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VIOLENCE AGAINST THE ROMA MINORITY  
IN HUNGARY AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

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**Introduction**

Post-communist central and east European (CEE) countries are home to some of the world's largest Roma communities, with 75 percent out of the estimated eight million Roma living in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The end of World War II, during which the Roma were victims of Nazi genocide, did not bring about a cessation of hundreds of years of resentment against them and persecution in Europe. Discrimination persisted even during the communist era, despite the ideology of equality. Nevertheless, during this period the Roma were protected from extremist manifestations. Once communism collapsed, anti-Roma feelings resurfaced, and the Roma became the main target of the new extreme right parties that began to proliferate in the early 1990s, challenging the newly democratic governments. In the resulting atmosphere of extreme hatred, the Roma became the victims of violent attacks perpetrated mainly by groups of neo-Nazis and skinheads, sometimes with the assistance of the local population.<sup>3</sup>

Following the collapse of state-mandated employment for the Roma under communism, their economic situation deteriorated. Illiteracy, lack of professional skills or training, and blatant discrimination have increased the barriers to their integration, leading to their disproportionately higher rate of unemployment compared to other ethnic groups and the lowest standard of living, despite some progress made by a small segment of the Roma population and the establishment of numerous Roma organizations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/18158>.

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Vago, "The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, The Plight of a Stateless Minority," <http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/asw2000-1/vago.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Motivated by their ambition to join the EU, the new CEE democracies began operating programs for integrating the Roma. While the various countries and governments have differed in their efforts and determination to implement such programs, in most states, according to EU monitoring bodies, the socio-economic and civic status of the Roma remains unchanged. The slow pace of the reforms has been influenced by the considerable social and economic gap between the Roma and the majority population, the reluctance of state or local officials to comply with EU or government directives regarding such projects, and resentment of the local population toward the Roma.<sup>5</sup>

This paper discusses the recent extraordinary wave of racially motivated violence against the Roma, focusing on Hungary and the Czech Republic, where particularly in the last two years, racial agitation has become a key social and political factor, with far reaching repercussions for the life of Roma communities. The situation could deteriorate even further in light of the delicate and complex relations already existent between the Roma and the surrounding society.

### **Violent Attacks against Roma**

In the early morning of April 19, 2009, Molotov cocktails were thrown into the house of a Roma family, including several children, on the edge of the town of Vitkov, in Moravia, eastern Czech Republic. Three people were injured, including a two-year-old girl who suffered severe burns.

About 250,000 Roma live in the country out of a total population of 10.2 million. The attack in Vitkov was one of a number perpetrated in the past year against the Roma minority in the Czech Republic. They appear to have been committed with the intention of intimidating the Roma population into leaving their towns or villages. While most cases remained unsolved, in the Vitkov incident, as well as in a few others, police investigators uncovered the activity of small groups of neo-Nazis or supporters of extreme right parties and groups, such as the Autonomous Nationalists, organized specifically to hurt the Roma in their communities.<sup>6</sup>

Hungary is home to some 600,000 Roma out of a total population of 10.5 million. Here, too, since November 2008 a number of Roma have been murdered in several localities. Police investigators regard the wave of killings of peaceful, vulnerable Roma residents as hate crimes. As in the Czech Republic, families and individuals living on the edge of villages or on the poorer outskirts of towns were preferred targets. Using guns and Molotov cocktails, the perpetrators

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<sup>5</sup> "Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area,"  
[http://www.osce.org/documents/hcnm/2000/03/241\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/hcnm/2000/03/241_en.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> "Czech Police May Arrest Extremist Leaders over Vitkov Arson – Page,"  
[http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/news/zpravyczech-police-may-arrest-extremist-leaders-over-vitkov-arson-page/393172&id\\_seznam](http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/news/zpravyczech-police-may-arrest-extremist-leaders-over-vitkov-arson-page/393172&id_seznam).

murdered six people and injured many others. Thus, for example, in the last week of April 2009, a Roma man was shot in the chest while he was leaving his home for work in a pharmaceutical factory in Tiszalök, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county, in eastern Hungary. The perpetrators, described by the Hungarian police as killing squads, make no distinction between adults and children. Two months prior to that attack, a farm worker and his 5-year-old son in Tatárszentgyörgy, 50 kilometers from Budapest, were shot dead as they ran from their burning home, which had been firebombed. Other members of the family were also seriously injured. In August, a Roma woman living in one of the last houses of a street lying at the edge of the village of Kisleta, eastern Hungary, was murdered and her daughter was seriously hurt in another night attack.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Impact of Anti-Roma Agitation**

The growing use of terror by individuals and groups in the Czech Republic and Hungary, demonstrating radicalization of the struggle of extremist elements against the Roma population, calls for an explanation. The escalation appears to have been influenced by two developments:

- Growing public support for extreme right parties and an upsurge in activities of neo-Nazi groups;
- A severe economic crisis, particularly in Hungary, which resulted in increased unemployment and in government decisions to cut pensions and public sector wages.

Increased support for extreme right groups and growing anti-Roma agitation were evident even prior to the onset of the global financial crisis in fall 2008. The latter, however, and particularly unemployment, was used by the extreme right to intensify anti-Roma incitement. In Hungary extremist racial activity was boosted by the rise of the nationalist, antisemitic Jobbik party (Movement for a Better Hungary), which won 3 out of 22 Hungarian seats in the June 2009 elections to the European Parliament. Its rise reflects growing mistrust of the democratic system, following political upheaval during the fall of 2006 that was unprecedented in the short history of post-communist Hungary.<sup>8</sup> Another outcome of the crisis was the formation of the paramilitary Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard), which is associated with Jobbik. Despite a court ruling

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<sup>7</sup> "Spate of Anti-Roma Attacks Claims Sixth Life," <http://www.budapesttimes.hu/content/view/full/12786/27/>; "Roma woman murdered in Kisléta, Hungary," <http://www.romarights.net/content/roma-woman-murdered-kisl%C3%A9ta-hungary>.

<sup>8</sup> Haim Fireberg, "The Extreme right in the European Parliamentary Elections: A Culture of Hate," <http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/articles/eu-parliament.pdf>; Raphael Vago, "Hungary the Case of a Post-Communist Society in Crisis," <http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/articles/hungary.pdf>; Adam LeBor, "Hungary Police Tackle Violence against Roma," <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5349016.ece>.

outlawing the Garda, which was found guilty of creating an anti-Roma atmosphere after they had marched through villages intimidating Roma residents, members of the organization, have continued to be active.<sup>9</sup>

In order to protect Roma inhabitants in the Czech Republic, thousands of policemen blocked off Roma-populated neighborhoods using tanks, vans and mounted officers.<sup>10</sup> Here, too, an increase in the activities of the extreme right was noted a few years before the onset of the global economic crisis. In the Euro-Parliamentary election the extreme right Workers Party, which focused its campaign on the “Roma issue,” recorded a significant achievement. By crossing the one percent threshold, the Workers Party qualified for state funds based on the number of votes it received.<sup>11</sup>

Using old stereotypes augmented by criminal biology theories, the extreme right in both countries depicts all Roma as criminals. It posits that the Roma were “born criminals,” that they are a foreign parasitic ethnic group, and that they alone are responsible for the increase in the crime rate. “Will you stand by while the government throws more aid at Gypsy criminals?” was the cry on one of the flyers during a Jobbik rally in Budapest prior to the EU elections. The organizers called on the people of Budapest to protest against “the brutal robberies and murders committed by Roma criminals.” Similarly the extreme right Czech National Party called for a “final solution” to the “Gypsy issue” during its television campaign for the elections.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Quest for Social Integration amid a Hostile Environment**

Anti-Roma violence in Hungary and the Czech Republic was heavily criticized in various EU committees and embarrassed the diplomats of both countries, where leading politicians and the mainstream media denounced the attacks, blaming extremist elements for causing untold damage to the reputation of their countries. Members of neo-Nazi groups were arrested in both states. While it may be assumed that the majority of the population in these states oppose violence against innocent people,<sup>13</sup> various opinion polls, as well as the behavior of non-Roma residents during several violent incidents, indicate that the extremists were encouraged by the general atmosphere of hatred toward the Roma. This was evident during the riots in Litvínov, 80 km north of Prague, where 600 neo-Nazis marched on a housing estate inhabited by Roma families in

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Hodgson, “The Garda Is Dead, Long Live the Garda,” <http://www.budapesttimes.hu/content/view/12522/27/>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.romarights.net/content/march-through-czech-town-puts-roma-community-fear>.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Konviser, <http://www.globalpost.com/notebook/europe/090607/right-wins-election-left-close-behind>.

<sup>12</sup> “Czechs Shocked by Anti-Roma TV Ad,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8061273.stm>.

<sup>13</sup> Police raid right-wing extremists in at least three cities, <http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/22853>.

November 2008. There, as well as in other towns with large Roma “ghettos,” the intention of neo-Nazi groups, such as the National Resistance and the Autonomous Nationalists, is to incite the Roma community to violence. During the clashes that erupted in Litvínov, local residents openly sympathized with the neo-Nazis, urging the police to let them attack their Roma neighbors; some even joined the assailants, who were eventually stopped by the police.<sup>14</sup>

Far right parties and neo-Nazi groups seem to believe that through the Roma issue they can extend their appeal to a larger segment of the population, which does not necessarily identify with other parts of their ideology. Indeed, opinion polls have suggested that most Hungarians and Czechs continue to hold negative images and stereotypes of the Roma. For example, almost 60 percent of respondents in a 2009 Hungarian opinion poll said they believed that “crime is in the blood of Roma,” while an estimated two-thirds of Czechs view coexistence with Roma as problematic.<sup>15</sup>

Violence against the Roma is an extreme manifestation of continuing conflicts between the Roma and the surrounding society and reflects ongoing difficulties in implementing various ideas and plans for Roma integration. Improving the socio-economic conditions of the Roma, who lived for centuries on the margins of European society as unequal citizens, became an objective of EU bodies, as well as of US and human rights organizations, in the early 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the official policy of Roma integration adopted in post-communist countries, including Hungary and the Czech Republic, was influenced considerably by the approach of accession to the EU and the scrutiny of European bodies. New members of the EU were required, *inter alia*, to guarantee human rights and respect for minorities and, especially to “further work on the integration of the Roma.”<sup>17</sup> However, once these countries achieved full membership, EU bodies lost much of their power to enforce more radical changes and to demand more protection for the Roma. Government agencies, Roma civil rights organizations and EU bodies disagree as to whether the current governments in Hungary and the Czech Republic are determined and able to

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<sup>14</sup> Rob Cameron, "Analysts Warn of 'Ethnic War' as Local People Cheer Neo-Nazis in Litvínov," <http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/22138>.

<sup>15</sup> Zoltán Dujisin, "RIGHTS: Roma Seek to Flee Czech Republic," <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46680>; "Crisis and Change in the Czech Republic," <http://ils.unc.edu/~hallw/RUES/ethandnat.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Eva Sobotka, "Human Rights and Roma Policy Formation in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland," in *The Roma: A Minority in Europe*, ed. R. Stauber and R. Vago (Budapest/New York, 2007), p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> "EU Inconsistencies regarding Human Rights Treatment: Can the EU Require Czech Action as a Criterion for Accession?" [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/law/lwsch/journals/bciclr/23\\_1/02\\_TXT.htm](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/law/lwsch/journals/bciclr/23_1/02_TXT.htm).

adopt powerful anti-discriminatory policies and more effective measures to improve their daily life.<sup>18</sup>

The negative reaction of large parts of the population, particularly in the countryside, to integration plans, and particularly to welfare benefits and state subsidies in fields such as education and housing, appears unequivocal and demonstrates the continuing rejection of the Roma by the majority, with many believing that the Roma are unable to adapt to social norms.<sup>19</sup> Residents often complain that Roma are noisy, listen to loud music, and are “messy.” Poor Roma families have been relocated from their homes in the center of major towns, frequently by the municipalities or property developers as part of gentrification.<sup>20</sup> This has led to the creation or the expansion of existing, socially excluded Roma communities angering non-Roma residents. According to the March 2009 findings of a comprehensive study on Roma housing problems in the Czech Republic, “Romany and other socially excluded people usually meet a far more hostile and racial environment in the places of their new residence.”<sup>21</sup>

Such public sentiment has been used by the extreme right which calls for expulsion of the Roma. In Hungary, in particular, the attitude of the police to crimes committed against the Roma and Jews was questioned. High ranking police officers admitted that at least in one case local officers were reluctant to investigate Roma murders.<sup>22</sup> In addition, one of the police trade unions, Tettekész, announced that it had made a formal alliance with Jobbik. Judit Szima, general secretary of Tettekész, was fourth on the list of Jobbik candidates in the Euro-Parliamentary elections. She is also the editor of the union’s newsletter, whose content is blatantly antisemitic. In March 2009 it linked the “Roma problem” to a “Jewish conspiracy,” claiming that “we should expect a Hungarian-Gypsy civil war fomented by Jews as they rub their hands together with pleasure.” While this union represents only 10 percent of the total number of police officers in

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<sup>18</sup> “NGOs Call for Action in the Face of Persisting Discrimination of Romany Children in Schools,” <http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/22792>; “Report Suggests Czech Roma Suffer More Discrimination than

Any Other Minority in EU,” <http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/22948>; Roma Have Not Noticed the Improvement to Their Situation Reported by the Council of Europe, [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_1322](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1322).

<sup>19</sup> “Opinion Poll Suggests Most Czechs Agree with Mr. Cunek’s Views on Romanies,” <http://romove.radio.cz/en/clanek/21387>; “Hungary: Treatment of Roma; State Protection Efforts (Sept. 2009),” <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,HUN,4562d8b62,4b20f043c,0.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See Dujisin, “RIGHTS.”

<sup>21</sup> See Dujisin, “RIGHTS”; “Czech Towns Unable to Solve Romany Housing Problem-Survey,” [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_1129](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_1129); RAXEN National Focal Point, Housing Conditions of Roma and Travellers, March 2009, [http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/RAXEN-Roma%20Housing-CzechRepublic\\_en.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/RAXEN-Roma%20Housing-CzechRepublic_en.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> “‘Death Brigade’ Killing Roma in Hungary, Police,” <http://www.bosnewslife.com/6382-death-brigade-killing-roma-in-hungary-police>.

Hungary, the views of its spokespersons raise concern about the prevalence of extreme right tendencies among law enforcement officers.

### **The Roma Continue to Wander**

As early as the 1990s, west European states expressed fear of the effect on their internal security of vast Romany migration from the post-communist countries. The summer 1992 terror attack on Roma immigrants from Romania in Rostock, Germany, serves to indicate the potential impact of Roma migration on extreme right groups. This was one of the main reasons for the diplomatic pressure on the new democracies in the CEE to improve the social and economic conditions of Roma communities.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, there has been a resurgence of Roma emigration. It is hard to tell how many of them were driven by the growing hate propaganda and violence. Roma organizations have called on those of their people who feel unsafe to leave the country. It might be assumed, however, that for many Roma the main reason for emigration is their poor living standard, which has deteriorated even further in the past year with little hope of improvement. As in the 1990s, extreme violence against the Roma has erupted in the destinations of the immigrants. Over the past two years, acts of intolerance have been rampant particularly in Italy, including mob attacks on Romany camps and forced evictions.<sup>24</sup> Because of its liberal immigration policy Canada has been a preferred destination of Roma emigrants since the end of the 1990s. Violence against them in Central Europe has enabled Roma to seek asylum as potential victims of racial persecution. The growing immigration has resulted in political tensions between Canada and the countries of origin, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Anti-Roma violence is an extreme manifestation of the obstacles that continue to exist against their inclusion in the new and old democracies. While this paper relates mainly to the wave of violence in Hungary and the Czech Republic, attacks against Roma have increased in other countries such as Italy, Germany and UK, too. This phenomenon seems to reflect a deep-seated animosity toward the Roma, severe social-economic dislocation, strong opposition to further Roma immigration and support for their exclusion. As noted, anti-Roma hate propaganda, as well

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<sup>23</sup> Sobotka, "Human Rights and Roma Policy Formation," p. 140.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Bonino Jan Marinus Wiersma and Andre Wilkens, "Europe Must End Violence against the Roma," <http://www.radicalparty.org/it/node/5074933>.

<sup>25</sup> Gwendolyn Albert, "Canadian Calamity," <http://www.praguepost.com/opinion/1231-canadian-calamity.html>; Peter O'Neil, "Canada Urges Hungary to Stem Flood of Asylum-Seekers," <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Canada+urges+Hungary+stem+flood+asylum+seekers/2078045/story.html>.

as intimidation and vigilante violence by paramilitary organizations, such as the Garda in Hungary and the Czech National Party, began prior to the outbreak of the 2008 economic crisis. The Roma did not benefit from the years of economic prosperity which only deepened the gap between most of the Roma and the surrounding society and accentuated their marginalization.<sup>26</sup>

While mistrust and hostility toward the Roma are centuries old, the economic crisis was exploited by anti-Roma agitators to re-emphasize existing negative stereotypes and thereby to attack the Roma, including the murder of peaceful citizens.

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<sup>26</sup> Andrzej Mirga, "The Extreme Right and Roma and Sinti in Europe: A New Phase in the Use of Hate Speech and Violence?" <http://www.errc.org/db/04/10/m00000410.pdf>.