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Interethnic conflicts as a result of racial hatred ¹

2000 – 2001

ISBN 80-86008-94-0

Extended summary

This study deals with criminologically important aspects of conflicts between ethnically different individuals. The aim of the study is to collect relevant findings for criminological analysis of the problem of interethnic conflicts. It summarises the basic features of the current situation in the Czech Republic and in a number of selected countries, its basic causes, conditions and current possibilities and lines of approach for prevention. A selection of literature and other sources is given to contribute towards an explanation of the aetiology of the problem.

The subject of the survey is events where the target of attack (or mutual attacks and fights) is individuals (groups) with different ethnic characteristics (in particular differences in skin colour, nationality, language, origin, religion and so forth and/or with these characteristics relating to different ways of life), ie interethnic conflicts motivated by xenophobia, racism and intolerance towards those with different ethnic characteristics. These are xenophobically and racially motivated attacks against people because they are ethnically different.

The work reviews criminological aspects of these events, in particular (but not only) those which are the subject of interest of law enforcement agencies. In the Czech criminal law in force, this concerns especially facts of the following offences: § 198, defamation of a nation, race or belief, § 198a, incitement to national and racial hatred, § 260 and § 261, support and promotion of movements aimed at suppressing the rights and freedoms of citizens, but also other criminal offences with a racist context - § 196 paras 2 and 3 of the Criminal Code – violence against a group of people and against an individual, § 198 para. 1(a), § 219 para. 2(g) – murder, § 221 para. 2(b) of the Criminal Code – bodily harm, § 222 para. 2(b) of the Criminal Code – grievous bodily harm with intent. In the empirical part, other similarly motivated acts which were later not classified as criminal offences but resulted in endangering the rights of other persons to a greater or lesser extent will also be reviewed.

The work includes definition of basic terms (ethnicity, ethnic group, ethnic minority, xenophobia, tolerance, interethnic conflict). The theoretical part of the study aims to achieve a better understanding of the causes and context of the phenomenon examined.

Racist and xenophobic violence is understood in foreign and our own sources too as a complex web of phenomena, which cannot be reduced solely to acts connected with certain ideological or political motives. Each act has many dimensions and behind each is an individual person with the past, personality and environment in which he/she moves. Interethnic conflicts are often given an ideological slant by the police and politicians: where it is not entirely clear that the assailant is a racist or is not in a racist organisation, the incident is swept under the carpet as something that has nothing to do with racist violence.

¹ Štěchová, M. Interethnic conflicts as a result of racial hatred. Prague: ICSP, 2001. 55 pages. Summary.

The most common motivation for commission of a racially motivated offence is, according to the literature, simply xenophobic aversion, but also an aversion with an ideological colouring, connected with affiliation or sympathies with a racist organisation. From the psychological point of view, a need for acceptance by members of the same age group and identification with a group may play a role. For many offenders, particularly a large number of young people, attacks on ethnically different individuals, especially Roma, are emphasis of their image or expressing membership of their own age group rather than expression of a political view. Many of these young people have the feeling (often justified) that they are not accepted by their parents and are not recognised by their teachers or fellow students. They find their identity and self-realisation in the gang where they have their rank. Those committing this type of offence are mostly youths, the majority under the age of 25, and many of them juveniles. They have grown up in a dysfunctional or non-existent family. They mostly have a low level of education, therefore also low potential professional capability. Their frequent unemployment is linked with their social problems.

A subjective feeling of higher social status may play a motivating role in these offences. All of a sudden, the person is “somebody” among the young troublemakers: defenders of “national interests” in some cases, nationalists, racists in others, or daring adventurers in others. In addition, wearing skinhead uniforms signals an aggressive and violent image to those around and signals that this person has links and friendly relations with the strong. The unrecognised, derided and rejected boy suddenly has a feeling of respect from those around him and even senses they are afraid of him.

The influence of intoxicating substances also features. In gangs with which violent young people identify themselves alcohol is often drunk or other intoxicating substances are used. Under the influence of these substances young people compete in expressing hostility towards Roma and foreigners and show off to each other in thinking up what they could do to them. When arrested, many claim that they were led on by the others.

In the empirical part of the study, an introductory analysis is provided of offences motivated by racial or national intolerance committed in the Czech Republic in the period 1997 – 1999. This was prepared on the basis of documents of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic as progressively published in specialist Reports of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and on the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic website. These are “Reports on the procedure of state authorities in prosecuting criminal offences motivated by racism and xenophobia or committed by supporters of extremist groups”. These reports contain a summary of cases in which there was suspicion that the criminal offence or transgression was committed with an extremist implication, including cases motivated by racial and national intolerance, regardless of their final criminal law classification.

527 cases (46.4%) were selected from the total number of 1135 cases on the basic criterion that the offender and the victim of the offence with an extremist implication reviewed belonged to different ethnic groups and the motive for the offence was interethnic hatred. Conflicts between, for instance, skinheads and punks or anarchists were therefore not studied. Nor were potential interethnic conflicts when there was no clash between persons, but, for example, shouting of racist slogans, scrawling of Nazi and racist symbols and so on. We studied these acts only where they were an accompanying attribute of an interethnic attack.

The aim of the analysis was to gain a deeper understanding of the background of the cases studied, in particular those characteristics of offenders, victims and other circumstances of the offences which could be ascertained from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic material.

Cases were studied over the three year period. 139 offences were committed in 1997, which is 26.4% of all offences for the period we studied, 192 offences (36.4%) in 1998 and 196 offences (37.2%) in 1999.

No final conclusions can be drawn from these three years, but it seems that the tendency for this type of offence to occur is growing slightly. If we take into consideration that in all cases this concerns clashes between an assailant and a victim, the number of these offences is relatively high and may create an atmosphere of fear in society. Many of these cases are featured in the media and some receive coverage over quite a considerable period. So these cases are known about and people talk about them. Fear and alarm are created especially among the Roma.

The wide spread of offences over the former regions is interesting. The absolute and relative numbers would be misleading in view of the different sizes of the regions. For this reason the data were recalculated in terms of indexes, ie the number of offences reported in terms of the number of inhabitants in the region. A significantly higher number of offences occur in the former North Bohemia region (83, which is 15.7% of all racial offences in the period, and when recalculated amounts to 0.70 offences per 10,000 inhabitants), whereas on the other hand Central Bohemia and West Bohemia have lower numbers of offences (32 in Central Bohemia, which corresponds to 6.1% and 0.29% of offences per 10,000 inhabitants, and 31 in West Bohemia, ie 5.9% of all racial offences and 0.36 offences per 10,000 inhabitants).

Data from individual districts provide an even more detailed picture. It was ascertained that the highest number of offences occurred over the three years reviewed in Brno (42). Other more seriously affected districts are Karviná (27), Písek (22), Bruntál (21), Trutnov (21), Ostrava (18), Ústí nad Labem (18), Břeclav (15), Kladno (15), Most (15), Prostějov (14), Plzeň (13), Prague 3 (13), Prague 8 (12), Zlín (11), Jeseník (11) and Prague 4 (10). In the other districts fewer than 10 interethnic conflicts were recorded.

Data for individual cities and towns provide us with yet another picture. Here as expected Prague dominates (69 cases) and somewhat surprisingly Brno (42). There are relatively high numbers in the larger cities and towns of Ostrava (18), Ústí nad Labem (17), Písek (14), Plzeň (12), Trutnov (11), Kladno (10) and Most (10). Noteworthy among the smaller towns are Krnov (12), Havířov (7) and Dvůr Králové nad Labem (6 cases).

We also ascertained the places where these offences occurred. Most frequently, as expected, interethnic conflicts were in public open spaces (371 cases, ie 70.4%), and less often in enclosed areas. To complete the picture, we also recorded the times when individual offences were committed. Offences were somewhat more frequent in the autumn months of October (54, 10.2%) and November (57, 10.8%), but the differences are too small to allow for any interpretation. As regards days of the week, interethnic conflicts occurred more often on non-working days (on average 60 conflicts were committed per working day and ca 90 conflicts per non-working day). (60 x 5, 90 x 2). Also the time offences were committed may be of practical significance for certain offences – these occurred predominantly in the evening (121, 43.2%).

Offenders and victims

Further findings concentrated on the circumstances of offences in terms of the features of offenders and victims. We reviewed each offence involving at most three offenders and three victims in more depth. Where there were more offenders or victims we took into account only the size of the group of offenders or the total number of victims.

An interesting item of information is the size of a group of offenders. Approximately half of offenders (53.3%) committed an offence alone, and the rest jointly. Groups most often consisted of two to three persons (86 and 89 groups respectively). Large groups, in which there were more than 10 persons, are rather few (12 groups). Also there were relatively few groups of 4 – 10 persons (59). For this reason we ascertained more detailed information on offenders where three were named (in the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic reports first of all).

The summary shows most of those committing this type of offence are male (91.7%, 97%, 95.6%) aged between 15 and 25 (66%, 81.8%, 89.3%).

Understandably, we attempted to record further data on the assailants. This data is rather of an indicative nature, which follows from the way it is recorded by the Police of the Czech Republic. The data given below can be described as follows:

Of the total number of 441 “white” offenders (83.8%), 102 were found and stated to be members of the skinhead movement and 4 members of the punk movement. 83 offenders (15.7%) were recorded by the Police of the Czech Republic as Roma.

The most common offenders are not members of the skinhead movement as generally believed but Czech citizens of non-Roma origin (63.4%, 52.3%, 45.9%) for whom the Police of the Czech Republic recorded no membership of any extremist movement. The question is to what extent the data in the documentation from which we took it is accurate. Of course if we allow for omissions and imprecision, including later reclassification by a court, it seems that most offenders are people who are not members of what are called extremist groups.

The typical offender is therefore a male aged between 15 and 25, a Czech citizen, not Roma and with no record of membership of an extremist organisation.

Noteworthy too is the relatively high number of Roma (15.7%, 15.9%, 16.4%) who were designated as offenders. These are mostly Roma who assaulted skinheads, sometimes police officers, and in a few isolated cases ordinary members of the public majority. It is clear from the cases that hatred between the antagonists arose from xenophobic and racist characteristics. It is difficult for us to discover the primary element from such limited information.

Victims

To be the victim of (confronted with) violence may be an extremely traumatising experience. To become the target of racial harassment or racial violence for reasons of difference – racial, national or because of ethnic origin – may be devastating for the person’s sense of self worth. Even what are referred to as less serious forms of racial harassment, such as jeering, pointing of fingers, refusal of access to publicly available space or other discrimination, or being ignored and being treated as a “nobody” may systematically undermine the personal feeling of

human dignity. Some individuals from ethnic minorities are quite indifferent to attacks on them but take attacks against their families very hard.

In our analysis of cases recorded by the Police of the Czech Republic there were a number of characteristics of victims. Again we reviewed only the first three victims mentioned in the reports.

Victims of interethnic conflicts were in the majority of cases also male (82.7%, 83.3%, 86.1% of the first three victims reviewed). The reason is the type of offences studied: the majority were direct physical assaults in the street or in a restaurant. Women (and children) were victims in those cases where, for instance, a family was attacked in its flat and so on.

The age of victims was somewhat higher than that of offenders; this is particularly evident in the juvenile and young adult categories. Nevertheless, we find a fair number of children (7.8%, 14.7%, 15.4%) in the role of victim. In a further grouping it was found that these children were in most cases attacked together with adults, probably parents or relatives.

The most frequent victims of racially motivated violence in the Czech Republic are Roma (345, ie 65.5%). This is certainly not a surprising finding, it is a sad fact. However, there are a fair number of “white” victims (91, 17.25%) and foreign victims (91, 17.25%). Cases of attacks against Jews, most of whom do not have a different skin colour, would merit closer attention.

We were also interested in what actually happened in the case of the racial offences studied. We discovered that:

- most frequently verbal aggression occurred (in 471, ie 89.4%, of the cases studied)
- physical violence was present in 318 cases, which is 60.3%
- in a smaller number of cases (86, 16.3%) we noted shouting of various slogans, mostly with a racial or nationalistic content, and the writing of such slogans (27, 5.1%)
- in a very small number of cases offenders were bearing Nazi symbols (11, 2.1%)

We attempted to record the consequences of the offences analysed. For these results it is necessary to bear in mind again that we are mostly dealing with a first description of an offence, and rather different or more detailed information could be yielded from further investigation.

In this phase of the investigation, injury was the result found most frequently in the offences studied (126, 23.9%). We also noted two cases of death resulting from injury.

The occurrence of other features such as whether there was an affray (29, 5.5%) or damage to something (61, 11.6%) was not very common, but this is connected with the limited police information available.

In conclusion, it can be stated that interethnic conflicts are a grave result of intolerance between people. The deepest causes of the phenomenon probably lie in human nature itself – in antagonism against anyone different, ie in “natural” xenophobia and the protection of “one’s own” territory. From the aetiology it is known that such behaviour can be observed among animals too. In human society this type of instinct – in contrast to animal communities – has ceased to fulfil its function. Human society rather uses observation of certain rules of

behaviour for survival, which suppress certain natural instincts and aggressiveness in the interests of the weaker members of society. These rules are usually termed societal norms, and legal norms form part of these as well.

Interethnic conflicts are therefore failure to respect societal and legal norms. Their manifestations and results lie on a wide scale from children jeering at a fellow pupil with a darker skin colour through attacks on ethnically different fellow citizens in the street up to murder with racial motives. For this reason society should in its own interests tend to refine and restrict this type of xenophobic emotions.

Relations between the majority population and ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic can definitely not be regarded as ideal. Problematic relations between ethnic groups are not a specifically Czech characteristic – they exist to a greater or lesser degree everywhere in the world, and all societies have to handle them in such a way that they do not spill over into more serious conflicts, such as racial and ethnic wars.

In democratic countries, manifestations of intolerance, xenophobia and racism are carefully monitored and transgressions in most cases severely punished. In all countries, including the Czech Republic, the problem is to a greater or lesser extent lack of conformity between the documentary declarations against racism and discrimination and the opinions of the population. Even in states with a long democratic tradition people with xenophobic attitudes are found and groups appear which manifest violence against ethnically different groups and immigrants.

Prevention of these phenomena is complicated for many reasons. Not only is a disposition to this type of behaviour clearly innate, but also the first formative patterns are perceived by children of pre-school age in the family. Furthermore, the family is, as is known, a difficult environment for preventive activities to penetrate. Prevention of interethnic conflicts must be viewed with a broad perspective – through carefully thought out education in all spheres – from the family through school - with the aim of integrating all people into civil society. Prevention must be aimed at both offenders and victims.

Together with education, legislation needs to be improved, even though there are no major problems in the current state of the law - this is comparable in this field with European Union legislation. The problems lie primarily in proving these offences. For this type of offence the importance of repressive elements stands out.

Xenophobia, prejudices and racism will probably be a feature of human society in the future too. Despite this and precisely for this reason it is necessary to utilise all known possibilities, experience and legal means in the fight against the occurrence of racial and ethnic violence. In selection of suitable approaches, it will be helpful to draw inspiration from experience abroad and, based on analyses of the situation, to create preventive programmes in the Czech Republic derived from the reality here.