

COLLECTION

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News



# Romani population in the Czech Republic and Eastern Europe countries

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## 1. The situation of Roma in Europe

Geneva  
5.3.2010

### UN says Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia suffer discrimination

Today UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said Roma in the Czech Republic, Italy and Slovakia suffer from discrimination and the situation seems to be deteriorating. Her remarks were reported by AFP. Czech Human Rights and Minorities Minister Michael Kocáb told the Czech Press Agency that in his view the claim that the situation is worsening for the Roma in the Czech Republic does not correspond to reality.

Pillay presented her annual human rights report to the UN Human Rights Council today in Geneva. "While the EU and several European governments have done their best to improve the situation of the Roma, in many other countries, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia, their position is noticeably deteriorating," she said.

Pillay also said the Roma continue to face unconcealed racism and racist attacks in many European countries. "I will be discussing the issue of discrimination against the Roma and attacks on them as well as attacks on immigrants with the authorities in Italy next week, and I will continue these discussions wherever advisable," Pillay said. She did not mention the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or any other country in this context.

Kocáb says there is no proof of the alleged deterioration of the position of the Roma in the Czech Republic. "I do not understand how the situation can be considered worse when we have not had reports of any serious racially motivated attacks since the one in Vítkov," he said.

Last April three Roma were injured during an arson attack in Vítkov; one, a little girl named Natálka who was not yet two years old, suffered burns over 80 % of her body. Police have charged four members of the extreme right with committing the attack.

A representative of the Office of the Government of Slovakia said the government is endeavoring to eliminate racial discrimination. "Slovakia proceeds in accordance with international agreements and international law, and through the use of our own national policies we are intensively involved in resolving the problems of our inhabitants in all areas, including eliminating all forms of racial discrimination," said Kristina Lempochnerová of the press department of the Government Rapporteur for the Roma Community.

The text of the UN report, which is dated at the end of January and has been published on the web pages of the UN in Geneva on the occasion of today's UN Human Rights Council meeting does not mention the Czech Republic or Slovakia specifically. In the report, the Commissioner generally criticizes discrimination against the Roma in Europe. However, she believes human rights are mainly being violated outside of Europe and that women are the most discriminated people in the world.

Pillay included passages on the Czech Republic and Slovakia in a cursory overview of the situation in several parts of the world. In addition, she expressed "deep uneasiness" over the deterioration of the human rights situation in Iran and over death penalty verdicts in Sudan, as well as "uneasiness" over attacks on human rights defenders, a context in which she mentioned Russia.

Pillay said "a certain amount of progress" had been made toward closing the controversial prison at the US military base on Guantanamo in Cuba, as well as in banning some interrogation methods there. In her view, the USA should now thoroughly investigate the alleged torture at its bases in Bagram, Afghanistan and Guantánamo and bring those responsible to justice.

Pillay also referred to ongoing serious violations of freedom of assembly and speech in some Central Asian countries. She called on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to increase their cooperation with the UN Human Rights Council.

**Prague** **Roma celebrate International Day of the Roma worldwide**  
**7.4.2010**

The International Day of the Roma is commemorated on 8 April. When and how did this day come about, and who celebrates it? Do you know other attributes of Romipen that connect Roma all over the world? If not, read on.

In 1971, the first-ever World Roma Congress took place near London thanks to the initiative of Grattan Puxon and Donald Kenrick of Great Britain; Matéo Maximoff, a representative of the Manouche in France; Jarko Jovanović of the former Yugoslavia; other Romani individuals and students of Romani studies who officially formed the basis of what is today the International Romani Union (IRU). The congress was attended by not quite 30 participants who approved the design of the Roma flag and the international Roma anthem. Delegates also officially established the first international Romani organization, initially called the World Romani Union. They also officially approved the use of the term "Rom" instead of "Gypsy".

Two more IRU congresses followed, and during the fourth congress in Warsaw in 1990, the 8th of April was recognized as an international holiday. The day was selected because it was the day on which international Roma cooperation was given the official seal of approval and the Romani movement achieved an international, sociopolitical dimension. On this day, celebrants are meant to remember their common cooperation, culture, language, origin, unity, and primarily, their Romipen.

International Roma Day has been celebrated in the Czech Republic since the 1990s. Czech organizers of this holiday do their best to participate in the unified symbolism that applies to each different year. In 2002, for example, the holiday began with the lighting of candles. In 2003, Roma symbolically threw flowers into the rivers of the Amazon, the Nile, the Vltava and many others. In 2004 a young linden tree was planted in Prague's "Letenské sady" public garden to symbolize national minorities planting their roots here.

The tradition of celebrating 8 April is strongest in the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia. The tradition is not as strong in the Czech Republic because awareness of the holiday only began in the mid-1990s. The International Day of the Roma enjoyed its greatest moment of popularization (mainly in Christian countries) in the year 2000, thanks to Pope John Paul II, who made use of a general address to popularize the day and call on the faithful to behave toward the Roma with greater respect.

The Roma flag

One of the designers of the flag was Dr W. R. Rischi, a linguist and Roma scholar from Chandigarh, India who founded the Romani Studies Centre in that country. Dr Rischi passed away on 1 December 2002.

The Roma flag is comprised of two horizontal bands, the lower green band symbolizing the Roma connection with nature and the upper blue band the Roma connection with heaven, philosophy, spirituality, etc. The wheel in the middle, which covers both bands, symbolizes life on the road and wandering. It is based on the ancient Indian wheel of fate. Originally it had 16 spokes and its bright red color corresponds to the first chakra, the earth element.

The Roma national anthem

Lyrics for the international Roma anthem "Gelem, Gelem" were set to a traditional melody by the Romani musician and politician Jarko Jovanović of Belgrade, who has lived in Paris for many years now. Czech and Slovak Roma have their own anthem, "Čhajori Romani", which was composed in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. The international hymn was not adopted here until the 1990s.

**Madrid/** **Roma consider their position in Europe to be scandalous**

**Budapest**  
**8.4.2010**

In advance of today's Second European Roma Summit, the Roma are calling on the European Union to put into practice a European Parliamentary resolution condemning all forms of discrimination and racism against them. Belén Sánchez Rubi, spokesperson for the EU Roma Policy Coalition, issued the statement yesterday. The summit, which is being held

at the level of ministers of the EU Member States, takes place today and tomorrow in the southern Spanish city of Cordoba.

"The position of the Roma is scandalous - they are victims of an increasing level of discrimination and racism. We hope this summit will lead to the European Commission playing a main role in addressing Roma issues, as the European Parliament has called on it to do," Sánchez Rubi told AFP.

On 31 January 2008 the European Parliament (EP) approved a resolution calling for a Europe-wide strategy vis-?-vis the Roma. Roma are Europe's largest minority, with approximately 10 million members. The EP resolution condemned all forms of racism and discrimination and called on the European Commission to prepare an action plan for integration of the Roma.

The plan would be implemented by all commissioners responsible for integrating EU citizens through the Directorates-General of Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; Justice, Freedom and Security; Education and Culture; and Regional Policy. Sanchez Rubi says little progress has been made since the resolution was adopted.

Sanchez Rubi denounced problems with education in schools, the very low participation of Roma on the labor market, and the housing conditions of the Roma, who are much more likely to live in poverty on the periphery of society than the rest of the population. She also criticized cases of "forced sterilizations in Romania and Slovakia".

AFP released several facts and numbers in relation to the summit. For example, in Slovakia only 3 % of Roma are said to complete middle school and only 0.3 % graduate from college. In Romania, the number of Romani children completing their mandatory school attendance has more than doubled during the past 20 years, but a 2008 study shows 19 % of Roma between the ages of 18 and 29 have never attended school. Only 1.8 % of non-Roma of that age in Romania have never attended school.

In Poland, the number of young Roma who do not attend school is around 10 %, according to Roma organizations, while government data place it at 30 %. In Hungary, 40 % of Roma do not complete primary education and fewer than one percent graduate from college.

In 2007 the European Court for Human Rights found the Czech Republic had violated the right to education of 18 Romani children by unjustifiably assigning them to "special schools". In March of this year, the Czech government approved an action plan for integrating more children into mainstream education, including young Roma. Hungary has also been criticized by the courts for the same problem. According to UNICEF, the practice is common in the region. Prague has invested almost EUR 40 million from EU funds into equal opportunity programs.

Slovak PM Robert Fico recently unleashed a firestorm of criticism when he announced the situation could be improved through boarding schools for Romani children from the settlements and other places where they are separated from the rest of the population. There are more than 300 000 Roma in Slovakia, more than half of whom are estimated to live in such conditions.

## **Prague 12.5.2010 Opinion poll: Relations with Roma still poor**

In a recent poll, the vast majority of people in the Czech Republic continue to perceive the co-existence of Roma and non-Roma as problematic. Relations with the Roma minority were rated "poor" by 82 % of respondents, of whom 33 % rated relations as "very poor". Only 13 % of Czechs rated relations with the Roma as "good". The research, conducted during April by the Center for Public Opinion Research, (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění - CVVM) was released today.

Compared to last year, when respondents rated relations with the Roma as the worst since 2007, the result has slightly improved, but only within the margin of error. Analysts clarified that it remains one of the worst levels recorded since 2007. Last year co-existence with the Roma was rated as critical by 85 % of respondents, while 10 % rated relations as positive.

CVVM says the ratings have been worsening steadily since 2006. At that time, 69 % of Czechs evaluated co-existence between the Roma minority and non-Roma negatively, with 22 % evaluating it as positive.

At the start of May the STEM agency published research confirming that the relationship of the Czech population to the Roma minority remains negative. This poll found that 67 % of citizens reject the Roma, 5 % have a good relationship with them, 20 % have neither a negative nor a positive view of them, and 8 % are unsympathetic to them. STEM reported that during the past year the number of people with a neutral or positive relationship toward the Roma had risen.

The CVVM research reported that people are also aware that the Roma are worse off than non-Roma in many areas. As far as employment is concerned, 61 % of respondents said members of the Roma minority are worse off. Two-fifths of respondents also believe the Roma have fewer opportunities to be of use in civil and public life. In the other areas of the CVVM research, the number of respondents who believe the Roma population has fewer opportunities was the same as the number who believe the Roma population enjoys the same or even better opportunities than non-Roma.

One-third of respondents stated that the Roma are worse off when it comes to earning qualifications. One-quarter of respondents said it is harder for the Roma to access education and housing. However, as far as housing is concerned, more than two-fifths of respondents also believe the Roma enjoy better conditions than the majority population.

According to 38 % of respondents, the government is addressing the Roma minority issue satisfactorily, but half of the respondents believe otherwise. Compared to last year, that rating has significantly improved, with the number of positive responses having increased by 13 percentage points.

People also rated municipal handling of the issue of Roma more positively; 41 % of respondents say municipalities are proceeding satisfactorily, while 27 % are dissatisfied. Here the number of positive responses rose by 8 percentage points compared to last year.

## 2. The social situation of Roma

Prague  
26.4.2010

### **Czech Television: One million Czechs suffer from poverty**

Czech Television reports that almost one million people in the Czech Republic are living in poverty, which means they are not able to provide themselves with enough clean water, clothing, or food. The Czech branch of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) says the country's social welfare system maintains the poor at subsistence level only. As part of the European Year for Combating Social Exclusion and Poverty, the Czech Republic has allocated CZK 12.5 million crowns (EUR 490 000) to 12 projects to improve the situation.

Those who suffer from poverty most in the Czech Republic are the chronically ill, invalids, seniors, the unemployed, and women supporting themselves. Such people are unable to afford even a Coca-Cola, to say nothing of dinner in a restaurant or a vacation. "One way to understand poverty is that I, as a poor person, cannot afford the ordinary things that are part of others' lives," Milena Černá, chair of the Czech branch of EAPN, told Czech Television.

People often fall into poverty because of debt, and the journey out of debt can be a difficult one. "A solution can always be found. On the other hand, some people's stories are so brutal that solutions are not so easy to find," Martin Kovalčík, a field social worker for the People in Need organization, told Czech Television. Those who have succeeded in overcoming poverty are now sharing their experiences with others by consulting on the development of a Europe-wide strategy for the fight against poverty for the next two years.

### **A. Housing**

Roudnice  
nad  
Labem  
21.4.2010

### **Roudnice nad Labem: Roma forced out under pressure, corruption suspected**

Roudnice nad Labem is not especially different from the other small towns nearby – except in its efforts to move some of its residents beyond the town limits. During the second half of March of this year, the town cut off the water to five families in "Masaryčka", as locals call the three Roma-occupied buildings on Masaryková street. Only a very few of these families will end up in decent apartments elsewhere in town; most have been moved into the surrounding ghettos of other towns and villages such as Ústí nad Labem or Bílina. Those tenants who have been evicted by court order end up on Na cukrovaru street, where the town owns a building with "skeleton" apartments. Up to eight people are now living in one or two rooms there, all because the town has sold the Masaryčka buildings and the land beneath them to a private firm called Bialbi for an unusually low price.

Pay your bill, get your water shut off

The town claims the water has been shut off in one building because of a mechanical problem and in another because some of the tenants have not paid their bills. Those who have paid their bills are simply out of luck. Speaking at a meeting between the town and NGOs requested by the Czech Helsinki Committee, Vice-Mayor Luboš Matek said, "The problem is that the water company has no choice but to stop service for everyone." A visit to the building shows the opposite is the case: Separate water meters and shut-off valves are in place.

The town never informed tenants who they should next pay their rent to until several months after the sale. "The Bialbi company literally turned us into rent defaulters," one tenant says. "I would gladly pay, but we don't know to whom, to what account to send it, they say they will tell us soon," says another tenant from a different building who has been waiting several months.

Hana Lukešová, former CEO of Bialbi Apartments, claims the tenants were all informed of the bank account number. She also claims it was posted at the town hall.

However, another former tenant from Masaryk street, Eugen Mati, makes a persuasive argument for the claim that Bialbi is not communicating with the tenants. He sent the company a request to set up a payment schedule, followed by a complaint, but never received a response to either communication. In his complaint, Eugen Mati writes: "On 1.2. 2010 I sent a request to the Bialbi company to set up a payment schedule for paying the back rent. However, I have yet to receive a response. I want to resolve this situation and meet my obligation to your company, but if you are not communicating with me by telephone and not responding to my written requests, I have no opportunity to resolve this. I refuse to accept any legal consequences resulting from the fact that the Bialbi company is not responding to my request, because I am doing my best to settle my debts."

#### Suspicious of corruption

When the Bialbi company became the buyer of the Roma-occupied buildings, it was listed in the Register of Companies as providing comprehensive hospital and outpatient care in the field of psychiatry. The company did not start managing real estate until it decided to purchase the buildings under the name of Bialbi bytové domy s.r.o. ("Bialbi Apartments, Inc."). At the time, Jiří Pišvejc and Jan Drahozal, both friends of Vice-Mayor Luboš Matek, were among Bialbi's executive officers.

The town sold Bialbi the three residential buildings with a total of 43 apartments and non-residential spaces, the land beneath them, and another three (already developed) plots for CZK 1.5 million (EUR 60 000). "At that price, the price per apartment would have been CZK 35 000, so why didn't they offer that to us, the tenants?" asks Eugen Mati, who has already been moved from "Masaryčka" to the town of Litoměřice.

Opposition town council member Pavel Šrytr, who did not agree with the sale or the price, filed criminal charges of suspicion of corruption, in which he wrote: "I am hereby filing criminal charges against the management of the town of Roudnice nad Labem and the following former council members who were wholly responsible, Messrs Bakeš, Matek and Urban, for setting the price of CZK 1.5 million crowns for the three residential buildings nos. 1470, 1492 and 1502 (43 apartments) including plots of 1 923 m<sup>2</sup>, an extreme undervalue. An independent, authorized real estate expert for the court has informed me the actual estimated value of this real estate totals CZK 9.5 million. Today, 2 April 2009, at a public meeting of the Roudnice nad Labem Town Council, I asked why this difference, at the town's expense, is so enormous, but none of the elected officials answered me. A motion for the independent Comptroller and Finance Committee of the Roudnice nad Labem town hall to investigate this matter was voted down."

Two months later, police sent Pavel Šrytr the following reply: "We hereby inform you that the criminal charges filed by you against the Roudnice nad Labem Council were shelved ... after an investigation determined no crime had been committed." "The police did not investigate correctly - I did not file three charges against the town council, but against specific individuals," Pavel Šrytr says.

According to a source from the town hall who is familiar with local real estate prices and prefers to remain anonymous, the town could have made up to CZK 30 million had it auctioned off the real estate. After renovations, the minimum market price of the buildings may be as high as CZK 70 million: "The non-residential spaces can be turned into more apartments. The land and the buildings are in the center of Roudnice, and it is possible, for example, to add on a garage or something like that. The apartments will probably be more expensive than is usual in Roudnice, because they are going to be luxury housing. Even if they sell the apartments at the market price, let's say, at an average of CZK 1.5 million each, they will make about CZK 70 million profit. If they sell them as luxury apartments, for more money, and also sell the plots, then they could make much more than CZK 100 million. Of course, the costs of reconstruction would have to be deducted from that."

#### Out on the street, tenants!

The 2 April 2009 meeting of the town council at which the sale of the real estate was decided was not run in a standard way. The sale was not approved during a first round of voting, due to the concerns of some of those present over what would happen to the tenants. The chair called a 20-minute break during which another plan was agreed. A

citizen who was not a council member suggested adding a clause to the contract between Roudnice and Bialbi obliging the buyer to find appropriate substitute accommodation for everyone residing in the buildings irrespective of whether they were legally entitled to such an offer. Should the company not meet this condition, it would be fined CZK 200 000 by the town for each instance of failure. Only after the insertion of this clause did the council members approve the sale.

As a source from the town hall confirmed to us, had this clause not been added, many of the Roma living in that locality would soon have ended up on the street. Most of them had short-term leases, usually for three months only, and all the company would have had to do would have been to simply not extend them. "I do not want to damage or harm anyone," says František Vaněček, the current CEO of Bialbi, "but we are a commercial firm, we want to reconstruct these buildings and sell them, and therefore we also want the tenants to move out as soon as they can." According to the information published on the online version of the business registry, all of the other executives have left Bialbi František Vaněček - or rather, the firm LUPEKO spol. s r.o., which he owns - is the only person left. It is not possible to determine how many silent investors Bialbi actually has.

Without the clause, the town would have had to solve the problem of homeless people on its territory. It is clear the town leadership lost out on an opportunity to make the town money, and a need to sell the real estate as quickly as possible probably also played a role: The council took a second vote on the matter during the meeting even though to do so violated standard protocol.

#### Pressure and attempted fraud

Bialbi thus acquired not only the real estate, but the obligation to provide all of the residents of the three buildings with appropriate substitute accommodation, even those who were not registered residents and had no legal right to such an offer. At that moment, the families became the target of various pressure tactics. Our investigations among the Roma in Roudnice show that the vast majority of them, with few exceptions, did not want to move out of the town because they have roots there, it is their home, and they like it. Another reason they wanted to remain in Roudnice was the fear they would be moved into a ghetto. Such neighborhoods are considered the "end of the line" from which there is no escape, and not just by the local Roma. "You can't get work there and the atmosphere is not good. Too many nervous people with no future suddenly end up there together and that is what it looks like, constant arguing every day," one tenant at Masaryčka told us, and gave another negative example of moving to the ghetto: "They just moved Josef Baláž to Bílina, he is 82 years old and deaf, and his wife is completely infirm and bedridden. They had him sign a paper that he would not ask either the town or Bialbi for housing. Mr and Mrs Baláž have now been moved away from their family and have no one to take care of them."

The pressure and subsequent difficulties which the Masaryčka tenants have been subjected to can be seen from the story of Renata Kašparová, her partner Robert Horváth, and their two children. Bialbi sent two men, each named Mr Berky, to talk with the Romani tenants as representatives of the Polabí civic association (with which we have not managed to establish contact). Former Bialbi CEO Hana Lukešová confirms there was no legal relationship between the association and Bialbi, but it handled the leases on Masarykova street and knew the amount each tenant was in arrears, as well as other information.

According to Renata Kašparová, the gradually increasing pressure on the tenants to move took place as follows: The Berkys (as the Polabí association) offered the family CZK 30 000 in cash to move from their nice two-bedroom apartment to one room in a hostel in Brozany. "I didn't see any reason to do that, according to the contract Bialbi was supposed to find us appropriate substitute housing, not a hostel. Moreover, we had no debts, so all that talk of shutting off the water and other possible problems did not apply to me. Then Mr Berky said he had found us another two-bedroom apartment - and asked me to sign a contract saying I was giving up my right to replacement accommodation. I refused to sign it. I said I would only do so after I had received the lease for the new apartment. Mr Berky was never able to produce one. It turned out he never told the owner of that apartment that my husband is Roma, he told them only three of us would be moving there, me and our two children. They

were misleading both sides.”

We don't want Gypsies

Renata Kašparová was pressured by the town hall, which said the Roma should look for new apartments on their own and not leave it all up to the town - which was looking for appropriate apartments even though it was not obliged to - or to Bialbi, which was contractually obliged to do so. “I called 30 people,” Kašparová said, “and when I went to see the place in person they would want to rent the apartment to me, and when I told them my partner is Roma, or if he came with me, they always said NO.” Almost every family from Masaryčka had the same experience - none of them found a sublet in Roudnice. Kašparová said Luboš Matek confirmed this to her: “He told me that he did not have accommodation for us in one municipal building because the tenants drew up a petition against Gypsies living there.”

Many of the tenants' testimonies, given independently of one another, confirm these and other pressure tactics. For example, one tenant claims he was offered a bribe of CZK 50 000 to sign a statement that he was giving up his right to substitute housing. On the other hand, Hana Lukešová claims Bialbi offered the tenants accommodation and “many apartments were rejected”. However, this begs the question: Nowhere is it stated that the tenants were obliged to accept the first offer made, and many claim the accommodation offered was not appropriate, while others complain that Bialbi offered them apartments only in the ghettos of surrounding towns. Unanimously, all the tenants say they do not want to leave Roudnice.

Another strange apartment sale

Vice-Mayor Luboš Matek says the total back rent owned from all three buildings on Masaryková street comes to CZK 669 000 and CZK 270 000 is owed on water bills. He also said the town did its best to accommodate Roma elsewhere in Roudnice as long as the capacity of apartments held out, and that those who were not in debt were made the first offers. The town hall sought apartments for the tenants even though it didn't have to since Bialbi had assumed that obligation. “The town is not obliged to look for the accommodation, but that does not mean we will just stand by and do nothing,” Matek said. However, the municipal apartments were first assigned to tenants who did have debts, even to a tenant whom the court had evicted (Roudnice mercilessly moved the others evicted by the court into the “skeleton” apartments). This is confirmed by Eugen Mati, who wrote to the town hall that he would like to know “what the criteria are for assigning apartments to the tenants.... We were told that socially vulnerable people and those who meet their obligations would be given priority. However, the apartments were assigned to people who do not fall into either category.... My wife is constantly going to the town hall (to see Mr Matek), where she is told again and again to either look for her own sublet or find out whether anyone was living illegally in a municipal apartment and her housing situation would be resolved.”

The town had the opportunity to move some of the Roma from Masaryčka into municipal apartments, of which there were approximately 80. Instead, it sold off half of those apartments. According to opposition council member Pavel Šrytr, that sale is another example of unclear management of the apartment stock in Roudnice. The town sold a total of 44 apartments to the firm of J. P. OBRAT a. s. PRAHA for CZK 14.5 million crowns. “The town could have gotten CZK 30 million if it had auctioned them,” Šrytr said.

CZK 1 000 per vote in the elections

Some of the Roma from Masaryčka and Cukrovar say the community itself is a bit to blame because they voted for Luboš Matek in the last elections, or rather for the US-DEU party, on whose ticket he ran. The party offered each eligible Romani voter CZK 1 000 for his or her vote. A total of 10 parties and groups were competing in Roudnice and every vote counted. “It definitely helped US-DEU a lot because they got at least 400 votes more out of it. Out of 10 candidate lists, five parties were not seated on the council, which is rather unusual in Roudnice. US-DEU was able to get four seats at the expense of everyone else,” says Pavel Šrytr of the opposition ČSSD.

## B. Work

Prague  
13.4.2010

### **Czech Labor Ministry: Retirement is based on income, not skin color**

The Czech Labor and Social Affairs Ministry (MPSV) has recently noted an increasing number of e-mails being sent as "spam" which allege that Roma are given some sort of advantage when retirement pensions are calculated. Part of this e-mail reads as follows:

"A working person who makes an average of CZK 15 000 per month (which most do) receives a retirement pension calculated on the basis of that amount. However, a Rom who has never worked and never paid a single crown into the social insurance system, who has been fed by the state through various welfare benefits - this 'discriminated' fellow-citizen receives a retirement pension calculated on the basis of the average wage in the Czech Republic, and that, esteemed fellow-citizens, is CZK 24 000 per month. So who wants to talk about discrimination here?????????"

This information does not correspond to reality. MPSV considers it essential to correct the record:

The conditions for the right to retirement insurance - to a bereavement pension, a disability pension, or an old-age pension - and the rules for calculating such insurance are established by Law No. 155/1995 Coll., on retirement insurance, as amended. One of the main principles of this law is that people must have been insured for the required amount of time in order to be awarded retirement. As far as an old-age pension is concerned, the person must also be of retirement age. The length of insurance is measured by the length of income-earning activity (work), and the amount of the retirement itself depends on how long one has worked and how high one's income was.

Every pension, even retirement pensions, in the Czech pension system has two components, the base rate and the adjustable rate. The base is the same for all kinds of pensions (irrespective of length of insurance and income level). It is currently CZK 2 170 per month. The adjustable rate of retirement pension depends on the length of insurance and the amount of income the insured earned during what is called the determination period prior to the pension being awarded. The determination period for pensions awarded in the year 2010 is the years 1986 - 2009.

Citizens of Roma origin are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged in the calculation of retirement pensions. The same rules apply to them as apply to all clients of the Czech pension system. MPSV does not know the author of these fraudulent e-mails, and the signatures using the MPSV letterhead that have turned up in some of the spammed e-mails are an abuse of publicly available contact information.

You can find detailed information on pensions on the website of the Czech Labor and Social Affairs Ministry at <http://www.mpsv.cz/cs/3> and on the web pages of the Czech Social Security Administration, which determines and pays out the majority of pensions in the Czech Republic, at <http://www.cssz.cz/cz/duchodove-pojisteni/>.

Original MPSV press release at [http://portal.gov.cz/wps/portal/\\_th/601/\\_lpid.698/699/\\_1/cs\\_CZ/\\_lp.698/0/\\_s.155/7226/\\_s.155/10202?docid=126264](http://portal.gov.cz/wps/portal/_th/601/_lpid.698/699/_1/cs_CZ/_lp.698/0/_s.155/7226/_s.155/10202?docid=126264)

## C. Children and school

Prague  
5.1.2010

### **OSF Prague announces grant supporting the desegregation of Czech schools**

OSF Prague has announced a new grant program supporting the desegregation of Czech schools. The maximum amount that can be requested is CZK 500 000. Applications should be submitted by 16:00 on 20 January or be postmarked 20 January.

The program is designed for non-governmental, non-profit organizations. Its support is intended for projects assisting the desegregation of Czech schools, especially projects designed in accordance with the aim of the Together to School coalition to implement the ECHR verdict in the case of "DH and others vs. the Czech Republic". Organizations that are

not members of the coalition may also apply.

Support will be provided primarily for:

Outreach and campaigns

Shadow reports on the performance of the Czech School Inspection Authority (Česká školní inspekce - ČSI)

Activities targeting the establishers of "practical" elementary schools

Pilot projects for the reintegration of pupils from "practical" elementary schools to mainstream schools

Projects focused on improving the quality of the diagnoses performed by the pedagogical-psychological counseling centers (pedagogicko-psychologický poradny - PPP) and the Special Education Centers (Speciálně pedagogická centra - SPC)

Non-profit organizations applying for a foundation contribution should submit a request on the official form, including:

A brief introduction of the applicant

A description of the project, maximum five pages in length

A presentation of the aims of the project and the changes to be achieved through its implementation

A proposal of the activities through which the project aims will be achieved

A budget

CZK 2 500 000 is available in this program category. The maximum amount that can be requested is CZK 500 000. The deadline for applying is 20 January 2010 by 16:00 or through an application postmarked 20. 1. 2010.

Prague  
11.1.2010

### **Czech Roma to be better informed of "practical school"**

The parents of Romani children who are to be placed in former "special schools," now called "practical schools," will sign an entirely new version of "informed agreement" as from this year's enrolment for the first year of elementary school, Lidove noviny (LN) writes Monday.

The parents of Romany as well as other children who may be sent to the practical school must sign the agreement before their child is placed in the school, LN writes.

Enrolment for the first year of elementary schools will start in the country in mid-January and it will last until mid-February this year.

LN writes that it will no longer be possible to send a child to the practical school because of bad discipline, frequent absence from school due to illness, the rejection of the child by his/her classmates, an insufficient knowledge of the teaching tongue, inadequate conditions for home preparation for lessons or behavioural and learning problems.

The version that was used in pedagogic and consultancy facilities was very brief. The parents did not practically know what advantages and disadvantages their children will have at school.

LN writes that it is not often looked into whether the child really has a light mental disability, which is in fact the sole cause for which the child should attend the practical elementary school.

"The directors and pedagogic-psychological specialists are obliged under law to inform parents about differences between educational programmes, but they do not do this," LN quotes Jan Stejskal, from the Jointly to School coalition, as saying.

The new informed agreement is also to be available in Romany as from now, the paper writes.

"Parents must know all consequences of their decision. It is therefore necessary that they understand it and know what it means," LN quotes Deputy Education Minister Klara Laurencikova as saying.

Another novelty is that the parents will sign the informed agreement before the child's obligatory examination, LN writes.

It says the ministry has also drafted a list of the rights of pupils and their legal statutory representatives.

As from this year it will also be possible to enrol talented five-year old children for the first year of elementary school while the regular age when children start attending school is six years, LN writes.

Experts welcome this opportunity, but say it is but one small step in dealing with the situation of talented children.

"Systemic care for these children is missing, the state is not much interested in developing their talent," LN quotes Vaclav Fortik, Czech Child Mensa chairman and Talent Centre association director, as saying.

He said Czech School Inspection has found out that teachers are unable to detect talented children in their classroom and they are unable to work with them.

The teachers lack guidance to uncover children's talent and to develop it, Fortik said.

He said, on the other hand, the opportunity to start attending elementary school at five years is not suitable for all talented children because some of them are not socially mature for it.

"Talented children are often on average level socially and emotionally," LN quotes child psychologist Vaclava Masakova as saying.

Prague  
14.1.2010

### **Amnesty International calls on Czech Republic to guarantee full education for all**

As parents plan to register their children into the first grade of elementary schools across the Czech Republic, Amnesty International has delivered the results of its research on access to education here to the relevant ministries, along with a challenge to change the approach of the Czech educational system as a whole. AI is recommending freezing the registration of students into 'practical' elementary schools for the 2010/2011 school year. These schools are disproportionately attended by Romani children, often completely unjustifiably, as the schools are intended only for pupils with mild mental disabilities.

The most recent research on the issue commissioned by the Czech Education Ministry last year confirms a clear disproportion between the number of Romani and non-Romani pupils attending 'practical' schools. While as many as one-third of Romani children attend this category of schools, only 2 % of children from the majority society attend such schooling. The distribution of mild mental disability in an average population is approximately 4 %.

Amnesty International is not the only organization to draw attention to the systematic segregating practices of Czech schools with respect to Romani children. In addition to international institutions such as the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) and the Roma Education Fund (REF), 13 Czech NGOs have added their voices to the issue and created the Together to School (Společně do školy) coalition, aimed at desegregating the Czech school system. The European Court for Human Rights verdict of three years ago, which recognized a complaint of discrimination in education filed by 18 Roma against the Czech state, was key to this call being raised on the domestic scene.

Since that decision, the Czech authorities have made an effort to adopt appropriate measures for gradually achieving the desegregation of Romani pupils. However, according to Amnesty International, which focused its research on changes in the approach to education, the measures have not gone far enough. "Abolishing these differences in education is still not a key element of education policy in the Czech Republic. In November, new measures aimed at including Romani children as part of instruction in mainstream schools were presented. However, the measures will not bring about rapid change without a better anchoring in the law. There is a need for measures that will have greater force and deeper impact," said AI Director for Europe and Central Asia Nicola Duckworth.

According to Fotis Filippou, an AI researcher, the problem is double-edged: "Mainstream elementary schools are very often either not prepared or not willing to meet the needs of children from various cultural and social backgrounds, and they decide their school is not the appropriate educational institution for those who are different. On the other hand, there are the pedagogical-psychological counseling centers and their evaluation systems, the results of which are used to relocate children into the 'practical' schools. Prejudices also

role here, as does the tendency to discriminate against these pupils. It is evident that discrimination and prejudice outweigh the interests of these children.”

Based on its research, AI has delivered a list of recommendations it considers key to Czech Human Rights Minister Michael Kocáb and Czech Deputy Education Minister Klára Laurenčíková. One is the recommendation mentioned above that no first-graders be registered into the ‘practical’ elementary schools for the 2010/2011 school year. At the same time, the organization says a comprehensive revision of the school system should be undertaken which would evaluate whether there is even a need for the ‘practical’ schools to exist. The report calls on the directors of ‘practical’ schools not to support the unnecessary registration of Romani children into their schools and instead to opt for collaborating with mainstream schools in their area.

AI also recommends support be provided for all children who need it during their inclusion into instruction and the development of their potential in mainstream elementary schools. The organization is appealing to mainstream school directors to take an interest in registering Romani pupils and supporting staff members who can influence the success rate of Romani children in mainstream schools. One such option which is still not being made sufficient use of, for example, is that of hiring teaching assistants. Last but not least, AI is emphasizing the necessity of anchoring a ban on segregation directly into Czech legislation.

Prague  
2.2.2010

### **Czech Television reveals Roma barred from enrolling in elementary school**

An elementary school in Brno is telling some students enrolment is closed while simultaneously keeping its doors open for others. Czech Television reporter Richard Samko recently performed a hidden camera investigation and discovered exactly how elementary schools approach the enrolment of Romani children. In general, it is important that all children attend school together. For Romani children, it is important they do their best to achieve academically, while for non-Romani children it is important to learn tolerance of those who are different. “We’re full, go ask somewhere else,” is what Roma often hear when trying to enrol their children in elementary school in the Czech Republic.

Czech Television tested how the Antonínska Elementary School in Brno, which specializes in offering foreign language instruction, responds to Romani parents and children. Two women, one of Roma origin, visited the school after the enrolment period had expired. The Romani parent was told there was no more room at the school for her child, but the other woman was much more successful – her child was added to a waiting list.

“I already have 70 people registered, which is three classes. I’m full, but I don’t know how many of these children will attend,” the director told the Romani mother. He recommended she try another school, which in his view is not as demanding, and warned her that at his school the pupils have to start foreign language instruction from the first grade.

In contrast, his meeting with the non-Romani mother was a completely different story. This mother visited the school the day after the Romani mother made her attempt. The director handed her over to the deputy director. “You are the third mother today who missed the deadline, but the registration must be done formally, you can’t just come here without bringing the child along. Next Wednesday I will not be teaching, and I am already agreed with some other mothers that they will come register, so you can too,” the deputy director said. The information about the school being full was never expressed to this mother. School officials did draw her attention to the foreign language instruction in the first grade, but in a completely different way, mentioning it as valuable for the child.

The result of the test has angered the Czech Education, Youth and Sport Ministry, but the establisher of the school, the Brno Regional Authority, responded calmly and downplayed its significance. “This is sensationalism. As far as I know, just because a mother has not yet enrolled her child does not mean it’s all over. If it should come to pass that they genuinely refuse to enrol a child because the child is Roma, then we would naturally address that and say it’s bad,” said Daniel Rychnovsky, Deputy Mayor of Brno.

According to the ministry, such an approach is not only unethical, it is illegal. “Basically

every teacher, every director should proceed fairly and in the same way towards all pupils and their parents," claims Deputy Education Minister Klara Laurencikova. Even though the school did not tell the Romani mother directly that it does not accept Romani children, the problem is still serious. "These days no one would permit themselves to state directly that they do not accept Roma. What makes it worse is that these various hidden methods are sought for refusing them," explains Veronika Vankova of IQ Roma Servis in Brno.

The school management rejects the claim that it makes such distinctions, even though the report shows the mothers were handled differently. Government research has admitted that Romani children are 27 times more likely to end up in schools for lightly mentally disabled children than non-Romani children, irrespective of their actual state of mental health and intellectual capacity.

All-Roma classrooms are another problem. In Brno there are a minimum of three schools in which 90 % of the pupils are Romani children. City leaders see nothing wrong with this. "If we have it under control this way, if the parents agree with it, and if it works, I do not see a problem," Rychnovsky said.

Prague  
17.3.2010

### **Czech Education Ministry wants Romanes language to be taught in schools**

Today's Lidové noviny (LN) reports that the Czech Education Ministry wants Romanes to be taught at elementary and middle schools as an elective language. Teachers should also include instruction on Roma culture, history and language in the general curriculum.

"We support the education of ethnic minorities. We want there to be awareness of Roma culture and language at schools. Romanes is an integral part of these children's lives. It is proper for it to be offered in the schools they attend," Klára Laurenčíková, head manager of the special education section at the ministry, told LN.

The paper writes that the ministry's aim is to bring more Romani children into mainstream elementary schools. At present Romani children are automatically sent to the former "special schools", which are supposed to exclusively serve children with light mental disability. The ministry wants the culture and language of Romani children to be taught in mainstream schools. Experts say the introduction of Romanes into schools will be positive for non-Romani children as well. Non-Roma should know the history, language and origins of their Romani classmates, as it will improve their understanding of Roma issues.

LN reports that analyses and studies show Romani children have greater problems with the Czech language during pre-school and elementary school than they do, for example, with mathematics. Often Romanes is the only language spoken in their families, or a "mixture" of Czech and Romanes is spoken. As a result these children often have limited vocabularies. Teachers should learn at least the basics of Romanes in order to aid Romani children's comprehension and guide them through the education system.

"If a German-speaking child attends school here, for example, everyone gives that child almost above-standard care. Nothing of the sort is offered to Romani children, even though they often do not fully understand what is being asked of them at school," warns Ondřej Klípa of the Czech Government Council for National Minorities.

LN writes that a pilot test of materials and support services for Romanes language instruction should begin soon in selected schools with "a significant representation of ethnic Romani pupils." The program materials have been translated from English into Czech and the two main dialects of Romanes spoken in the country. Future teachers will be exposed to the materials in college.

The paper reports that children will learn about Roma culture and history during history instruction and will be exposed to Romanes during civics instruction. "However, teachers should be able to use Romanes in all subjects. I know one mathematics teacher who uses it when giving the children word problems, for example," Klípa says.

Organizations focused on the issue welcome the introduction of Romanes into schools. "Elective Romanes is one possible auxiliary support route. However, what is more important is that Romani children enjoy learning Czech because they know it is the

language of a society that accepts and respects them. They should feel this society provides them with a standard measure of safety and gives them an equal opportunity to succeed," says Jan Stejskal of the Together to Schools coalition.

Brno  
14.4.2010

### **SocDem leader Jiří Paroubek: Roma must be kept in mainstream education**

Do the various Czech political parties approach the topic of the Roma differently? Do they consider it important, will they focus on it? In the run-up to the elections, we asked those political parties that achieved at least 5 % of the vote last time to answer these questions. In Romano hangos 2 we interviewed the leading candidate of the Public Affairs (Věci veřejné) party in South Moravia, Jiří Dobeš, and the leading Communist Party candidate in North Moravia, Kateřina Konečná. Party leaders Jiří Paroubek of the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) and Ondřej Liška of the Green Party have responded on behalf of their parties, while we have yet to hear from the Christian Democrats, the Civic Democrats, or TOP 09.

Jiří Paroubek's responses are below. Our next issue will belong to the Greens.

#### **Do you have any Roma or citizens of other nationalities on your candidate lists? Where and how many?**

We do not follow nationality as a criterion for our candidates in any elections. In the regional elections, Rudolf Polák, who is Roma, was elected on our ticket to the Hradec Králové regional government. We know that David Beňák, who is proud of his Roma nationality, is running in the parliamentary elections on the Prague list. There could be other Roma on the candidate lists in other regions.

Who in your party, perhaps on an expert commission, focuses on topics related to the Roma? What are the results of that focus?

During the second half of 2008, ČSSD established its own Expert Commission for Roma Affairs, which I personally oversee. This commission used to be chaired by Kateřina Kalistová and is now chaired by David Beňák. The commission includes experts, non-Roma and Roma, who are experienced, who take an active interest in this area, and who do good work. Proof of this is our Framework Program for Roma Affairs and Socially Excluded Localities, which was published in 2009 as part of the election campaign. This April, on the occasion of International Roma Day, we will publish a revised version of the program. I dare say no other political party has developed as comprehensive of a concept on the issue of Roma integration. I believe the framework program is a good basis, and it is of course still open for comments. Our other expert commissions, whether the central, regional or local ones, also deal with the topic of Roma integration as part of their work - for example, the school commissions or the social affairs commissions. I personally meet regularly with representatives of Roma organizations to listen to their problems.

#### **Do you know of any localities or quarters which might be considered ghettos in your neighborhood? Can you briefly describe what goes on there and how it is being addressed?**

Right now there are no localities similar to ghettos in the immediate area where I reside. However, that does not mean that I have never been to such a locality. I know what they look like. Their residents wrestle with dozens - with hundreds - of problems, but the solutions do not lie in the populist, short-term steps such as were practiced, for example, by the former Minorities Minister Michael Kocáb. Our party is aware of this, and therefore experts who are members or sympathizers of ČSSD are writing what we call Orange Books which will comprehensively address this issue. Effective solutions will only come about through long-term, targeted programs with the participation of everyone concerned - experts, institutions, and the residents themselves. There must be enough financing from the budgets of the state, the regions, and the municipalities, and of course from the European funds, and laws and regulations may also have to be changed. We are aware that not only Roma live in these localities, but unfortunately very often more than half of the residents in such places are Roma. Our party has espoused an active solution through the Framework Program for Roma Affairs and Socially Excluded Localities, as I have already

mentioned, and also by signing a Memorandum of Cooperation with Roma NNOs. We are doing our best to support the exchange of experiences; for example, in March we held a seminar in Ústí nad Labem on the topic of Roma Integration in the Regions, where we presented our experience in this area.

**What do you think of the special schools? What steps should be taken to make sure most Roma attend elementary schools and non-Romani parents do not remove their children from them?**

The former special schools may have been well-founded, and if elementary schools are not able to educate children of reduced intellect, then they cannot be abolished without an adequate substitute. This has to do with the number of pupils in specialized schools, today called family schools. Unfortunately, Czech schools are not yet sufficiently multicultural. They are not able to take into account the specifics of how children are raised in Romani families and the basic cultural differences, and they do not know how to work with the unwritten rules that are followed in Roma communities. As a result of this and other factors, Romani children have ended up and continue to end up in the practical schools even when they should not. The result is that they then cannot study at a proper middle school. The path toward a solution is to keep Romani children in mainstream education through high-quality pre-school preparation at nursery schools, preparatory classes, etc. Above all, this means pre-school preparations that are free of charge. This also means strengthening the elementary schools by providing a sufficient number of teaching assistants and, of course, high-quality, professionally trained teachers. The implementation of other activities is also related to this, such as field social work or community planning. Outreach to Romani parents and to elementary school directors is important. The work of the educational psychology counseling centers also needs to undergo a fundamental change – these centers often recommend children attend practical school even though they have not been diagnosed as lightly mentally disabled. The School Act is not thoroughly obeyed in this regard, even though it requires the prior written informed consent of the parents. All of this makes it evidently clear that enrolment in such a school should not just be a matter of course. Romani children are assigned to these schools more often than non-Romani children and are then labeled lightly mentally disabled, less intelligent. I believe the Czech School Inspection Authority has been conducting inspections in this context for several months and the results so far are very disturbing. Healthy children have been educated as if they were mentally disabled.

**Do you believe that using Romanes in schools and in the media will awaken Roma self-confidence? Will it contribute toward integration, or will it distance Roma from the educational process conducted in Czech?**

There is no doubt that use of the mother tongue is definitely one of the ways to awaken the self-confidence of any nation, which is desirable. It definitely should not be claimed that such a step would deteriorate the quality of education. It would never occur to anyone to say that children attending English-language or German-language schools are not properly educated or something like that.

I do not understand why such questions are asked in the context of Romanes instruction and the idea of voluntarily learning the language. Romanes is a codified language taught at colleges all over the world. I cannot agree with “experts” like Mr Josef Klíma, who told Czech Radio that it would not be entirely correct to teach Romanes because not enough books have been published in that language, or rather, books are not translated into that language. The problem that Romani children beginning school encounter is the fact that they do not speak either Czech or Romanes well, but they do speak their specific ethnolect. That is why we must discuss when to start Romanes instruction so that children will be able to master every aspect of both languages.

**Do Romani role models – singers, journalists, officials, politicians, musicians, etc. – inspire other Roma? Do you believe other Roma want to follow in their footsteps, or do they bad-mouth them and envy them when they are from a different extended family?**

Romani role models do have an influence, as do others. In my opinion such role models generate positive motivation. More and more Roma are studying at middle schools, at

colleges, and at universities. I believe this is the result of positive role models and supplementary programs which financially support Romani middle school students in their studies, both from the state budget and from foundation sources. There definitely exist cases in which successful Roma encounter envy or back-biting, but we non-Roma are neither better nor worse in that respect.

**Which sections in your party's program concern matters related to the Roma?**

Our party strives to ensure that every citizen can enjoy his or her right to a dignified life and a fair chance. That is what our electoral program is about. The program as a whole concerns all citizens, the Roma included. We are aware of their specific needs, and that is why we have created the Orange Book focusing comprehensively on Roma integration. Naturally, this issue affects many areas of culture, education, housing policy and the labor market, including discrimination, loan-sharking, political radicalism, social exclusion, etc., and these are also in our Program for Hope and Change – A Better Future for Ordinary People, which is based on the Orange Books. It is also available on our web pages.

**In today's economic crisis, how can we increase the computer literacy, foreign language skills and qualifications of the large number of Roma who are unqualified? Where and how can they improve their qualifications if they are working full-time?**

We see two paths. The first is prevention, keeping Romani children in mainstream education. The second is an active, effective, targeted employment policy. The basic tool is to offer re-qualification courses, to recognize other forms of education, etc. We will therefore support and implement projects that offer various forms of education. Roma are not the only ones who encounter a lack of available jobs or affordable housing. Qualifications, therefore, are only one of the problems faced by those at risk of social exclusion or those already excluded. Our party is aware of this, and our Hope and Change program proves it.

**Brno**  
**28.4.2010** **Romani high school student faces prejudice daily**

Sára (17) has three brothers and three sisters. Currently a student at the High School for Management and Law in Brno, she loves to sing and would like to go into business once her studies are finished. Recently she spent several weeks in the USA, where she gained experience and was exposed to ideas she wants to make use of in her work with children in the Roma community. In other words, this intelligent young girl has already come a long way. She is also Roma.

I first met Sára at the IQ Roma servis non-profit organization, where she attends singing lessons and contributes to the magazine Romano VIP. What is surprising is how much charisma radiates from this young person and how much ambition she has. She sees herself in the future as an entrepreneur, but she would also like to become more involved with events inside the Roma community. She intends to focus primarily on working with children, providing them with activities that will not only help them spend their time in quality ways, but will help develop their personalities. She also has even more daring plans: In the future she would like to contribute toward bringing the Roma community and the majority society closer together and erasing mutually held prejudices and social barriers.

Even though Sára is full of youthful optimism, she is all too painfully aware of the complexity of the situation in which the Roma minority finds itself in the Czech Republic. Even at her young age, she has already directly experienced racially motivated discrimination. As she says, "I believe Czechs are not used to people who are visually different from the majority, for example, those who have a different skin color. They treat such people with suspicion, if not racism. This doesn't just concern their attitude toward the Roma, but towards foreigners as well." Sára has noticed this backhanded behavior towards those who are different on the basis of her own negative experiences: "Sometimes when people do not know me they judge me according to my appearance, they behave differently toward me, let me know I am different." However, Sára rises above these experiences and accepts life as it is.

A person living as part of a minority, whether ethnic, racial or religious, experiences the world from a different perspective than those who live as part of the majority society. Members of minorities experience concerns which those who have not undergone such experiences can hardly imagine. There are the moments of unpleasantness when someone on the street yells abuse at you because of your appearance. There is the feeling of menace when you pass by a group of men with shaved heads. Do you not know these feelings? For Sára, it is an everyday experience to be carefully watched in stores by staff who think she might steal something, or for her fellow passengers to avoid sitting next to her on the bus. Despite all this, Sára is not giving up and is pursuing her dreams. She draws her enthusiasm from the motivation she got from her stay in the USA, where, as she says, she realized that if others can achieve their desires, she can too.

**Olomouc**  
**30.4.2010**

### **MfD: Teachers at an Olomouc elementary school make jokes at expense of Roma**

Teachers at the Nedvědova Elementary School in Olomouc, which is working to integrate Romani children, have been making jokes at the expense of the Roma. One year ago, someone used an official school e-mail address to send teachers an e-mail to their private accounts containing the text of a fictitious letter making fun of a Romani family. A similar case had occurred at the school one year prior. Yesterday's Central Moravian edition of the Mladá fronta Dnes (MfD) daily reported that police are now investigating the school's e-mail.

MfD reports that a teacher who received the email and knew he was being let go reported the incident to the police. Both e-mails were sent from an address to which only the school director and his two deputy directors have access.

"I did not personally receive the e-mail, I only found out about it when it became a police matter," school director Jan Hándl told the daily. He believes the jokes were sent from the computer assigned to his deputy director for the first three grades, Pavel Pala. Mr Pala did not want to comment until the police investigation is completed.

One of the e-mails included the following text: "Last week my neighbor fell into a barrel of pear brandy. They tried to pull him out, but he heroically drowned and then burned for three days in the crematorium." The e-mail also included what purported to be a letter from a Romani mother to her son in prison, full of spelling errors. The other e-mail included an image, evidently taken from the internet, which was reminiscent of the vehicle used to drive on the surface of the moon, but mounted on blocks instead of on wheels. The text accompanying the image read "The presence of Roma on the Moon confirmed!!!"

The town leadership, which established the school, says the entire affair is inexcusable. "The school director has been emphatically warned to take measures to make sure such a situation never repeats itself," Mayor Martin Novotný told MfD.

Marie Štrbáková, spokesperson for the Olomouc Police, told the daily the matter had been taken up by specialists in right-wing extremism. "Criminal proceedings have not yet been initiated," she said.

**Prague**  
**22.6.2010**

### **Together to School: Roma inclusion in regular schools will save the state billions**

Representatives of the Together to School initiative, of which 15 non-governmental organizations are members, said today that ending the discrimination of Romani pupils and including more of them in mainstream schools will save the state dozens of billions of crowns. The initiative also called on the incoming government to specifically mention the issue of Roma inclusion in its program declaration.

"The discrimination of Romani pupils at elementary schools, recently confirmed by the Czech School Inspection Authority and an official opinion from Czech ombudsman Otakar Motejl, is not just a legal and social problem. The ongoing segregation of Romani pupils into schools for children with mental disabilities also means billions of crowns in losses for

the entire Czech economy – the World Bank has calculated the loss at a minimum of CZK 16 billion annually,” the initiative’s press release says.

The World Bank report was based on statistics estimating the number of socially excluded people in the country at 50 000. “That number, however, is much higher,” Stano Daniel of the European Roma Rights Centre warned journalists today. Excluded localities are said to already cost the state dozens of billions. The activists say low Roma education levels are the root of the whole problem. Roma are said to be targeted for assignment into practical (previously “special”) schools intended solely for the lightly mentally disabled.

Together to Schools has called on the incoming government to include the topic of equal opportunity for Romani pupils in its program declaration. “The amendment of two particular decrees will also help address the situation very quickly,” says Jan Stejskal, who coordinates the group. The Czech Education Ministry has already prepared the amendments to the decrees, thanks to which schools should receive more money for educating socially disadvantaged children.

The group also called on the government to introduce one year of obligatory pre-school attendance through which neglected children would acquire the social habits necessary to their being assigned to regular school. The group also said the government should launch a media campaign to help eradicate the public’s anti-Roma prejudice.

The Czech Republic has been criticized internationally over the high number of mainly Romani children in its practical schools. While 30 % of the Romani children in the country attend such schools, only 2 % of non-Romani children attend them. The Czech School Inspection Authority has also reported that some practical schools are educating healthy children as if they were lightly mentally disabled in order to receive state subsidies for special education.

## D. Inclusion v. Exclusion

Prague  
4.1.2010

### **Czech Republic to assume presidency of Decade of Roma Inclusion in July**

After running its first-ever EU Presidency last year, the Czech Republic will take on the presidency of yet another international project in 2010. >From 1 July the country will lead the Decade of Roma Inclusion for one year. The Decade aims to improve living conditions for the Roma minority in the states of Central and Eastern Europe by 2015.

“Our vision is to focus on children and the role of Romani women,” Gabriela Hřabaňová, director of the Czech Government Office for Roma Community Affairs, told ČTK. The office will be responsible for the Czech Decade Presidency. Hřabaňová said another priority for the Decade Presidency would be to increase state support for non-profit organizations that assist Roma.

“We do not yet have specific plans,” Hřabaňová said when asked for details. She believes the organizers of the Czech Decade Presidency will present their aims in May.

The Czech Republic will take the Decade Presidency over from neighboring Slovakia. The governments of Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia are also participating in the Decade.

The 10-year-long project started in 2005 and will continue until 2015. In the Czech Republic it has focused on improving Roma education, employment, health and housing. The program was initiated by the Open Society Institute and the World Bank.

During the 2001 census, approximately 11 000 people in the Czech Republic claimed Roma nationality; according to some estimates, however, there are at least ten times as many Roma in the country. According to a three-year-old analysis by the GAC company, as many as 80 000 Roma currently reside in about 300 excluded localities in the Czech Republic.

Social exclusion is transmitted from generation to generation. Romani children have only half the chances of other children to successfully complete primary education and even worse prospects for acquiring qualifications and employment.

In an evaluation of the results of the various countries after the Decade had been underway for two years, the Czech Republic placed fourth out of the nine states participating; at the time the most successful country was Hungary. The non-profit organizations preparing the evaluation pointed out the Czech Republic's deficiencies, particularly in terms of communication between government ministries and municipalities; in comparison to other participating countries, evaluators said the Czech Republic was lagging on Roma education and access to health care. They also said measures against discrimination in the Czech Republic were insufficient.

Since then, the Czech Republic, on the model of other EU Member States, has adopted the Anti-Discrimination Act in support of minority rights. The governmental Agency for Social Inclusion in Roma Localities, which has been preparing concrete aid programs together with selected municipalities since last year, should particularly assist the Roma. This year alone the management of the Agency intends to help some of the municipalities where Roma localities are found to acquire up to CZK 750 million from EU funds.

**Córdoba** **EU summit calls for integration of the Roma minority**  
12.4.2010

Racism, violence, school segregation, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, and gender discrimination are the main problems the Roma minority faces today, according to participants in the Second EU Roma Summit held recently in the Spanish city of Córdoba. In a final declaration issued today, those meeting at the conference called for greater efforts on including the Roma into mainstream society, according to the Associated Press.

Spanish Health Minister Trinidad Jiménez announced today that the Spanish government will create a plan to improve Roma integration and will commit a total of EUR 107 million towards its implementation by 2012. The money will be used, for example, for stipends for Romani students. Jiménez called on other Member States to take similar steps.

The two-day meeting in Córdoba was attended by representatives of the European Union and Member State governments, as well as representatives of the Roma minority, NGOs, and humanitarian organizations. The summit concluded that the standard of living of many Roma in Europe is deteriorating and tens of thousands of healthy Romani daughters and sons are segregated into schools for mentally disabled children.

School segregation is said to be common in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. A general lack of interest on the part of majority societies and institutionalized racism against the Roma is a great problem, conference participants said.

The economic crisis is another obstacle. "The socioeconomic conditions of the Roma have never improved, and due to the economic crisis they have deteriorated even further," said David Mark, a 27-year-old Romani man who works for a Roma foundation in Romania.

Violence against the Roma is also growing. Since 2008, cases of violence have been reported in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Italy. In Hungary alone, 45 physical attacks against the Roma have been noted during the past two years, nine of them fatal.

Katalin Barsony, a Hungarian Romani woman from the Romedia Foundation, complained that the list of speakers at the conference illustrated yet another problem of the Roma: Significant discrimination of women. Of the 52 lecturers who spoke at the forum, only five were Romani women.

Barsony is also exasperated with right-wing extremist parties blaming the Roma for economic problems. "They need scapegoats, and the easiest thing to do is to denounce the Roma," Barsony said.

Mark said the EU is providing financing and support to aid the Roma, but individual governments are not very active in this direction. In his view, the solution is for the Roma to step up the pressure at local level.

"The Roma also need to push back a bit. It's better than saying 'Good, you go away. ... Find yourselves a better life somewhere else'," Mark said.

An estimated 12 million Roma live in Europe. The Roma population of the Czech Republic is estimated at a quarter million and at 400 000 in Slovakia. There are about 600 000 Roma in

Spain, where the conference was held, half of them in Andalusia, where Córdoba is located.

**Budapest 21.7.2010 V4 countries want to coordinate their approach to the EU and Roma integration**

Today at a meeting of the Visegrád 4 group in Budapest, the prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia agreed to intensify their cooperation, primarily as it relates to the European Union. Slovak PM Iveta Radičová said V4 PMs will meet regularly prior to sessions of the Council of the EU. As of this month, Slovakia is chairing the V4 for the next year. In addition to a common approach toward the EU, the Slovak presidency has set its priorities as addressing the economic crisis, energy security, and unemployment. The V4 group has been in existence for 20 years.

"What connects us is the search for answers and solutions to the deepest economic crisis of recent times. In this search, in the creation of mechanisms to overcome high levels of unemployment and serious everyday problems, we want not just to assist one another, but to cooperate very actively," Radičová stressed at a post-meeting press conference.

In a joint declaration, the Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak PMs expressed appreciation for the successes of the Hungarian V4 presidency, such as its efforts to bring countries in the Western Balkans into NATO, its cooperation with Eastern European partners, and also its work on integrating the Roma minority. The social inclusion of the Roma population is also mentioned in the declaration as a priority of the current Slovak V4 presidency.

Radičová said the security of the citizens of all four countries depends on diversifying their energy sources. "The proposal of specific practical solutions is the aim of our next meetings," the Slovak PM said.

Czech PM Petr Nečas emphasized that all of the V4 countries had recently experienced the disadvantage of their dependence on a single dominant supplier of strategic raw materials. "From this point of view, the mutual interconnection of our energy networks, mutual support on joint energy projects - and here I would stress the southern corridor, the Nabucco pipeline, the north-south route for liquid natural gas terminals - these are steps that will make it possible to be less dependent on a single dominant supplier," the Czech PM said. Nabucco is a project supported in the EU to transport natural gas from Central Asia without Russian participation.

The approach taken by these Central European countries toward the EU as a whole is the third priority of the Slovak V4 presidency. The V4 would like to coordinate that approach, for example on the preparation of the EU's Strategy 2020 document. "The European Union today is responding to serious challenges to its values, challenges for responsible policy and consolidation of public financing, challenges not to put future generations in debt, to create employment, new jobs, challenges to create new forms of solidarity," Radičová said. In her view, the V4 countries want to "create room for a return to the basic premises of the EU, built on principles and values."

Nečas said the idea of V4 PMs meeting regularly before important EU summits was "interesting". In his view it would be useful for experts to pre-negotiate stances on issues which the V4 PMs would then approve. "It could increase the influence of these four countries in the EU," Nečas said. If the meetings prove themselves, they could become a permanent mechanism. "At the end of the day, France and Germany also meet, so why should it bother anyone if the V4 adopts a similar mechanism?" noted the Czech PM.

Polish PM Donald Tusk pointed out that thanks to the V4 group the Central European countries are safer in the European Union. "We managed to win on some important matters," he said. Tusk says the V4 agreed to jointly support Poland's EU presidency. Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán said the year 2011, when Hungary and the Poland will chair the EU, will be "the year of Central Europe". Tusk said the V4 are not doing any worse than Western European states in managing the economic crisis and the region, in his view, will not lose any credibility on that score.

Nečas also reminded the press that the combined strength of the V4 is considerable, as their GDPs and common market are strong. He emphasized that the V4 are closely

interconnected in Central Europe and that the budgetary or economic problems of any one of the countries could have an unfavorable impact on the others. "That is why I consider it extremely important that all four countries make the fiscal stabilization of their public expenditures a priority," the Czech PM said.

### 3. Anti-Roma Acts and Attacks

#### Prague 19.1.2010 Facebook 'Help for Haiti' group turns into racist scam

Tens of thousands of Czech Facebook users who joined a group that alleged it would donate financial support to Haitian earthquake victims had unwillingly become supporters of racist ideas as the group suddenly changed its description.

[Aktuálně.cz](#) learned about the con from its readers.

According to its original description, the group named, "For every member, 10 CZK (0.40 EUR) will be sent to help Haiti" was started by Czech entrepreneurs to help the Caribbean nation.

Soon, tens of thousands of Czech Facebook users joined the group - in the morning hours of Monday 19 January 2009, there were about 135 thousand registered.

"No reason to support an overpopulated species"

However, already on Saturday 18 January 2009, the alleged noble cause turned into a cynical joke and racist propaganda.

"Blacks are not an endangered, but rather overpopulated species. There is no single reason to support them," the group founded by a user named Adéla Sobotková started to say on Sunday.

The author added her own alleged experiences with non-white inhabitants of other countries. "I myself have seen in France and England how terrible it is for whites to live in quarters inhabited by blacks, Arabs or Pakis. The idea that someday they start to breed less and experience demographic decrease caused by low birth rate as in the case of white people, is naïve," the author said.

By 10:30 on Monday 19 January, the group appeared to be deleted.

Wanted an iPhone? Here, have a welfare state instead.

It is at least for the second time in the last weeks when tens of thousands of Czech Facebook users were conned by a group that suddenly changed its description.

[Na Paroubka se na Andělu snesly stovky vajec](#)

The other recent case is of a Facebook group that promised some of its members would win iPhones. After roughly 70 thousand joined, the group was re-named, becoming a fan-site of Czech Social Democratic (ČSSD) leader Jiří Paroubek.

To fully understand the irony in this, it needs to be added that Paroubek is far from being popular among Czech Facebook users, a social group composed mostly of younger people, with numerous anti-Paroubek and anti-ČSSD groups on Facebook having tens of thousands of members. Famously, a wave of egg-throwing attacks on pre-election campaign meetings of the ČSSD in spring 2009 was organized via Facebook group.

#### Prague 26.2.2010 Czech police find assault weapons in the home of an anti-Roma Facebook page author

Yet another Czech-language anti-Roma Facebook page has been set up recently, this time entitled "Prerov against Gypsies!" However, unlike the authors of previous racist Facebook pages, the author of this particular page will not get away with it so easily. News server Tn.cz reports police have detained the 19-year-old male.

Detectives found an air rifle with a targeting system and a submachine gun in the author's home. Reports suggest the Facebook group had been previously shut down and then reopened without the original photographs, which promoted Nazi armed units with swastika flags.

Just before it was shut down, the social networking site had 248 members. After it reopened today, membership rose to 264. According to data posted on Facebook, the founder of the group is Karel Trojak of Olomouc, who endorses the Workers' Party in his profile. Members of the group were not very active on the page, but police started investigating the problem at the suggestion of a TV Nova reporter.

Whoever founded the Facebook page is evidently uncivilized and uneducated, as are the

other contributors who were glad to find yet another site against Roma. The page is headed by the slogan "YOU ARE NOT WELCOME IN OUR COUNTRY". Czech chauvinists (extreme nationalists), fascists, neo-Nazis and other racists deliver similar messages to the Roma very often.

Opava  
4.4.2010

### **Police investigating arson attack in Ostrava as attempted murder**

Police officers are now investigating the arson attack on a Romani family in the Bedřiška settlement of Ostrava as attempted murder. The investigation first began as one of reckless endangerment. Police spokesperson Soňa Štětínská informed the Czech Press Agency of the change today.

Reckless endangerment could lead to a sentence of between three to eight years in prison. Attempted murder could result in a sentence of 15 to 20 years in prison, or even extraordinary sentencing.

"The crime has been qualified as attempted murder because one of the possible motives under investigation is that it was racially motivated. However, currently that possibility is being investigated to the same degree as other possibilities," Štětínská said.

The spokesperson went on to say that it is not yet possible to either confirm or deny any of the possibilities under investigation. Police officers are still working with several potential motivations for the attack: It could have to do with the victims' business activity or interpersonal relationships, it could have been racially motivated, or it could even have been a random crime. Štětínská said detectives have not yet received results from experts contributing to the investigation.

Czech Senator Liana Janáčková, who is also mayor of the district, made a statement about the case today, saying that a son of the victimized family had recently returned from England. According to information she has from other citizens living at Bedřiška, during his visit the family's intention to move to Canada or England was discussed. "They are said to have been in need of proof that they are discriminated against in the Czech Republic," Janáčková said in the statement, which also points out that the family owes money to the town hall.

According to Janáčková, the family was moved to Bedřiška roughly 10 years ago at the request of the landlords of the building in which they previously lived. The reason for the move is said to have been poor co-existence with their neighbors.

Janáčková previously earned notoriety for controversial statements about the Roma living at Bedřiška. However, she was never tried for her remarks, because the Czech Senate refused to strip her of immunity.

The investigation of the arson attack was taken over on Wednesday by regional police. Regional staff will augment local efforts. The case is being overseen by the Ostrava Region state prosecutor. Brigita Bilíková, who oversaw the investigation of the arson attack on a Romani family in Vítkov, is in charge.

An arson or arsonist attacked the single-family home in the Bedřiška settlement during the early morning hours of Sunday. A Molotov cocktail containing a highly flammable liquid crashed through the window of a room in which a teenage girl was sleeping. The bottle did not break and the chemicals inside it did not catch fire. Part of the carpet caught fire from the wick. The girl was awoken by the breaking glass and managed to put out the fire.

Last April arsonists attacked the home of a Romani family in Vítkov, injuring three people. The most seriously injured was little Natálka, who was not quite two years old at the time. She suffered extensive second and third-degree burns over 80 % of her body.

The trial of the four right-wing extremists from the Bruntál and Opava districts who have been indicted over the Vítkov attack will begin at the Regional Court in Ostrava on 11 May. The men have been charged with racially motivated attempted murder against multiple individuals, one of them a child. They face up to 15 years in prison, but could receive exceptional sentences, including life in prison.

Opava  
4.4.2010

## Two Molotov cocktails were thrown in Opava attack

The recent attack on Rybářská street in Opava involved two Molotov cocktails. No one was injured, Czech Television reports. Perpetrators threw the bottles into the entryway of an apartment building at about 1 AM Saturday. The doors to the building are usually open. The case was reported to police in Opava at 6:30 AM that same morning by a 55-year-old occupant of the building.

"I was taking the trash out in the morning and there were two bottles lying there. One had exploded and started to burn, the second never exploded," the witness told Czech Television. Criminal investigators, firefighters and police officers came to the scene.

Police claim there was no fire. "The bottles never caught fire, no fire ever started, there were no injuries and no damages were caused," Opava Police Commissioner René Černohorský said.

Černohorský said the content of the bottles has yet to be precisely determined. A source familiar with the case said the bottles had wicks and may have contained some kind of oil.

Police are investigating the case as one of reckless endangerment. "The bottles with the unidentified contents were secured and sent for chemical analysis to chemical experts," Černohorský said.

Residents of the building told the Czech Press Agency today that even though their windows have recently been replaced, the main doors to the building are old and will not close, so anyone can get in. They were quoted as saying the bottles were thrown at around 1 AM, that they were used alcohol bottles, and that both had shattered.

Families with children live in the building and the residents are now afraid, as they believe the attack could have been racially motivated just as other recent incidents in the same region have been. Roma are said to experience verbal assault from non-Roma in the town often, for example, when shopping in the nearby store.

Mayor of Opava Zbyněk Stanjura (ODS) told the Czech Press Agency that Rybářská street is not an exceptional part of town in any way and that there have never been problems with similar attacks. He believes the crime must be condemned, as all crime should, and hopes the police investigate thoroughly and find the perpetrators, whom he hopes will receive harsh punishment.

Kumar Vishwanathan, who has worked for several years with the Roma community in the region, said today that no such attack should be underestimated and that much will depend on the upcoming verdict in the trial of last year's arson attack in Vítkov, set to start in May. "Society must receive the clear signal that these are dangerous matters that will be punished," the activist believes.

Vishwanathan said such attacks are not pranks and society should not forgive them. He believes some youths are starting to lose any sense of limits, and throwing a Molotov cocktail is becoming as normal to them as slapping someone. "They do not see that this is something completely different, that it's not like a firecracker," he said, adding that people are even beginning to threaten members of their own families with such attacks. Vishwanathan recently was contacted by an older woman whose grandson had made such a threat to her.

An unidentified arsonist or arsonists also attacked the single-family home of a Romani family in the Bedřiška settlement of Ostrava in the early morning hours of 14 March with a Molotov cocktail. No one was injured.

Last April, arsonists attacked the single-family home of Romani family in Vítkov with three Molotov cocktails. A little girl, Natálka, suffered second and third-degree burns over 80 % of her body and subsequently lost three fingers as a result of her injuries. Police managed to track down the alleged perpetrators in this case. The trial of the four right-wing extremists from Bruntál and Opava districts who have been indicted for the incident will start at the Regional Court in Ostrava on 11 May. The main hearing will be accompanied by extraordinary security measures. The men are charged with racially motivated attempted murder against multiple individuals, one of them a child. They face up to 15 years in prison but could receive exceptional sentencing or life in prison

## Opava Police reviewing CCTV footage of attack in Opava

6.4.2010

The investigation of the recent Molotov cocktail attack in Opava is continuing. Sona Stetinska, spokesperson for the Regional Police in Ostrava, says police officers are intensively evaluating video footage from CCTV cameras on the street.

Two Molotov cocktails were thrown at the apartment building in Rybarska street in the early morning hours of Saturday. No one suffered any physical injuries, but for the time being no one is investigating the psychological trauma the attack has caused the victims. No material damages were caused by the attack.

Detectives in Opava are continuing to investigate, but the Regional Police have taken over reporting on the case. "The detectives are working on several versions of a possible motive. We can neither confirm nor deny whether the crime was committed randomly, whether a personal motive was at play, or whether it was racially motivated - even though the information so far does not indicate racial motivation, it also cannot be ruled out at this time," Stetinska said, adding that detectives in Opava have not yet received the results of the expert chemical analysis of the contents of the bottles.

The police spokesperson said investigators have already contacted dozens of people who might have information about the case. Most of those interviewed were residents of the building where the bottles were found, but their neighbors have also been interviewed. Detectives are determining who got the bottles into the hallway and how.

As Romea.cz previously reported, someone threw Molotov cocktails into this same building at the end of June 2008. An unidentified perpetrator threw two Molotov cocktails into the entryway of the building, setting fire to the door of a ground-floor apartment. Fortunately, tenants managed to put out the blaze. Police never found the perpetrator. Soon after the attack, two assailants attempted to attack a pregnant woman who lived in the building in front of the entrance, but she managed to escape with the aid of one of her relatives.

At the same time in Sadova street, which is right next to Rybarska street, local hooligans returning from a match threw a tear gas grenade into a building near the stadium. As a tenant of the building told Romea.cz, "The children had difficulty breathing, we had to move away for a few days, we had to clean up the apartment at our own expense, including painting all the rooms. Recently local thugs threw a big rock at our window." Police never found the perpetrators of any of these attacks.

## Opava Third Molotov cocktail found in Opava attack

8.4.2010

Another Molotov cocktail has been found in the building on Rybářská street in Opava which was recently attacked. The bottle landed in an abandoned apartment on the first floor. Last week someone threw two other Molotov cocktails into the ground-floor entryway of the building. Police say the bottles did not shatter and did not catch fire. Kumar Vishwanathan of the Life Together association visited the building this afternoon and believes the two discoveries are related. "I believe the bottle has been there since the attack in the early morning hours of Saturday. Someone probably wanted to set the building on fire both from below and from above," Vishwanathan told news serveru Romea.cz.

The window of the first-floor apartment was left open during the early morning hours of Saturday because the owner of the building was airing it out before renting it to new tenants. Vishwanathan said there were oil stains on the walls. He believes the wick had been lit but that it fortunately did not shatter when hitting the wall and its contents did not catch fire. "At first glance it appears to contain the same material as the bottles found in the building over the weekend," Soňa Bradáčová, spokesperson for the Moravian-Silesian police, told news server iDNES.cz. Police officers are now determining who threw the bottle into the apartment and why.

Vishwanathan believes the tenants of the building are under great stress. "They are very afraid, not least because there is a skinhead pub nearby," Vishwanathan said. "Very often a car pulls up and someone yells racist abuse at us. Two weeks ago we were coming home

with our seven-year-old granddaughter and some guys with nightsticks flew out of a car in front of the building and threatened to beat us up," Katel Giňa, a tenant of the building confirmed to Romea.cz. Tomorrow evening a meeting will be held between police and NGOs to seek agreement on how attacks of this kind can be prevented.

As Romea.cz has previously reported, the same building was attacked with Molotov cocktails at the end of June 2008. An unidentified perpetrator threw two Molotov cocktails into the entryway of the building, setting fire to the door of a ground-floor apartment. Tenants luckily managed to put out the fire. Not long after that attack, two assailants attempted to attack a pregnant tenant in front of the building, but she succeeded in escaping with the help of one of her relatives.

At the same time in Sadova street, which is right next to Rybarska street, local hooligans returning from a match threw a tear gas grenade into a building near the stadium. As a tenant of the building told Romea.cz, "The children had difficulty breathing, we had to move away for a few days, we had to clean up the apartment at our own expense, including painting all the rooms. Recently local thugs threw a big rock at our window." Police never found the perpetrators of any of these attacks.

### **Bratislava** **Slota absurdly insults the Roma on International Day of the Roma**

8.4.2010

The civic association People against Racism (LPR) must once again express its deep distress over statements by Slovak MP Ján Slota (SNS). News server [aktualne.sk](http://aktualne.sk) has reported that on 8 April, the International Day of the Roma, Slota said: "The only action [the Roma] ever take is when they breed. That's the only the move they know. In that, they are very active." Irena Bihariová, a lawyer with LPR, says such rhetoric crosses the line of what is legal. "If Ján Slota were not protected by parliamentary immunity, prosecutors would have to charge him with the crime of defamation, as his statement evidently meets the definition. This public defamation of the Roma is even more deplorable as it has been committed on the International Day of the Roma. This is proof that the MP has no compunction about repeatedly making racist statements that incite hatred against minorities with total disregard for their dignity and honor."

LPR calls on everyone, including public figures, to unequivocally condemn these shameful racist statements. We also demand that Ján Slota publicly apologize to all Roma.

### **Ostrava** **Police make arrests in Bedřiška arson**

21.4.2010

Police arrested several people today in connection with the recent arson attack on the home of a Romani family in the Bedřiška settlement of Ostrava. Settlement residents claim neighbors from the settlement were arrested. "They locked someone up, how many people I don't know," the victim's son-in-law told the Czech Press Agency today. Police are refusing to comment on the case for the time being. Police spokesperson Soňa Bradáčová would only say the investigation is ongoing.

"Right now police officers are performing other tasks related to the investigation. Detectives are constantly, repeatedly analyzing and checking all of the information they have discovered and received. Officers have not yet initiated criminal proceedings against anyone," Bradáčová said, adding that police would not comment on today's information until they were ready to charge someone: "We are not authorized to comment on whether or not we suspect someone."

Other residents of the settlement followed the police intervention today. "Several police cars came and took three people away in handcuffs. Then they searched the house. They were here quite a long time," one witness said, adding that those arrested all live in the house across the street from the victims. "They had some disputes. They used to yell at each other, but none of us thought they would ever do such a thing," the witness said.

However, another colony resident spoke of police taking away five people in handcuffs,

allegedly a man, a woman, her brother and the couple's two teenage sons. "It was not a Romani family. The man lived in the victim's house at one time," activist Kumar Vishwanathan, who is following the case, told the Czech Press Agency.

Dušan Podraný, whose home was attacked, also left Bedřiška this morning accompanied by police. "They brought me, my wife and our daughter to the station at around 06:30," Podraný said, adding that detectives had asked him about his neighbors. "They wanted to know everything, whether we had any disputes," he said. The whole family returned home after 13:00.

An arsonist or arsonists attacked the home in the early morning hours of Sunday 14 March. A Molotov cocktail containing a highly flammable liquid crashed through the window of a room in which the 13-year-old daughter of the family was sleeping. The bottle did not shatter and the chemicals did not catch fire. Part of the carpet caught fire from the wick, but the girl, who was awoken by the breaking glass, managed to put the fire out. Police are investigating the attack as attempted murder.

Last April arsonists attacked the home of a Romani family in Vítkov. An investigation revealed that three Molotov cocktails were used in the attack. Three people were injured during the subsequent blaze. The most serious injuries were suffered by a little girl, Natálka, who was not yet two years old. She suffered extensive second and third degree burns over 80 % of her body.

Police have arrested suspects in the Vítkov case and the trial of the four right-wing extremists from Bruntál and Opava charged with the crime will start at the Regional Court in Ostrava on 11 May. The main hearing will take place under extraordinary security measures. The men are charged with racially motivated attempted murder against multiple individuals, one of them a child. They face up to 15 years in prison or could receive exceptional sentences or life in prison.

#### **Husinec Attack on Romani children from a homeless shelter** 27.4.2010

At around 6 PM on 20 April 2010 in the town of Husinec, a group of children was playing by the fish pond. Two men approached the children and told them to remove a stone they had allegedly thrown into the pond. When the children did not obey, one of the men grabbed a 13-year-old girl, threw her into the pond, and allegedly repeatedly pushed her head down under the water. The other children wanted to help her, but the other man prevented them from doing so. The attackers fled before a police patrol drove up. The girl's mother has filed criminal charges; police are investigating the case as one of rioting.

This is not the first time that children from the homeless shelter in Husinec have been assaulted. Last August a resident of a small village nearby shot an air pistol at them. Before that, a youth attacked some of the children, kicking them brutally. Eva Dvořáková, director of the homeless shelter, has now decided to publicize the case. She refuses to accept the idea that her clients will continually be attacked just because they are socially vulnerable.

Dvořáková says the attack at the fish pond endangered the life of the victim, a Romani girl. Had water gotten into her lungs, she could have died. The local daily paper described the story of the most recent attack as follows: "A 13-year-old girl and three boys went for a walk by the fish pond, where two men from Husinec were also walking their horses. A two-year-old boy threw a stone into the pond from the embankment. This evidently enraged one of the men so much that he threw the girl into the pond. He then repeatedly pushed her head under water."

Witnesses say the man yelled "black pigs" at the children. He was evidently under the influence of alcohol. Fortunately, another man was taking his dog for a walk near the scene of the crime and saved the girl's life. The dog barked, startling the attacker. The girl managed to escape at that moment and ran home, where she told her mother what had happened. Her mother reported the case to the director of the shelter and to the police.

"The girl was so shaken she could not go to school for the next three days," Dvořáková told the news server Romea. "Our people work, they behave themselves," she said in defense of

her clients. In her view the attack was not a display of racism, but of xenophobia. The shelter houses both Romani and "non-Romani" children, and Dvořáková believes this was an attack on "the shelter children": "Our children know how to say hello, how to say thank you, we teach them proper behavior. If they're naughty, it's the same as any other child who is naughty. They are children - no one has any right whatsoever to attack them."

The assaulted girl and her parents have given their testimonies to the police. Štěpánka Valentová, spokesperson for the Czech Police in Prachatice, is allegedly not authorized to provide any more information about the case. She would only confirm the details of the previous attack: On 23 April 2009, a man from the nearby village of Podivín attacked children from the shelter. Witnesses said he drove up in front of the shelter and swore at the adults and children there, saying he would beat them up and shoot them. As proof of his intention he fired several shots from a weapon. Police said it was a starter pistol and posed no threat to anyone. However, the children's nerves were shaken by the shocking experience. Many of them justifiably feared for their lives.

"He yelled at them that they were 'black Gypsy pigs', that he would eliminate them, shoot them all, that this was just the beginning and that there was more to come. We have white citizens living here too, not just Roma. I am really afraid for my people, mainly for the small children and also for us employees. Police officers confirmed to the shelter residents that they know this man and that he shot at someone in the past," Dvořáková told the Mediafax press agency.

Dvořáková said the man returned to the facility the very next day and threatened a female shelter resident on the street, saying he would beat them all up, shoot them, and throw a Molotov cocktail into the building. "The lady saw a weapon in his bag - the pistol he had used on the weekend. He didn't shoot the second time around, but our people, mainly the children, were frightened all over again and are truly shaken by this," the director said.

Police confiscated the perpetrator's weapon and classified the incident as a misdemeanor against civil co-existence, eventually re-classifying it as the offense of rioting. The perpetrator had been in trouble with the law before. The director said his case was eventually handled by the town's misdemeanor commission.

Shortly thereafter, a local boy from Husinec kicked several of the small children from the shelter so brutally they had to be hospitalized. Police spokesperson Valentová said the perpetrator was less than 15 years old at the time of the crime. Dvořáková said the court eventually sentenced him to a suspended prison sentence and was supposed to have transferred him to a diagnostic institute.

#### THE RYBKA SHELTER

The Rybka Shelter in Husinec is a non-profit facility operated by a civic association of the same name. The facility is exceptional in that it is the only one in the country that accommodates entire families with children. Around 45 people, including children, live there because their situations have become too oppressive. The shelter residents are from the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia. The facility is sponsored by the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation, the Rotary Club of Hluboká nad Vltavou, and Bavarian Count Leopold Deym of Munich.

At the end of last July, the Count invited the shelter children to vacation for a week at his chateau in Dražiče, South Bohemia. "These days there are very few people who keep their word, and I am very glad the Count is truly noble, not just in origin, but by nature, because he truly kept his promise and invited the children to his chateau," Dvořáková said.

A rich cultural program was prepared for 15 children and three adults. During their stay at the chateau they visited the "Western village" at Jerotice, the chateau in Bechyně, and the museum in Týn nad Vltavou. In previous years "some of our children vacationed at a camp at Lake Lipno organized for them by the South Bohemian Water Rescuers," Dvořáková said.

Count Deym lives part of the time in Bavaria and part of the time in the Czech Republic. He organizes seminars and small-scale European Youth Days at his South Bohemian chateau. He is dedicated to assisting problem youth and the socially disadvantaged.

After these first few days of the Vítkov arson trial, people are asking whether the lawsuit should perhaps extend beyond the four indicted right-wing extremists to include others who bear responsibility for the attack. Animosity and hatred cannot be imprisoned, of course, and last year's attack was a hate crime. As one of the arsonists said, "We wanted to do something bad to the Gypsies."

According to the available information, the trial in Ostrava is being conducted correctly, according to the penal code. Be that as it may, no one doubts the defendants will be found guilty of attempted murder - except their attorneys, who are legally required to represent their clients.

As the law requires, the defendants will be sentenced under the penal code that was in effect at the time of the crime, and that is advantageous for them. According to the current penal code, the sentencing for the crime of which they are accused could be even stricter. They face the possibility of between 12 and 15 years in prison, but the court may hand down an extraordinary sentence, either 25 years or even life in prison. The question, of course, is whether the court will actually issue a life sentence.

This trial is not addressing a dispute between Natálka's parents and the perpetrators, nor is it addressing a conflict between neo-Nazis and the Roma minority. The state is prosecuting the perpetrators of a crime that poses a threat to society as a whole, not just Natálka and her family. However, those who monitor anti-Gypsyism and anti-Semitism are correct: It is not just the defendants who are on trial here. Society's prejudices are also on trial, all its intolerance, both its open and its hidden animosity.

The German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers, reflecting on the "German" responsibility for Nazism, divided that culpability into the criminal/legal, the political, the moral and the metaphysical. In this case the court will seek to determine only criminal/legal guilt, the guilt of the four defendants.

Since 1997, statutory regulations have been improving in this country. Fomenting hatred against any group of people, not just for racist reasons, is prosecuted even more strictly now than before. However, many bear a share of the political and moral guilt here nonetheless - from the parents of these young men, to their teachers, to the politicians and journalists who label people using expressions such as "gypsies", "inadaptables", "welfare abusers", or "they have it in their genes".

All of us bear a bit of political guilt - every person, as a citizen, is responsible for the results of the state's behavior. The regional court does not determine moral guilt, but the court of last resort does. To put it in civil terms, our consciences decide.

The core of this problem is not, of course, political correctness, but something we have not managed to get rid of since the Middle Ages. It is the reductive view that transforms complicated social phenomena into the word "they". "They" used to be heretics, or on the other hand Papists. Then "they" were the bourgeois, the imperialists exterminated by the proletariat. Then "they" were the Germans, the Russians, and today "they" are the communists and the "gypsies".

In their day, Protestant reformers refuted Manichaeism, based on the bond between light and dark, and proved that while good and evil do exist, the reduction of their polarity, the restriction of one's view of life to "plus" or "minus", to "black" or "white", can lead to tragedy. These days, the author Milan Kundera and the philosopher Václav Bělohradský are warning us against this mindset.

Reflecting on that black-and-white view of the world is a good way to leave behind hatred and prejudice.

Bratislava  
30.6.2010

## **Aktuálně.sk: Romani man dies of poisoning after tear gas exposure in police raid**

A 46-year-old Romani man has died of suffocation as a result of a raid conducted by riot police in Tornal'a, Slovakia. Officers allegedly used a disproportionate amount of tear gas against him. News server Aktuálně.sk reports that the organization Ľudia proti rasizmu (People against Racism) has filed criminal charges over the incident.

On 9 May the man, who worked in Tornal'a as part of the Romani civil patrols there, visited the operators of a carousel who were packing up to leave town and asked when they would be paying their electricity bill to the village. A scuffle broke out and the state police were called to the scene. They used tear gas to break it up.

After testifying at the police station, the Romani man was treated by emergency responders and then released. "The patient's health was stable, there was no need to send him to a medical facility," Falck Záchraná emergency services spokesperson Magdaléna Magdová told Aktuálně.sk.

However, on 17 May the Romani man sought medical care again, complaining of breathing difficulties. "They determined he was having difficulties breathing, his overall state of health began to deteriorate and he lost consciousness," Magdová said.

Magdová said doctors resuscitated the patient and hospitalized him in the town of Rimavská Sobota, where he died. The autopsy report made available to Aktuálně.sk says the cause of death was severe edema of the brain preceded by overall signs of suffocation.

There are two different versions of the entire conflict. The carousel operators testified to police that the Romani civil patrol member had been drunk and behaved aggressively toward them. Police also took testimony from the civil patrol member to the effect that the carousel operators had been aggressive and drunk.

The Romani man's family and eyewitnesses claim his behavior was normal and the use of tear gas disproportionate. He is said to have signed his testimony shortly after the police raid even though he was unable to read it because his eyes kept tearing up. An ambulance was called for him shortly after he signed the statement. Five witnesses are willing to testify to that effect.

Police did not test the Romani man's blood alcohol level but are said to have automatically believed the claims of the carousel operators. His family, represented by the legal organization People against Racism, filed criminal charges today against the intervening police officers for commission of the crime of manslaughter, "causing death through their neglectful behavior". His death may have been caused by "slow, gradual poisoning as a result of a disproportionate amount of tear gas." The pathologist who performed the autopsy allegedly made that claim in a conversation with the family members of the deceased.

The charges also say the Romani man was taken advantage of while indisposed in order to get him to sign his testimony. It also asks for an investigation into whether the police officers' conduct was racially motivated.

Aktuálně.sk sent various questions to the regional directorate of the Slovak Police Corps in Banská Bystrica. They will not be able to respond until tomorrow, as those responsible were either not available or are on sick leave.

The Slovak Interior Ministry says the Inspection Authority will review the case. "If criminal charges have been filed, the Interior Ministry's Inspection Authority will investigate them as it does all charges. Once the results are known we will inform the public," Interior Ministry spokesperson Erik Tomáš told Aktuálně.sk.

Budapest  
5.7.2010

## **Roma in Hungary targeted for attack once again, no injuries**

Late Sunday evening a single-family home occupied by Roma in the northeast of Hungary was fired upon. The MTI agency reports there were no injuries. In recent years, Roma in Hungary have become the target of several attacks during which at least eight people, including a five-year-old child, have died.

A Romani woman and her children were sleeping in their home in the village of Olaszliszka at the time of the attack. The woman said she was awakened by three loud shots. The bullets struck the masonry of the building's facade.

Sunday's incident happened not far from another village where, in October 2006, a non-Romani man ran over and injured a Romani girl. Her relatives retaliated by beating him to death on the spot. Eight Roma were subsequently sentenced to several years in prison for the attack. László Ferencsik, a representative of the local minority self-government, issued a statement Sunday saying the residents of the house that was attacked in Olaszliszka had no connection to the events of four years ago, MTI reports.

Recent attacks on Hungarian Roma have mostly taken place at night, while they are sleeping. Last August, a 45-year-old Romani woman was shot to death in the village of Kisléta in the east of the country; her 13-year-old daughter was also seriously injured in the attack. In November 2008, assailants murdered a Romani couple with a hand grenade in the southern Hungarian town of Pécs. That same month, two Roma in the village of Nagycséc in northeastern Hungary lost their lives when assailants threw Molotov cocktails at their homes and then used shotguns to target them as they fled the ensuing fires.

The Roma community is Hungary's largest national minority, comprising between five to seven per cent of the country's 10 million inhabitants. As unemployment and economic problems grow in the country, the Roma are also being more frequently targeted with seditious attacks from extremist parties such as the right-wing Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), which now has representatives in Parliament after the recent elections.

#### **Prague/ Svitavy**

#### **Racist murder of Romani man from Svitavy continues to arouse great emotion**

16.7.2010

Nine years ago, a 30-year-old father of two, Otto Absolon, died at the hands of a young neo-Nazi murderer, Vlastimil Pechanec, now serving 17 years behind bars. He was sentenced by the High Court in Prague at the start of March 2003. It is as hard to imagine what it must be like to live in prison for so long as it is to imagine what Pechanec will do as a 40-year-old when he is released. It is also difficult to imagine the lives of the two children who were orphaned by one youth's struggle for a "white Bohemia".

How did this all start? Pechanec, a troubled pupil at the special school in Svitavy, began committing crimes non-stop at the age of 16 (although not during two years in prison), but he never considered his actions criminal. He had committed them as part of what he considers legitimate combat on behalf of the "white race". He has never expressed the slightest regret for his actions. He is a true believer.

During his 2002 trial, Pechanec claimed to have left the skinhead movement in 1996. In April of that year, he had organized and attended a march by the neo-Nazi organization Bohemia Hammer Skins in Svitavy. The young "patriots" had ended their march by attacking the home of a Romani family. Pechanec was subsequently given a suspended sentence for rioting.

Again in Svitavy in 1997, Pechanec stabbed 32-year-old L. P., a member of the famous Roma band Točkolotoč, in cold blood, confirming his desire to exterminate the Roma nation. The musician only survived thanks to invaluable rapid medical aid. The court sentenced the teenaged Pechanec to two years in prison for racially motivated grievous bodily harm. However, another incident of grievous bodily harm committed by Pechanec in Blansko in September 1996 was rewarded by the Brno Regional Court in 1999 with a suspended sentence. Pechanec had allegedly acquitted himself well in prison in the interim.

Pechanec returned from prison in 2000 none the wiser. He and others attacked a customs officer on Svitavy's main square due to his allegedly Jewish origin. Since the victim was afraid to testify against Pechanec, the case was handled as a misdemeanor. This fanatical racist then attended a demonstration organized by the hard core of the Czech neo-Nazi scene on 1 May 2001 in Prague. Police diligently filmed the entirety of this action "for the homeland"; while they did eventually press charges against Pechanec, they never found it necessary to take him into custody.

On the evening of 20 July 2001, a police patrol called to the scene found Otto Absolon had been stabbed in front of the Kongo discotheque in Svitavy. Eyewitnesses told them he had been attacked by a certain Pechanec who frequented the disco. The police asked him to identify himself. He showed them he had a knife on him, claimed it was his, showed them it was clean, and promised to be available at his residence in the morning. Police were satisfied and left the scene of the crime. When Otto Absolon died in hospital the next day, police then asked that Pechanec, who had arrived for interrogation, be taken into custody, and a judge issued the warrant.

Local police make major mistakes

Regional-level detectives took up the case and learned to their surprise that police had failed to compile a list of the witnesses present. The patrol had not even completed a protocol on their search of the premises immediately following the crime. Detectives were not able to subject the clothing worn by the suspect at the time of the crime to expert analysis because he had already laundered it. No house search was ever conducted, although one might have produced evidence of racial motivation. The investigator and the court had to rely on eyewitness testimony and the courage of those witnesses to testify against such a person. They were in luck. The eyewitness testimony was convincing.

Pechanec was no sleeping terrorist – on the contrary, for years police had noted he was very active. He had now committed not just racially motivated murder, but what some viewed as a “heroic Nazi action.”

The daily MF Dnes reported on the criminal proceedings as follows: “The argumentation throughout the case has been complicated from the start by the fact that there is no direct evidence against Pechanec. The prosecution is based solely on witness testimony. Regional State Prosecutor Renata Vesecká (...) drew attention to the lack of professionalism of the Svitavy police at the scene of the crime and admitted there could have been more evidence had police done a better job. In her view, the patrol that was first on the scene after the incident did not ascertain the necessary information. ‘Their approach complicated the subsequent investigation,’ Vesecká said. A review conducted by the police presidium confirmed that local police made mistakes in the days following the crime: ‘The review came to the conclusion that the operations center of the district directorate in Svitavy did not proceed completely in accordance with regulations. It did not send a sufficient number of police officers to the scene of the crime as the situation required and did not inform the relevant superior officers.’ ”

The trial began on 3 February 2002. Over the next few months it was attended by observers from human rights organizations, the relatives of the murdered man, friends of the defendant, and the media, which reported regularly on the course of the trial. From the start the defendant denied his guilt and said he was the victim of a plot by the Roma in Svitavy, who allegedly did not like him. Otto Absolon’s common-law wife also testified, even though she was in the advanced stages of a serious illness. Her relatives tried in vain to persuade her not to come face to face with the man suspected of the murder of her partner. She testified as to what she had seen with her own eyes at the time of the crime and what she had heard her dying partner say.

When the judge was through questioning Absolon’s wife, it was the defendant’s turn. He attempted to provoke an emotional outburst from the witness in order to cast doubt on her testimony, asking her whether she had been aware of a love affair between Absolon and another woman who had also been involved with another man who had been present at the time the crime was committed. The defendant claimed that jealousy had been the motive of the person he alleged was the real murderer. He also claimed to have had no reason to murder Absolon. The judge allowed the question and asked the witness to respond. While she was aghast at these claims, she did not break down. She looked the defendant in the eye and told him she knew for certain that he had murdered the father of her children.

Before the end of this first-instance trial at the Regional Court in Hradec Králové, Jakub Polák, attorney-in-fact for the victim’s family, came to the conclusion that Pechanec was not necessarily Absolon’s murderer. He determined that there was a great deal of circumstantial evidence pointing to the fact that another man had been standing in proximity to

Absolon at the time of the crime, and that it could have been this person who delivered the fatal stab wounds or at the very least assisted the murderer as an accomplice. He therefore proposed the court return the case to investigators in order to complete the collection of evidence; should it turn out to be warranted, he proposed the state prosecutor also charge the accomplices. R.Ž., the mother of Absolon's children, fundamentally disagreed with this proposal and cancelled Polák's power of attorney.

Absolon's sister then turned to the author of this article with the request that he quickly find another legal representative who would insist on Pechanec's guilt. The Prague lawyer David Strupek took up this role. However, Polák did not give up his efforts and reported his own conclusions to the press on the day the verdict was handed down.

Courts look into the case in detail

On 29 March 2002 the Regional Court in Hradec Králové decided Pechanec was guilty and sentenced him to 13 years in prison for racially motivated murder. In the verdict, the judge writes that Pechanec "on 29 July 2001 at approximately 23:30 was in a state of drunkenness, and after yelling 'What do you want here, you black swine?' at a group of Roma from a discotheque ongoing at the bar in the Národní dům Hotel in Svitavy, he subsequently physically attacked one of the group, Absolon, for reasons of racial intolerance (...) first by pushing him in the shoulder, and then by stabbing him twice in the area of the abdomen and once in the right forearm when the victim tried to protect himself, perforating his large intestine and wounding his lower veins and abdominal aorta with the blade, injuries so serious given their general nature and number that the death of the victim was not reversible despite the provision of immediate professional medical attention."

On the kind of punishment and its duration, the judge added: "The degree of danger of the crime committed by the defendant against society is determined primarily by its irredeemable result, the death of another, for which the motivation was the defendant's racial intolerance, behavior which the victim did not provoke. (...) The possibility of his re-socialization was evaluated as ambiguous and doubtful given the abundance of negative factors in the defendant's prognosis."

On the day of the verdict, the news server iDNES.cz wrote this: "The trial was followed by roughly 20 skinheads and more than 10 Roma. Nine police officers were there to maintain order in the courtroom but did not succeed. 'In front of the courthouse, Pechanec's promoters attacked representatives of the Roma and civic activists who had followed the trial,' the MF Dnes correspondent reports. For almost an hour, the situation in the center of Hradec Králové was tense. The skinheads first began cursing the Roma and shouting that Pechanec was innocent. Then they even chased the attorney for the Roma around town. Only the presence of police reinforcements at the courthouse calmed the situation. 'No one was arrested, but four or five people are suspected of the misdemeanor of disturbing the peace. For the time being we have not managed to determine whether anyone has been beaten up. Verbal attacks predominated during the incident,' the head of the Hradec Králové district police said. A consultant for the European Roma Rights Centre claimed the murder of Otto Absolon should never have occurred. In his view, the authorities had completely failed by not taking the defendant into custody long before then. While on probation for a different violent crime, Pechanec was sentenced for yet another racially motivated offense: 'If they had taken him back into custody, he would never have killed anyone. The prosecution says this was a racially motivated murder, and even though the state organs and the government have been promising for some time to crack down on the prosecution of neo-Nazis and racists, Pechanec's past record shows they have seriously neglected their obligations.'"

The verdict was appealed by the defendant, who demanded an acquittal by reason of his alleged innocence, and by Regional State Prosecutor Renata Vesecká, who believed the punishment was too mild, as the case met the conditions for extraordinary sentencing. In her view the defendant had given the victim no chance to defend himself and his previous punishments had evidently not led to his correction. The case was thus heard by the High Court in Prague.

One year after Absolon's death, a commemoration ceremony was held at his grave,

attended by his seriously ill common-law wife. The Roma newspaper *Romano hangos* reported on the event as follows: "Relatives, acquaintances and total strangers came to the Svitavy cemetery on Saturday, 20 July to pay their respects to the memory of Otto Absolon, murdered one year ago. All day long, citizens brought dozens of bouquets, which completely covered the murdered man's grave. Representatives of the European Roma Rights Centre and the Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust (Výbor pro odškodnění obětí romského holocaustu – VPORH) also brought wreaths. 'I felt the need to honor the memory of this person who died so unnecessarily,' said VPORH chair Čeněk Růžička.' "

In his ruling to overturn the Hradec Králové Regional Court's verdict, the judge of the High Court in Prague wrote: "The Regional Court should have given more details as to why it did not choose the option of extraordinary sentencing for defendant Pechanec (...). It is primarily necessary to stress the essential fact that with the exception of his most recent conviction, the defendant has made smooth going of all of his previous convictions and that the racist motivation of his behavior is the legal marker of a felony."

Just before the appeal trial began, Absolon's common-law wife and the mother of their children, R.Ž., passed away. She did not live to see the final conviction of her partner's murderer. Her suffering was compounded by the lengthy criminal proceedings in the case, which were far from complete when she died. The Regional Court judge handling the case said on 17 October 2002 that the testimonies requested by the High Court had not produced any new evidence and once again sentenced the defendant to 13 years in prison.

That verdict states: "In its previous verdict, damages were awarded to the aggrieved R.Ž. in the amount of CZK 18 215, costs related to the burial and establishment of a memorial to the deceased. However, she has passed away. There were no inheritance proceedings. Her children currently do not have a legal representative according to the Svitavy court's report. Given these circumstances, R.Ž.'s right to compensation for these damages has been added to the above-mentioned original award to the aggrieved I.V., represented by Mr. David Strupek, who contributed toward paying those costs according to the original statements and in whose name all of the above-mentioned documents are listed."

After this verdict, both the defendant and the regional state prosecutor appealed once more. The High Court in Prague eventually decided on 4 March 2003 that Pechanec deserved extraordinary sentencing. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison. The daily *Právo* wrote of the verdict: "The judges (...) emphasized the abject nature of the motive for the murder and the fact that the skinhead, according to experts, cannot easily be re-educated, as he is a recidivist who has been repeatedly previously convicted of violent crimes. (...) According to experts, his assaults frequently had a racist subtext which was difficult to prove, so the perpetrator was usually 'only' convicted of the crime at issue."

Varied recollections of a shocking crime

To this day Pechanec continues to insist he is the victim of judicial error and that the real murderer is running free. Since 2006, demonstrations in support of him have been held in Svitavy in which promoters of neo-Nazism call for the trial to be re-opened and Pechanec to be acquitted. These demonstrations were repeatedly attended by the youths who are on trial today in Ostrava for the attempted murder against multiple victims which they allegedly committed in the course of an arson attack on a Romani family in Vítkov.

Every year the Svitavy town hall reiterates the reasons it cannot legally prevent these demonstrations from taking place. Otto Absolon's sister, who has custody of the children orphaned by his murder and their mother's death, leaves town with them whenever the march takes place. In her view, the children should not have to witness the fact that neo-Nazis are able to move freely about the town expressing their support for the murderer of their father.

This scenario will evidently play out again on 24 July 2010, when the Workers' Social Justice Party will hold a protest in Svitavy. One hour prior to the march by Pechanec's promoters there will be a march against racism, organized by opponents of the neo-Nazis for the second year in a row. They hope more local citizens will attend this year so that future neo-Nazi actions will not be realized in the town where Otto Absolon's children live.

## A. The Nataalka's affair

Budišov  
nad

### **Natálka to undergo more operations, trial of arsonists may start mid-February**

Budišovkou  
(Opavsko)  
19.1.2010

Two-year-old Natálka, the Romani girl who was severely burned during an arson attack on her family's home in Vítkov last April, is about to undergo more operations. Her mother, Anna Siváková, brought her to the Burn Center of the Teaching Hospital in Ostrava for re-bandaging recently and learned after the check-up that it would be best for her to remain at the hospital. "I knew she had more operations ahead of her, but I was surprised it was so soon," news server iDNES.cz quotes Siváková as saying.

The server reports police have charged three of the alleged arsonists with attempted murder; they could face up to 25 years in prison or extraordinary sentencing. According to unofficial information, the trial of the four people charged will start in mid-February.

Zdeňka Crkvenjaš, the head physician at the Burn Center, says Natálka's scars from her previous plastic surgeries are healing very well. However, it is necessary to operate on the skin of her fingers, as it is shrinking and deforming them.

The little girl is not yet walking again, even though the range of motion of her legs is fine. "Her legs need proper exercise and then she can start walking normally," Crkvenjaš said.

iDNES.cz reports that Natálka and her mother will return home next week. "For the time being I have no idea how long it will take. I am going to have to leave my three other daughters with their father and I will be here with Natálka. She is so fixated on me she could not handle being here alone," Siváková said.

Siváková described what her everyday life is like: "We get up in the morning, I give Natálka a bath, I put her ointments on her, massage her, and we exercise. Then I do my best to cook lunch with her in my arms, because she won't move away from me even for a second. After lunch she sleeps for a little bit, and then I give her another bath, put her ointments on, massage her, and then we exercise together once more," Siváková explains.

Sometimes Natálka wants to exercise with a ball, but she cannot stand the massage or moving her joints. "That hasn't changed, she has not gotten used to it, she cries and complains," said Siváková, who was clearly showing signs of how difficult it was to perform these tasks every day, according to iDNES.cz. "However, she also brings me a lot of joy, her scars are healing rapidly, she is adroit and sharp," Natálka's mother said with a smile.

Burn treatment specialists say Natálka will require lifelong care. Many more operations will be required, for example, should the shrinking of the girl's skin prevent her mobility.

Budišov  
nad

### **One year after the arson attack in Vítkov, little Natálka is learning to walk**

Budišovkou  
(Opavsko)  
15.4.2010

Little Natálka, the two-year-old who suffered serious burns during last year's arson attack on her home in Vítkov, is learning to walk once again. Her mother, Anna Siváková, told the Czech Press Agency that for the time being the child cannot take a step unless someone holds her hand. The girl will soon attend rehabilitation to address problems with her right foot, on which she does not want to step. She then faces yet another operation, of which she has already undergone dozens. On 19 April it will have been exactly one year since the tragic events which changed the lives of so many people.

On 11 May those charged with causing the misfortune of this little girl and her parents, who were also injured in the blaze, will stand trial. Natálka's parents will have to face their attackers. "I am not looking forward to it. I have no idea how I will respond once I see them," Siváková says.

Natálka's mother recently received a copy of the charges, which are almost 50 pages long, and has read up on many of the details. "They say Lukeš organized everything. He called the others and waited for them in Opava. He allegedly even chose our house," she says, adding that the defendants all blame one another. However, they all claim they did not know the house was occupied. "The police interrogated Lukeš's girlfriend from Vítkov. She said they had driven past our home several times and seen children playing by the house,"

Siváková says.

She has also read that another defendant, Müller, burned his hand when throwing the Molotov cocktails. The charges allege he sought ointment for the burn at a friend's house later. They also allege the group originally wanted to commit the attack a week earlier. "They couldn't find a car," says the mother.

The arsonists, all right-wing extremists from Bruntál and Opava, threw three Molotov cocktails filled with gasoline through the windows of the house. Natálka, who was not yet two years old, suffered extensive second and third-degree burns over 80 % of her body. Her parents suffered lesser injuries.

The arson attack completely changed the family's life. Even after Natálka came home after an eight-month hospital stay, nothing was the same. "We thought it would be better after she came home. We were wrong. That was just the beginning," Siváková says. Little Natálka has undergone dozens of operations and is by now afraid of doctors. She screams desperately the minute she sees the hospital, but she will soon have to undergo another hospital stay. "We have to start rehabilitation in two weeks. Then they will operate on her hands. We will be in the hospital for a month. I don't know how she will manage," the young mother says.

David Vaculík, Jaromír Lukeš, Ivo Müller and Václav Cojocarú will stand trial under extraordinary security measures. They are charged with committing racially motivated attempted murder against multiple individuals, one of whom was a child. They could face life in prison. "For me it would be just if they received the harshest possible punishment. They have condemned us to a punishment that will last our entire lives. I think they should suffer as our family is suffering," Siváková says.

Ostrava  
16.4.2010

### **Police capture suspect who may have sent Natálka's family death threats**

Today's edition of the daily Právo reports the North Moravian Police have captured a man they believe sent threats to the family of little Natálka, the Romani girl who suffered serious burns in an arson attack on her home in Vítkov. At the start of this year, Anna Siváková, Natálka's mother, found this message in her mailbox: "To the gas chambers with everyone - first Anna Siváková, then Natálka, and then her father and the other three children!"

Soňa Štětínská, spokesperson for the Moravian-Silesian Police, told the paper police had tracked down the probable author of the letter. "Detectives collaborated with their colleagues from the Police Presidium and requested several expert evaluations. Thanks to this intensive work, the last piece of the puzzle fell into place at the end of March and the detectives are now able to say they know the identity of the suspect," she said.

Štětínská says the possible author has not yet been charged. However, that is likely to happen in the next few days. Police are investigating the case as one of suspicion of supporting and promoting a movement to suppress human rights and freedoms.

"I still get goose bumps whenever I think of it. Photos of our entire family, cut from the newspapers, were also in the envelope. It was written in ballpoint pen that we would be going to the gas chambers, and they wrote numbers on the photographs to indicate the order. I was number 1, Natálka number 2," Právo quotes Anna Siváková as saying.

Arsonists attacked the single-family home in April 2009. The investigation revealed that three Molotov cocktails were thrown into the building. Three people were injured during the subsequent blaze. Natálka, who was not yet two years old, was the most severely injured, with extensive second and third-degree burns over 80 % of her body. David Vaculík, Jaromír Lukeš, Ivo Müller and Václav Cojocarú are charged with the crime. All four are members of the extreme right wing. The trial starts 11 May.

**Ostrava Pensioner sent racist threats to family of burn victim Natálka**  
**14.5.2010**

Police have charged the person they believe to be the author of the anonymous death threats sent to the family of burn victim Natálka, the little girl who suffered serious burns during last year's arson attack on the home of a Roma family in Vítkov. The suspect is an 81-year-old woman from the Litoměřice district. She has been charged with threatening violence against a group and individuals.

At the start of this year, Anna Siváková, Natálka's mother, found the letter in her mailbox. It contained various materials depicting the Siváková family members and Anna herself. "Abusive, threatening comments with a racial subtext were written on the pictures. Everything was reported to the police," said Darina Majková, spokesperson for the Moravian-Silesian Police.

The family, targeted for attack by right-wing extremists last April, was scared by the letter. "I still get goose bumps when I think of it. The envelope contained photographs of our entire family cut from the newspapers. Someone wrote over them with a ballpoint pen that we would be going to the gas chambers. The numbers on the photographs indicated the order. I was number 1, Natálka number 2," Siváková said last month.

Police officers from Opava district investigated the case and recently announced they knew the name of the sender. The crime was originally qualified as defamation, but during the course of the investigation, especially after interviewing the pensioner, the case was re-qualified as one of threatening violence against a group and individuals. The senior citizen's motivation is said to be general bitterness, not racial hatred.

Arsonists attacked the Roma family's home in April 2009. Investigators revealed that three Molotov cocktails were thrown into the house. Three people were injured during the subsequent blaze. The most serious injuries were suffered by little Natálka, who was not yet two years old. She suffered extensive second and third-degree burns over 80 % of her body. Václav Cojocar, Jaromír Lukeš, Ivo Müller and David Vaculík have been charged with carrying out the attack. All four defendants are promoters of the extreme right. Their trial began on Tuesday 11 May. They could face extraordinary sentencing or even life in prison for racially motivated attempted murder.

**Budišov nad Budišovkou Natálka celebrates her third birthday**  
**13.6.2010**

Natálka, the little girl who survived an arson attack by four neo-Nazis in Vítkov last year, celebrated her third birthday today. The Romea.cz news server and the ROMEA association join all those who are congratulating her today. We wish her much happiness and hope the state of her health improves.

"She was born exactly at 4 PM three years ago. This year she received more presents than she ever has before. She wanted a doll's house. We found a really big one - it was not cheap, but we bought it for her," her mother, Anna Siváková, told the Aha! news server.

"We want her to get well," said Natálka's sisters. Her father, Pavel Kudrik, said good health is what Natálka needs most of all right now. "She has many operations ahead and I just hope everything goes well. That's why we gave her so many dolls today, stuffed animals, sweets. We're not just celebrating her birthday, we are celebrating the fact that when she survived that attack, she was reborn to us."

## B. Acts against Romani women

Prague  
7.1.2010

### **Czech court awards two women compensation for illegal sterilizations**

Two women who are no longer able to bear children as a result of operations performed on them without their permission have been awarded hundreds of thousands of Czech crowns by the High Court in Prague. David Záhumenský, chair of the League of Human Rights, which is representing the patients, announced the news in a press release to Romea.cz today. Some activists say dozens of women, most of them Roma, have been sterilized without their consent in the Czech Republic, but precise statistics on the phenomenon have not been gathered.

Záhumenský said the court has awarded CZK 200 000 to a woman from North Bohemia. A previous decision by the regional court awarded her only one-fourth that amount.

Another woman was awarded CZK 150 000 in compensation for the removal of her ovaries without her consent. The High Court doubled the amount awarded by the lower court.

The League says medical professionals in both cases most probably did not intend the women harm. In the case of the sterilization, they believed they were protecting the woman from the risk associated with carrying another child to term, and in the case of the ovary removal, they believed they were reducing the woman's risk of cancer. However, instead of offering the women other possible solutions and allowing them to freely choose, the doctors decided in an authoritarian manner on the women's behalf. "Such an approach has nothing to do with modern medicine. Doctors must learn to respect patients' freedom of choice and their rights. If they not, then they should count on patients turning to the courts, which are slowly learning to award compensation for such harms in amounts that are not insignificant even for large hospitals," Zahumenský said.

The League of Human Rights informs patients of their rights through the web pages of a special project, "Fair Hospital". People can access the project's counseling service free of charge; the project strives to achieve out-of-court settlements of health care disputes.

The Czech Constitutional Court has repeatedly pointed out that the failure to award sufficient satisfaction for violations of bodily integrity is equivalent to denial of justice. Despite this, it is taking a very long time for the Czech courts to learn to award the kind of financial compensation that could at least somewhat ameliorate the harm caused by these violations of human dignity.

In the past, several women suing over illegally performed sterilizations have not succeeded. Last October the Constitutional Court rejected a complaint by Helena Ferenčíková, who was awarded an apology from the Vítkovice Hospital, but not the one million crowns compensation she was seeking, due to the expiration of the statute of limitations.

In 2007 the Regional Court in Ostrava awarded CZK 500 000 to Ms Iveta Červeňáková, also represented by the League. However, the High Court subsequently overturned that ruling due to expiration of the statute of limitations. The League believes the fair amount of financial satisfaction in cases of such serious violations of bodily integrity should be a minimum of half a million crowns.

In November 2009, the government of Czech PM Jan Fischer expressed regret over these illegal sterilizations, which have primarily concerned Romani women. Czech Human Rights and Minorities Minister Michael Kocáb says measures are forthcoming to prevent similar crimes. Health care facilities should be able to ensure that women undergoing sterilization have given genuinely informed consent. The Czech Health Ministry should include this question on the program of its Expert Forum for the Creation of Standards of Care.

Athens  
14.1.2010

### **Swedish Minister: Romani women are doubly discriminated**

The Second International Conference of European Romani Women took place in Athens earlier this week, at which Swedish Minister for Integration and Gender Equality Nyamko

Sabuni also spoke. Romea.cz publishes her speech below in full:

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

This year we celebrated that it was 20 years since the fall of the Berlin wall. The wall separated Europeans who lived with human rights and those without. Today the wall is gone, but many Europeans still live in fear, because their human rights are not protected.

In Europe 2009 we have witnessed repeated killings and firebombs against an oppressed minority. In August a Roma woman was brutally shot dead in her home in Hungary. Her teenage daughter was badly wounded. In February a Roma father and his son were found inside a burnt down house, shot and killed. The boy was five years old and had been shot 18 times.

These acts are almost too cruel to believe. But they happen again and again, despite all our conventions and declarations. Despite the United Nations and the European Union's treaties on human rights. We can no longer wait for implementation. Action speaks louder than words.

The violence does not happen in a vacuum. It happens because attitudes and misconceptions are spread and not countered.

We all know that the negative attitudes towards Roma are not only a concern for some countries - but for all of us. The EU agency for fundamental rights has concluded that the Roma are Europe's most discriminated minority. The social indicators on education, health, employment, housing and political participation for Roma serve as a call for action.

In all Member States far-right parties are gaining influence; either in parliament and governments or in the media debate. For them intolerance is a badge of honour. They promote the politics of fear. Their common idea is to portray immigrants and other minorities as a threat. We need to make our voices heard in order to make sure that these parties don't dominate the debate. This conference gives us a chance to do so.

The European Union must stand for more than economic cooperation; it should stand for values and ideas. The right to equal treatment and the right to live without fear of violence and discrimination must be protected by the governments. The Roma people's situation shows how much remains to be done.

Ladies and gentlemen, what should we discuss in order to improve the situation for Roma women?

First of all, we know that Roma women encounter a double challenge: On one hand discrimination for belonging to the Roma minority, and on the other hand discrimination as a woman.

All over Europe women face barriers to influence and power. Even in Sweden, which is viewed as the most equal country in the world, women are still the second sex. The lack of equality is seen in violence against women, lower participation in the labour market, and fewer positions of power in the business world. Roma women face all these challenges, in addition to the discrimination for belonging to the Roma minority.

As you know, the first conference for and with Roma women was held in Stockholm in 2007. One of the Roma women's goals was to make the conference an annual event hosted by the Council of Europe, together with a Member State.

Therefore, I am honored to stand here at the Second International Meeting of Roma Women. I convey my gratitude to Greece for hosting this second meeting here in Athens. I am also very pleased that Finland and Spain have announced that they will host the following third and fourth conferences.

Three challenges have been identified for our talks these two coming days: Roma women and media, harmful practices and entrepreneurship.

I would like to focus on the second challenge - changing harmful practices. I believe harmful practices and harmful traditions are the largest challenge for equality between men and women.

When I spoke at the Roma women's conference in Stockholm in 2007, I underlined the state's responsibility. Its responsibility to protect, preserve and develop minority cultures as part of the European cultural heritage. But let me be clear; the important work to protect and preserve minority cultures must go hand in hand with determined efforts to prevent

traditions that harm the individual.

It is time to agree upon and implement concrete actions that guarantee all women and girls their fundamental freedoms and rights. Even if this means going against traditional customs and practices.

One such custom is underage marriages. A consequence of premature marriages is that girls are denied access to education. Access and quality of education are crucial elements for the inclusion of Roma as equal members of society. Access to high quality education can help break the vicious circle of exclusion from the labour market, poverty, poor housing, poor health and segregation. Education empowers individuals.

That is why the state and the Roma community - side by side - must ensure that all girls and boys have both access to education and that they complete their studies.

The success of Roma children in school depends on the support of their parents. Parents have to take responsibility for keeping both their daughters and sons in school. We will not reach this goal unless the tradition with underage marriages ends. I especially encourage all mothers and women to work forcefully to put an end to these practices.

Special efforts are also needed to establish trust between the parents, schools and other authorities. One way to create confidence and trust between actors is by using the civil society.

We find several examples in history of the important role of civil society in spreading democracy and human rights.

One obvious example is the American civil rights movement. Martin Luther King and many more helped bring equal rights for African Americans. Another example is the important role grass roots movements played in making sure that women got the right to vote in, for example, Sweden.

It is equally important to include non-governmental organisations and civil society in discussions on how to implement Roma people's human rights. Therefore it is important to remember the added value that civil society can bring to discussions on minority policy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During the Swedish Presidency of the EU, which ended less than two weeks ago, the situation of the Roma was highlighted on a number of occasions:

At the meeting of the Informal Contact Group of International Organisations and Institutions dealing with Roma, Sinti and Traveller, organised together with the Council of Europe;

at the Second meeting of the European platform for Roma inclusion, organised together with the European Commission;

at the 3rd Equality Summit held in Stockholm; and

at the 2nd Fundamental Rights Conference organised in Stockholm by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU.

One conclusion from these conferences was that we need to promote cooperation. Cooperation can empower. We should consider involving new partners that we don't involve normally. New partners can provide fresh ideas and bring our message to new arenas.

At the Equality Summit an idea that came up from the Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Transgender movement, was to initiate cooperation between the LGBT-movement and the Roma movement. Today's conference gives opportunities to make new contacts and to find new partners for cooperation.

One important actor is of course the media. The media can bring attention to the Roma people' situation, as well as put it on the political agenda. Hopefully, media also checks that local and state governments implement and follow treaties and conventions.

The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health.

At the first conference of Romani women in Stockholm forced sterilisation of Romani women was discussed. The victims of sterilisation often feel shame. Since they are reluctant to talk about what has happened, they do not get the help and support they need. At the

conference the meaning was to give voice to these women.

In the 1990s Sweden spent several years coming to terms with the fact that women - many of them Romani - had been forcibly sterilised. A Commission was appointed to look into the responsibility of the politicians, authorities, researchers and medical professionals. Possible ways of giving economic compensation to the victims was also included. A bill was later presented to the Parliament.

I am glad that the Czech government recently expressed regret over the illegal sterilisations of women that have been performed in the country. Sweden is certainly willing to be of assistance in the onward process.

To conclude, an important reason for this gathering is to create an opportunity for Roma women to meet and exchange ideas. But equally important is to find ways for Roma women to look beyond the basic struggle for survival.

We all know that for many women in the world the daily struggle for personal survival excludes them from active participation. We can not achieve human rights when people's basic needs are not satisfied. This conference is part of the important process towards giving women and girls better opportunities to shape their existence and exercise power over their lives.

## 4. Public issues

Brussels  
17.1.2010

### MEPs investigating Šefčovič, some Roma standing up for him

The influential EPP faction at the European Parliament does not want Slovak Commissioner-designate Maroš Šefčovič to step down over alleged anti-Roma statements he has previously made, but does want him to explain his attitude further. The faction also wants to ask him to give more visibility to the problems of the Roma community and other minorities should he join the Commission. Hungarian MEP Livia Járóková, who identifies herself as a member of the Roma community, communicated the faction's stance to journalists in Brussels on Friday. Some Roma from Slovakia have come to Šefčovič's aid, with their organizations backing his candidacy on Friday as well.

"Šefčovič has always been very accommodating of the activities and requirements of Roma associations and has been prepared to advocate for Roma projects," the news server Sme quotes from a joint declaration made by four Roma organizations in Slovakia. Šefčovič's personal engagement is said to have decisively contributed to the adoption of a new strategy for improving the Roma minority's situation in Slovakia. Bratislava media quote the Roma declaration as saying that Šefčovič is also allegedly partly responsible for the fact that Slovakia and other Central European states have announced cross-border cooperation on improving the living conditions of the Roma and their social inclusion through the so-called Roma Decade.

Šefčovič's candidacy for Vice-Chair of the European Commission was allegedly in jeopardy after Hungarian MEP József Szájer published a demand for the Slovak candidate to explain a remark he is alleged to have made five years ago at a conference in Brussels. The remark was allegedly anti-Roma.

"His remark was deeply racist and was never retracted. However, we are not here to judge Šefčovič. This topic (the problems of the Roma community) is important to the EU as a whole. This is a strategic matter," Járóka said.

Šefčovič was working as the Slovak Ambassador to the EU at the time he is alleged to have made the remark and is said to have charged the Roma with abusing the Slovak social welfare system. The remark is quoted in the materials for a conference convened by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). "Similar statements about any other ethnic group in Europe would initiate the breakdown of diplomatic relations and most probably would lead to the ending of any other conference being convened on human rights. However, in this case, there was never any such reaction," the report says.

Šefčovič says he does not remember making the remarks, but has said that if he really did make comments in a way that might have caused injury to others, he apologizes. Of course, this does not mean his candidacy will make it through the EP without difficulty. The Hungarian MEPs' stances have now been taken up by the EPP faction, which has the most influence at the EP.

"If he can satisfactorily explain his remarks, and if he makes a good impression otherwise, it cannot be ruled out that he would become the Slovak Commissioner," Czech MEP Jan Březina (KDU-ČSL), who is also a member of the EPP faction, told ČTK and Slovak radio on Friday. It is clear that an explanation will not suffice for all of the faction's MEPs, however.

"In addition to his apology, we would like to go much further. We are interested in how he intends to handle the entire topic (of the problems of the Roma community) as Commissioner for Equal Opportunity," Járóka said, pointing out that Šefčovič would have equal opportunities in the EU on his agenda as a Vice-Chair of the European Commission.

Of course, diplomats and legislators from other factions are speculating that the incident is merely the EPP faction's revenge for the impeachment of two of their Commissioner-designates, Algridas Šemeta of Lithuania and Rumyana Zheleva of Bulgaria, by the socialist faction. The socialist faction is the second-largest at the EP.

Some MEPs are of the opinion that the entire conflict is merely an extension of Hungarian-Slovak disputes at the EP. "Injecting Hungarian-Slovak animosity into EU politics benefits no one," an unnamed MEP from the European Conservatives and

Reformists' faction told ČTK. The ECR faction includes the British Conservatives, the Czech ODS party, and representatives of the Polish Law and Justice party.

Březina, however, rejects such speculations. "I would really not like this to be raised to the level of Hungarian-Slovak relations, which are not the best. I do not see this as a specific attack by Hungarian MEPs on Slovakia. The Roma are all-around Europeans," he said.

**Prague**  
**19.1.2010**

### **Martin Barkóci's sentence suspended, case is being reopened!**

Today Czech Justice Minister Daniela Kovářová has suspended the sentence currently being served by former Roma police officer Martin Barkóci. His case will now be taken up by the Czech Supreme Court. The minister decided that the motion submitted to her by Czech Senator Jan Horník on 12.11.2009 was sufficient grounds for a complaint regarding legal violations to be filed on Barkóci's behalf.

"After reviewing the file I have made use of my jurisdiction and decided to file a legal complaint against the final judgment of the High Court in Prague dated 26. 8. 2009. In the complaint I have proposed overruling the High Court judgment and the judgment of the Regional Court in the section concerning Mr Barkóci. At the same time I have decided to suspend Mr Barkóci's prison sentence," Daniela Kovářová said. The relevant criminal file will be immediately sent to the Czech Supreme Court.

Horník and Karlovy Vary representative Jiří Kotek said previously that Barkóci's trial was unfair. In their view, the entire case was based on the testimony of one man, an employee of the Czech Police's Organized Crime Detection Unit (Útvar pro odhalování organizovaného zločinu - ÚOOZ). However, his testimony was said to have contradicted all the other testimonies provided.

Barkóci was charged with abusing his role as a police officer to cover up violence allegedly committed by two Roma against a non-Roma man who turned out to be an ÚOOZ informer. He has always claimed he is innocent. The Regional Court in Plzeň first sentenced him to four years in prison; the High Court reduced the sentence to three years and struck down the section of the lower court's verdict claiming Barkóci's actions were racially motivated.

In Karlovy Vary and Ostrov, where the former police officer is from, people signed petitions against his conviction. Students to whom Barkóci had lectured about fighting against bullying at schools also called for his release.

**Bratislava**  
**15.4.2010**

### **Slovak political parties allegedly buying votes from the Roma**

The Slovak Roma Union is alleging that some Slovak political parties have started buying votes from the Roma. Slovak Roma Union president František Tanko announced the news to the press today. Offers of between EUR 8 or 9 are being made to guarantee a vote on behalf of certain parties running in the June parliamentary elections. Suspicions of the illegal acquisition of Roma votes have arisen in the past during parliamentary and regional elections. Political scientists do not rule out the possibility that votes will be bought in the upcoming election.

Voters will decide among 18 political parties and movements to determine the composition of the 150-member National Assembly on 12 June. The only Roma party running is the left-wing Roma Coalition Party, which reportedly hopes to attract voters irrespective of their origin. An estimated 500 000 Roma live in Slovakia, some of them in settlements lacking electricity and running water.

"There are indications that some political parties are sending people to the Roma settlements to make contact with the Roma with the aim of buying their votes," Tanko said. Both parties currently in parliament and those not currently seated are said to have made offers. Tanko said he would not name any parties for the time being but will publicize specifics at the end of May with photographs and other evidence.

Tanko says the parties and movements have visited local Romani leaders in Rimavská Sobota, Čierna nad Tisou, Nitra and Kráľovský Chlmec. The Slovak Roma Union will be turning to the Interior Ministry to offer assistance in the form of dozens of volunteers to monitor the situation during the elections and report any vote buying.

Suspicious that Roma votes were being purchased surfaced during the first round of last year's regional elections, mainly in the Prešov region. To date no violations of the law have yet been proven.

Trmice  
5.5.2010

### **Locals don't want the DSSS in Trmice and are preparing a "surprise" for them**

Police officers and town halls across the Ústí nad Labem region are getting ready for the election campaign of the Workers' Social Justice Party (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti - DSSS) in the region. The party has planned several electoral rallies for Friday and Saturday in towns which feature socially excluded localities. Locals are preparing a "surprise" for the DSSS promoters but are not specifying details. Police representatives told the Czech Press Agency yesterday that patrols will be enhanced at all locations and additional forces will be called in if necessary.

The Trmice town hall has joined the efforts to prevent a conflict between local Roma and the DSSS. Roma in Trmice were under the impression that a right-wing extremist march was being planned and were said to be preparing defenses. Mayor Jana Oubrechtová said she met with representatives of the Roma community and did her best to explain to them that no march is planned.

In cooperation with the local Roma association Romano Jasnica and the "We Don't Want (Neo)Nazis in Ústí" Initiative, the town of Trmice has succeeded in calming the fears of the local Roma. The Initiative is also doing its best to convince non-residents not to travel to Trmice on Friday to see DSSS party chair Vandas speak. The Romano Jasnica association and the Initiative jointly designed a flyer on the issue which is being mailed to all the residents of Trmice.

"When we learned the Nazis were coming to Trmice, we wanted to do something, not just stick our head in the sand," Martin Cichý of Romano Jasnica told the news server Romea.cz. The association and the Initiative are planning activities for Friday 7 May. "Trmice was part of Ústí nad Labem until very recently, and for us they continue to be a part of the town. That means the Nazis' meeting will not go according to plan," Miroslav Brož, spokesperson for the Initiative, told Romea.cz.

Brož said all of the events organized by Romano Jasnica and the Initiative will be completely non-violent and will help to reduce the tensions created by the arrival of the (neo)Nazis in localities inhabited by Roma. "There is a large Roma community in Trmice, and the co-existence and relations between the Roma and the majority society are good. Relations here could serve as a good example for some other towns in Northern Bohemia," Brož said.

In Krupka, the next town on the DSSS tour after Trmice, tensions have existed for quite some time between right-wing extremists and the Roma. The Workers' Party (Dělnická strana - DS), the predecessor to the DSSS, has held events in Krupka before.

Last Sunday, the husband of the chair of the local DSSS cell in Krupka used a gas pistol in an incident which police are investigating as a misdemeanor. "For the time being we are investigating how the scuffle started, who was the victim and who was the assailant. It is possible that the case will be reclassified based on the results of the investigation," Teplice police spokesperson Ilona Novotná told the daily MF DNES.

Daniel Vítek, also a spokesperson for the Teplice police, told the Czech Press Agency today that police officers have no information for the time being about the threat of any clashes this weekend. However, they will be prepared to augment patrols in Krupka.

On Saturday, DSSS representatives will head to the towns of Litvínov and Most. Ludmila Světláková, spokesperson for the police in Most, said they have no information about any possible clashes on the weekend. She also said police are not taking any extraordinary

measures as they did for previous Workers' Party events, when they searched the vehicles of people traveling to the rallies. On 17 November 2008 police had to intervene against a march by right-wing extremists on the Janov housing estate in Litvínov that took place after a Workers' Party gathering there.

**Bratislava** **Embassies said to take an interest in anti-Roma election campaign in Slovakia**  
6.5.2010

The Roma Union civic association in Slovakia reports that the embassies of foreign governments are starting to take an interest in the controversial election campaign of the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana - SNS). Association head František Tanko made the claim to journalists today but did not name any specific countries, saying he had agreed not to. The Slovak Prosecutor General has also begun to investigate the party's billboard advertisements.

The controversial billboards have intensified what has so far been a rather boring competition between the political parties in the run-up to the June parliamentary elections. Other NGOs and political parties have also condemned the SNS billboards. SNS has already objected to charges that it is inciting racism.

"More than one embassy on Slovak territory has contacted us," Tanko declared, adding that the governments were seeking an explanation of the situation. He said organizations from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland had also expressed support for the Roma Union. The SNS, currently in the governing coalition, ordered the ad campaign to run nationwide. The billboard features the image of a tattooed Romani man with a bare chest and a massive gold chain around his neck. The photograph is accompanied by the slogan "So we don't feed those who don't want to work". In the past the party has attacked members of the Roma minority by claiming they abuse the social welfare system.

The Roma Union in Slovakia has condemned the SNS campaign and called on the other political parties to distance themselves from it. The Union is also demanding an apology from the nationalists and a declaration of what SNS intends to do for the Roma should they return to office.

The Prosecutor General started to take an interest in the party's controversial electoral campaign on Wednesday. "The Prosecutor General started taking action of its own accord on 5 May (Wednesday) and received two motions for it to take action today," Jana Tökölyová, spokesperson for the Prosecutor General, told the Czech Press Agency.

The billboard company euroAWK has committed to covering up the controversial ad campaign at its own expense. Peter Jančárik of the Seesame Agency told the Czech Press Agency that the company has already covered up the objectionable image on about 30 billboards. However, the posters might also be featured on the advertising spaces of other companies. The news server Pravda.sk reports that another four firms have been hired to post the image. Two different agencies allegedly ordered the billboards for the SNS.

The most recent public opinion polls show the SNS party's electoral preference ranking at around 5 %. The party must gain more than 5 % of the vote to enter parliament.

**Prague** **VV patrols are similar to the Protective Corps of the dissolved Workers' Party**  
6.5.2010

Radek John, the chair of the non-parliamentary Public Affairs Party (Věci veřejných - VV), does not have the right to sign contracts for the party or negotiate on its behalf. According to reporting in the daily Mladá fronta Dnes (MfD), only Executive Vice-Chair Jaroslav Škárka has that responsibility. The daily Hospodářské noviny (HN) reports that Škárka makes no secret of his provocative opinions, even though he rejects the "extremist" label. Experts consider the VV patrols to be similar to the Protective Corps of the recently dissolved Workers' Party.

The daily referred to Škárka's blog, which features a special column of texts on the topic of "Unadaptables", including articles with headlines such as "How to take a trip to Canada for

free" in response to reporting about Romani families who had returned from Canada after requesting visas there. The Green Party has already criticized Škárka's pieces, charging him with racism. "By no means is this an extremist blog. I do not foster a hostile attitude toward any group," Škárka said. He is the party's top candidate in the Plzeň region.

"Mr Škárka has chosen to place a critique of so-called 'socially inadaptable' citizens at the center of his electoral rhetoric, an eye-catching, rewarding topic which manages to curry favor with voters rather reliably, even though he is not an expert on the issue and does not provide any constructive or credible solutions," Radka Steklá, project coordinator for the ROMEA civic association, told news server Romea.cz. Steklá said the country has witnessed such developments before with politicians such as Čunek and Řápková: "It always turns out that such people not only do not solve these problems, they intensify them and create many more. We can only hope people in the Czech Republic will not permit the hidden danger of Škárka's rhetoric to become reality."

Škárka was involved with VV long before John joined the party. John explained his lack of signature rights to MfD by saying that when he decided to become party chair, he said he would never sign any papers because journalists had already been after him over papers he had signed in the past. Škárka said John has the party "firmly in hand through his authority" and has in fact signed some materials. Party chairs normally bear the responsibility of signing for their parties.

Public opinion polls show that VV has a chance of entering parliament after the upcoming elections. The party recently sent its patrols out into the streets of Prague, prompting the animosity of other parties. The Christian Democrats and Greens have called the patrols unacceptable and reminiscent of Nazi and Communist practices.

Video clips of the patrols at work were posted on the VV web pages for several days. In the clips, a group of young people wearing reflective vests speaks with people whom they label "socially inadaptable" in a park in Prague's fifth district. The patrol warns their interlocutors that the space around them should be left clean, that they shouldn't smell of alcohol, and that they should stay away from the children's playground. The patrols also call over police officers when they find injection needles and other paraphernalia.

"VV places an emphasis on order and security, which is classic for this kind of nationalist politics. Their patrols may be different aesthetically from the Workers' Party, but the content is the same," Miroslav Mareš, an expert from Masaryk University in Brno, told the daily HN.

Radka Steklá of ROMEA agrees: "For voters who honor the principles of democracy, humanity and morality, the opinions of Mr Škárka and these pseudo-saviors, the self-appointed VV patrols should be a sign warning that this party has more than one side to it, and some of those sides are not unlike the opinions of the dissolved Workers' Party."

## Prague 10.5.2010 **Czech government appoints new members to its "Roma" council**

The Czech Government has approved a proposal to appoint the members of its new Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs. The following people have been appointed to represent civil society on the Council:

Bc. Cyril Koky, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, Central Bohemian Region

Bc. Lýdia Poláčková, Roma Advisor, City of Ostrava

Jiřina Bradová, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, Zlín Region

Ing. Karel Holomek, chair, the Society of Roma in Moravia

Mgr. David Beňák, head of the Prague 14 Department of Social Affairs and Health

Lenka Kurová of the Začít spolu ("Starting Together") civic association

PhDr. Renata Köttnerová, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, Olomouc Region

Ing. Jozef Holek, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, Liberec Region

David Dudáš, Metropolitan Council of the Orthodox Church for Roma Pastoral Affairs

Roman Slivka, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, South Bohemian Region

Štefan Gabčo, People in Need

Marta Valková, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, Pardubice Region  
Lenka Balogová, Regional Coordinator for Roma Affairs, Ústí nad Labem Region  
Božena Fílová, Coordinator for Roma Affairs, City of Prague  
Mgr. Jožka Baláž, Roma Advisor to the Municipality of Bruntál  
Mgr. Jarmila Balážová, ROMEA civic association

The government approved the Council's new statutes at the end of March, including many fundamental changes to the government's view of Roma integration. The change is based on the conviction that the successful integration of Roma into society is essential from the point of view of the continuing decline of the country's socially excluded Roma communities and the disappointing position they have occupied in Czech society for quite some time. This minority is still not accepted by the majority society and faces a great deal of discrimination.

Part of the change in the general societal view of this topic is reflected in the members appointed to the Council, which is now a ministerial-level body. The Czech Prime Minister will chair the Council, which includes government ministers and deputy ministers. The change is meant to significantly impact the implementation of the government's Concept for Roma Integration 2010-2013 and to emphasize the integration of Roma overall as part of government policy at the highest level. The name of the council has also been changed to the "Council for Roma Minority Affairs".

Since 1997, the council has been the only inter-ministerial body with the aim of unifying the activities of government ministries vis-à-vis Roma minority integration. The council initiates systemic changes to remove obstacles preventing the Roma minority from living with full dignity in the Czech Republic. The council also comments on draft legislation and strategic and conceptual documents.

#### **Ředhošť 9.6.2010** Extremist DSSS exploiting tension in Ředhošť' to send "citizen patrols" there

Yesterday the Workers' Social Justice Party (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti - DSSS) sent "citizen patrols" into the streets for the first time since the court-ordered dissolution of its predecessor, the Workers' Party (Dělnická strana - DS). Such patrols were previously referred to as the DS "Protection Corps". Seven DSSS members visited the town of Ředhošť, allegedly at the request of local residents who are at their wits' end regarding several local Romani families. The conflict resulted in a large brawl at the end of May.

Police monitored the DSSS visit in Ředhošť. No incidents were reported. Roma living in the community allegedly either left town or stayed indoors. DSSS members spoke with several dozen local non-Romani residents and walked through the town. Non-Romani locals told the Czech Press Agency that they "just want calm" and that members of the Romani families are constantly "provoking" them.

During the night of 28 May, several local residents brawled in the pub. The DSSS claims the incident had a racial subtext. According to Alena Romová, spokesperson for the Litoměřice Police Department, officers are currently investigating the incident only as the crime of rioting, not as a racially-motivated event.

The Supreme Administrative Court dissolved the Workers' Party (DS) on 17 February. Most of its members have now joined the DSSS. The court found the DS ideology, program and symbols included chauvinistic and xenophobic elements, a racist subtext, and an ideological connection to the National Socialism of Adolf Hitler. The court said the party had instigated violence and was attempting to radically change the democratic order. The verdict also said the party was artificially promoting the sense that foreigners and immigrants pose a threat to society. The Constitutional Court rejected the DS party's complaint against its dissolution last week.

In its decision to dissolve the DS, the Supreme Administrative Court evaluated the party's "Protection Corps" and found the party was trying to use the corps to play a role that actually belongs to local government, municipal police, or state police. The court also found the symbolism of the "Corps" evoked the symbolism used by Hitler's armed corps. DS chair Tomáš Vandas halted the activity of the "Corps", but in response to similar patrols organized by the Public Affairs party (Věci veřejných - VV) he announced he would be

renewing their activity. VV patrols were active in Prague in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. The party halted them in response to criticism.

**Bratislava 14.6.2010 Slovak elections: Nationalism stopped, Fico wins, opposition rules, Roma bribed**

According to unofficial results released by the Slovak Statistical Bureau yesterday, Saturday's parliamentary elections in Slovakia were won by Slovak PM Robert Fico's left-wing Social Democrats (Směr-sociální demokracie - Směr-SD), which received almost 35 % of the vote. However, at 79 seats the opposition now dominates the 150-member parliament. Six parties won parliamentary seats. Former PM Vladimír Mečiar's populist People's Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Lidová strana-Hnutí za demokratické Slovensko - LS-HZDS), which was in the previous government, did not achieve the 5 % minimum needed to stay. The opposition Hungarian Coalition Party (Strana maďarské koalície - SMK) also failed to pass the 5 % threshold.

Fico considers the results an "enormous success". "No one can take this success away from us," he said at a live press conference yesterday on the TA3 television channel. Fico told journalists he was ready for Slovak President Ivan Gašparovič to entrust him with forming a new government. He also said he would respect a right-wing coalition government should one be formed, but warned his party would then play the role of a "fierce opposition".

Iveta Radičová, the head of the strongest opposition party, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská unie-Demokratická strana - SDKU-DS) has said she will not cooperate with Fico. On Saturday night she said she would meet Sunday with opposition parties Freedom and Solidarity (Svoboda a Solidarita - SaS), the Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické Hnutie - KDH) and the Hungarian minority party Bridge (Most-Híd) to discuss a coalition government. The Social Democrats won 62 parliamentary seats, 12 more than four years ago.

SDKU-DS came in second place with 15.42 % of the vote, winning 28 seats. Newcomer SaS fought its way through to third place with 12.14 % of the vote. Observers compared its results to those of the Public Affairs party (Věci veřejné- VV) in the Czech Republic. KDH won 8.52 % of the vote.

Bridge, another new party founded by the former chair of the Hungarian Coalition Party, Béla Bugár, won 8.12 % of the vote. The anti-Roma Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana - SNS), which was in the last government, barely made it into parliament with 5.07 %, a significant loss of voter support.

Saturday's election saw 18 political parties and movements vying for votes, 10 of which fell quite short of the 5 % limit. The Democratic Left Party (Strana demokratickej ľavice - SDL) received 2.41 % of the vote. The extremist People's Party Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko), which cooperates with the Czech extremist Workers' Social Justice Party (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti) only won 1.33 % of the vote (33 000 votes total).

The Roma Coalition Party (Strana romské koalície - SRK) received only 0.27 % of returns, or not quite 7 000 votes. The party was founded in 2009 by a group of Romani intellectuals around Gejza Adam, who headed the list of candidates.

Suspensions that Roma votes were being purchased surfaced several times during the elections, for example in the Kecerovce district, where there was high voter turnout among the poorest Roma in Kostolán. Voters confirmed their votes had been purchased, stating they had promised to vote for #8, Mečiar's populist LS-HZDS. "I was supposed to put just #8 in the envelope and to get rid of the other lists. They are giving me three euro," and older man said. Almost none of the voters from the Kostolán settlement threw away their unused party lists. "When we asked one man what he needed them for, he said kindling. We offered him old newspapers in exchange, but he refused," news server Korzár.sk quoted a member of the electoral commission as saying. Romani activists condemned the vote-buying and intend to hold a press conference this week to publicize the names of the

electoral commission as saying. Romani activists condemned the vote-buying and intend to hold a press conference this week to publicize the names of the parties who did the most business in Roma votes.

SDKU-DS, SaS, KDH and Bridge said yesterday they would be creating a governing coalition and would refuse to cooperate with the Social Democrats. Fico nevertheless announced he wanted to try to form a two-party government. However, the SNS and Social Democrats combined would only have a total of 71 seats.

Of the roughly 4 million registered voters, 58.83 % made use of the opportunity to vote. Voter turnout was higher than in 2006, when it reached an historic low point of 54.67 %.

The Slovak result is similar to the situation in the Czech Republic. The Social Democrats also won the recent parliamentary elections there, but the government will be formed by its rivals, who won the majority of parliamentary seats.

**Bratislava**  
**19.6.2010**

### **Roma votes allegedly bought in Slovakia for between three and 10 euro**

Slovak political parties are said to have bought the votes of Romani voters in the recent parliamentary elections for anywhere between three and 10 euro. František Tanko, chair of the Roma Union civic association in Slovakia, made the allegations at a press conference in Bratislava but did not present any evidence. The Roma Coalition Party, which did not succeed during the 12 June elections, also brought up the controversial practice recently.

Tanko said Roma votes had been "bought on a large scale", especially in central and eastern Slovakia, specifically in the towns of Revúca, Kecerovce, Banská Bystrica, Košice, Spišská Nová Ves and Prešov. Slovakia has a Roma community of about half a million. Tanko claims several thousand Roma were involved.

Roma are said to have received instructions at the entrance to the polling place as to which party's number to put in the ballot envelope. They then had to deliver their unused party lists to the buyer to prove they had obeyed the instructions. Tanko described the process: "The voter drops the right number in and then goes to the person who is supposed to pay, he checks that no other party list was submitted, pays up, and the voter leaves." The amount of compensation was said to depend on the party's ambitions.

Even though Tanko had originally planned to provide photographs and sound recordings at the press conference, in the end he presented no evidence. He also would not say which political parties had bought the Roma votes. "They include parties that never visited these Roma," he said.

Tanko said he had decided not to present the evidence because he did not want to endanger the volunteers who had helped gather information about the practices. "I don't want anything to happen to anyone in this country... I would be putting many people in danger," he said.

The buying of Roma votes has been raised as an issue in previous parliamentary, regional and local elections. After last year's elections of regional leaders (district administrators), the police investigated several reports of fraud in Levoča and in Stará Ľubovňa. The charges have yet to be proven.

## 5. Romani asylum seekers in Canada

Ottawa  
4.7.2010

### **Canada changing its asylum system, Czech Republic may have visas lifted**

Canada is changing and partially tightening its asylum system. The Canadian Parliament passed asylum policy reform last week. According to the web page of the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, the Governor-General has agreed to the reforms. Most of the changes will start to apply over the next year and a half. The new, stricter asylum legislation may somewhat open the door for the lifting of the Canadian visa requirement for citizens of the Czech Republic and other states.

Canada unilaterally reinstated visas for Czech citizens last July due to the rising number of asylum seekers from the Czech Republic. Both the Czech Republic and the EU criticized the move. Under pressure from Brussels and Prague, the Canadians then also started working on changes to their asylum system. The system itself was considered to a significant extent one of the reasons that so many asylum seekers from the Czech Republic, mostly from the Roma community, headed overseas.

The Canadian asylum system was generally considered easy to abuse. People who made baseless asylum requests had the opportunity to stay on in Canada for years afterward as part of a protracted repatriation process. In mid-2009, Canadian politicians repeatedly acknowledged the system was under great strain and overloaded. This allegedly made it impossible to efficiently address requests filed by those who had truly been exposed to persecution in their homelands. Canadian leaders also said it would not be possible to lift the visas without changes to the asylum system.

The newly reformed legislation makes it possible for the authorities to quickly process requests which evidently are made by claimants who truly need asylum and are not abusing the system. Those whose requests are denied will have to leave Canadian territory quickly, evidently within a few months.

"Canada has one of the most generous refugee systems in the world. These reforms will lead to more rapid protection of victims of torture and persecution and to the more rapid expulsion of those denied asylum, including those who are doing their best to abuse Canada's generosity," said Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney.

Failed asylum seekers allegedly will still be able to appeal their rejections. However, their requests will be given priority and will be decided on much more quickly. Requests coming from citizens of particular countries will be decided on more quickly as well.

According to the minister, this new tool will make it easier to address "the waves of false asylum claims from safe, democratic countries." Over the next five years, the measures will allegedly save the Canadians up to two billion dollars.

The money saved by the reformed system will supposedly go towards genuine refugees who truly need help in Canada. Refugees from Iraq, dissidents from Iran, or people persecuted in their homelands because of their sexual orientation will allegedly receive more help.

Of the EU Member States, Canada has instituted visas for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens as well and is allegedly considering instituting them for Hungarian citizens. Ottawa has also introduced visas for non-European states, Mexico among them.