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***The status of Romanies  
in Czechoslovakia until 1989***

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**Introduction**

For the first time after February 1948 Romanies become de jure equal members of society. It was guaranteed by the Constitution of 9th May from 1948. However, the low socio-economic level of a substantial part of Romanies represented for the state and its government not only economic, but mainly ideological problem. This proclaimed social equality of citizens enshrined in the Constitution and their real and planned living standard was in sharp contrast with the actual achieved level of Romany population. In the period 1948 – 1989 the civil service attempted to solve this discrepancy with several concepts for which it was common, that the State took Romanies under your patronage and excluded from the cooperation those, whom these solutions should be allocated, that is Romanies themselves. Just during this period there was a great moral devastation of sovereign Romany ethnic group.

**Theoretical definition of the problem**

The basis for the wrong procedure was deliberate classification of Romanies as members of social, to be more precise socio-pathological group of

inhabitants, not ethnic group which has the right to grow and develop their specificities. The cultural and ethnic specificities were then considered to be undesirable manifestations of retardation. Assimilative pressure caused considerable damage, but, on the other hand, the objectivity is to be noted that it also brought the positives. These were mainly related to the emphasis on eliminating of illiteracy and improving the qualification of Romanies as well as providing them commonly inaccessible health and social care. Despite of this, however, it is necessary to note that just the attitude of the state system in the years 1948 – 1989 to so-called Romany issue can be considered as one of the main reasons for the current socio-economic status of Romanies, their low ethnic self identification, and not least a high degree of social distancing of non-Roma majority from Romany minority. According to ethnologists Arne B. Man, A. Jurová and others "right government policy accenting the material assistance to Romanies, at the same time ignoring the" human dimension "(identity, desires, ideas about life, value systems, a reflection of coexistence with the majority population), caused the gradual devastation of their positive consciousness, the loss of personal motivation, apathy. The whole post-war development of the bulk of Romany population in this respect can be described as a process of the loss of culture, social and moral retardation. The change of state access in relation to Romanies was manifested itself, but as a matter of priority it was not the current result of reflection of these policies. That change became a consequence of changes in the ideological looking at function of the state and its citizens." From the second half of the fifties, the authorities begin to intensively discuss how to solve the so-called Gypsy issue to the future. There are consulted two radically different approaches: ethnic and assimilation. Regime of that time tried to rearrange the society and change its natural stratification, thus, the ethnic identity of Romanies began to deny and the policy of social assimilation was adopted. The issue connected with the identification of Romanies, which arose just in relation to refusal of ethnic acceptance, resulted in the formulation "person of Gypsy origin, Gypsy". So much criticism of the discriminatory Act of wandering

Gypsies, however, remained in force and continued up to 1950. In March 1952 the Commission of the Interior issued a directive on modification the circumstances of persons of Gypsy origin, which is requested and assumed assimilation of Romany population not by sanction means, but the solution of their employment, education, provision of housing, re-education through an action on the change in their traditional way of life. The responsibility for implementation of these guidelines was in the hands of national committees. There were no objective or subjective right conditions to fulfil the expected intentions to remove the social and cultural backwardness of Romanies by the universal help of the state and in particular by the re-education accompanied with the permanent denial of acceptance of their ethnic identity. On the one hand, the continuing of discrimination against Romany ethnic, although not open and obvious, on the other hand, in many ways significant economic and social preference of this ethnic group provoked the aversion of the majority population. As a consequence of accumulated and unresolved problems, when in practice as in a vicious circle the social, health, educational, housing and other problems of Romanies were accumulated, was the release of the act on permanent settlement of itinerant persons, which was approved by the Parliament in October 1958 under № 74. The Act was implemented in 1959 by police operations similar to raids carried out in previous periods. From day to day it had to be dismantled wheels of nomadic chariots, Romanies were obliged to settle where they have just been caught and municipalities were required to provide them an alternative accommodation. The act was very insensitively affected mainly Valachian (Olachian) Romanies. The nomadic life formed part of their traditions and suddenly they were forced to change their way of life forever. It is sure that today we are facing the consequences of that forced migration, because the enforced settlement realized through the coercion acted for that matter as a criminogenic factor. In terms of theory and political practice of the former political system the leveling of social differences up to egalitarianism was logic. It was based on the fact the very nature of this system. Not calling Romanies to social ad-

vancement should therefore be considered as discrimination. Toleration of nomadic life would mean the toleration of extreme poverty and according to the rest of society the undignified or even unfair way of life. This act was not only against fundamental rights of freedom of movement and residence, but it was also an unworkable and absurd for lack of jobs and housing opportunities in local conditions. As a matter of fact, the inventory spaces should become a permanent place of residence of Romany family and national committees were required to offer them several options for housing and job prospects, which could not be absolutely possible at that time. Although the concept of assimilation has failed, many Romanies have managed to break out of a backward way of life, to gain a professional qualification, or to solve their housing problem. The persistence of the problematic situation of Romanies and then, when nomadism has already been disposed, led since the early sixties to considerations on the new conception. Problem that could not be solved in the framework of previously adopted legislative changes of Romany issue, was the high share of Romany population in the region of Eastern Slovakia. Another of the fundamental steps of state that affected the destinies of Romanies in Czechoslovakia, was carried out the liquidation of unwanted Romany camps and the subsequent dispersal of their inhabitants mainly from 1965. The conception of dispersion and removal created the beginning a new phase of their forced assimilation allowing the mechanical procedures, manipulation of Romany population and other violations of fundamental human and civil rights. Discrimination measures of this conception against Romanies coincided generous allocation of funds and in order of priority in the first place the disposal of huts and villages, and therefore preferred solution to the housing problem of Romanies. The hallmark of this conception was the fact that the dispersion was required and at the same time it had to be voluntary. It failed, however, to connect in time the liquidation of Romany settlements with the dispersion, which then ran very spontaneously. As a consequence of this, there was the migration of Romanies from Slovakia to the territory of Bohemia beyond control. In bigger cities it began to devel-

op new isolated Roma camps similar to today's ghettos. The instructions for elaboration the tasks of dispersion and transfer part of Romany population into the Czech regions became the Organizing principles for dispersion and removal, already approved in December 1965 by the Government Committee. The Government committee even recommended twinning regions to implement this shift in view of existing conditions and concentration of Romany inhabitants. For the territory of West Slovakia there were determined the Central and South Bohemian Regions, for Central Slovakia it was South Moravia region and the East Slovakia had to share with Romanies from North Moravia region and East Bohemia region. Because of a significant number of own Romanies, the West Bohemia and North Bohemia should not participate in the transfer. Thus, Romanies from Slovak settlements started to wander into the industrial-growth areas of Czech towns. The transfer had to be strictly organized and each unplanned, unorganized and unconfirmed transfer Romany family or individual was considered to be an undesirable migration. The East Slovakian districts requested to relocate during the year 1966 of about one thousand persons to Czech regions. When disposing of the old Romany settlements in addition there was a very negative phenomenon: while the destruction of villages together with the dispersion of their people in different places of the Republic the family communities were becoming extinct, being at the same time the guarantee of sure moral order for their members. The community functioning system of social institutions could not be maintained under the new conditions. The anonymity in cities prevented the mutual supervision over observance of traditional customs. The dispersion was accompanied by other negative, such as the insensitive Roma settlements from different backgrounds and groups next to each other, for example, as one prefab concrete block. The significant differences between individual Romanies and the existence of barriers between groups, for instance, through the application of gender-specific rules, prevented the harmonious co-existence in shared dwellings. In adapting to the new resident then approached other problem. It was the practical ignorance of some of the

achievements of civilization as well as their using (e.g. flush toilet, gas stove, electric oven, etc. – ed. VG). "The modern Romany settlements" that were created in urban areas and housing estates, can not be equated with traditional Romany community as a functioning social unit that was created many years of natural evolution. The national committees interpreted the "Voluntariness" of move as an obligation of Romany families to move into a designated region, regardless of kinship ties and other circumstances of life of Romany family in their locality. The whole situation in Slovakia was complicated by the efforts of some Czech districts to return back Romany families, even those that worked there several years and had flats. In 1966, a total number of 263 Romany families moved from Slovakia to the Czech lands and only a small part migrated there. In the same year there were in Slovakia destroyed 59 villages and 1 715 shacks redeemed for 19 million crowns. There were repaired 139 housing units in the Czech lands for transferred Romanies. Moreover, national committees in Slovakia hold the dispersion of further 1490 families in the framework of districts and regions, in the Czech Republic it was 28 families. For 325 families it was arranged a new accommodation of public housing, 1097 families bought an older house themselves and 325 families built their own one. The conception of state-run assimilation with dispersion followed to efforts of including Romanies among the general population, gradually remove all the differences that distinguished them from others. Specifics of Romanies were suppressed, so there was a systematic loss national identity of Romanies, so that they could be better placed. Therefore, the assimilation after the previous dispersion and removal had in itself an encoded failure since its very beginning. The unnatural and violent actions, which were pointed to the destruction of values coming to a head during centuries, created for Romanies a very dangerous moral vacuum. Their own values were scorned. As a consequence of this, Romanies, moreover, with a sense of shame gradually surrendered themselves. The government of the Czechoslovak Republic finally recalled the dispersal policy and controlled assimilation in its resolution from 1970 (in Slovakia, this policy applied for an-

other two years – ed. VG). It was the end of conflicts between the Czech and Slovak authorities, when the Czech authorities stated that the process of integration is not so successful, because they come from Slovakia the most backward Romanies in the settlements, while the Slovak authorities claimed that, on the contrary, the most advanced leave their settlements and they are those, who realized the need to deal with his life and after their leaving the villages are decimated with the sick, the elderly and mothers with children. The spiritual culture was quite far from Romanies and probably only about a little more than a member of the majority understood and known culture of Romanies. Therefore, Romanies subjected to assimilation disruptive pressures, took from the majority the elements of material culture in particular, on which, like many of them wanted to demonstrate their approach on the social ladder. The material facilities of Romany households increased steadily, while from the spiritual point of view pasted Gypsies on the surface of "Gadže" society have been ridiculed, and therefore rapidly vanishing traditional Romany values were continuously fluently substituted with the negatives from the neighboring observation of mostly working class, sometimes explicitly pathological social environment. The implementation of the new approach – The conception of all-round social and cultural integration of Romanies began on the basis of the Government Resolution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR) № 231/197, where the Romany issue as a multi-generation problem was formulated for the first time. The focus of the objectives was defined on the inclusion of all working-age Romanies into the labor force, the education of Romany youth and adult re-education, solution the quality of housing and the elimination of increased crime. Subsequent resolutions adopted by the government specified the intentions for each period, in fact, until the beginning of 1989. However, the goal remained the same – to include and assimilate. Just the form of its execution should not be so violent, because in addition it proved to be unsuccessful as well. The compensation with the majority should take place through physical and social benefits to "citizens of Gypsy origin." According to this conception, there

were primarily allocated flats to Romanies, they received an increased social benefits, specially earmarked contributions under the social benefits etc. Although still referred to as an example of Romany ingratitude, just this "protectionist" approach paralyzed most of the Romanies. In fact, it dulled their ancient sovereignty and independence. Moreover, the real Romany problems the material benefits for themselves were unable to solve. These benefits has just veiled the Romany problems. Compared with past decades, the conception of social integration of Romanies presented the certain procedure forward. Romanies could grow elements of their culture in limited extent, in the framework of hobbies they could base folk groups etc. Since the seventies appears a change in approach to Romanies in terminology as well. The word "Gypsy" has already been written with a capital letter, then it is used the collocation Gypsy-Romany, which at least partly take into account the own Romany ethnonym. As sovereign ethnic group, Romanies, however, were not practically recognized before 1989, they were from now on considered to be the socially retarded group, which has to be re-educated following the pattern of the majority. It should be noted, however, that the system has reached, on the one hand, a number of partial targets, but on the other hand, in the implementation of conceptions there was fully apparent the dogmatic effort to deny the Romany identity. No respect of the cultural particularities of Romanies then naturally led to unforeseen consequences.

### **Conclusion**

In this sense of solving the Romany issue, they did not become and could not become a subject of its own socio-cultural integration. They remained, mostly, the passive object under the protective hand of the socialist state. The official recognition as an ethnic group, however, Romanies received just after 1989. In the period after 1989 it was also founded the ROI and other Romany organizations. It was followed by development of Roma culture, the establishment of the Museum of Romany Culture in 1991, the establishment of Romany periodicals, centers, and other support



in this particular culture, both at the initiative of Romanies themselves, as well as the initiative and support of the majority society.

### Summary

*The aim of this article is to highlight the situation of Romanies in the years 1948 – 1989 in former Czechoslovakia. In this period there was a moral devastation of Romanies as a sovereign ethnic group, whose foundation was a wrong classification of Romanies as members of social group of inhabitants and not the ethnic one.*

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