

State racism in the Czech Republic

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At 4.00 a.m. on October 13 a wall was erected overnight under the supervision of the police in Usti, the capital of the north Bohemian province in the Czech Republic. The wall is 62 metres long, 1.8 metres high and has three doors. It is supposed to separate 37 Romany families living in two housing blocks from their neighbours on the opposite side of the street. The latter had complained of noise and dirt.

Municipal authorities had arranged accommodation in the military-type blocks because the Romany families were no longer able to afford the rent of their initial housing. Pavel Tosovsky, the 37-year-old mayor of the district who allowed the construction of the wall, explained that it had solved a small social conflict and that in addition the move was supported by the local population.

The idea of separating the Romany families from the rest of the population with a wall has been entertained by politicians for some time. The construction of the wall had already been promised last year by the conservative mayor, Ladislav Hruska, and the towns of Rokykany and Vsetin are demanding their own fences against the Romany.

The plans became known internationally as “a ghetto for Romany”. Czech President Vaclav Havel and the Czech human rights representative Petr Uhl protested against the action. Despite a dispute between the town of Usti nad Labem and the district over the legality of a building permit, the wall itself was erected in record time.

The European Council has demanded the immediate demolition of the wall. The secretary-general of the European Council described the wall as incompatible with democratic principles and human rights. President Havel has described the wall as a symbol of intolerance: “First of all this wall has a symbolic meaning. It seems to be getting higher every day and soon you will no longer be able to look over it to

Europe.”

These statements are an expression of fear that the construction of this disgraceful wall could delay the application for membership to the EC by the Czech Republic. The discrimination of the Romany people, however, did not just begin with the building of the wall. After the separation of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993, both of the new states tried to dump their minority groups onto one another. In the Czech capital of Prague the Romany were classified as Slovaks while in the Slovak capital of Bratislava they were reckoned to be citizens of the Czech Republic. The result was that Romany, lacking proof of nationality, were no longer entitled to any social benefits and lost a number of their civil rights.

According to estimations by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), this affected about one-third of the 300,000 Czech Romany. As living conditions are already desperate for Romany families, they were doubly hit by this new law. According to an investigation by the council for nationalities in the Czech Republic, about 70 percent of Romany are without work; in some areas it is as high as 90 percent. Romany children are only allowed to go to special schools and have little chance of acquiring a decent education. In the school term 1996-97, 62.5 percent of Romany children were routinely assigned to schools for children with learning difficulties. This makes it nearly impossible for them to progress to higher education.

Romany have also repeatedly been the victims of violent attacks by skinheads and such attacks have already resulted in dozens of deaths. If apprehended, the culprits can expect lenient treatment from the judiciary, which has been the pattern in a number of cases.

In addition the weekly paper *Respekt* reported that for over a year CSA, the Czech airline, has had a system of marking its passenger lists for flights to London. The

names of dark coloured Czechs have been marked with a “G”—standing for Gypsy.

Rudolf Kral the vice-president of CSA, explained these measures had been employed because the company's representative in London had indirectly requested such a measure. London had repeatedly requested the introduction of obligatory visas for all Czech citizens if the number of Romany applying for asylum increased. Last year, however, there were just 512 such applications and 588 in the first six months of this year.

According to the *Society For Threatened Peoples*, the world population of Sinti and Romanies and other associated groups stands at about 12 million. The largest communities are in the countries of eastern Europe, with populations between 300,000 and 1 million Romany in each country. Following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, many east European countries are continuing—often in even more severe forms—the tradition of discrimination of minorities which had taken place under Stalinist rule. Despite the criticism of the European Council, conditions for Romany families in western European countries are not much better.



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