

Incendiarism as a misdemeanour

One morning in September somebody set on fire our cottage. By chance, professional firemen, which were spending their holiday in the neighbouring pension, noticed the fire and managed to extinguish it before the wooden building burned down. When we arrived to the place, the Police was already there. The investigator showed us a cavity above the back entrance where the fire was set on. After the investigator had found out that the building was not insured against fire, his first and only working hypothesis had to be abandoned. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the fire was raised intentionally.

After nearly two months of alleged investigation the police closed the case as an infringement of the safety rules without specifying what rules were broken, or how they were broken. In fact, we did not seriously expect the police would identify the culprit but the classification of incendiarism as a mere infringement of the safety rules, i.e., the lowest grade of offence, which deserves at most a fine, was really shocking. Therefore, we filed a protest to the state's attorney arguing that fire-raising has always been a serious crime, certainly not something like a driving offence and must be classified accordingly. We also pointed out that the fire might threaten not only our cottage but also the wood around and the neighbouring pension. It was only a lucky coincidence that the firemen were at hand very soon.

The attorney decided that the case must be re-classified and sent it back to the Police. In the second turn the Police re-classified the case as a crime of causing damage to other person's property. This was again an underestimation because they did not take into account the apparent threat to the neighbourhood.

This blatant case illustrates a more general tendency of Czech Police to underestimate the classification of crimes in the endeavour to improve the statistics of unresolved crimes.