

ANTIGYPSYISM IN PUBLIC DISCOURSES AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Central Council of German Sinti and Roma
Heidelberg, 2017

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COUNCIL Sinti & Roma

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ANTIGYPSYISM DURING THE 2016- 2017 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic is coming to the end of a marathon sprint of elections. Within the past year, voters have turned out to elect representatives to regional authorities and both houses of the Czech Parliament. Now negotiations are underway to shape the next government, and for the first time a large number of “anti-establishment” parties are slated to take control.

Antigypsyism has been a key theme during all of these elections and will undoubtedly be a theme of the presidential elections in January 2018. For that contest the incumbent, Mr Zeman, has a head start on playing the antigypsyist card, having recently asserted that he does not want to see the pig farm removed from the site of the former WWII-era concentration camp for Romani people, Lety u Písku, because he considers such a move a waste of state resources.

Antigypsyist rhetoric is brandished by all politicians here wishing to establish their nationalist credentials and to demonstrate their lack of “political correctness”. The only party that has refused to engage in such tactics and instead advocated for a discourse of equality, the Green Party, has suffered an unequivocal defeat in every contest undertaken this past year.

In almost every Czech party there is at least one politician who makes sure to hint from time to time that he or she believes sending Romani people to such camps as was done in the “good old days” is a fine idea. The 2017 lower house outcome has been brewing since the 2016 elections to the Senate (although just 15.4 % of the electorate bothered to turn out to seat representatives in the upper house). Below is a party-by-party description of the electoral gains connected to the use of antigypsyist sentiment.

SEVEROČEŠI.CZ PARTY (“NORTHBOHEMIANS.CZ”)

Anti-establishment parties made quite noticeable gains in the Senate last year, with Senator Jaroslav Doubrava’s Severočeši.cz party (“NorthBohemians.cz”) winning re-election with 57.89 % of the vote, and his colleague Alena Dernerová winning with 70.81 % of the vote, an almost unheard-of result. Both politicians are known for deploying generalized, stereotypical assertions about Romani people in order to score political points.

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS

In the 2016 regional assembly elections, Jiří Čunek, running for the Christian Democrats, scored a significant success in the Zlín Region, which he now governs. Starting 10 years ago, his political rise from the local to the national level has been entirely based on evicting Romani people and making politically incorrect statements about them. While he does not profile himself as an ultra-right extremist, his continuing membership in the Christian Democrats is a serious problem for that party's moral reputation among those who believe in equal treatment.

FREEDOM AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Tomio Okamura's SPD ("Freedom and Direct Democracy") movement is a populist, right-wing party building on hatred of all that is not "Czech". It has just shocked observers by entering the lower house in 2017 for the first time. The party combined hints of antigypsyism, Islamophobia and nationalism in the 2016 regional contest to attract votes away from the right-wing extremist parties that campaigned bluntly, single-mindedly and unsuccessfully against alleged "threats" to society such as immigrants in general or radical Islamists.

ANO

The main victor of the 2016 regional and Senate elections, of course, is the party that is now also the 2017 winner in the lower house, ANO. Last year its chair, Andrej Babiš (who is under investigation for subsidy fraud) made sure to make a colloquial, undignified reference to the way the so-called "Gypsy Camp" at Lety u Písku functioned during WWII. When he was criticized for his remarks, he visited the former concentration camp site (that same one with the pig farm still on it) to pay his respects carrying a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses, and then made sure to reference alleged Romani "parasitism" while he was there, to the delight of the tabloids.

SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

In the Ústecký Region, the Social Democrats' candidate list for the 2016 regional and Senate elections was led by Jaroslav Foldyna, the man who convened one of the first anti-Romani demonstrations in the Šluknov region in 2011 that deteriorated into violence. Foldyna is now the lone politician from his party left standing from his region in the Czech lower house. His response to the Social Democrats (one of the longest-lived pillars of Czech politics) losing the helm of government was to make racist verbal attacks against Romani people, continuing antigypsyist campaign rhetoric in which he accused Romani people of abusing the foster parent system. He also said the Social Democrats should have done more to win over voters who cast ballots for Okamura's party instead. Most remarkably, he also said he was "pissed off" at the news server Romea.cz¹, which reports on human rights and minority-related issues, because it gives "room to Romani people to say vulgar things about the majority...".

CIVIC DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Legislation eventually enacted as a result of such antigypsyist posturing sometimes receives a response of outrage once the Czech public realizes the provisions will apply to them, too, and not just to Romani people, as they anticipated. One year ago an amendment to the law on misdemeanors took effect requiring municipalities to approve ordinances defining in more detail what it means to disrupt nighttime quiet. The high level of the fines and other sanctions to be instituted for committing such an offense, including the option to ban somebody from local residence, sparked a general backlash, with some commentators calling the legislation more draconian than anything that ever applied during totalitarian rule.

¹ <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-mp-embittered-by-his-party-s-loss-curses-news-server-romea-cz-and-roma-in-general>

The law is a result of antigypsyist messaging by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) dating back to 2011, and their ideas enjoyed widespread support as long as they were discussed as being necessary because of “Gypsies” and “inadaptables”. Now the rest of the public is expressing amazement that they, too, could find themselves targeted by this very legislation.

The ODS party’s recent second-place showing in the lower house elections (which, at 11.32 %, was a full 18 percentage points behind ANO) was preceded by their successful use in last fall’s regional elections of the antigypsyist slogan “*Gadje*, get to work” in the Ústecký Region (the term “*gadje*” in Romanes refers to non-Romani people). That campaign revived a racist slogan from 2008 and used it in a video published on Facebook which opens by asking: “Hey, *gadje*, why do you have time to sit down? Get to work so we’ll have enough money for welfare!” The video then shows a Romani man entering a gambling room and losing all of his money (supposedly from welfare) at the slot machines together with other Roma.

In the town of Obrnice in that same region, which is approximately 40 % Romani, the ODS won with almost 30 % of the vote in the 2016 regional contest. The lower house results have now put the ODS party in second place there at 25.46 % (with ANO coming in at 31.01 %). Drahomíra Miklošová, the Mayor of Obrnice, ran in second place on the ODS regional candidate list last year; in 2013 she was given an award² by the Council of Europe for enacting policies that ostensibly set a good example on Romani integration. Whatever the actual situation in Obrnice, its mayor remains a member of a party that exploits antigypsyist propaganda, and she is also an enthusiastic supporter of municipalities being able to ban individuals from residency if they rack up misdemeanor offenses. The mayor has told the media in no uncertain terms that “I want to decide who we can register here and who not.” Such strong-arm statements are of course a winning proposition in the Czech context, where opinion polls continue to show that 80 % of the population holds views of animosity toward the Roma.

REWARDS OF ANTIGYPSYISM

Czech politicians enjoy both impunity and reward in the court of public opinion for their antigypsyism despite the existence of antidiscrimination norms and laws against defamation, Holocaust denial, and incitement. So many non-Romani people assume that they, too, may yet prove to be above the law when expressing such views. This cavalier attitude to the law may also explain the many voters who seem to be unfazed by the fact that their next Prime Minister is on the verge of prosecution.

While human rights activists, Romani activists, and citizens generally do push back against these kinds of statements, usually on social media, when politicians comment on each other’s antigypsyism, it is usually only ever to reinforce it. There is little evidence that critiquing bigoted behavior on the Czech political scene will ever get one elected.

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² <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-town-of-obrnice-receives-award-in-strasbourg-for-romani-integration-projects>