

Senate

ROMA BRIDGE BUILDING

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OF MARYLAND

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Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, at the end of January, something remarkable happened: Slovak Deputy Prime Minister Rudolf Chmel made a positive statement about Roma . Saying something nice about Europe's largest ethnic minority may not seem newsworthy, but it is and here is why.

The Deputy Prime Minister reacted to an escalation of anti-Roma rhetoric in the runup to Slovakia's March 10 parliamentary elections by calling on political parties not to play the ``Roma card." But more than that, he welcomed a landmark decision of the European Court on Human Rights holding that the sterilization of a Slovak Romani woman without her consent had been cruel and inhuman. He welcomed the findings of a Slovak court that concluded Romani children had been placed in segregated schools in eastern Slovakia. And he commended the human rights organization that had helped litigate both these cases.

To say that statements like these are few and far between is an understatement. On the contrary, officials at the highest levels of government frequently perpetuate the worst bigotry against Roma.

For example, after four perpetrators were convicted and sentenced for a racially motivated firebombing that left a Romani toddler burned over 80 percent of her body, Czech President Vaclav Klaus wondered if their 20-plus-year sentences were too harsh. Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi suggested that Roma were ``physiologically" disposed to crime. Last year, President Silvio Berlusconi warned the electorate of Milan to vote for his party lest their city become a ``Gypsyopolis." And French President Nicolas Sarkozy has explicated targeted Roma --from EU countries--for expulsion from France. The common thread in most of this rhetoric is the portrayal of Roma as inherently criminal.

Nearly 20 years ago in the New York Times--Dec. 10, 1993--Vaclav Havel described the treatment of Roma as a litmus test for civil society. Today, Europe is still failing that test miserably. As Hungary's Minister for Social Inclusion Zoltan Balog has argued, Roma are worse off today than they were under communism. While a small fraction of Roma have benefited from new opportunities, many more have been the absolute losers in the transition from the command-to-a market economy, and vast numbers live in a kind of poverty that the United Nations Development Programme described as more typically found in sub-Saharan Africa than Europe. Endemic discrimination has propelled economic marginalization downward at an exponential pace, and the past 20 years have been marked by outbreaks of hate crimes and mob violence against Roma that are on the rise again.

In the current environment, those who play with anti-Roma rhetoric are playing with a combustible mix.

In the near term, there is the real prospect that fueling prejudice against Roma will spark interethnic violence. Before Bulgaria's local elections last October, the extremist Ataka party parlayed an incident involving a Romani mafia boss into anti-Romani rioting in some 14 towns and cities. In the Czech Republic, the government has had to mount massive shows of law enforcement to keep anti-Roma mobs from degenerating into all-out pogroms; it worked so far, but at a huge cost.

Significantly, Roma are not always standing by while the likes of the Hungarian Guard mass on their doorsteps; they have sometimes gathered sticks, shovels, scythes, and anything else handy in an old-school defense.

Even without the prospect of violence, there is a longer term threat to many countries with larger Romani populations: if they fail to undertake meaningful integration of Roma, they will find their economies hollowed out from within. More than a decade ago, then-Hungarian Minister of Education Zoltan Pokorni said that one out of every three children starting school that year would be Romani. Some economic forecasts now suggest that by 2040, 40 percent of the labor force in Hungary will be Romani. A number of other countries face similar trajectories.

A desperately impoverished, uneducated, and marginalized population will not serve as the backbone of a modern and thriving economy. But several studies have shown that the cost of investing in the integration of Roma --housing, education, and job training and the like--will be more than offset by gains in GNP and tax revenue. In order to undertake those integration policies, somebody has to build popular support for them. And that is where Mr. Chmel comes in.

Until now, most popular discourse about Roma seems predicated on the ostrich-like belief that perhaps they can be made to go away. Few politicians have shown the courage and foresight to reframe public discourse in any way that acknowledges Europe's future will definitely include Roma. Mr. Chmel has taken an important step in that direction. I hope he will inspire others.