

Roma man dies during brutal arrest by police in Czech Republic

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As a result of a brutal police operation on June 19 against a member of the Roma minority in the northern Bohemian town of Teplice, 46-year-old Stanislav Tomáš died during his arrest. While video footage clearly proves the violent actions of the security forces, the government in Prague has declared its full support for the police and announced there will be no investigation of the perpetrators.

A video circulated on social media shows how a police officer pushed Tomáš to the ground, holding him down for minutes with his knee on his neck and throat. Another video shows a half-dressed man hitting a car parked on the side of the road in an uncoordinated manner. The police officers who then approached acted with tremendous brutality against the man, who was already lying on the ground and obviously in a wretched physical and mental condition.

The second video, almost six minutes long, shows Tomáš being pushed to the ground by three police officers. After his hands were tied behind his back, one of the officers pressed his knee into the victim's neck for minutes—even after he was already lying motionless on the ground and the two other officers were no longer holding him. Terrible screams can be heard, which fall silent at a certain point.

A few minutes later the man was pronounced dead, after rescue workers tried in vain to resuscitate him. Another video has not yet been released by the police, according to media reports. It is said to document the arrival of an ambulance and may show that the victim was already dead. Eyewitnesses were expressly asked by the police not to speak to the media about the case.

The death of the Roma man is frighteningly reminiscent of that of George Floyd last year in the USA. The latter's killing, in a similar manner by the now-convicted police officer Derek Chauvin, triggered

a worldwide wave of protests. Millions of workers were shocked by Floyd's killing, which they saw as symptomatic of police terror in the US and around the world.

Many reacted to the video of the death of Tomáš in horror. "This is the height of brutality," commented Roma activist Michal Miko. Last Wednesday, a demonstration against police brutality and discrimination against Roma took place in Prague, the capital. In Teplice, several hundred people demonstrated on Saturday afternoon after a memorial service for Tomáš, and spontaneously marched to the local police station, where they chanted, "Come and kill us."

Although the European media hardly reported the case, hundreds of people also gathered in cities such as Berlin and Glasgow for protests and vigils. The Council of Europe is calling for an independent investigation, saying the footage of the police action was alarming. Amnesty International is also calling for an investigation into the incident.

Contrary to the video footage that has emerged, which leaves no doubt about a connection between the death and the brutal operation, the security forces have denied any responsibility for the man's death. The General Inspectorate of the Security Forces (GIBS) said on Thursday that there was no evidence of a criminal offence and therefore no criminal proceedings would be initiated against the police officers.

There is no connection, supposedly, between the death of the Roma man and the actions of the police, according to an evaluation of police documents and captured images, as well as the autopsy report. According to the report, the deceased had crystal meth in his blood, which was the cause of his death. The coercive measures applied by the police had been

appropriate, it says. A statement by the Czech police says explicitly, “There is no ‘Czech Floyd.’”

Immediately following the crime, the deadly police action was justified by the highest government circles. Social Democratic Interior Minister Jan Hamáček declared on Twitter, “The intervening police have my full support. If someone breaks the law while under the influence of addictive drugs they must expect the @PolicieCZ [Czech police] to intervene; thanks mainly to the work of police officers, we are among the ten safest countries in the world.” The leader of the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) described police officers as “great professionals.”

Head of government Andrej Babis also justified the murderous actions of the security forces. “When someone demolishes cars, acts aggressively and even bites a policeman, he cannot expect to be handled with kid gloves,” he wrote on Facebook. The prime minister explicitly thanked the police in Teplice for their “work.”

The dramatic incident is the latest in a series of brutal attacks by security forces against Roma. In October 2016, Miroslav Demeter, a mentally ill man, died under similar circumstances when he was arrested by police about 50 kilometres from Teplice. Again, the official cause of death was given as a drug overdose; and again, there were no investigations, let alone sanctions against the police officers involved.

In 2017, two police officers were investigated on suspicion of forcibly coercing confessions from Roma. One police officer was convicted but acquitted on appeal. Many cases of police abuse against Roma do not even come to public attention.

Of the approximately 300,000 Czech Roma, many live in Teplice. The town, which is about 75 kilometres from Prague, is considered a social hotspot, with high levels of unemployment. The Roma are particularly affected by this. In the Roma settlements, unemployment is often as high as 80 percent. Across Europe, 62 percent of young Roma are currently without work or education.

This minority is exposed to systematic social harassment and racist agitation. Following an amendment to the social laws in 2017, certain zones were defined in which residents are not entitled to housing benefits. This regulation is almost exclusively limited to areas with a high Roma population. In 2018,

President Milos Zeman publicly called for Roma to be beaten if they “refuse to work.”

But the police brutality, legitimised and publicly defended by the government, is not only directed against the Roma minority, it is also a feature of the capitalist system, a social and economic order in which workers are exploited for the profit of a small minority.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the establishment parties have demonstrated very clearly whose interests they represent. Government head Babis is a businessman and the fourth-richest person in the Czech Republic. His party, ANO, forms a minority government with the completely discredited Social Democrats, which is kept in office by the Communist Party.

As a result of the policy of opening up the economy, the Czech Republic has at times recorded the highest infection and death rates in the EU. More than 10 percent of the population has so far been infected with the virus and over 30,000 people have died. As everywhere in Europe, the pandemic is accompanied by mass layoffs, rising unemployment and poverty.

By publicly defending police violence, and mobilising right-wing and racist forces, the government in Prague is preparing for fierce class battles ahead.



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