

EU: It is time reparations are paid for Roma slavery

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Romanians continue to actively deny the history of Roma enslavement in Romanian lands.

Years before fast sailing ships with enslaved people from Africa made it to the shores of North and South America, the Roma people on the territories of modern-day Romania had already been forced into a system of chattel enslavement. My ancestors were among them.

Today, this 500-year system of exploitation and domination of Roma remains utterly forgotten in Romania and in the global history of slavery, race and racism.

Roma people were coerced into this system of chattel enslavement beginning in the 1370s or perhaps earlier by three types of enslavers: the Crown (and later, the state), the Orthodox church, and the nobility. By law, the enslavers owned the slaves as their property or possessions, and slaves without a “master” would become the “property” of the Crown.

In the Romanian territories, the Indian origins and skin colour of the Roma made it possible to distinguish them as non-Romanians and non-Christians. Ethnic distinctiveness or race was one of the original reasons for enslaving Roma.

The institution of slavery ended in 1855 in Moldova and 1856 in Walachia. After the final act of abolition in 1856, the 250,000 Roma slaves who became legally free, some 7 percent of the Romanian population, received no reparations for the inhumane treatment they had suffered. As also happened on other continents, after five centuries of exploitation, the abusers received monetary compensation for freeing their Roma slaves.

October marks 635 years since the first written attestation of the enslavement of Roma people in Romania. In October 1385, Dan I, prince of Wallachia and an enslaver, gifted to the Tismana Monastery 40 Roma families, among other “assets”.

Year after year, this date has passed unnoticed and unacknowledged, while Romanian institutions and the Orthodox Church have shown little interest in taking responsibility for Roma enslavement. They have not even issued a formal apology for the enslavement.

This disregard is not surprising, given the pervasive anti-Roma racism in Romania and elsewhere in Europe. Roma slavery has been denied in Romanian history books, while global cultural and knowledge production rarely mentions it.

At a recent online event on race and racism organised by the Romanian cultural institute in New York City, for example, several attendees engaged in invalidating the Roma enslavement and equating it with the experiences of Romanian serfs. Some historians have gone as far as arguing that the Roma were “lucky” to have been enslaved, as this system helped them maintain their identity and “protected” them. Apart from these dismissive voices, countless progressive Romanians

continue to perceive the process of truth-telling about Roma enslavement as a threat to the image of Romania.

Across the world, descendants of enslavers have been uncomfortable in accepting the truth of their forefathers as oppressors. Accepting the ancestors' legacy may be complicated. Thus, instead, many descendants of enslavers hurry to justify the structural inequalities and wealth gaps that the descendants of enslaved people face today, through race and cultural prejudice.

In the case of the Roma, the construction of the racecraft of "g*psy criminality", an idea made-up during slavery, has constituted a central justification for anti-Roma racism. More so, progressive politicians, bureaucrats and scholars have long focused the public discourse on what they see as Roma "backwardness". It must be more comfortable for them to address Roma integration, enrolment in primary education, poverty, and vulnerability than to directly tackle the problem and end anti-Roma racism.

But the agenda of Roma integration is not enough for us, any more. We now demand justice, reparations, and anti-racist policies.

For half a millennium, our ancestors were coerced into gruelling, uncompensated labour. And it is self-evident that the history of 500 years of economic exploitation stripped Roma people of any prospect of accumulating intergenerational wealth.

A large portion of the wealth gap in Romania stems from this little-known history of economic exploitation. The forced labour of Roma slaves constituted a central element in the development and growth of the Romanian economy; it was a critical source of wealth for the Romanian state, the Orthodox Church, and the aristocracy.

Let us take, for example, the case of Orthodox Church property. Many of its churches and monasteries have been built using the free, highly skilled Romani workforce. For instance, the Caşin monastery in Bacau was built in the 1650s by 800 Romani slaves. Should the Orthodox Church not pay back the Roma for having built Caşin and other properties from scratch?

The aristocracy also accumulated wealth through the enslavement of Roma people. In the village where I grew up, there was still dependency and a culture of respect for boyars (landowners), and during my childhood, people were still using the term "boieri". In fact, my mother's sister once hinted at our past. I asked her why she never went to school when she was a child in the 1940s. She looked at me like the answer was obvious and said: "I was working on the lands of the boyars."

In 1906, her grandparents - my great grandparents, Maria Nicolae and Marian Ghita - were still identified in their marriage certificate as "emancipated Romanians", which in the language of those times, meant former Romani slaves. They themselves were not slaves, as the enslavement ended in 1855, but their parents had been. The term "emancipated" remained in the books for two to three more generations after the abolition. Thus, what Romanians perceive today as a distant past is very much a legacy of dispossession and dishonour which still affects many Romani families today.

Along with exploitation, as expert Orlando Patterson argues in his book, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, honour, alienation, and "social death" - the denial of slaves' humanity by society - are equally important in understanding slavery and its legacy. And the Romanian enslavers did see and treat Romani enslaved people "a little bit better than animals".

The Roma had no alternative to enslavement, humiliation, and dishonour; their only options were death or escape. The enslavers imposed their power over Romani slaves not only through laws and church regulations, but also by misrepresenting the Roma as outsiders, criminals, inferiors, and

nonpersons.

Hiding, ignoring, or neglecting slavery and its legacy is not, however, just a matter of failing to understand the past. Forgetting, distorting, and erasing the past have always been powerful tools in the hands of oppressors and their descendants in all corners of the world.

But the time has come to remember the past and correct the present, through reparations and power-sharing. It is time for descendants of enslaved people across the world to rise in solidarity and demand compensation and justice. It is time for governments to not only hear their pleas and compensate them, but also apologise, engage in truth-telling processes, and memorialise resistance.

Margareta Matache A justice activist and scholar from Romania, director of the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights' Roma Program, and a Harvard instructor.

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