

Episode 43: Ana

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be a Moldovan and Romanian woman? In this episode, Ana shares her stories of growing up with a specific understanding of racism and living in different countries in Western Europe. Her story is about how she began to question and make sense of the many racisms she grew up with.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Ana.

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Ana is Moldovan and Romanian and spent the first 19 years of her life in Moldova. She would then move to Romania, Hungary, Belgium, and the French-speaking part of Switzerland to pursue her tertiary education. She shares the different manifestations of racism she observed throughout this time.

A:

I mean, obviously in Eastern Europe or in Europe, in general, there are multiple forms of racism circulating around, some of them more relatable to what we call racism in the Western, very kind of American-centered discourse, and some that are quite local, quite specific. So I guess the very local original "brand" of racism, if I can put it this way, is definitely that directed at the Roma people. And that is common in virtually any European country, regardless Western or Eastern. I guess the specifics of it in Eastern Europe is a very, very old historical and systemic racism that we're talking about. This is the kind of community that has been historically and systematically discriminated in my country and other countries in the region as well, both for reasons related to being a racialized community, but also because of their lifestyle that is nomadic so they're traveling people, or at least used to be... now less and less, obviously under the pressures and the racism directed at them, they settle more and more often.

So obviously, this is the kind of racism that I grew up with without realizing actively its different manifestations, particularly in terms of discourse. You know, if you're a kid, and you're behaving badly, you're being threatened to be given to the Roma people. That's like an actual threat which means, "I'm gonna..." You're going to be punished to live with these people in their wilderness and then their "crazy" traveling lifestyle, never really having a home, never really cleaning... They're very disorderly, they're very antisocial as well for that reason because they cluster inside their communities, don't really want to socialize with everyone else... So that's the very mundane manifestation of this kind of racism. I think this is a lot more acute in countries with a more sizeable Roma population, so Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia. This is the number one racism in that region of Europe.

If I think even back, or even earlier than that, how my parents grew up, then I guess it's on top of this anti-Roma feeling and discourse in society, I guess because they grew up under communism and in the Soviet Union, there was this kind of brotherhood or kind of "friendship" of the nation's discourse in Soviet Union, kind of bringing together all the communist countries. Satellites of Moscow, obviously, but there were many African countries, many Asian and South American countries. So obviously, in a Cold War logic in which the world was divided into two, there were quite a lot of non-White countries that were associated with the Soviet Union. And the Soviet Union was doing quite a lot to bring

students for exchange programs, for instance. So, my parents in their BAs (bachelor studies) had African colleagues and African classmates that they could interact with and so on. So that was a quite an interesting and very specific, very different from what we know about the American brand of racism, for instance.

I don't think it was always very well-intentioned. I think there was a lot of power projection coming from Moscow through these kinds of initiatives. Probably was, to a certain extent, if not White-supremacist, then kind of like Russia-supremacist because it was Russia that was directing everything. And so we can't really look at these models exclusively through a positive light. But let's say that there was a genuine attempt at saying, "Hey, people are different in this world and they have different skin colors and different religions and so forth, but you can all go to school together and it's going to be fine." So that was relatively interesting. But I think that what happened with the collapse of that system is a very strong revival of nationalism in pretty much all the former communist countries, a revival of religion, so Christianity mainly because we're talking about mainly Christian countries, but also Muslim ones if we look at Central Asia.

So with this revival of nationalism, with this revival of religion, I think most former communist countries have started to appropriate more and more of a racist nationalistic discourse as we see it in Western Europe and Northern America, mainly in the US and so on. Even if the history is entirely different, one could hardly speak about any involvement in slavery and colonialism. Obviously, the Soviet Union was actively anti-colonial and was feeding a lot on anti-colonial discourse and anti-colonial feelings. So yeah, I guess it's interesting to see what has happened in the past three decades, thirty years since the collapse of the former system and how people have become increasingly nationalistic, increasingly racist in a Western European kind of sense, very very Islamophobic – particularly Islamophobic – I think this is the number one alterity, the number one *other* that exists in the collective imaginary, so to speak. And I think this anti-immigrant anti-Muslim sentiment has been exploited quite a lot recently.

So I guess with this baggage, since I've been kind of moving myself from east to west, I could only see pretty much different manifestations of that, because in Romanian and Hungary, the situation is largely the same, particularly regarding the anti-Roma discourse and measures... Both Romania and Hungary have segregation, particularly affecting children of school age. These are obviously human rights infringing measures that should be actively punished and eradicated, but the system is such that society accepts that to a very large extent.

And then the one year I spent in Belgium was obviously more of closer to the way we talk about racism in a very Western European sense. It's [Belgium] a very diverse society. I mean, I didn't live in Brussels, and Brussels is a very, very diverse city. I was in Bruges, which is a very White little touristic town where people at max might joke about Asian tourists but nothing else. Whereas I know that Brussels has segregated quarters in the city: there are streets where you know that this kind of people live on, or this other kind of people live on, and so on. So it's a very diverse but kind of very fragmented city, obviously with the same quite strong Islamophobic discourse. And as a former colonial power, I guess Belgium has a very difficult situation to deal with. I don't think they're doing a good job at that. In fact, no European former colonial power is good at doing this.

So when I came to Switzerland, the first feeling was like, "Wow, great. This is not a former colonial power." However, I think it was fairly soon that I realized just how important the role of Switzerland was at that time mainly through its financial system and so on. So there, you can talk about Swiss colonialism, which is very subtle but very insidious.

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Ana thinks back to the discourse around race in Moldova.

A:

I think there's a lot of indirect clues about race, particularly regarding the Roma community. So we know from literature and poems and so on that they are like this, that they are like that. But our history books do not talk about the history of slavery of the Roma community. They have been enslaved for years towards the end of the Middle Ages, and kind of feudal Europe. And instead, what we hear is this kind of very romanticized version of the story of them being really good at music. So a good wedding in Moldova or in Romania would not be organized without a Roma band that, you know, was acknowledged to be the most talented and they're just great musicians. That's probably the only positive thing. But that's pretty much what they can do, that they're great musicians because they're crazy like that, and [because] they're nomadic, and [because] they don't have any other worries in life; that's why they're good musicians. And that's about it.

Obviously, there would be a lot of other kinds of romanticizing opinions such as women being particularly beautiful, obviously, sexualized or hyper-sexualized, them being into all sorts of, yeah, horoscope-like divinity-sources, "weird" sources-like looking into the future and so on. So this is this very kind of typical, almost orientaling attitudes that you see in Western Europe regarding other communities, including the Roma themselves. But we've never had a structured way to talk about race in school. I think this was just entirely wiped out. We would quite simply not look at it as a criterion to distinguish among people for better or worse. We *did* talk a lot about inter-ethnic relations because that's what hurts us, or that's what we have the feeling that hurts us more, particularly along language lines. So Russophobia starts getting constructed in school. Of course, this is not only my family, this is an entirely educational system that contributes to that.

And then obviously, media representations that have become increasingly Islamophobic, Arabophobic in general. And that, I guess, they're not part of the school curriculum, but they're very much part of what you talk with your classmates or what you see in the news and so on. But unfortunately, there was no structured discussion about race. And I guess if you go around and even ask people around there what they think about the Roma communities, they wouldn't even see race as a criterion for asking this question. Yeah, I don't even know. I think it's really the lifestyle that bothers people so much, even if again, you'd hear quite a lot of comments related to skin color, as well. I'm really not sure how people conceive of this topic now since I haven't really been recently either.

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Ana shares how she navigates different spaces by revealing or hiding her nationalities.

A:

I've always mobilized in my advantage the fact that people don't really know what this [being Moldovan] means and what this place [Moldova] is, *means* that I did not embody stereotypes in their view and that they could take me as I was a lot easier than if I presented myself as something else. So I've always juggled these two passports of mine and presented myself as either or depending on the situation. And I've learned to do that with time to minimize potential harm to myself or to minimize discomfort and interaction with a person, to minimize provoking embarrassment for either of the sides, but usually for the other side.

So for instance, in Hungary, I would almost universally present myself as Moldovan because if I present myself as Romanian, there's a clear baggage of prejudice of stereotypes of active anti-kind of sentiments. Hungary is not good with any of its neighbors. It's a very nationalistic place, especially in the past decade or so. So I would never present myself as Romanian there. People would figure it because they'd be like, "Oh, well, wait a second. Aren't you guys like neighbors with Romania?" And

I'm like, "Yeah, we kind of speak the same language, but it's a bit of a dialect so we're still different." So I would try to *other* myself and dissociate myself from what I knew would be received quite badly.

And then in Belgium, I think I would present myself as Moldovan as well, kind of betting on the fact that people have no idea, and then avoiding to say, "I'm Romanian." Because in Western Europe, when you say Romania, you're a cheap worker, a prostitute, or just outright Roma, which is obviously a criminal, and yeah, just comes over here [to Western Europe] to steal their jobs and abuse their social security. So it was an act of self-defense mechanism to avoid putting myself in situations in which I will have to justify anything or destroy prejudice. Once a relationship was established, I could go further and say, "But you know what, I'm actually Romanian as well." And that will usually provoke quite interesting reactions because it just didn't cross people's minds that someone can be both and that not their stereotypes are so, so bad that they were struggling to make sense out of these things in their mind.

In Switzerland, I think I've changed quite a lot and I use more often the opportunity of presenting myself as Romanian even if the situation is not necessarily much different from Belgium. I think I'm just more self-confident here. You know, I have a permit here, which was not easy to obtain, and I struggled to get jobs without this permit – that was quite difficult and it was a time in which Romanians and Bulgarians were still experiencing active quotas on the Swiss labor market just because these are the countries that joined the EU later. So here are more structural barriers to accessing the job market for instance. So in the end, I had to get married to get a permit and to be treated with the respect and equality that I would have deserved anyway.

But I think I became a little bit more cunning, probably, or self-confident, and instead of hiding behind a country that no one has any clue of, or maybe not enough to make immediate links in their minds or pop up prejudices of sorts, I'm more ready to just lay it all out there and be confrontational if the case requires it. But that wasn't necessarily too often, or I can't remember an instance where I had to actively defend myself against a bureaucrat or a shopkeeper or a colleague at work, and so on. So I think I've... I'm a lot more comfortable with presenting my Romanian identity a bit more to the front rather than go into hiding, which is what I was doing before.

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It's been nearly 16 years since Ana left Moldova. She contemplates upon her journey of reflecting on and unlearning the things she grew up with.

A:

Moldova is still very much a divided society, particularly on ethnic criteria. So obviously, it's a society that has a Romanian-speaking majority but also a very significant Russian-speaking minority. But it's a big minority. We're talking about 30%. And I come from a family that is really quite Russophobic and Romanophile on that, since things are really divided in this way in that place. And much across Europe, I mean, Russophobia is kind of an attribute to have if you want to be taken seriously to this day. So I grew up with this style of... yeah, you could call it "education", you could call it "hate speech" and "discrimination". I mean, you can find different words more or less poignant to describe it.

But I remember having to be confronted with Russian speakers as friends, as potential friends, as potential boyfriends. And that was a difficult barrier to overcome, not only because my Russian was quite poor even if it still remains a mandatory second language taught in state schools and so on, but in the insanity of this Russophobia that I grew up with in the home and the family, you get to take pride in the fact that your Russian is bad. It's that silly, obviously. But that's the consequence of that. And once I was confronted with the fact that I was interested in someone that is actually a non-native Russian speaker and it could have gone better if my Russian was better, but instead, I could speak

English better than anything else on top of Romanian by the time, you know, we get to mid-adolescence in which these socialization becomes very, very important.

So I think this is where my big first question mark appeared, in that I thought, "Well, that's interesting. Why was I raised like that? Why was I educated like that? Where's this really coming from? I mean, I understand that Stalin was a really horrible man, but why can't I speak Russian to date this guy?" I mean, it felt so stupid that I'm paying the price for this Russophobia that has built up in the past decades, obviously because of the very horrible things that happened, but people took it so personally... and again, I understand why: My grandfather was deported twice by the Stalinist system. But it just felt so weird for me to carry on the consequences for that. Like, if I can't speak Russian, am I gonna fix his suffering? Really? I doubt it very much. So that's I think my first time I started to question this thing.

It took a lot longer to start questioning anti-Roma racism. For that, I had to already leave home and meet a few good progressive, actively anti-racist friends in my circle of friends in my bachelor's and be confronted with their anti-racist discourse and being told to my face, "You know what, if you keep saying these things, I'm gonna stop hanging out with you because this is some racist crap. So you really need to stop saying these things... Ideally, stop *believing* in them as well. But up to you if you continue believing, I just don't want to hear it."

So I think those friends were really instrumental in continuing to question myself further than along these ethnic language lines, but go into the hardcore stuff that is racism, as we define it most of the time. And from that, it took even many more years obviously to not only stop being a racist, but start being an anti-racist, which is the next step. It's not enough to not be racist. If you are serious about it, you have to do actively anti-racist action and do concrete things to undermine the very horrible place that we live in, including in a place like Geneva.

So those were all stages that took time, that took quite unpleasant confrontations either with myself and my family or with my friends. None of this was a pleasant experience. And I very strongly believe in telling people upfront. So there's this kind of like, "let's all be diplomatic and friendly, including with the racist people", I don't really buy that. I think that when you say racist stuff, when you do racist stuff, you need to hear from the others that this is what you're doing, that this is what you're saying. There is really no way to sugarcoat these things, and nothing that can, or at least in my experience, nothing that could have caused this click in your head to stop and think, "Wow, am I really not doing the right thing here? Am I really being an idiot? Am I really risking my friend because I've heard these things as a child and I keep repeating them for no reason whatsoever, right? So why am I doing that? That's just stupid, right?"

Obviously, it takes a bit of curiosity as well. Maybe not everyone could do this exercise independently, sort of unassisted. But this confrontation is, I think, kind of a mandatory element. There's really no way to make these things diplomatic. If you're a racist, you need to hear it. And if you said something racist, you need a slap on the face. I mean, figuratively speaking. But you need to be confronted with the fact that you are doing the wrong thing.

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Against the background of her experiences, Ana has the following to say on what it takes to be antiracist.

A:

I guess it starts from relatively simple things such as calling out racism when you see it. It's something that White people, with all their privilege, should be doing on a systematic basis if they want to get any respect whatsoever and any credit. So it's not enough to shut up. It's not enough to stay quiet. It's

not enough to kind of pretend you didn't hear it. You *need* to stand up against things. And that's the kind of very, very basic, concrete everyday life kind of action that you can do.

And then I guess it depends on everyone's time and possibilities and kind of mental resources, to take even more action, be it collective in terms of showing up for protests or supporting protests or any kind of anti-racist campaigns. In Switzerland, there are multiple opportunities since people vote so often, and it so happens that every now and then there's a voting that touches slightly on race relations issues. So you can do that.

And then you can do more personal things, such as supporting People of Color directly in either their life here or in any kind of other support people might need, all of... again, since I mentioned this association that provides counseling for victims of racism, we know for a fact that those are pretty much volunteer lawyers, or social workers, psychologists and so on. So you can get involved into concrete action based on your profession. Some professions are more conducive to this than others, obviously, but if you're a lawyer, maybe you want to donate your time for an association like that and take an active stance against racism with your pro bono services.

And yeah, I guess the associative kind of nongovernmental organization network do provide for quite a lot of opportunities. The reason why I got to an Eritrean wedding in the first place is because I am helping an Eritrean couple here in Geneva with all sorts of things. Initially, we got put in touch by an association looking to help youth or migrant youth with learning French and doing their French homework and kind of have social interactions that go beyond the migrant residents, which can be heavy and a constant confrontation with traumatic migration experience and so on. So that was their idea. And that's how we came in touch with this couple. So yeah, we do all sorts of things, not necessarily *for* them but *with* them including going to their wedding and helping them buy furniture or go through some administrative process that takes two people with Ph.D. degrees to figure out how to go about them and so on. So in the sense, you can take a very personal concrete action to support someone who's not White to have a better life in this country, in this city.

I guess there would be quite a lot of Swiss people that wouldn't like the fact that I do that, or they wouldn't do it themselves, even if they wouldn't dare to say, "Well, I don't like it." But if you'd ask them, "Well, would *you* do that?", people would be like, "Oh no, no way. I'm against immigration anyway so why are you even asking this?" So there's this subversive side to it. And every now and then, I'm thinking about the fact that yeah, the right-wingers in Switzerland would definitely not approve of what I'm doing, but that gives me renewed kind of satisfaction. It's a bit evil to think like that, but I do like the thought of pissing off a racist every day.

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You can find more information about racism towards the Roma communities, as well as other articles, books and videos Ana recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on December 6th!
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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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