

Migration and the Roma Minority in the Czech Republic

The economic crisis has worsened the situation of foreign workers and Roma people in the Czech Republic. They suffer from unemployment, substandard work conditions, institutionalised discrimination and racial hatred.

Saša Uhlová
ADEPTs
Pavel Porízek
SOZE

The Czech Republic is facing numerous problems, as are many countries, as a result of the global economic crisis. Such problems include increasing unemployment, a decrease in industrial production, and the degradation of health and educational systems, to name a few. A new issue that has come to light due to the global economic crisis is the case of migrant workers. These people, who helped build the Czech economy by living and working abroad in precarious conditions, have been the first victims of the crisis. In comparison (but no less important), the problems faced by the Roma people have been known for decades. Increasing violence against the Roma and the growth of fascist and neo-Nazi groups have become a pressing problem, and one that divides Czech society.

Situation of the Roma minority¹

While the economic situation has deteriorated for the majority of people in the Czech Republic, socially excluded groups, including the elderly, single mothers and the Roma community, have borne the brunt of the economic crisis. Not all Roma people, who according to reliable estimates represent a minority of almost 250,000 in the Czech Republic, are affected by social exclusion, but the social and economic downturn has affected most of them. Data from 2006 reveals that 80,000 Roma live in as many as 300 socially excluded locations, and in 80 per cent of these locations the Roma constitute the majority (Gabal Analysis & Consulting, 2006). Reasons for the current situation include institutionalised discrimination, recent events and the Government's lack of interest in solving the problem.

In January 2008, the Agency for Social Integration in Roma Locations officially commenced operations. Its aim is to improve the living conditions of socially excluded Roma, abolish the 'ghettos', or at least substantially improving the quality of life in these locations, work towards the integration of Roma people into society, and assist a significant number of Roma to gain access to education, work opportunities and better housing.

The non-governmental sector hoped that the Agency represented a change in the State's attitude

towards social exclusion. However, the Agency commenced operations several months after the official date, and only in twelve locations. In the document defining the Agency's remit, the terms 'Roma' and 'socially excluded person' are used interchangeably. Thus, it would seem that the Roma are by definition socially excluded people, and vice versa. Surprisingly, the document does not clearly state how racist prejudice plays a role in the situation of the Roma people.

The Agency's main task is to make money available to pay for services (such as health care and education), and, as such, the Agency had been preparing to cooperate with interested parties on various projects in the target locations. However, as the Agency is a government body, it is bound by internal regulations, which prevented it from following its original plan of funding projects implemented by other organisation. Instead, the Agency has been relegated to an advice-giving role on solving the problems in the given locations. Thus, initial hopes for the Agency and for a change in the State's attitude towards the Roma people have not been fulfilled.

The deteriorating economic situation in socially excluded locations has not received the necessary attention of the Government. Socially excluded Roma people have tried to improve their economic situation themselves by borrowing money from informal creditors and loan companies, as many do not qualify for loans from commercial banks. Informal creditors (i.e., individuals) lend money at high interest rates and without any written contract, often reclaiming their money using violent means. Loan companies lend money at lower interest rates than these individuals, but bind their clients to contracts containing onerous conditions. Debtors are often confronted with unexpected and unpleasant surprises after entering into these contracts, creating a dependency on the creditor. If the debtor is late with just one payment, the total outstanding amount can increase to many times the original amount by the end of the year. The indebtedness often ends with a distraint being ordered upon the debtors' income, dispossessing them of the means to support themselves.

Inhabitants of some socially excluded locations suffer not only from serious economic problems, but also from racial hatred. The racist marches in Litvinov in 2008, during which Roma from the Janov suburb faced the growing manifestations of racism from both neo-Nazi groups and other inhabitants of the neighbourhood, were an alarming example. The current racial crisis is the result of long-ignored

problems in socially excluded locations, and, with the deteriorating economic situation, it is likely that extremism will appear more often. Another case that received extensive media coverage was the arson attack on a family in Vítkov in March 2009. Unknown assailants attacked the house of a Roma family at night, throwing incendiary bottles through the windows. The ensuing fire caused severe injuries to both parents and especially to their two-year-old daughter who suffered burns to 80 per cent of her body. The case is not being investigated as an act of racism, although it is the fourth arson attack on Roma in the area in the last seven months. In connection with this case, the Minister of the Interior, I. Langer, said it is necessary for the Roma to realise "it is not normal not to work and not to send their children to school, such behaviour will provide an impetus for racially motivated attacks".²

Another example of the Roma people's human rights being violated is segregation in the education system. Special schools for the Roma were replaced by vocational schools, but in many places these still act as instruments of ethnic segregation. But segregation happens, even if Roma parents succeed in enrolling their children in a 'normal' elementary school. A good example is the town of Valašské Meziří, where 20 children were registered for school, 10 of them Roma. From September, the school proposes to divide the children into two ethnic classes. The headmaster explains that parents of non-Roma children will move their children to other schools if they are in the same class as Roma children.

Throughout the year, an increasing number of Roma have applied for asylum in Canada, which the Czech Government puts down to economic reasons. There are many reasons why the Roma do not feel welcome in the Czech Republic, and the problems the Roma face are multi-layered. Fear of the increasing fascist tendencies in Czech society is a big issue, as is the oppressive economic situation. To reduce the whole complex of problems that drive the Roma to emigrate to simply 'economic problems' is a sign of insufficient understanding of the matter.

Situation of immigrant workers³

In 2008, the number of foreigners in the Czech Republic grew significantly beyond figures for 2007. By the end of the year, there were 438,301 foreigners, according to statistics from the Directorate of Immigration Police, an increase of 43,144 on figures for

² Czech TV programme CT24, 22:30, 20.4.2009

³ This section was written by Pavel Porízek.

¹ This section was written by Saša Uhlová.

the previous year and the second largest increase in the past 10 years. Of those, 172,927 were foreign nationals with permanent residence and 265,374 were foreign nationals with a long-term residence permit exceeding 90 days (CSU, 2009a). In total, 361,709 were employed as at 31 December 2008 – 284,551 by local companies (CSU, 2009b). Of the foreigners employed by local companies, 141,101 were nationals of EU, European Economic Area (EEA) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries and 143,450 nationals of third countries.⁴ Employed foreigners were concentrated in the capital (31.7%) and in the Central Bohemia region (15.0%) (CSU 2009c). In 2008, 3,829 persons were detected residing illegally in the Czech Republic, following a decreasing trend (Czech Helsinki Committee, 2008, p.97).

There has been a visible change in the pattern of foreign nationals with a decrease in the number of foreign workers from Bulgaria and the Ukraine, contrasted by an increase in foreigners from Vietnam and Mongolia. There is a growing concentration of foreign workers in the Czech Republic, especially in the 'industrial zones' – not just from third countries, but also EU nationals. Government papers⁵ admit that neither local authorities, nor the general public are entirely prepared for such a surge of foreigners. The municipalities are having trouble absorbing the newcomers and there is an apparent tension between foreign workers and local residents.

The global economic crisis started to affect foreign workers in the Czech Republic during 2008, with the situation peaking in the first months of 2009 (by February 20,000 work permits were cancelled and a total of 68,000 are expected to be cancelled by the middle of the year). The Ministry of the Interior reacted by establishing a project of 'voluntary return'. The goal is to offer help to foreigners from third countries residing legally in the Czech Republic, who have lost their jobs due to the present economic crisis and want to return to their home country, but cannot afford it. The Czech Republic offers not only to arrange their flight, pay for their ticket and provide assistance before and during the return journey, but also contributes EUR 500 to cover the costs associated with leaving the Czech Republic (Ministry of the Interior, 2009). By the end of April 2009, more than 1,500 immigrants had taken up the offer.

During 2008, the exploitation of foreign workers by job agencies persisted, exacerbated by the global economic crisis. These workers, viewed as cheap labour, are willing to work hard in 'substandard'

conditions or conditions clearly unequal to those of Czech employees in the same company. They are dependent on the employer to an almost slave-like degree.⁶ This dependency is caused by a number of factors, be it the need to repay a loan taken to 'buy' the chance to work in the Czech job market, or the fear of losing employment (Czech Helsinki Committee, 2008, p.100).

Under the current public health insurance system, certain groups of foreigners are unjustly disadvantaged. Since December 2007, it is no longer possible for a relative of an EU or Czech citizen to request permanent residence immediately after gaining the status of citizen's relative. Instead, unless employed by a local company, they must live on a temporary stay permit for two years and have no access to the public health insurance system during that time. This limits them to commercial health insurance with all its disadvantages (narrower range of health care, no legal claim to it and, often, inadequate health insurance, especially for those with an illness or aged over 70). As for foreigners from third countries who are not related to EU citizens, by being excluded from the public health insurance system, neither the duration of the foreigner's stay in the Czech Republic or the amount of their (or their relatives') contribution to resources used to cover the costs of health care are taken into account.⁷

In the course of 2008, the Ministry of the Interior, together with other authorities, prepared to implement the 'Green Card' project, which is designed to solve the shortcomings of the current system of foreign worker recruitment, and to make the whole system more flexible (especially towards highly qualified workers) and easily adaptable to the immediate needs of employers.⁸ However, the Ministry of the Interior limited the list of countries whose citizens are entitled to request a Green Card, excluding Vietnamese, Mongolian, Russian and Moldovan nationals. A Green Card is issued by the Ministry of the Interior for a period of up to three years and combines a work permit with a long-term residence permit. The status of a foreigner with a

Green Card is undoubtedly stronger and more advantageous than that of a foreigner with a long-term visa/work permit, but so far uptake has been low.⁹

In 2008, the Ombudsman highlighted a number of shortcomings in visa practice, as well as in the monitoring of the Office of the Immigration Police Inspectorate (Konevova Street, Prague). Based on many stories in the media, the Ombudsman concluded in mid-2008 that the situation at the Office had returned after some improvement to its alarming state of affairs (i.e., illicit trading of queue numbers, running out of all queue numbers immediately after opening, etc.), which the Ombudsman perceived to be evidence of serious misconduct, especially as these practices create conditions conducive to non-standard procedures and corruption. In the last quarter of 2008, conditions were significantly improved due to the adoption of a number of measures (personnel reinforcements of policemen and civilian employees, separate entrances for third country foreigners and EU citizens and their relatives, the setting up of another detached office in Prague, which reduced the number of applicants at Konevova Street) (Ombudsman, 2008, pp. 76-77).

The situation of foreigners in the Czech Republic needs to be observed very carefully, because this group has been significantly affected by the economic crisis, which deepened their social exclusion, especially among foreigners in industrial agglomerations. The evident stagnation of the number of foreigners can be considered temporary. On the contrary, the number of foreigners is expected to rise, and integration will be (and in fact is) a great challenge for the Czech Republic. ■

References

- Czech Helsinki Committee (2008). *Zpráva o stavu lidských práv v České republice (Czech report on Human Rights)*. Prague: Czech Helsinki Committee. Available from: <www.helcom.cz/search.php?rsvelikost=sab&rstext=all-ph-prS-all&rstema=96>.
- CSU (Czech Statistical Office) (2009a). Available from: <www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci.nsf/kapitola/ciz_pocet_cizincu>.
- CSU (Czech Statistical Office) (2009b). Available from: <www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci.nsf/kapitola/ciz_zamestnanost>.
- CSU (Czech Statistical Office) (2009c). Available from: <www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci.nsf/o/ciz_zamestnanost-popis_aktualniho_vyvoje>.
- Gabal Analysis & Consulting (2006). Prague: GA&C. Available from: <www.mpsv.cz/files/clanky/3043/Analiza_romskych_lokalit.pdf>.
- Klepalova, A. (2009). *Government's failure*. Available from: <www.euro.cz/detail.jsp?id=15066>
- Ministry of the Interior of Czech Republic (2009). Available from: <www.mvcr.cz/clanek/migrace-novy-clanek-890951.aspx?q=Y2hudW09NQ%3d%3d>.
- Ombudsman (2008). *Activities in 2008*. Available from: <www.ochrance.cz/documents/doc123972209.pdf>.

4 The number of these foreigners according to nationality: Ukrainian 81,072; Vietnamese 16,254; Mongolian 12,990. For details see <www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci.nsf/datove_udaje/ciz_zamestnanost>.

5 Report on "Conception of integration of foreigners in 2008", realisation and suggestion of another process, IV. Process of realisation of "Conception of integration of strangers in 2009", Interior Ministry document authorised by government decree on 16 February 2009 n. 183.

6 Many stories illustrating horrible and alarming work and living conditions of foreign agency employees are available from: <www.migraceonline.cz/czechmade>.

7 The Ombudsman referred to this problem (Press release Nerovné postavení cizinců v R v postupu k veřejnému zdravotnímu pojištění from 11 March 2009), <www.ochrance.cz/dokumenty/dokument.php?back=/cinnost/index.php&doc=1454>, also referred to in Report of human rights' state in the Czech Republic 2008, Chapter 9.3: Problems in health insurance of some categories of foreigners from third countries, who permanently stay in the Czech Republic, page 98 and also in the Report of the Czech Helsinki Committee about human rights' state in 2008, from 4 May 2009, part on Foreigners' situation.

8 The project has been authorised by government decree n. 1174 from 22 October 2007 about condition simplifications for employment of qualified foreign workers. For details see <www.mvcr.cz/clanek/migrace-novy-clanek-890951.aspx?q=Y2hudW09NQ%3d%3d>.

9 There is no interest in Green Cards: so far only one foreigner has received one at EURO weekly's server (Klepalova, 2009).