

# Culture at the Margins, Culture-Free Margins? Lunik IX

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Empty window frames, trash heaps, demolition, lack of access to water, electricity, or gas. The Lunik IX borough in Košice, Slovakia has been notorious for years. The buildings are being systematically wrecked, however, and many Roma are leaving for the West. Yet tents are also appearing, housing those whose apartment blocks were wrecked— whether on the grounds of the same housing development or in another of the dozen-odd Roma slums in the vicinity. And there is nothing to suggest that anything is going to change.

When the Austrian writer and reporter Karl-Markus Gauss published his moving book *Die Hundeesser von*

*Svinia* (The Dog-eaters of Svinia) in 2004, he estimated that from four to six thousand Roma inhabitants were living in the Lunik IX borough on the outskirts of Košice– the second largest city in Slovakia, located in the eastern part of the country. Nearly a decade later, estimates are closer to between six and eight, or even ten thousand Roma in that housing development. Lunik IX was built in the 1970s for two and a half thousand people, located southwest of the center of this then heavily industrialized city. For years, Lunik IX has held an inglorious place at the top of the list of the largest urban Roma ghettos in Europe– with dramatically poor living conditions, almost 100 % unemployment, and deepening isolation from the majority society. And all of this in what was the European Capital of Cultural just three years ago. Although in recent years, according to certain members of the community, the population has decreased, due to economic migration, to the level it was at when Gauss visited, it remains difficult to depose Lunik IX as a model example of ghettoization, separation and marginalization of a minority. But it wasn't always that bad.

### **First Uniforms, Then Misery**

Not everybody agrees about why Lunik IX came into existence. Some claim that it was intended as a luxury development for the middle class and administrative workers, others that it was supposed to provide sleeping quarters for people in uniform: police and army officers. In that context, it is intriguing to consider the fact,

noted by many scholars, that from the beginning many apartments in the development were planned for large families with numerous children. The way Roma families usually are. Hence the rise of theories that *Lunik IX* was initially planned as a kind of social experiment, with the goal of isolating poor people and those unable or unwilling to pay rent. Roma quickly began to appear in the development– the first resettlements of Roma inhabitants there from the slums of Košice began in the early 1980s. Yet even the time of change and transformation, though the Roma already represented a majority in Lunik then, are remembered surprisingly warmly. Artur Conka, a Roma photographer and the director of a short film called simply *Lunik IX*, remembers the housing development in his childhood in the early '90s as clean, well-kept and characterized by good relations between Roma residents and their (non-Roma) neighbors.<sup>1</sup> So what happened? A sizable part in the change of situation was played by Rudolf Schuster – Košice's ambitious two-term mayor (1983–1986 and 1994–1999), later elected president of Slovakia, who openly opposed positive discrimination in favour of the Roma. The resettlement process reached its height in the year 1997, when under Schuster's leadership the City Council carried out a multi-million dollar project of renewing the neglected and dilapidated city center, home in Communist times to a large group of Roma. They did not suit Schuster's vision of a European center of culture and tourism. A mas-

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<sup>1</sup> A. Conka, *What is life really like for Roma families around Europe?*, Huffington Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/artur-conka/roma-families-in-europe\\_b\\_3253404.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/artur-conka/roma-families-in-europe_b_3253404.html) (3.11.2016).

sive resettlement effort was therefore begun. Lunik IX seemed ideal for the purpose – the development was situated on a hill where some Roma already lived, marked by natural conditions of isolation from non-Roma society. There quickly followed what usually takes place in Europe when there is an increased concentration of Roma population in one place– the non-Roma residents of Lunik began moving out. The ghetto thus became a fact. In some apartments, large, unrelated families were placed together and suddenly a dozen-odd strangers began being forced to live together within a space of 60 square meters. These residents had no thought of looking after a place where they did not necessarily wish to live, one they had not chosen themselves. They lived crammed together like sardines in a tin.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Košice’s old town was considerably beautified, to such an extent that in 2009, Košice, together with Marseilles, was sonorously proclaimed the European (Co-) Capital of Culture. That title meant more millions for investment– in the city’s infrastructure or the tourist and creative industries.<sup>3</sup> There turned out to be no place in the budget, however, for Lunik IX. Instead, in 2012, the water was cut off after the Roma failed to pay their water bills.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Hušová, *Even after demolition, Lunik IX remains the greatest Romani ghetto in Europe*, Roma Transitions, <http://www.romatransitions.org/even-after-demolition-lunik-ix-remains-the-greatest-romani-ghetto-in-europe/> (20.10.2016).

<sup>3</sup> L. Edmonds, “Slumdogs of Slovakia: This city was given £51million when it was named European capital of culture... so why are Roma children still living in such horrifying squalor?”, *Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2486333/Kosice-won-51million-grants-named-Europes-Capital-Culture--thousands-Roma-children-living-slums.html#ixzz4Ly9Opznl> (16.09.2016).

## No Roma Please, We're Cultural

Karl-Markus Gaus, mentioned above, in describing the attitude of non-Roma toward the residents of Luna IX, wrote of two different worlds:

*[...] the slum is surrounded by an invisible wall, and that wall separates worlds. Behind that wall there live other people, people whom many who otherwise know how to behave in a civilized manner openly even refuse to regard as real human beings. 'From a distance you see a person coming towards you,' a man who had earlier treated me most graciously said to me, 'and when he comes close, you see it's only a gypsy after all.'*<sup>4</sup>

Where in 2004, when Gaus's reportage was written, the wall was still invisible, it became real and concrete in 2013, that is, with no shortage of irony, the year in which Košice, through various cultural initiatives and events, was being advertised to the whole continent as the European Capital of Culture. As late as 2008, when the non-governmental organization Košice – European Capital of Culture 2013 was preparing its application for the city to be granted that title, the proposal contained references to elements of Roma culture and its creators, including in the domains of music and theater. After the city was awarded the title, however, the distinction of Roma culture as part of Košice's cultural

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<sup>4</sup> K.-M. Gaus, extract from *The Dog Eaters of Svinia* (Vienna, 2004), English translation (translator uncredited) published at: Open Democracy, [https://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-literature/ulysses4\\_3927.jsp](https://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-literature/ulysses4_3927.jsp) (6.04.2017).

landscape paled somewhat,<sup>5</sup> though finally in 2013 a few events involving that culture were held, but featuring only the participation of Roma artists, without attendance by the inhabitants of the largest Roma center in the capital of eastern Slovakia. At the same time, not far from the center, in the Lunik IX development, conveniently hidden from tourists and cultural aficionados, in July of that same year a wall was raised, separating Roma from non-Roma, on which there shortly thereafter appeared the inscription *Prepáčte* (Forgive—in the second-person plural imperative form), which soon after, however, was removed.<sup>6</sup> This was the eighth wall in the east of Slovakia and the fourteenth in the country as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The necessity of its construction was explained with the standard reasoning – crime, specifically acts of vandalism and car theft in the parking lot belonging to the neighboring Lunik VIII development. The city council did not officially consent to the wall, but the neighborhood council designated five thousand euros for the purpose.<sup>8</sup> The European Commission called on Slovakia to resolve this uncomfortable situation, but to no effect. The neighbourhood authorities explained that it was just a fence, and that such construction did

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<sup>5</sup> Slovakia: *Košice is the European Capital of Culture 2013*, 1.02.2013, Romea, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/slovakia-kosice-is-the-european-capital-of-culture-2013> (5.09.2016).

<sup>6</sup> Similar inscriptions also appeared on, for example, a 150-meter wall in Ostrovany (compared to the Berlin Wall) and near a Roma encampment in Wrocław near ul. Kamieński. The authors of these inscriptions were probably members of the Roma community themselves.

<sup>7</sup> N. Beard, *Celebrating the culture of segregation*, Open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/nadia-beard/celebrating-culture-of-segregation> (3.09.2016).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

not require applying for a building permit. Over a year later, in September 2014, four unidentified perpetrators demolished part of the wall, leaving an inscription that translates as “Stop segregation” with the date of the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>9</sup> The wall was quickly repaired, however, and furthermore – the activists’ action did not receive support from the local Roma community, who were wary of escalating minority-majority tensions.<sup>10</sup> Particularly as the incident took place shortly before the local governmental election. In that election, one of the candidates, Vladimír Gúrtler of the local party The Seven Brave Ones, promised to distribute tickets to Brussels to Roma or to pay each Roma woman who agreed to be sterilized a sum of ten thousand euros.<sup>11</sup> He also stated that he was not a racist and simply wanted to help the residents of Lunik IX, because, as he claimed, “if we don’t help them, then we, the majority society in Slovakia, are going to have serious problems later on.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Anything but the Future**

Increasing numbers of Roma living in Lunik wanted to leave<sup>13</sup> – in interviews, the overwhelming majority of Roma residents saw no perspectives for improving the sit-

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<sup>9</sup> *Slovakia: Activists demolish part of segregation wall, ignoring local Romani opinion*, Romea, 16.09.2014, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/slovakia-activists-demolish-part-of-segregation-wall-ignoring-local-romani-opinion> (29.09.2016).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Slovakia: Candidate offering remuneration to Roma for sterilization*, Romea, 22.10.2014, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/slovakia-candidate-offering-remuneration-to-roma-for-sterilization> (12.11.2016).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> G. Albert, ‘Lunik IX’ - the film no one wants to see?, Romea, 31.08.2011, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/lunik-ix-the-film-no-one-wants-to-see> (14.09.2016).

uation there.<sup>14</sup> It is thus not surprising that the results of a study in 2014 showed that Košice was ranked second, after Michałowce, among the places that sourced the largest number of Roma victims of human trafficking— many desperate family fathers in middle age were enticed by schemes promising emigration to Great Britain for work; their passports and benefits were confiscated in Slovakia and forced labor imposed on them.<sup>15</sup> Some, nonetheless, managed to leave, heading mainly to Great Britain and Belgium,<sup>16</sup> which improved their situation and led to a decrease in the population in Lunik. Those who remained face not only a lack of access to basic conveniences and utilities, but also an enormous and daily growing dumping ground for trash, threatening with disease and the contamination of drinking water with toxins. The city rarely remembers to collect trash, as if it sought to forget about its Roma population. After demolitions that destroyed buildings, including in the years 2008, 2012 and 2014, there currently nine apartment blocks standing in Lunik IX, which will soon also disappear.<sup>17</sup> The current residents

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<sup>14</sup> See J. Rusnáková, R. Rosinský, M. Šramková, M. Čerešníková, M. Samko, A. Rochovská, "Subjective perception of coping by destitute Roma communities in Slovakia and the importance of education as a strategy of pulling them out of poverty," [in:] *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 174/2015, pp. 2721–2726, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042815010174>, p. 2723 (29.09.2016).

<sup>15</sup> See R. Medvedová, "Human trafficking of Slovak Roma for the purpose of forced labor," *Scientific Cooperations International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 1/2015, [http://ase-scoop.org/journals/jHumanitiesAndSocialScience/papersHumanity4\\_Medvedova.pdf](http://ase-scoop.org/journals/jHumanitiesAndSocialScience/papersHumanity4_Medvedova.pdf), p. 29 (29.09.2016).

<sup>16</sup> See more on this topic: D. De Wilde, L. Virostková, *From Slovakia to Belgium: a story of failing Roma policy*, 9.04.2014, <https://euobserver.com/eu-elections/123600P>; P. Henry, M. Daduc, *Caring for the Roma Community in Derby*, 3.07.2014, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/caring-roma-community-derby> (30.09.2016).

<sup>17</sup> It should be stressed, however, that after the demolitions most residents remained in Lunik IX – either in their families' apartments or in tents. Some of the residents of other slums in the area also pitched tents in the development after their demolition.

are supposed to move to some containers, located 30 km from Košice, for which they will be forced to pay prohibitively high rent.<sup>18</sup> Will Lunik IX cease to exist, as Artur Conka predicts?<sup>19</sup> For the time being, as Eva Gasparova, activist, teacher of the Romani language, co-founder and current principal of a private elementary school in Košice, told me a few years ago– education is the only solution that can free the children of the city’s ghetto from the vicious circle of social assistance and learned helplessness. Gasparova went on to describe the situation of her pupils: “my school guarantees education to Roma children from the notorious Lunik IX development in Košice. Each class has about 195 pupils. Most of them have a difficult social situation. Around 70% of them come from families dependent on state social support. [...] Our school is focused on improving the educational and cultural position of Roma children, as well as preserving the Roma language, which remains an important part of our inheritance. [...] We are trying to build a good foundation for our children’s further education, so that they can become valued members of the society in which they live, and so that in their later life they will be judged on an equal footing with others, for their skills and knowledge. We are also organizing an afterschool community center [...]. We are fighting for survival [...]. There is very little support from the state. We need considerably more than they are offering us.”<sup>20</sup> It

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<sup>18</sup> A. Conka, *The End of Lunik IX*, 12.09.2015, <http://unframe.com/the-end-of-lunik-ix/> (6.11.2016).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Interview conducted in the course of research undertaken for a doctoral thesis published in a modified version in a publication entitled *Etniczna mobilizacja Romów a Unia Europejska. Polska, Słowacja, Węgry*, Kraków 2014.

is difficult to determine what will happen with Lunik and the struggle for the future of Roma children. The level of resignation, passivity, and acceptance of the situation by many Lunik residents does not fill us with optimism—research has shown that they do not want to talk about their situation, poverty and difficult life, and above all do not want to talk about the future or even think about it.<sup>21</sup> If they are not going to feel motivated to fight for their rights, nobody else will think about the inhabitants of Lunik IX.

**translated by Timothy Williams**

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<sup>21</sup> “Subjective perception of coping,” p. 2723.