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## **The re-evaluation of the Roma policy in Hungary**

### **Introduction:**

By the beginning of 2009 it has become obvious that the Roma policy pursued in the past decades, and especially that of the left-liberal government during the last seven years, cannot be continued. The need for a change is well reflected by the degree and intensity of popular protests in relation to the crimes committed by Romas which have by now - after some villages concerned - reached two important county seats, Miskolc and Veszprém, as well. The turn of mood in the society can be linked neither to the economic crisis, nor to the so called "political extreme right". This change of mood started more than two years ago when in October 2006 a group of Romas lynched "by error" a teacher, driving his car, at the sight of his own children at Olaszliszka (a small village). The latest incident - the killing of a Romanian international handball player, while seriously wounding some others - has already provoked an international reaction too. It is characteristic of the general atmosphere in Hungary that some intellectuals are envisioning publicly a civil war situation which might easily be an exaggeration but well reflects the public sentiment. A new element is that the real political force behind this change of mood is not any more provided merely by parties or organizations which are not represented in the national parliament, but by mayors in the countryside who belong to the mainstream - socialist or opposition - parties or are independent. Just recently it was the influential lobby of the socialists in Borsod county who stood up united against the dismissal of the police chief of Miskolc after he had talked about "Gypsies committing street robberies". The present situation can be compared mostly to that when the Dutch society was compelled to re-evaluate its relationship to the immigrants following the killings of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh and had to realize: not only the majority but also the minorities having a different culture must undertake certain obligations in the context of their integration.

### **Analysis:**

At the latest census there were 190,000 people who declared themselves Gypsies in Hungary. In any estimation their real number is much higher than this and it is rapidly growing. After the jobs in the agriculture had disappeared upon the change of system (political and economic transition) many small towns and villages were abandoned by the active-age non-Roma population. Those who stayed were mainly retired people and a growing number of Romas, who mainly live on social aid and by occasional work, while part of them earn their living by smaller or greater crimes. The so called "subsistence criminality" makes the rest of the active population flee, this way "ghetto villages" are emerging where almost nobody has any money-earning activity. The situation is aggravated by the fact that a significant portion of the Roma is not able or not willing to maintain the self-sustaining agricultural activity of the farming population, therefore they rely entirely on the social aid system. Hungary's demographic indicators - similarly to those of most European countries - are quite bad. The level of employment is one of the lowest in the European Union. Less and less active-age people need to sustain - beyond the growing number of pensioners - also those who chose to live on social assistance. As for comparison: while there are 3,8 million employees in Hungary according to

the official statistics, in the Czech Republic with a similar size of population a million more people are being employed (data from 2007). The integration of the Roma in the labour market has so far been unsuccessful. On the basis of various surveys the unemployment rate among them exceeds even 80 percent.

The left-liberal Roma policy implemented by the MSZP-SZDSZ government is built on four pillars:

1. Limiting the freedom of speech. In the name of "political correctness" it is prohibited to talk about forms of behaviour which are characteristic of one part of the Roma but are totally incompatible with the European lifestyle and values. In the view of left-liberal politicians and pundits the exclusive reason of the Roma problem is that there is racism in the major part of the society and discrimination. This phenomenon well illustrates the dogmatism of the left which has as its starting-point a single-layer model imported from abroad: skin colour and racial prejudice are the only factors of explanation. If any evidence emerges that questions this doctrine it can be swept aside by evoking alleged racism.
2. Getting money to the Romas through various channels: in the form of pecuniary social allowances based on automatic entitlement or exigency (social need), in the form of certain cost exemptions (free catering and books in the school, remittal of public utility debts), and in the form of social housing and Roma integration programs.
3. Imposing the task of Roma integration on the local governments and schools in the wake of forced anti-segregation campaigns. For example, a local self-government which is not able to show that it has an anti-segregation program cannot have access to EU funds.
4. Tolerating the so called "subsistence criminality".

"Subsistence criminality" is a special Hungarian concept linked to Mr. Gábor Kuncze, former liberal (SZDSZ) minister of interior affairs. This concept is precisely the opposite of the principle of "zero tolerance" introduced by the former mayor of New York, Rudi Guliani. In Hungary a theft worth of 20,000 HUF (70-80 EUR) is not considered as a matter for the police, but instead the notaries at the local governments should deal with such cases, however they do not have the proper means and staff for that. Although the sum involved does not seem to be high, the loss of regularly stolen crops, produces, animals, tools or bicycles constitutes a real disaster for the Hungarian pensioners with tiny income. Being aware of the passiveness of the authorities the victims do not bother anymore with reporting the permanent petty larcenies, therefore the official police statistics do not include them. "Subsistence criminality" has rendered it impossible to produce vegetables and fruits or to breed livestock in entire communities. "Subsistence criminality" then naturally turns into violent crimes, not rarely even into murders, whose victims tend to be lonely old people, children and women. (By the way, we are not aware of any cases where the category of "subsistence criminality" would have been applied to non-Roma perpetrators as well!) It has become more and more frequent that persons providing public services, teachers, doctors, ambulance men, firemen and recently even policemen are being attacked by people of Roma origin. In the name of "political correctness" the mainstream media in general try to keep quiet about the ethnical background of the perpetrators, in the age of Internet, however, it is virtually impossible. The main problem is that "keeping quiet" contradicts reality, creating thus a political vacuum. The present government has much worsened the situation by weakening the police. There is a shortage of policemen and a large part of them are inexperienced because, due to the change of retirement rules, a big portion of policemen beyond 50 years old retired. The government pulled out significant police forces from the villages because since the 2006 anti-government turbulences its priority has become - by reallocating budget funds - to purchase crowd-

dispersion devices, such as water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets. The prime minister, who has completely changed his former position and now declares "zero tolerance", gave two weeks (!) for sorting out the short-term tasks of criminal prosecution which will inevitably lead again to trepidations in the government. An important question is whether the proposals of the opposition FIDESZ on stricter criminal laws will be adopted by the legislature.

The failure of the present Roma integration policy has become obvious. As the State Audit Office pointed out, the billions of forints spent on Roma integration programs have not born any results. In the wake of the failure, a rift was produced within the governing socialist party (MSZP). On one hand, there are the mayors of towns and villages who encounter the problem as a day-by-day reality and wish to see practical solutions. On the other hand, there is the left-liberal intelligentsia which still thinks only in terms of antimracist media campaigns. These latter have been weakened, however, in the course of the crisis suffered by the liberal SZDSZ. The exit of the SZÄSZ from the government coalition allowed the government to perform a sost of "half-turn" and to announce the "Road to Work" program which is supposed to help those living on aid enter the labour market, primarily through communal work programs. The failure of the Roma integration and the anti-racist propaganda transmittzd by the media might distance many voters from the MSZP. The men in the street who respect the law, work and pay taxes feel that they are not protected by the state. Moreover, the media present the Roma as victims of racist attacks while people have a quite different experience in their neighbourhoods. It has also proven to be the case that the left-liberal elite, while preaching about equality of opportunities, is elitist in a rather distasteful way. All its measures and its whole aid policy suggest that "You should stay where you are!", freezing thereby any possibility of social mobility. (This attitude brings not only the Gypsies in an impossible situation, although, beyond doubt they are the ones who are the most hit by it.) Finally, another specific feature of Hungarian politics should be mentioned: a Gypsy elite has emerged in the political sphere which is in fact loyal to the different parties and which prevents the rise of a legitimate Roma political movement not seceded from the Gypsy population.

Contrary to the general view - according to which the non-parliamentarian extreme right party "Jobbik" can take away votes only from the centre-right FIDESZ - it is very conceivable that former MSZP voters might give their votes to Jobbik in 2010. This way the Hungarian society would follow the pattern of Western Europe where, in many countries, as a result of their everyday experiences, the former Communist workers' districts have become the strongholds of anti-immigrant parties. A similar process may take place, for example, in the crisis zone of North-Eastern Hungary where MSZP traditionally keeps strong positions, and where, at the same time, the Gypsy issue presents itself in the gravest form. This danger was anticipated by the socialists in Borsod county, including the mayor of Miskolc, when they stood up - against their own government - for the police chief who had spoken of "perpetrators of Gypsy origin".

It is a general view that the "Gypsy issue" will be - right after the economic crisis - the second most important campaign topic at the 2010 parliamentary elections. The MSZP can loose extremely lot on this issue since both the government and prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany have made the fight against racism and intolerance the most important element of their political profiles. The main argument against the opposition centre-right FIDESZ has always been - both at home and abroad - its alleged concealed nationalism and racism. At the same time, surveys show that the voters of MSZP are more strongly anti-Gypsy than those of FIDESZ, since among them there are many such people with low income who live close to Romas. (This sentiment was exploited by the "whispering propaganda" of the 2002 election campaign which alluded to the alleged Roma origin of FIDESZ chief, Viktor Orbán.) Prior to that the Gypsy issue had never formed a part of any election campaign because FIDESZ too supported the positive discrimination of all minorities living in Hungary, including that of the

Romas. By now, however, the situation has changed, and the major question is now whether or not the Hungarian opposition will yield this topic to the non-parliamentary, extreme right Jobbik. Thereby, Hungary has joined the family of those European countries - like Austria, Great Britain, the Netherlands or France - where the relationship to the minorities and immigrants living on the territory of the country constitutes an important domestic political issue.

The centre-right FIDESZ is often being accused by its left and liberal adversaries of "cahoots with the racist extreme right". In contrast with this, the reality is that the most organized Roma association in Hungary, the Lungo Drom, forms part of the FIDESZ party alliance. It was the FIDESZ which has - for the first time in Europe - delegated a representative of Roma origin to the European Parliament. In the Roma policy of the FIDESZ government between 1998 and 2002 the main emphasis was placed on the education of Roma children in the framework of an extensive scholarship program. (The present government regularly delays the granting of the scholarships due to the Gypsy students.) The FIDESZ government operated the inter-ministerial committee in an effective way, and this body ensured that the comprehensive government Roma policy would be properly implemented by all parts of the government. FIDESZ linked the granting of family allowance to the taking of children to school. (This condition was abolished by the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition government, as one of its first measures, when it entered into power in 2002.) On the top of family allowance, FIDESZ strove to support the families having children while working by granting them tax-benefit. The MSZP-SZDSZ government - by giving priority to the so called "principle of exigency" prefers the inactive groups to the active work force. This way it increases the trap of aid beneficiaries, since, while work is encumbered with one of Europe's highest tax burdens, the inactive groups benefit from numerous pecuniary allowances and benefits. It is not worth for them finding a job! Granting children benefits is a separate issue. Thanks to the family allowance granted without any condition (GYES), to the so called "social policy" housing allowance and to the recent nursery-school support, having a child has become a real source of subsistence even for teenager girls. As a result, parents, who being inactive cannot even take care of themselves, undertake to have a big number of children. They cannot therefore present their children a way of living which would allow them to have a job and be integrated in the society. As it is often said, "the third generation is growing up without having ever seen their parents go to work". A further task is to harmonize the Roma policy with the EU and national development programs. It is important to support rural development in order to let family farms flourish again vis-à-vis the present system of latifundia. If FIDESZ forms a government again in 2010 it won't be enough to return to its former policy: in order to have real results it will need to take much more radical measures, and it will need to explain the public that the programs cost taxpayers' money. Besides, it will be important for the government to involve the representatives of the local society in the decision-making process concerning the Roma policy, taking into account the principle of subsidiarity.

### **Conclusion:**

The integration problem of the Gypsy society has become by now a cardinal issue in Hungary. To confront the existing cultural and ethnic tensions is in Hungary's elementary interest, otherwise the problem becomes unmanageable. If the present democratic political elite doesn't start to speak honestly, on one hand, the anti-democratic political forces, so far unrepresented in the parliament, will gain political ground. On the other hand, the process entailing ethnic tensions might threaten mostly those Romas who have a job and who make sacrifices for their children's education, and by that the opportunity will be lost for a new elite to emerge within the Gypsy community that would be, from the perspective of co-existence, a positive model to follow for all sides.