



14 July 2009

The Honorable Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism
Citizenship and Immigration Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
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Dear Minister Kenney,

We are writing to express concern about the Canadian Government's decision to re-impose visas for Czech citizens in response to an increase in asylum claims by Roma, Europe's largest and most persecuted minority group. This decision and the rhetoric surrounding it signals to the EU and the rest of the world that Canada is not concerned with the consideration of individual claims of persecution and human rights abuse, and unwisely follows a path taken earlier in 1996 which proved ineffective at addressing a root cause of Roma migration – intense discrimination in the Czech Republic. We urge the Canadian government to invest its time, energy and resources into helping mitigate the discrimination faced by Roma in Europe.

The recent rise in asylum applications by Roma from the Czech Republic correlates to a well-documented rise in neo-Nazi activity throughout the country. Last November, television viewers worldwide watched video footage as 1,000 police officers were deployed to keep order as rampaging neo-Nazis tried to march on a Romani settlement, setting fire to police vehicles and pelting the police with rocks and bottles resulting in injuries to 17 people. Prosecution of the perpetrators has not yet yielded any result, as is so often the case when crimes are perpetrated against Roma. In subsequent months, extremist political parties continued to drum up pressure against the Romani community in Litvinov and elsewhere in the country.

Anti-Romani violence and vitriol in the Czech Republic have continued unabated in 2009. In April of this year, attackers firebombed the home of a Czech Romani family, causing severe injury to a two-year-old girl, who is still fighting for her life in hospital after suffering third-degree burns over 80% of her body. Violence is not the only problem the Czech Roma face. Although declared illegal by the European Court of Human Rights in 2007,¹ the Government continues to foster systemic discrimination against

¹ D.H. and Others v. The Czech Republic.

Romani children by tracking healthy Romani children into schools intended for children with disabilities.² Moreover, the Czech government has yet to acknowledge and remedy the coercive sterilization of Romani women.³

By suggesting that asylum claims from Czech Roma are specious, your Government is also ignoring the wisdom of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, which granted asylum to Czech Roma nationals in 84 out of 89 individually assessed cases in 2008.⁴ The work of this independent body affirms that the applicants had a well-founded fear of persecution in the Czech Republic.

The re-imposition of visa requirements for Czech nationals will no doubt sour Canada-EU relations and deter many legitimate asylum seekers, while imposing additional burdens on Czech nationals, whether Roma or not, who seek to visit Canada. A more effective Canadian government policy would 1) acknowledge the Czech Republic's shortcomings in its treatment of the Roma minority; 2) stop the blanket stigmatization of Roma asylum seekers as false refugees; 3) continue the review of asylum claims on a case-by-case basis; and 4) offer Canadian expertise in helping the Czech Republic build a multiethnic and multicultural society free of extremist violence.

Sincerely,



Robert Kushen
Managing Director
European Roma Rights Centre



Gwendolyn Albert
Director of Women's Initiatives
Peacework Development Fund

² Romea, Romani pupils attend "special schools" more often than others, 3 July 2009, http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1262.

³ "Závěrečné stanovisko veřejného ochránce práv ve věci sterilizací prováděných v rozporu s právem a návrhy opatření k nápravě", Sp. zn.: 3099/2004/VOP/PM a násl., V Brně dne 23. 12. 2005.