

## FPC Briefing: Antigypsyism – A pernicious racist ideology spreading throughout Europe

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On 4<sup>th</sup> September, the Czech Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting found that the private NOVA television station had been illegally inciting hatred against the Roma people. The public regulatory authority cited a study of the station's news programme during the first seven weeks of this year, and concluded that, in its crime reporting, NOVA reinforced stereotypical prejudices about the Roma minority, focusing on the purely negative and making a point of identifying the ethnicity of Roma perpetrators, but not of those from the majority community. Moreover the station was alleged to have linked problematic locations and situations with the Roma minority, to have broadcast racist, anti-Roma statements by members of the non-Roma public without editing, and to have given excessive space to the views of right-wing extremists.<sup>1</sup>

Stereotypical prejudice against Roma people is nothing new in the Czech Republic or anywhere else in Europe. The Roma – a collective term which we shall use to describe a number of related groups – form one of the oldest ethnic minorities in Europe and probably the largest, and are primarily located in the countries of the former Communist bloc. Thanks to linguistic, genetic and anthropological research it is now not disputed that the Roma originated in India (the English word 'gypsy' is a result of the mistaken belief that the community originally came from Egypt), although very little is known about the exact timing, duration and route of their migration. It is likely that Roma were settled in parts of the Byzantine Empire by 1200, in what is now Greece. According to early records, groups of Roma migrated north into the rest of Europe in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and by around 1450 had traveled throughout the continent.<sup>2</sup>

The Roma were first welcomed by their host communities, but soon came to be treated with suspicion, and it was not long before prejudices became entrenched, with stereotypes of Roma as thieves and heathen forming, and persecution began, often at the behest of church authorities and government. Laws expelling the Roma from the Holy Roman Empire came into force towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and other parts of Europe followed suit.<sup>3</sup> The 1530 Egyptians Act banned Roma from England, and in 1554 the death penalty was imposed on those remaining in the country. In Moldavia and Wallachia (present-day Romania) Roma became slaves. In time persecution changed in form, with a range of measures enacted to suppress the culture and traditions of the Roma and to enforce their assimilation into mainstream society.<sup>4</sup> Suspicion and persecution of Roma continued through the centuries. For instance, in Spain in 1749, up to twelve thousand Roma were interned in the 'Great Gypsy Round-Up' during which they were subjected to deportation, forced labour and maltreatment. The Nazi regime and its puppet states killed between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma in mass executions and in the concentration camps, an aspect of the Holocaust which has not received a great deal of attention.<sup>5</sup> The 'Gypsy Holocaust' was not an issue during the Nuremberg trials and was only officially recognized in Germany in 1982, by Chancellor Helmut Schmitt.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Czech Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting. Press release: 4 September 2012. NOVA has rejected these findings, vowing to appeal in court.

<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe *Information Fact Sheets on Roma History*: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/histoculture\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/histoculture_EN.asp)

<sup>3</sup> *Human Rights on the Margins: Roma in Europe*. Amnesty International (2010): [http://www.amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc\\_21165.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_21165.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Human Rights of Roma and Travelers in Europe*. Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe (2012).

Postwar communist governments practiced forced assimilation policies, sometimes guided by eugenics concepts, including programmes of coercive sterilization of Roma women. Whilst these programmes were discontinued after the fall of communism, there have been cases of doctors continuing to sterilize women illegally, without their proper consent. To this day the Roma are subject to racist attacks and face widespread discrimination in access to education, housing and employment. Moreover there is evidence across Europe that members of the Roma minority are unfairly treated in the criminal justice system and form a significant overall proportion of victims of illegal human trafficking.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop of centuries of collective prejudice and persecution against Roma, often with deadly consequences, there has been a marked change in the discourse around Europe since approximately 2005. Expressions of anti-Roma prejudice have gained increased legitimacy throughout Europe, both in the statements of political leaders, and in media reporting, and this has been accompanied by a marked increase in violent hate crimes committed against Roma minorities in several countries. There was a rise in racist attacks on the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s after the fall of communism, but this newer wave of violence, which includes well-planned action by organized extremists as well as spontaneous mob violence, and which has led to numerous deaths, extends to Western Europe.

New far-right parties with a clear anti-Roma agenda have risen in a number of countries, in particular in Hungary and Bulgaria. The far-right Movement for a Better Hungary (or Jobbik for short), which almost came second in the popular vote in the 2010 general election, has made its anti-Roma populism a central part of its platform. It drew on language and sentiments that have developed in local government,<sup>8</sup> which has had to bear the brunt of social tensions arising from economic stagnation and the continuing lack of integration of the Roma community. Jobbik and its uniformed wing have not been averse to physically intimidating Roma communities in parts of rural Hungary. Previously being seen as a nuisance, the Roma are now portrayed as the major threat to the nation – a role assigned to the Jews by Twentieth century extremist movements. The Vice-Chair of Jobbik has even gone so far as to call for Roma to be interned in camps<sup>9</sup> - without receiving any strong official condemnation. This pattern of a far-right political party with a uniformed wing mirrors the Bulgarian National Union, with its subgroup, the Bulgarian National Guard. Together with another rightist party, Ataka, the Bulgarian National Union has leveraged existing anti-Roma sentiment in society, which has been compounded by rising economic insecurity and tied in into a wider narrative about national identity.<sup>10</sup>

And anti-Roma rhetoric has not been confined to the political fringes, with mainstream politicians also guilty of what can only be described as hate-speech. In 2009, Bulgaria's current Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, referred to Roma, Turks and pensioners as 'bad human capital', in a speech in which he urged Bulgarian emigrés in Chicago to return home.<sup>11</sup> This legitimizing of xenophobic rhetoric on the part of the political mainstream has been seen in a number of countries. We have already referred to the growth of openly inflammatory language in local politics in Hungary, where it has now become commonplace. In the Czech Republic, the media and political leaders are more cautious when it comes to openly provocative language, but there is nevertheless evidence of more subtle forms of hate speech.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>8</sup> Zolnay, Janos (2012). *Abusive Language and Discriminatory Measures in Hungarian Local Policy*. In: Stewart, Michael (ed.): *The Gypsy Menace: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics*. Hurst & Company, London.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>10</sup> Efremova, Georgia (2012). *Integralist Narratives and Redemptive Anti-Gypsy Politics in Bulgaria*. In: Stewart, Michael (ed.): *The Gypsy Menace: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics*. Hurst & Company, London.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 10

It is common to hear the Roma referred to as ‘inadaptables,’ and framed in media stories as petty criminals and a drain on the welfare state, and there have been several instances in recent months of the media reporting crimes allegedly perpetrated by Roma – which upon further police investigation turned out to have never even been committed. While the Czech far-right is weak and marginal, a number of parliamentarians from the main centre-right parties have boosted their careers by an appeal to populist anti-Roma sentiment, a trend which has also touched some parts of the centre-left Social Democratic Party.<sup>12</sup>

In France two years ago the government began a high-profile campaign of dismantling camps and deporting thousands of Roma to Romania and Bulgaria. Amidst leaked evidence that Roma were being clearly singled out by the authorities, in contravention of the 2004 EU Freedom of Movement directive, the action led to a well-publicized clash between the French government and the European Commission. The then French Interior Minister told journalists: “in all three cases – Roma, sedentary Travelers, and other Travelers – the consequence is the same: an increase in crime.<sup>13</sup>” The Budapest-based European Roma Rights Centre claimed that the French plan “reinforces discriminatory perceptions about Roma and Travelers and inflames public opinion against them<sup>14</sup>”. The policy of breaking up Roma camps and inducing their inhabitants to return to their countries of origin has continued under the new government of Francois Hollande, with a major operation taking place in Lyon this August.<sup>15</sup> And Italy, with a population of approximately 140,000 Roma, many of whom are immigrants from the former Yugoslavia and Romania, has also seen inflammatory talk from senior politicians. In 2007, the then leader of the National Alliance Party, Gianfranco Fini was quoted in the press as saying that for the Roma theft was “...virtually legitimate and not immoral.” And in 2008 Silvio Berlusconi, newly returned to the office of Prime Minister called all immigrants an ‘army of evil<sup>16</sup>’ and his government implemented a series of new measures including the fingerprinting of all inhabitants of Traveler camps, including minors. It should be stressed that this fingerprinting was a measure specifically targeted at the Roma ethnic group. And as recently as October 2012, a Roma camp in the south of Rome was dismantled by the authorities, with a degree of violence that was criticized by local charities and human rights organisations.

The theme of ‘inadaptability’ is a common thread that runs through this new wave of anti-Roma feeling across Europe. Under this repackaging of old stereotypes the Roma are portrayed as work-shy, prone to petty crime and generally incompatible with mainstream communities. This may be seen as an application of the principle of ‘cultural racism’ as defined by Paul Gilroy<sup>17</sup> in which the focus has shifted from older racist narratives which claimed inferiority based on physical features such as skin colour and physiognomy. Under this new articulation, the Roma are claimed to be fundamentally different, and incorrigibly so, due to differences of culture. This concept resembles Samuel Huntington’s notion of a ‘clash of civilizations’ in which intractable differences of culture mark out the lines of international conflict.<sup>18</sup> Huntington applied his ideas to domestic politics in a piece in *Foreign Policy* in 2004<sup>19</sup>, ‘The

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<sup>12</sup> Albert, Gwendolyn (2012). *Antigypsyism and the Extreme Right in the Czech Republic 2008-2011*. In: Stewart, Michael (ed.): *The Gypsy Menace: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics*. Hurst & Company, London.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>14</sup> BBC World Service: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11027288>

<sup>15</sup> BBC World Service: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19398239>

<sup>16</sup> BBC World Service: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11344313>

<sup>17</sup> Stewart, Michael (2012). Populism, Roma and the European Politics of Cultural Difference. In: Stewart, Michael (ed.): *The Gypsy Menace: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics*. Hurst & Company, London.

<sup>18</sup> Huntington, Samuel (1998). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Pocket Books.

<sup>19</sup> Huntington, Samuel (2004). *The Hispanic Challenge*. In *Foreign Policy*: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/03/01/the\\_hispanic\\_challenge?page=0,0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/03/01/the_hispanic_challenge?page=0,0)

Hispanic Challenge’ in which he discusses the ‘contemporary flood of immigrants from Latin America’ to the USA, which he presents as a ‘major threat to the country’s cultural and political integrity’. Towards the end of the article Huntington describes the cultural ‘traits’ of Hispanic immigrants in terms of what appear to be crude cultural stereotypes (the ‘mañana syndrome’) and asserts that nothing short of absolute assimilation can prevent the ‘reconquest’ of parts of the United States and a split between two very different cultures. Whilst the ideology underpinning the new racism, which we can call ‘antigypsyism,’ in Europe may or may not have been inspired consciously by the thinking of Huntington, there is a clear linkage between the patterns of thought on display in both. In this context it is perhaps clearer why some of the far-right movements in Europe, in particular those focused on attacking Muslim minorities, claim a seemingly paradoxical adherence to liberal western values, values which they assert are threatened by waves of immigration. In other words, the notion of impurity central to racist doctrines is no longer based on ethnicity but on culture. Moreover what gives this new articulation of collective prejudice its salience is the central role attributed to the Roma in defining the problems faced by individual nations, within new narratives of national victimhood. The emerging intellectual framework underpinning a new kind of racism, at least superficially free of associations with the Nazi era, increasing levels of social insecurity and the blurring of old identities caused by the forces of hyperglobalization<sup>20</sup>, compounded by the current global economic climate, have formed a lethal cocktail, with the Roma turning into easy scapegoats in much of Europe.

So what can be done to counter this disturbing new manifestation of racism that seems to have been spreading across Europe? There is a whole raft of measures that need to be taken to combat discrimination against Roma in all areas of life, and to facilitate their greater inclusion and integration into society. Amongst these, inclusive education must surely rank high on any list of priorities. But addressing the current wave of antigypsyism that has woven its way into mainstream thought will require more than long-term measures to improve the condition of Roma populations. First and foremost data collection on a Europe-wide basis will need to be enhanced and strengthened, and much more research will need to be done on how anti-Roma hate speech spreads through the media and through political discourse and transforms public opinion. Effective monitoring of the media and the statements of politicians can serve as an early warning mechanism to predict a rise in tension between different communities. Coherent strategies will also need to be formed to rebut hate speech whenever it occurs and to reject the narratives that legitimize antigypsyism. Moreover there will have to be a major initiative to raise public awareness of the Roma and of Roma history, which will require training of journalists and also a revision of school textbooks. At the end of his term as the Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner, Thomas Hammarberg proposed a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission to be set up on a Europe-wide basis<sup>21</sup> in order to study and publicize past crimes committed against the Roma. If taken seriously, and allowed to conduct its work with sufficient rigour, such an endeavour might go some way towards challenging deeply ingrained prejudices against Europe’s Roma. The years 2005 to 2015 have also been designated as the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an initiative supported by twelve governments, several international organisations and civil society, including Roma organisations. It is surely time to make sure that this commitment is remembered as more than a mere gesture.

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<sup>20</sup> The term ‘hyperglobalization’ is used by D. Rodrik (in *The Globalization Paradox*, 2011. Oxford University Press) to refer to the liberalization of trade and financial flows since the 1980s which has extended so far as to impinge on national policy making, often leading to increased inequality and insecurity.

<sup>21</sup> Krauthamer, Ky (2012). *A Truth Commission for Europe’s Roma?* Transitions On Line: <http://eastofcenter.tol.org/2012/04/a-truth-commission-for-europes-roma/>