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Transatlantic dialogues and the solidarity of the oppressed: critical race activism in the US and Canada

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Introduction

As a growing number of Central and East European Roma progressively became European Union (EU) citizens, Romani people, activists, scholars and their allies nurtured a hope that the systemic inequalities that haunted Romani communities for centuries would finally be dismantled. However, although progress can be observed in European policies (at least on paper), national strategies vis-à-vis Roma or even enrolment rates in primary education, the complex and intertwined problems of unaddressed historical injustice, economic injustice, exclusion and anti-Romani racism continue to this day.

Few gains have been achieved, even in relation to ensuring the basic right of Romani children to access quality education as segregation in schools remains a shameful reality in many EU member states. Indeed, a recent EU report indicates that the school segregation rate for Romani children across Europe actually increased from 10 per cent in 2011 to 15 per cent in

2016 (FRA, 2018). For Romani children, school enrolment clearly does not equal access to quality, non-discriminatory education. Moreover, in countries such as Hungary and Poland, the neoliberal politics of the post-transition decades have been replaced by a corrosive politics of populism and resurgent ethno-nationalism (see [Chapter One](#)).

Although Romani self-organizing dates back to the early 1900s in Europe, activism in the US has long held great relevance for the Romani movement. The US civil rights movement and strategic litigation were models for the fledgling post-socialist Romani movement in Europe as it began to revive, expand and strengthen in the early 1990s. Euro-Atlantic integration, via institutions such as the Council of Europe, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, reinforced liberal conceptions of rights, and a neoliberal view of the role of civil society increasingly took hold. In response, disillusioned by weak and biased ‘integration’ processes (including National Roma Integration Strategies) that did little to address socio-economic exclusion, some Romani activists and scholars have turned to calling on governments to focus on structural anti-Romani racism. Moreover, Romani activists were influenced by critical North American debates on effective community organizing and mobilization, including how movements can be derailed through donor-driven agendas (Trehan, 2001).

This chapter explores the relationship between European and North American Romani activism through the experiences and reflections of Margareta ‘Magda’ Matache, a Romanian Romani activist and scholar who is Director of the Roma Program at Harvard University’s FXB Center, and Nidhi Trehan, a political sociologist engaged in the movement for the rights of Romani peoples since the mid-1990s. We also incorporate the Roma-related advocacy work of Serbian-Canadian Roma based in Montreal, Quebec, primarily that of Dafina Savić, a human rights activist and founder of the non-governmental organization Romanipe, and the journalist Lela

Savić, as well as activists within Voice of Roma, a Roma-led organization based in San Francisco.

The first section of this chapter is based on a dialogic interview between us that offers a window into contemporary Romani activism, which increasingly employs an anti-racist, intersectional approach that seeks to highlight voices and approaches hitherto neglected. The second section provides case studies of transatlantic Romani activism today in the US and Canada, and draws lessons learned on recognition battles, anti-racist work and its reparatory potential on the frayed social contract between the state and the (Romani) citizen.

Throughout these discussions, it became clear to us that contemporary transatlantic Romani activists – those who have crossed over from Europe to North America – have a distinct perspective on these critical issues, and that Reverend King's 'fierce urgency of now' continues apace for the global Romani justice movement.

Reflections on Romania and the work of Romani CRISS

With a long history in Romani activism and advocacy work with the Roma Centre for Social Intervention and Studies (Romani CRISS [RC]), Magda has engaged with the European Romani movement and EU policy since the late 1990s, and is active in advocacy work with the US Congress on Roma recognition as well. Thus, we discuss her insights into the pitfalls, gains and enduring lessons within Romani organizing, strategy and anti-racist work.

This section is semi-biographical, and through Magda's journey in Romani activism, we see resonances with the narratives of many Romani activists who grew up in the time of profound transition in Central and Eastern Europe when countries in the region challenged communism from the late 1980s onwards, setting a course to becoming liberal democracies and joining the EU and NATO. However, the transition in the 1990s also meant absorption into neoliberal

economies, where austerity measures and ‘restructuring’ led to growing unemployment, social insecurity and rising violence against Romani people unleashed by acute ethno-nationalist forces. Magda recalls growing up in the shadow of the terrible anti-Romani pogroms in Hadareni and Kogalniceanu in early 1990s’ Romania, when mobs burnt down the homes of Roma (ERRC, 1996: 6–7). At one point, her father mediated a potentially violent attack against Roma in her hometown in Ilfov County with the help of leaders from Bucharest, and she recalls being frightened for her father’s safety and by the palpable threat of the attack.

In 1999, as a social work student at the University of Bucharest, Magda began working with RC, a leading Romani rights organization, to help obtain documents and birth certificates for families in the Romani neighbourhood of Zabrauti (Bucharest), enabling them to access their rights as citizens (a common challenge for many Roma). Then, in 2001, Nicoleta Bitu became Magda’s mentor at RC: “I owe a lot to Nicoleta ... she introduced me to the world of tactics on how to create resources and power within Romani communities, especially with Romani women and youth.” From this point on, she also worked with the late Nicolae Gheorghe, a sociologist and the founder of RC, and a pioneering Romani activist, policymaker and institution builder in Romania and internationally. At the end of 2005, she became the Executive Director of RC, continuing in this role until 2012. Here, she reflects on some of her successes:

‘Our work focused primarily on documenting cases of discrimination and abuse of Roma. We looked at violations of human rights against Roma and brought cases to court, and employed test case litigation to eventually render change in legislation and policy. So, it was a very straightforward path, partially inspired by American struggles on public school segregation and the use of case law. We also focused on creating

Romani leadership and power in communities, including health mediators and human rights monitors. And it partially worked!’

In 2005, RC urged the Ministry of Education (MoE) to adopt a law on recognizing education segregation as a discriminatory phenomenon based on a pattern of discrimination that Romani children faced in Romania. RC then worked to build a strong coalition with Amare Romentza, and two *gadje*-led organizations – The Intercultural Centre in Timisoara and OvidiuRo – to join forces on desegregation and intercultural learning. The coalition received Office of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) support as Nicolae Gheorghe was Head of the Contact Point for Sinti & Roma at the time. Ultimately, a partnership was formed between the NGO coalition and the MoE, who agreed on a memorandum for working jointly on segregation in state schools and intercultural education. In 2007, the MoE adopted an ordinance that prohibited segregation in education, and another one promoting intercultural education and diversity.

RC staff felt that although the drafting of policy, the partnership with other NGOs, the tactics employed and the advocacy work were all successful, regrettably, there was little change on the ground. Magda adds:

‘Another moment of hope on desegregation and equal access to education came in 2011 when our Parliament amended the Education Act to prohibit placement in special schools on ethnic grounds. To implement the amendment, RC collaborated with MPs along with Romani leaders, such as Petre-Florin Manole (now an MP with the Social Democratic Party), Amare Romentza and allies. We personally approached the Parliamentary committee drafting this law. Still, the only point which the committee adopted was recognizing the abuse of school placements on ethnic grounds of children

in special schools, as one of the parliamentarians was especially sensitive to this issue, and the other points were left out of the national Education Act.’

As seen earlier, these desegregation initiatives, as in other parts of Europe, had limited success as they were unable to overcome institutional racism (see also Matache and Barbu, 2018). Another observation of Roma policymakers and activists – both during the time of transition and the present day – is that they only have a limited say as they are often silenced or not heard. Racist behaviour, paternalism and, at best, tokenism, as well as a corrosive one-upmanship, are far too common. Magda reflects on how this has prompted her own anti-racist work rooted in Romani representation, and weaves it into a broader conversation on the role of Romani people in spaces and places of power:

‘Perhaps in the past few years, we have seen some seeds of hope in the representation of Roma in a few governments, parliaments and intergovernmental organizations. *But, as a people, I would say we are still lagging behind in terms of representation, leadership and power.* We must be vocal in demanding our place at the table. In the case of other marginalized groups ... their leaders and scholars would certainly not stay silent if someone organizes public fora on their oppression, and there isn’t enough representation from their particular group. I think in the case of Roma, *gadje* continue to discount us. We continue to see non-Roma represent us and speak on behalf of, or about, us, and even though it may not be the same as the 1990s, this power differential is still there. Often, we don’t see a conscious and intentional effort to rectify this.’

Moreover, within the movement, the quest for power and visibility often results in corrosive competition, rather than collaboration based on mutual trust, and we have seen this

in the history of Romani and pro-Romani organizations. As Magda acknowledges, RC had a complex relationship with the ERRC:

‘Sometimes, we worked well together; other times, we felt they used our work without proper credit and equal partnership. During my mandate at RC, I tried to reconcile our relationship with the ERRC several times but it didn’t turn out very well, and I felt that it was because I encountered backlash from a white male Romanian “saviour”. It’s really hard to have such conversations because it just looks like two organizations fighting for credit and/or visibility when Romani people are struggling with oppression. *Thus, how do we critique this and dismantle the power imbalance? How do we ensure that we practice justice when we promote justice? It’s a work in progress, and it’s complicated indeed ...* and we lost our chance to experience the power of true partnership and solidarity.’

Despite some progress, a continuing issue is the lack of representation within the staff of many pro-Romani or human rights organizations, and Nidhi shares her insights:

‘As an Indian-American, I felt like I had a very different perspective on working within the ERRC in 1996. I had already been to Shuto Orizari (one of the largest Romani settlements in the world), and met Bulgarian Roma communities and activists before coming to Budapest. It was my first full-time job after my master’s degree in public policy, and I was very passionate about our mission at the ERRC. I was the only person of colour there at the time and, often, I would ask in staff meetings, “When are we going to hire Roma? When?” And after some time, we had some Romani interns ... but it’s not the same thing. Nicolae Gheorghe was on our board (and, later, Hristo Kyuchukov and Rudko Kawczynski) but having

Romani staff persons who work in operations and who set the priorities was very important to me – *indeed, all the knowledge was within the Romani communities themselves*. But it also seemed that Nicolae couldn't push the power structure to hire Roma fast enough. This was my main problem with the European Roma Rights Centre, where are the Roma I would ask? It was frustrating and I left after only two years there. Afterwards, the ERRC gradually hired Roma full-time staff (first Angela Kóczé, and then others). So, the criticisms I raised back then began to be addressed little by little.'

Today, the ERRC, with a Romani leadership and staff representation, continues to be a lead civil society actor in the arena of Romani rights.

Differences in ideas, philosophies and solutions on human rights work among Romani activists are contentious issues that Magda has long grappled with. Coming to the US was transformative for her thinking, and she elaborates on the journey from RC to Harvard:

'When I led Romani CRISS, sometimes, certain leaders around us felt that we were too "inclusive". Once, when RC joined the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans] Pride March in Bucharest, I faced some adverse reactions from a well-known leader in the movement. And there were many moments when I made particular choices against the stream, and I faced backlash from other Romani leaders ... which was fine. Sometimes, my political choices upset others. Often, I made mistakes; and other times, I got things right. But my heart was always in the right place for Romani people.

Also, while Nicolae Gheorghe had a strong influence on my growth through his ideas on human rights and movement building, we also had disagreements. When I became the Director of RC, one issue we disagreed

on was the fact that Nicolae was trying to question and conceptualize if and when Romani activists needed to recognize the role of some Romani communities in the predicament of their destitution. For instance, he wanted RC to get involved in work on begging – to denounce it, to speak out against begging as a practice amongst some Roma communities – as he was wondering whether it was our duty as Roma to do this for Roma.

But I had a different opinion. Back then, I thought that “No, it’s not for us to deal with the failures of the state; it’s the role of the state to repair the harm and the exploitation of Roma dating back to slavery and to support Roma pushed into begging, not to blame them.” The media too presented begging as a Romani cultural issue, as if begging was somehow part of “Romani culture”. Thus, I was not willing to contribute to the growth of that racist idea. I didn’t entertain it then, and I don’t entertain it now; but now I understand that it’s because I embrace more of an anti-racist school of thought. So, Nicolae and us, the team at RC, we fought over these issues, and our paths diverged. Some activists portray our separation as a fight for power but it was mostly based on philosophical differences, although we continued to share the same goal and hope for Roma justice.’

Magda also relates a contemporary schism within the movement arising from the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic:

‘In April 2020, a few communities in Romania became visible in the national media due to police violence perpetrated against them, as well as a conflict between two rival families. The first thing some Romani activists did back home was to apologize on social media and television for the alleged “misconduct of Roma”. To me, that felt like an “assimilationist” mindset by definition

[Kendi, 2016]. More importantly, I felt that they should have spoken to the people beaten up by the police *before* they blamed and mocked them. *And I do think that we have to break out of these patterns, which show how we Roma, too, internalize white supremacist ideas.* It was only when I came to Harvard that I began to articulate and verbalize my critical race perspective, for example, my take on “racecraft” [Fields and Fields, 2014] or the ideology of criminality that pathologizes and demonizes Romani people to justify oppression. I have embraced ideas of anti-racism, justice and reparation as solutions for Roma, and these are beyond the individual human rights framework.

I have been influenced by the work of African-American thinkers, in particular, Kendi, a theorist on the racial state and racial disparities in the US. In *Stamped from the Beginning* [Kendi, 2016], he suggests there are three different perspectives on racial disparities, each embodied by people with distinct attitudes. The first are the *anti-racists*, those who talk about racial disparities in an anti-racist framework that focuses on dismantling racism. I believe I now belong to this school of thought. The second are the *assimilationists*, and they see racial disparities, on the one hand, as related to discrimination but they also partially blame or question oppressed people themselves. So, for example, if a policeman kills a Black or Romani person, they would say that “it’s bad, but, see, that man was stealing”, and so on. The third category Kendi terms *segregationists*, and these are racist people who put the whole blame for racism on the victims of racial disparities themselves. When I read his books, it created more clarity in my mind around the nature of the conflicting ideas we experience in our movement. But back in Romania, it wasn’t the reasoning that informed my point of view, but it was just me thinking instinctively “this is not fair. The police can’t abuse and kill a human

being, regardless of their criminal background. Everyone has a fundamental right to life.”

Nevertheless, I still believe that strategic litigation, human rights work and policy advocacy are mandatory for our democracies and Romani individuals and families. So, I believe that the work of RC and other human rights NGOs has been, still is and will remain essential, especially in these times shaken by far-right groups, populists and racists. But I’d say that my work and vision today are focused more on identifying paths to dismantle collective injustices against Roma, anti-racist work and reparations, and an emphasis on the states, societies and the systems of oppression, rather than on “Roma integration”. So, while violations of human rights require remedies rooted in individual human rights frameworks, collective injustices require collective remedies. But this is a different moment in our history, in our movement and in my growth as a Romani scholar and activist.’

In her transatlantic work as an activist-scholar based in the US, Magda gains further inspiration from scholars and writers such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Dubois, James Baldwin, Patricia Hill Collins, Cornel West, Barbara Fields, Khalil Gibran Muhammad and many others. These influences have been important in debates on knowledge production and the marginalization of the Romani voice in depictions of Romani life worlds (see [Chapter Eight](#) by Kóczé and Trehan). Magda elucidates:

‘It was through the work of African-American scholars that I’ve been emboldened to own my scholarship, and to ignore and not fight against the labels that *gadje* [non-Romani] scholars stamp Roma scholars with (for example, “activist”). *To many of them, we are not scholarly enough, we are not objective enough and, most importantly, we should have stayed where we were 20 years ago – helping*

them gaining access to our communities. But I am not going to stop because some want us to stop, or because they feel uncomfortable, or because they feel they are the experts and we are the subjects of their research. There is also a lot to unpack about “*gadjo* objectivity” – and the power of their collective subjectivity – in Roma-related research given that they, too, carry on their shoulders the experiences and legacies of their ancestors – in this case, oppression, enslavement, Holocaust, forced sterilization and so on. And we can all learn from the lessons and struggles of other oppressed people. As you know, the critics of early Black scholarship also called Dubois and others “subjective”, “not scholarly enough”. And at the same time, we should aspire to gain the courage of Ida B. Wells, whose instrumental work on lynching and dismantling the ideology of criminality paved the way for so many other scholars engaged in the study of racism.’

Reflecting upon her expansive knowledge of human rights work in Romania and other Balkan countries, Magda shares valuable insights on Romani organizing and what skills she built upon in her transatlantic work:

‘One thing to note is that whatever we were doing in Romania and with RC, it was not community organizing per se. *It was policy advocacy, strategic litigation, health mediation, human rights work, but it wasn’t community organizing.* In a way, strategic litigation has been at the core of many advocacy initiatives of RC and others, inspired as it was, somehow, by the US civil rights movement and the judgment of *Oliver Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* and others in 1954.

However, the Roma movement has yet to make demands for reparations, to work towards economic or environmental justice, and to build power through community organizing and mobilization, protest, and mass action. Up to this day,

I cannot point to many genuine instances of community organizing as such in Romani communities. There are some initiatives in Romania and other parts of Europe but they are far from fitting into the framework of real organizing. But there is some hope as seeds of community organizing have recently been sown in North Macedonia.’

For Magda, à la Ganz (2013/14), *community organizing means the creation of power within communities*. In fact, community leadership can greatly strengthen the work of NGOs. She hastens to add that the ‘NGO advocacy’ model that is now seen in Europe is not wrong; it is just one approach among a diversity of tactics within human rights work. Creating NGOs and establishing goals towards policy advocacy or case law continues to be valuable. She suggests some new pathways for organizing:

‘Successful social movements in Europe, such as Serbia on the Move,^[1] are making an effort to build leadership and the power of the people within local communities, be they parents, patients or, broadly, citizens. Yet, Roma and pro-Roma NGOs in Europe have focused primarily on litigation, service provision projects and advocacy work. And while their efforts have shown some results, organizing Romani parents, youths and adults with lived experiences of segregation in special schools has been tried in only a few places. Miroslav Klempar and the Awen Amenca team in Czech Republic are using this approach [Prague Monitor, 2020]. *I argue that most “organizing efforts” have not invested in, and therefore have not created, the power and organizing skills of the people. Meanwhile, human rights NGOs are losing their efficacy due to lack of funding and pressure from governments, so there is currently a serious void in advocacy and desegregation tactics.*’

As mentioned earlier, Magda cites the influence of the strategic organizing philosophy of scholar-activist Marshall Ganz of

Harvard's Kennedy School. In his youth, Ganz had been a volunteer with the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, and then an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a youth-focused civil rights group working in the South. In the autumn of 1965, he joined Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in an effort to unionize California's farm workers, and later, through his academic research, was able to fuse activism with knowledge production and generate a novel approach to organizing. Magda explains:

'Let me be clear, in the Roma movement, we've seen some NGOs trying to implement community organizing projects but, unfortunately, the tactics did not lead to a shift in power towards the people and, thus, sustainable constituencies were never built. And when I say "constituency", I use Ganz's [2013/14] definition, namely, "A community organized to use its resources to act on behalf of their own interests." We are all accustomed to a model in which mostly national-level activists and NGOs voice the Roma-related concerns of local communities. A power over as opposed to a power with model, as Ganz would say. This is not to say that there aren't any challenges in organizing actual constituencies, nor that community organizing is the panacea in dismantling anti-Romani racism, but it is to say that there is power in building strong constituencies with a base at the local level. And organizing could be an effective tool.'

Magda offers her perspectives on the critical importance of local organizing as a bulwark against the vagaries of top-down government policies:

'Based on my own mistakes and experiences, I think it is essential. It gives more power to people because then they don't depend on donors, and can't be put down by the government easily. I experienced first-hand how the

government put down Romani CRISS, in a moment when we were at a crossroads: either implement desegregation together with state schools ourselves *or* let the harmful phenomenon persist. We decided to partner with the MoE and one hundred schools on desegregation. And though these were state schools (under the MoE) implementing the desegregation activities, the MoE decided not to reimburse the costs for materials, which were considerable over two to three years. And although they initially approved 90 per cent of our work and expenses, later the state bureaucracy blocked us. Their decision was based on an unfounded “suspicion” of key activities not being implemented, although they were conducted by their own local bodies, that is, the state schools. This problem hasn’t been resolved since 2012, and RC is still fighting them in court and even after several recent positive decisions from the courts in Romania, as thousands of reports and pictures from the schools implementing the project prove the MoE wrong. We received a lot of political pressure and mistreatment from the MoE.

Community organizing has a better chance to be sustainable in the long run because it doesn’t depend on a call for proposals from a donor, but on the needs of local people and the power they generate for themselves. I also think that for Roma, it’s not just a matter of violations of individual rights. So, if we are to go into “Western thinking” [liberal human rights framework] about imagining rights, it’s a very “white framework” because it was built on the idea that violations are perpetrated predominantly against individuals. *But in the case of racialized minorities, such as Roma, it is also about structural racism, patterns of collective injustice, not just about violations of individual rights. The problems we racialized groups face are structural, so working on an anti-racist agenda is essential for communities of colour since we need to dismantle structural racism.*

Certainly, the individual rights framework remains *mandatory*. It's important to be able to go to court, to be able to point out these patterns of structural discrimination. In the landmark case of education desegregation in Europe, *D.H. v. the Czech Republic* (2007), as well as in other cases, a few-dozen Romani children did receive remedies after the ECtHR [European Court of Human Rights] judgment found they had been unjustly placed in special schools. However, as Jacqueline and I wrote in our book on reparations [Bhabha and Matache, [forthcoming](#)], *does \$4000, the amount received by each of the 17 applicants in D.H. v. the Czech Republic, undo the lifelong impact of social, economic and emotional segregation in an educational system with an inferior curriculum?* Moreover, how do we ensure justice and remedies for the large number of Romani children facing similar circumstances? A majority of them cannot go to court. *The ECtHR accepted as evidence, and consequently as true, statistics showing the structural nature of segregation and demanded policy changes. But how do we ensure reparatory justice for collective injustice?*

Magda emphasizes the need for shifting strategy and making specific demands beyond a mere call for the acknowledgement of racism and the need for racial justice, suggesting the requirement for focused approaches to tackle structural problems:

'I believe we need a strong advocacy movement that focuses on structural racism, wealth and resource inequalities, *and* on reparations. Much of our work at Harvard focuses on reparations, and we started collaborating with Romani advocates and scholars to emphasize the issue of reparations in knowledge production, advocacy and policy demands. We are also contributing to the strengthening of a global conversation

and a coalitional advocacy movement on reparations claims across historical and geographical spaces. Most importantly, we have set out several reparations strategies that are relevant in addressing the continuum of Roma collective injustices in Europe: (a) truth-telling; (b) memorializing resistance; (c) victim empowerment; (d) offender accountability; (e) restitution; (f) apology; (g) reparative compensation; and (h) legal measures [see Matache and Bhabha, 2020].’

Magda also reflects on how to build coalitions and the value of intersectional alliances with other marginalized groups:

‘What I learned in the US is that solidarity work takes a lot of effort and patience. In my work here at Harvard, including with Black Americans and Dalit people, first of all, what we are trying to do is to create friendships between our struggles. We are trying to understand each other, learn the history of the specific forms of oppression we face, the vocabulary we use in each movement, and support each other [a basis for building trust in each other]. It’s a slower process but sensitive to the specificities of each group and more sustainable in the longer term.’

Notably, Magda has developed a close collaborative relationship with Professor Cornel West, a renowned public intellectual and teacher on race and social justice at Harvard, and in a 2018 piece in *The Guardian*, they discuss the historical wrongs perpetrated on their peoples:

The impetus to kill and chain Roma and African American bodies remains one of the appalling facets of how the criminalization and demonization of these peoples have historically translated into action.... From early on in their histories, Roma and African Americans crossed similar paths, as white policymakers continued

to employ similar tactics to maintain white normativity, social power, and privilege. (Matache and West, 2018)

Alongside West, Magda has been engaged in dialogue with Suraj Yengde, a Dalit scholar at Harvard, on solidarities between communities of colour and bridge-building between African-Americans, Dalits and Roma, and has been an interlocutor, along with Angela Kóczé, in Harvard debates on solidarity strategies, as well as the feminist of colour panel discussions with African-American, Dalit, Palestinian and Romani feminists. Here, a key goal is to forge solidarity networks with other oppressed minority groups, and our discussion raised the significance of creating an inter-community ‘safe place’ where you are free to contemplate on the oppression and anxiety you face, even in the midst of building a coalition:

‘With reference to “safe places”, often, the level of understanding of pain and harm in scholars belonging to historically oppressed groups is stronger, so I feel safer in having these conversations and learning from others. For me, it has been harder to build coalitions with some white feminists as it’s been frustrating the way in which some white feminists want to engage with Romani feminism. Some want to focus on intra-community issues, such as early marriages, while we believe their voices would have greater impact on issues of intersectional discrimination and racism, and on discrepancies in access to education, health and jobs between Roma and non-Romani women. But while that would have been more helpful for us, it would have been more uncomfortable for them. Romani scholarship and activism are not as mature as in other movements. For decades, we have borrowed and adjusted tactics from the US and other civil rights movements. We also adopted concepts and vocabulary from Black American scholarship – and thousands of books have been written in this area, whereas with

Roma, we are still at the beginning, and much of the scholarship has been written by non-Roma. *I believe that while we learn from other groups, we also need to keep in mind the specificities of our history and our people.*'

Here, Nidhi emphasizes the importance of solidarity work among a diversity of groups, and reflects on racism in the US and her motivation for working in the field:

'Professor Ian Hancock was a key influence upon me, and taking his course on "Gypsy Language and Culture" in 1992 at the University of Texas at Austin greatly inspired me to learn about Roma and their human rights situation. Hancock, as my mentor, emphasized: "If you want to understand Roma, you'll have to go to Europe." And so I worked as a human rights researcher at the ERRC in the mid-1990s, just as the Roma movement was becoming "formalized" with the emergence of "Roma rights" NGOs in Central Eastern Europe. Part of my desire to get involved stemmed from my own experiences of racism in the US. When my family immigrated from India to the US in the 1970s, the "N-word" was still a term of abuse used by white racists, and I experienced it myself as a child in Ohio. In Europe, as I began working with Roma and learning the Romani language, I discovered further connections between Romani culture and that of my birthplace, thereby embracing a broader understanding of "diaspora".'

Magda also reflects upon the early days of the programme at Harvard with Professor Bhabha, the Director of Research at the FXB Center:

'I first met Jackie in 2010 when she came to Romania and wanted to conduct participatory action research (PAR) with local Roma. Jackie and Arlan Fuller

(FXB Center's director then) wanted to establish PAR initiatives with young people. At that time, RC was working with the International Research & Exchanges Board [IREX] on project development and identifying community needs with high school students, so it was a good fit with Harvard's goals. Then, once I joined as a postdoctoral fellow in 2012, I suggested we organize the first of what was to become an "Annual Roma Conference" at Harvard, with the financial support of the OSCE (via Andrejz Mirga). In the first year of the conference in 2013, eminent panellists attended, including Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and Jack Greenberg, a respected white American lawyer who had worked on *Brown v. Board of Education*, and is also a friend of RC.'

PAR gives those being researched a central role in the design of research, the collection of data and its interpretation, and ideally leads to change in their lives, as Magda explains: "Our participatory methodology challenged conventional Roma-related research, both in terms of structure (top-down, paternalistic research 'on' Roma) and focus, that is, the tendency to view obstacles to educational advancement particularly through the lens of economic deprivation and Roma 'vulnerability'."

Another project that Magda and Jackie are coordinating, along with Voice of Roma, a transatlantic Romani advocacy group established in 1996 by Sani Rifati that promotes Romani culture, is 'The Romani Realities in the US' study, which sheds light on key aspects of Romani-American life. It covers education, discrimination by law enforcement and identity issues, such as language and the ethnonyms American Roma prefer (that is, 'Roma', 'G*psy', 'Romani people'). It promises to be path-breaking for the US because scholarship on American Roma written in the 1970s/80s was generally limited to anthropological works on particular communities.

The Harvard/Voice of Roma study gives an overview of the contemporary situation of Roma across the US, raising issues of discrimination of Romani people based on ethnicity. One Romani-American entrepreneur familiar with the study offered us his perspective on its significance in June 2020:

‘It will have positive influences in two specific areas: access to education and to economic schemes for minority businesses. For too long, we have been labelled as being part of so-called criminal gangs. Some states still have “Gypsy Task force” police who monitor and racially profile us. When we go out to work as contractors (in construction and related trades) – and understand that 95 per cent of us are self-employed and small business owners – they often shut down our work, arrest us and, sometimes, we even get jail sentences for up to 20 years. So, if the study helps to show that we are an ethnic minority, I’m hoping we will no longer be seen as “criminal gangs”, but as a genuine ethnic group in America, and be eligible for the government’s minority-owned business tax breaks in the future. And we would qualify for education scholarships too.’

Indeed, this could have a profound impact on how Romani people are perceived within US society, and plant the seed for rectifying centuries of mistrust and discrimination, as Romani-Americans would finally be part of the ‘American mosaic’ as a people whose culture and economic contributions are recognized and valued across society.

Advocacy in focus: Romani activists go to Washington and Ottawa

This section covers two parallel efforts on the recognition of Roma in North America. The first effort is that of the ‘DC Working Group’, which consists of a core group of Romani people and allies in the US, including: Magda; Nathan Mick, an

American Romanichal based in Kentucky who was previously a congressional aide and is active in Republican Party circles; Erika Schlager, counsellor-at-law with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)/Helsinki Commission (she has been actively following Romani affairs since the 1990s); Jim Goldston, a legal advocate and director of the Open Society Institute's Justice Initiative; Professor Ethel Brooks, who, until recently, represented Roma and Sinti at the US Holocaust Memorial Council and is herself a transatlantic activist and scholar; Dr Petra Gelbart, a Czech-American Romani activist; Jud Nirenberg and David Meyers of the US State Department; and Kristin Raeesi and Professor Carol Silverman, activists with the Voice of Roma.² Initially, in the DC Working Group, Magda proposed a resolution to recognize an annual 'Roma Heritage Month' but, ultimately, the group decided pragmatically on a congressional resolution for the recognition of Romani American heritage and International Roma Day (8 April), the Romani Holocaust Memorial (2 August) and the slavery of Roma.

The next stage was the most crucial one, that of lobbying congressional leaders and gaining their sponsorship. American Rom Nathan Mick worked to enlist bipartisan support for the Bill, and was able to get several co-sponsors from the Republican Party, such as Representative Steve Watkins of Kansas and Senator Roger Wicker of Missouri. Representatives Alcee L. Hastings (D-FL), Steve Watkins (R-KS) and Andy Barr (R-KY) introduced H.Res.292, Celebrating the heritage of Romani Americans, a resolution that marks 8 April 2019 as International Roma Day, honours the culture, history and heritage of the Romani people, and raises awareness of the widespread human rights abuses and discrimination that Romani people continue to face. Senator Benjamin Cardin (Democrat from Maryland) and Senator Roger Wicker (Republican from Mississippi) introduced Senate Resolution 141, A Resolution Celebrating the heritage of Romani Americans, on 4 April 2019.

Congressional leaders Hastings, Watkins, Wicker and Cardin issued the following statement:

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. Through this resolution, we celebrate our shared history and applaud the efforts to promote transnational cooperation among Roma at the historic First World Romani Congress on April 8, 1971. (US House of Representatives, 2019)

Further advocacy efforts in Congress were coordinated by Victoria Rios, an American Romani activist from a renowned Flamenco music family in Spain, who spearheaded a letter-writing campaign supporting the adoption of the resolution. Activists and scholars, including from Voice of Roma, and other American and European Romani people, also participated. The resolution is yet to be adopted by the US Congress.

With respect to Canada, it is critical to point out the common roots of structural racism with its neighbour to the south. Black Canadian writer Desmond Cole elucidates:

They are both countries dominated by settler colonial white governments and white majority populations. They are both places that displaced and killed Indigenous people to take their land. And so the legacies of colonialism are the same in both countries – not identical, but those legacies carry on in our institutions today. And just like the US, our police forces were designed to do these things – to catch slaves who were running away, to push Indigenous peoples off of their territories. And those police functions ... and the institutions are the same ... giving us the same outcomes you would expect. (NPR, 2020)

The history of modern Romani activism in Canada can be traced to the seminal work of Quebec-born writer, activist and linguist Ronald Lee. In the 1970s, he assisted Romani refugees and migrants from communist regimes in central and eastern Europe as well as Yugoslavia. Along with renowned linguist, scholar and activist Professor Ian Hancock (OBE), American Kalderash Romani leader John Tene and actor Yul Brynner, Lee was an integral part of the International Romani Union (IRU) delegation that successfully petitioned the United Nations in New York City in July 1978 for NGO Status Category III for the IRU; this was granted in 1979, and then upgraded in 1993 to Category II status (Acton, 2017; Lee, 2018).

Then, from 1989 to 1990, he assisted Romani asylum seekers from eastern Europe, going on to establish the Roma Community and Advocacy Centre in Toronto in 1997, as well as the Western Canadian Romani Alliance in Vancouver the subsequent year, leaving behind a rich legacy for a younger generation of Romani-Canadian activists to build upon (Lee, 2018).

Similar to contemporary Romani activism in the US, key issues – such as raising the visibility of the rights of Romani asylum seekers and immigrants to Canada, and the recognition of the Roma Holocaust – have been addressed by Dafina Savić of the NGO Romanipe and professional journalist Lena Savić, both of whom are involved with transatlantic anti-racist work from their base in Montreal, Quebec. Dafina Savić, a former United Nations Minority Fellow, in her testimony from 11 June 2019 before the Subcommittee on International Human Rights Committee of the Canadian Parliament, recounts the work of Romanipe³:

Securing rights for Romani refugees has been a priority for us, so the elimination of Bill C-31 ... or at least the revision of the criteria used to determine what does and does not constitute a 'safe country' is definitely a priority. I think the Canadian government has the responsibility,

at least as a first step, to speak out about the very gross violations that Roma are facing. When Roma are being killed, the world is actually silent. So, I think Canada could take a lead on responsibility in this. (Government of Canada, 2019, testimony by D. Savić)

Here, she outlines the importance of bridge-building with other oppressed groups in Canada:

Seven years ago, I founded a not-for-profit organization ... and [we] built collaborations with many different groups who have been victims of genocide. In the spirit of standing in solidarity, but also in action with those groups, we want to acknowledge our solidarity with people who have presented before this Committee, namely Indigenous peoples as well as the people of Burundi and the Rohingya in Myanmar. (Government of Canada, 2019, testimony by D. Savić)

Dafina Savić then offers her views on Romani persecution in Europe through segregation, extreme poverty and anti-Romani racism, problems exacerbated by the rise of the radical right in recent decades, and that compel many Roma to seek asylum in Canada:

How has the Canadian government reacted to this? Unfortunately, in 2012 under the previous government, a lot of Roma were coming to Canada to seek asylum and seek protection from the rise of the neo-Nazi movement. This was just in 2012, when the far-right reached its peak. Actually, in a village in Hungary, six Roma were killed, including a six-year-old boy, as a result of these attacks by the far-right. A large number of Roma came to Canada to seek asylum. *The response of the government at the time was unfortunately to repeat that rhetoric of criminality, accusing Roma of being bogus refugees undeserving of Canadian*

protection. (Government of Canada, 2019, testimony before Parliament by D. Savić. Emphases added)

To European Roma, these actions may seem modest but, in fact, this is path-breaking for North American Romani advocacy because it strengthens the official recognition of Romani people in a part of the world where Roma often survive by being ‘invisible’ and not drawing attention to themselves. Moreover, the earlier case studies highlight the efficacy of transatlantic Romani organizing and leading national campaigns that mobilize support from US and Canadian lawmakers by combining the synergies of activists in Europe and North America, and are a harbinger for greater collaboration.⁴

Lela Savić, as a journalist and public intellectual, who also leads the Quebec chapter of the Canadian Journalists of Color (CJC),⁵ has played an important role in lifting the voices of Romani people in Canada through her community radio initiative and media work. Here, Savić (2019, emphases added) explains the complexities of minority visibility and inclusion within mainstream media:

It’s not enough to have Romani people enter mainstream media, if you don’t change the system, nothing is going to change. I have an Indigenous friend who is a reporter, and she said, “it’s not enough that I’m an Indigenous reporter, because you are putting all the pressure of decolonizing on me, you’re putting all the pressure of racism on me.... I entered mainstream media, and now I’m doing conferences on how to decolonize the media”.

So, yes, I think it’s important that we Roma enter the system, but there is a price to be paid for this, as Fatima Khemilat (2014) suggests. And she cites the French political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart, who says, “dominated people seldom arrive at penetrating the social structures which oppress them”. But at what price Khemilat asks?

And she makes a distinction between ‘screen’ intellectual and ‘resistant intellectuals’, whereby those who enter the social structures that oppress them, often become a ‘screen’ of tokenization, thereby reproducing systems of power, while those that resist this tokenization, challenge them. So, the question for Roma is “do you uphold white supremacy or dismantle it?” When you uphold white supremacy, you get rewarded, but when you try to dismantle it, there is a price to be paid.

So, what happens when you have the ‘Roma elite’ entering the system? What ends up happening is that in order to survive, you will end up *whitening your speech* ... so that you don’t make the white person feel bad, and that’s *white fragility* actually. *White fragility is the idea that white people feel bad all the time whenever you dare to say how oppressed you are, you dare to take up space.* Within Romani studies and Romani activism, are we dismantling white (*gadjo*) supremacy?

The critical race work of Magda Matache, Lela Savić and Dafina Savić points to a new approach within Romani advocacy in North America and internationally, one that places a central emphasis on *positionality* (in terms of Romani ‘voice’) and *intersectionality* within anti-racist work (see [Chapter Eight](#) by Kóczé and Trehan). Within their advocacy, they also harness community initiatives and solidarity building to foster the recognition of Roma at the national policy level – the recognition of both Roma and their struggles within North American political spaces – but also a transatlantic awareness of the struggles of Romani communities back in Europe and those of oppressed groups globally.

The work of anti-racism and intersectional solidarity

Through the rich exchanges between activists, scholars and scholar-activists, we arrive at a few insights as regards the

question ‘What is to be done?’ in terms of dismantling racism and future organizing within the Romani movement. Areas of action include genuine and substantive participation, community organizing, enhanced representation, and reducing the power differential with *gadje*, as outlined earlier.

The ideas generated from Magda’s experience with critical race activism and strategic solidarity development in both Europe and the US – with groups such as African-Americans and Dalits of India – are woven into this narrative of transatlantic Romani activism to highlight the core potential of global anti-racist alliances. Transatlantic activism is enriched by creating diverse coalitions of Roma and other activists of colour to harness the power of intersectional solidarity (the ‘together we rise’ ethos) for recognition, reparations and anti-racist policies. The synergy and lessons learned from initiatives in Europe and North America take on new significance given the increasingly visible presence of authoritarian (white) nationalist politics in the US, which is further polarizing the citizenry along identity lines.

Regardless of the strategy chosen by activists – organizing, protest, litigation or policy advocacy – they should all become integral parts of the anti-racist tactical repertoire of a coherent and strong Romani anti-racist movement that embraces not only individual rights, but also economic, environmental, social and reparatory justice. In developing a tactical repertoire, the global context needs to be considered. In the summer of 2020, it is evident that President Trump has sought to exploit fears and tensions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the catastrophic economic downturn and structural racism, all in an effort to galvanize his base in order to win re-election in November 2020.

Yet, in response, a diverse and transformational anti-racist movement is also growing. Institutionalized racism, as reflected in the brutal murders of African-Americans Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of police, spawned a series of Black Lives Matter (BLM) solidarity demonstrations across

the globe (Younge, 2020). Roma active in civil society are emphasizing the direct relevance of the BLM movement as a model for Roma to organize against police brutality against Roma (including murders) over the past few years in Europe (Romea.cz, 2020).

Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, activists in Europe point out that racists and nationalists have begun to resort to violent, supremacist tactics. As Matache, Leaning and Bhabha (2020) argue:

In the past two months, from Ukraine to Spain, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Serbia, state representatives, police, journalists, and public figures have propagated inflammatory rhetoric, labelling Roma as sources of coronavirus contamination. Bulgaria has instituted discriminatory roadblocks and police checkpoints to target Roma individuals; in Romania, some local stores are allegedly prohibiting the entry of Roma. They all exploit a false narrative to disseminate irrational fear: Roma are transmitters of the virus.

Thus, perhaps one of the most important and immediate points of intersection and solidarity between the US and Europe is the fight for anti-racist policies and against white supremacist nationalism. Today, a new generation of critical Romani activists and thinkers in Europe are exploring ideas centred on intersectionality and structural racism, and wonder what lessons may be learned from similar approaches that groups like BLM (established in 2013) are taking.

However, a remarkable dissonance can be found in the responses of some European leaders who, while pointing out flaws in the US system, hasten to praise Europe for its social inclusion. Margaritis Schinas, the Vice President of the European Commission, stated that Europe had better systems for social inclusion, protection and universal health care than the US (Barigazzi, 2020). He also claimed that:

there is also a European tradition for protection of minorities, we have less issues than they have in the [United] States.... [This] doesn't mean that we don't have some way still to go in terms of fostering equality and inclusion, income distribution – all these are issues that Europe has still to address. (Barigazzi, 2020)

Such assessments of the treatment of minority groups in Europe are simply not true; rather, they are rather illusory (Barigazzi, 2020). Moreover, such statements underplay or refuse to acknowledge the reality of structural anti-Romani racism in Europe as underscored earlier – particularly during these troubled but transformational times – raising concerns about Europe's commitment to repudiate the current trajectory of white supremacist nationalism in the US.

Nonetheless, there are a few positive signs towards recognizing structural racism in Europe. In June 2020, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, endorsed a discussion on racism within the College of the EU Commission, and stated: "Because each of us has a role to play. This starts with examining ourselves, our unconscious biases and the privileges that we take for granted." In addition, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the anti-racism protests following the death of George Floyd, indicating a renewed desire to tackle racism and discrimination within Europe itself (European Parliament, 2020).

The work of transatlantic Romani activists and interlocutors based in North America represents a sea change in the movement, with clear positions on intersectionality and solidarity but also an unwavering courage in challenging racist discourses and norms wherever they encounter them. They are engaging in a critique of structural racism and the responses to it, and this presents a far greater challenge to the status quo.

Today, Roma, minority ethnic groups and other minority groups, such as the LGBTQI community and the differently abled, as well as those who believe in democracy, are engaged

in an epic and monumental battle against racism. We live in critical times but can also seek inspiration from a new generation of Romani public intellectuals in the US and Europe who believe in anti-racist work and fight and hope for anti-racist societies and policies.

Notes

- ¹ See: <http://en.srbijaupokretu.org/who-are-we/>
- ² See: <http://www.voiceofroma.com/>
- ³ For more on Romanipe's activities, see: <https://romanipe.wordpress.com/>
- ⁴ Indeed, recent efforts by Romani survivors, organizations and individuals has resulted in the official recognition of the Holocaust of the Romani people by the Government of Canada. August 2 will now be marked as an official day of remembrance, and Canada joins Germany, Hungary, Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic and the EU in officially recognizing the Romani Genocide (the US is yet to do so). August 2 commemorates the day in 1944 when 4,300 Roma and Sinti prisoners who remained in the 'Gypsy camp' inside Auschwitz-Birkenau were brutally murdered by Nazis and their collaborators. Recent estimates suggest that across Europe, over 500,000 Roma perished during WWII (<https://romanipe.wordpress.com/2020/08/19/a-historical-and-long-awaited-moment-the-government-of-canada-declares-august-2nd-as-an-official-day-of-commemoration-of-the-romani-genocide/>).
- ⁵ See: www.cjoc.net

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