Channel's news programme, the couple's defence lawyer said, "There are two ways to view this case. The first is that there is a little girl missing from its parents and the reprehensible act would be if the girl was stolen from them, a fact which we deny. The other side says that maybe the girl's mother abandoned her and another family lovingly stood by her."

The couple said that the little girl was left with them to look after by a Bulgarian Roma woman who was too poor to care for the young girl.

Interpol has stated that it has no records regarding the disappearance of a girl who matches Maria's description and her age. In this context, the decision to imprison the Roma couple was described by Panayiotis Dimitras of the Greek Helsinki Monitor human rights

organisation as "disgusting and condemnable."

In an interview with the British-based *Independent*, he said that "it is a racist presumption on behalf of the Greek authorities...to charge her family with abduction just because they are Roma and because it was proven that [she] is not their own natural child."

The mass media, both in Greece and abroad, has been stoking centuries-old prejudices against one of the most oppressed and vulnerable ethnic groups in Europe. To reinforce the stereotype of "gypsies stealing children," the little girl has been dubbed by the Greek media as the "blonde angel." In the UK, the media reported the story of Maria as "giving hope" to the families of Madeleine McCann and Ben Needham, who disappeared on family holidays in Portugal in 2007 and on the Greek island of Kos in 1991, respectively.

In an article in the Greek daily *To Vima* entitled "The Roma camp at Farsala is on the edge of town and illegality," police trade union representatives told the paper that police "at regular intervals carry out investigations at the three main encampments of gypsies in Larissa [the largest city nearest to Farsala]" and "our colleagues usually find something out."

In other words, due process or reasonable suspicion of criminal behaviour does not apply in the case of the Roma, who are seen as being guilty until proven innocent. The police trade unionists went on, "We did not invent the wheel by our investigation results in the Farsala camp. We all know the crimes that gypsies are involved in such as theft, drug dealing and even buying and selling children."

The media witch-hunt reached a high point when the second alleged abduction case came to light. A Roma couple in Ireland was accused of child abduction due to their daughter's fair appearance not resembling theirs. On this basis, police took the girl from her family and

she was placed in the care of the Health Service Executive.

DNA tests have since confirmed that the seven-year-old girl is indeed the biological daughter of the accused couple.

The demonisation of Roma communities completely ignores the chronic social exclusion they face. According to London-based Minority Rights Group International, 80 percent of Romani Greeks are illiterate. Alexis Koutrovelis, a principal of a school in the town of Aspropyrgos, whose students are primarily Roma, told *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton* that the majority of the children in his school live in shacks with no running water. Some have suffered from multiple burns from the stove in the middle of the shack on which they fall when they wake up at night.

Such conditions of social deprivation are common for Roma communities across the continent, particularly in eastern Europe.

The persecution of Roma communities is bound up with the shift of official politics sharply to the right and has been embraced by the ruling elite in every country. Mass protests broke out recently in France after the Hollande government deported a 15-year-old Roma schoolgirl and her family. French interior minister Manuel Valls has promoted policies traditionally associated with the far right, calling on the entire Roma population to leave France and go back to eastern Europe.

In Ireland, reports emerged only two weeks prior to the removal of the Roma girl from her family of inhumane conditions in the country's asylum system. Hundreds of asylum seekers are accommodated in facilities lacking in electricity and provision of water, with some having to cook food in their bedrooms. The report commissioned by the government found conditions in some centres that were so bad they were given only one month to rectify them or face closure.

In Greece, the police raid on the Roma camp that led to the discovery of Maria comes in the wake of a long-standing policy of arresting and detaining suspected immigrants based on their skin colour or ethnicity, and holding them in specially created deportation camps where they live in terrible conditions. In pursuing such policies, the Greek authorities have not held back from collaborating with far-right and openly fascist organisations such as Golden Dawn.

The Greek pseudo-left fully embraced the child abduction allegations. An article in SYRIZA's *Avgi* (The Dawn) quoted extensively and uncritically from a number of UK and German news sources that alleged that the little girl had been abducted. It even invited readers to click onto the *Daily Mail*'s "extensive reportage with a video, which shows little Maria dancing with the woman 'appearing' as her mother."

The article informs us that "footage emerges of child 'performing for camera when she was just a toddler' " and that an unknown woman in the footage "can be seen grabbing the little girl as she staggers about, pushing her back into the centre of a sunny courtyard to continue her dance."

In another article posted on the same day on the *Daily Mail*'s web site, we are told that "Little Maria was made to dance for cash."

The KKE's (Greek Communist Party's) *Rizospastis* declared that the unfolding events have "evolved into a witch-hunt, whose evident purpose is to provide a smokescreen for an extremely serious issue, which is the trafficking of people, especially children."

Both Syriza and the KKE have promoted Greek nationalism as a response to the economic crisis. Their adaptation to the most reactionary and backward prejudices towards Roma communities is in keeping with their role of sowing divisions within the working class to defend the bourgeois order.



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