PRESS STATEMENT

The Maria case in Greece: will we ever learn from the past?

Brussels, 29 October, 2013 - The discovery of a blond girl in a Roma camp in Greece recently led to intense public scapegoating and stigmatization of Roma individuals and communities based on millennial racist stereotypes. Although DNA tests have shown that the girl’s parents are a Roma couple in Bulgaria, the ethnic focus and racist underpinnings of much of the reporting in media and public debates triggered other removals of blond and blue-eyed Roma children from Roma communities. In Ireland, for instance, two blond Roma children were taken from their families and later returned after DNA tests confirmed that the Roma were their parents. Another case is pending in Cyprus.

ENAR condemns such flagrant racial profiling of the Roma and demands that the EU and Member States take immediate measures to end racial profiling and address the failure of anti-racist education in Europe. The Maria case and the preoccupation with her blond and ‘angelic’ features vis-à-vis the darker features of her caretakers have exposed the still pervasive influence of biological racism, an aspect of European race science and history that a democratic Europe had supposedly left behind. In addition, the so-called kidnapping of Maria, which proved to be a case of informal adoption, has caused old myths about the Roma as child abductors and thieves to resurface and proliferate across the whole of Europe.

The Maria case is a reminder of how difficult it is for Roma to be accepted as part and parcel of European societies. 18% of Roma respondents to a Fundamental Rights Agency survey from 2012 said that they had been victims of at least one racially motivated crime in the last 12 months prior to the survey. A woman in Italy recently threw acid at a Roma family, and in August this year four people in Hungary were convicted for the racially motivated murders of six Roma in 2008 and 2009. Moreover, although there is no documented case of Roma stealing non-Roma children, there are countless occurrences where states remove Roma children from their families. The European Roma Rights Centre reported in 2011 that there exists “significant over-representation” of Roma children in state care institutions in Italy as well as several countries in Eastern Europe. High levels of prejudice and racism were cited by researchers and activists as reasons for the removal of children from Roma families.

ENAR recommends that the EU develop strict guidelines and objectives for Member States on anti-racist education, and that anti-Gypsyism is recognized as a specific form of racism with deep historical roots that culminated in the Nazi murder of up to half a million Roma during the Second World War. In order to counter racism against Roma, ENAR further recommends the establishment of a Europe-wide ‘truth commission’ to ascertain the truth about mass atrocities against Roma. Raising historical awareness of the past persecution of Roma is absolutely necessary to tackle and dismantle contemporary racism.

ENAR Chair Sarah Isal said: “Roma inclusion in Europe will be impossible as long as public attitudes about the Roma are based on fear and the false belief in their inferiority and their ‘otherness’, whether cultural or biological. There must be a greater emphasis on teaching history and debunking the myths of different races and race hierarchies in education across Europe, and the history and culture of Roma should be part of every school curriculum”.

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Notes to the editor:
1. The European Network Against Racism (ENAR aisbl) stands up against racism and discrimination and advocates for equality and solidarity for all in Europe. We connect local and national anti-racist NGOs throughout Europe and act as an interface between our member organisations and the European institutions. We voice the concerns of ethnic and religious minorities in European and national policy debates.