

British and Czech governments suspend racist anti-Roma airport checks

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Racist pre-flight checks of passengers flying to Britain from Ruzyně Airport in the Czech Republic, aimed at preventing possible Roma asylum seekers entering the UK, were suspended earlier this month.

On July 18, twelve British immigration officials had been despatched to Prague to begin screening all Czech travellers to the UK. The measure, agreed beforehand with the Czech government, was specifically aimed at preventing minority Roma people entering the UK, where they might then make a claim to asylum. The British Ambassador to the Czech Republic said that the checks were to prevent “the continued, systematic abuse of our immigration and asylum system by some Czech citizens.” Another embassy official conceded that this specifically meant Roma.

The checks provoked widespread opposition and adverse international publicity, especially following their exposure on Czech television.

Five days after the Prague airport checks were inaugurated, Roma journalist Richard Samko and a white-skinned Czech colleague Nora Novakova surreptitiously filmed their differing treatment at the hands of British and Czech officials. Novakova and Samko had previously agreed to give the same answers to immigration officials. While Novakova was allowed to continue checking-in after being questioned for just two minutes, Samko was subject to a 30-minute interrogation. The British officials quizzed him in detail about his reason for travelling, his occupation, his finances and his relationship with the friend he was supposed to visit in the UK. He was eventually barred from boarding the flight to London, on the grounds that he did not have enough money. Footage of the two journalists’ treatment was then shown on Czech TV.

After the broadcast, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Kavan defended the measures, on the basis that otherwise the British government would impose visa restrictions on all

Czech travellers to the UK. This would, he claimed, affect business people and relations between the Czech Republic and Britain. It was also suggested that it might impede Czech accession to the European Union. However, following the broadcast, Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman, who had originally agreed to the scheme, described it as racist and discriminatory.

A spokesman for Amnesty International said the measures had caused great concern, and contravened the spirit of the 1951 Geneva Convention, enshrining the rights of those seeking asylum. According to the *Times* newspaper, Czech President Vaclav Havel had also condemned the way British officials had carried out what the Home Office euphemistically called “pre-clearance immigration controls” at Prague airport.

After operating the pre-flight checks for three weeks, the British government said August 8 that they were being suspended. The Home Office claimed it had only been intended to post the British immigration officials to Prague as a short-term “deterrent” measure. Since the checks were introduced, the Home Office said that about 110 people had been stopped from boarding flights to London, of which at least 60 were members of the Roma minority.

In announcing an end to the controls, Foreign Minister Kavan made clear he supported the British attempts to discriminate against Roma: “The introduction of this screening system has sent a clear message that abusing the asylum and immigration procedures in Great Britain is unacceptable.”

The screening system essentially meant the UK deciding *a priori* that certain Czech citizens have no legitimate right to seek asylum. It followed the introduction of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, which specifically excluded immigration officials from any requirement to avoid racial discrimination. In May, the *Guardian* newspaper exposed an April 23 order from

the Home Office, which allowed discrimination against Kurds, Roma, Albanians, Tamils, Pontic Greeks, Somalis, and Afghans on “grounds of ethnic or national origin”.

According to the order, people identified as being from these groups were to be subject “to a more rigorous examination than other persons in the same circumstances.” The same order also lay down that “If the information [needed to pursue an application to enter the UK] is not available in a language which the person understands, it is not necessary to provide the information in a language which he does understand.”

As with Roma peoples across the entire European continent, those living in the Czech Republic have been the target of vicious discrimination and scapegoating for years. Covered over under Stalinist rule, the issue assumed prominence in the aftermath of the 1993 “velvet divorce,” when the former Czechoslovakia was broken up into the independent states of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The Roma minority is more likely to be unemployed, and face discrimination in jobs, housing, health care and education.

In 1995, Roma rights campaigners won a legal case against apartheid-style restrictions on Roma using public housing facilities. In 1997, 1,600 Roma in Ostrava attempted to leave for Canada because of the marginalised and impoverished conditions under which they were forced to live. Of Ostrava’s Roma, 70 percent were unemployed, living in flood-prone makeshift camps outside the town. In 1998, the authorities in Usti Nad Labem built a wall separating a Roma tenement block from the rest of the town. Another fenced ghetto was proposed in the southern Bohemian city of Plzen.

In 1999, campaigners for Roma rights protested the Czech government’s refusal to demolish a pig farm built on the site of a World War Two concentration camp that held Roma prisoners. The camp at Lety was classified as a Roma concentration camp from 1942 onwards, and at one point held 1,300 inmates. The most conservative estimates suggest that 327 Roma are buried there. All the Czech Roma were eventually deported to Auschwitz in 1943. The post-war Stalinist regime commemorated the fate of the Roma by building the pig farm in 1976 on the Lety site, which was lucratively privatised in 1995.

Many Roma were denied citizenship in the newly formed Czech Republic, and as a result, official figures minimise the size of the country’s Roma minority, claiming they only constitute some 33,500 out of a population of 10.3 million, or 0.32 percent. However, a

1997 Council for Nationalities Report accepted “unofficial, qualified estimates” that there were at least 200,000 Roma living in the Czech Republic, with other estimates placing the figure as high as 300,000, making them the largest minority population group.

According to Amnesty International, a new law introduced this year gives the police widespread and arbitrary powers to demand documents from those applying for residency: “Article 5 lists documents which the police, at their discretion, can demand of an alien applying for residence; it was feared that the power to demand a full list of documents would be used in a discriminatory manner, especially against Roma.” Since the right to work, as well as entitlement to many benefits and basic social services require permanent residence status, they can be denied to those deemed to be “foreigners,” which is how many Roma are classified.

In addition to such state discrimination, Roma in the Czech Republic are also the target of violent attacks by skinhead and racist gangs, but many racist incidents go unreported, or are not recorded by the police. It is believed at least 50 Roma have been murdered since 1990. According to Amnesty International, the most recent victim is Ota Absolon, a 30-year-old Roma man killed July 20, 2001.

In June, the European Roma Rights Centre submitted evidence to the United Nations Human Rights Committee showing that Roma living in the Czech Republic continue to be the victims of racist violence and widespread discrimination.

Despite such clear evidence of state racism, discrimination and skinhead violence directed against the Roma minority in the Czech Republic, the British government refuses to accept there could be grounds for Czech Roma seeking asylum in the UK. In introducing the pre-flight checks, the New Labour government is complicit in the anti-Roma racism that is endemic in the Czech state apparatus.

See Also:

State racism in the Czech Republic
[24 November 1999]



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