

Hard Times and Hardening Attitudes: The Economic Downturn and the Rise of Violence Against Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

RISE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST ROMIA

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ANTI-ROMA RACISM IN FORMER CZECHOSLOVAKIA

and its development, determinants and political dimensions in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

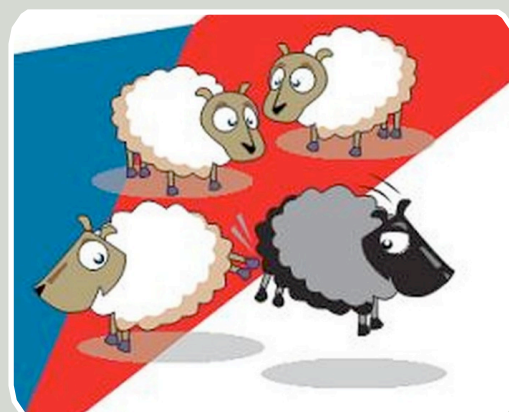
In the area of anti-Roma racism, same as in many other spheres, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have a very similar history. The anti-Roma attitudes are historically deeply rooted and we can say without any doubts, that positive attitudes to Roma are highly exceptional and are only individual.

Both countries can be characterized by increasing acts of racism and violence against Roma (including coercive sterilization), as well as persistent segregation in schools and housing and discrimination against Roma in all facets of life. There are, however, some differences between the two countries, most significantly in the political dimension. While in the Czech Republic the current political spectrum is rather wide and we can see parties and politicians being openly racist as well as politicians defending Roma, on the Slovak political scene the spectrum is more or less in the grayscale - rarely a politicians expresses open racist statements but on the

other hand rarely a politician defends Roma and even those speaking about Roma integration are often trying to find the root cause of exclusion of Roma amongst the Roma themselves.

Many Roma-rights activists see the global economic downturn as a potential explanation for the increased anti-Roma violence. Even though there was no serious research about this issue, many believe the general tensions in the society caused by the global economic crisis have an even deeper impact on marginal groups; Roma are stigmatized as dependent on social welfare and thus on the taxes of working people, the easiest target in the Central and Eastern Europe.

Regardless of the strength of the link between increased anti-Roma racism and the economic downturn, the current developments need immediate action on all levels of the society.



Political level

The National Party in the Czech Republic in their campaign focuses on getting rid of parasites using the symbols of black and white sheep.

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oral presentation by Stanislav Daniel

In the area of anti-Romani racism, as in many other spheres, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have a very similar history. The anti-Romani attitudes are historically deeply rooted and I can say with confidence that positive attitudes towards Roma are highly exceptional and at the individual level. Both countries can be characterized by increasing acts of racism and extreme violence against Roma (including the practice of coercive sterilization which continues to this day), as well as persistent segregation in schools and housing and discrimination against Roma in all facets of life. There are however, some differences between the two countries, most significantly in the political dimension of the Roma issue.

On the Slovak political scene, the spectrum can be more or less seen as a grayscale - rarely do politicians make openly racist statements about Roma but, on the other hand, rarely do politicians defend Roma. Even politicians speaking about Roma integration often try to find the root cause of Romani exclusion amongst Roma themselves – they are described as a group exhibiting negative social behavior needing to be taught positive social values and behavior. When in April 2009, graphic video footage from Kosice in Eastern Slovakia was released of police officers torturing 6 Romani boys by forcing them to beat each other, strip naked and kiss each other, mainstream Slovak politicians responded publicly that such acts of the police cannot be tolerated. However, the strength of their denunciations was tempered by repeated references to the alleged crime committed by the minors and statements that this type of treatment cannot be tolerated because one day it might happen to “normal people.”

In all such public acts, Slovak politicians contribute to the continuance of the negative image of Roma in society. Despite this, the extreme acts of violence against Roma that occurred in Slovakia in the 1990s and early 2000s have not yet recurred.

In the Czech Republic, one can see parties and politicians being openly racist as well as those defending Roma, and extreme acts of violence targeting Roma have recently occurred. The National Party has utilized clearly racist anti-Romani and inciteful messages in their European Parliament campaign: The most horrifying, in light of Europe’s not so distant history, being a spot aired on Czech national television calling for a “final solution” to the Roma problem, as well as many other advertisements on “getting rid of parasites” using the symbolism of a white sheep kicking out the black sheep. In January 2008 the party established a paramilitary National Guard to “protect the interests of the country.”

A second party, the Worker’s Party, has increasingly been utilizing the image of Roma as dependent on social welfare - on the taxes of the working class – as a key component of its political propaganda in the last year and a half. The Workers’ Party mostly campaigns in towns with Romani ghettos, focusing on the non-Romani working class and where their meetings are often attended by members of the Autonomous Nationalists and neo-Nazi group National Resistance. Expressions of hate-speech against Roma and Nazi-era symbols are frequent.

Both parties appear to be strongly supported (both by “ordinary” citizens and by neo-Nazi skinheads) and are growing in strength at the local and regional level.. At a demonstration organized by the Worker’s Party in 2008 during which police had to stop a sizable group of neo-Nazis attacked the Janov Romani neighborhood in the Czech town Litvinov, the non-Romani inhabitants of Litvinov cheered the neo-Nazis on, shouting at the police: “Let them go!”

In an increasingly hate filled atmosphere, violent racist attacks against Roma involving Molotov cocktails have taken place in two different locations in Czech Republic in the past several months. In one case, a 2-year old Romani girl sustained third degree burns to 80% of her body.

There is currently a tendency to relate the recently increased levels of anti-Roma violence to the global economic downturn. Yet the ERRC would argue that it is in the political sphere where the major responsibility lies, though the economic crisis likely contributes to an environment in which ordinary people are more susceptible to the influence of racist politics. It also seems clear that the growing strength of racist political messages which gain substantial exposure at the national level create a climate conducive to more violent expressions of hatred.

At the same time, national governments appear unprepared or unwilling to respond with enough force to quell this frightening trend. Most significantly, investigations of violent racist crimes committed against Roma are ineffective and rarely lead to the prosecution of perpetrators. Indeed, Czech media reported last week that no suspects had yet been identified in either of the Molotov cocktail attacks and that the investigation was not going well as the owner of the car linked to the first crime were cleared of any wrongdoing. In contrast, last week three Romani men were found guilty of a racially motivated assault of a non-Romani Czech man and sentenced to 4 years imprisonment.

According to the European Commission’s public opinion survey Eurobarometer on ethnic attitudes Slovaks and Czechs are historically the worst in Europe in their attitudes to Roma. The data from the recent survey show, that in these countries about half of the respondents would feel uncomfortable if they had Roma neighbors. This is about a double compared to the overall European attitude to Roma, when every fourth European out of the 27,000 said they would feel uncomfortable about being neighbors with Roma.



FORGETTING THE PAST

Very shortly after Roma were recorded for the first time in Europe, in the early 14th century, not even two centuries later (in 1471) the first anti-Roma laws were passed in Switzerland, followed by similar legislation in other countries. The systematic persecution of Roma started all over Europe, in the form of exclusion, expulsion or slavery and killings.

In 1936 the Nazis started their genocide of Roma, killing up to 1,500,000 Roma persons for their ethnicity.

During the communist era in former Czechoslovakia, Roma cultural identity was suppressed, yet many Roma believe their rights were more protected than they are now. Twenty years after the Velvet Revolution, bringing democracy to Czechoslovakia, Roma often think about the pre-1989 era as the times when they all had jobs and when open racism was punished. On many occasions Roma speak about democracy and freedom of expression as something bad because wrongdoings to Roma are tolerated in the name of these ideals.

The Czech Republic does not show respect to the Roma persecuted during World War II and even though human rights activists protest and fight for their recognition, one of the most famous concentration camps in the Czech Republic (Lety u Pisku) for the past 35 years has been used as a pig farm. In 1995 president Vaclav Havel inaugurated a memorial site near the mass graves. Only few things changed since then and the number of 1307 Romani men, women and children who passed through, 327 who died and more than 500 who were sent to Auschwitz from here are still disrespected in this manner.

The company owning the pig farm of about 20,000 pigs is willing to be moved away for a fair compensation, however, the no one from the government came with the offer so far. The pig farm still remains at its place and every year a commemoration of the victims takes place in the shade of the pig farm accompanied by the sound of 20,000 pigs.

NEO-NAZISM TODAY



Nazi Symbolics Today

In both Slovakia and the Czech Republic the official Nazi symbols are prohibited to be used as supportive and promoting a movement aimed on suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms. However, the symbols are still present.

Many far right extremist movements and even political parties use the modified Nazi symbols and the colors of the Third Reich, with the leaders usually dressed in typical clothes of Nazi leaders. In Slovakia the disbanded political party Slovenska Pospolitost (Slovak Gregariousness), currently registered as a non-governmental organization that celebrates the Nazi Slovak State (1939-1945).



Workers' Party symbolics resemble Nazi Era



POLITICAL RACISM

Not only neo-Nazis

On the left: leader of the Workers' Party with one of the supporters Anna Frankova, symbolizing that not only neo-Nazis are supporting the party. Below: leader of the Czech National Party Petra Edelmannova (bank analyst in the newspaper article saying "Cleaning Bohemia from parasites"



Anti-Roma Statements as a Political Capital

It is clear, that in countries where attitudes towards Roma are historically always the worst in every survey ever done - the Czech Republic and Slovakia, mainstream politicians only very rarely defend Roma against popular prejudice.

When a video circulated showing police abuse of Roma boys in Kosice, Slovakia, the mainstream Slovak politicians declared that such acts of the police cannot be tolerated, but the main message of their statements was not about the ill-treatment of minors or members of a marginalized ethnic group. Rather, the victims were characterized as criminals. Politicians warned that we cannot tolerate this ill-treatment, because it can happen to 'normal people' one day. Similarly dangerous is the approach of those politicians who are trying to help inclusion of Roma and speak about the Roma ethnic group as a group of people exhibiting negative social behavior, who need to be integrated by teaching them about positive social values and behavior. In both politicians contribute to the negative image of Roma in the society as being negative and not contributing to the development of the society in any aspect.

In the Czech Republic, the picture of Roma as dependent on social welfare, i.e. on taxes of the working class, is one of the key propaganda messages of two far-right extremist parties. The Workers' Party (Delnicka strana), mostly campaigning at meetings in towns with high concentrations of Roma in ghettos, focuses on the working class which is an easy target for their messages of Roma being privileged as the recipients of government benefits paid for by mainstream society. Their meetings are often attended by members of the Autonomous

"the good [us] versus the bad [them]"

Nationalists (Autonomni nacionaliste) and neo-Nazi group National Resistance (Narodni odpor). The meetings are regularly accompanied by expressions of hate-speech against Roma and symbols resembling those of the Nazi era. Often there are conflicts with the police forces and attempts to attack Roma neighborhoods.

The other far-right political party - the National Party (Narodni strana) became recently popular for their TV spot for the European Parliament (EP) elections, where they depicted Roma as living on "our" taxes and reminded viewers of the previously proposed "final solution" - sending Roma "back" to India. In January 2008 the party established a paramilitary National Guard to "protect the interests of the country."

Even though both parties still do not reach the criteria for being in the national parliament, they are getting stronger at the local and regional level. Both National Party and Workers' Party candidates were running for the elections to the EP and they had a lot of confidence. Their preferences are still very low (Workers Party - 1%; National Party - 0,26%). However, their current strongest asset is that they are no longer parties whose appeal is confined to neo-Nazi skinheads; there are a lot of "ordinary" people supporting them and attending their meetings. At one of the demonstrations last year, during which a sizable group of neo-Nazis were forcibly prevented by police from attacking a Roma neighborhood in Litvinov, the non-Roma inhabitants of Litvinov were cheering the neo-Nazis and shouting at the police: "Let them go!"

WHAT IS REQUIRED...

- a. An end to impunity: Countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic must implement an effective law enforcement and political response to acts of violence and hate speech directed against Roma. Perpetrators of violence (including coercive sterilization) must be identified and punished. Victims of such violence must be properly compensated. Public officials engaging in hate speech must be dismissed. Private actors engaging in hate speech must be condemned.
 - b. An end to discrimination: Countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia must end the segregation of Romani children in schools and the segregation of Romani people in health care facilities. The Czech Republic must pass a comprehensive anti-discrimination law (it is the only EU member state without one, contrary to EU requirements).
 - c. Positive action: Countries with significant Roma populations must design, fund and implement effective programs to ensure that school completion rates, employment levels and health indicators of Roma people rise to the same level as the majority population.
 - d. A Europe-wide response focused on Roma needs: The European Union must recognize that the problems faced by Roma communities are a legacy of hundreds of years of government policies fostering discrimination and exclusion, some of which continue to this day. Migration of Roma across borders encourages member states to regard Roma as "someone else's problem." For these reasons, Roma are different from other minorities in Europe; it is therefore imperative for the EU to place a special focus on and devote special resources to addressing the challenges faced by Roma communities.
- The US should:**
- 1) Consistently condemn acts of violence and hate speech directed against Roma.
 - 2) Offer law enforcement support to investigate and prosecute hate crimes against Roma.
 - 3) Put Roma issues on the bilateral political agenda - particularly with regard to Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic.
 - 4) Put Roma issues on the European agenda, not just through the OSCE but more importantly through the EU.

TIMELINE

Non-exhaustive summary of incidents and anti-Roma violence

November 1989

fall of communism in former Czechoslovakia, shortly after: increased number of incidents against Roma.

February 1991 (CZE)

Emil Bendik beaten to death after a pogrom on a Roma family in Klatovy

August 1991

Radko Rudolf (age 6) was killed by skinhead (22) while playing in the park

November 1991 (CZE)

Vaclav Balaz killed by the policeman who shot into a group of drunk Roma. The policeman was released from service without further charges.

September 1993 (CZE)

Filip Venclik dies one day after being kicked to the back of the head by a neo-Nazi

September 1993 (CZE)

Jiri F. died after being beaten by the neo-Nazis for not agreeing with their opinions about Roma

September 1993 (CZE)

Tibor Daniel drowned in a river after running from the neo-Nazi attackers, who later threw stones at him and prevented the bystanders from helping him

June 1994 (CZE)

Martin Cervenak shot dead during the police interrogation. The policemen present at the interrogation remained with the police

May 1995 (CZE)

Tibor Berki died after being attacked by 4 neo-Nazis at his home

July 1995 (SVK)

Mario Goral burnt to death by a group of neo-Nazis

February 1998 (CZE)

Helena Bihariova beaten by neo-Nazis, thrown into the river, found dead after 2 days

August 2000 (SVK)

Anastazia Balazova murdered at her home by the three men with baseball bats

July 2001 (SVK)

Karol Sendrei killed by the police at the police station in Revuca

October 2002 (CZE)

Marek F. (12) brutally attacked by two adult neo-Nazis, kicking him until he fell unconscious

April 2003 (SVK)

Two soldiers fined by the Military Court by approximately 122 EUR for racist statements saying that 97 per cent of Roma are unable to adapt and should be shot dead.

February 2004 (SVK)

After the cuts in social benefits the poverty of many Roma was deepened. Their

protest were pushed by more than 2600 mobilised policemen and soldiers.

March 2006 (SVK)

a political party Slovenska pospolitost disbanded for being contradictory with the constitution

September 2008 (SVK)

A teenager sent to prison for 5 years for beating a Roma teenager to death with an axe

November 2008 (CZE)

Neo-Nazi demonstration following the meeting of the Workers' Party in Litvinov; neo-Nazis trying to march through a Romani neighborhood

November 2008 - May 2009 (CZE)

A number of Workers' Party demonstrations, often with a lot of people taken by the police for promoting fascism; some demonstrations canceled by the local municipalities

April 2009 (CZE)

After a Molotov cocktail attack a small Roma girl (age 3) is burnt on 80 per cent of her body

April 2009 (SVK)

6 Romani boys are ill-treated by the police, threatened to hit each other and strip naked, videotaped by the policemen

May 2009 (CZE)

Another arsonist attack, this time no one is hurt

June 2009 (CZE)

Three Roma sent to prison for 4 years for a racially motivated attack