

*Vincent Danihel*

## The Roma in Slovakia - Past, Present and Future

The acceleration of globalization in our world has also made certain communities more dynamic. As a result they have been increasingly forced to deal with the effects of this trend on their own development. This makes it imperative for citizens, social groups, states and nations to devise their own strategy above and beyond "normal" political, economic and social problems and - most important - to react and take action within the framework of these developments.

This is a comprehensive worldwide problem that characterizes the transition of humanity to the third millennium. Like the development of human society thus far, typical signs of increasing entropy and a high level of disorder in the system will doubtless accompany this process as well. All societies, who would like to deal successfully with realities, should take these facts into account.

It is a particularly delicate problem for communities, who have not attained certain existential conditions that others possess. The Kurds and the Roma, who currently do not have their own territory, are an example of this. Will they be in existence in the near future and under what conditions? Will their status as nationalities become stronger? Will they melt together with other nations to become a global society without maintaining their identity? Or will their identity as a nation become stronger?

Up until the fundamental changes occurring in 1989, the history of the Roma in the area that is now the Slovak Republic was for decades characterized by continual fluctuations in the political stance taken towards them. These shifts in attitude ranged from open hostility to decisions being made for them, which was more a humiliation than a relief. To be able to describe the current life of the Roma community and explain the complications involved in solving their problems, first the developments of the last eighty years will be outlined summarily.

### *The First Czechoslovak Republic and the Second World War*

In 1927 the first Czechoslovak Republic<sup>1</sup> passed Law No. 117/27 Sb. "On nomadic gypsies". This law was modelled on its French and Bavarian precursors and was regarded at that time as one of the most stringent in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> The first Czechoslovak Republic came into being in 1918. It fell apart 21 years later through the proclamation of the Slovak state.

"Gypsies moving from place to place and other work-shy vagabonds"<sup>2</sup> were under the jurisdiction of this law. The people subject to it were required to be registered and instead of normal identity cards, they were issued "gypsy legitimacy cards", which every Roma over 14 was required to carry with him or her at all times. The law allowed the state administration to institute a broad range of repressive measures and bans against Roma communities (e.g. they could take children under 18 away from their parents and place them in special institutions. In general, Roma families were considered incapable of bringing up their own children between the ages of six and eight because allegedly these children needed a strict institutional regime...).<sup>3</sup> Due to this, the law was in direct conflict with the constitutional guarantee of equality for all citizens in the first Republic.

It was characteristic of this epoch that old Roma villages and neighbourhoods began to grow and new ones emerged in which hundreds of Roma and more were forced to live together in very confined spaces. Their life was characterized by their isolation from the rest of the environment and society as well as from economic and social life. Illiterate and undernourished children grew up in unhygienic circumstances.

The period of the Second World War is the most tragic chapter in Roma history. Racist ideology during fascism placed special emphasis on the Roma, along with Jews, as being a "physically, psychologically and morally degenerate race".<sup>4</sup>

The constitutional law on citizenship passed in 1939 stripped those Roma, who had no permanent place of residence and no profession or no permanent job, of their citizenship. Yet only citizens had full public and political rights. Citizenship was also rescinded, especially from Jews and half Jews.<sup>5</sup>

The Holocaust did not hit the Roma in Slovakia as horrendously as it did in Bohemia where practically the whole Czech Roma population was exterminated by the Nazi regime (this tragedy is multiplied by the fact that the Czech authorities collaborated with the Nazis). Nevertheless even today, the Slovak Roma remember this period in great detail. Most Roma men worked as forced labourers in so-called labour brigades that were created to teach discipline to the Roma, "who did not submit to any rules". Many Roma were banned from their flats and houses. The Slovak fascists and the German Nazis murdered dozens of Roma in pogroms in the villages. Roma who lived among the non-Roma population were often forced to leave their homes and move to special isolated Roma settlements outside the cities. A direct effect of this policy was the emergence of isolated Roma ghettos. Even today many

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2 P. Lhotka, *Stručný přehled dějin Romů v českých zemích do roku 1945*, in: *Rómové národ bez budoucnosti?*, Brno 1999, p. 11 (author's translation).

3 Cf. V. Gecelovský, *Právne normy týkajúce sa Rómov a ich aplikácia v Gemeri (1918-38)*, in: *Neznámi Rómovia*, p. 82.

4 Quoted from H.S. Chamberlain, *Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts [Foundations of the Nineteenth Century]*, Munich 1940 (author's translation).

5 Cf. Anna Jurová, *Vývoj rómskej problematiky na Slovensku po roku 1945*, Bratislava 1993, p. 14.

of these ghettos are still in existence. Roma were only allowed to go into the city on certain days and were denied access to restaurants, theatres, parks and public transport. After the occupation of Slovakia by the German armed forces in 1944 many Roma were murdered and several Roma villages were eliminated.

According to estimates, around 300,000 European Roma were killed during the Second World War.<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Development of the Assimilation Policy of the Totalitarian State*

According to the first population survey after the war in 1947, over a hundred thousand Roma lived on Czechoslovak territory with 17,000 residing in Bohemia (15,000 of these were moved there from Slovakia) and 84,000 making their homes in Slovakia.<sup>7</sup>

The Czechoslovak state took a different stance towards the Roma than that of the Slovak state during the war or than the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. At the same time however, due to a refinement in bureaucratic mechanisms, intrusions in the lives of the Roma reached a climax. The new authoritarian measures included programmes for forced resettlement of the Roma with the goal of "civilizing" them. The first Communist government in Czechoslovakia did not recognize the Roma as an ethnic group, but viewed them as a backward social class, which had to be civilized.

After the events of February 1948,<sup>8</sup> the problem of the Roma minority continued to be seen from an ideological perspective. The living standard in real terms achieved by most Roma was in contradiction with the goal proclaimed by the Communists to develop socialism. Thus, the Roma problem was transformed into a means of political manipulation: It was meant to solve itself in the course of industrialization and the construction of a socialist order. Based exclusively on the effects of this political order, the Roma were meant to be compensated for the injustice they had suffered in the past and to be raised to a higher level according to the concepts and demands of Communist ideology.

Thus in the ensuing period the Roma were denied their ethnic identity and were subject to a policy of social assimilation. The problem of describing the Roma, which arose precisely due to the fact that they had been stripped of their ethnic identity, was solved by the introduction of the term "persons of gypsy origin, gypsies".<sup>9</sup>

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6 Cf. Arne B. Mann, *Rómsky dejepis*, in: *Rómové, národ bez budoucnosti?*, cited above (Note 2), p. 7.

7 Cf. Anna Jurová, *Rómska problematika 1945-1967, Dokumenty I. část*, Prague 1996, p. 10.

8 In February 1948, the Communist Party took power in Czechoslovakia.

9 Jurová, *Rómska problematika 1945-1967*, cited above (Note 7), p. 13 (author's translation).

At the beginning of the period during which the Roma were forcefully assimilated into society, practiced until 1970, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had already passed a resolution on 8 April 1958 "On the work conducted within the gypsy population". With this resolution the highest party organ were able to justify the measures they took at that time to solve the problem. Furthermore, they defined the Roma as a socially and culturally backward population group, who differed from other populations due to certain characteristic features in their way of life.

Nomadic life was again banned through Law No. 74 in 1958 "On the long-term settlement of nomadic persons", whose precursor was the ban on vagabonds instituted in 1956 in the USSR for similar reasons.<sup>10</sup> Due to its repressive effects, this law can be compared with Law No. 117/1927 Sb. "On nomadic gypsies". However it must be noted that paradoxically this law created the prerequisites for the Roma to gradually put down roots and stabilize their communities in one place. This is exactly what the Roma in Western European countries are demanding today. They in turn have been confronted with discriminating measures, which make it impossible for them to gain the right to a domicile or to establish their own business and/or secure citizenship.<sup>11</sup>

Through this single repressive measure against a part of the Roma population, nomadic life in Czechoslovakia was *de facto* abolished until 1959. This was achieved by confiscating horses and wagons of non-settled and half-nomadic people when they went to register with the authorities.

All these concepts ended in failure. Up until 1965 only 45 of the worst (out of over a thousand) Roma settlements had been disbanded in Slovakia. The average number of people living in one hut even increased from 6.1 in 1958 to 7.4 in 1965. The number of Roma holding a job remained low (57 per cent) and illiteracy only decreased minimally.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically: Seven years after the law forcing nomadic people to settle had been adopted, the government passed a resolution, which was intended to scatter and systematically deport the Roma population to other sections of the Republic.

The scattering concept was the start of a new step in forced assimilation. It allowed the use of mechanical procedures and made the manipulation of the Roma possible, which essentially was in violation of fundamental human and civil rights. The discrimination against the Roma was concealed by the generous funds made available to implement this concept. In 1966 the government allocated 75 million crowns from their budget reserves for this purpose.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16.

11 Cf. Jurová, *Vývoj rómskej problematiky na Slovensku po roku 1945*, cited above (Note 5), p. 59.

12 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 75.

13 Cf. Anna Jurová, *Riešenie rómskej problematiky na Slovensku po druhej svetovej vojne*, p. 97.

After the scattering process and deportation, assimilation was doomed to failure. The hypotheses made about this process had not embraced the most fundamental features of the "Roma question": their specific identity, the strong cohesion of this ethnic group and their clearly dissimilar cultural characteristics. Moreover no one gave much thought to the fact that this was primarily an inter-ethnic issue where the coexistence of two different cultures had to be dealt with and that only on a secondary level was this a social problem. The introduction of this policy caused the coexistence between the majority and the minority to deteriorate considerably.

Since the beginning of the sixties the state had been responsible for providing the Roma with housing. However they never pursued a conceptual plan or a consistent policy on this matter. Frequently the most acute cases were simply solved *ad hoc* and with time the total situation worsened. As a result of assignment policies or opportunities to acquire an older flat, the Roma people were concentrated in historical city centres, which then became increasingly slummy. After several years of searching for a solution to the problem of the Roma being concentrated in certain cities, the idea of establishing special new housing settlements was conceived. The result was the emergence of totally dilapidated satellite cities like Lunik IX in Kosice.<sup>14</sup> In this manner inter-ethnic distance and the prejudices linked to it grew and even the policies of positive social discrimination could not stop these developments.

Because of this approach to solving the Roma question, the Roma could not actively pursue cultural and societal integration through their own initiatives. On the contrary they remained a passive object under the protective hand of the socialist state.

On the one hand, the totalitarian regime made several partial achievements, but on the other, through the implementation of its concept, a dogmatic determination to deny Roma identity became evident. This lack of respect for Roma cultural distinctions naturally had immeasurable consequences.

#### *After the Fall of the One-Dimensional Society*

After the fundamental changes in 1989 the Roma were given status as an ethnic group; thus they were given a right to protection and specifically also to international protection.

During the census in 1991, for the first time since the Second World War, the Roma were able to declare their nationality as Roma and their native language as Romani. Since its foundation on 1 January 1993, the Slovak Republic has committed itself to all the most significant international political and legal documents on maintaining and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the rights of national minorities. The independent

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14 Cf. Jurová, *Vývoj rómskej problematiky na Slovensku po roku 1945*, cited above (Note 5), p. 102.

Slovak Republic has since 1993 also participated actively in the preparation of relevant norms within the framework of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and other international organizations and institutions. The government of the Slovak Republic has organized over ten visits by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) to Slovakia. In 1998 because of an initiative of the government of the Slovak Republic, consultations took place with experts of the Council of Europe, the European Union and the OSCE with respect to the evaluation of the existing legislation in the Slovak Republic regarding the use of the languages of national minorities. The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoep, took part in a meeting of experts to attempt to solve the problem of the Roma minority, which was held in March 1999 in the Slovak city of Čilistovo. As a result of his visit to Slovakia, the HCNM made some recommendations based on his observations. These were related to improvements in legislation for the implementation of international commitments by the Slovak Republic associated with minorities as well as improvements in relations between the government and minority organizations, subsidizing the culture of national minorities and guaranteeing education and instruction of minority languages.

In the present laws of the Slovak Republic or any place else in the world, there is no legal definition of the term "national minority". Moreover there is no formal procedure towards the official recognition of national minorities. The rights of national minorities are derived from the fundamental individual rights of persons belonging to national minorities as they are embodied in the constitution of the Slovak Republic, other relevant national laws and international legal norms in existence. Persons belonging to national minorities have the right to learn the state language, establish and maintain educational and cultural institutions, obtain information in their native language, use their native language in dealing with the authorities, as well as participate in the solution to issues of national and ethnic minorities (Art. 34 and 35 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic). International organizations like the Council of Europe have expressed no criticism of the legal regulations for the status of national minorities in Slovakia. On the contrary, in 1993 Recommendation No. 1201 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was aimed merely at complementing existing regulations and not making new changes. According to the last census in 1991 (the next will take place in 2001) a total of eleven national minorities live in the Slovak Republic. 80,627 citizens confessed they were part of the Roma ethnic group, which is 1.5 per cent of the total population. However, according to estimates by experts, 480,000 to 520,000 Roma live in Slovakia. That means that in the Slovak Republic, the Roma have a higher percentage of the total population than they do any other place else in the world (eight to nine per cent of the population).<sup>15</sup> The fact

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15 Cf. M. Vašečka, *Rómovia*, in: *Slovensko 1998-1999 Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, Bratislava 1999, p. 758.

that during the census only about a fifth of all Roma admitted to being of Roma nationality can be explained by their bad experiences in the past, when their registration with the authorities was followed by sanctions. Furthermore some Roma do not completely understand the term nationality and identify it with citizenship. Moreover others do not want to be viewed as Roma and simply stated another nationality. Another important point here is the position of the Roma in society and the degree of acceptance they are given by the majority of the population.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Activities of the Government after the 1998 Elections*

With the assumption of office by the new Slovak government after the 1998 parliamentary elections there was some progress on certain problems, which hitherto had not been solved or received little attention. This occurred through the direct and extensive participation of representatives of national minorities in state leadership in the highest-level administrative positions, through the creation of the office of a Deputy Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic for Human Rights, National Minorities and Regional Development as well as due to the transformed attitude of the new directors in the relevant ministries. This was true in particular for improving national legislation so that it was in complete harmony with the full range of international commitments made by the Slovak Republic, the fulfilment of the justified demands of each national minority predominantly in the areas of culture, the school system, and the opportunity to co-operate in the affairs that relate to them and - not least - the creation of conditions for the complete integration and participation of all citizens in public life.

The new democratic government of the Slovak Republic declared on 3 November 1998, just after they had formed their cabinet and before the publication of their governmental programme that one of their priority objectives was "(...) the re-establishment of a tolerant atmosphere, of mutual understanding and of coexistence between all citizens belonging to the Slovak Republic (...) The government of the Slovak Republic would like to create an environment and conditions for all its citizens in which they feel secure and in which they find no reason to leave their country. In this context the government of the Slovak Republic confirms their determination to take concrete measures towards the solution to the complex problem of their Roma fellow citizens in all areas of societal, economic and social life. In this regard they are prepared to conduct an open and objective dialogue with representatives of the Roma community."<sup>17</sup>

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16 Cf. K. Kalibová, Romové z pohledu statistiky a demografie, in: Romové v České republice, Prague 1999, p. 94.

17 Government Declaration, in: [www.government.gov.sk](http://www.government.gov.sk) (author's translation).

In February 1999 the government appointed Vincent Danihel as the Government Commissioner for Romani Issues, approved the statute regulating the activities of the Commissioner and in addition made funds available for the expansion of his office. The adverse social situation of a large number of the Roma minority, the existing problems in the relationship between the majority and the minority as well as the openly declared readiness and the endeavours of the government to find the quickest most objective solution to the problem, set in motion an initiative in April 1999, which led to the presentation of a strategy paper for discussion in the cabinet. Roma and non-Roma associations took part in the preparation of this paper, titled "Strategy of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Solution of the Problems of the Roma Community and Measures towards its Realization in a First Stage". This paper was developed in the secretariat of the Government Commissioner with special emphasis placed on co-operation with Roma associations and important public figures from the Roma ranks. The results of the round-table discussions with representatives of embassies of EU member countries and of the four Višegrád states, Roma representatives, Roma experts, non-governmental organizations and representatives of district offices also became a part of this strategy. The consultations on strategy were also conducted with OSCE experts. The programme of the government of the Slovak Republic is oriented towards a long-term systematic approach to the solution of minority problems. It includes measures for the Roma minority in the areas of education, the development of the Romani language and culture, fighting unemployment, improving the housing situation as well as social and health services.

Thus the goal of the government of the Slovak Republic is not the assimilation of the Roma population, as was the case of state powers during the last decades, but the integration of minorities. We understand this process as leading to the gradually functioning coexistence between the majority and the minority as well as the cultural exchange between majority and minority setting in motion a multicultural society. Only an emancipated minority can integrate into society, otherwise it would not culminate in real integration, but lead to their being absorbed by the majority. The road to emancipation with the goal of becoming a multicultural society is not common in Western Europe. It is more often followed in Central and Eastern Europe (including Austria and Germany) and partially in Great Britain. Most of the states in Western Europe understand the term integration to mean assimilation or they do not even recognize the existence of ethnic minorities in the sense that we do, as the French example shows. Barely two million Roma live in Western Europe (including Greece and Turkey), including 600,000 in Spain, whereas an estimated five to six million live in post-Communist countries. In contrast to Central and Eastern Europe, there are no settled Roma who have not been assimilated; the nomadic Roma are placed in the category of so-called travellers. Because in EU states the situation of minorities differs so widely, the



legal regulation of these circumstances is left to each individual state. The fact that the European Commission does not have the resolve to interfere with these legal regulations has led to only insufficient and fragmentary assistance to the Roma minorities in the countries seeking admission to the EU, or any other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. In face of the traditionally neglected social situation of the Roma community, the assistance from the PHARE programme is not very effective.

In view of the different ways that ethnic minorities are regarded in the individual EU states, where even the existence of minorities is sometimes doubted, it has been suggested lately in international forums that the European Commission and the EU states should guarantee that their associated countries and the candidates for admission in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Balkans receive joint assistance co-ordinated by the European Commission towards improving the social situation of the Roma. An improvement in the Roma social situation could be achieved with relatively little conflict through EU assistance. The governments of these countries, their populations and the Roma themselves would, in my opinion, welcome taking such steps, which would lead to the majority and the minority moving closer together. These steps would also contribute to the comprehensive affirmation of the ethnic dimension in the development of the Roma minority. They would lead to the promotion and the maintenance of the Romani language, the Roma culture and its educational system, they would preserve Roma traditions, support the establishment of Roma associations and organizations as well as ensure their participation in the administration of public affairs through democratically elected minority bodies. It can be expected that as a result of this kind of a social upturn and the development of an emancipated Roma minority, Roma emigration in EU countries would decrease. Despite the special characteristics of the Roma problem in each individual European country, and despite the differing approaches to their solution, it is evident that the issues surrounding coexistence between the majority population and the Roma have common points in each country. Therefore it is imperative that a joint concept be developed, which would initiate a fundamental stance on this coexistence leading to an improvement in the current situation.

The so-called Roma problem is - not only in the Slovak Republic - primarily a problem of coexistence between the non-Roma majority and the Roma minority. In the last decades (chiefly during the Communist dictatorship), the assimilation policies of the state deepened the mistrust of both groups; the distance between the majority and the Roma grew. The principle of assimilation suppresses identity, culture, traditions and customs, that is, all forms of group difference from the majority. Assimilation has been tested frequently and history has proved its failure. Integration necessitates partnership, i.e. a changed attitude on both sides. During the construction of the one-dimensional, totalitarian society all diversity was suppressed. The result was a predominantly intolerant society, which has not been able to accept human be-

ings of a different culture, with other opinions and attitudes. The adverse social and economic situation of the Roma - and also of the non-Roma - demands economic and social reforms and commitments by foreign investors. Changing the attitude of the majority towards minorities - in this instance towards the Roma - will require time, patience and in certain cases even courage. And perhaps even an honest and critical examination of one's own history.