

Nachrichten aus Ungarn

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The Situation of the Roma in Hungary

Certain groups of the Hungarian Roma people have lived in Hungary since the 15th century. Following the expulsion of the Turks (late 17th century) their national history or rather their “regularisation” can be described as the history of an administrative and violent integration into modern society. The state began with the resettlement, categorization, and census of the Roma people, but by the first half of the 20th century the social policies of the Horthy regime practically reduced the "Gypsy" issue to the maintenance of law and order, a "moral" and even health issue (part of it were the infamous sterilization programs of the authorities). With the progress of modernization and the raising of the middle class the market for the traditional Roma occupations became extinct (potter, copper smith, hors dealer, basin maker, basketry, etc.). The social backlog of the Roma accelerated, which - because it has been accompanied by an increasing exclusion from the labour market, the spreading of begging, an increased number of acts against property, while forced resettlement lead to the formation of ghettos - deepened the tension between the majority society and the Roma, and created an atmosphere of mutual antipathy and incomprehension. This situation culminated in Hungary during World War II and ended in the genocide of Jews and of Hungarian Roma and the systematic massacre of thousands.

The period after World War II had a double impact on the Roma community who survived the war. First of all, compared to the authoritarian and explicitly racist regime before 1945, during the short-lived democratic interlude between 1945 and 1948-49 and during the following state socialist regime any ethnic-based discrimination was strictly forbidden and due to forced modernization and equalization policies of the era the number of uneducated Roma dropped drastically compared to the period between the two world wars (by 1957 this rate was 10% compared to 50% during the previous twenty years, which rate shrunk even further in the following decades). On the other hand, the post-1945 changes in the economic structure had tragic consequences for the Roma: the liquidation of large estates of feudal nature made masses of the Roma unemployed. Although most of them had lived from agriculture before the war, this minority group was left out from the land reform. The government collectively ignored the Roma during the redistribution of the land simply because this way more land

could be allocated to the non-Roma small farmers as land areas were limited. This resulted in massive migration to cities and the continuous phasing out of old Roma settlements – which on its turn undoubtedly improved the housing conditions of the Roma people. At the same time the equalising politics of state socialism ignoring ethnical and minority issues virtually cut off the roots of traditional Roma communities. This process has only confirmed that the Party did not handle the problems of the Roma as a minority issue, but described them as problems of purely social nature, rejecting the idea of keeping alive Roma language and culture and considered the development of Roma-language schools and colleges as an obstacle in the integration (or rather assimilation) process. Thus, during the modernization process Roma people were virtually uprooted from their traditional and cultural existence, depriving them from their fixed points and without providing new ones.

Some of the “handrails” were full employment usually in a state-owned industrial establishment and despite the problems of education – especially for a narrow layer – the obstacles of social rise of the Roma were in principle eliminated. As regards the former, however, the transitions to free market economy following 1989-1990 caused the Hungarian Roma to lose full employment. Previous to the political transformation about 85% of the Hungarian Roma population was employed, especially as unskilled or low-skilled labourer. After the privatization of state-owned companies, this rate dropped to 31% in 1993 and to 29% in 2003.

It is not surprising that due to an educational system which disregards the different attitude of gypsy culture towards hierarchy, writing and knowledge in general, the majority of Roma who are still employed work in areas with high fluctuation rates, practically in existential uncertainty (construction, agriculture, mining, as skilled worker or unskilled labourer). In the majority society the stereotype of the Roma – “who has not worked a day in his life” – is still alive. During the two decades following the political transformation of Hungary a small minority of the Roma became entrepreneurs; an even fewer number became part of the cultural elite and they were able to adapt to changes. The vast majority however face many difficult problems of complex and sensitive nature. This is why Roma are often called “the biggest losers in the system.”

The situation of the Roma and the tensions between Roma people and Hungarians in their coexistence has been problems of the Hungarian society which were treated only superficially even after the political transformation of the country. It is only one aspect of the difficulties

that despite the provisions of the Constitution (stating that “the laws of the Republic of Hungary ensure representation of national and ethnic minorities living in the country”) and a resolution of the Constitutional Court in 1992 the parliamentary representation of minorities in Hungary is not solved, and at present a strong political will towards the realisation of this is not visible (it must be noticed, however that since the first free elections there are Roma representatives in the various fractions of the Parliament). Although Roma NGOs have become more active since 1990 and law 77 of 1993 regulating National and Ethnic Minorities created an opportunity to form local and national minority self-governments, due to the absence of sufficiently assets and a qualified Roma political elite they are not able to perform their functions efficiently.

Hungarian Roma do not have effective and uniform political associations serving the interests of the community, not to mention political parties. The existing political organizations (the National Roma Self-Government, the Roma Parliament, the Lungo Drom, the Phralipe, etc.) are struggling with structural problems. On the one hand, these civil organizations depend on the actual government and the national government institutions due to the above-mentioned lack of assets. On the other hand, Roma political interest groups and the elite are also influenced by certain negative aspects generally characterising Hungarian political life such as troubled finances, corruption, and formal or informal interweaving with major political parties. About the MCF Roma Solidarity Party founded in a hurry just before the European Parliamentary elections it can be said that in addition to lack of funds and activity it is virtually unknown to the public. Since 2008 its chairman has been the same Orbán Kolompár, who is currently president of the National Roma Self-Government, the defendant in two criminal cases and suspect in one. Added to this, the atomisation of the Hungarian Roma intellectual elite is well-known (as opposed to the African-American elite) and the political activity of the Roma voters is exceptionally low compared to that of the total population.

This partly relates to the fact that Hungarian Roma living at the margins of society do not only feel left alone but also experience a particularly hostile atmosphere around them, which reinforces tensions on both sides. Segregation in education (according to modest estimates several hundreds of schools practice segregation in Hungary today) the low number of mixed marriages, the tendency of ghetto formations in municipalities are phenomena which become increasingly accepted on both sides. This may be a particularly great problem because this

attitude will hinder a possible positive move towards coexistence and the formation of a long-term viable and productive community of non-Roma and Roma citizens.

As the majority society is concerned, besides struggling with traditional prejudices the government has treated the Roma issue as a power distribution question for twenty years, in other words it tries to reassure its conscience by unstructured and incomplete help programs and financial benefits. In addition, the authorities not only lack a targeted and publicly accepted Roma integration program based on international experiences but do not possess the consensus to a convergence program. The twenty years since the political transformation has been characterised by concealment policies with smaller or larger deviations in both major political camps. Political correctness was imported by the socialist-liberal camp in a distorted, formalistic way into the domestic discourse, which at the end greatly contributed to more harm than good. Thus, for example the use of the term "Roma" instead of "Gypsy" became a measure of political correctness in Hungary, instead of propagating knowledge about gypsy culture, solidarity with minorities, or sympathy in any way through public education or the media. The fact that the very real conflicts rooted in social and cultural differences between Roma and non-Roma were handled by the political elite in comfortable silence, by "sweeping things under the carpet" instead of looking for real solutions generated a huge gap between public perceptions and the "official" discourse. This fuelled considerably the advancement of the Jobbik (an extreme right party) in 2009, when it became apparent that the above described silence made the voters only responsive to the primitive racist ideas of the extreme right - and not just of the extreme right - because many voters deemed it as a courageous articulation of truth unsaid.

Undoubtedly the main problem, however, is a deep and aggressive hatred towards Roma rooted in Hungarian society, which is by no means confined to the uneducated citizen, as it has become apparent in public discourse and as slips of the tongue in the media. A Roma-hostile attitude is more prevalent in Hungary than the also existing anti-Semitism, or homophobia. A survey of the Progressive Institute addressed the anti-Roma attitudes in October 2008. The results showed that about four-fifths of the Hungarian population agrees with very grave anti-Roma statements. For example, 81% agree with forced assimilation, and are not open to letting this minority group to live according to their specific culture. About 82% agree that Roma issues would be resolved if Roma started to work, meaning that Roma do not like to work, and this is the main cause of their disadvantaged position. The depth of

the problem is well characterized by the fact that according to our study analysing anti-Roma attitudes there is no difference between the voters of the two major parties. This means that the right and the left share an exceptional understanding concerning racist stereotypes. The assertion for example that Roma issues would be resolved if they started to work were agreed by 81% of the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party – the Left) voters and 80% of the Fidesz (Association of Young Democrats – the Right) voters. A study conducted by the Progressive Institute in May differentiated and confirmed this picture: according to the majority of the respondents there is such a phenomenon as Roma criminality, which should be punished by special penalties; added to this the majority of the respondents considered the Roma as a source of threat to the population, threatening the security of society merely by its multiplying numbers. As a solution to the problem positive discrimination was rejected by three-quarters of the people asked, but traces of good will and taking individual responsibility were not present either: 80% do not believe that they could do anything personally in order to improve relations between Roma and non-Roma, but expect positive action and attitude from the part of Roma individuals. Furthermore they indicated it mainly as the responsibility of Roma people – and not of organizations – to insure improvements in the matter. Finally, the research also revealed that the closer a relationship with Roma people or their family is, the less it is tolerated by non-Roma.

Finally, there is another serious issue apart from the anti-Roma prejudice, namely the distorted Hungarian democratic culture. Hungarian history of the twentieth-century was characterized by censorship and the alternation of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, which was only twice interrupted by short periods of a brief democratic interlude (in 1918 and between 1945 and 1948-49). As a result, deep-reaching traditions of constitutionalism and democracy have not developed in Hungary, compared to more fortunate countries where it is completely obvious. In Hungary, basic democratic values form the credo of only a narrow layer, while they still remain vague abstractions for a frighteningly large number of people. Even for the majority of dedicated democrats the equality and equity of citizens signifies solely a political slogan while tolerance and acceptance of diversity as a value, is not practiced in sincere and real situations (for example, towards Roma neighbours or gay employees, or during tense political situations). We did not develop the necessary sensitivity, which at the first sign of suspicion rings a bell to mark a clear boundary for ideas, discourses and attitudes which have no place in a democracy. The well-known publicist László Bogár draws his inspiration from public opinion when talking about human rights as the weapon of

mass destruction or the politician Csanád Szegedi (from the extreme right) who said that in Hungary “Gypsy breeding is taking place from public funds controlled at state level”.

It can be stated that in Hungary those political parties who play on the anti-Roma attitude of society may expect success and growth in popularity. This became evident during the EP elections of June 7, 2009, when the Jobbik (extreme right) won 14.77% of the votes. This was the most disturbing political development of 2009 and the probable winner of the next elections, the conservative Fidesz is cautiously flying his kite in this matter. The leading politicians of the party follow odd tactics, rather than drawing a sharp line between extremism and the moderate right when they attack and try to isolate themselves from the Jobbik as a political organization, whereas at the same time they are trying to seduce the voting basis of the far right by sending ambiguous messages and by using a rhetoric which alludes on national grievances.

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