

When the “saints” go marching in

Far right mobilization and the roots
of anti-Roma sentiment in Hungary



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This is the third piece of a series of articles in which the author endeavors to lift the veil on significant social, political and cultural transformations since the right-wing government came to power in Hungary. Here, he looks at right-wing extremism through the lenses of the recent ethnic conflict in the village of Gyöngyöspata, which rocked the Hungarian political scene and also made international headlines. The text is written from the perspective of a long-time member of the Hungarian green movement who co-founded the “Lehet Más a Politika” (LMP) party.

In the name of the “oppressed majority”

“Those who are not willing to integrate into Hungarian society and live by the values we stand for should leave the country” – declared Gábor Vona, the leader of the far right party Jobbik, at the demonstration organized on the 6th of March in the village of Gyöngyöspata. It was obvious who he had in mind, given the fact that members of the Civil Guard Association for a Better Future¹ had been patrolling the area around the Roma settlement for a week, with the aim of

preventing “Gypsy-criminals” from stealing and harassing “hard-working citizens”. The far right's decision to symbolically take control of the village – located about an hour's drive northeast from the capital – had been preceded by a long, at times vicious debate within Jobbik focused on the party's political strategy. Tensions between “doves” and “hawks” – the former calling for a stronger focus on policy-work and suggesting some form of cooperation with Fidesz, the latter pushing for a return to the streets and advocating a stronger reliance on radical extra-parliamentary allies – had

been palpable since the party entered parliament, but turned poisonous when it became clear that it was slipping back in opinion polls. The debate ended with the predictable victory of the hawks and the decision to re-shift focus to the “Roma question”, in view of drawing a clear distinction between the politics of Fidesz and Jobbik, and strengthening the latter's radical voter base. All the Vona-team needed was a real-life conflict which would allow it to credibly argue its case for the need to protect “oppressed members of the defenseless majority”, and hate groups' willingness to provide the foot-soldiers and action.

Worlds coming into friction

Gyöngyöspata is a picturesque little town nested in the foothills of the Mátra mountains and renowned for its beautiful medieval church and tradition of wine-making. The village's Magyar inhabitants are usually described by neighbors as hard-working people who are difficult to deal with (due to their excessive sense of pride). While many strive to preserve the viticultural heritage of their ancestors, others earn a living from tourism, construction or the transportation of goods. The world of “peasants” is separated by an invisible divide line from the “Gypsy settlement”², where the majority of Gyöngyöspata's 450 Roma inhabitants (comprising one sixth of the total population) live. This is an ‘alien’ space which those ruling the town have traditionally sought to keep under surveillance and control³, in order to prevent the infiltration of members of the lower caste into “ethnic Magyar territory” and simultaneously assure a steady supply of low-skilled labor for the local economy. The fragile co-habitation of these two worlds – connected through livelihood, but distanced by form of life and access to political power – had already been challenged during the second half of the socialist period when new channels of mobility, falling outside the local elite's control, became available to Roma⁴. However, growing prosperity and the omnipresent gaze of an egalitarian state prevented the emergence of ethnic tensions. All-in-all, this was a period of hope presenting the prospect of individual advancement and the potential merging of Roma and peasant worlds (more specifically, the incorporation of Roma into the working class). As we now know, these hopes were premature. The collapse of socialism brutally crushed individual gains and put a break on the convergence of life-worlds. Needless to say, the advent of an era of ruthless competition, economic insecurity and the demise of the welfare state was most detrimental to Roma who were hit by the dual waves of unemployment and impoverishment. Although this was not specific to this locality, local leaders failed to come up with solutions which in other places helped to ease the depth and consequences of *declassément*. The non-Roma elite, which undeniably had some resources at its disposal, remained largely deaf and blind to the plight of the Roma community. On the other hand Roma leaders proved incapable of forging alliances with extra-local actors who could have provided either access to employment opportunities or resources for community development. This resulted in an all-pervasive feeling of helplessness and

betrayal on the Roma side which – spurred on by the reintroduction of local mechanisms of control (especially in schooling and housing⁵) – translated into different forms of deviance. While some of these constitute internal problems for the Roma community, most have by now spilled over the walls of the “ghetto”. Non-Roma have been complaining for some time of “idle Roma youths’” unruly behavior, as well as thefts committed to the detriment of “innocent elderly people” and owners of vineyards on the Goat Rock (a hill overlooking the Roma settlement). Importantly, these injustices are perceived as being fully or partially ignored by both the police and politicians (except for Jobbik whose local leader has been a vocal propagandist of “Gypsy-crime”). Local memory also recalls stories of physical aggressions, committed by “Roma mobs” against non-Roma individuals. Significantly, the victims of these “atrocities” tend to live close to the symbolic frontline separating the settlement from the village, and to emanate from the ranks of the local elite or those who have openly voiced anti-Roma sentiments. This clearly signals that diverging Roma and peasant worlds have, as in many other places, come into friction in Gyöngyöspata. Mutual distrust and anger are fuelled on the one side by the Roma community's deep-seated, but largely unexpressed grievances related to rampant racism and segregation. On the other, it is fed by the above-mentioned grievances related to petty crime and by the majority's unexpressed fear of losing control over “its Gypsies” (who, thanks to the ideological work of the victimized elite⁶, are perceived as incapable of obeying the basic norms of society). Anti-Roma feelings are also, albeit in a less direct way, fuelled by the Roma community's demographic dynamism⁷, and the opening of new (albeit narrow) mobility channels falling outside the purview and control of the majority⁸.

The “forces of hell on the loose”

This short introduction was necessary to contextualize the ethnic conflict that broke out in Gyöngyöspata in March 2011 – a conflict which not only rocked the locality, but the whole Hungarian political scene (also attracting international media attention). As I have made clear, the co-habitation of Roma and non-Roma was already tense in the last years, and especially since 2006⁹. The most “unruly” families have been forced to leave the village (with the silent backing of Roma leaders). Ritual skirmishes have been fought for control of space. Grievances have been voiced, mythical narratives have been anchored in social memory, and this has been done with the help of the vocabulary of ethnic prejudice (using building blocks offered by historical memory and contemporary far right rhetoric). But these elements have come nowhere close to coalescing into the scenario of overt ethnic conflict. This can be explained mainly by the presence of actors – amongst them the mayor and his allies sitting on the local council – who were not interested in the escalation of tensions. For “the forces of hell to break loose” (the local priest's words, not mine) it was necessary to neutralize these bridge-building actors and silence their supporters by pushing local citizens into two antagonistic

ethnic camps and lock their key figures in pre-constructed roles and a chain of events over which they had no substantial control.

The opportunity to perform this political work was provided by a seemingly weightless incident. The Red Cross was planning to buy a house in a street bordering the Roma settlement (and situated on the previously mentioned symbolic frontline¹⁰ separating the two communities) for a large Roma family whose house had been severely damaged by a recent flooding¹¹ of the creek bordering the settlement. Aware of the tensions that the "infiltration" of a large - and allegedly problematic - family may cause, the organization pursued behind-the-curtains negotiations with residents of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Street. Word of the bargaining, however, quickly got out, provoking the suspension of the Red Cross's plans. Before this piece of information could trickle back to residents, an elderly man (known to be one of the Roma family's prospective neighbors) committed suicide. His death, despite the refutation of kin, prompted speculation that he had chosen to die rather than face the prospect of being "surrounded by Roma". News of the incident quickly made its way to Barikád TV, a far right media outlet with close connections to Jobbik. One of the questions raised in the video report¹² - entitled "Gypsy terror in Gyöngyöspata" - filed by the crew (concerning non-Roma residents' opinion on the prospective intervention of the "guard") warrants the assumption that Jobbik's national leadership had been monitoring the situation in the village and may have already decided to intervene prior to the suicide. Be that as it may, members of the Civil Guard Association for a Better Future¹³ - formed last year by members of the disbanded Hungarian Guard¹⁴ - began patrolling in Gyöngyöspata right after the release of Barikád TV's video on 25 February. According to the statement of Róbert Kiss, former leader of the Hungarian National Guard¹⁵, the intervention of the civil guard was warranted by the pleas of local citizens and aimed at "proving that things can be set straight in two weeks". A substantial part of the local population, but especially those living on or close to Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Street, received the paramilitary force warmly. This is demonstrated by interviews, as well as the fact that activists were housed by local inhabitants (among whom we find victims of the mentioned "atrocities").

The speaker of the rally staged on 6 March "in defense of Magyars" was Jobbik's national leader, Gábor Vona who - as a native of the nearby town of Gyöngyös - could present himself as a protector of not only Magyars in general, but of Gyöngyöspata in particular. The rally ended with the march of 2000 Jobbik supporters through the Roma settlement and the presentation of a letter to local Roma leaders (containing the demand to hand over "Gypsy criminals" to the forces of justice). This was followed by three weeks of patrolling, with members of the Outlaw Army¹⁶ and the Defense Force¹⁷ joining the civil guard's extremist campaign¹⁸. Although these organizations all vowed to defend "innocent citizens suffering from criminality"¹⁹, their activities were primarily aimed at intimidating members of the Roma community²⁰. Defense

Force captain Tamás Eszes purchased a wine cellar on Goat Rock - a stone's throw from the Roma settlement - and announced his plan to organize a military training camp on 22-23 April in the vicinity of the Roma settlement. On April 16, an incident took place between members of the Defense Force - on their way back from the wine cellar to the village - and members of the local Roma community that required police intervention. On 19 April the mayor, unable to control events, resigned from his post. On 22 April, as trainees arrived to the paramilitary camp, the police placed uniformed members of the Defense Force and other participants wearing military-like attire under custody. However, the City Court of Eger freed all detained the next day and members of the Defense Force immediately returned to Gyöngyöspata where they provoked a fight with members of the Roma community on the evening of 26 April. (Three far right activists were hospitalized, and three Roma men were taken into custody.) On 27 April Prime Minister Orbán finally spoke out, proposing an amendment to the penal code in view of preventing the occurrence of similar events in the future. The governing party also announced the creation of a parliamentary committee charged with the task of investigating the causes of the events. Since then a certain degree of calm has returned to the village, but this is very far from what we could call any sort of lasting peace. Roma leaders fear that even if Jobbik's candidate does not win the race for the mayor's seat (scheduled for 17 July), his predictably high score will force the new mayor to introduce additional segregationist policies²¹.

Throwing a lid on a boiling pot

The first, rather obvious lesson that can be drawn from the Gyöngyöspata case is that the state has shamefully failed to fulfill its most fundamental duty to protect citizens from the actions of hate groups. Although Prime Minister Orbán had warned Jobbik's leaders that Hungary "cannot march out of civilization" at the very beginning of his mandate, it took the police seven (!) weeks to actually step up against forces who had clearly abused of the right of free assembly and association to intimidate members of an ethnic minority. On the positive side of things I must also note that the events paved the way towards a consensus on the need for quicker and tougher sanctions against extremist groups and greater protection of minorities between the parties in government and the center-left opposition. Both LMP and the Socialist Party supported Fidesz's amendments to the penal code, which Parliament approved on 2 May 2011. (The first allowed courts to pronounce sentences of up to three years in cases of intimidation against members of ethnic groups. The second introduced a new paragraph sanctioning the activities of groups who threaten the state monopoly of physical power under the pretext of help in maintaining the social order.) As a result, the line between what is permissible and non-permissible conduct towards members of the Roma minority has become less fuzzy.

And yet the case also makes us painfully aware of the

limitations of the politics of containment based on repressive penal measures. Although paramilitary groups' room of maneuver has been seriously curtailed by the sanctions introduced, it is hard to imagine that the far right – which can count on the backing of a network of highly motivated and talented lawyers – will not find loopholes in the political system's legal edifice that it will be able to exploit to its advantage. In other words the answer provided by the political establishment does nothing to tackle the key problem: the fact that Jobbik – being perceived as the only political force willing to deal with citizens' "real concerns" – enjoys a wide degree of sympathy and support in large swaths of rural Hungary. Using the police to hit Jobbik is likely to strengthen the far right's argument that it is being punished by an unpatriotic comprador elite for speaking the truth and acting in the interests of the people.

Gyöngyöspata has also brought to light the deep-seated reasons underpinning anti-Roma sentiment (and the popularity of a political movement which may be called the fascism of the 21st century). The key words are popular experience and, more specifically, popular grievances. The role of everyday experience in the production and reproduction of xenophobia was explicitly highlighted by István Bibó, the author of one of the key studies focusing on the roots of modern anti-Semitism (which remains almost completely unknown outside Hungary²²). The main point here is that prejudice and xenophobia are not only historically given, "stubborn" phenomena – but that they feed off experiences which are themselves produced and structured by economic and political forces. In this regard it is important to draw attention to the Orbán government's extremely poor – one can even say: shocking – record on tackling socio-economic marginalization. In its first year in power Fidesz pushed further the Bajnai government's policy of reducing unemployment benefits (by introducing a new cap of approximately 100 EUR - per month and per family). While the expert government's decision was already questionable, the need to cut a budgetary deficit which had spiraled out of control gave the measure at least a degree of legitimacy. Orbán's decision to introduce additional welfare cuts (the cap on unemployment benefits constituting just one of the attacks on social rights) was paralleled by a massive tax reduction – amounting to almost 2 billion euros – solely benefiting the upper and upper middle class. This means that while a few thousand people living in Budapest's fancy quarters have been given the opportunity to spend more money on luxury goods, tens of thousands of others have been forced to make the impossible decision between heating their houses and putting food on their table. The injustice of this massive restructuring of incomes was so blatant that even the IMF's Hungarian representative felt a need to voice her concerns. But it is not only social justice that is at stake here. Wars waged on the poor usually lead to a surge in petty criminality, thereby reproducing mutually negative everyday experiences pitting Have-a-Little and Have-Nots against one another. It is a commonplace that these tensions tend to become explosive in situations when the ethnic or racial

composition of these groups differs significantly – as is the case in Hungary (where Roma make up approximately 40 % of those living on the dole). The Hungarian government is of course aware of this. This is why it has announced the launching of large-scale construction projects where the unemployed will be "asked" to work (far from their home and for an income inferior to the legal minimal wage) under the surveillance of retired policemen (also compelled by a controversial recent measure to return to the labor market). This, significantly, is a politically correct ("colorblind") reconfiguration of Jobbik's demand for the creation of forced labor camps for "Gypsy-criminals". In other words, while Orbán and other members of his government are ready to pay lip service to the values of tolerance and the equality, the ruling coalition is introducing deeply unjust social and economic policies – designed to appease the anger of the downwardly mobile lower middle and working class. Forcing Roma back into work may temporarily ease grievances accumulated on the side of the majority. But it is also very much likely to reinforce anti-Magyar sentiments on the Roma side, pushing a significant section of the ethnicized underclass "underground". This, in turn, is bound to further fuel anti-Roma sentiment, thereby creating the need for even more repressive criminal and social policies.

For a truly better future

The political stake of this scenario can be grasped in a simple question: which force(s) will profit from it? Will it be Fidesz, the obvious choice for those unwilling to pay the price of Roma inclusion but resenting radical rhetoric? Jobbik, whose ideology reflects best the "common sense" perception of an "ethnic folk" fired up by the "unruly behavior" of the classe dangereuse? Or will left-of-center forces be able to convince members of the apathic majority to support a politics of social cohesion? It is too early to tell. What is sure is that the task of the left-of-center is more daunting in that the vertical polarization induced by neo-conservative social reforms clearly favors the emergence of horizontal cleavages within society. And yet, the task is not impossible. As one of the European Roma rights movement's key figures, Nicolae Gheorghe, pointed out, "Roma inclusion needs to happen in local communities and not just in courts of law or other official contexts"²³. The lesson we can derive from this is that we need to focus more on place-based political activism or, in more elevated terms, on the creation of local "laboratories of hope". We could, for instance, help local Roma and non-Roma actors mend their strained (or even ruptured) ties by engaging in a dialogue aimed at outlining the cornerstones of a new (local) social contract. The possibility of overcoming ethnic conflicts involving Roma has been demonstrated empirically in different social and political contexts. The Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition's successful mediation between Travellers and non-Traveller residents of Cottenham (South East Cambridgeshire) in 2006 is a case in point²⁴. But we do not have to go as far as England for examples. The resolution of tensions resulting from violent clashes between ethnic Magyars and Roma in the

Transylvanian villages of SČnmartin and SČncraieni (Harghita County) in 2009 revealed that carefully crafted compromises can lead to a reconfiguration of social relationships which is acceptable to both sides. I am not saying that this is always possible. The lack of financial resources or the lack of leadership may render reconciliation hopeless. And in some cases the compromises reached might actually prove to be detrimental to one of the sides. But in other cases, and I believe Gyöngyöspata can be one of them, it may be possible to prove that ethnicity is not an insurmountable barrier and that social tensions can be eased through the implementation of local policy reforms. Through good media work we could make these localities visible in the national arena and get people thinking about whether the Civil Guard Association for a Better Future is actually faithful to its name or not.

Notes

1 The civil guard was formed in April 2010 by members of the Hungarian Guard which had been dissolved by Budapest's Court of Appeal on 2 July 2009. Attila László, head of the association, had previously been the Hungarian Guard's captain in Békés County.

2 Here I must note that the "new" settlement dates from the 1960s. It was at this time that the local Roma population was resettled from the "old" settlement which stood on the opposite side of the village (where members of the community lived in huts on the edge of the forest).

3 The ethnic majority has, for instance, exercised a strong degree of control over building permits granted to Roma. Most of the properties situated on the settlement are to this day subject to an alteration moratorium (introduced by the local council) which prevents owners from expanding their houses. (The report prepared by the Minorities Ombudsman – published on 19 April 2011 – found that the local council's decree violated the Constitution.)

4 Some Roma found stable and secure jobs outside the locality. For instance, members of the older generation worked on the construction of the Budapest metro in the 1970s. Also to be taken into account were ancillary welfare benefits which, for instance, allowed some Roma to buy a house outside the settlement.

5 I have already alluded to control over building (see footnote 3). The other key terrain of conflict is the local elementary school where the ratio of Roma students has been steadily raising (thanks to the community's higher fertility rate and the concomitant phenomenon of "white flight"). The ethnic majority has sought to maintain control over the institution by creating parallel "Roma" and "non Roma" classes – as revealed by the report of the Minorities Ombudsman.

6 The majority's grievances have tended to be over-exaggerated and generalized. As far as I can tell, this homogenous image is largely the creation of a handful of individuals who – being descendants of the traditional elite or occupying important positions in social life – exercise a strong influence over lay perceptions and understandings of the social world.

7 Although Roma make up only 15 % of the total population, the ratio of Roma children attending the local elementary school is close to 50 %.

8 This latter was important because it reduced (to some degree) the Roma community's dependence on the "Gadje" and simultaneously weakened the incentive to adapt to the cultural and political will of the ethnic majority – a formerly unknown and potentially explosive phenomenon.

9 2006 was a landmark in the history of ethnic relations in Hungary. It was the year of the infamous Olaszliszka incident, involving the lynching of a teacher – whose car had almost hit a Roma child – by a group of Roma. (The Olaszliszka case provided one of the key motives for the killing of innocent Roma by members of the "death squad" responsible for the six murders committed between July 2008 and August 2009.) 2006 was also the year of successful mobilization of anti-government and anti-systemic sentiment on behalf of an increasingly popular far right. These negative forces also found their way to Gyöngyöspata: In 2006 a group of local Roma almost lynched a local wine-maker (suspected of beating a Roma child). Later that year the village's first democratically elected mayor (who had a reputation of being too lenient towards petty crime) was defeated in the municipal elections.

10 An analogy that comes to mind is the "Short Strand/Newtownards Road" pocket of east Belfast where tensions fired in June 2011. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/jun/27/the-truth-about-belfasts-riots?INTCMP=SRCH>

11 It is worthy to note that most Roma settlements tend to be located in areas prone to environmental and/or health risks. The literature on environmental (in)justice is replete with examples of floods devastating Roma settlements. See for instance Krista Harper's work on Hungary: http://works.bepress.com/krista_harper/

12 http://www.barikad.hu/barik%C3%A1ldtv_%E2%80%9Ecig%C3%A1nyterror%E2%80%9D_%E2%80%93_heves_megye_polg%C3%A1rh%C3%A1bor%C3%BA_sz%C3%A9l%C3%A9n_%C3%A1ll-20110225_0

13 <http://www.athenainstitute.eu/en/map/olvas/42#read>

14

<http://www.athenainstitute.eu/en/map/olvas/30#read>

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<http://www.athenainstitute.eu/en/map/olvas/41#read>

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<http://www.athenainstitute.eu/en/map/olvas/33#read>

17 According to the [Athena Institute](#), the Defense Force is 'a splinter group formed in 2008 from the Hungarian National Defense Union (MOVE). That time, the Defense Force changed its uniform from the earlier SA and Nazi party member-style armband and uniforms of green and black to today's regular army booster, camouflage blouse version. Members of the extremist group have military ranks and are divided into units. The aim of the organization is to prepare its members for the "upcoming war" that results from "Gypsy-crime"'. One of the group's main activities is the organization of paramilitary training camps.

18 Members of the Outlaw Army and Defense Force were also provided food and shelter by local residents, some of whom had previously been the victims of "atrocities" committed by Roma.

19 Police statistics, however, do not confirm local citizens' and far right activists' claims that the security

situation had become untenable in Gyöngyöspata. Official statistics reveal an average level of criminality. (Here I must note that local residents claim that many crimes are unreported because of either fear of reprisal or lack of trust in the efficiency of police work.)

20 Unimpeded by local police, members of the civil guard – dressed in black boots and uniform – regularly followed Roma inhabitants on their way to the shop and school. On at least one occasion, a member of the Outlaw Force threatened Roma residents with a whip.

21 The account of events is based on the Athena Institute's compendium
<http://www.athenainstitute.eu/en/infocus/read/8>

22 The study in question is entitled „The Jewish Question in Hungary After 1944", which the author wrote in 1948. For a summary of Bibó's theory see for instance: www.csseo.org/Papers/paperCsepeli.rtf

23 Nicolae Gheorghe: "Choices to be made and prices to be paid: Potential roles and consequences in Roma activism and policy-making," *The Price of Roma Integration*, forthcoming.

24 Jo Richardson and Andrew Ryder: "'Stamp on the Camps' – A Case Study of a 'Moral Panic', 'Othering' and Political Furore in the U.K.," unpublished conference paper.

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