

Summary

This monography is dealing with the attitude of the majority population towards the Roma in the Czech Lands since the end of the Second World War, particularly in the years from the arrival of communism in the Czechoslovak Republic in 1948 until its downfall in 1989. At first sight the policy of the communist regime on the Roma population does not rank among the most brutal manifestations of the totalitarian regime repression, but its impacts markedly eroded traditional social and cultural system of Roma communities and also contributed to their current deep crisis. The development of the state policy in the period in question should be divided into several chronological and ideological and political stages.

After their coming to power the communists focused their attention on the issue of legal regulations which according to their nomenclature embodied the capitalist law. In 1950 they repealed the existing special legislation concerning „persons living a Gypsy way of life“ and formally made the Roma equal to the rest of the population. The first stage of the formulation of the state policy towards the Roma (until 1957) was marked by lack of coherence and consistency. According to state authorities (as well as to a number of Roma representatives), the new regime was expected to bring along swift and considerable social and cultural advancement of the Roma. They considered „a backward lifestyle of Gypsies“ as a remnant of the former „exploitative system“, assuming that within the framework of the so-called building of the socialist society it would change by itself, and the Roma would automatically adopt the ideology and lifestyle of the communist-oriented society. But with respect to such swift transformation opinions diverged on how this process should be accelerated. The proposed methods ranged from rather a repressive policy (forced labour camps, placing children of „maladjusted“ Gypsies to children’s homes), suggestions to establish a sort of Roma enclaves with their own self-governments, for instance in border areas, up to attempts to recognize the independent existence of the Roma nationality, and the support of its language and culture development (the line promoted especially by representatives of culture and science in co-operation with the small Roma elite and based on a quite idealized idea about the position of the Roma people in the USSR). Permanently hesitating over their further steps, the regime tolerated the existence of several special „Gypsy“ schools, gave support to summer „educational camps“ and other activities matching with cultural and mental distinctions of the Roma, and at the same time brought them up in the spirit of the communist ideas.

From the early fifties the number of Roma migrating in waves from settlements in Slovakia to the Czech Lands, primarily to industrial agglomerations and to the so-called constructions of socialism absorbing enormous amount of unskilled labour, was steadily rising. The state policy was aimed at its priorities such as the issue of the Roma employment, provision of basics of education, or improvement of hygienic and sanitary conditions, in particular. The urbanization process affected traditional Roma families rather unfavourably, eroding their natural family ties and their relationship with the original environment. In these new circumstances there were no basic social preconditions created for such cardinal changes. Lots of Roma families failed to sufficiently quickly adjust themselves to the alienated environment of industrial cities, there were problems arising related to their housing, school attendance of children or illiteracy of adults, adequate health care, relationship with the majority population etc. In the late fifties it turned out that the decision-making sector was not able to cope with such problems. Petitions and complaints against groups of migrating Roma were increasing in numbers. Former workers’ settlements, lodging facilities for temporary workers, streets and quarters intended for demolition gradually turned into overpopulated ugly Roma ghettos. In this atmosphere the communist project on Roma’s assimilation into the

majority population was taking shape and in the following period it became a binding directive.

As regards a new concept of the state policy on the Roma, crucial was Act No. 74/1958 concerning the ban on a nomadic way of life under criminal sanctions. Its adoption was preceded by an extensive analysis of the present state of the so-called Gypsy issue as well as of further strategy towards its solution which was considered by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). At this stage, again, it drew its inspiration from the solution of the Roma issue in the Soviet Union at that time where in 1956 the Supreme Soviet introduced the ban on nomadism. The Act and the subsequent register of nomadic and the so-called semi-nomadic population was unconstitutional. It restricted not only the movement of nomadic people but also of several thousands of „maladjusted Roma manifesting their dislike of work“ and families who had not been given an opportunity or had failed to comply with the requirements of the majority population for adjustment. Full assimilation which was based on a number of other repressive measures had been enforced until the end of the sixties and this stage was marked by the most drastic approach towards the Roma minority which became an object of paternalistic „social engineering“ of the regime. It strictly demanded the blending of the Roma people with the majority population, not allowing them to actively participate in handling problems related to their position in society and suppressing manifestations of their traditional culture etc.

Apart from general duty to work, gradual improvement of the overall social and health standard and an effort to eliminate illiteracy, the communist nomenclature decided to further accelerate the process of urbanization through the so-called dispersion of undesirable concentration of Gypsy population which was legalized by government resolution No. 502/1965. It stipulated the removal of Roma settlements in Slovakia and ghettos in the Czech towns and cities, as well as the dispersion of the Roma population around the territory of the state under the guidance of decision-making authorities. National committees, however, failed to carry out the scheduled resettlement, and Roma families, disregarding them, continued their uncontrolled migrations. Within three years the dispersion schemes collapsed, and in 1968 they were definitely abandoned. Inappropriate state interventions as well as hasty urbanization deepened the crisis of Roma families and the entire communities whose life in the urban environment was beginning to lose its natural order, and who were losing awareness of traditional rules of co-existence as well as an attitude towards their traditional culture and their active role in it. Assimilation pressures resulted only in an adjustment of a lesser part of the Roma communities or individuals only to consumerism of certain social strata.

In the late sixties it was clear that the policy of full assimilation proved to be ineffective, and so in the atmosphere of overall political liberalization the conditions for a certain emancipation of the Roma movement were gradually created, and also a new concept of the state policy was developed. The first Roma organization was established: the Union of Gypsies (Roma) – SCR, whose funding was supposed to be contributed by its production facility Névodrom (New Path). The SCR leadership and local organizations contended with organizational and financial difficulties, nevertheless they succeeded in giving a considerable support to the development of Roma culture as well as other activities. The SCR leadership prepared a memorandum on the recognition of the Roma national minority and after its rejection by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) it participated in the formulation of a new concept of the state policy towards the Roma people. It established a lot of international contacts and, as a founding member, contributed to the set-up of the first international Roma organization. During normalization, in April 1973, the SCR was dissolved. In 1970–1972 the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic government definitely abandoned the assimilation policy and began to promote the so-called cultural and social

integration of the Roma. New principles of the state policy were supposed to be based on scientific knowledge and fieldwork research. Emphasis on education, more respect for their traditions and specific distinctions, and initially, also more encouragement of their own activities were necessary preconditions for the Roma to catch up with the majority population. In practice, however, on the arrival of normalization the application of these principles was frozen, and once again the Roma became a passive object of state interventions, and social care aimed at individuals and communities became an exclusive domain of state authorities. Discriminatory criteria continued to be applied dividing the Roma population into three groups, based on „a degree of social maturity“. A steadily rising number of the Roma population in the Czech Lands was accompanied by further inappropriate interventions into their resettlement and the formation of new ghettos in industrial towns and cities. A newly built „Gypsy“ housing estate Chánov in the North-Bohemian town of Most became the symbol of a naive idea about effectiveness of state interventions, and an example of inadequate housing policy. Moving together families of different standard into several blocks of a „Gypsy quarter“ resulted in a collapse of the local Roma community whose impacts can be felt by the inhabitants to date.

Already in the seventies it became apparent that the newly emerged intolerance of state authorities towards the Roma was unacceptable. In the first year of its existence the dissident group ‚Charter 77‘ issued a document drawing attention to the infringement of civil rights of the Roma minority. A wave of criticism of the Roma position in Czech society came also from abroad, especially from the Forum of the Second International Congress IRU (International Roma Union) held in Geneva. Czechoslovak activists were not allowed to travel out, nevertheless they participated in preparations and running of the congress. In the eighties a new generation of activists as well as representatives of the mainstream culture became involved in the development of culture and public initiatives, meeting a considerable response from the public. At the very close of their power monopoly the KSCĚ representatives invited the Roma activists to judge a very critical report revealing failure of their long-term project on the Roma population „uplift“. The report contained proposals expected to alter the Roma position in society, i. e. grant them the status of nationality, permit their association and publication of printing materials, or encourage their creative attitude towards traditional culture. Shortly afterwards, the totalitarian regime definitely collapsed and these or other rights of the Roma population were exercised by newly elected democratic state institutions.