

Hard Times and Hardening Attitudes: The Economic Downturn and the Rise of Violence Against Roma

By Stanislav Daniel¹

“Two months ago in Hungary, Jenó Koka went out his front door to go to work at the same factory he had worked at for decades and was shot to death in front of his own home. His 84-year-old father is a Holocaust survivor.

In the Czech Republic, even as we hold this briefing, two-year-old Natalie Sivakova is still fighting for her life in intensive care after her home was fire-bombed, leaving her burned on over 80 percent of her body. In February, also in Hungary, five-year-old – and I’ve read another article where it said he was four-year-old – but a too-young child, Robert Csorba, and his father were riddled with bullets to prevent them from escaping their fire-bombed home. These deaths are absolute tragedies and appear to be part of a larger and escalating pattern of deadly violence against Roma.”

United States Congressman Alcee L. Hastings Co-chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe CSCE Hearing on the rise of violence against Roma 9 June 2009, Washington, D.C.

ON 14 April 1994, Ms Klara Organova, Ms Livia Plaks, Mr Nicolae Gheorghe, Mr Andrzej Mirga and Mr Ian Hancock were the first Roma ever to testify before a congressional body in the United States – the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). In their presentation, called “Human Rights Abuses of the Roma (Gypsies)”, they briefly presented some of the key issues determining the quality of life for Roma in Europe. Today, many issues remain the same, complicating the social inclusion of Roma as many have come to accept discrimination as a part of their everyday life.

Fifteen years ago the chairman of the Subcommittee on International Security at the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Tom Lantos, reminded the CSCE that many Roma believed their lives were better under Communist rule – they had jobs and housing and were relatively free from ethnic violence.² In June 2009, the co-chairman of the CSCE, the Honourable Alcee Hastings, remarked that in the past 20 years, since the fall of Communism in Central Europe, too few of the fruits of democracy have reached the Romani community.³

Indeed, in the eyes of Roma living in social exclusion not much has changed in the last 15 years.

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² House Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights Abuses of the Roma (Gypsies), 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., April 1994, <http://www.archive.org/stream/humanrightsabuse1994unit#page/2/mode/1up> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

³ Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, “Briefing: Hard Times and Hardening Attitudes: The Economic Downturn and the Rise of Violence Against Roma”, 9 June 2009, [http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewTranscript&ContentRecord_id=452&ContentTy](http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewTranscript&ContentRecord_id=452&ContentType=B&ContentRecordType=B&CFID=13472014&CFTOKEN=98365804)
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During the hearing of this bi-partisan Commission of the US Congress, four experts working on Romani rights issues discussed the effects of the ongoing global economic crisis on Romani communities, focusing on inter ethnic tensions and the escalation of violence in Europe. The experts present at the hearing were (from left to right) Katalin Barsony, Stanislaw Daniel, Isabela Mihalache and Andrzej Mirga.

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Their living conditions and their access to resources and services remain at an alarmingly low and limited level, which is likely to be perpetuated by the continuously emerging waves of ethnic violence. The persistence of these issues was the main topic of the CSCE briefing on 9 June 2009.

The CSCE, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent US Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Final Act and other Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) commitments. The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the

US House of Representatives and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair are shared by the House and Senate and rotate every two years when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work. The Commission contributes to the formulation of US policy towards the OSCE and takes part in its execution, including through Member and staff participation in US Delegations to OSCE meetings and in certain OSCE bodies. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, NGOs and private individuals from other OSCE participating States.⁴

⁴ *Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, "About the Commission", 2009, <http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=AboutCommission.WorkOfCommission> (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

Concerned about intensified anti-Romani hate speech, the increasing number of reported attacks on Roma and killings of Roma in Europe in recent months, the CSCE organised a briefing to which four Roma representatives, Ms Katalin Barsony, Ms Isabela Mihalache, Mr Andrzej Mirga and Mr Stanislav Daniel, were invited to present the situations in their home countries.

One of the key issues that Hungarian filmmaker and project manager Katalin Barsony⁵ raised was the perception of the collective guilt of Roma. She highlighted the media's habit of stressing the ethnicity of suspects of crimes whenever there is the information that they are Roma. In her presentation, Ms Barsony criticised the use of the common expression "Gypsy crime" which has remained in the centre of public discourse despite being widely criticised by human rights activists as contributing to the polarisation of society where the "Others" are viewed negatively. According to Ms Barsony, Roma in Hungary, as in other countries, are stereotyped as welfare cheats and Romani women are accused of breeding for profit.

Such perceptions of Roma, intensified by political representatives who repeat the stereotypes and use them to their advantage, only contribute to the popular belief that perpetrators of acts of anti-Romani violence should enjoy impunity. There have been many attacks, including a number of fatal attacks, against Roma reported in Hungary. Concerning this, Ms Barsony mainly criticised the lack of effective investigative measures from the law enforcement officials responsible for solving the crimes against Roma and protecting their safety in a time when death threats are constantly being made against Roma.

In my testimony,⁶ I pointed out several factors contributing to increasing anti-Romani racism in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. One of the main issues supporting the negative social trends is the widespread manipulation of anti-Romani attitudes by far-right politicians in order to gain political support. The increasing power of Czech far-right parties, supported strongly by nationalists and neo-Nazis, nurtures the sense of impunity for acts of violence against Roma.

The attendees of the hearing were informed that the current trends in Slovakia are mostly linked to the passive approach of the government and political officials to tackling anti-Romani sentiments. In cases of attacks on Roma reported by media, politicians only rarely defend Roma; they usually frame their statement in a conditional form, linking the attack to the alleged criminality of Roma or other patterns of negative social behaviour.

In the introduction of her testimony, Isabela Mihalache,⁷ senior program manager of Roma Initiatives at the Open Society Institute and Board Member of the European Roma Rights Centre, presented the situation of Roma in Europe, mainly from the perspective of the constant abuse of their human rights and the everyday discrimination they face in their lives.

Apart from more general issues, Ms Mihalache focused mainly on the current conditions of Roma in Romania and Italy. Concerning Romania, she spoke primarily about the impunity of those responsible for the anti-Romani pogroms of 1990-1993, in which the perpetrators of gross human rights violations were never punished. In this type of environment, there is a general understanding that acts of anti-Romani racism have

⁵ *Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, Testimony of Ms Katalin Barsony, 9 June 2009, http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewWitness&ContentRecord_id=1140&ContentType=D&ContentRecordType=D&ParentType=B&CFID=13472014&CFTOKEN=98365804 (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

⁶ *Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, Testimony of Mr Stanislav Daniel, 9 June 2009, http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewWitness&ContentRecord_id=1141&ContentType=D&ContentRecordType=D&ParentType=B&CFID=13472014&CFTOKEN=98365804 (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

⁷ *Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, "Testimony: Ms Isabela Mihalache", 9 June 2009, http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewWitness&ContentRecord_id=1142&ContentType=D&ContentRecordType=D&ParentType=B&CFID=13472014&CFTOKEN=98365804 (accessed: 20 July 2009).*

no legal consequences. Related to the situation in Italy, Ms Mihalache mainly highlighted the increasing pressure on Romani migrants, which is based on the principle of collective guilt.

Andrzej Mirga, advisor on Romani issues at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, was the only witness who had also been present at the hearing in 1994. Mr Mirga raised the issue of the absence of official data on hate crimes committed against Roma. Although some of the countries identified crimes committed against Roma as notable examples of hate crimes in their country and the Czech Republic even identified Roma as the group most vulnerable to hate crimes, only a few participating states reported collecting official data on hate crimes against Roma or Sinti.⁸

In all the testimonies, the witnesses spoke about the link between the global economic downturn and the rise of violence against Roma. The original belief that the negative economic trends are a significant determining factor in the increase in anti-Romani violence has not been confirmed by any serious research. However, the witnesses stated that the global tension caused by the economic downturn supports the already strong negative anti-Romani attitudes prevailing in society.

The witnesses used this opportunity to voice their recommendations concerning what the United States can do to help Roma and to change the circumstances in which they live. The witnesses asked for continued US commitment to protecting and promoting the human rights of Roma through bilateral relations and through involvement in organisations such as the United Nations and the OSCE. They further stated that the US should hold the relevant governments accountable for the situation of Roma in their countries and should co-ordinate human rights activities with important allies, including the European Union and regional organisations. The witnesses also asked the US to support actively, through USAID, the establishment and work of human rights NGOs in Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

The presenters at the hearing expressed appreciation for the commitment of the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who has an important record of diplomacy related to Roma issues in Europe. It is often said that Roma need role models among their peers. Politicians also need role models among other politicians. Motivation to change the situation is very low among Roma living in social exclusion. Motivation among politicians to change the situation of Roma is very low because of fear of political exclusion. That is why role models are so precious.

⁸ *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission, Witness Statement by Andrzej Mirga, 9 June 2009, http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord_id=452&Region_id=0&Issue_id=0&ContentType=H,B&ContentRecordType=B&CFID=16048849&CFTOKEN=27290899 (accessed: 20 July 2009).*