

Tolerance to Racism in Slovakia

By Stanislav Daniel¹

“Give it to him [hit him]! And you pay back! Now you kiss each other [...] Give it to him and shut up. I will tell you how much. And if he moves away, I will kick him.”

--A police officer in Kosice shouting at and abusing a Romani boy in police custody who alleged attacked an elderly woman, 21 March 2009²

“The ‘A’ [in this case] also needs to be mentioned and this is that these children, and it happens often, attacked an elderly woman.”

--Slovak Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights commenting on the ill-treatment of six Romani boys by police in Kosice, 14 April 2009³

IN THE context of Slovakia as well as in other countries, one can say with confidence that anti-Romani attitudes are historically deeply rooted and that positive attitudes towards Roma are highly exceptional and at the individual level. At the political level the situation is not different; rarely do politicians make openly racist statements about Roma, but on the other hand, rarely do they defend Roma. In the current trends they only reflect the general opinion.

It is very difficult to state whether politicians really do not care about Roma, are racists or just do not get involved in pro-Romani movements because they are afraid of losing their political power. One event that provides a lot to think about is the ill-treatment of six Romani boys by police forces in Kosice in April of this year. These boys were taken to the police station because of their

alleged involvement in the robbery of an elderly woman. Instead of following ordinary procedure, the police forced the boys to violently hit each other, kiss each other and strip naked. When asked for a response, top politicians emphasised that the victims were criminals, making judgements before the court hearings even started, equating the videotaped crime of the police with the alleged crime of the boys.

Unlike in the Czech Republic, where anti-Romani speech is part of the political capital of far right political parties these days, in Slovakia there is currently no openly racist politician making anti-Romani statements. This compares to 2006, when the leader of the Slovak National Party Jan Slota refused to use the word *Roma* (saying it was only an artificial name introduced in 1973⁴) and publicly made direct links between ethnicity and social inadaptability:

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² Video footage of the incident, SME, 7 April 2009 (unofficial transcript by the author), <http://www.sme.sk/c/4383566/policia-mucila-romskych-chlapcov.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

³ De Facto, TV Joj, 14 April 2009 (unofficial transcript by the author), <http://televizia.joj.sk/tv-archiv/de-facto/14-04-2009/2561995.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁴ Interview for Live Magazine, 17 June 2006, (in Slovak on the Slovak National Party website), <http://www.sns.sk/clanky/rozhovor-s-janom-slotom-v-tyzdenniku-live-c-17-06-z-26-aprila-2006-exorcista-552.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

I am strict towards asocial persons and I do not care whether they are brown, white or red. However, it is true that among Gypsies the percentage of inadaptable is several times higher than among whites. If in 400 thousand Gypsies about 350 thousand is in about 600 settlements, then I am saying it openly.⁵

After the Slovak National Party became part of the coalition following elections in 2006 and formed the government with socialist SMER, there was a lot of international attention to the party's behaviour towards Roma. The risk of losing political respect probably forced the party leaders to avoid playing the so-called Roma card.

Since the only strong far-right political party has become involved in the government and practically eliminated overt anti-Romani speech, one can compare the Slovak political spectre to a grayscale. This means that while no politicians are openly racist, none of them are defending Roma nor taking action against the human rights abuses that Roma suffer.

When the above mentioned video footage of police officers torturing six Romani boys became public, 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 decent people. This was the sentiment of former Minister of Justice Daniel Lipsic, who stated, "Such treatment is unacceptable also because if several policemen behave like this towards teenage delinquents, where is the guarantee that in the future also decent people won't be objects of inhuman treatment?"⁶

Civil society, Romani and pro-Romani non-governmental organisations were also

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Polícia: Reakcie na mucenie Romskeho chlapcov (Police: Reactions on ill-treatment of Romani boys)", *Romano Nevo Lil*, 1 June 2009, <http://www.rnl.sk/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=16091> (accessed: 23 July 2009).

⁷ *De Facto*, TV Joj, 14 April 2009 (unofficial transcript by the author), <http://televizia.joj.sk/tv-archiv/de-facto/14-04-2009/2561995.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁸ Daniel Quinn, *The Story of B.*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 305.

surprised to see Slovakia's Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights publicly stress that the Slovak public should bear in mind that the children who had been abused by police allegedly violently attacked an elderly woman, stressing that this happens often.⁷

In the context of Central Europe – with a growing number of anti-Romani gatherings, arson attacks and attempted pogroms in the Czech Republic and a number of killings of Roma in Hungary – the situation in Slovakia can be considered much better. However, this calls to mind the *boiling frog syndrome*, which states:

If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death.⁸

When politicians make openly racist statements against Roma, there is a number of people supporting those politicians but it is generally believed that there is about the same number of people against such statements. There is also a large number of people who do not like Roma but who understand that open racism is bad and therefore they do not support racists. In the political realm, if statements that are not openly racist are made not by a politician who is generally considered to be racist but instead by a politician who is trying allegedly to *solve problems of Roma*, the statements are very dangerous.

Suggesting that Romani kids should go to boarding schools is one of the statements which is continually repeated by the Deputy Prime

Minister for Human Rights and Minorities,⁹ which practically reflects the general belief that Romani children should grow up in an excluded environment. Recently the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights and Minorities made even stronger and more negative statements about Roma. In his press release on Roma issues, he mostly spoke about the “poor performance” of Romani children in education instead of focusing on the issues of human rights abuses – discrimination and segregation in education. Moreover, he focused primarily on negative social behaviour, generalising and making a direct link between ethnicity and patterns of behaviour. In his statement the Deputy Prime Minister said, “Roma need to find identity and values,”¹⁰ thereby belittling Romani culture, and he continued by supporting corporal punishment for children, saying, “Many young Roma lack a father’s hand¹¹ and a mother’s understanding, therefore they adopt bad patterns of behaviour already in their early childhood.” A few days later, the Deputy Prime Minister made another public statement in which he said that the next Plenipotentiary of the government for Romani communities has to be male: “I say it clearly, it has to be man and a strict person, who will put things in order and will lead a fight against loan-sharks in Romani settlements.”¹²

Even though these statements may seem very negative to human rights activists and gender-sensitive persons, the majority population did not take them as racist or sexist. Pervasive stereotypes about Roma only support negative statements and vice versa. The only solution to this is a *strong man* and corporal punishment.

Such statements made by the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights and Minorities are naturally not taken as racism in the first place. It is generally believed that he is the person looking for solutions as that is his agenda in the government. The most dangerous part in this is the above-mentioned *boiling frog syndrome*, when the rhetoric of the politicians is measured by the criteria given by the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights. If his racist and sexist statements are tolerated then other politicians may try to go further with their language, bit by bit. And by the time of the Slovak parliamentary elections in 2010, *the frog may be cooked*.

Anti-Romani statements are usually tolerated in Slovak society as well as in other societies. Generalisation plays a key role. Anytime a Romani person is involved in a crime, it is not a crime committed by an individual but by a representative of an ethnic group, thus confirming the stereotype that Roma are highly involved in criminal activities. None of the politicians commenting on the ill-treatment of the six Romani boys, alleged delinquents, doubted that they were guilty.

Similarly, in cases of other problems such as the segregation of Roma in schools, public opinion does not reflect a human rights perspective. The public does not discuss the segregation and discrimination of Romani children but focuses instead on the children’s unpreparedness for mainstream education. The government unfortunately perceives the situation from the same perspective. Rather than stopping segregation, they speak about truancy, lack of family support and other issues on the side of Roma, not even thinking about

⁹ “The first step is to create conditions to seriously begin considering boarding schools for Roma, with parents’ consent.” Dusan Caplovic, “Srbsko: Caplovic od Srbska prevzal predsednictvo SR v romskej Dekade”, 25 June 2009, <http://www.caplovic.vlada.gov.sk/16350/srbsko:-caplovic-od-srbska-prevzal-predsednictvo-sr-v-romskej-dekade.php> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁰ Dusan Caplovic, “Vyhlásenie podpredsedu vlády SR pre vedomostnu spoločnosť európskej zalezitosti, ľudské práva a mensiny Dusana Caplovica k Rómskej problematike”, Press Release, 22 May 2009, <http://www.caplovic.vlada.gov.sk/15947/vyhlasenie-podpredsedu-vlady-sr-pre-vedomostnu-spolocnost-europske-zalezitosti-ludske-prava-a-mensiny-dusana-caplovica-k-romskej-problematike.php> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹¹ In Slovak language referring to *otcovska ruka* [father’s hand] evokes corporal punishment.

¹² “Čaplovič: Nový splnomocnenec pre Rómov bude tvrdý chlap” (Caplovic: The new Plenipotentiary will be a strict man), SME daily, 25 August 2009, <http://www.sme.sk/c/4907386/caplovic-novy-splnomocnenec-pre-romov-bude-tvrdy-chlap.html> (accessed: 28 July 2009).

unpreparedness and truancy being a reaction to an unwelcoming school environment.

The *frog is being cooked* and tolerance to racism is higher and higher. Even though many

may argue that the situation in Slovakia is better compared to the Czech Republic or to Hungary, the current trends show that the country is heading the same way. Only in a much slower, maybe more sophisticated way.