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## The stench of a holy ground: a reflection on the politics behind the pig farm – Holocaust memorial in Lety

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During last month's annual commemoration at the site of the Roma concentration camp in Lety, the US ambassador to the Czech Republic [declared the place a holy ground](#). Despite the cool and breezy day, the stench from the industrial pig farm, which covers over 90% of the camp site, served as a constant reminder of the long-running tensions between successive Czech governments and Roma activists on what constitutes a proper memorial. Many Roma perceive the refusal of the governments to relocate the pig farm not simply as a matter of indifference but as a symbol of the relationship of the Czech state and society with its Roma minority.

The situation reflects a wider tendency across Europe to overlook the Roma Holocaust as evidenced by the scarcity of signs that remind us of the places where over half a million people perished and by the overwhelming absence of details in history books and museums about the *Porajmos*. In the Czech Republic, in particular, there is little awareness of the numerous 'Gypsy' camps, which used to cover Bohemia and Moravia. What is even less known in Czech society is that the establishment and the operation of these camps were authorized by the Czechoslovak Government on its own initiative, prior to the Nazi occupation. Extensive research by Roma activist and author, Paul Polansky, and lawyer, Markus Pape, suggests that these camps were run by Czech guards under the direction of the Department of Interior [without German involvement](#). In Lety, approximately 300 children died; many of them were drowned by Czech supervisors in the nearby pond, which served as [the only water source](#) for the camp's population.



*The commemorative plaque for Roma children*

It is questionable whether raising awareness about these details will garner the popular support needed for the removal of the farm in a society in which Nazi marches in Roma localities have become commonplace. The term 'inadaptable', used by the Third Reich, has been employed freely by elected officials at the local and national levels, and opposition to inclusion of Romani children in mainstream education continues to hamper government efforts to close loopholes in the existing legislation. As a result, non-disabled Romani pupils are channeled into separate schools for children with mental disabilities. In fact, the absence of substantial domestic pressure for a dignified memorial and the potential backlash against the pig farm buyout are among the main reasons behind the hesitancy of every post-1993 government to remedy the situation.

Widespread domestic opposition has successfully prevailed over international pressure and the demands of a tiny domestic lobby headed by the Committee for the Redress of the Romani Holocaust (VPORH) and the civic association Konexe. Pressure exercised from above has been inconsistent and has relied on the political goodwill of the state. This is exemplified by two non-binding resolutions issued by the European Parliament in 2005 and 2009 and two farm relocation calls by the [CoE Human Rights Commissioner in 2011 and the UN Human Rights Committee in 2013](#). Furthermore, the domestic activist lobby has been able to garner support for the cause only from political figures like the Czech Commissioner or Minister of Human Rights who traditionally have played a peripheral role.

Activist attempts to raise awareness of the issue through protests highlight the difficulty of persuading Czech society to accept the Roma Holocaust. This weekend's protests coordinated by Konexe, which blockaded the highway leading to the farm, underscored the societal non-receptivity and outright hostility toward Roma-related causes. According to the activists' accounts, drivers stopped and respected the blockade until they realised what the protest was for, after which the drivers proceeded to accelerate their cars [forcing the protesters to end the blockade](#). Such situations serve as powerful deterrents against actions that would align the Czech position with international normative standards that safeguard Holocaust memorials.



*Holocaust memorial*

At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that all governments have approached the Lety situation in a uniform manner. The previous governments of Josef Tošovský, Miloš Zeman, and Vladimír Špidla publicly declared their intentions to have the farm removed and comprehensive assessments were done under the leadership of former Human Rights Minister Džamila Stehlíková and her successor Michael Kocáb whose team managed to secure state funding for a [small memorial at the edge of the complex](#). On the opposite end, the discourse popularized by former President Klaus from 2003 until 2013, which presents Lety not as a place of genocide but of a [camp for people who 'refused to work'](#) has done considerable damage by craftily creating powerful analogies between Roma Holocaust victims and today's popular perceptions of Roma as a collective burden on 'decent Czech citizens' and *their* social assistance system. Arguments related to the lack of funds from the state budget for the buyout are based on outdated price assessments.

Opposing messages by the representatives of the newly established centre-left government at last month's commemoration service point at a continuous lack of consensus on the situation. Prime Minister Sobotka and Culture Minister Herman tried to keep the fragile status quo by remaining silent on the fate of the farm and speaking in general terms about the Nazi genocide against the Romani people. On the other hand, Human Rights Minister Dienstbier attempted to bring up an alternative discourse by raising the relocation issue and briefly remarking on Czech complicity in the Lety atrocities. For the foreseeable future, however, the marginalisation of an alternative discourse will continue. During his comments after the commemoration,

PM Sobotka played down the situation, framing the buyout as requiring massive financial resources without citing specifics. It appears that even under the new government, which is perceived as progressive and affirming the fundamental rights of all Czech citizens, the farm will remain as a powerful statement of latent racism and the stench over the holy ground will linger.

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