

The Rise of the Radical Right in Europe and the Case of Hungary: 'Gypsy crime' defines national identity?

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ABSTRACT *Katalin Halasz looks at the impact of the profound political, economic and social changes that have swept across Europe. She argues that there is a new wave of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that has propped up the extreme and radical right on the margins of politics, but also increasingly in the mainstream. She focuses on the worrying implications of the growing escalation in violence against Roma in South and Central-eastern Europe, and the chilling call for a 'decisive solution to the Roma problem' in Hungary, which openly embraces anti-Gypsism.*

KEYWORDS *xenophobia; racism; anti-semitism; immigration; ethnicity*

Introduction

Profound political, economic and social changes that have swept across Europe in the last decades exacerbated clashes between democratic norms and values and radical right ideologies that flourish on the soil of rapid changes and growing anxieties. Fears of the effects of globalization and social tensions evoked by the awareness of Europe as a continent of migration have paved the way for a new wave of identity politics and scapegoat ideologies. Political formations and social movements have emerged that oppose further modernization, European integration and immigration, and promote the idea of homogeneous nation-states and the rejection of pluralistic democracies. This sentiment is propagating a new wave of contemporary forms of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and is often used by the extreme and radical right on the margins of politics but also increasingly in the mainstream and even within government in order to gain popularity and votes.

Increasing xenophobia and negative public discourse

The proliferation of right-wing political movements, and growing numbers of acts of racist and xenophobic violence against Roma, North Africans, Muslims and Jews (just to name a few) occur in a political environment that employs a utilitarian and

short-term approach to immigration, whereby migrants will come to Europe for a few years, contribute to the economy and leave before they become a 'burden'.¹ In addition to its economic contribution, immigration has also been discussed in relation to challenges of demography as offering an evident solution to problems generated by ageing populations. According to estimates, currently 18.5 million people with a migration background live in the territory of the European Union and immigration accounts for 80 percent of the population change today.² The lack of recognition and value placed on the contribution that can and is made to Europe's economy, society and culture by immigrants is a key feature of the debate. By creating a hierarchy between immigration statuses, those not defined as 'highly skilled', and thus not to settle in Europe, are excluded even from recognition of the economic value of immigration, denying society the fruits of their participation in civic, political, social, cultural and economic life.

The denial of rights to many migrants, including asylum-seekers, undocumented migrants and others, not only has a negative effect on the individuals concerned but also undermines social cohesion, which is further accelerated by the securitization of the migration agenda. The upsurge in terrorism and new political global tensions have fuelled an increasingly visible negative public perception of migration, and the fear of fundamentalism and Islam extremism has led to high levels of xenophobia in many EU countries, triggered anti-Islamic measures and further discrimination based on religion and ethnicity. Legal, policy and practice developments in the fight against terrorism have contributed to an environment whereby direct and indirect forms of discrimination are increasingly tolerated and even mandated in many areas of life.³

Discourse around racism and xenophobia increasingly centres on migrants and also impacts on the lives of settled religious and ethnic minorities. Many ethnic and religious minority groups have been affected by public perception and the negative debate on migration. The negative portrayal of migration by mainstream policy-makers, right-wing groups and by the mass media

through stereotypical language and negative images has led to a worrying increase in racism and xenophobia towards migrants and members of religious and ethnic minorities.

This has been the case in many European countries including Italy, where the arrival of Roma people from Romania was presented by both media and politicians as an invasion and a threat to the security of the Italian population. Racist sentiments in public discourse, excited by government officials, fuelled the climate of open hatred and racist violence against the Roma and Romanian nationals. The incident in Ponticelli, a district of Naples where, in May 2008, a Roma girl was accused of having attempted to kidnap a baby, was manipulated and used to amplify the perception of a sense of insecurity and fear.⁴ These incidents have led to increased xenophobic reactions to Roma and to a new decree proposed by the government on public security and a series of provisions that declared a 'state of emergency' in several parts of the country due to the presence of 'nomadic' communities (i.e. Roma). In early July 2009, a new security package was ratified that directly targets migrants and minorities.

The radical right on the rise across Europe

The general trend towards far-right populism and right-wing extremism is a present and growing force in Europe (Kober, 2009). With the upsurge of the radical right, racism becomes more socially accepted, racist crimes against migrants and minorities become justifiable under right-wing ideologies. The radical right is a complex phenomenon that must be investigated in the national context, but its importance and implications on Europe's diverse communities must be recognized. With a populist-nationalist agenda and by playing on sensitive issues such as immigration and Islam the radical right entered the European Parliament in June 2009. Far-right parties gained seats in Austria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Romania and the UK. A number of parties described by the national media as far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigration, xenophobic and racist formed a new far-right

Eurosceptic group, the Europe of Freedom and Democracy group under the leadership of the UK Independence Party. The reinforcement of the right and far-right populism in the European Parliament signals dangerous developments at the national levels.

Protecting true Hungarians against Gypsy petty criminals and Jewish state robbers

At the time of writing, a day after the International Remembrance Day of Roma Victims of the Pharraimos (Holocaust), a 45-year-old Roma QJ;woman was shot dead, and her 13-year-old daughter suffered life-threatening injuries when their house in the eastern Hungarian village of Kisléta was attacked overnight.⁵

'Based on investigation at the crime scene and earlier experiences, it is likely that this attack is part of a series of attacks on Roma', the national police said in a statement (Reuters, 2009). Between January 2008 and June 2009, attacks against the Roma took a combined total of eight lives, left dozens of people with injuries, ten of which were life-threatening.⁶ Anti-Romany sentiment escalated in the country after two murders allegedly carried out by groups of Roma in Olaszliszka in 2006 and in Veszprém in 2009. The house in Kisléta is located in the outskirts of town and was attacked in the middle of the night, without any apparent provocation. This pattern reflects other attacks against Roma over the past year. In February, in one of the most brutal attacks, Róbert Csorba and his five-year-old son Robika were shot dead when they attempted to flee their home that was set on fire with a Molotov cocktail in Tatárszentgyörgy. This was soon followed by the murder of Jenő Kóka in Tiszalök. The police, who have been heavily criticized by Hungarian NGOs on official misconduct in the Tatárszentgyörgy case, have set up a 100-men unit to investigate incidents of anti-Roma violence in the past year, offered a reward for information about the identity of the criminals involved in attacks, and tasked the National Investigation Office to take over the investigation (Index, 2009).

The escalation in violence against Roma in South and Central-eastern Europe has met a growing public sympathy calling for a 'decisive solution to the Roma problem' and openly embracing anti-Gypsism. In the Hungarian domestic political scene, nationalist and racist rhetoric specifically targeting the Roma, increased with and contributed to the rapid popularity and success of the Movement for a Righter/Better Hungary (Jobbik – Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom), the second generation of Hungarian nationalist radical party that emerged after the decline of the Hungarian Truth/Justice and Life Party (MIÉP – Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja), an influential radical-right force in the 1990s.

Hungary has a relatively low immigration rate and a largely homogeneous population. The estimated 400,000–600,000 Roma has been long subject to prejudice and segregation, and are among the hardest hit by the economic, social and political transformation of the country. Anti-Romany tension and anti-Semitism have had a widespread and strong presence in the country in the last centuries.⁷ Drawing on the disappointment over the process and outcome of the transition process in the 1990s, the Hungarian Truth/Justice and Life Party's traditional nationalist ideology (based on irredentism and the rejection of the Treaty of Trianon that set out the current borders of the country) was supported by the arguments that Jewish and American capital robbed the nation of its assets during the privatization process, and this conspiracy continues to date (through globalization and European integration), and that national purity is endangered by the higher reproduction rate of Roma/Gypsies.

Since the 2002 national elections, when MIÉP did not reach the threshold into parliament, the party went into a slow decline. Racist ideology and ethnic nationalism, however, gained new momentum again after the country's accession to the European Union, which 'put a provisional brake on right-wing radicalism' (Bayer, 2009: 285). Hungary's foreign and domestic policies that were characterized by the attempt to carve out its place in the international political arena and global capitalism on the one hand, and by the growing public disappointment and lethargy over

the government's performance that eventually led to violent street-riots in the autumn of 2006 on the other, paved the way for Jobbik and its repackaged old–new radicalism.

Through constructing an ideology that builds on the topics and elements propagated by MIEP (a blend of traditional irredentist and ethnic nationalism, xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism) and not shying away from provocative public actions and the use of autocratic symbols and snappy, easy to read slogans, and by recruiting young charismatic intellectuals as leaders, Jobbik could reach out to the segments of the Hungarian population that MIEP was not able to: the youth and the people living in the countryside. The reasons for its popularity among the young, 20–35 years old, university educated, mainly male supporters (Varró, 2009) can be traced back to the construction of a sense of belonging for people who seem to have their identity reduced only to be ethnic 'true Hungarians', and is based on a simplified ideology and a common purpose to act. The creation of the Hungarian Guard (*Magyar Gárda*) in 2007 was a crucial step. It has created a 'grass-roots' element to the 'Movement' and a pool of trained and well-organized volunteer-militia ready to be called on for action for the common 'Hungarian cause'.

The common cause is first and foremost the fight against 'Gypsy crime'. Jobbik's political programme is very much a social policy agenda covered with racism (Varró, 2009) and includes elements that resemble leftist ideas: a strong and sovereign nation-state against global capitalist forces and European integration, the working man at the centre instead of money and profit, higher taxation for the rich, public ownership etc. (Magyari, 2009). The 'ethnicization of poverty' and 'welfare chauvinism' goes to the heart of the people who feel the ground slipping away from them and gather under Jobbik's programme, who dares to tell the truth and addresses real societal problems that other political parties do not: immigrants take away work from Hungarians, the political elite is corrupt and plays the cards of Jewish and other foreign interests, the whole welfare security system is endangered by Roma/Gypsies who are breeding for profit

and stealing instead of earning money by honest work.

Movement for a Better Hungary took in charge as the only party to face one of the underlying problems of Hungarian society, the unsolved situation of the ever growing gypsy population. It stated – what everyone knows but is silenced by 'political correctness' – that phenomenon of 'gypsy crime' is real. It is a unique form of delinquency, different from the crimes of the majority in nature and force.⁸

As the argument follows, Gypsies commit this particular type of crime not because of their genetic pre-determination but because their 'peculiar socio-cultural background'. Jobbik denies racist claims and that they would propagate collective guilt of the Roma, but does not address criminality among Hungarians (or, for that matter, 'petty crimes peculiar to low socio-economic backgrounds' independent from ethnicity). Hungary must be protected, depending on the location, from the Jews in the capital, where anti-Semitism is significantly higher and brings in the votes, and against Gypsies in the countryside (Bayer, 2009). The tools of protection are terrifying, in particular for the Roma minority who has witnessed many of the Guard's black marches through towns and villages in the last two years.

Conclusion

Group identity is constructed by acting against Gypsies, Jews, sexual and other minorities who are being perceived to be hostile to the 'Hungarian cause' and is reinforced by every march of the Guard. The sense of impunity for violence against Roma is growing, and the ineffectiveness of law enforcement bodies in charging perpetrators only contributes to this, as does the fact that the 5300-member law enforcement officers' trade union announced a formal alliance with Jobbik. There is no evidence that members of the Garda are involved in the attacks mentioned above and it remains to be seen whether the incidents will be treated as suspect hate crimes and whether the Hungarian government will demonstrate political will in condemning anti-Romany violence.

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Notes

- 1 A research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights on ethnic minorities and discrimination in Europe conducted through interviews to the most representative communities in each country shows a high level of ethnic discrimination and racist crime throughout Europe (FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009).
- 2 Data obtained from Lanzieri, Giampaolo (2008) 'Statistics in Focus: Population in Europe: 2007: first results', EUROSTAT, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-081/EN/KS-SF-08-081-EN.PDF, accessed 2 August 2009.
- 3 Lynch, Catherine (2008) 'Racism in Europe', ENAR Shadow Report 2007, <http://www.errc.org/db/04/20/m0000420.pdf>, accessed 2 August 2009.
- 4 Bencini, Camilla and Sara Cerretelli (2008) 'Racism in Italy', ENAR Shadow Report 2007 <http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Italy%20-%20SR%202007.pdf>, accessed 2 August 2009.
- 5 The 2nd of August was the day in 1944 where more than 3000 Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz-Birkenau were gassed. Devoting 2 August to the International Remembrance Day of Roma Victims of the Pharrimos (Holocaust) was suggested by the Roma National Congress and the International Romani Union, on a Hearing of the European Roma and Travellers Forum in the Council of Europe, in Strasbourg on 29 June 2009, and was adopted by all participants of the hearing 'Together against the Anti-ziganism in Europe'.
- 6 ERRC, European Roma Rights Centre (2009) 'Attacks against Roma in Hungary January 2008' '6 June 2009', <http://www.errc.org/db/04/20/m00000420.pdf>, accessed 2 August 2009.
- 7 FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2009b) 'Anti-Semitism' 'Summary overview of the situation in the EU 2001-2008', http://www.fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/Antisemitism_Update_2009.pdf, accessed 2 August 2009.
- 8 Jobbik (2009) 'Movement for a Better Hungary', http://www.jobbik.com/?page_id=2, accessed 2 August 2009.

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