

Spoken Today, Committed Tomorrow

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UNDER the shroud of night, on 23 February 2009 a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a house on the edge of Tatárszentgyörgy as the family slept inside. Waking to find their house burning around them, the father and his five-year-old son were fatally shot as they attempted to escape from the fire.³ They are survived by a devastated mother, two other children and a grieving community.

On another quiet evening about two months later in Tiszalök, a 54-year-old grandfather bid his wife goodnight and stepped out of their home to go to work the night shift at a chemical plant. He was shot and killed in the darkness just in front of his house.⁴

Just one month after this, while a family slept in their home in Abádszalók an intruder broke in and brutally attacked the couple in their bed with a razor blade. They were both badly cut by the perpetrator while struggling to protect their child who had been sleeping in the bed with them. It took the assistance of several other family members to stop the violent attack and hold the perpetrator for the police.⁵

Such horror stories have become all too common in Hungary. Over the last 18 months, at least eight Romani people have lost their lives and at least twice as many have been seriously injured in various parts of Hungary as a result of crimes which many suspect to be racially motivated. A particularly alarming aspect of the attacks has been that so many of the incidents have similar characteristics: Targets, type of attack, type of plan and even witness accounts of certain vehicles. The locations of the target houses in these attacks have often been on the edge of the settlement, making a quick escape feasible for the perpetrators. The choices of weapon or type of attack preferred seem to be arson or an incendiary explosive, and perpetrators are typically armed with guns. Since January 2008 the attacks have included at least nine arson attacks, eight shootings, three incidents of mob violence and two assaults involving hand grenades.⁶ The evidence strongly suggests that there are connections between these extremely well-planned incidents, which expert investigators say are conducted with military precision.⁷ Indeed, it is clear that an extensive pattern of fatal attacks is underway.

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³ Judit Doros, "Agyonltek egy férfit Tiszalökön", *Népszabadság Online*, 24 April 2009, http://www.nol.hu/lap/mo/lap-20090424-20090424_korai-25 (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁵ Hirösszefoglalónk, "Borotvával támadt egy férfi egy roma családra: Rasszista indítékot sejtene a helyiek - elfogták a tettest", *Népszabadság Online*, 27 May 2009, http://www.nol.hu/mozaik/borotvaval_tamadt_egy_ferfi_egy_roma_csaladra_abadszalokon (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁶ European Roma Rights Centre, "Attacks against Roma in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia", <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=3042> (accessed: 1 July 2009).

⁷ Gy. Attila Fekete, "Nem vették észre a töltényhüvelyeket a tatárszentgyörgyi helyszínelk: Két-három, vadászpuskákhoz ért férfi nagy sötét terepjáróval", *Népszabadság Online*, 27 February 2009, http://www.nol.hu/mozaik/nem_vettek_eszre_a_toltenyhüvelyeket_a_tatarszentgyorgyi_helyszínelok (accessed: 20 July 2009).

This escalation in anti-Romani violence is probably more critical in Hungary than any other country in the region at present. Still, the incidents were widely met with a public response that is better defined as apathy than sympathy. Condemnations of the racist climate and the resulting violence are few and far between; instead, many voices in society calling for decisive action to address the “Roma problem” are largely legitimate and mainstream, wielding significant power. Thus, the violence against the Romani community is both trivialised as random and mitigated through assertions that it is eclipsed by violence committed by Roma. Jobbik has published documents directly comparing the rates of violent incidents against Roma and by Roma. The information included is erroneous, misleading and dangerously inflammatory: Juxtaposing the violent incidents in this manner implies the possibility of a causal relationship and further increases the divide between Roma and the majority population.⁸

In almost every one of the cases of violent attacks, the perpetrators remain unknown and at large, and the police – though investigating forcefully – seem to be groping in the dark. The only notable exception to date is the case mentioned above in Abádszalók, in which the family was able to detain the perpetrator at the scene of the crime. To date, the police have only independently identified people responsible for these crimes in one case. This can be accounted for partly by the actions of the police themselves. Especially in the first case described above, in Tatárszentgyörgy where a young father and his five-year-old child fell victim to an arson attack and deadly shooting, their actions were inadequate. The official

police actions at the crime scene and their public reaction to the crime fell direly short of the minimal professional requirements and appear to have compromised the investigation from the beginning. According to NGO reports, none of the emergency services arrived quickly at the scene of the crime, and their oversight or failure to communicate somehow resulted in the crime scene not being secured until more than 12 hours after the attack, allowing for the significant possibility of contamination of the evidence. Despite the testimony of witnesses and evidence at the scene of the attack, police further compromised the investigation through their stubborn assertion that the incident was an accident, denying the possibility of an attack. Investigations and disciplinary proceedings were launched against some of the emergency personnel present at the scene of the crime concerning their actions, but to date no conclusions have been made public.⁹

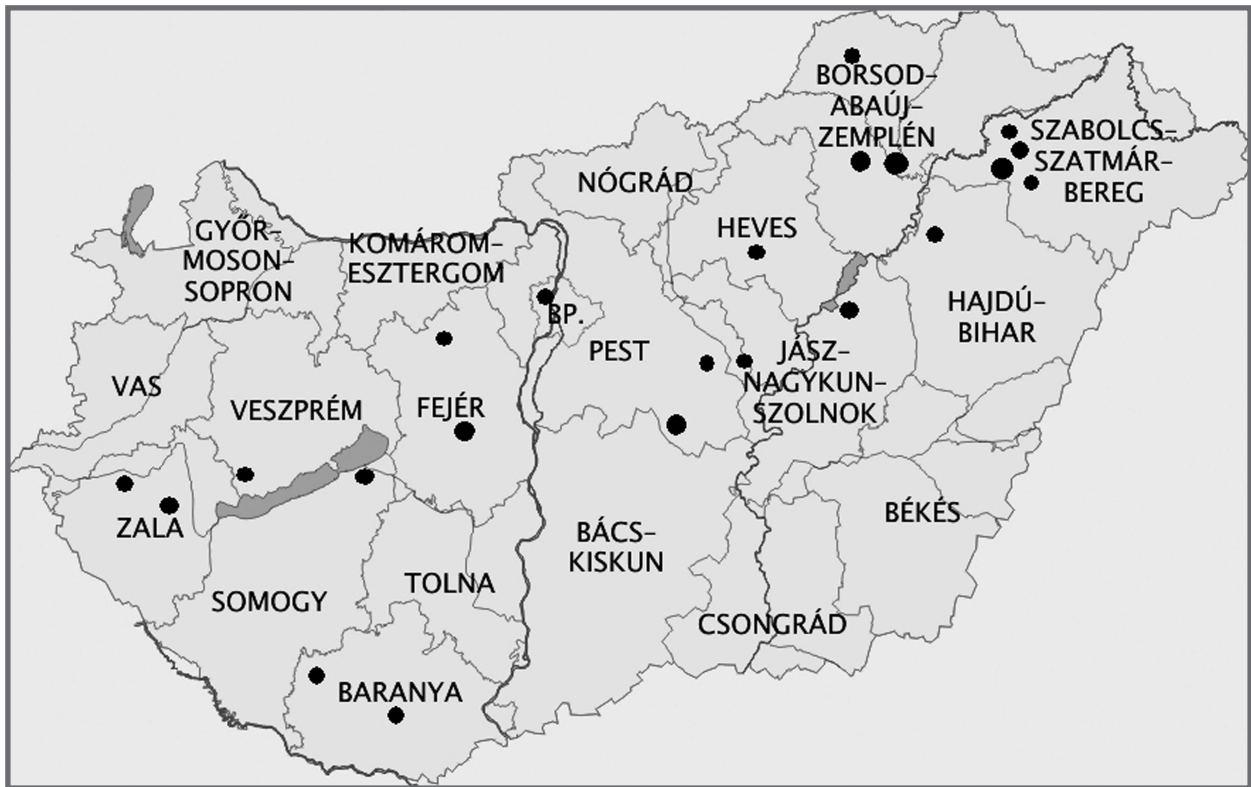
An outside observer may logically wonder whether the official proceedings are less thoroughly conducted when the victims are Roma. This is confirmed by the sociological studies and surveys conducted in police quarters.¹⁰ In January 2009, the chief of police in Miskolc blamed Roma for street crime, stating during a press conference that all burglaries in the city in December and January were committed by people of “Gypsy origin”. He was removed from his position for this speech but quickly reinstated after thousands demonstrated publicly to support him.¹¹ There is not only a lack of appropriately prompt responses to crimes targeting Roma but there are also specific shortcomings of protocol, which indicate tolerance or support of the attacks. These procedural deficiencies are accompanied

⁸ Jobbik, “Recent Attacks in Hungary”, 15 May 2009, <http://www.jobbik.com/?p=559> (accessed: 19 June 2009).

⁹ European Roma Rights Centre, Legal Defence Bureau for National and Ethnic Minorities, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, “Report on the circumstances of the double murder committed at Tatárszentgyörgy on 23 February 2009 and conduct of the acting authorities (the police, ambulance and fire services)”, <http://www.errc.org/db/03/DA/m000003DA.pdf> (accessed: 19 June 2009).

¹⁰ The Ombudsman for National and Ethnic Minority Rights, investigated many cases in which anti-Romani attitudes and misbehaviour of police officers played a role. One of the well known cases involved brutally racist comments written and circulated on internal police forums. For details, see the Annual Reports of the Ombudsman for National and Ethnic Minority Rights, www.obh.hu (accessed: 19 June 2009).

¹¹ “Police chief restored to post”, *Budapest Times*, 1 February 2009, http://www.budapesttimes.hu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=10807&Itemid=27 (accessed: 21 June 2009).



Since the beginning of 2008, various physical attacks targeting Roma have been reported in 22 locations around Hungary. At least eight people have lost their lives, and at least twice as many have been seriously injured as a result of crimes which many suspect are racially motivated.

by accusations that Romani perpetrators are behind the attacks on Roma (consequently trivialising the incidents to outbreaks of interethnic violence) and a stubborn refusal to consider racist motives, despite evidence to the contrary.

The police officers have recently clarified their position even further, when *Tettrekész*, the law enforcement trade union of about 5,300 members, joined an alliance with the far-right Jobbik party.¹² Jobbik's frequently racist discourse is largely anti-Semitic and anti-Romani: The group's leadership developed the now-popular term "Gypsy crime".¹³ Thus, the affiliation is troubling as it confirms the widespread concern that the police not only fail to be objec-

tive and impartial but also proactively collude with such radical elements. It is obviously a dangerous and inappropriate official allegiance for civil servants whose job it is to protect all citizens of Hungary, including Roma. This allegiance is not particularly surprising, however, as the group has previously expressed its ideological support for Jobbik. Judit Szima, the secretary-general of *Tettrekész* and editor of the group's publication, *Prepared for Action*, was a Jobbik candidate in the recent European Parliament election, only narrowly missing a position as the fourth in line. She has recently published and defended an article which espoused the 'duty' of anti-Semitism, and the inevitability of Hungarian-Gypsy civil war.¹⁴

¹² "Hungarian Police Union Links to Far-right Party", *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 14 June 2009, <http://jta.org/news/article/2009/06/14/1005865/hungarian-police-union-links-to-far-right-party> (accessed: 15 June 2009).

¹³ Bojan Pancevski, "Boy, 4, murdered in hate war against Hungarian gypsies", *Times Online*, 1 March 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5821924.ece> (accessed: 1 March 2009).

¹⁴ Yehuda Lahav, "Proud Hungarians Must Prepare for War Against the Jews", *Haaretz*, 1 January 2009, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArtStEng.jhtml?itemNo=1089550&contrassID=19&subContrassID=1&title=%27%27Proud%20Hungarians%20must%20prepare%20for%20war%20against%20the%20Jews%27%27&dyn_server=172.20.5.5 (accessed: 20 June 2009).

Why should this be otherwise, when the police officer, the mayor, the doctor, the teacher and the journalist all live in the same society, whose majority, 58% of the mainstream, think that “crime is inherently in the Gypsy blood.” The same research revealed that 80% of those questioned think that “the Gypsies do nothing to fit into society.”¹⁵

In this context it is little wonder that 17% of the votes cast in the recently held EU parliamentary elections on 7 June 2009 were in support of the grossly anti-Gypsy, right-wing party Jobbik, securing it third place in the list of parties. This allowed them to send three candidates to the European Parliament, an unprecedented leap, even among a general increase in representation of right-wing parties across Europe.¹⁶

In fact, Jobbik has become the second strongest political force in certain counties, while the liberals with their mission to consistently uphold and effectuate human and minority rights have sunk into utter insignificance, occasionally failing to achieve the 5% threshold required for participation in national elections. The election, in which the numbers supporting the ruling socialist party plummeted to a distant second, barely ahead of Jobbik, was the first public measure of the drastic change in the political climate. Despite this significant shift, some aspects can perhaps be explained: this EP election was marked by a particularly low turnout among liberal voters, for example, and has been interpreted as a protest vote. These factors are likely to have had some weight, as there is widespread dissatisfaction with the economic situation and issues of corruption and incompetence in the government. However, it is particularly ominous that the vehicle for expressing such discontent is

within the racist rhetoric of Jobbik. The party is fuelled by the dissatisfaction of the masses towards further dangerous action.

Now in the majority is the centre-right Fidesz, facing a critical moment. Some believe that their implicit support for Jobbik, in failing to condemn their rhetoric and chiming in on the call for the government to address the increase in the rate of crime committed by Roma,¹⁷ has played a role in allowing the rise of the fringe group to its current place of prominence. It is conceivable that the level of support for Jobbik that presently exists will be maintained or even grow during the period between now and the national election, allowing the right-wing a significant place of power in the next administration.

Additionally, Jobbik has organised a paramilitary troop emulating the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) organisation that supported the National Socialists in Nazi Germany: the *Magyar Garda* (Hungarian Guard). Despite a December 2007 ruling by the Budapest Municipal Court, upheld on appeal in July 2009, disbanding the group due to their unconstitutional behaviour, charging them with racial discrimination and creating a “climate of fear”,¹⁸ this uniformed paramilitary group continues to meet and induct many new members.¹⁹ They are vocal and public about their ongoing crusade to end “Gypsy crime” and continue to organise huge rallies, demonstrations and marches promoting racial division and inciting their members and supporters to violence. They continue to persist, seeming to grow in popularity and bravado. *Magyar Garda* began only two years ago, in June 2007, but already boasts several thousand members.²⁰ As recently as March 2009, the organisation held

¹⁵ See the results of the survey published in HVG, 28 February 2009, 16-18.

¹⁶ “Far-right parties in the European Parliament”, *Times Online*, 18 June 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6528429.ece> (accessed: 18 June 2009).

¹⁷ Siobhán Dowling, “Racist Crime Wave: Hungary’s Roma Bear Brunt of Downturn”, *Kuruc.info*, 26 February 2009, <http://kuruc.info/r/35/36048/> (accessed: 28 February 2009).

¹⁸ Internet Centre Anti-Racism Europe, “Court Case on Banning Far Right Hungarian Guard Adjourned - Summary”, 14 March 2008, <http://www.icare.to/news.php?en/2008-03> (accessed: 21 June 2009).

¹⁹ “Higher court upholds Hungarian Guard ban”, *MTI*, 2 July 2009, <http://english.mti.hu/default.asp?menu=1&theme=2&cat=25&newsid=262851>.

²⁰ “Jobbik holds large rally in downtown Budapest”, *Politics.hu*, 16 March 2009, <http://www.politics.hu/20090316/jobik-holds-large-rally-in-downtown-budapest> (accessed: 19 June 2009).

a massive rally, inducting 650 new members.²¹ Whether or not there is evidence that *Magyar Garda* members are responsible for the violent attacks against Roma because the police have not come forward with public information about the prosecution of the perpetrators of any of the attacks, it seems clear that their rhetoric has played a role in encouraging the violent situation that exists today. And their calls for pre-emptive action to prevent a Roma–Hungarian civil war continue to inflame the tensions further.

It is almost unbelievable that barely more than a generation after the most brutal era in European history, the same behaviours appear to be repeated. The remedy to society's predicaments is not being sought in solutions for a way out, but in the mindless rhetoric of hatred, cheap populism and the blame-game. Roma have been identified as a scapegoat as they have been the greatest losers of the regime change and live for the most part in destitution, on the periphery of society. They are a minority with little power, providing an easy and rewarding target.

Terrifyingly, it seems that Hungarian society has taken that road (again) that characterised the Europe of the 1930s, one of widespread passive tolerance towards the erosion of society and increasing daily brutality. The acts have become mundane and the public proves itself detached from the moral outrage that such violence should illicit. Of this social mentality, the famous Austrian writer Joseph Roth had this to say:

The world's obtuseness is greater than in 1914. One does not even flinch when humanness is killed or offended. In 1914 diverse efforts were still made to justify bestiality with humanitarian reasons and ruses. As it is today, bestiality is justified by bestial explanations that are more ruthless than the bestial deeds

themselves. [...] It appears tragic in itself when one simply remains honest.²²

This, of course, has not come about instantaneously or without preceding events. It is now 2009, two decades since the fall of the Communist regime. The political change which began 20 years ago ushered in a freedom that also relieved inhibitions. And Hungarian society remains full of unexpressed, unprocessed "historical" injuries, to which it clings tightly. The new political class has not helped to process and surpass these injuries as it should have. Instead, it has instrumentalised them, employing them to serve its daily political purposes to garner support in the present.

In Hungary, one of the main issues in the centre of political debate is who is a truer Hungarian (Jobbik's recent campaign cry was "*Magyarország a magyaroké!*" or "Hungary for the Hungarians"),²³ thereby questioning whether or to what extent the other belongs to the same community. In such a polarized context, it is unsurprising that Roma, who have never really been considered an integral part of the nation, are further excluded, stigmatised and incriminated.

The eradication of inhibitions was facilitated by the Hungarian practice of unbridled freedom of speech, without a modicum of social responsibility. Although the negative effects of it could initially be postponed for a while, at this point, extreme racist, hateful speech has not only transcended the ghettos but also has become and has continued to be an increasingly accepted, legitimate, ubiquitous part of public dialogue. What used to be relegated to the anonymous world of the internet is now a natural part of the vocabulary and argumentative rhetoric of public figures, opinion makers and public institutions (police, municipality, media, etc.). It is the widely publicised conviction of broad communities that "Gypsies are criminally inclined,"

²¹ Adam LeBor, "Jobbik: Meet the BNP's fascist friends in Hungary", *Times Online*, 9 June 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6457752.ece> (accessed: 10 June 2009).

²² Joseph Roth, *A Szent Korhely Legendája (The Legend of the Holy Drinker)*, (Budapest: Scholar, 2007), 213. The last sentence is in the letter written to Stefan Zweig in 1939.

²³ Gábor Vona, "Letölthető a Jobbik EP-választási programja!", *Jobbik*, 16 March 2008, <http://www.jobbik.hu/program> (accessed: 19 June 2009).

useless, work-shunning people given to thievery. Jobbik is frequently reported as having discussed its commitment to addressing one of the “underlying problems of Hungarian society [...] gypsy crime.”²⁴ Representatives of the media similarly express their condemnation of Roma openly; explicitly, a journalist in *Magyar Hírlap*, one of Hungary’s largest publications, referred to the common knowledge that “those murderous animals were Gypsies [...] A huge number of Gypsies have given up on coexistence and given up on their humanity.”²⁵ Arguments to the contrary are powerless and barely audible, reaching an ever dwindling audience.

What can be done in this milieu? Although things are bleak and optimism seems foolish, it is at this moment that action is so critical: awakening the public from their moral sleep and affirming the central importance of protecting and preserving human rights and equality for all members of society today. Cynics are prone to follow Johannes Nepomuk Nestroy, the famous Austrian actor and playwright, who recommended: “*Die beste Nation ist die Resignation*” (The best nation is resignation). Instead, it is better to share Joseph Roth’s opinion: “This is what responsibility is made of; to save life when it is threatened by brutes, and to save writing. To acquiesce to nothing that we presumptuously call fate.”²⁶

²⁴ Jobbik, “About Jobbik”, 7 September 2008, http://www.jobbik.com/?page_id=2 (accessed: 19 June 2009).

²⁵ Bayer Zsolt, “Betelt a pohár!”, *Magyar Hírlap*, 9 February 2009, <http://www.magyarhirlap.hu/cikk.php?cikk=159771> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

²⁶ Roth n. 22 above, 223.