

Persecution of Roma in the Czech Republic

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In recent weeks, the Czech Republic has witnessed violent attacks on the Roma minority, sparked by clashes between Roma and young Czechs. The ethnic tensions are a direct consequence of increasing social decline. As in Hungary and other European countries, bourgeois and far-right parties are exploiting the discriminated and disadvantaged minority in an effort to channel social tensions along racist lines.

In confrontations in Nový Bor and nearby Rumburk on August 7 and 20, several young Czechs were injured by Roma, some seriously. The incidents followed a veritable witch-hunt on the part of the political establishment, media and police against the Roma minority in the country.

Immediately afterwards, the police said the incidents had a “racist” dimension. The media enthusiastically took up this refrain, and spoke of “brutal Roma perpetrators” who attacked “white” victims.

In response to the incidents local mayors in several towns called for protests, which involved several hundred residents of the region. At the request of several mayors, Czech police dispatched more forces into the region on August 23. Some 50 riot police are being brought in, supposedly to provide added security in Rumburk, Varnsdorf, and Jiřkov. Detectives from the “organized crime division” are also working in the region.

Local politicians from northern Bohemia have long been stirring up racist sentiments against the Roma. In May, the mayors of Rumburk, Jiřetín pod Jedlovou, Jaroslav Sykáček and Josef Zoser sent an open letter to right-wing Prime Minister Petr Necas. In it, they complained about the increasing influx of Roma from other parts of the country and Slovakia, saying this was overwhelming the municipal authorities, social services and schools, and that crime was also on the increase.

About two weeks ago, after a rally in Rumburk attended by local politicians, about a thousand people

surrounded homes inhabited by Roma, seeking to provoke them. Among those present were a number of neo-Nazis. The police only intervened when they started to demolish a fence. According to a report on Roma.cz, a Roma family from Rumburk fled after receiving death threats and appealing unsuccessfully to the local police.

The neo-fascist Workers Party (DS) has called a rally in Nový Bor for September 10. In the past, activities involving the DS often ended violently. Roma representative Albert Deme ter recently spoke to Czech television about the “hunting down of Roma”, which he compared to “the days of fascism”.

The DS has long been notorious for its provocative actions against the Roma minority. Their paramilitary arm is oriented to the fascist Hungarian Guard and organizes marches in Roma districts. In April 2009 in the Moravian village of Vitkov, they attacked the house of a Roma family. As a result, a two-year-old girl suffered severe burn injuries and only survived after several emergency operations.

These facts are not mentioned in the media, which reports extensively about the “white” victims. According to non-governmental organizations, since 1989 more than 20 people have died as a result of right-wing violence. Every year, dozens of Roma are attacked, beaten, threatened or insulted.

Even more serious is the social discrimination against the Roma. The social situation is tense in Northern Bohemia, an area scarred by unemployment, poverty and poor education. For example, in the district of Decin—where Rumburk is situated—the jobless rate is 13.7 percent, the third highest in the Czech Republic. At least 50 percent of the Roma population are unemployed and living in poverty.

The austerity measures implemented by the Necas government have further exacerbated the situation. Cuts in welfare and education are pushing the Roma even

deeper into the margins. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising if young people without any clear perspectives react in violence, as in Novy Bor and Rumburk.

As the Czech government plans further austerity measures to meet the stability criteria for the introduction of the euro by 2014, it is specifically involving far-right forces, thereby legitimising the DS and other right-wing groups.

The right-wing government coalition led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) has made self-professed nationalist and anti-Semite Ladislav Batora the personnel director of the Ministry of Education. This initially caused conflict between the ODS and its two coalition partners, the neo-liberal TOP09 of Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg and the right-wing populist VV (Public Affairs). In the meantime, the dispute was settled, and Batora continues to perform his duties.

Batora is currently president of DOST (which stands for Faith, Objectivity, Freedom and Tradition). The organization is deeply reactionary, combining ultra-conservative Catholic views with Czech nationalism.

The non-partisan Batora entered parliament in 2006 on the slate of the far-right National Party. He has provoked uproar several times with his anti-Semitic remarks and attacks against Sinti and Roma. He also vehemently denounced the Prague mayor for granting permission for a gay parade in the Czech capital.

His DOST group is preparing to become a political party, and enjoys close links with the right wing of the ODS. Batora owes his post in the Ministry of Education to good relations with President Vaclav Klaus (ODS). Colleagues of Klaus have encouraged Batora.

Klaus, who is notorious for his nationalist and euro-sceptic views at home and abroad, unequivocally supports Batora and defends his political affiliations. "Poor Batora, he is in the position of a proxy", he declared publicly. "He is being attacked because some people do not trust to attack me directly."



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