

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

“The Roma”

Guests:

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TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, on today's episode we'll be talking about the largest ethnic minority in Europe, the Roma. Estimated at over 12 million people in EU countries, with significant numbers in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Turkey, Roma have historically faced racism, discrimination and persecution in Europe. In our conversation today, we'll be featuring Romani scholar and activist Dr. Margareta Matache, Magda, who's calling in from her office at Harvard University today.

Magda, thank you so much for joining us for this conversation.

MATACHE: Thank you so much. Good afternoon, everyone. It's such a great pleasure talking to you today.

TIERSKY: Also joining the conversation today is my dear colleague Erika Schlager. She's the Counsel for International Law at the U.S. Helsinki Commission. Erika closely follows the human rights situation of Roma and has published and spoken extensively on the subject. Erika, welcome to the Helsinki on the Hill microphones for the first time.

SCHLAGER: Thank you, Alex. It's great to be here with you and with Magda as well.

TIERSKY: Terrific.

Magda, I really wanted to start our conversation with asking you a few questions, because some of our listeners may just not be familiar with the history of the Roma people in Europe. And I think one way that we can help folks get a sense of the issue is for us to talk about your own personal story. So if you don't mind, I'd like to start at the beginning. You, yourself, are Roma, born into a Romani family, and raised in Romania during the communist era, is that right?

MATACHE: Yes, that is correct.

TIERSKY: Can you tell us a little bit about what life was like for your family at that time when you were a child?

MATACHE: So I grew up in communist Romania. And as some of you may know, back then in most European countries where communism was a reality, Romani people were forced into assimilation. So that means that we were not allowed to speak about our culture, and we were not allowed to learn our language. So I grew up in a – in a context in which I was exposed mostly to white Romanian narratives, Romanian culture, although I was living in a neighborhood that was mixed both Romani and non-Romani.

Our family back then, we didn't hide our ethnicity, although many Romani families would do so for various reasons, including the fear of stigmatization and the fear of deportation and, especially in the case of elderly, senior Romani people who were deported to Transnistria. But in our family, we started to talk much more about our ethnicity immediately after the Romanian

revolution because my father became one of the very few activists in our village who started to speak up about Romani issues.

TIERSKY: You used the term “forced assimilation.” And I’d love for our listeners to get a better sense of what that looks like for a school child. You know, were the Roma provided the same educational opportunities as children who were not Roma, for example?

MATACHE: The communist regime would promote this idea that people – all people in Romania were Romanians. So we were not allowed to talk about our ethnicity. At the same time, we were supposed to have equal access to education, and equal access to other rights. But what I remember from childhood was that many Romani children in schools were still placed in the back of the classroom or were still neglected by various teachers.

In my case, for instance, when I went to school I was very lucky to be placed in the first rows of our classroom, but I think it was mainly because I was friends with a white Romanian girl. But I do remember many of my Romani friends and classmates being placed at the – at the back of the classroom.

TIERSKY: And what was – what was the impact of some of these measures, being placed in the back of the country. Did Romani children have the same kinds of scholastic achievements and, you know, educational opportunities as other children?

MATACHE: What we know is that in the case of Romani children who were placed in the back of a classroom, or the case of Romani children who are segregated in separate classes, or separate schools, or even in special schools, what we know is that the quality of education in these classrooms is worse than in other cases.

There is a tendency of teachers – including nowadays, so it wasn’t just then – there is a tendency to have lower expectations from Romani children.

We have a study at Harvard that we published in 2018. And what we show in that study is that what makes the difference for Romani young people who make it to universities is really a belief at the level of teachers in the potential of these children. So basically treating them as children, not as, quote/unquote, “inferior” children.

TIERSKY: Magda, it sounds like some significant obstacles placed in front of Romani children from their earliest years in schooling. Did you, your family, and other members of the Romani community experience discrimination in other areas besides education when you were growing up?

MATACHE: I have three siblings, and a large Romani family in our village and not only. And I think that each and every one of them have had instances of discrimination in various environments, from getting a job to really being treated unfairly by their medical doctors, or so.

But I think there is also another nuance in this conversation, because racism does have many manifestations. I think that the experience of stigmatization as Michèle Lamont would call it, or

everyday discrimination, as David Williams at Harvard would call it, these experiences do have an impact on the lives of Romani people. And I think that those moments when you are isolated, when you are not seen by others, those when – in which you are called a racial slur, those incidents, they also matter and have to be taken into account. Many members of my family have gone through those.

In my family we are four siblings, we were all raised by the same parents in the same parenting style, but yet it is just me who made it to high school, and then to university, and later on to Harvard. And I think that the question is really what happened. And it's not because I'm exceptional, and it's not because I work harder than they do. They worked as hard as I did. But it is, again, getting back to the argument about the [Harvard FXB's One in a Hundred] study. It was because I was lucky enough to have a white Romanian friend, to have a teacher who would promote me, to have a professor in university who would believe in me, and to have all these spaces of opportunity and spaces of privileges that really pushed me further.

It's not like I didn't experience discrimination, because I did. And it's not like we are not resilient in front of discrimination. But we should not be resilient. We should have the same treatment or similar treatment to the others - treated with dignity and respect.

TIERSKY: Magda, thank you for that. You've alluded several times that the conditions that you and your family faced when you were growing up, you referred to them in the present tense, which suggests to me that this is not a problem that has gone away for Roma communities in Romania today. Is that the case?

MATACHE: That is the case. And it's not a case only of the Romani community in Romania. I think it is a case of many Romani families, and individuals, and communities across Europe. And there is research, especially from the European Union, from the Fundamental Rights Agency, showing the high levels of discrimination that Romani people face in Europe. And more so in the past decade or so, we've seen also a rise of far-right and far-right politics, and extreme-right organizations. So these also pushed a wave of violence against various communities in Europe.

TIERSKY: I'd like to bring in Erika here. Erika, I know you've done some work on this question of the wider problem across Europe of conditions for Roma communities. Can you speak a little bit to the breadth of this problem?

SCHLAGER: So you know, as I'm listening to Magda talk about her early experiences in Romania, I'm also thinking about what that looked like from our side of the Atlantic. The Helsinki Commission has been engaged on Romani issue for about 30 years now. And I think the very first instance when one of our commissioners advocated on Romani issues specifically was actually when our then-Chairman Steny Hoyer made a visit to Bucharest with a congressional delegation in 1990. And it was right after – it was at a time when there was real political ferment throughout Central Europe. Communist regimes were crumbling in many countries.

And in Romania, at this moment of uncertainty, minors were called out in large numbers and instrumentalized by a regime still hanging onto power and used to attack intellectuals and Roma. And Congressman Hoyer I think was really taken by this, and really pressed the Romanian government regarding these attacks, and then also took that concern about Roma to Copenhagen where the international community was negotiating what would turn out to be a document with the very first commitments on recognizing the human rights problems faced by Roma. And it really came out of those Romanian perspectives.

I think looking back to an incident that occurred just a year ago in Bulgaria that our current Chairman Alcee Hastings spoke to, there's still mob attacks going on in some places in Europe today. So last year in Bulgaria we saw this. We've also seen some attacks in Ukraine. And the Commission had a briefing to focus on those issues, and to press for the Ukrainian government to take steps against it. So while I don't think we're seeing the scale of violence that we saw in the early 1990s in Romania, the threat of violence and some of the rhetoric that we're seeing today is as alarming as it was then.

TIERSKY: I understand that there's been efforts by various national governments to actually work on this issue on a national basis. There was a Romanian commission that was supposed to be established to study the question of the enslavement of Roma. Can you tell me a little bit about that effort?

SCHLAGER: Well, I'll turn it back to Magda in a second, but this was something that Congressman Hastings when he was previously the chairman of the Commission had spoken about, because the Romanian president had made a statement indicating that his country would establish a commission to look at the history of the enslavement of Roma. And I think it was understood that this would be similar to something that was known as the Eli Wiesel Commission that looked at Romania's experiences during the Holocaust and what happened at that time.

But, Magda, maybe you can tell us a little bit more about what happened with that commission, and kind of what the current state of efforts are to address Romani-specific experiences with the enslavement of Roma.

MATACHE: Yeah, sure. So I think that it was in June 2007 when the Romanian government adopted a governmental decision, if you want, which aimed to set up a national commission to study in depth the enslavement of the Romani people in Romania. So the commission was supposed to be coordinated by the National Agency for Roma, which is some sort of a governmental body in charge with Romani issues. But also, the Center for Romani Studies, which was based inside the Faculty of History at the University of Bucharest, were supposed to help with that.

The governmental decision said that they were going to select twelve members to conduct research and to write a report, or what they called a "scientific report" about the enslavement. From the beginning you could see that it was a very superficial step because, first of all, it was poorly budgeted. And second of all, I think it was very interesting to see that the whole

commission was supposed to work only for four months to come up with the scientific report and to organize several meetings. So it felt like it was some sort of a joke, if you want.

But they did organize the first meeting of the commission in August, if I'm not mistaken, in August that year. But there was no really public information about what happened. What we know is that some of the members of the commission were well-known Romanian historians, including Neagu Djuvara but also Romanian Roma scholars. And then the only information that is available online, at least to my knowledge, is another report of the National Agency for Roma which was published in 2013. It was an activity report. And that report, the president of the National Agency for Roma was promising to reestablish and reactive the commission in 2014. But unfortunately that really didn't happen.

There are other efforts, though. So we don't have the commission, but in 2015 the National Center for Roma Culture, which is a governmental body – different from the National Agency for Roma. They published a study on the enslavement, which I find very informative and well-reasoned. And they also started to work on an online database where they put information and documents from various state institutions and from various places that were related to the enslavement.

SCHLAGER: Magda?

MATACHE: Yes?

SCHLAGER: I'm wondering a little bit more about how the government is connecting that information to people. Is it – is it being included in school curriculum or does the government talk about this in a public way, or does this sit in an archive someplace?

MATACHE: So the report is not really a document that it reaches the general population. I think I read it because I do a lot of research on the enslavement. But I think that the prime minister, for instance, and the president, this year they did deliver speeches during the commemoration of the enslavement on February 20th. And they tried to speak about it, but in a very, I think, simple way. We never heard apologies from state institutions, and so on. I think that the National Center for Roma Culture, though, does a good job of promoting more awareness-raising about the enslavement, and other Roma-related organizations, or activists, or scholars in Romania do talk quite a bit about this issue.

We've tried for many years to include the enslavement in the history books. And I understand that the new curriculum for the upcoming year will include information about the enslavement as well as about the Holocaust. But we will see how that information is being told, and by who, because I think in many instances several Romanian intellectuals really question the reality of the Roma enslavement or, rather, you know, equal it with the Romanian serfs back in the day, which I think is not a fair description, and it's also not an accurate description.

TIERSKY: So, Magda and Erika, as I understand the purpose of this commission, you know, at least at the origin it really was the intent to wrestle with a difficult chapter in history and come to terms with it. What I – whether, you know, its various successes and failures in the process to

date, it's still an effort in that direction. I would love for you to kind of compare and contrast that approach to some other recent news in this space, in particular the announcement by the Hungarian government that it is going to hold some sort of a national consultation on Roma issues.

And, Magda, maybe you can tell us what your perspective is on this national consultation that's been announced in Hungary. And then, Erika, I'd love to bring you back into the conversation as well.

MATACHE: I think it is fair to say that as the result of some policies that were started back in 1990s in Hungary, we do see Hungary as an example in ensuring access of Romani children to education because if we look at data today what we see is that 90 percent or more than 90 percent of Romani children in Hungary are enrolled in kindergarten and in primary education. So from that perspective, I think we do have a lesson that we can draw from this policy. And that is that it is important to have Romani leadership in education, because it is Victoria Mohasci and her team that led to what we have today.

However, this consultation is not aiming to support Romani children. Basically what the Orbán government does is to challenge a decision that was given by an appeal court in Hungary. And the case is about a Roma rights organization from Hungary, which is called the Chance for Children Foundation. And they filed a complaint against the school in a small town in Hungary which implemented segregation of Romani children from 2004 through 2017, according to this organization. The court awarded 300,000 euros to 60 Romani children who were segregated. Then, Orbán and his government argue that this is not fair because Romani children and their families received this money without "working for it," and I quote them.

So I think that there is a lot to unpack in terms of the words that Orbán and his government are using when they talk about Romani - this idea of laziness, because, you know, they think that Roma don't work. But also the very - the very thing that they want to challenge, the court decision, puts a question mark - a big question mark on the rule of law and the democratic choices of this country. I don't think that a national consultation has to be organized in order to provide remedies to children whose rights were violated. I think that the law says that clearly, and the jurisprudence of the national courts in Hungary as well as the European Court of Human Rights show that this is a right, that these children are entitled to.

And it is not an isolated case. We've seen this in Hungary for a long period. I think that it was in 2007 when the wave of anti-Romani violence started in Hungary. And we had a report that was published at Harvard in 2014 which looked at patterns of anti-Romani violence in Hungary. We mentioned 61 instances of violence from, I think, 2008 to 2012.

[The small town] is also a place where in 2011 we've seen a rise in far-right organizations and also marches against Romani people. I don't know if you recall, but Red Cross had to evacuate Romani children and their mothers from the community, fearing violence. So this community counts a history of anti-Romani racism that has been there for almost a decade now. And I do think we do need to take into consideration when we talk about this consultation, which is, in my opinion, is wrong, and is unjust.

SCHLAGER: And, Magda, the cases that you're talking about of violence in 2008, '9, and '10, those were serial murders in which half a dozen people were killed, including a five-year-old. So it seems to me that the trauma from those relatively recent cases is still with the communities today.

MATACHE: Yeah. And I think there is a report from the Pulitzer Center, it's an article in which they talk about the trauma of the young children in the [Gyöngyöspata] village. I think there is a lot to learn from this case, but I think that more generally when we have cases of anti-Romani violence and anti-Romani racism, we often really forget to look at the traumatic experience of these people and what can be done in order to diminish the harm.

TIERSKY: Magda, what strikes me is the words that keep coming up as you recount for us these tragedies – words like racism, violence, trauma, segregation, unequal access, discrimination, even slavery – these unfortunately are not challenges that have afflicted only the Roma people. And so I'd like to bring it back to your own advocacy and ask you: Do the conditions that the Roma people have faced and Roma communities have faced in any number of countries, as you've described for us just today, do those resonate with other minority groups elsewhere, whether it's in the United States or other countries in Europe, that help you build coalitions to start to work on these issues and address this problem?

MATACHE: Yes. Back home in Romania, at the local level, we usually would create coalitions with various other minority groups and organize advocacy efforts together. But I think that in the United States, as I've been here only for a few years, we've started these spaces of solidarity at a very small scale, starting at Harvard. And I think that one of the bases of our solidarity work at Harvard are really rooted in the work of Dr. King; as we commemorate his assassination in April, we usually connect the International Roma Day with the commemoration of Dr. King. And we really think about his words, because he talked about humanity and justice for all people. He talked about true peace as the presence of justice and brotherhood and sisterhood between communities.

So I do think that the experience of discrimination and racism more broadly, but also hatred, have been daily realities for many minority and marginalized groups across the world. And at Harvard, we work primarily with Black Americans, with Dalit leaders to look at similarities but also at differences. Because I think that it's important to see how all these groups in the face of racism, they are – they are mostly fundamentally equipped with faith in humanity. And you see that their response often in the face of oppression, their response is usually love and understanding.

So I think that what we see is that the manifestation of racism, including anti-Romani racism in Europe do find similarities across countries and regions, from violence, as you said, to poor quality of education, or residential segregation, or structural discrimination, or poverty, or higher levels of mortality among children. And I think it's important to have those in account, but at the same time, you know, me, coming from a minority group which has been mostly voiced by others, I do feel a responsibility when I get involved in conversation about solidarity, because I do know that I don't want to misrepresent brothers and sisters from other oppressed groups. And

I think that we talk about solidarity, but we do have to acknowledge the different contexts, histories, and sufferings of the Romani or other people.

TIERSKY: Magda, thank you. And I wanted to turn to Erika here. What about the U.S. context? I mean, clearly we have some of these issues present in our own history and our own society. Has this resonated from an American perspective, and here in the United States?

SCHLAGER: So as Alex, you know, and Magda may also know, the current Chairman of the Helsinki Commission Alcee Hastings is the first African American to serve as the chairman of our Commission. And he has been a champion of civil rights throughout his entire career and started out working for desegregation efforts in Florida. So I think from his perspective these issues really do resonate, and there's a commonality that he sees in that work. He is one of the four members of Congress that introduced a resolution celebrating Romani American heritage. One of the things the resolution does talk about is the history of enslavement.

MATACHE: Yes. In 2019 in April, Representatives Barr, Hastings, Watkins, Cardin, and Wicker led efforts to introduce in U.S. Congress and Senate the first ever bipartisan resolution to recognize Romani heritage and history. And it was a big achievement for us. And we are very grateful for it. But what we hope today is really to see more efforts to push this resolution towards adoption, because Romani scholars and activists here in the U.S. feel that it's been sitting on the table of the House Committee of Foreign Affairs for almost a year.

This resolution put emphasis on the difficult history of the Romani people across the world. It talks about the enslavement as much as it talks about the extermination by the Nazis. The resolution also acknowledges the contribution of Romani Americans in the United States from arts and crafts to science and sports. And at the same time, I'd say that the resolution also recognizes April 8th as International Roma Day. And it pays tribute to the Romani people who were exterminated in Auschwitz-Birkenau on August 2nd and 3rd in 1944, in the Gypsy Family Camp. And finally, I think it really pays tribute to all the Romani people who were victims and survivors of the Nazi regimes in Europe during the Second World War.

As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum underlined back in April 2019, this resolution has the power to raise more awareness in the United States about the history of Romani people, the racism that they face nowadays in Europe, but also about the richness of the Romani heritage and culture.

TIERSKY: Magda, if I could jump in here, I just wanted to share with our listeners the statement that the four members that introduced the resolution issued when they introduced the resolution. Again, this is our Chairman Alcee Hastings, our Co-Chairman Senator Roger Wicker, Congressman Steve Watkins, and Senator Ben Cardin. When they introduced this resolution, and this was extremely powerful I thought in their statement, their statement reads – it's a joint statement. It reads, "Roma enrich the fabric of our nation. They have been part of every wave of European migration to the United States since the colonial period, tying our country to Europe and building the transatlantic bond."

So I just wanted to share that with our listeners. And I really appreciated kind of the positive contributions that were recognized in that sense. Please, go on.

MATACHE: One other reason why this resolution is important is also because it gives a voice to Romani Americans. There are more than 1 million Romani Americans living in the U.S. They've been here for centuries. The Romani people moved to the U.S. in different waves of immigration; some groups came here in 1850s from England, especially the Romanichal in a period which somehow, if you want to characterize it by an increased demand for horses in agriculture and urbanization in the United States. And horse traders, like these Romani families, they got a good place on the market. So I think there is also a contribution to the urbanization and also the economy of the United States. But also, going back to the communist times, I think we also noticed a wave of immigration from former communist countries in Europe to the United States.

So the voices of the Romani people in the U.S. do matter, and they need to be seen, because many others they would argue that Romani Americans are still invisible in the United States. So this resolution is important today, more so as we see a rise of extreme right, and vigilante groups, and far-right movement in Europe. And I think it is important for the United States to send a message to these communities that face discrimination and violence, and to send a message to the governments in Central and Eastern Europe about these problems.

TIERSKY: Magda, you mentioned in passing something that's, I think, a critical part of the resolution, which is a recognition of the importance of International Roma Day, which is slated for the 8th of April. Can you tell us a little bit more about International Roma Day, how it started, and why the 8th of April?

MATACHE: Well, I think it started in 1971, when Romani leaders from various parts of the world organized what is today known as the First World Romani Congress. And that event, the leaders agreed on various fundamental symbols for Romani people, including the anthem and the flag, which are today recognized and celebrated and shared by Romani people across borders and continents.

But back then, also following on the steps of activists in the early 1919 or 1930s, they also agreed to move away from the racial slur that we know today as "gypsy," and to reclaim the name Roma, which is actually a name rooted deeply in our own language.

So I think that International Romani Day remains emblematic in terms of having these symbols recognized, but also in terms of commemorating the Roma victims and survivors of the Nazi genocide during the Holocaust. And even though I think every year we recognize International Roma Day, we also acknowledge that there is so much more to be done, and that the struggle has been slow, and that the struggle has to continue. So I think we do have a long way to go in consolidating knowledge and awareness about our history and culture. And I think there is some level of fragility of the Roma movement when it comes to pushing their issues forward.

International Roma Day and its recognition, it is an example of that. Because it took us basically about 20 years to have this day recognized at some level in Europe. And I think we are also at

the beginning of having this day recognized in the United States; although I have to say that some communities – some Romani communities and some Romani families do celebrate it. So I do hope that the resolution passes this year and we have a government in the United States that recognizes the International Romani Day as much as the Romani heritage in the United States.

TIERSKY: I'm afraid we've run out of time. But I do want to thank you very, very much for participating in our own, the Helsinki Commission's, small contribution to the overall International Roma Day action. And mostly, thank you for your activism in this area and your partnership with the Helsinki Commission on the various initiatives that we've been working on.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of our podcast, Helsinki on the Hill. Magda Matache, Erika Schlager, thank you so much for joining me on the microphones today. Before we go, I'd love for you to tell our listeners how they might be able to find out a bit more about your work. Magda, why don't you start us?

MATACHE: Yes. First of all, thank you so much for the invitation. I am very grateful. But I'm also so grateful to Erika for everything that she has done in the past few decades to support the Roma rights.

I think that in terms of more resources, what I would suggest is the Roma Program at the FXB Center for Health & Human Rights at Harvard University. There is plenty of information on our website. But at the same time, in Europe, I think there is a website that is called RomArchive. And it includes information about the Roma history in Europe and Romani culture, and everything from the past to the present.

TIERSKY: Thank you, Magda.

Erika.

SCHLAGER: Alex, thank you so much. It has really been an honor to be here with Magda. Materials that the Helsinki Commission has generated over the years, including the records of several dozen Romani witnesses who have participated in hearings and briefings, is on our website, which is www.CSCE.gov. And I am really happy that Magda could be with us, because I think one of the goals of our work at the Helsinki Commission has been to try to create a space where Romani voices can be heard coming and participating in events like this, or hearings, or briefings, supporting Romani voices as public members on U.S. delegations to human rights meetings, ensuring that there's a Romani voice on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Council. And so, Magda, thank you for continuing that work with us.

TIERSKY: Thanks, Erika. What a wonderful way to close that out.

Listeners, as you know, we're always interested in hearing back from you with feedback. Get in touch via our website, which Erika has very helpfully described for you. We of course are all over social media. Listeners, thanks again for joining us on Helsinki on the Hill. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

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