



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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SDIR • NUMBER 158 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, June 11, 2019**

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**Chair**

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg**



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• (1305)

[English]

**The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)):** Welcome, everybody. I'm very pleased to have today's subcommittee hearing on the Roma.

We have with us, from Montreal, Dafina Savic, who is the founder of Romanipe, a Montreal-based not-for-profit organization that fights discrimination against Roma worldwide. We are very pleased to have her as a witness today.

Ms. Savic, we will give you about 10 minutes to do your opening remarks, and then we will open up the floor to questions. As this is the first time that the subcommittee has heard on this topic, we are very much looking forward to your testimony.

Go ahead, Ms. Savic.

**Ms. Dafina Savic (Founder and Executive Director, Romanipe):** Thank you.

First and foremost, I want to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to present the far-too-often ignored human rights situation of Romani people across the world today, a people whose very existence remains threatened, a people whose human dignity is continuously denied today across the world, a people whose fight remains largely invisible, and on which I will attempt to shed light today through my presentation.

In the Romani language, when greeting people, we say

[*Witness spoke in Romani*]

[English]

This translates to "I greet you with good will."

I'm really hopeful that my presence here today will give you the will to take action on the often invisible human rights situation of Roma, which remains largely ignored today across the globe.

Seven years ago I founded a not-for-profit organization called Romanipe, whose main mission is to defend human dignity against human rights violations that Romani people face across the world. Our organization was built on the principle of unity. In that regard, it has worked in collaboration with many groups of people with whom we share suffering and has 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 also 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. We stand with them in solidarity.

Almost 75 years ago today, the remaining 2,998 Romani prisoners of the gypsy family camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau were murdered en masse by the Nazis and their collaborators. According to the latest estimates, at least half a million Roma were killed by Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War. Unfortunately, this history remains largely ignored, unknown and untaught globally.

Our organization has been fighting for the past eight years for the Canadian government to officially recognize the Romani genocide. On August 2 of last year the Canadian government, via Minister Freeland and Minister Rodriguez, acknowledged the commitment of the government to recognize the Romani genocide. Today we are still waiting for an official act of Parliament to be adopted so that recognition can officially be granted.

Recognition of the Romani genocide is highly important since the human rights situation of Roma and the hatred and racism against Roma remain very normalized forms of racism today given that the history of the Romani people, specifically during the Second World War, remains largely unknown and unrecognized.

During the Second World War, rhetoric portraying Roma as criminals was used by Nazis and their collaborators to justify the mass murder of at least half a million Romani people. Across European countries today, unfortunately we see that rhetoric being repeated. In many European countries, physical walls have been built to separate Roma from non-Romani citizens. These walls are not at borders but have actually been built within cities to separate Roma from non-Romani citizens. In countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Romani children are disproportionately placed in segregated schools without prior testing based on the idea that Roma are mentally inferior to non-Roma.

This segregation has been documented and condemned by many organizations, such as Amnesty International, the European Roma Rights Centre and many others, which have spoken out and actually called on those countries to take concrete measures to end the segregation of Romani children in those countries. Unfortunately, as reported recently by Amnesty International and many other organizations, the segregation of Roma is still present in almost all of those countries.

As recently as 2012, cases of forced sterilization of Romani women were also documented in countries like Hungary and Slovakia. Governments of those countries have actually acknowledged that this was the case, yet no measures have been taken to actually offer compensation to the women who were forcibly sterilized in those countries.

Just recently, in fact last year, in countries like Ukraine, despite the many warnings of organizations like Amnesty International of the violent attacks inflicted on Romani settlements in Ukraine, a young Romani man was actually killed by members of the far right on the basis of the idea that Roma need to be killed to eliminate so-called gypsy crime.

In Italy, the minister of the interior, Matteo Salvini, recently announced his intention to create a Roma census, a policy that is very reminiscent of the 1933 policies inflicted upon the Jewish population in Italy at the time. This policy gained wide public support and in fact has led to an increase in hate crime against the Romani population in Italy.

Just last year, after the violent killing of three young Romani girls, graffiti throughout Rome praising the deaths of those three girls was actually documented. In fact, some pictures show graffiti saying "three less Roma". This was just last year.

This month, in fact, in Bulgaria, neo-Nazis have marched threatening Romani villages, chanting anti-Romani slogans and encouraging anti-Romani violence.

In France, a few months ago, as a result of a medieval stereotype, Roma were accused of stealing children. There have been many violent attacks that have left many Romani families, including children, hospitalized. These things were the results of fake news being spread via social media.

Our colleagues in France are part of the only organization that has spoken out against this. Due to their efforts, the government has actually taken action.

There are many, many, many countries. These things took place in just this past month. We're not talking about years ago. We are talking about a few weeks ago that Romani people were actually killed, including in Bulgaria, simply because they were Roma.

I would like to read some of the quotes from the ruling parties in those countries with those marches. "Whoever runs over a gypsy child is acting correctly if he gives no thought to stopping and steps hard on the accelerator." This is a quote from a political columnist and a founding member of Hungary's governing Fidesz party. "Gypsies to the gas chambers." "Set them all on fire." "Bury them alive." "Stab them in the back." These were quotes from ethnic Czechs during a demonstration against Roma in the Czech Republic.

Between 2012 and today, we have seen what we call anti-Romani marches. Most of the time these have been organized by the far right but they have also been widely supported by everyday citizens. People march carrying signs with swastikas and often dress up as Hitler and chant anti-Romani slogans.

How has the world reacted to those situations? Unfortunately, it hasn't, because, as I mentioned before, one of the most normalized forms of racism today is actually the violence committed against

Roma, which is unfortunately based on the belief that Roma are fundamentally criminals.

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.

• (1310)

Our organization has asked that you work to address these issues with every single minister since Jason Kenney was minister. He was in fact responsible for the introduction of Bill C-31, under which specific measures were taken to restrict the entrance of Romani asylum seekers, whereby billboards were actually placed in the villages, such as in Hungary, where Roma were known to come from, discouraging Roma asylum seekers from applying to Canada. The policy measures that were taken have proven to be efficient. According to the statistics, Roma acceptance decreased by 90% between 1998 and 2012.

Our organization has actually worked with many families who have been unjustly deported. We are in fact still working with a family that is to face deportation in the next two weeks because Bill C-31 is still in place, and the countries that I have mentioned, where Roma are perceived to be animals and are threatened with being killed, are considered safe by the Canadian government. One of the provisions that we suggested be made to Bill C-31 was that the criteria of what constitutes a safe country be revised and that there be a board of experts deciding under what criteria those countries are safe.

A new government came into place, and Minister Hussen was given the mandate. That was dropped from the mandate of the minister, so those countries are still considered to be safe.

Of course, there is an increase in the acceptance of Roma, especially those from Hungary, in light of the well-documented evidence of persecution of Roma in those countries, yet there are still consequences to that bill, which we have seen from our organization's point of view. In the past three months, we have worked at least on three cases of deportation of Romani families who came here around 2012. There are still consequences to the policies enacted by the Canadian government.

Just to give you a bit of the background of our organization, when we started the organization, our intention was actually to use Canada as a model for Europe, despite Canada having its own human rights issues, in terms of how Europe could do better. Unfortunately, the Canadian government led us to do the opposite of that, because Roma coming from those countries were actually facing discrimination in their countries and were sent back to situations of discrimination, which actually doubled the discrimination of the home countries.

On that, just to give you a concrete example, according to the 1951 refugee convention, which the Canadian government has ratified, a country cannot send people back to situations where they will face persecution, whereas in the case of the Roma, that is exactly what happened. We've worked with many families, especially Romani children, who knew that they were to be refused because of the high refusal rate of refugees whose education was not recognized in countries where they already face segregation. They were sent back to their countries, faced double discrimination and actually had to drop out of school.

I'll end on that note, but I just want to take 30 seconds to make some concrete recommendations, if I may.

Essentially, what we're asking the Canadian government for is to eliminate Bill C-31 or to at least appoint a board of experts to determine what constitutes a safe country; to work with European governments to address the ongoing human rights situation in those countries; and, to officially adopt an act of Parliament. I have drafted a bill that is ready to be presented. It simply needs to be presented by members of Parliament so that the Romani genocide can be recognized. I think the committee's very mission is to prevent future atrocities from happening. That really begins with recognition.

Thank you.

• (1315)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for your very informative testimony.

Now we will go to some questions.

We will start with Mr. Anderson.

You have seven minutes.

**Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate this.

Thank you for being here today.

I'm wondering if you can tell me the size of your community, how many people—

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** In Canada?

**Mr. David Anderson:** No, Europe is what I'm interested in. I think it's at about 5,000 in Canada. Is that right?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** No. Actually, one of the main issues with Roma is documentation, and the numbers and data. Part of the reason is that there is no way to identify one's Roma identity other than self-identification. According to the latest census in Canada, there are between 4,000 and 6,000 Roma, but in fact, according to a Romani civil society organization, there are between 80,000 and 100,000 Roma who live in Canada, if not more.

The reason that Roma are less likely to self-identify is that obviously most Roma who come to Canada are here to escape situations of discrimination and most often come here with European passports, such as I did. I have a European passport. There's no way to identify somebody who is Roma unless they self-identify. In Europe, the latest estimates are between 10 million and 15 million. That is in Europe only. In the Americas, there are at least two million.

**Mr. David Anderson:** If the main identification is self-identification, what definition would you use to define your Romani community then? Do you have a definition or is it too broad to do that? I know you're speaking specifically about a community, but what are the identifying characteristics of that community, to your mind?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** From a human rights standpoint, we tend to avoid defining people, but I think what defines the Romani peoples is that there's a common history, a common language and a common cultural heritage. In terms of the history of Roma, it's actually a history of discrimination and persecution. That's part of the reason that Roma are actually a global diaspora. Roma came through Europe in the 12th century originally from northern India, and are now spread across the world. There are Roma populations in the Middle East, in Australia, and in Latin America as well.

In terms of definition, there are common traits. The common traits are in fact the common history and cultural heritage of Roma, but it's very difficult to restrict the group of people to a definition. There are many subgroups throughout the Roma.

**Mr. David Anderson:** What countries have been most effective in dealing with the anti-Roma sentiment? Who's done a good job? Where would you point to?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Unfortunately, whenever there's a Roma population, there is discrimination. I think it's not a question of which country has been more effective. It's unfortunately where Roma have been the most invisible.

In Canada, in fact, the reason the Roma have been able to be emancipated is that the first Roma who came to Canada came as early as the 1800s. Roma have been here for at least 200 years. Their emancipation is due to their invisibility. When I mentioned earlier in my address that when we started the organization we wanted to use Canada as a model, what I meant was that Canada, from a lack of knowledge, didn't inflict any—quote, unquote—“inclusion policies”. That was a success, because in fact they were simply granted equal rights, equal access to education, equal and not special treatment. I don't like the word integration, but the emancipation of Roma became natural because they were granted equal rights.

In Europe, there are many issues with the way things are done in terms of addressing the human rights situation of Roma. One of them is the structural racism that exists within European organizations, and the fact that policies about Roma are made by non-Roma. Roma are excluded from policy processes that concern them, so they often are what I call “exclusionary inclusion policies” because they are targeting the wrong problems. We speak about, for example, integration without addressing the fact that Romani children are segregated in schools. When talking about education, it's first important to address the problem's root causes, one of which is often, as I mentioned, the entrenched mentality that Roma are inferior.

• (1320)

**Mr. David Anderson:** Can I ask you about that then? I think the last thing we want is for our children to be discriminated against. Is it a general principle across Europe that Romani children are segregated, or do only some countries do that? Where would you find that?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** There are certain countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Serbia and Greece. I would say that Hungary and the Czech Republic have cases that have been documented more and there's much more evidence. That's also the case in Romania. In fact, just to go back to what I was saying before, there's been a lot of money allocated to Roma inclusion. In Romania, in fact, part of the funds were actually used to build a separate school for Roma.

**Mr. David Anderson:** Do they put the schools in the area where people are settled, and then draw the line around them? Is that—

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** They put the school in a Roma settlement, but that was excluded. No teachers wanted to teach there, in fact. The money was actually used to build a segregated school, and there were no roads to access the school either. One of the issues is that a lot of teachers refuse to teach in Romani settlements because of racism and prejudice.

**Mr. David Anderson:** There's an issue with lacking documentation and being able to—

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Yes.

**Mr. David Anderson:**—access the bureaucracy. Could you talk a little about that as well?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Sure.

**Mr. David Anderson:** What are the causes of that, and are there any solutions to that?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Again, the root cause is often situations of racism. My grandfather had to change his last name in order to gain a Serbian passport, because our last name was Sajin, which was a very identifiable Romani name. We had to change it to Savic, which was a very commonly known Serbian name, in order to gain access to a Serbian passport.

Especially in eastern Europe—I was recently at the UN forum on minority issues which focused on statelessness. The European Roma Rights Centre just issued a report documenting the fact that there's a high proportion of Roma who are undocumented and stateless.

One of the many issues I didn't have time to address during my presentation is the fact that during conflict, Roma often face double discrimination. The situation in the former Yugoslavia is one that attests to that, where we have a high proportion of Roma who became stateless as a result of the war because they are not considered to be part of any of the countries that then separated. Essentially nobody really wanted them, so they were bounced back and forth from country to country. The fact is that many Roma were illiterate, so in terms of accessing the documentation, not being able to actually be identified during birth is one of the reasons there is a lack of—

**Mr. David Anderson:** Do I have time for one more short question?

**The Chair:** You have eight seconds.

**Mr. David Anderson:** On the stateless and undocumented, I'm just wondering if you can tell me what impact the massive migration into Europe has caused for your community in the last 10 years. Maybe somebody else wants to follow that up.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Migration is a big one. The thing is, I think that when we're looking at the situation of Roma, we always have to

address it from a historical perspective. Part of the discriminatory policies, for example, in Italy, or in most countries, is a result of the fact that Roma are believed to be nomads, whereas 90% of Roma are actually sedentary. For example, immigration policies are often built on the perception that Roma are nomads and that it's part of the Romani culture to travel, when most of the time they are fleeing situations of persecution.

In terms of migration, of course, because of the rise of the far right and the rise of strong anti-Roma sentiment, there has been movement. Even when we talk about the situation of conflict in Syria, the Domari population of Syria, which is a subgroup closely related to the history of Roma, was actually doubly discriminated against, because they were refused from refugee camps. This was reported by the UNHCR. Their plight was not addressed. In terms of migration, there's always that double effect.

Just to finish on that point, because I know my time is up, the Hungarian government used the Roma as an excuse to refuse refugees from Syria. They were saying, "We already have our Roma to deal with, so we're not accepting more refugees." There's a double effect in terms of migration.

• (1325)

**Mr. David Anderson:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Fragiskatos for seven minutes.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Savic, for being here, and thank you for your work. Stateless minorities face a particularly difficult time in the international environment when it comes to raising their voices, and your spearheading of advocacy here in Canada means a great deal. I want to ask you about that with my first question.

Here in Canada, while you've also mentioned that you're collaborating with others—in Europe, I take it, and perhaps the United States—where does your advocacy tend to concentrate? Is it within national parliaments or the United Nations, or is it a combination? How do you do it?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Everywhere, quite frankly and, as I mentioned, that is because one of the main issues of Roma is invisibility. It's an invisibility in terms of Roma as a people. For a lot of people in the Americas, the very existence of the Roma is being denied. When I introduce myself and I say that I'm Roma, people are like, "That's not a thing." There are even the stereotypes associated with gypsies.

There's a strong dehumanization of Roma, which is actually one of the steps in genocide, in terms of the strong belief that—quote, unquote—"being a gypsy" is not a people but a lifestyle. It contributes to the dehumanization of Roma. It makes it very difficult to address issues in the Americas. Even in human rights circles when we are presenting the situations of Roma, that is often disregarded, or they say, "Oh, but Roma, that's a little different." That's one aspect.

In terms of our advocacy work for the past seven years, we've addressed it at every level, both provincially and, as I mentioned, federally. Since 2012, we have submitted a report on Bill C-31 to every single minister. We've requested meetings, which unfortunately we haven't had yet. We're still waiting.

I am a former UN minority fellow, so we are also working with the UN's OHCHR based in Geneva. We were part of the past two regional Roma in the Americas workshops, which we helped organized in the Americas. We were recently at Harvard University, and we facilitated the collaboration between the OHCHR and Harvard University to continue the recommendations that were made during the last Roma in the Americas regional workshop, which took place in Boston. We're working now with the UN for the upcoming session, which most likely will be in Mexico.

We also work with a strong network of European-based organizations that are working strongly with the Council of Europe. That initiative actually led in 2015 to the official recognition by the European Parliament of the Roma genocide. We are working with them mostly in terms of the recognition of the Roma genocide. We've recently been approached by the European Network on Statelessness to become a member of the network, which is also addressing issues mainly of statelessness, mostly in Europe.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** You're busy. That's your point.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Yes, a little bit.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** It sounds like it. Again, I commend you, because it requires a lot of effort, to say the least.

I've had the opportunity in the past, in a previous life, if I can put it that way. Prior to going into politics, I worked as an academic and media commentator, and your experience parallels very closely what the Kurdish minority and the Amazigh minority have done in terms of raising international attention and awareness about their cause.

I wanted to ask you, though, about something quite specific. You've touched on it here today a bit, but I wonder if you could expand. What are the main goals? If you're going to leave this committee with a message on what you would like to see this government enact in terms of an approach to some of the issues you have raised, what one or two take-aways can we keep in mind as a committee?

● (1330)

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** We have a few, but I'll keep it to two.

In terms of our objectives in Canada in relation to the situation in Europe, really over the past seven years our priority has been the recognition by the Canadian government of the Romani genocide. As I mentioned, it is an essential step in preventing a genocide as we see it, especially today, because what we are asking in the bill that we drafted is for a commitment to recognizing the Romani genocide, but also with that commitment, committing to addressing the human rights situation of Roma not only in Europe but worldwide.

Also, 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.

I just want to say that we are currently working with Global Affairs and Canadian Heritage regarding the recognition. We have asked Global Affairs to address situations with embassies in those countries, so we have been in touch, for example, with the ambassador to Bulgaria regarding the recent killing of a Roma child and the hate speech promoted by a minister at the time. We are now trying to address situations in France. The Canadian government could take a leadership role in at least facilitating dialogue between the embassies in those countries with strong Romani populations.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** I'm happy that engagement has at least begun, so thank you for that.

You could come to this committee with 40 priorities and not leave us with any priorities, but you've left us with two things to consider and ponder.

Madam Chair, do I have time for one more question?

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** Okay. This is my final question then.

You talked about social media and about particular images and particular narratives that are circulating on social media. I know you didn't get into it, but I'm going to guess you mean WhatsApp and Twitter, and perhaps we can think of other examples. Here in Canada, in fact, we've had a whole debate, and recently a committee of parliamentarians based in Canada but from various countries convened to talk about what democracies can do to look at social media. As MPs, we continue to urge—and I know the government has said this as well—social media organizations to recognize their responsibilities to combat false information, fake news, the real fake news, and not the fake news that some say exists, which is actually true.

Can you go into that?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Sure.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** You've talked about the Roma as being particular victims, victimized within, especially populist rhetoric these days that builds upon historical narratives that have always targeted the Roma. When you talk about advocacy, are your organization and others like it asking Facebook, Twitter and those who run WhatsApp to get serious about policing the sorts of activities that happen on their platforms?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** I guess there are three answers to your question.

First, I mentioned before that we work in strong collaboration with other groups that have been victims of genocide. Recently, in April, in the context of Genocide Awareness and Prevention Month, we were here to ask the Canadian government to adopt a policy on the prevention of online hate. We all know that genocide begins with words, and one of the main triggers is actually the legitimization of hate speech, especially on social media. You mentioned Twitter. I mentioned what happened in France, which was actually purely the result of the promotion of fake news on Twitter, which led to attacks on Roma settlements. Most people were hospitalized simply because of the spread of a rumour. There's a medieval stereotype in which Roma were believed to actually steal children. Based on the spread of that, hate against Roma was promoted. Of course, we are addressing it.

I think that in the Americas the issue, as I mentioned before, is that we actually have to fight to get people to stop using the word “gypsy” as being synonymous with “nomad” or “free-spirited”. The level of dehumanization is very strong. In Europe, we have many—

I see that my time's up.

**The Chair:** Yes. Thank you very much. Maybe you can elaborate in a later answer.

We'll go to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP):** Ms. Savic, I'd actually like you to continue to elaborate on that, because I have to be honest with you that if we're going to educate people and be candid and be respectful of Roma, I want to understand more about using terminology like “gypsy” and what we can do on social media.

Go ahead.

• (1335)

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** I won't give you their historical background, because it is quite long. I'll just give you an understanding of why the terminology is derogatory. Of course, as in many situations, the use of the G-word is often debated.

The root of the word “gypsy” comes from the Greek word *athinganos*, which means “untouchable”. This term was imposed on Roma when they first arrived in Europe. Because they had darker skin, they were falsely believed to be Egyptian. “Egypt” became “gyp”. When you say you're being gyped, it's synonymous with theft. The very identity of Roma is associated with theft or robbery. We have American TV shows like *Gypsy*. It has nothing to do with Roma, but it has to do with misbehaving, I guess, or theft and robbery. There's a restaurant that just opened in Montreal, and it's called Gypsy. We contacted them and said that was derogatory. They said they thought it was “free-spirited” and so it was okay.

In terms of the level of understanding, convincing people to use the right terminology is difficult. We made a recommendation to the United Nations to adopt a resolution to officially condemn the use of the word for their purposes. The challenge that comes with that, similar to the use of the N-word, is that some Roma will identify themselves with the term, as it's been like that for centuries. It's about reclaiming the term. So a lot of layers of complexity lie with that.

As for what concretely can be done, definitely there's social media. I think Facebook especially has been under a lot of scrutiny. In the case of Myanmar, for example, there's the responsibility of social media in allowing hate speech. Definitely there are concrete things that can be done. I think the first thing is to start to condemn globally the use of such terminology when we see it. It is very difficult, given the scope of the human rights violations of Roma, to address terminology. In the Americas, I would say it's one of the root causes of the dehumanization of Roma and the perception of Roma as not being a group of people but rather as a social behaviour. This in fact is one of the reasons that the human rights violations against Roma continue to be justified today.

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle:** That's really interesting. I was just signalling, because I think the members of Parliament who are from the Montreal area need to have this explained to them. Even a best-case scenario would have the restaurant change its name, but you understand a small business person's perspective; they put a lot of investment into the name. They can also use social media to talk about what they're embracing and what they're denouncing. They can do that.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Of course.

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle:** That's so intriguing. I'm so glad you spoke to us about that, because there is a lot we can do.

Can you tell us what we should be taking away in terms of this issue of the designated country of origin list and removing the countries? Where do you think we should be going with that moving forward?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Of course, our recommendation is to eliminate Bill C-31 as a practice. Bill C-31 did not only negatively impact Roma. In fact, the safe country list constitutes all the countries that are under the European Union, as well as Mexico and the United States. Most of the countries were arbitrarily placed on the list. After the removal.... The visa that was imposed on Hungary and Romania was a direct result of the fear of Roma coming to Canada.

Moving forward, definitely our recommendation is to eliminate Bill C-31, but if for whatever reason that's not possible, I think definitely we should reinstate the provision that was part of the Minister of Immigration's mandate, which is to revise the criteria that decide whether a country is safe or not. This is not only for Roma but also for minorities at large in most of these countries where we definitely see a rise in the far right. We see a rise of anti-Semitism as well in those countries. In those countries there is also a strong homophobic sentiment. I think we need to define the criteria under which a country is considered safe, and for whom.

• (1340)

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle:** I need to clarify that in May of this year, all the countries were removed from the list.



**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Yes. Well, the thing is that there are still impacts from that. Since 2012, in terms of the commission and the way the decisions are made, I can only speak to the situations of Roma refugees, because those are the cases we've worked on. For example, I mentioned that we have a deportation case that we're working on now. We see the impacts of the bill in terms of the perception it had that those countries were safe. That's actually used in decisions to justify the lack of credibility of the claim, because those countries are perceived to be safe.

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We will now go to Mr. Tabbara for five minutes.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here and for being an advocate for the Roma people.

I know that on International Roma Day the foreign affairs minister put out a statement on social media in solidarity and said that Canada stands against the hate and discrimination that are often faced by the Roma people. I know that your organization has been sponsored to speak at many international organizations about the plight of the Roma people. I would like you to elaborate on how Canada has assisted, and on what more Canada can do to assist on the global stage.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** In terms of being sponsored, we haven't been sponsored. Our organization has been running with zero dollars for the past seven years. It's a completely volunteer organization. Part of the reason—and I know this has changed recently—is that we are not registered as a charity, so we couldn't actually access funds. Most of the work we were doing was actually political advocacy.

I know that this changed relatively recently. The only source of funding we've had was from benefit concerts, and that actually went to the Roma to pay for the legal fees of Roma refugees.

That being said, in terms of the words you mentioned, that statement came as a result of the work we're doing with Global Affairs and Minister Freeland's office. We requested that the statement be made in light of the commitment for the recognition of the Romani genocide. That's just to give you the background. We have asked the Canadian government to recognize officially the Romani genocide and declare August 2 as the official day of commemoration of the Romani genocide.

With that, we asked for a commitment to address the ongoing human rights violations of Roma across the world. As part of that commitment, we are working with Global Affairs to see what can be done. I can say that the situation in terms of human rights has been a much easier situation in terms of the government response to take steps. The recognition, however, has been very, very difficult in terms of getting the government to adopt an official act of Parliament to officially recognize the Romani genocide. As it stands right now, it remains a statement whereby the government commits or it recognizes the Romani genocide, but there's no act of Parliament officially recognizing it. That's what we're working on now.

I think that what the government can do more of is to speak out about these situations. We haven't seen statements from the government about all these situations. We do address that regularly

with Global Affairs. Whenever there is a situation, we send an email. Also, we raise awareness, both with our own MPs in Montreal but also at the federal level, and at the international level as well. Those are two concrete things that can be done.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** Besides this committee, I also sit on the citizenship and immigration committee. In recent years, there has been a large influx of migrants fleeing to better prosperity in Europe. Within the last 20 or 30 years, I would say, has the spike in discrimination and hate crimes towards the Roma people increased in Europe? Has this been a factor with other immigrants coming into the region and with eastern Europe having strict immigration policies and closing the doors on any new migrants? Has it increased the discrimination against the Roma people?

• (1345)

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** That's always a difficult question, because I think it's been more documented in the past 20 years. There have actually been more actions to try to document it, but definitely, according to the latest Harvard University report, there was actually an increase in hate crimes against Roma in Italy from 2017 to 2018. With the rise of the far right across Europe, there has been a strong anti-Roma sentiment that's been promoted, and a lot of these parties have actually gained power on the basis of that anti-Roma rhetoric. We've seen this in Hungary, for example, and we've seen this in the Czech Republic. There have actually been more instances of violence. We've seen anti-Roma marches in villages not only in Hungary but also in the Czech Republic and in Bulgaria recently. Even in France, there weren't marches but there were attacks carried out by citizens.

I think the danger, in terms of anti-Roma hate speech, is that it is, unfortunately, not limited to the far right. We see it at the centre as well. We have seen it in France just recently, and we see everywhere that there is a strong normalization of anti-Roma hate speech.

Yes, definitely, there's been documentation of the increase. CERD, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which just reviewed Hungary, actually in its last report expressed its deep concern over the rise of anti-Roma hatred and violence.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Sweet for five minutes.

**Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Savic, in fact, since you're on that subject, the instance of hate against Roma in France has now eclipsed that in Hungary, hasn't it? It's become really bad. Is that correct?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** It's hard to beat Hungary, but definitely, in the past few weeks, we've seen, as I said, that, yes, there's definitely been a rise in anti-Roma sentiment.

**Mr. David Sweet:** You said for the past seven years. Is that how old your organization is, seven years old?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Yes. We started the background work in 2012 but we officially registered in 2013.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Okay. Have you had any resistance at the UN with regard to any of your efforts to have them address the statelessness of some of your community in Europe and to recognize the size of your community?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** The resistance met at the UN was not with regard to the issue of statelessness. It was with regard to the recognition of the Romani genocide.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Okay.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Annually January 27 is International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Many Romani civil society organizations have actually asked for Roma to be invited as part of that ceremony. In the past 20 years, only two Roma have been invited. The resistance has been more in terms of the recognition of the Romani genocide rather than statelessness. In fact, I mentioned that the minority forum focused on statelessness last year, and many statements on statelessness have actually been made by civil society. In terms of the size, we've also done a lot of work with many organizations to get the UN to actually speak more about the situation of more Roma in the Americas, because one of the challenges in Canada and the Americas at large is that the human rights situation of Roma is very Eurocentric at the moment because of, for example, institutions such as the European Union. The plight of Roma in the Americas or even in the Middle East, for example, is often ignored because there are no international institutions monitoring it. We're working now with the UN to try to have more action taken on that.

**Mr. David Sweet:** One similarity in the situation of Jews and anti-Semitism and the hatred towards Roma is that there are these diabolical stories concocted. In the Jewish case, it's the blood libel that's insidious and perpetuated by evil people. I see stories of baby theft that are constantly concocted around Roma.

Tell me about that and about how that's disrupted communities and caused even police officials to actually investigate.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** I mentioned very briefly the history of the Romani genocide, but in fact, in 1936, the Nuremberg laws were actually modified to include Roma. In terms of racial purity—the rhetoric of the Nazis—they actually specifically said that Roma were inferior and prone to crime. As I mentioned, the idea of Roma criminality was used during the Second World War to justify the mass murder of Roma. Unfortunately, we still see it today.

We've mentioned social media. When we post situations of what are often segregation or forced sterilization, the response is often, "Yes, but some Romas steal." I think it's very entrenched in people's minds that Roma are inherently criminals. We see that at large in policy. As I mentioned, with the policies of Matteo Salvini, for example, the intention is to eliminate gypsy crime. In Hungary, the newest extreme right group actually has a manifesto. In its manifesto, it has a section called "the gypsy question". In the gypsy question, the intention is to eliminate gypsy crime. In Italy, they actually sent troops to Roma settlements to guard against the security threat of Roma.

We've seen that this rhetoric of Roma being criminals has actually been one of the main arguments used to justify the human rights violations of Roma today.

● (1350)

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will now go to Ms. Hardcastle for five minutes.

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle:** Thank you.

This is really interesting. Just in continuation of that, you talked a bit about what some of these groups are doing in talking about the elimination of gypsy crime. Can you give us some examples of the structural racism that you've talked about? I know that would be in Europe, but how is that a ripple effect and what is structural even here in western countries, including Canada?

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Just to build on that notion in terms of your mentioning the police, often when there are situations like that, the police are called to intervene, but they're actually contributing to the violence. This was documented in Ukraine. There's video evidence of that. That rhetoric is often used for this.

As I said before, it's unfortunate, but the Canadian government itself used that rhetoric in saying that Roma are bogus refugees who are coming here to abuse the social welfare system. Their claims were deemed to be unfounded, whereas obviously the situation in Hungary and in most of the countries where Roma were coming from at the time was very documented. This was actually followed by the killings of six Roma in Hungary.

That rhetoric, as I mentioned, is not limited only to Europe. It has really spread across.... Even in Latin America, we see it as well, and in the Americas and the United States. It's a very predominant rhetoric that we often see justified in terms of equal access to opportunities. Educated Roma will not be able to access jobs because there is a structural racism and people don't want to hire Roma. There is a concrete example in Italy, for example, where local Roma developed a food truck and nobody wanted to eat there on the presumption that they were cooking rats or things like that. This mentality is very entrenched.

In terms of the structural racism, as I mentioned, there's a higher proportion of Roma across the world who are highly educated but are not able to access employment, often because of racism, so they have to hide their Romani identity. Of course, some Roma who are not as visibly Roma and who have lighter skin are able to do that, but also, with last names, it is difficult to identify if one is Roma or not. This has also been documented: Roma have sent in their CVs and, when they show up for interviews, they are not given the jobs because they're obviously Roma.

Also, as I mentioned, in terms of political participation, despite the strong population in most of those countries where Roma are actually the main minority, very few Roma are a part of political processes or elected officials. Also, in terms of Roma inclusion policies, they're often not done in consultation with Roma; they're often done by non-Roma. Some of the European Union's policies are, for example, "come and volunteer to teach Roma hygiene", which obviously is itself problematic in addressing the human rights situation of Roma.

**Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle:** How problematic is it when you think of the goal of your organization and the goal of achieving recognition not just of the genocide but also of human rights for the Roma?

You mentioned that your family changed its name. How common is that? Also, do you see that being a problem in the future or as something we're going to have to make better known—I'm speaking hypothetically now—if we think this has affected 200 people when, in fact, it's affected 200,000 in a community?

• (1355)

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Again, there are always layers of complexity when talking about Roma. I think part of the reason is that centuries of persecution have left these things unaddressed. There have been things beyond the Romani genocide, throughout their very existence. During the Spanish Inquisition, the Roma had their tongues cut out if they spoke Romani.

That's why in many groups of Roma the language has actually been endangered and, quite frankly, quite lost. Many of the Roma who have been able to be emancipated and get access to jobs or higher education have been able to because they have, in a sense, given up on their Roma identity. That's why they would actually be able to access the space.

My grandfather is an example. He was a tall white man with blue eyes, so not visibly Romani, and that's why he was actually able to change his last name. That has been the situation of many Roma. In my family alone, there are many who, in order to access passports, had to do that.

In terms of recognition of our history, as I mentioned, for Roma the issue is that there needs to be recognition of our existence as a people. In Romania, Roma were displaced for 500 years and there are obviously socio-economic repercussions to that with regard to the situation of Roma.

I think there is a strong parallel that can be drawn between our history and that of African Americans. We see that because this history is actually reflective of the socio-economic situation of Roma. Roma have been very passive. Despite the fact that there has been violence, persecution, slavery and forced labour camps since even before the Second World War, Roma have actually not been

violent. The response of Roma has never been one of violence; it has been a passive one. That's why there are Roma spread across the world, because there has been forced nomadism. Roma left their country to look for equality, but they have never been able to find that equality because wherever Roma have gone, they have faced persecution.

It's about recognition of history but also of the contribution that Roma have made since the 12th century in European countries as well as in America.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Just for two minutes we have the chair of our parent committee, the foreign affairs committee, Mr. Levitt, for a very short question.

**Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.):** Ms. Savic, I have had the pleasure of speaking with you on previous occasions. I last ran into you coming out of a press conference, and I want to ask you about that, because it was genocide prevention month; I believe that was the occasion. It was a coming together of civil society groups from the Ukrainian, Armenian, Rwandan, obviously Romani, Jewish and other communities that have faced persecution over the years.

I'm wondering if you could briefly give us a bit of background on the support that exists in civil society and through those kinds of organizations, and how that is a real advantage for the Romani community here, which probably doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

**Ms. Dafina Savic:** Yes, of course. I have also strongly collaborated with the Montreal Holocaust Museum, especially in terms of the recognition of the Romani genocide. You mentioned the history shared by the Jewish population and the Roma. CIJA has created a kind of coalition of groups that have been victims of genocide. The Yazidi of Iraq should also be added to that list.

The press conference was aimed at actually asking three concrete things from the Canadian government in light of genocide awareness and prevention, one of them being adopting a policy to address online hate; trying to welcome those people who are currently facing situations of mass atrocity and genocide, so that would be Burundi, for example; and officially adopting an act of Parliament to recognize the Romani genocide.

**Mr. Michael Levitt:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. Thank you for your advocacy and for your very knowledgeable testimony today.

We are going in camera as we have to take care of some committee business.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*





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