



# HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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## Testimony :: The Hon. Monika Horakova

**M.P. - Czech Parliament**

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Testimony of The Honorable Monika Horakova, M.P.

"Human Rights of the Romani Minority"

June 8, 2000

I am here to tell you about the serious situation the Romani people are facing in Eastern Europe.

Two years ago I had the opportunity of visiting the United States at the invitation of the USIA. Here, in the U.S., I learned a lot about the history of the struggle for human rights. This experience became the framework for my understanding of the situation of the Romani people in Eastern Europe today. I shall be speaking primarily about the Czech Republic and the experience of the Romani people there, but I know that my conclusions could be applied to the situation in much of Eastern Europe and in a number of other countries as well.

I wanted to start on a positive note, so I was trying to find an area, where the situation of the Romani people is good, but it was not an easy task. Our birth rate, as one example, is still fairly good, but even this has been affected by the forced sterilization of Romani women under the communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia. Thankfully, this of course has ceased with the destruction of communism but there continue to be many other forms of mistreatment, discrimination and prejudice against the Romani people, which went on under the communist regime and unfortunately persist today.

In the last ten years we have made some positive progress in changing the way the general Czech populace views us. If we accuse them of having racist attitudes, they don't like it anymore. They now recognize that it is wrong to be racist. But if you ask them why they discriminate against Romani people, they will tell you that they have nothing against the Roma in general, but nevertheless they regard the vast majority of Romani people as thieves, crooks, uneducated, dirty, etc, and therefore believe they deserve the discrimination to which they are subjected. This attitude is common not only among ordinary people, but can be found also among the political elites.

Just imagine that you are going to dinner or to a club and when you try to enter, the bouncer or doorman man comes along and tells you that Romani people are not allowed into this establishment. There are no signs prohibiting Romani people from entering anymore, but the unwritten rule still applies in many places. We have seen this type of discrimination in other places and in other times, both in Europe and North America, but sadly it lives on today in Eastern Europe.

When this experience had happened to me one time too many times, I took them to court. I initiated a criminal prosecution of the owner of the Orpheus club in Brno. However, the state prosecutor in Brno rejected my suit

on the basis that no valid laws were broken. I later won a landmark victory, at least as far as the Czech Republic goes, and subsequently was awarded about \$7,500 in damages in a civil court, but I know that I will have to wait a long time before I collect this award, if I ever do. In the event that I do, I have decided to devote the money to the construction of decent residences for orphaned (Romani) children.

Like other minorities who experience widespread and ongoing prejudice, the Romani of Eastern European are vastly under-represented in political life, even where exist institutions specifically for dealing with Roma issues.

For example in the case of the Czech republic I am the only Roma Member of Parliament. I was elected as a citizen of the Czech Republic, not as a representative of the Roma people. For a person to become a Member of Parliament in our republic, she or he must join a political party, which in its turn must gain at least five percent of the total vote before it can hold a seat in Parliament. This means that if the Romani try to get into Parliament by forming their own political party, they will have no chance because the Romani community forms only three percent of the population of the Czech Republic.

In this respect, we should note, that there is no Roma representative in either the 150 member Slovak Parliament or among Hungary's 386 Members of Parliament. Only one individual who identifies himself as a Roma serves in Bulgaria's National Assembly. Only one self-identified Roma in the Romanian Parliament was elected as a representative of a Romani association to a reserved minority seat.

The prospects for Romani political candidates are somewhat better at the local levels of government - at least in districts where Romani voters constitute a majority. But even here, too, the picture is one of significant under-representation.

I am working to find a good and effective way to improve the present bleak situation of the Romani minority in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. One way to improve the situation, in my view, is to involve the Romani in public life.

We would of course love to receive financial assistance for our cause from the US to help deal with the situation of the Romani people, but lets face facts, the US Congress is already spending significant funds to help Easter European countries democratize and retake their rightful place in the modern world. The US and its partners have been very generous in this regard. However, we should remind ourselves that all around the world the US government makes its developmental assistance to other countries dependant on their human rights performance. Why would the same conditions not apply to US assistance to Eastern Europe regarding the treatment of its minorities and, in particular, the treatment being given to the long-suffering Romani people? Adding such a rider to assistance for Eastern Europe would be an easy and obvious way to persuade Eastern European governments that they should deal with this issue now if they wish to be regarded as governing truly democratic societies - and there would be no additional cost to the US taxpayers, but you would know that justice is being served.

The US Congress has funded many programs for leadership training, for building and strengthening political parties, and for programs which monitor elections throughout Central Europe. While maintaining these programs, it is important to ensure that the Romani people as individuals, and as a community are actively involved and included in these programs. We are not looking for special, preferential arrangements like quotas; we just want to be part of the national dialogue and the electoral process, no more and no less, and, of course, as part of this process, we want to see the general public educated such that the old stereotypes are abandoned and the Romani people are able to live as equals, without discrimination, in their own countries.

The situation of the Romani and Sinti people in Eastern Europe is off the radar screen for most of the US media and therefore may not appear to be such a serious problem for many Americans either. For that reason, I welcome this opportunity to appear here and to remind you that there is a serious problem, which needs to be dealt with as soon as possible, because it is the right thing to do. The US has fought and overcome the legacy of years of discrimination in its own country. Please help the Romani of Eastern Europe do the same in our countries so that we can say we live in real democracies without the disfigurement of racism and discrimination. Thank you.