

Roma family gunned down in Slovakia

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On Monday, a man gunned down six members of a Roma family living on a ramshackle estate on the outskirts of the Slovak capital of Bratislava. The murderer, Lubomir Harman, aged 48, was a neighbor of the six victims. Harman had lost his job in 2008, having worked at no less than four different companies since the 1990s. He was a member of his local shooting club and owned six guns, including a Kalashnikov assault rifle.

Having shot down the Roma family, which included a 12-year old boy, Harman continued his shooting spree. He claimed a seventh victim, a woman on a balcony, and wounded 15 others, including a 3-year old boy, before being shot down by police.

Slovak police and political representatives quickly sought to downplay the significance of the attack, claiming there was no indication of a racial motive. Slovak Police President Jaroslav Spisiak even tried to shift the blame for the tragedy onto the Roma family itself who, he declared, “lived a very lively social life and often received visits”.

Despite attempts by the police to divert attention from this question, witnesses spoke of long standing antagonisms between the shooter and the Roma family. According to a surviving member of the family quoted in a Slovak daily paper, the gunman had repeatedly harassed the family. “He’d always been very hostile to coloured people and hated us”, said a granddaughter of one of the victims. “He picked on us all the time”.

The shooting in Slovakia takes place at a time when a number of leading European governments, with France at the forefront, are whipping up chauvinist campaigns and stepping up their efforts to expel large numbers of Roma.

In response to the latest killings in Slovakia, the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), an EU-funded association of anti-racism NGOs, warned on Tuesday that European countries engaged in expulsions had created an anti-Roma climate that had “triggered a license to kill”.

ENAR published a statement declaring, “We are extremely worried that recent discriminatory measures and statements targeting the Roma population and stigmatizing this ethnic group in a number of countries, including France, Italy, Denmark and Sweden, have led to a climate of impunity for

those who want to target this population”.

Slovakia is one of a number of Eastern European countries with an appalling history of discrimination against Roma and other minorities in recent years. Reports by the EU’s human rights agency and Amnesty International note that the number of registered cases of racially motivated crimes has risen significantly in the country in recent years.

At the same time, official statistics dealing with the number of offences against Roma are often unreliable and tend to underestimate the problem. Investigators concede that many crimes are not reported by the Roma themselves, as they fear further recriminations and have no faith that the police or authorities will deal with the culprits.

While the case of the latest shooting in Slovakia appears to be the work of a deranged individual, the type of social and racial prejudice he evidently shared has been sanctioned by the Slovak state, which discriminates against Roma in every field of social life.

According to Martina Mazurova of Amnesty International, a majority of Roma children are placed in “special schools” or classes for children with mental disabilities, or are segregated into Roma-only educational institutions. “The failure of the Slovak government to provide adequate education for all Romani children blights their future educational and employment prospects and adds to a cycle of marginalization and poverty for Romani people”, Mazurova told a Slovak newspaper.

Denied any chance of a proper education, it is impossible for adult Roma to find work. According to some statistics, the unemployment rate for working-age Roma in Slovakia is near 100 percent.

In addition to discrimination in the fields of education and employment, Amnesty International’s world report 2010 notes that the physical segregation of Roma is continuing apace in Slovakia. This includes the forcible displacement of Roma settlements, and the building of barriers to wall off Roma communities.

The Amnesty International report also notes incidences of the forced sterilization of Roma women in the country. Eight Roma women have lodged a complaint with the European

Court of Human Rights claiming that their infertility is a result of a sterilization procedure performed on them in a Slovakian hospital. Their cases follow the recent settlement of a similar case in nearby Hungary, where the Ministry of Social Affairs announced it would award compensation to a Roma woman sterilized without her consent in 2001.

The Amnesty International document has a chapter dealing with “torture and other mistreatment”, which reports on a case in which seven police officers beat up six Roma boys in a Kosice police station in April 2009. The case only came to public attention after a daily newspaper published the details of a video recording the abuse.

Another report, published in May this year, states that the Slovak police were also complicit in the death of a 46-year-old Roma man taken into custody after a scuffle. The relatives of the dead man are seeking to charge the police with his death. The pathologist who examined the victim’s corpse concluded that the man may have died of “slow poisoning with a disproportionate quantity of tear gas”.

The discrimination and persecution of the Roma minority in Slovakia is sanctioned at the very highest levels of the political establishment. In its election campaign held in May of this year, the Slovak National Party (SNS) published posters featuring a bare-chested Roma man bearing tattoos and a thick gold chain together with the slogan, vote for the SNS, “So that we do not feed those who do not want to work”.

Between 2006 and 2010 the SNS was part of the Slovak government, in coalition with the social-democratic Smer-SD, led by Robert Fico.

The situation for Roma in adjoining countries is no better. Slovakia’s neighbour to the south has witnessed a series of vicious attacks on Roma settlements in recent years. Between 2008-2009, a series of shootings took place in Hungary targeting Roma families. According to investigators a total of 78 shots were fired at nine different locations and Molotov cocktails were thrown at seven homes in a total of three Hungarian villages. The attacks killed six Roma, including a five-year-old child and seriously injured five others, including another child.

Anti-Roma agitation is a hallmark of the extreme right wing Party for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), which has formed its own Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard) militia. As part of its election campaign earlier this year, the Magyar Garda staged a series of provocative marches in towns with a Roma population in eastern Hungary.

Just last month Jobbik’s mayoral candidate for the north-eastern city of Miskolc called for those of Roma origin convicted of an offense to be forcibly transported to a camp outside of the city limits and stripped of their citizenship. In support of his proposal to “banish Roma criminals” from the

city, the Jobbik candidate cited similar measures introduced by “Slovakia, France, Italy and Finland”.

Hungary’s current ruling Fidesz party played a leading role in cultivating the political fortunes of Jobbik, and in the lead up to this year’s elections, worked together with the neo-fascists on no less than 200 local councils. In the federal elections held earlier this year, Jobbik was able to enter the Hungarian parliament for the first time.

Similar forms of persecution afflict the Roma in many other Eastern European countries. All of these countries have in common the fact that they are currently implementing huge austerity programmes involving massive social spending cuts in order to finance the bank bailouts of 2008-2009. As unemployment rises dramatically, regimes throughout Eastern Europe are systematically seeking to whip up chauvinist and racist campaigns in order to channel growing social discontent away from national governments and the thoroughly corrupt ruling elites in the region. In many countries, the first target of this racist agitation is the Roma—an exposed and vulnerable community, least able to fight back.

Faced with intolerable living conditions, state violence and a complete lack of prospects for their children, many Roma families have sought to travel to Western Europe in search of a better future. As one country after another slams the door in their face, they increasingly face the types of repression and criminalization they sought to leave behind. The persecution of the Roma is not only an indictment of the rapacious policies of the post-Stalinist elites in Eastern Europe, it also demonstrates that the pledge inscribed in the charter of the European Union guaranteeing the free movement of people is nothing more than a charade.



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