

Violence against Roma in Bulgaria

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Bulgaria has recently witnessed violence against Roma for the first time. There were violent demonstrations in the capital Sofia and 14 other cities, including Plovdiv, Varna and Pleven, against the Roma minority, estimated at half a million out of a population of 7.5 million. In the forefront of the demonstrations were local Nazi gangs, who exploited the death of two Bulgarian youths for their own purposes.

On Friday, September 23, 19-year-old Angel Petrov was killed in a car accident in the southern Bulgarian town of Katuniza. The car that ran over the youth was driven by a member of the local Roma minority, and a close confidant of local Roma boss Kiril Raschkow, who allegedly swore revenge on the family of the deceased. According to media reports, Raschkow is closely involved in Bulgaria's ubiquitous network of corruption. Roma also feel oppressed and threatened by Raschkow's mafia methods.

On the night of September 24, a small group of villagers gathered outside the houses of "Tsar Kiro", Raschkow's nickname, and called for his expulsion from the village of 2,300 inhabitants.

The following day, the mob swelled in front of Raschkow's property. From neighbouring Plovdiv, some 2,000 right-wing hooligans arrived from the city's two biggest football clubs. They stormed three houses belonging to Raschkow and torched them. The police, who had initially protected Raschkow's property, had pulled back, leaving free rein to the attackers.

Many of these right-wing attackers wore masks and wigs. According to bTV television, villagers had urged restraint. During the riots, a 16-year-old teenager collapsed and died of heart failure.

The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee later criticised the Bulgarian security forces of being conspicuously inactive during the riots in Katuniza while a "flood of serious crimes unfolded before their eyes", which led to

"racist abuse" and "social tensions" in many parts of the country.

The Interior Ministry justified the police conduct on the grounds that they had not been investigating the arsonists so as to avoid a further escalation and clashes with police, causing injuries.

The right-wing extremists took this toleration of the pogrom in Katuniza by the state forces as a licence for engaging in more racist violence against Roma and other minorities. In the city of Pleven, fascists destroyed a meeting place of the Turkish minority.

Since the introduction of capitalism two decades ago, impoverishment and unemployment in Bulgaria have increased dramatically. Economic integration into the EU and the impact of the international economic crisis have further exacerbated this trend, with the Roma population most affected, and increasingly forced into ghettos.

According to a report by Amnesty International, longstanding Roma settlements are often forcibly cleared. As a result, hundreds of people have lost their homes. The Roma in Bulgaria are also massively discriminated against in education and health care, and are often subjected to excessive police brutality.

While the EU average is for 90 percent of children completing their primary school education, it is only 42 percent among Roma. According to UNHCR, unemployment among the Bulgarian Roma lies between 56 and 80 percent.

On April 19, Bulgarian news agency Novinite reported a protest meeting of the 60,000 residents of the Roma district of Stolipinovo in Bulgaria's second largest city, Plovdiv. They denounced the deplorable conditions of life: houses without windows and stairs, looking like the aftermath of a bomb attack, rats, filth and the stench of garbage scattered everywhere.

A leading role in the riots is being played by the right party Ataka (Attack), which has organised numerous

anti-Roma demonstrations in recent weeks. In the European elections in 2007, Ataka received 14 percent of the votes cast, and 9.4 percent in the parliamentary elections in 2009. In parliament, it supports the conservative minority government of Boyko Borisov.

Ataka calls for the reintroduction of capital punishment as a response to “Roma criminality”. On Facebook, the party employs slogans like “Death to Tsar Kiro!” and “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!” During the riots involving the nationalists, slogans such as “[Turn] gypsies into soap” and “Gypsies out” could be heard.

The pogroms against Roma are part of the drastic social attacks on working people throughout Europe. Ataka and the fascist thugs are attacking the weakest members of society in order to poison the social atmosphere, to divide the working class and to mobilise support for dictatorial measures.

Recently, Ataka supporters have also instigated violent disorder at the Banya Bashi Mosque in downtown Sofia, in which several people were injured.

Ataka leader Siderov organised a “storming” of the presidential residence in Sofia, handing over a petition to head of state Georgi Parvanov of the Socialist Party blaming the pogroms on the Roma themselves.

The right-wing minority government GERB (Citizens for European Development), the party of Premier Borisov and supported by Ataka, now has its back to the wall. According to a recent survey, Ataka would today win only 2.2 percent, meaning it would no longer be represented in parliament.

Since Borisov entered office, he has implemented a brutal austerity programme under pressure from the EU, World Bank and International Monetary Fund. With a flat tax of 10 percent, the country now has the lowest tax rate of all EU members.

Attacks by right-wing fascist gangs are on the increase, not only in Bulgaria but also in other European countries. At the beginning of September, northern Bohemia in the Czech Republic, a region characterised by poverty and unemployment, saw racist marches by the neo-fascist Workers Party for Social Justice (DSSS) and several violent confrontations. In Hungary, paramilitary gangs regularly march through local districts. Vigilantes from the fascist Jobbik party hunt down Jews and Roma, without the government intervening.

The European elites are responding to the crisis of capitalism by turning openly to the right. Chauvinistic, anti-Islamist and racist elements are also included in the programmes of the established parties. The media support this development, providing a forum for right-wing demagogues like Thilo Sarrazin in Germany and Marine Le Pen in France. In Finland, Italy and Switzerland, anti-immigrant parties are now in the government. In the Netherlands, the conservative government rests on the extreme right.



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