

Persecution of Roma stepped up after “blond angel” child trafficking allegations

Julie Hyland

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It has been confirmed that four year old “Maria”, found living with a Roma couple in the Greek town of Farsala, was not abducted as claimed by authorities.

The child, dubbed the “blonde angel” by the media, had been placed in the care of Christos Salis and Eleftheria Dimopoulou by her birth mother who was too destitute to provide for her.

Sasha Ruseva, a Roma from Bulgaria, said she had given birth to the child while working as an olive picker in Greece. Sasha shares her one room mud-floored home in Nikolaevo, Bulgaria with her husband and nine other children between the ages of 2 and 20 years of age.

Despite the fact that her account backed that of Christos and Eleftheria, the Greek couple have been detained for abducting a minor. Sasha is under investigation for selling her baby, an allegation she strongly refutes.

Sasha’s youngest seven children have also been placed in care by Bulgaria’s social services, which asserted that it has done so in order that the couple “can expand their parental potential.”

The parents are to be given the “chance to improve their living conditions—in which case they can be reunited with their children,” it was reported.

The discovery of “Maria” was the occasion for a hysterical campaign over alleged Roma child-trafficking. Alerts were put out in 191 countries to trace the biological parents of “Maria”, who was suspected of being abducted from a “white couple”.

Three other Roma children in Europe were taken into care, solely on the basis that their blonde hair and blue-eyes did not match their parents—one on the Aegean island of Lesbos and two others in Ireland. The seizure of a seven-year girl from a traveller family at Tallaght, Dublin was based on a Facebook posting. Both children in Ireland have been returned to their parents and an investigation launched into their removal.

There has been at least one report, from Serbia, of

fascist vigilantes attempting to take a two-year old boy from his Roma parents because his skin colour was lighter than theirs.

While there was much righteous indignation from the media and the authorities at the conditions that the little “blonde angel” was found to be living in, there is official indifference and outright hostility to the tens of thousands of Roma children living in abject poverty and subject to discrimination and harassment on a daily basis.

To the extent that their terrible circumstances are acknowledged, it is only to use them as a stick to beat Roma families with. As the *International Business Times* pointed out, “The media focused exclusively on the notion that the Roma couple had abducted Maria, but they conveniently ignored the abduction perpetrated by the police and state.”

Victimisation of the Roma is not new. Up to one million were killed by the Nazis and many forcibly sterilised under Hitler’s “racial purity” laws.

After the war, in the Stalinist-controlled Eastern European states Roma were subject to forced assimilation programmes, their language banned and women sterilised. Similar policies were employed in western Europe, in Germany, Switzerland and Sweden.

In Sweden, it was not until 1959 that Roma were granted the right to public education and accommodation, and they were only designated an official minority in the country in 1999. More recently it was revealed that Swedish police in the southern region of Skane have compiled a 4,000 strong database of Roma in the area.

It is this official racism and discrimination that accounts for the conditions of terrible deprivation faced by the Roma—the poorest minority in Europe. Nearly 90 percent live below the poverty line, while a 2012 survey of 11 European Union countries found they faced rampant unemployment of more than 66 percent and just 15 percent had managed to graduate secondary school.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Zeljko Jovanovic, Director of the Open Society Foundations' Roma initiatives office, explained that Roma children have on average 10 years lower life expectancy “than the mainstream population due to hunger and malnutrition, squalid housing and substandard healthcare.”

Many lack official documentation, either because they cannot afford the cost of registering a birth or they are afraid of discrimination. As a result they cannot access public healthcare, schooling, employment or legal protection. Such invisibility is encouraged by European governments as “a fully documented and registered Roma population” would mean they would be entitled to such provision.

Throughout Europe, Roma have become the target of xenophobic campaigns by extreme right-wing groups, with the backing of the government and the state, as a scapegoat for the social crisis caused by the ruling elite’s policies of mass austerity.

In Greece, where conditions for the majority of people have been plunged back to the 1920s, segregation in Roma-only housing camps and schools has long been practiced. This is now being accompanied by vicious police actions. According to reports, in the first nine months of this year, police conducted 1,131 operations in Roma camps, detaining 19,067 people for further checks. Of these, some 1,305 were subsequently arrested on charges of having committed an offence.

In Hungary, the far-right party Jobbik campaigns for mandatory labour camps for Roma and the seizure of children from their parents, while there has been several instances of fascist paramilitaries surrounding and invading Roma camps, chanting “you are going to die here!”

In Western Europe, where Roma make up a miniscule proportion of population, a virulent campaign is underway.

Since 2008, Roma in Italy have been subject to mandatory fingerprinting. In France, the premierships of conservative Nicholas Sarkozy or the Socialist Party’s Francois Hollande have made no difference to their treatment as Roma camps are routinely raided, dismantled and their populations expelled.

The racist attitude of the Hollande government was typified by the treatment of 15-year-old Leonarda Dibrani, seized by authorities from a bus during a school trip so she could be deported to Kosovo with her family. Amid student protests against her treatment, Hollande magnanimously “offered” that Leonarda could return to

Director but only without her family.

The aim of such action was made clear by a French Interior Ministry official speaking anonymously to the *Independent on Sunday*, “Free movement of peoples within the EU was never expected to apply to people who are often illiterate” he said, and “who are, almost without exception, very, very poor.”

For the ruling elite in Western Europe, attacks on the Roma provide a convenient justification for measures against all citizens of Romania and Bulgaria. Both countries are members of the EU, but have been subject to restrictions on their freedom of movement for work throughout the bloc. These restrictions are due to be lifted in January, leading to a campaign across much of the media in France, the UK and elsewhere to demand the restrictions remain in place.

The demand to bar these citizens from their legal entitlements is directed against the social rights of the working class as a whole, on the spurious grounds that these cannot be afforded or can only be accessed by those deemed “deserving”.

In the UK, the *Daily Express* has set up a petition to demand the restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian citizens stays. The bogus case of the blonde-blue eyed child “abducted” by “gypsies” has played a central role in its scaremongering.

This is by no means restricted to overtly right wing media. In the *Guardian*, readers editor Chris Elliot was forced to make a mealy-mouthed account of its own coverage of the “Maria” case which, in one article, it said had exposed the “extent of child trafficking in crisis-hit Greece.”



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