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No! to Racism – the Struggle of Czech Activists against Nazi Propaganda

PRAGUE, Czech Republic—Since the independence, Czechs are facing with rising of anti Roma movement, that resulted with murder of 5 Roma people, and violence against this minority on a daily basis. During past years, more than hundreds of anti Roma protests occurred in few towns in Czech Republic. Neo Nazi movement is getting more and more followers as time passes. Except organizing protests, last year Neo Nazis used another tactic for spreading their idea—addressing high school students via sharing pamphlets with racist content.

“It is very dangerous that Nazis started focusing on sharing their propaganda among very young boys and girls, which are 13 or 14 years old. It’s very easy to manipulate with them and put some false ideas in their minds. They mostly approach to them by Facebook, asking if they want to become part of their group. They even go to schools and try to talk to them” says human right activist Lukas Houdek, who works on promoting Roma rights, for several years. He started doing the project “Theory of adaptive”, which included photos of both Roma people and Czech Neo Nazis. Soon he was asked by some local schools to present the project to the students, in order to teach them about consequences of this movement on society. “When I started communicating with the students directly, I saw that lot of them had some kind of personal experience with them which was shocking. Most of them were contacted by Nazi activists” says Lukas.

Soon he started project about educating high school students, with Open Society foundation. So far he has visited two schools in Děčín (northern part of the Czech Republic) and Stříbro (Western Bohemia). “Until now we realized discussion and meeting with ex leader of Neo Nazi scene in Germany. He talked with students and taught them how to recognize Nazi propaganda. It’s really important when someone from ‘inside’ share his experiences. It’s an effective way of explaining why something is not good, especially for young kids.”

The Roma minority in the Czech Republic number between [250,000 to 300,000](#) (out of a total population of just over ten million). While the overall unemployment rate for the Czech Republic at the beginning of the millennium hovered around eight or nine percent, Roma experienced unemployment rates estimated at 45 percent for the same time period. Although high, it’s one of the lowest Roma unemployment rates in the region. Hungary’s 56 percent and Slovakia’s is 70 percent. “Roma students are mostly going in ‘practical’ schools, not in regular schools like Czech kids. Therefore are less qualified to the labor market. That’s why the unemployment rate is so high among this minority” says Czech activist Lucie Bittalova.

Anti Roma protests in Czech Republic are starting in the 90s. Ethnic tensions started in times of economic stagnation in Czech Republic. “Before the independence, during communism everybody had job, it

was kind of state policy. But after 1989, we adopted capitalism as economic system, and things changed. Some people lost their job, mostly Roma people. So everybody in our country blames on them for the economy issues that we have, since they mostly live depended from the social welfare system” says Petra from AntiFa, a non formal organization which exists for more than 18 years and works “on promotional, informative and practical ways of struggle with all authorities ideologies and groups promoting any kind of oppression, particularly against Neo Nazism and right-wing radicals”. “Social security is the biggest topic, many urban legends about Roma getting rich from welfare run around. Nobody wants to aim at the real causes - corruption, structural racism, state violence... Roma people are the scapegoats for our failures” continues Petra, which identity is hidden due to potential violent acts by Neo Nazis.

A survey conducted by the Perfect Crowd market research agency for the University of New York in Prague showed that over 60% of the population harbor negative feelings towards the Roma – more than for any other single ethnic group, well above the levels of hostility felt towards Russians, Ukrainians and the Vietnamese minority. In this survey, 31.7% of respondents perceived the Roma as being biologically different from the rest of the population; 76.8% perceived the Roma as living a parasitic lifestyle and 92.5% believed the Roma to be abusing the Czech welfare state. According to Lucie Bittalova “Most of the Czechs are saying I am not a racist, but I don’t like Roma people. People are unfriendly to other people who are having different culture and tradition from them.”

Another problem is the passiveness of political structures about this question. Strict state intervention in preventing the violence against Roma people, is missing. “During the anti Roma protests political parties and the government stayed quiet. They didn’t say anything. Political parties don’t do anything because are afraid of losing votes, since generally Czechs are not so friendly to Roma people” adds Lucie.

Facing lack of political will, anti Roma movement inspired lot of organizations and individuals to get involved in improving the position of this minority in Czech Republic, which gives hopes for change. On another hand, civil activism against Neo Nazi movement in CR is improving, and many initiatives for solving this problem rose during past years. A variety of activities happened during 2013. It became increasingly common for far-right marchers to be matched in numbers or outnumbered by anti-racist protesters. Civil activists even stayed at houses of Roma families during the pogroms, protecting them from potential violence. An activist from Brno created the web platform “Nic než názor”, which collects opinions by Czech respectful members of the society about the problem with racism.

The platform “Blokujeme!” is one of the online spaces where human rights activists organize themselves, and during past year was a platform for organizing creative offline protests, such as collective reading books in public spaces where Neo Nazis planned to gather or blocking their passage on the way to Roma neighborhoods with music concerts.

As for Lukas, he continues with his project about educating young students. In the future, Lukas will organize open discussions between students and authorities on this issue, but also organize public exhibition where students will present their opinions about stereotypes

related with Roma people, and negative effects of them on everyday's living in Czech Republic.

Struggle against Neo Nazi movement is a long-term process, say the activists. It takes joint action and precise policies. “We must educate people that racism is bad, especially young members of society, since they are the future of our country. Roma people are discriminated today, tomorrow will be another ethnic group, if we don't stop this immediately. It's a chain reaction that will reflect on everybody's life in our country. If we don't stop this now, many other people will be violated. We don't want more people get killed” ends Lukas.

Imprint

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