

SEARCH FOR A COMMON SYMBOL

The exhibition of Tomáš Rfa has been surrounded in controversy since its inception. The artistic design symbolizing peaceful Czech-Roma co-existence gained great publicity in the media, but also set off a wave of protest. Many even erroneously considered it to be the official design for a new flag. Internet discussions on the gallery web pages and the server aktuálně.cz, where the public could vote, were filled with hateful racist sentiments. When the media falsely informed the public that this was the new Roma flag, it aroused resistance within the Czech Roma community. Even several artists criticized the project. According to them, the controversy over the flag was fanning the flames of Czech anti-Roma sentiment and distracting attention from more important issues.

Tomáš Rfa received an official criminal charge; the flags were sprayed with paint and disgraced with swastikas. At the end of 2013, a conclusion by the City Hall of Prague 7 found the artist guilty of committing a legal violation, specifically the abuse of Czech state symbols, and a fine was demanded from him. State violation authorities began proceedings based on information from sympathizers of the extreme Workers Party of Social Justice, successor to the legally banned Worker's Party (the informer was previously a candidate for this party). Ironically, it was precisely the misuse of Czech flags on neo-Nazi marches that Tomáš Rfa's exhibition criticized.

The artist himself commented on the decision with the following: "I have been watching the growing hatred towards minorities for a long time and I am drawing attention to that in my artwork. It is sad that, instead of working on a solution to this situation, state institutions are focusing on the prosecution of my work." Following a drawn-out legal process, the legal matter died when the period for a decision lapsed (the charges were pressed and dropped two times).

In February 2014 the artist exhibited the Czech-Roma flags in the gallery Art Space at Anglo-American University. Shortly after the exhibition opening Czech police visited it on the basis of an informer and confiscated three of the seven exhibited Czech-Roma flags. Police engaged the issue for the City Hall of Prague 1, which had begun proceedings on suspicion of a committed offense. In December 2014, however, the proceedings stopped with a clear conclusion that "the action which is the subject of the proceedings is not a criminal offense" with the reasoning that the activities of the accused neither violated nor threatened the interests of society, which is the essential so-called material criteria of a violation.

During that time the flag entered the public domain and was used by activists at several demonstrations. In January 2015, when Tomáš Rfa picked up his confiscated flags from the City Hall of Prague 1, a new case arose concerning the Czech-Roma flag. At a gathering organized in protest against an anti-Islamic demonstration the police detained activists for carrying Czech-Roma flags. Although the police later released the activists, the case was another illustration of police turning a blind eye to the open expression of xenophobia and racism and focusing on subduing people with opposing opinions.

The presented vision of the co-existence of white and black Czechs has its own significance. Although the actual discussion was by far not as audible as the shouts about "defiling the state flag", racist outpouring and xenophobic sentiments concerning Rfa's Slovak origins, Czech-Roma co-existence was actually being discussed in connection with his project. Leaving aside the educational potential – the project caused many white Czechs to discover the existence of the international Roma flag – the exhibition also drew attention to several not very apparent aspects of Roma issues.

Misleading information that this was the actual Roma flag sharply demonstrated the blindness of the majority, who always view the problem as existing only on the side of the other. Seen through this

lens, the flag should have been intended for the Roma because it concerned them integrating into the majority of society. By shifting responsibility onto the minority, the members of the majority achieved the illusion that the problem of integration is a Roma problem and not a problem of society as a whole.

Simultaneously, the project has shown patriotism of Czech Roma. Miroslav Kováč, discussing with Tomáš Rafa and representatives of the gallery in Krupka, summed up this feeling for everyone. He emphasized that Roma are proud of their symbols, but at the same time feel that they are Czechs: “We have ties to this country. Our great-grandfathers spilled their blood for it. Our ancestors are buried here.” Unlike the approach of the so-called “nationalists”, who mask racism in their aggressive proclamation Czechness, Kováč’s informal speech between the panel walls of the “Roma” housing estate had all the features of actual patriotism, shaped by the experience of the dual cultural identity he blends within him.

The exhibition did not stop the wave of anti-Roma racism but it has not initiated it either. It just made the status quo visible. Certainly even in the future we will witness the misuse of state symbols by self-proclaimed “patriots”. Nevertheless, there is hope for a change, which will not be brought about by one work of art, but can it can contribute to the everyday emphasis on what unites the inhabitants of this country.

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