



Coexistence International at  
Brandeis University

## Country Studies Series: Czech Republic

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### Background

The status of coexistence in the Czech Republic stands at a crossroad between the legacy of its Communist past and the promise of a Europeanized future. Of all of the former Communist states, the Czech Republic is seen as having made one of the most seamless transitions to democracy. During Communist rule, minority policy was focused on assimilation and integration into a unified nation. Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Czechoslovakia was led by the charismatic and liberal Vaclav Havel, who was a leading member of the Charter 77 movement, which criticized the government of failing to implement human rights provisions of the Constitution and other documents to which Czechoslovakia was signatory in the 1970s and 1980s. But despite Havel's origins in the Czech human rights movement, the situation of minorities under his government - particularly the Roma<sup>1</sup> - deteriorated substantially as a result of ongoing prejudice, lack of structural and resource support for Roma initiatives, and resentment for the initiatives that have been undertaken for the promotion of Roma rights.<sup>2</sup> Tensions between the Czech and Slovak populations led to what is known as the "Velvet Divorce" in 1992, and the formation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia as separate states. Through the exercise of political will and because the Czech and Slovak populations were already living in geographically distinct areas, the separation of the nation was nonviolent.

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Yet ethnic violence and discord still plague the nation. While the country sees itself as a bastion of multiculturalism, its treatment and view of the Roma is quite another story. The situation of the Roma is one of the most blatant cases of rampant and “acceptable” racism in the world. There still remains a large amount of anti-Roma sentiment and violence, and this is the greatest threat to coexistence in the Czech Republic. The current situation in the Czech Republic is one of slow evolution. Impetus for change has come from external factors rather than internal movements. While some NGO and civil society pressure has been applied, the most apparent catalyst has been EU accession and its benefits. While EU accession in 2004 has provided the Czech Republic with ample incentives for change, many of the rural and less socio-economically stable regions are still experiencing ethnic violence and other symptoms of intolerance.

In its report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Czech Government reported that the traditional national minorities (those born in the Czech Republic but identified as part of other ethnic groups) that make up the country are Bulgarians, Croatians, Hungarians, Germans, Poles, Roma, Ruthenians, Russians, Greeks, Moravians, Slovaks, Serbs, and Ukrainians. “Foreigners” (immigrant populations that were not born in the Czech Republic) include Slovaks, Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Poles, and Russians.<sup>3</sup> According to the State Department’s assessment, the total population of the Czech Republic is 10.2 million, with the most sizable minorities being Moravians (3.7%), Slovaks (1.9%), and Roma (1.7%).<sup>4</sup> While that would indicate that there are approximately 173,400 Roma in the nation, the complicated Czech citizenship laws and the transience of the population make this an inaccurate estimate. It is especially important to note that this calculation is an approximation due to the complex citizenship laws that legally classify most Roma as foreign visitors, as they were initially born in the regions of Czechoslovakia that are now classified as Slovakia.<sup>5</sup>

With such a diverse, pluralistic society, the demands for fair treatment of minorities and the delicate balance between diverse peoples is a serious issue with which the nation must grapple. The current state of coexistence in the Czech Republic is one of negative peace, meaning that though the

nation is not experiencing a widespread outbreak of violence, there are few collaborative, cross-cultural initiatives that make for an easy living situation between minority groups. Through the examples and policy implementations outlined below, this state of negative peace - of coexistence without meaningful intercommunal dialogue - will become apparent. The need for more cross-cultural interaction, tolerance education, and anti-discrimination initiatives will also become clear.

## Current State of Coexistence

### *Issues and Differences*

The treatment of the various minority groups in the Czech Republic varies greatly. The Roma, as noted above, have been systematically excluded from Czech life - part of a pattern of marginalization and discrimination that has existed since their appearance in Europe in the 10th century. This population has suffered indignities ranging from forced sterilization to employment discrimination to educational separation. In the modern-day Czech Republic, the Roma are particularly marginalized through housing policies, educational discrimination, and racially motivated hate crimes. For instance, one disturbing trend is the high percentage of Roma who were placed in “special schools” – schools for students with physical or educational impairments. Surveys indicated that as much as 80% of the student body in many of these schools were Roma children. Forced eviction, ethnic violence, and scattered and uneven political participation characterize the Roma experience and are a threat to the stability of the nation.<sup>6</sup> With the sizable Roma population and the repeated abuses they have suffered throughout the years, there is little doubt that this will become an even larger problem if steps are not taken to promote Roma inclusion.

Other minority groups have fared much better. The Polish minority has flourished in post-Communist times, as numerous organizations were created to ensure the political and societal representation of this minority in aspects of Czech life. The split of Czechoslovakia left a significant ethnic Polish minority in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Germans, Slovaks, and Hungarians have enjoyed a

more even footing than the Roma with the majority of ethnically Czech citizens. It is worth looking in a little more depth at one of these examples. Following World War II, a large number of Germans settled in the Czech Republic, and today they have been successfully assimilated into Czech society. Under the Communist regime, Germans were only allowed basic education and were actively discriminated against.<sup>7</sup> But with the end of the Cold War, their situation improved. Tensions between Germany and the Czech Republic have eased with the increasing cooperation between them as a result of EU membership. Also, the Czech-German Future Fund, a non-profit cultural organization, has been successful in the celebration and preservation of German culture for the minority. Some negative feelings still remain in the regions of the Czech Republic bordering Germany, which was exemplified in a 2002 incident in which Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman called regional Sudeten German minorities "traitors" who were a "fifth column for Hitler."<sup>8</sup>

#### *Positive and Problematic Aspects*

What bodes well for the overall harmony of the Czech Republic is the promise of economic stability. Economic incentives from the European Union, a low unemployment rate, and the target for adoption of the Euro currency within the next three-five years have helped to raise the positive economic outlook of the nation. It is important to note, however, that while economic boosts have been beneficial to the Czech Republic as a whole, not all members of the society are reaping the same benefits. Whereas the majority has enjoyed low unemployment rates, minority populations have been left out of the economic boom. To outsiders, this would seem like a clear case of discrimination. However, the majority population sees the disparity as self-inflicted. Exclusion, in their eyes, is the natural consequence of a culpable minority loath to work hard in an otherwise positive economy. Any economic problem or downturn is often blamed on the minority populations, and much economic scapegoating happens as a result.<sup>9</sup>

Other problematic issues stem from the nature of an infant democracy and the slow transition into the European Union. The Roma are chronically under-represented in the political sphere. Through the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), there have been a number of initiatives to engage Roma activists and encourage political avenues to help their situation. Roma participation in government and civic life, however, remains difficult due to an imbalance in education and linguistic differences. Furthermore, the Freedom House, a U.S. human rights organization, has noted a threat to the burgeoning Czech democracy, as the two most powerful parties, the Social Democratic Party and Civic Democratic Party, have introduced legislation that makes party creation and participation more difficult.<sup>10</sup> An attempt

at decentralization of power that began in the late 1990s has only added to a complicated political situation - one that does little to serve minority interests. During this time in Czech politics, a greater push was made to take power out of the hands of the federal government and transfer it to city and regional lawmakers. Unfortunately, some of these lawmakers have used racist sentiment and promises to "cleanse" the population as ways to garner political support. This is especially true when it comes to the Roma population; the removal of Roma from villages has been both a rampant problem and a tool to win local elections.<sup>11</sup> In the city of Vsetin, for example, a middle-of-the-night raid upon a Roma community resulted in the displacement and relocation of the Roma population into portable huts 50 miles outside of the city. The mayor of the city, Jiri Cunek, was met with cheers as he sent in bulldozers to destroy the houses, announcing that he was "cleaning an ulcer."<sup>12</sup> Czech laws on housing, which to date do not include non-discrimination provisions, have increasingly led to these types of scenarios around the nation.

There have, however, been new efforts to encourage police cooperation and responsible legal recourse against those who commit crimes of hate. There has been an increase in court cases regarding discrimination or racially motivated attacks, and an increase in positive verdicts for the victims.<sup>13</sup> In cases which in past times would have been either decided in favor of the perpetrator or ignored completely, there is an increasing push to punish ethnically motivated violence and discrimination.

## Policies and Initiatives

#### *Czech Government*

As of 2000, no Central or Eastern European nation - including the Czech Republic - had a comprehensive minority policy in place. The constitution of the Czech Republic, drafted in 1992, outlines the rights of all individual citizens - including minorities - within the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms. Under this charter, no group had any special provisions or treatment. While this seems like the ideal, it is only so when different ethnic groups are already on equal footing. A controversial and potentially coexistence-disrupting measure was the Czech Citizenship Law of 1993.<sup>14</sup> The law, through its careful wording, essentially made the majority of the Roma population non-citizens, and therefore not beneficiaries of the rights and privileges of citizenship. In 1994, the Council for National Minorities (Rada pro národnosti vlády České republiky) was established to advise and coordinate initiatives to address the needs of minority populations.

But international outcry about the Roma's deteriorating situation forced the Czech Government to reevaluate its stance on minority legislation. In 2000, the Czech government reversed the longstanding rule of umbrella protection for minorities with a set of economic policies targeted at helping the situation of the Roma.<sup>15</sup> In July 2001, the Czech Parliament adopted a further deviation from the earlier "civic principle", stipulating a more active role in the protection of minority rights.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, regional advisory committees, which have more significant participation of minorities in governance issues, have given minorities more control over their cultural affairs.

In 2002 and 2003, the government enacted the "Campaign Against Racism," whose purpose was to promote coexistence in the region and eliminate the type of violent racism that had developed within the country. Multiple initiatives were started in order to promote tolerance in communities throughout the Czech Republic. The most basic and earliest of these was a library-book propagation plan, which donated books that pertained to minority issues and celebrated diversity and tolerance messages.<sup>17</sup> "Common Ride" was another government-created program aimed at coexistence. In this initiative, four-person groups of youth from different nationalities traveled the country, visiting secondary schools and apprentice centers. These visits served in many cases as the first face-to-face meetings with people of other races, and had a marked impression on children.<sup>18</sup> Those initiatives, however, were not carried on following Vaclav Klaus's ascension to power in 2003.

Finally, another recent set of initiatives has focused on combating expressions of racism and violence. The Czech Inter-ministerial Commission for Combating Extremism, Racism, and Xenophobia was formed in 2001 to create and sustain a working relationship between the government, self-governing bodies, and the Czech police force. Activities include monitoring Internet sites, creation of a hotline to report extremist activity, and increased focus on policing hate crimes.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Czech Civil Society*

With the right-wing government of Vaclav Klaus currently in power, the job of tackling racism and stereotypes and teaching tolerance has fallen primarily upon Czech civil society. One example of this effort is the work of the well-known humanitarian organization People in Need. The organization conducts tolerance-education programs throughout the Czech Republic, through the public school system as well as through wider community events.<sup>20</sup>

Coexistence Village, an experimental housing project in the northern Czech city of Ostrava, is a response to both

housing discrimination and a natural disaster that left most of the city's residents homeless. The village, a low-cost housing option for the multi-ethnic population, was the fruit of one particular man's labor.<sup>21</sup> Kumar Vishwanathan, an Indian activist who came to Ostrava in 1997, has fostered relationships within the flood-ravaged city. Focusing on intercommunal dialogue and small acts of trust, over the past ten years Vishwanathan has helped Romany settlers build cultural bridges with officials and their neighbors. The result has been a rare case of community collaboration and cross-cultural understanding, and a model for future initiatives.

Other initiatives from non-governmental and non-profit organizations range from responsible media campaigns to youth education. One high-profile minority-rights organization working within the Czech Republic is the European Roma Right Centre (ERRC). As noted before, the ERRC has provided significant training and an activist voice for the Roma population.

Gradual shifts in societal opinions have also affected the coexistence situation in the Czech Republic. The first high-profile Roma newscaster, Ondrej Gina, has made a large impact on dispelling stereotypes about the Roma.<sup>22</sup> Inch by inch, small acts of acceptance and understanding have helped to move the situation of minority rights into a more positive place.

#### *External*

In 1997, as the Czech Republic negotiated for acceptance into the EU, governance moved from an internal affair to an externally monitored endeavor. With the lure of EU accession came many demands to further "Europeanize" the nation, and that has arguably been the biggest impetus for reform in the Czech Republic's minority policy. Previously, little was done to address the serious problems in the treatment of the Roma population, and minority-rights legislation in any capacity was non-existent. As a condition of accession into the EU, the Czech Republic was forced to adopt anti-discrimination laws and policies.<sup>23</sup>

Also as a condition of its membership in the European Union, the Czech Republic must report to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). In 2004, the group lauded the nation's efforts to fight discrimination and violence, as well as its national plan to integrate the Roma minority. However, ECRI also pointed to a number of disturbing trends, including the ghettoization of Roma on the outskirts of cities, ill-treatment of Roma by police, and the disproportionate number of Roma children attending schools for those with disabilities.<sup>24</sup> ECRI and Amnesty International have both called for more

to be done to combat racism and violence in less developed and rural areas, where the majority of violence seems to be occurring.<sup>25</sup>

As a signatory to the United Nations' International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Czech Republic is subject to monitoring on its treatment of minorities and its inclusion of all populations within its borders. Through periodic reports, the Czech Republic is obligated to give a complete summary of the state of affairs with regards to human rights. The so-called "internationalization of legal standards" is exhibited through such treaties, and joining the international community through participation in such institutions brings a level of respectability and national pride to the Czech Republic. This search for legitimacy in the eyes of the international community is a compelling reason for the nation to adopt minority-rights policies.

## Complementary Approach

Implementing a complementary approach to promote coexistence in the Czech Republic would require a number of actors to become engaged in cross-sector collaboration. While there have been numerous initiatives implemented to address minority inclusion, there exists a deficit in enforcement and assessment to bolster the effectiveness of such policies. For the Czech government, the necessity for a unified voice on issues of coexistence is critical. Some officials have openly made statements undermining the seriousness of minority rights policy, while others have flatly ignored the need to promote unity within the population. While previous governments have undertaken the challenge of minority rights legislation, the current conservative administration has eased on its enforcement and creation of new vehicles for minority rights. Positive changes are happening, as well. Judicial representatives have been increasingly aware of the need to prosecute those who commit crimes in the name of ethnic identity. Increased positive media attention towards minorities, especially the Roma, is breaking down barriers and increasing interethnic interactions. Oppressive citizenship laws are being overturned, and the influence of the EU is moving the country in the right direction in terms of coexistence.

For all of the initiatives, better monitoring and evaluation of the structures already in place is crucial. The proliferation of NGOs throughout the Czech Republic has contributed to the increase in focus on minority-rights issues. At the same time, there are many competing efforts carried out by NGOs that would benefit from better communication. Government initiatives must be monitored in localities with

socioeconomically burdened populations to ensure that socioeconomic problems do not boil over into ethnic scapegoating. Finally, the European Union must increase its monitoring of initiatives pertaining to the "Decade of Roma Inclusion." The program demands better integration efforts of all participating countries for their Roma populations. The EU needs to make certain that the Czech Republic is adequately meeting the challenge. The Czech Republic is a nation of promise in regards to its coexistence efforts, and with better communication and monitoring, a more stable state of coexistence with positive interethnic dialogue can be realized.

## Conclusion

Still, questions remain about how these policies will be implemented and how effective they will be. How involved will the EU be in shaping minority-rights policy? Following the completion of the "Decade of Roma Inclusion," begun in 2005 by nine countries in Central and Southeastern Europe, where will the state of Czech-Roma relations be? What exactly does an integrated but respected Roma minority look like?

The future success of Czech coexistence hinges upon the nature of external pressure from the EU and the proactiveness of Czech civil society. With the incentives and structure offered by the EU, there is some recourse for those minorities who continue to suffer discrimination, humiliation, and violence. At the moment, the situation of the Roma is still dire, and racist violence has not seen a significant decrease. As an outcropping of dissatisfaction with unemployment and the "blight" of Roma villages, politicians have either taken a proactive stance against the Roma, or have skirted the issue entirely. With the current right-wing government of President Klaus in power, and set to secure a second term, the political options from within the nation seem slim.

The Czech Republic is a nation of contradictions. The highly conservative government enjoys a 71 percent approval rating,<sup>26</sup> yet in 2006, the Czech Republic became the first post-Communist nation to allow same-sex marriages.<sup>27</sup> With such disparate examples of public opinion on social issues and human rights, only time and political pressure can reveal the true measure of societal stability and pluralism within the Czech Republic.

## Endnotes

- 1 Roma or Romani refers to an ethnic group found in many places all over the world, with a significant proportion of the world's population living in Central or Eastern Europe, frequently in squatter communities with very high unemployment rates ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roma\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roma_people))
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## About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

### What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

### About the Series

In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

## Other CI Publications

### Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

*What is Coexistence and Why a Complementary Approach?*

*Focus on Coexistence and the Arts*

*Focus on Coexistence and Democracy-building*

*Focus on Coexistence and Natural Resources*

*Focus on Coexistence and Security*

With this publication series, CI examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

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