

# Hatred is the Cheapest Fuel: Political Power, Not Economics, is Behind Rising Czech Nationalism

By Gwendolyn Albert<sup>1</sup>

AS the global economic recession unfolds, it is tempting to see the invisible hand of the market as somehow behind the rise in anti-Romani violence throughout the European Union during this first part of 2009. Speaking in Prague at the launching of the integrated European Roma Platform in late April, Vladimír Špidla, Czech European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, said the current recession is increasing Roma social exclusion EU-wide. He called for the Member States to provide opportunities for Roma integration, constructive ones, “not repressive measures that will only deepen poverty.”<sup>2</sup>

Špidla’s call for action was laudable; unfortunately, in the Czech political climate in particular, such calls for equity for Roma become grist to the mill of a domestic political discourse that has openly embraced both anti-Gypsyism and euroskepticism for all they are worth. The stakes are high and the game here is about domestic political power pure and simple.

In the Czech Republic, nationalist and racist rhetoric specifically targeting Roma from the mouths of political figures increased on the domestic political scene during the 2006 elections,

and the appointment of the second of former Czech PM Mirek Topolánek’s cabinets formed a sort of coup *de grace* in those terms.<sup>3</sup> That year saw the resurgence of the extreme right in political party form after a decade of hiatus – specifically, in the increasingly public presentations of the National Party and the Workers’ Party – and, for the first time ever, saw the denial of Roma losses during the Holocaust exploited as a political strategy aimed at generating electoral support. On this last point, Czech government mishandling of the issue of the pig farm on the former Roma concentration camp site at Lety by Písek in South Bohemia is clearly to blame.<sup>4</sup>

No other political figure personifies the problem of the past three years more clearly than the recently deposed head of the Christian Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL), Jíří Čunek. This politician attained national prominence by making a political issue of Roma during his election campaign in the fall of 2006 in a most striking way. As mayor, he engineered the forced eviction of several hundred Romani people from the town of Vsetín, some to a new temporary housing complex on the town outskirts and others to completely different administrative regions, a move later condemned by the country’s Ombudsman.<sup>5</sup> Čunek

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<sup>2</sup> “Czech EU commissioner: Roma to be affected by recession”, *Prague Daily Monitor*, 27 April 2009, <http://praguemonitor.com/2009/04/27/czech-eu-commissioner-roma-be-affected-recession> (accessed: 1 May 2009).

<sup>3</sup> All material on the events of 2006 is taken from Gwendolyn Albert, “Racism in the Czech Republic”, *European Network Against Racism Shadow Report, 2006*, [http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Czech\\_Republic\\_2006.pdf](http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Czech_Republic_2006.pdf) (accessed: 4 May 2009).

<sup>4</sup> See: Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust, <http://www.cestiromove.ecn.cz/crrheng.htm> (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Czech Public Defender of Rights (Ombudsman), *Final Statement in the Matter of the Eviction of Romany Inhabitants from the Gallery House in Vsetin’s Smetanova Street No. 1336*, <http://www.ochrance.cz/dokumenty/document.php?back=/cinnost/index.php&doc=795> (accessed: 4 May 2009).

proudly sought and received media coverage of the creation of his new “Roma ghetto” and made several anti-Romani statements for which he received some condemnation and many more popular expressions of support. His moves were perceived by many Czechs as examples of backing up plain speaking with “action” on the “Romani question”. As a result of his “purging” the town of most of its Romani inhabitants, he was re-elected mayor, elected Senator, elected KDU-ČSL chair, and then was appointed Regional Development Minister and First Deputy Prime Minister in the Topolánek cabinet.<sup>6</sup> A clearer example of the political gold that is anti-Gypsyism in the Czech Republic cannot be asked for.

Earlier in 2006, the far-right National Party, led by a photogenic single mother named Petra Edelmannová, who surrounds herself mafia-style with large numbers of security, held a demonstration at the site of the former Nazi concentration camp for Roma at Lety. The demonstrators said the “real victims” of WWII had been ethnic Czechs and that the Roma who perished at Lety had died due to their own “poor hygiene.” They also argued that removing the pig farm located on site in order to honour the dead was not worth the expenditure. Counter-demonstrators, one of them Markus Pape, author of the most comprehensive work on Lety,<sup>7</sup> were arrested by police for shouting “Down with Nazism.” Charges filed against the National Party on the suspicion of having committed the crime of defamation were dismissed by police, who referred to an opinion from the Czech Academy of Sciences holding that the camp at Lety “could not be recognized as either a concentration or an extermination camp” and that the speeches given did not “openly declare” ideas in support of genocide.<sup>8</sup> This response by the authorities essentially

declared open season on Holocaust denial, defamation and anti-Gypsyism in the Czech Republic. Various ultra-right nationalist groups soon followed suit with marches “against affirmative action” in various locations across the country.

On 1 May 2006, a traditional day for neo-Nazis to demonstrate, the National Party and the unregistered, dedicated neo-Nazi group National Resistance (Národní odpor) demonstrated in Prague. Again, counter-demonstrators were punished rather than protected by police: Ms Kateřina Jacques, then a Green Party candidate for Parliament and member of the Czech Government’s Human Rights Council, was physically assaulted by an enraged municipal police officer at the National Resistance demonstration who said she was “disrupting” the gathering; the incident was captured on video. Police also detained a journalist who photographed the incident. The upshot of the subsequent legal battle which Ms Jacques fought against this police brutality was to absolve the officer concerned of any wrong-doing.<sup>9</sup>

At least 25 violent racial attacks, mostly against Romani victims, were reported by NGOs and the media in 2006. Most disturbing were incidents of vigilante violence which the authorities were unable to effectively prevent or subsequently prosecute. These incidents have very clearly paved the way for the strategy currently wreaking such havoc in the Romani community by the neo-Nazi Workers’ Party and other extremist groups in 2009. Ironically, the official statistics on hate crimes for 2006 showed a downward trend which the authorities at the time confidently predicted would continue. Instead, what has happened is that an intense form of psychological warfare – considered within the limits of the law because

<sup>6</sup> *The greatest damage was suffered by Romani people who, under threat of having their children institutionalised, signed contracts to assume loans from the town for the purchase of real estate they had not seen, following a late-night round-up by social workers. During this process, husbands and fathers were separated from their families and moved hundreds of kilometers to their new “homes”, properties which were unfit for human habitation. Black mold, a lack of potable water and inferior electrical wiring endangered the men. See Czech Public Defender of Rights (Ombudsman) n. 5 above.*

<sup>7</sup> Markus Pape, *A Nikdo Vám Nebude Veít*, (Prague: GplusG, 1997).

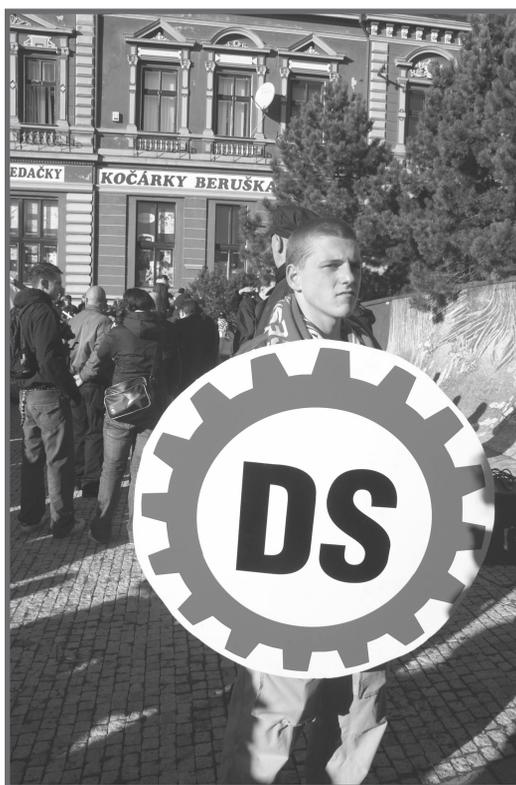
<sup>8</sup> “Chronologický vývoj skandálu kolem aktivity Národní strany v Letech u Písku”, *Romea.cz*, 20 January 2006, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=servis/z2006\\_0053](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=servis/z2006_0053) (accessed: December 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn Albert, “Racism in the Czech Republic”, *European Network Against Racism Shadow Report*, 2006, [http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Czech\\_Republic\\_2006.pdf](http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Czech_Republic_2006.pdf) (accessed: 4 May 2009).

it is being committed by a legally registered political party following the formal rules for announcing and conducting public gatherings – has been increasingly perpetrated against Roma by these groups with the sanction of the authorities.

Vigilante violence in 2006 included an incident in July when an unidentified perpetrator shot and wounded four Roma, two of them children, with an air rifle over the course of the month on the grounds of the largest housing estate in the South Bohemian town of České Budějovice. Town authorities told the press they could “not afford” to increase the police presence there despite the attacks. In September 2006, the neo-Nazi “National Resistance of Silesia,” some of whose members were already under criminal investigation,

organised armed militias to conduct “patrols” of the Roma quarter of the North Moravian town of Orlova, citing local robberies allegedly committed by Roma as their excuse. An armed group of 20, including young women, used tonfas, chains, brass knuckles, baseball bats and axes in their assault on six similarly armed Romani youths.<sup>10</sup>



*Insignia of the Workers' Party (Dělnická strana), Litvínov, Czech Republic, 2008.*

PHOTO CREDIT: LENKA KUČEROVÁ, ROMEA

During 2007, the negative trends of 2006 continued to worsen in the Czech Republic even as key Council of Europe and UN bodies drew attention to the crisis.<sup>11</sup> Leading politicians continued to make racist remarks at the expense of Roma. Then-Deputy PM Jiří Čunek in particular continued to generate controversy with his anti-Romani comments to the press and remarks posted to his party's web page.<sup>12</sup> Independent Senator Liana

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Gwendolyn Albert, “Racism in the Czech Republic”, *European Network Against Racism Shadow Report, 2007*, <http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Czech%20Republic%20-%20SR%202007.pdf> (accessed: 4 May 2009).

<sup>12</sup> *In March, responding to a question from a reader of the tabloid Blesk as to how other people besides the Roma could get state subsidies, Čunek said: “You’ll have to go get a suntan somewhere, and then you and your family should make a mess, set fires on the town square – then some politicians might stand up for you and say, ‘The poor guy.’” In April, echoing calls from international organisations, Czech Romani activists demonstrated for Čunek’s resignation. An opinion poll commissioned by Czech TV in April 2007 indicated that most Czechs agreed with Čunek’s views. In the poll, conducted by the STEM agency, 64% of respondents agreed with Čunek and 58% said he should not resign (<http://www.radio.cz/en/article/90045> (accessed: 25 May 2008)). By June, as many as 20 criminal charges had been filed against him; those concerning his racist remarks were shelved that month. In August, the criminal investigation into the Vsetin evictions was shelved. In October, responding to leaked information, Čunek admitted having received family support benefits from the state in 1998 despite having a bank balance in the millions of crowns (assets for which he has never given a satisfactory accounting); while he broke no laws in applying for social benefits, the irony of his having accessed state support while criticising Roma for welfare dependency was apparent to his fellow Christian Democratic senators, who called on him to resign. In November, Čunek resigned as Regional Development Minister. After the shelving of corruption charges against him (unrelated to his racist words and deeds) he was reinstated as Regional Development Minister in April 2008. (<http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=rubrika&rubrika=Cunekgate> (accessed: 4 April 2008)).*

Janáčková, who is also mayor of a district of the city of Ostrava and to this day a member of the Czech Senate Human Rights Committee, became the centre of a similar scandal in 2007. Regional-level Roma Coordinators called for her resignation in July 2007 after a recording was released of her saying the following at a meeting of the town's housing committee, attended by residents, in August 2006:

I have to deal with the Gypsies. Unfortunately, I am a racist. I do not agree with the integration of Gypsies, that they should be able to live throughout the district. Unfortunately, we selected Bedřiška [quarter], so that is where they will be – with a high fence, an electric one for all I care, I'll tell the whole world that.<sup>13</sup>

Janáčková did not know the recording was being made at the time; it was provided to the media by Radomír Michniak (Občanská demokratická strana – ODS), her predecessor in the post as mayor. Shortly after the news was released, Michniak received an anonymous death threat.

Janáčková remains in office despite the controversy. The NGO Romea filed criminal charges against her and another town council member for incitement to hatred. In 2008, the police asked the Senate to strip her of immunity from prosecution, but their request was rejected.

During 2007 the distribution of anonymous, violent, anti-Romani racist messages via SMS and the internet remained a problem, as did the real-time encouragement of television viewers or

internet users to participate in racist exchanges. The first half of the year included the following other highlights in anti-Romani violence and extremism: A 36-year-old Romani man in Zlonice na Kladensku lost both arms and legs trying to remove a burning bottle packed with explosives from in front of his house, where the graffiti “He steals” had been freshly painted.<sup>14</sup> A small group of Roma who were standing in front of their own residences were attacked prior to a demonstration in Přerov by 180 members of the ultra-right wing “National Corporativism” group.<sup>15</sup> On 1 May, riot police in Prague arrested anti-fascist demonstrators against a neo-Nazi march by the “National Unity” and “Patriotic Front” groups, who were allowed to proceed.<sup>16</sup> In Brno, the town hall banned a march by “National Resistance”, but to no avail; riot police intervened against the 500 marchers, who responded by throwing rocks and bottles and attacking several onlookers at a bus stop. On 13 May, members of the National Party decided to return to Lety, demonstrating during the memorial ceremony by holding signs saying the deaths of the ethnic Czech camp guards, who succumbed to the typhus epidemic that caused the camp to be closed, should be commemorated as well.<sup>17</sup> Just a few days later, on 17 May, 26-year-old Ján Tóth, a Romani man, was surrounded by four drunks in Hodonín who beat him up, took the toluene he had been sniffing, poured it over him, set him on fire and photographed the incident on their mobile phones. Tóth died in hospital.<sup>18</sup>

In July 2007, neo-Nazis demonstrated in Vlašim; the invitation to the event, which organisers called the “Day of the Race”, read: “Gangs

<sup>13</sup> *European Network Against Racism, “Combating Racist Crime and Violence: Testimonies and Advocacy Strategies”* May 2009, 8, [http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdf/AdvocacyBooklet\\_EN\\_lowres.pdf](http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdf/AdvocacyBooklet_EN_lowres.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> “Policisté stále nevdí, kdo stál za výbuchem ve Zlonicích”, *Romea.cz*, 29 January 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=servis/z2007\\_0063](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=servis/z2007_0063) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>15</sup> “Ultrapraviáci v Perov napadli Romy”, *Romea.cz*, 10 March 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_2131](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_2131) (accessed: 16 June 2009)

<sup>16</sup> *The Social Democratic Youth organisation subsequently alleged that police humiliated the detainees, strip-searching them and forcing them to do knee-bends while naked. Five police officers were subsequently disciplined for misdemeanours related to the incident. Albert n. 11 above.*

<sup>17</sup> “Romové uctili památku obětí nacismu, lenové Národní strany rušili pietu”, *Romea.cz*, 13 May 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_2482](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_2482) (accessed: 19 June 2009).

<sup>18</sup> “Pokraoval soud se skinheady, kteří upálili Roma”, *Romea.cz*, 1 November 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=komentare\\_ukaz&detail=2007\\_3303](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=komentare_ukaz&detail=2007_3303) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

of Gypsy criminals wander the streets of the town harassing all decent Czechs.” Civil rights observers began to complain that town officials were not exercising their rights to ban such gatherings, nor were police dispersing them. In Litvínov, a town that was to become infamous the following year, supporters of the National Party distributed the party newspaper featuring anti-Roma articles to Roma living at the Janov housing estate. An unidentified perpetrator threw a Molotov cocktail at a single-family home occupied by Roma in Vrbno pod Pradedem.<sup>19</sup> In August, Czech football player Pavel Horváth was accused of giving the Nazi salute to fans during a match in Prague.<sup>20</sup> That same month, a group of skinheads attacked two young Romani men and injured them in Olomouc, shouting racial abuse at them during the attack.<sup>21</sup>

On 1 September 2007, right-wing extremists demonstrated in Prague in support of Tomáš Čermák, the police officer who had beaten up Kateřina Jacques a year and half prior; Čermák even addressed the gathering.<sup>22</sup> On 28 September, an official holiday, 200 extreme right-wingers demonstrated in Kladno; the gathering, organised by the “Autonomous Nationalists of Central Bohemia”, explicitly mentioned ethnic minorities as a target of their protest.<sup>23</sup> On the same day, 80 members of the “National Corporativism” movement demonstrated in Bruntal.<sup>24</sup> It was at this point that the neo-Nazi Workers’ Party,

registered since 2003, first poked its head above ground to announce it was considering creating its own “security units” to guard their public events and “monitor problems with immigrants.”<sup>25</sup> They would soon replace the term “immigrants” for “Roma,” to great effect.

In October 2007, Michal Kašpar, a patrolman with the Pardubice police force, was exposed by the private television station TV Nova as an active neo-Nazi and subsequently resigned.<sup>26</sup> Photographs of Kašpar in Nazi uniform and posing under swastikas appeared on the internet. The Antifascist Action organisation also drew the attention of the TV station to Kašpar’s membership in the organisation POW, which assists imprisoned neo-Nazis. Later that month, seven skinheads attacked a group of Roma in Moravská Ostrava using a knife, collapsing night sticks and brass knuckles while shouting racist insults. On 28 October, the official holiday commemorating the founding of Czechoslovakia, the extremist National Party announced it was forming a paramilitary organisation, the “National Guard”, uniformed units armed with special knives intended to “replace” the police and “oversee the behaviour of inadaptable minorities and immigrants.”<sup>27</sup> That same month, the Prague City Council rejected a petition by a right-wing extremist group to march through the Jewish quarter, ostensibly to protest the Iraq war. The timing of the protest coincided with the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*,

<sup>19</sup> “Neznámý žhá hodil na Bruntálsku zápalnou láhev do domu s Romy”, *Romea.cz*, 2 July 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=komentare\\_ukaz&detail=2007\\_2704](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=komentare_ukaz&detail=2007_2704) (accessed: 19 June 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Video footage at <http://www.romea.cz/romeatv/index.php?id=detail&source=g&vid=6981004864425566095&detail=6981004864425566095> (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>21</sup> “Skupina skinhead napadla v Olomouci dva Romy a zranila je”, *Romea.cz*, 26 August 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3003](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3003) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>22</sup> “Extremisté si připomni zásah proti Jacques, kritizovali zelené”, *Romea.cz*, 1 September 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3042](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3042) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>23</sup> “V Kladn demonstrovali pízivci krajní pravice”, *Romea.cz*, 29 September 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3140](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3140) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>24</sup> “Nova: Pravicoví extremisté demonstrovali v Bruntále”, *Romea.cz*, 28 September 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3136](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3136) (accessed: 6 July 2009).

<sup>25</sup> “Dlnická strana uvažuje o vytvoření vlastních ochranných oddíl”, *Romea.cz*, 28 September 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3138](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3138) (accessed: 9 May 2008).

<sup>26</sup> See: <http://czechtek.bloguje.cz/tema-4-media.php> (accessed: 26 May 2008).

<sup>27</sup> “Nic než nádor aneb Národní garda - protizákonné Lidové milice eských fašist”, *Romea.cz*, 10 December 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3507](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3507) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

so the council declared the demonstrators' intent was to incite racial hatred. Despite a court battle upholding the ban, hundreds of neo-Nazis, including from neighbouring countries, defied it and clashed with anarchists and police during the march in early November.<sup>28</sup>

Other November 2007 incidents included three skinheads attacking a Sri Lankan university student in Zlín, calling him racial epithets. A group of 30 neo-Nazis was captured by security cameras giving the Nazi salute at the statue of St Vaclav in Prague's Wenceslaus Square; an eyewitness said they spoke mostly German and were chanting "Sieg heil" but dispersed before police arrived. In the town of Cheb, leaflets were posted by the neo-Nazi organisation "Combat 18" attacking the Romani and Vietnamese communities. The year ended with a building occupied mostly by Romani families in the town of Vimperk na Prachatické catching fire three times in short succession. No one was injured, but the mayor said arson could not be ruled out.<sup>29</sup>

At this point the reader should be reminded that all this extremist activity, targeted against Roma and anyone not ethnically Czech, was well underway *before* the global financial crisis was officially announced in the fall of 2008. There has always been plenty of racist hatred to go around here, irrespective of the fortunes of the market. Moreover, last year the Czech crown was performing so strongly against both the dollar and the Euro that Czech exporters were even beginning to worry their products might become too expensive. Even after the crisis became full-blown, Czech authorities hastened to soothe taxpayers by letting them know that Czech banks had not been involved in the hedge funds and other financial instruments that had wreaked such havoc elsewhere. As Hungary, Iceland and

Ireland have imploded, the Czech Republic has remained relatively stable – and, as usual, has also remained relatively self-absorbed by its own domestic political agenda up to and during the Czech EU presidency in the first half of 2009. Predictions issued by the European Commission expect Czech GDP to shrink by only 2.7 % this year, one of the mildest forecasts in the EU.<sup>30</sup>

There is, however, a market economy mechanism that has been steadily at work in the country for quite some time; far from part of the current "crisis", it is considered part and parcel of the development of commercial real estate markets in capitalist economies and is largely behind the rise in the number of Roma "ghettos" documented by the Czech Labour and Social Affairs Ministry in 2006. The process is that of gentrification; as in Vsetín, where Čunek evicted Romani tenants from a prime real estate location in the town centre so it could be capitalised on, similar processes have been taking place across the country for the past decade.

The problem with gentrification is that the average citizen now finds their local "Roma ghetto" expanding with unhappy residents – not due to official planning, as happened under Communism, but due to real estate agents randomly redistributing the underclass as gentrification requires. In this scenario, the only ones satisfied are the property developers, whose owners usually do not have to live day-to-day with the actual impact of their commercial activity. Given that there is no definition of social or low-income housing enshrined in Czech law, towns are also free to invent their own approaches to this problem, with the result that many poor Roma end up paying exorbitant rents to live in undignified accommodation with communal facilities for which they are not eligible to receive any state support.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Albert n. 11 above.*

<sup>29</sup> "Dm ve Vimperku, kde bydlí Romové, zapálil zejm žhá", *Romea.cz*, 29 December 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3568](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3568), (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>30</sup> *European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, "Economic Forecast", Spring 2009, http://ec.europa.eu/economy\_finance/publications/publication15048\_en.pdf* (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>31</sup> *Joint Submission of the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, Peacework Development Fund and Vzájemné soužití, Communication to the UN special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing concerning violations of the Right to Adequate Housing in the Czech Republic, 8 February 2008.*

During both 2007 and 2008, there was a regularly publicised political tussle in the cabinet regarding who was supposed to work on the government's "Roma Concept." Was this the purview of the Human Rights and Minorities Minister, or was it for Regional Development – run on and off between 2006 and 2008 by the notorious Čunek – to decide? As might be expected from the grand scale on which he enacted plans in his own town, Čunek's draft Concept was basically a revival of Communist-era policy on Roma, and some of its principles clearly contravene human rights law. For example, he recommended classifying Roma into three categories and allocating them housing on that basis; the lowest category basically comprised "inadaptable" people who should be pre-emptively assigned to prison-like living arrangements to keep them from engaging in petty crime. While his ideas were immediately criticised by the Czech Government Council on Roma Community Affairs and others, his supporters relished in being able to rally around his plan. Before it could be submitted for consideration, though, he had resigned over a corruption scandal not related to his racism.<sup>32</sup>

Political corruption is an enormous problem in the Czech Republic, and if Čunek's example is anything to go by, it seems clear that local-level politicians pull out the Roma card when they want to distract voters from their other deeds. Before he left national politics, Čunek was charged with having misappropriated public funds and with having committed sexual harassment. The criminal investigation into the charges of fraud seems to have been improperly influenced by the government, leading to calls for Supreme State Prosecutor Renata Vesecká to step down.<sup>33</sup> The government's motivation for interfering with the prosecution seems to have been simply the mundane need to preserve domestic political power. Had Čunek been successfully prosecuted, he would have had to have been removed as party head, which would have brought the government's wobbly coalition

down and necessitated early elections. In the end, perhaps precisely due to its myopia and questionable interference in the justice system, the government collapsed anyway – but this has not kept Čunek from continuing to air his Roma "expertise" in the media spotlight. During a recent Czech Television programme he claimed that the only reason the neo-Nazis have never targeted Vsetín as a destination was because he had already "dealt with the problem" – i.e., by cleansing the town of Roma he had satisfied his constituents, who then saw no need to call on radicals from the Workers' Party for assistance.<sup>34</sup>

Another example of a politician pulling out the Roma card in an effort to hide her own tracks is that of Mayor Ivana Řápková of the North Bohemian town of Chomutov. As in Vsetín, Mayor Řápková is from a right wing, mainstream political party (ODS). Her tenure in office was marked by a number of scandals surrounding the leasing of public real estate to a town councillor, the wasteful decision to build a recreation centre on the town outskirts and the petulant removal of the director of the local zoo due to his criticism of her decisions. Faced with 6,000 signatures on a petition calling for her resignation, Řápková launched "Operation Lifesaver," a move intended to divide Chomutov voters into two camps, the "decent" and the "inadaptable."

As in Vsetín, Řápková inherited a situation that had developed over many years. Many tenants in municipally-owned flats owed the city back rent. In this and many other situations, the question that is rarely asked is why the authorities allow such significant amounts of back rent to accumulate for years before taking action – especially when they are actually obliged by law to make use of their status as a "special beneficiary" should an unemployed welfare recipient not pay rent. Take action Řápková did – illegal action, in the full glare of the media spotlight. She arranged for collections agents,

<sup>32</sup> "Čunek: Není pravda, že romská otázka není v mé gesci", *Romea.cz*, 21 September 2008, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_4941](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_4941) (accessed: 7 July 2009).

<sup>33</sup> "Vesecká potvrdila amnestii pro unka", *Romea.cz*, 23 November 2007, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3426](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3426) (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>34</sup> *Máte slovo*, *Ceskatelevize*, 30 April 2009, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/209572230800017-mate-slovo/> (accessed: 5 May 2009).

accompanied by police officers, to accost welfare recipients as they were receiving their monthly stipends in person from the town hall – monies intended for food and other necessities which are not legally subject to collections.<sup>35</sup> The police officers asked those standing in line to prove their identity and the collections agent next to them would just “happen” to overhear the person’s name, find them on the list and deprive them of their cash on the spot.

The procedure was totally illegal, but that was not the worst of it. The town hall sent the media advance information that this would be taking place – including lots of unattractive footage from the local Roma ghetto – and provided them with images from the CCTV cameras located above the counter concerned in the town hall, a violation of the law on the protection of personal information. The faces of the police officers in the images were digitally manipulated to render them unidentifiable, but the welfare recipients’ identities were not protected.<sup>36</sup>

In the aftermath of the criticism and prosecution she has faced for these moves, Řápková has constantly maintained that “Operation Lifesaver” is aimed at the “inadaptable”, not at Roma, but local residents reported a sharp rise in anti-Romani sentiment following her campaign.<sup>37</sup> While she also declared it was a last resort, locals working with the Romani community claim the town placed little emphasis on social work with indebted families, never monitored the situation and never asked

for the town’s status as a special beneficiary to be acknowledged by the courts, etc. Some of the families whose monies were collected were left with only CZK 1,000 (EUR 38) for the month; moreover, the collections agents included their own exorbitant fees in the amounts collected.<sup>38</sup> As for that local petition to remove her from office, it was soon dwarfed by an online petition with more than 100,000 people writing in from all over the country in support of Řápková’s tough measures.

The political genius of the Workers’ Party during the past year and a half has been to capitalise on exactly these volatile situations, on the sense of unease felt by those who have watched the populations of their local Roma ghettos grow due to circumstances seemingly beyond anyone’s control. For members of the Romani community in the Czech Republic, 2008 and 2009 have been a nightmare. Neo-Nazi marches have increased in frequency, with municipal authorities unwilling or unable to stop them, and the number of followers of this ideology willing to take part in them has risen as well.<sup>39</sup> Those attending the marches are not teenaged thugs, but middle-aged, clean-cut, average-seeming men and women. The National Party’s attempts, while still ongoing, have faded into the background in comparison to the success of the Workers’ Party, which stopped attempting to generate hatred against “immigrants” (of whom there are not really enough in the country to cause concern) and instead has discovered the tried and true enemy, Roma. It would be facile to suggest that

<sup>35</sup> *The legal organisation Zšvule prava has published the following analysis (on collecting social welfare benefits): “Section 48 paragraph 1 Law No. 111/2006 Coll., on aid in material distress, expressly states that ‘subsidies cannot be subject to the execution of a court order’. Any procedure whereby subsidies, due to a collections proceeding, are not sent directly to the account of their intended beneficiary but are sent to the account of a collections agent, or any procedure where a collections agent confiscates these subsidies from their intended beneficiary at the moment they are physically available to the beneficiary, contravenes the sense and purpose of this law. This is particularly true in situations where it can be demonstrated that the collections agent is aware that the money being collected has exclusively come from a subsidy given as aid in material distress.” Zšvule prava, “Exekuce sociálních dávek”, <http://madenpes.cz/pripadove-studie/exekuce-socialnich-davek-zakladni-argumentace/> (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

<sup>36</sup> “On Mayor Řápková’s populism”, *Romea.cz*, 2 March 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_1173](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1173) (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>37</sup> “LN: Chomutov šikanuje rodinu, která dluhy platí”, *Romea.cz*, 23 March 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_5816](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_5816) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>38</sup> “Koho zachránil Záchraný kruh v Chomutov?”, *Romea.cz*, 26 February 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_5632](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_5632) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Kateina Opjaková, “Pro jsou tak úspěšní”, *Respekt* 20, nos. 3-4 (2009): 20-21.

the promoters of this hatred are motivated by any objective worsening of the country's living standard; in August 2008, the Czech Statistical Office reported unemployment, as calculated by the International Labour Organisation, fell during the second quarter of 2008 to 4.3%, the lowest level since 1996.<sup>40</sup>

During the last year and a half, the Workers' Party has perfected a formula: It sends its "patrols" to towns with large Roma ghettos to "monitor" the situation, which usually means meeting with local residents to ask them about their grievances with respect to their "inadaptable" neighbours. The party then claims it has been "invited to address the situation"; an individual related to the party then convenes a public demonstration in the town, usually involving a march through the Roma quarter. Members of hard-core neo-Nazi organisations, usually National Resistance and the Autonomous Nationalists, then show up in support, usually armed with blades and other weapons (gun violence has yet to become part of the formula). In cases where they can make advance preparations, they even cache weapons and materiel such as smoke bombs along the route of their march. The intention is to provoke the Romani community to violence; delighted onlookers in various towns have been captured on video urging these attempted pogroms on.<sup>41</sup>

Czech Human Rights and Minorities Minister Michael Kocáb recently called these neo-Nazi marches "terrorism", and in my view he is correct to do so.<sup>42</sup> A hallmark of these efforts is that the Workers' Party returns repeatedly and relentlessly every few weeks to the same community, hoping to provoke the violent catharsis its followers evidently crave. The worst of these

events occurred on 17 November 2008, ironically, the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the non-violent Velvet Revolution, which marked the transition to democratic rule in the former Czechoslovakia. At a cost of CZK 40 million (USD 2 million) to the Czech taxpayer, clashes between hundreds of neo-Nazis and 1,000 police officers transformed the Roma-occupied Janov housing estate in the North Bohemian town of Litvínov into a war zone and resulted in 17 injuries, including police officers on horseback. Police confirmed that the neo-Nazis were themselves armed with materiel only available to members of the armed forces, such as various types of explosives.<sup>43</sup>

In the aftermath of Litvínov, the Czech government succumbed to public pressure and made an historic first attempt to request that the Supreme Administrative Court dissolve a registered political party for other than technical reasons. The Workers' Party website alone and the many speeches in which its leaders have railed against the democratic order should be ample reason to disband it, but the evidence submitted in the government brief was so weak as to prompt various speculations among civil society observers that it had essentially been just for show.<sup>44</sup> For now, therefore, the Workers' Party continues its activities with the additional legitimacy of having defeated the government in court.

Shortly after this humiliating defeat, the Topolánek government had the rug pulled from under it during the fifth attempt at a vote of no confidence by the opposition. The collapse of the government during its historical first time at presiding over the EU rotating presidency was disappointing and embarrassing. A caretaker government has now been appointed and early elections will be held in

<sup>40</sup> "Zamstnanost a nezamstnanost v R podle výsledk VŠPS - asové ady", CSU, 6 May 2009, [http://www.czso.cz/csu/redakce.nsf/i/zam\\_cr](http://www.czso.cz/csu/redakce.nsf/i/zam_cr) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>41</sup> "Neonacisté útoili v Litvínov na policisty", Romea.cz, 17 November 2008, <http://www.romea.cz/romeatv/index.php?id=detail&source=w&vid=http://ct1streaming.visual.cz/new/asx/high/Udalosti-171108.2.asx&detail=http://ct1streaming.visual.cz/new/asx/high/Udalosti-171108.2.asx> (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>42</sup> "Kocáb: Žhářský útok ve Vítkov byl teroristický in", Romea.cz, 23 April 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_6020](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_6020) (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>43</sup> "Romové klidn demonstrovali, neonacisté vyvolali bitku s policii", Romea.cz, 17 November 2008, [http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_5213](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_5213) (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Kateina Opjaková, "Taková neztracená válka", *Respekt* 20, no. 9 (2009): 21.

October. As a result of this government's crack-down on extremists during early June 2009, Czech Police recently confirmed they have had to put the children of both Czech Prime Minister Fischer and Interior Minister Pecina under their protection, as the neo-Nazi anger at the government show of force poses a threat to them.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, the June European Parliament elections have come and gone and the Workers' Party exceeded the 1% threshold requirement, which means it will now be able to carry on its unsavoury activities with state funds. The party scored yet another victory for its agenda with an unprecedented march in Ústí nad Labem, held on 18 April (a few days prior to the anniversary of Hitler's birth). The event saw hundreds of neo-Nazis, some of them from Germany, standing on the town square named after the village of Lidice (which was razed to the ground by the Nazi regime in return for the Czechoslovak/British assassination of Heydrich) listening to a speech in German that called for the revival of the Reich. Police intervened only against the few counter-protestors who turned out that day.<sup>46</sup>

That same evening elsewhere in the country, three Molotov cocktails were thrown into the home of a Romani family in the north Moravian town of Vítkov, resulting in a two-year-old Romani girl receiving third-degree burns over 80 % of her body. As of the date of writing she remained in critical condition in the intensive care unit of the Ostrava Teaching Hospital. Roma protested the attack in 12 cities nationwide, in the UK and in Canada, a country to which many Czech Roma have fled over the years. This unprecedented show of unity and strength by the Romani community, supported by Amnesty International and other NGOs, was marred by three

locations in which neo-Nazis fearlessly attacked the demonstrators. In Chomutov, home of "Operation Lifesaver", neo-Nazis threw smoke bombs into the peacefully demonstrating crowd as police looked on. Civil rights observers immediately wrote a joint letter of protest to the authorities over this unprecedented police laxity.<sup>47</sup>

The key to understanding the general tolerance for extremism in the Czech Republic lies not in any economic factors, real or imagined, but is perfectly encapsulated in the remarks of the Mayor of Chomutov, Ivana Řápková, shortly after the events described above took place:

We want quiet in Chomutov, and therefore we will not permit any other similar demonstrations, whether by Roma or by either left or right wing extremists. The only one who pays the price is the decent citizen.<sup>48</sup>

"Decent" citizens, in the view of not just Mayor Řápková, but of many people in the Czech Republic, are those who do not draw attention to themselves. They do not bother others with their problems, troubles or demands, political, social, economic or otherwise. It is logically impossible, in this particular world view, for a Romani person to also be "decent" – Roma are, by definition, troublemakers, because for some unfathomable reason, after all their years of living off the state, they are always complaining. The substance of those complaints is immaterial – it is simply an irritation and must be silenced. Because the police, in the view of many in Czech society, are useless these days (compared to their heyday during totalitarian rule) Roma can only be counterbalanced by another "extreme" force, namely, the neo-Nazis, whose relationship to the "decent" part of society is never discussed. It is best if this balancing act does

<sup>45</sup> "Neo-Nazis a threat to children of the Czech PM and Interior Minister; police are protecting them", Romea.cz, 16 June 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_1246](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1246) (accessed: 16 June 2009).

<sup>46</sup> "The Neo-Nazi march is over; police took harsh action only against the anti-fascists", Romea.cz, 21 April 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_1191](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1191) (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>47</sup> "Open letter by nonprofit organisations regarding the neo-Nazi attack on the demonstration in Chomutov", Romea.cz, 5 May 2009, [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_1205](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1205) (accessed: 5 May 2009).

<sup>48</sup> "Stovky Rom protestovaly po esku proti rasismu, napadli je extremisté", DNES, 3 May 2009, [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/stovky-romu-protestovaly-po-cesku-proti-rasismu-napadli-je-extremiste-1n9-/domaci.asp?c=A090503\\_085209\\_domaci\\_pei](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/stovky-romu-protestovaly-po-cesku-proti-rasismu-napadli-je-extremiste-1n9-/domaci.asp?c=A090503_085209_domaci_pei), (accessed 6 May 2009).

not take place in public, because that would disturb those who are “decent”; rather, it should take place under the cover of darkness, through attacks by “unidentified perpetrators”, and it should ultimately result in establishing the kind of peace and quiet that Mayor Řápková and everyone else who spent their formative years under totalitarian rule experienced. Those opposed to the neo-Nazis are of course also “extremists.” The police should always make sure they are the first to be removed from any scene, and the “decent” people should be grateful to them for it. This, in brief, is the tenor of the discourse in the Czech Republic on these issues. Economics is beside the point. People want “order”, “quiet”, and to be left alone, perhaps, if they feel so inclined, to cast an eye towards the intricacies of that domestic political wrangling which has just brought down the Czech government during one of its most crucial, historical moments on the international stage.

Roma who have chosen to stand their ground in the Czech Republic have been deprived of so

much during the past decade that a few more years of languishing unemployment will not seem like much of a change to them. Money, after all, is not everything. The security of friends and family is much more important. What the European Commission and other governments should urge the Czech Republic to do is to repair the holes in its rule of law and in its democratic order. The country needs to develop a political culture that will rise above this cheap populism, fuelled as it is by ignorant hatred, and that will unequivocally and forcefully promote the principles of equality and non-discrimination. The country must develop a media culture that promotes rationality, not rashness. Given its relative success on the economic front, the country must also ameliorate the blows dealt by the market economy to the vulnerable, not allow rabble rousers to mine them for political gain. If things are this volatile in the country when times are still relatively good, then I for one do not want to see what excuses for racist hatred a genuine economic “crisis” might provide.