

## **GYPSIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC:**

### **The Controversy about Usti nad Labem**

In the spring of 1998 the international media reported alarming stories about the treatment of gypsies in two Czech towns, Usti nad Labem and Plzen. According to their critics, the mayors of both towns were threatening to create 'concentration camps' by ghettoising their local Gypsy communities - in Usti nad Labem behind a high wall and in Plzen by surrounding a Gypsy-inhabited block of flats with barbed wire.

News reports about these alleged plans appeared in media as diverse as *The New York Times* and the *BBC* at the same time as hundreds of Czech and Slovak Gypsies had begun to arrive in countries like or Britain or as far away as Canada.

A year earlier, on 6th August 1997 the Czech Republic's independent TV station *Nova* screened a programme *With Their Own Eyes* showing Czech Gypsies being given a warm welcome in Canada where they had sought asylum from racist attacks. Many had responded to this programme by purchasing airline tickets to Canada where they were received less than enthusiastically by the authorities. By October 1997 the Canadians had imposed visa requirements on all Czechs to stem the flow of unwanted Gypsy asylum seekers. Early in 1998, large groups of Slovak Gypsies (as well as others from the Czech Republic) began to descend on the British port of Dover after another TV programme (this time on independent Slovak TV station *Markiza*) gave an exaggerated account of the generosity of the British welfare state.

In reaction to the exodus, the authorities in the West spoke with forked tongues. Although it is clear that governments in Britain and other Western countries are hostile to a large influx of Gypsies (or any other group of immigrants, for that matter) into their territories, they have failed to support claims by the Czechs that there is no systematic persecution of Gypsies in the Czech republic. Indeed the European Union has also seemed to endorse the charges in its assessment of the Czech Republic as a candidate for membership.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Czech president, Vaclav Havel, whose name is a byword for tolerance and respect for human rights has echoed the views of those who charge that the Czechs are inherently racist. Several of the President's statements imply that the Gypsy population in his country is, indeed, persecuted by representatives of the state like the police.

## **The Roma since 1989**

No-one can seriously deny that Gypsies in the Czech Republic frequently face serious problems in their lives. However, whether these problems are primarily the result of racism directed at them by (parts of) the majority population or result from other less emotive if no less real grounds needs to be investigated.

Certainly, the British Helsinki Human Rights Group's monitors have repeatedly found that Gypsies emphasise socio-economic problems like unemployment rather than racism whereas NGOs and journalists tend to place racism at the top of the list.

Across the former Communist bloc there has been considerable upheaval since 1989 which has affected the economy and the world of work profoundly. Old labour intensive industries and the obligation on all to work and the state to provide at least the simulacrum of it have past.

Gypsies have been badly hit by unemployment since 1989. The economic downturn in recent months has exacerbated the plight of all low-skilled groups. The question seems to be whether the problems that face the hundreds of thousands of Gypsies in the Czech Republic (and elsewhere in Eastern Europe) are specifically the product of a society and economy dominated by institutionalised racism or are merely extreme examples of the difficulties confronting so many people in these transition economies.

Also, with the end of Communism, jobs for life disappeared as economic restructuring took place and even though the Czech Republic undertook economic reform far less rigorously than people in the West imagined, many low-paid low-skilled jobs disappeared. The Gypsies were the first to suffer from these changes as they tended to be unskilled. Exact statistics for an ethnic breakdown of unemployment in the Czech Republic are not available as the post-Communist governments rejected the previous regime's use of national identity to categorise Czech citizens. (A unclear number of Slovak citizens who are Gypsies resided in the Czech Republic after the separation of the two parts of Czechoslovakia in 1993. There may be about 100,000 out of an estimated 300,000 + Gypsies in the Czech Republic.)

The family history of many Czech Gypsies meant that frequently they were relatively recent arrivals in the country from further east in former Czechoslovakia or even other ex-Habsburg territories like Transylvania. Even today it is common to meet families with three or more

different generations whose mother tongue varies from a grandmother speaking Hungarian, via a parent with Slovak as the first language to children attending a Czech-speaking school.

Such linguistic complications compounded the low esteem with which many Gypsies had traditionally viewed formal education. A migratory lifestyle (at least until enforced settlement under Communism) was hardly conducive to regular schooling. Poverty and Gypsy traditions discouraged children from remaining long in school even when settled. There is some evidence that since 1989 with greater freedom of movement patterns of disrupted schooling among gypsy children have tended to reappear, though not for the majority of such children.

In the absence of statistics, it is impossible to give an accurate picture of unemployment among Gypsies, but certainly they are very much more likely to be unemployed than other Czechs \_ many media sources repeat a figure as high as 75%.

Prejudices against the transient Gypsies and folk-tales of their unreliability have undoubtedly also helped to discourage their employment since 1989. However, it is issues like punctuality and reliability on the job as well as a tendency to move suddenly from place to place since 1989 rather than a crude perception of Gypsies as petty criminals among Czech employers which has tended to reduce their chances of employment in the post-Communist private sector.

For all that it tried to halt their traditional migratory way of life and impose its standard strait-jacket upon them, the Communist system also offered the Gypsies like other poor people accommodation in cheap, state-owned properties albeit of limited quality. Now with many buildings being privatized, they are frequently moved on by owners without much realistic prospect of finding adequate alternative housing. The frequent inability to pay commercial rents has meant that many gypsies migrate from one block of flats to others less salubrious but yet to be privatized.

### **Racist Attacks**

Gypsies have also been the targets of racist attacks. In the early 1990s journals like the Czech newspaper *Respekt* reported crimes against them committed by local thugs or skinhead groups. Since 1990, more than 28 murders apparently racially-motivated have been recorded. However, no pogroms have taken place in either the Czech Republic or Slovakia. The ultra-right Republican Party failed to reach the 5% threshold for representation in parliament in the 1998 election. Moreover, Usti nad Labem a town which has received the most criticism for its alleged anti-Gypsy policies refused to elect any Republican representatives in either national or local elections.

The most notorious incident of apparently racial tension between the Czech authorities and Gypsies occurred in Usti nad Labem in April, 1997, when the local town police became involved in a street brawl with a group of local Gypsy residents after one of their number had been knocked down in a road accident. After about a dozen men had attacked a police patrol car, police reinforcements arrived and one policeman shot in the air to restore order. This incident took place at the junction of Maticni Street and a main thoroughfare. Although no-one was killed or seriously injured in this brawl (as opposed to the car crash which sparked it), it made Maticni Street into a headline issue.

### **Assimilation or separation?**

Even if the extent of socio-economic problems associated with Gypsies may be exaggerated, governments across East-Central Europe face complex problems. Many of these problems existed under Communism but were swept under the carpet like much else. Then a policy of forced integration was followed. While in the past Western countries like Great Britain have integrated the bulk of their Gypsy populations into the mainstream community (or virtually exterminated them as in Nazi Germany), many Westerners now regard assimilation as the wrong way to proceed.

Over the past few years a large number of organizations have arisen to address the Gypsy/Roma issue. The philanthropist George Soros, in particular, funds many such groups. Most of them pursue a similar agenda, namely, that the Gypsies of Eastern Europe should make themselves *more not less* distinctive by learning about their history, customs and language. To this end there are numerous projects to promote 'Roma' identity. As organizations like the Council of Europe regularly encourage minorities in member states to assert themselves this seems to be the way governments in the region are expected to proceed.

Members of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group went to the Czech Republic in June 1998 and visited both Plzen and Usti nad Labem. Since then the allegations against the authorities in Plzen seem to have died down - possibly because the mayor, Zdenek Prosek, was threatening legal action against journalists who accused him of planning to put the town's Gypsies into a 'concentration camp', something he vehemently denied. However, we understood that the situation in Usti had not been resolved. Therefore, in February 1999 the same members of the Group made another visit to Usti nad Labem.

## **The Wall in Usti nad Labem**

The controversy about the widely-reported plan to build a ghetto-wall around the Gypsy-inhabited flats in Maticni Street in Usti nad Labem continued into 1999.

The town lies on the River Elbe barely 10 miles from the German border in the former Sudetenland. As a major communications and industrial centre officially inside Hitler's Reich, what was then called Aussig was heavily bombed. After the war, when the German-speaking majority was expelled, migrants from other parts of Czechoslovakia came to the town. As elsewhere in the Sudetenland, empty houses were frequently handed over to Gypsies from Slovakia.

Today, like many industrial towns in Eastern Europe, Usti has seen a drastic fall in output and consequently high unemployment since the collapse of Communism. The town's population is about 94,000. Circa.10,000 Gypsies live in the town. Many are unemployed and live in municipal flats.

Maticni Street in Usti nad Labem is a side-street lying between a main road and the railway tracks. On one side of the road are 3 blocks of flats, two of which are occupied by 37 Gypsy families. It is generally agreed that these families were moved in 4 years ago from flats where they had failed to pay rent. The Maticni Street flats are by no means the worst form of accommodation people have in the Czech Republic – there are consumer goods and satellite dishes sprout from the walls. We were taken to other areas of Usti itself where the living conditions are far worse.

On the other side of Maticni Street are half a dozen grim but private houses lived in by ordinary residents. It was their complaints about noise and rubbish that set off the train of events leading to the town hall's proposal in 1998 to build a wall beside the flats where now there are iron railings. The incident where drunken Gypsies attacked the two people in a car and injured several policemen in April 1998 exacerbated the already existing tensions.

According to the residents and representatives at the Town Hall the main problems with their Gypsy neighbours was noise and the accumulation of quantities of rubbish that were causing vermin to appear. The mayor of Usti, Ladislav Hruska, said that 150 tonnes of rubbish had been removed from the street by the municipal authorities. Critics imply that the town hall's failure to collect rubbish from the Gypsies is a racist act so it is important to point out that the rubbish in question is not just household debris. The Gypsies travel to Germany where they buy disused

refrigerators, car engines etc. Back in Usti these items are stripped, the useful parts sold and the items themselves left to rot outside the flats in Maticni Street. It is unsurprising that others add their own rubbish to the piles already there and that the quantities involved far outstrip that produced by ordinary families.

In June 1998 and again in February 1999 the area around the flats was clean and clear. However, residents we spoke to anticipated more problems with the onset of warmer weather. They also anticipated a possible tragedy as children played in the street amid the many unlicensed vehicles used by the Gypsies. Despite the international outrage against the building of a wall they still supported its construction.

Despite the apocalyptic language of many Western journalists the Gypsies we spoke to in Maticni Street seemed remarkably calm and reasonable. We talked to their spokesman Josef Laska and his partner Gizela Kulenikova on both visits. By February 1999 the pair and their 4 children had moved into a spacious flat in one of the blocks. Mr. Laska himself does not work - he is on what he calls 'maternity leave' as his daughter has a young child.

Since last June the Maticni Street Gypsies have had many important visitors. The British Ambassador donated 30,000 Czech crowns (£600) and in November President Havel himself paid a visit. His solution to the problem was the building of an underground car park! Mr. Laska himself talked of the need for a playground for the children, a school closer to the street and a room for community activities. He was full of praise for the young mayor of the locality, Pavel Tosovsky, elected in the local elections in November 1998. He also said that the community wanted a fence (Cz. *p/ot*) to be built rather than a wall. The semantics are, no doubt, important but the basic desire from all sides to be somehow cut off one from the other seems a proven fact. Another Gypsy representative in Maticni St. actually said he would welcome a wall as a form of protection. The theory of "defensible space" has found wide approval among the sociologists of architecture and town-planning. Complaints by Gypsy residents of Maticni Street that others find it too easy to come into their courtyards and use them as a waste-disposal reinforce their desire for a clearly demarcated space around their dwellings. They certainly do not want to be shut in, but they do want to have a say over who comes and goes through their territory.

Mr. Laska also showed the Group a lavishly produced catalogue of photographs from an exhibition of Gypsy life that had been recently staged in the Czech Republic - the Usti pictures had been taken by his eldest son. One such photograph attracted our attention. It was of a high wall photographed to look like the Berlin Wall. We were told that this structure had been put up

to segregate a local Gypsy community: Josef Laska and his family were adamant (understandably) that they did not want a wall like this to be built in Maticni Street

Members of the Group discovered that this 'Berlin Wall' was situated across the main thoroughfare from Maticni Street. Our investigations carried out with Usti residents and the local authorities revealed that this wall had nothing to do with any Gypsies - there was only one such family living 'behind' it. It had been erected 4 years ago to hide an unsightly property development and cut down noise from the main road. However, no doubt, with some encouragement from outsiders the impression had been created that Gypsy reservations were sprouting up all over Usti nad Labem.

In June 1998 Mr. Laska said:

- The Gypsies had no problem with the police - they try to help them. (For instance, The local police had organised a competition for Gypsy children and taken the winners on holiday to Spain.)
- Their children were treated well at school.
- They did not want to learn Romany; they wanted their children to learn Czech properly.

**He also said (on both occasions) that journalists had exaggerated the situation in Maticni Street. Their information is misleading. They don't print accurately what he says making him sound inflammatory.**

### **The Authorities**

The mayor of Usti, Ladislav Hruska, has come in for much criticism because of the wall-issue. During a meeting in June 1998, like everyone else, he told the BHHRG that the problem had been blown up out of all proportion. He was particularly critical of politicians like Zdenek Mlynar the young Freedom Union MP who had been put in charge of Gypsy affairs in the first part of 1998 by the interim Tosovsky government in Prague. A group of journalists and human rights activists had come from Prague and proceeded to harangue him about his alleged plans for concentration camps rather than discuss the matter reasonably. He said that initially the wall came up as part of a range of issues to improve the situation of the Gypsies. He wanted to see proper play areas and other facilities provided for them, but that was not reported.

His spokesman, Oldrich Zeman, told the BHHRG in February 1999 that matters had improved in that disparate Gypsy community groups now seemed able to cooperate better. He said that only three families in Maticni Street pay rent. The town hall did not pursue them for any arrears because of the children. Social security is generous (in Czech terms). A family of 4 receives 12,000 Czech Crowns per month. Until the economic situation improves and more jobs appear he did not anticipate a change in the Gypsies' circumstances. Despite the town's reputation as a centre of racism he said that there had been no recorded incident of a racist crime last year and that the situation had improved. He did not anticipate that the wall would be built although he confirmed the remarks made to the Group that the Gypsies themselves wanted some kind of fence/wall.

The young mayor of the Nestemice district of Usti (which includes Maticni Street) Pavel Tosovsky echoed the feelings of many that the media had exacerbated the situation. For example, an *Arena* programme on Czech TV before the local elections had presented the town's inhabitants as racist. He said that it was vital for all citizens to be treated the same - now some Gypsies say that if they are charged with a crime they will effectively get away with it because the president will pardon them.

It is manifest that the Czech media gives extensive coverage to Gypsy-related issues. During a short visit over the weekend 5/6th February 1999 the Group saw such items on both Czech television channels as well as on TV news. One such programme featured the ongoing debate surrounding the future of a pig farm at Lety where Nazis are accused of having run a concentration camp for Gypsies during the war. Many people are becoming cynical about what they see as a media campaign and some even think that independent TV Nova's programme in 1997 was a less than subtle attempt to encourage Gypsies to leave the Czech republic and, thus, rid the country of an insoluble problem.

### **Education**

It is widely believed that all Gypsy children are educated in schools for the mentally handicapped, the so-called 'special schools'. This is an untrue – in Usti there is only one special school. A report by the Czech Helsinki Committee<sup>1</sup> clarifies the issue further by pointing out that children went to special schools because of difficulties with language as well as other social or psychological handicaps. Their report admitted that parents as well as teachers agreed that their children should attend these schools. The report says it is undeniable that these schools help

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<sup>1</sup> Report on the state of human rights in the Czech Republic, 1997

many children and that the state allocates more money per child to them than it does to normal schools.

Although it is desirable for all children to be educated together the stigma of special schools could be reduced were they not presented as places for the mentally handicapped rather than for those with learning difficulties. Such establishments exist in the West without criticism.

Usti nad Label has its own purely Gypsy school although it is not a special school as such. The Zakladni Skola in the south east of the town is a normal Czech primary school, which had a mixture of pupils before 1989. After that people could choose which school their children went to and 'whites' left. Now the school caters almost exclusively to Gypsy children and the head has kept it going despite a shortage of money and resources. The school has small classes for the whole 9-year course and the director thinks that the Gypsy children benefit from being taught separately at first from other Czech children. Often, they arrive without an understanding of basic Czech and this can be remedied more easily in these circumstances.

The BHHRG has been very impressed by this school which should be a model for others of its kind in the Czech Republic. The teaching staff seemed very dedicated and the pictures of extra-curricular activities (e.g. a visit to Dresden or a camping outing) showed that they gave their own time too. However, the staff faces problems, not all of them financial. Gypsy parents are often ambivalent about education: a child can suddenly be removed from the school without warning. It can be dispiriting, too, when a bright girl pupil moves to the gymnasium only to be removed by her parents whose custom is to have her 'working' and usually pregnant by her early teens.

### **The Government**

In September 1997 the Czech government published a detailed report<sup>2</sup> on the situation of the country's Gypsies containing a large number of recommendations, 40 of which were accepted by the government. The new government, elected in June 1998, opened a Human Rights Office that December headed by ex-dissident Petr Uhl that intends to promote more understanding between Czechs and the Gypsies. Its spokesman today is Marta Miklusakova who teaches programmes dealing with ethnicity at Charles University.

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<sup>2</sup> "Zprava o situaci romske komunity v Ceske republice a opratreni vlady napomahajici jeji integraci ve spolecnosti" Prague, 1997

Anyone dealing with the Gypsy population in the Czech Republic faces the immediate problem of data - no one knows exactly how many Gypsies there are in the country. Miklusakova says between 200,000 and 300,000, an enormous statistical disparity. But since the Czechs adopted UN recommendations of not recording the details of a person's ethnicity in their population censuses (unless volunteered by the citizen) precise statistics about all sorts of issues are unavailable. For example, the police department in Usti nad Labem had no statistics of the racial origin of criminals. Even if crimes committed by the Gypsies had **gone down** no one would know.

The absence of such statistics exacerbates the tendency to exaggerate, even at government level. Marta Miklusakova claims that Gypsies face "tremendous fear" in the community; that they cannot send their children to school because of "fear", that there are many, many racist cases that are not being reported to the police because of this fear. A fight in a pub might be racist in origin or it might just be a brawl between inebriated people, but because of the absence of statistics no one can really know.

It is obvious that those who make these claims cannot continue to have it both ways. Either scrap the ban on collecting ethnic data or accept that allegations that many crimes are racially motivated are purely hypothetical. To label a whole nation like the Czechs as vicious racists without proper evidence is unscientific and risks provoking a serious backlash.

BHHRG representatives can say from their conversations with Gypsies in Usti, Beroun and Plzen in June 1998 and again in Usti in February 1999 that **not one of them** made such extreme allegations. These interviews were **videotaped**. While many are worried about unemployment and housing as well as deploring the (relatively few) attacks by skinhead groups they seem relaxed in their relations with their Czech neighbours.

### **Contrast Slovakia**

This is in sharp contrast to the situation facing Gypsies in some parts of Slovakia. There too international media have detected anti-Gypsy bias and state-persecution, but usually have alleged that any official sponsorship of anti-Gypsy activities was at the behest of the former Prime Minister, Vladimir Meciar (who lost office in October, 1998). However, since Mr Meciar's party ran Gypsy candidates \_ one of whom was killed in a car crash just before the general election in September, 1998 \_ the charge that his party was anti-Gypsy needs questioning.

In September, 1998, BHHRG representatives visited the eastern Slovak city of Kosice. They had been to the city before. Until five years ago, Gypsies were as much features of the central city scene as baroque buildings. However, in 1998, the observers noted that Kosice city-centre was strikingly "free of Gypsies". Blocks which had housed many Gypsy families a few years earlier were vacant or undergoing redevelopment.

Everyone agreed that the city's mayor, Rudolf Schuster, who was re-elected in 1994 (having served as the district Communist Party boss for many years before 1989) had concentrated the city-centre Gypsies into a derelict former military housing estate (Lunik 9) beyond the Kosice's western suburbs. Here many inhabitants complained that they were prey to skinhead attacks and that the Kosice city-police (unlike the Slovak state police) were either unsympathetic to them or downright hostile and occasionally violent. (One resident showed the marks on his forearms of what he claimed were the handcuffs used by the city police to bind him a few days earlier.) Their treatment was causing deep resentment among the Gypsies concentrated in Lunik 9 and many asked how to get to Britain or other West European countries.

It is not surprising to find that many Gypsies are fleeing Eastern Slovakia for countries like Great Britain. What is odd is that the media which eagerly latched onto the story of the Usti Wall has ignored clear evidence of ghettoisation in Kosice. Maybe it is because Kosice is far to the east in Slovakia, or perhaps it is because Mr. Schuster enjoys the reputation of being the West's favourite politician unlike its *bête-noire* erstwhile premier Meciar. Mr Schuster's picture appears on the US embassy web-site and it seems clear that he is the West's favoured candidate in the presidential election in Slovakia despite his *nomenklatura* past and the situation at Lunik 9.

### **Conclusion**

Ordinary Czechs are now in danger of being seriously radicalised. Not only have they been labelled 'racist' by their own and the foreign media but Czech politicians, President Havel in particular, have regularly attacked them in the same way. This has contributed more than anything else towards the president's loss of popularity in his own country.

For the government's human rights department, Marta Miklusakova suggested that the country needed stronger laws forbidding racist language although people would be able to say what they liked in private, a proposal starkly reminiscent of the Communist-era mindset. She also indicated that the authorities in Usti nad Labem (the two mayors are both from the ODS) were no better than the Republican Party, a grotesque allegation. Ordinary Czechs now have to

accept that these allegations are common currency. However, the BHHRG disagrees and argues that:

It is untrue that the majority of Gypsy children are afraid to walk to school.

It is untrue that Gypsies do not receive social security.

It is untrue that every fight or scuffle that breaks out involving a Gypsy is a racist attack or the fault of the other party.

It is untrue that Gypsies are thrown out of their flats if the rent isn't paid

Compared with race relations in the USA, France or Britain, for instance, the Czech Republic seems in many ways a model of inter-ethnic harmony. The difference is that whereas people in the West can confront their alleged racial prejudices from a position of strength the Czechs are being targeted from a position of weakness. They rightly say that they too suffer from the legacy of Communism through economic dislocation of one form or another. For example, many elderly Czechs have been removed from their flats to other accommodation by property speculators offering small amounts of compensation.

A doctor in Prague recently articulated such unease by saying that she felt she must always give priority to her Gypsy patients otherwise she could be labelled a racist. Such insecurity could yet find a more respectable political outlet than that of Miroslav Sladek's Republican Party. Although the party and its racist policies were roundly rejected in last year's Czech election it is not inconceivable that a more plausible politician could emerge to articulate resentments among Czechs at being vilified as bigots especially if one group of economically-disadvantaged people within Czech society seem to receive preferential treatment at the expense of others in a period of severe economic depression and growing unemployment. In other words, exaggerated accusations of rampant racism in the Czech republic whether by domestic or foreign politicians and human rights groups could turn out to be a tragic self-fulfilling prophecy.

The BHHRG has seen no evidence of state-sponsored racism against Gypsies in Plzen or Usti nad Labem. Rather the opposite: local officials, the police and the Gypsy community itself are making strenuous efforts to improve the situation for the towns' Gypsy populations. Neither have they seen examples of racial prejudice among ordinary Czech citizens living in these towns. Gypsies and their representatives there did not make the most severe claims alleged elsewhere on their behalf. This is not to deny that the local Gypsies face serious social and

economic problems or that very occasionally racist incidents occur. However, by blowing the latter out of all proportion and urging as Gypsies and their children, parts of the international human rights solutions policies which fail to deal with the real everyday economic problems of community are doing the Gypsies of the Czech Republic (and Gypsy communities elsewhere in Eastern Europe) a disservice. .

For instance, although substantial aid has been donated by foreign bodies for Roma-related projects in the Czech Republic, few tackle the less headline-grabbing problems of daily life. The Czech government's 1997 report lists the grants given by foundations and bodies like the European Union to Gypsy organizations in the country. Most go to vague projects covering 'interethnic conflict', 'Romany culture' and 'centres for Romany information'. None of these grants addresses the main problem: the need for employment in the Gypsy community.

As many people have pointed out, some Gypsies are well-off and in work. If the disproportionate unemployment of Gypsies is to be attributed to prejudice as well as lower than average educational attainments and skills then training to promote self-employment and Gypsy cooperatives would make a good investment. In Usti nad Labem, for instance, there are already several successful small Gypsy-owned building contractors and construction firms. If the money went to help set up and sponsor small businesses for Czech (and other and expertise which has gone to fund 'cultural' and 'toleration' centres Gypsies) a start could be made to solving the problem.

The failure to devote some of the substantial aid budget to practical aid raises the suspicion that in addition to well-intentioned but misguided efforts to create a culture of tolerance from above, there may be some activists whose motivations for pursuing misdirected and counter-productive schemes are less pure. The European Union's Commission's assessment of the fitness of the Czech Republic to enter the EU contained a very negative interpretation of the country's minority rights situation based on second-hand criticism. The near hysteria of some of the press reporting about the so-called Gypsy 'problem' in the Czech Republic may so damage its reputation that it could be a contributory factor in undermining its chances of admission to the European Union (which are already weakening under the impact of economic crisis). This may be a development which some European politicians would welcome warmly if only behind closed doors.

The cult of a separate Roma ethnic and cultural identity on the part of some NGOs and human rights groups ironically seems bent on creating the very kind of apartheid that otherwise is condemned. For instance, the costly efforts to revive \_ some would say (re-) invent \_ a

Romany language to cement that separate Roma identity can only tend to isolate the Gypsies further in Czech society. Our rapporteurs did not meet any Gypsies who wished their children to learn Romany rather than Czech. In any case, no-one has decided which branch of the now virtually extinct Romany language group should be the variant taught to Czech Romany children as "their own". If re-Romanisation of the Gypsies is promoted in future, it is a policy that could create the very ghettos it deplors. At the same time it would destabilise a country which suffered under Nazi occupation and forty years of Communist rule. The tendency to denigrate Czechs as ingrained racists and neo-fascists goes against the reality that despite decades of totalitarianism and the dilemmas of economic change since 1989 extremist parties have failed to secure a place in Parliament or local councils.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Czech authorities should continue their policy of strict enforcement of the law against anyone engaged in violence or harassment of Gypsies or anyone else.

An intensification of education in the Czech language combined with essential life-skills should be promoted to avoid ghettoising Gypsies and give them better employment opportunities.

Efforts by the police and schools, in Usti nad Labem for instance, to promote integration and harmony should be supported by politicians and community representatives.