

Nationalist Pride and Popular Prejudice

Bernard Rorke¹

RENEWED attention to the surge in anti-Romani violence against the backdrop of economic recession has led many commentators to insinuate that these phenomena are inter-related. Across media outlets this makes for easy copy in hard times. The sequence and substance of events in Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic puncture this convenient narrative. The acts of violence against Roma by state and non-state actors, the coarsening of public discourse coloured by inflammatory racist rhetoric and the increase in broad public hostility towards Roma predate the economic downturn and form part of a wider populist assault on the liberal content of contemporary democracy. Prejudice has become a mobilising force, and unabashed and uninhibited anti-Romani prejudice has taken centre stage with crude ultra-nationalism as the core ingredients in a wider radical populist assault on the so-called liberal consensus. In an idealistic vein, and somewhat at odds with the venal reality of contemporary practice, Hanna Arendt described the task of politics in all times and in all places to shed light upon and dispel prejudices. She stressed that prejudices differ from small talk and idle chatter; that the power and danger of prejudices is that something of the past is always hidden within them.² Prejudices dragged through time without being examined or dispelled block judgment, obscure wisdom and corrode the fabric of democracy. When it comes to the situation of Roma in the European Union (EU), the very real consequences of prejudice unchallenged are becoming all too apparent.

The brutal murder of Robert Csorba and his five-year-old son in the small village of Tatárszentgyörgy in February 2009 sent shock waves across Hungary. It would be followed soon by the assassination of Jenő Kóka, gunned down as he left home for his night-shift in Tiszalök. Agnes Kóka, the grief stricken god-daughter of the latest victim and one of the generation of educated, active and civic-minded Roma, stated: “We feel like the real targets. The death of my god-father proves that whatever we do, however we try to prove ourselves to the majority population and to our own community the only thing that matters is that we were born to be Roma.”³ The Magyar Garda had staged meetings and marches in both Tiszalök and Tatárszentgyörgy prior to these fatal attacks. This latest assassination has further heightened fears that the wave of firebomb, grenade and gun attacks targeting Roma is a coordinated terror campaign. The police, hitherto bungling in their investigations and inept in their response, now concede that three of the atrocities may be linked; indeed that the attacks have been carried out by a four-man cell with military expertise “killing with hands that are too confident.”⁴ Confidence in the police force was further shaken by an article which appeared in a newsletter of the trade union of Hungarian police officers *Tettrekész*, “prepared for action,” which boasts some 5,300 members. The article stated that a “crumbling country, torn apart by Hungarian-Gypsy civil war could easily be claimed by the rich Jews [...] Given our current situation, anti-Semitism is not just our right, but is the duty of every Hungarian homeland lover, and we must

¹ Bernard Rorke is the Director of Roma Initiatives, Open Society Institute.

² Hanna Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 99.

³ Varró Szilvia, “Kivégzés. Tiszalökön: volt egy álmuk”, *Magyar Narancs* 21 (April 2009): 17.

⁴ Nicholas Kulish, “As Economic Turmoil Mounts, so Do Attacks on Hungary’s Gypsies”, *New York Times*, 26 April 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/world/europe/27hungary.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

prepare for armed battle against the Jews.”⁵ Judit Szima, the editor of the newsletter and the general secretary of *Tettrekész* was fourth on the list of Jobbik candidates in the European elections. Three Jobbik candidates have been elected to the European Parliament. Most recently, the 5,300-member law enforcement officers’ trade union announced that it had formed a formal alliance with Jobbik, which prompted many to voice deep concerns. An investigation into the legality of the accord is currently underway.⁶

In response to the killings of the Csorba father and son, European Commissioner Vladimír Špidla issued a statement urging European Union Member States (MS) to guarantee the security of their Romani citizens: “Roma have become the target of organised racist violence – fed by political populism, hate speech and media hype [...] and are being made scapegoats for wider societal problems.”⁷ As Špidla noted, this phenomenon is not confined to Hungary. In the Czech Republic a similar pattern of incitement and intimidation against Roma by far-right groups such as the Worker’s Party has been accompanied by an increase in violent attacks, most notoriously the horrific firebombing of a Romani household in Vitkov that injured both parents and left their two-year-old girl in a coma with 80% of her body burned. This attack, which sparked outrage and anger among Czech Roma, occurred the same evening as a large neo-fascist demonstration in Usti nad Labem. Further public outrage prompted Czech TV to halt further

broadcasting of the extremist National Party’s advertisement for the European elections which called for a “final solution to the Gypsy question.”⁸ In neighbouring Slovakia, any sense of celebration of International Roma Day, 8 April, was eclipsed by the release of footage, subsequently broadcast on YouTube, showing police officers in Kosiče forcing Romani children to strip naked, kiss and strike each other in the face. The Slovak Spectator described these degrading scenes as “reminiscent of mistreatment at Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib jail.”⁹

In Italy the brutal murder of an Italian woman in November 2007 sparked a wave of arson attacks and mob violence directed against Roma living in camps. Tensions were further stoked in the run-up to the April 2008 general election, as Silvio Berlusconi’s campaign promised a clampdown on “Roma, clandestine immigrants and criminals” and his coalition’s candidate for Mayor of Rome pledged the expulsion of “20,000 nomads and immigrants who have broken the law.”¹⁰ In the wake of the burning of one illegal camp in Naples, the head of the right-wing, anti-immigrant Northern League party, Umberto Bossi, argued the attack was understandable, saying: “People are going to do what the political class cannot.”¹¹ The controversial plans by Berlusconi’s Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni of the Northern League, to fingerprint all Roma including children living in camps drew fire from EU politicians and human rights groups. It even prompted a scathing attack by the mass Roman

⁵ Lahav Yehuda, “Proud Hungarians must prepare for war against the Jews”, *Haaretz*, 1 January 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1089550.html> (accessed: 2 June 2009).

⁶ “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: 20 July 2009).

⁷ *European Commission*, Statement by Vladimír Špidla on recent attacks on the Roma Community, 26 February 2009, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=464> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁸ Allan Hall, “Czech far-right party linked to BNP runs Euro Election TV ads demanding ‘Final Solution’ to gypsy problem”, *Daily Mail Online*, 22 May 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1186400/> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

⁹ Tom Nicholson, “Police filmed abusing Romani children”, *Slovak Spectator*, 13 April 2009, <http://www.spectator.sk/articles/view/35193> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁰ Peter Popham, “Neo-fascist sweeps in as Rome’s Mayor”, *The Independent*, 29 April 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/neofascist-sweeps-in-as-romes-mayor-817128.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹¹ Bernard Rorke and Valeriu Nicolae, “Hard times, hardening attitudes”, *European Voice*, 18 March 2009, <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2009/03/hard-times,-hardening-attitudes/64311.aspx> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

Catholic publication *Famiglia Cristiana* which likened the security decree to the racial laws imposed by Benito Mussolini in the 1930s.¹² More recently, Berlusconi refused to condemn an ally in Milan who proposed that seats and carriages on local public transport be reserved for native Italians and declared that his party rejects the idea of a “multi-ethnic Italy.”¹³ He used a vote of confidence to push through an amended *pacchetto sicurezza* or “security package” which was ratified by the Senate in early July. This new security package, together with other recently adopted legislation, contains provisions that directly target migrants and minorities. Another disturbing measure is the introduction by emergency decree of “Citizen Anti-Crime Patrols.” In light of previous violent actions by unofficial vigilante groups against Roma and other minorities the spectre of officially sanctioned *squadristi* with a specific mandate to “enhance public security” and to target “illegal immigration” is decidedly sinister.

As stated earlier, the tendency of late to link the spike in anti-Romani violence with the impact of the current global economic crisis is simplistic and misleading. While it is entirely plausible that an economic crisis may aggravate existing tensions and further erode the legitimacy of governing elites, anti-Romani prejudice remains well-nigh ubiquitous and has long thrived in good and bad times alike. Like most forms of prejudice it is neither static in terms of its content, nor is it somehow spread evenly across the polities of the European continent. Within different states prejudice against Roma is either more or less pervasive, more or less overt, manifests itself to differing degrees and in very specific direct and indirect forms against Roma and/or takes its bearings from the

flows and eddies of wider political developments. The gravity of the situation was highlighted by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Housing, Miloon Kothari, who warned in October 2007 of the “undeniable growth of anti-Romani sentiment” in Europe, and the failures of authorities to tackle this problem: “It is regrettable that the actions of many public authorities – particularly at the local level – have been to acquiesce in this intensification of anti-Romani hatred.”¹⁴ Anti-Gypsyism must be recognised by all EU Member States as a long-established and distinct species of racism prevalent across Europe and on a par with Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

To better comprehend the recent ominous and lethal surge in anti-Gypsyism it is more appropriate to attribute it to a wider political malaise than to forge a synthetic, reductive cause-and-effect linkage with current economic woes. Among the new Member States, political instability and an erosion of trust in democratic institutions has led to a situation where, as Jacques Rupnik put it, “Democracy has no rivals but is losing supporters. Populist movements, to some extent express that ambivalence and discontent.”¹⁵ Described by Ivan Krastev as “the new, electoral version of the Molotov cocktail,” populism is not anti-democratic but profoundly anti-liberal. Common features include authentic anger, unrestrained hatred of the elites, cultural conservatism, Euroscepticism, declared nationalism and undeclared xenophobia.¹⁶ At its extreme, expressed through radical rightist manifestations within an increasingly polarised political context, xenophobia is “declared” and much of the “authentic anger” is directed towards Roma and other minorities. Back in 1996, reflecting on the rise of Jorg Haider and the Freedom Party in Austria, Tony

¹² Richard Owen, “Vatican distances itself from Catholic magazine’s warning for fascist revival”, *Times Online*, 14 August 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4531027.ece> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹³ John Hooper, “We don’t want multi-ethnic Italy, says Silvio Berlusconi”, *The Guardian*, 10 May 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/10/silvio-berlusconi-italy-immigrants-libya> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁴ United Nations, “Governments should take positive steps to protect housing rights of Roma in Europe, UN and Council of Europe experts say”, Press Release, 24 October 2007, <http://www.unhcr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/view01/824CB02DF5A5C358C125737E00367C30?opendocument> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁵ Jacques Rupnik, “Populism in Eastern Central Europe”, *Eurozine*, 10 September 2007, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-09-10-rupnik-en.html> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁶ Ivan Krastev, “The New Europe: respectable populism, clockwork liberalism”, *Open Democracy*, 21 March 2006, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/node/3376> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

Judt cautioned against indulging the thought that this represented some kind of renascent fascism or even a sort of para-nazism: “an echo of the ghosts of Europe past.” Rather the successes of Haider and his ilk stand for something more far more serious: “they are the ghosts of Europes yet to come.”¹⁷

Now that the ghosts are with us, what is to be done? A cursory inventory of what *has* been done by European institutions reveals them to be engaged as never before. The Council of Europe has long been a vociferous champion of Roma rights, producing numerous reports, issuing forthright statements and clearly identifying priorities to encourage its members to protect minorities, to combat racism, anti-Gypsyism and intolerance and to prevent social exclusion. Since 1995, the Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers (MG-S-ROM) has been tasked by the Council of Europe with advising Member States and encouraging international authorities to take action where needed.

In Strasbourg on 14 November 2007, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights, by a vote of 13 to four, ruled that segregating Romani students in special schools is a form of unlawful discrimination that violates fundamental human rights. The European Parliament has adopted numerous resolutions condemning anti-Romani racism, specifically urging the European Commission in 2005 to develop a European Strategy for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to Roma inclusion. This was echoed in the Council Conclusions in December 2008 which called upon the Commission and the Member States in close cooperation:

10. on the basis of the conclusions of the report from the Commission, to take account of the situation of the Roma when designing and implementing policies to defend fundamental rights, combat poverty and discrimination and uphold gender equality, and

ensure access to education, housing, health, employment, justice and culture, and where appropriate to identify specific actions for 2009 and 2010 to that end;

11. to make better use of the Structural Funds, the Pre-Accession Instrument and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument to promote the inclusion of the Roma, particularly in the fields of education, housing, health, employment and access to justice and to culture;[...].¹⁸

In response to effective and targeted civil society advocacy by the EU Roma Policy Coalition and others, combined with prompting from governments participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, the European Commission has moved in recent years from passive somnolence to active engagement. The establishment of an integrated EU Roma Platform marks an unprecedented effort to grapple with Roma issues at a European level. At the first ever EU Roma Summit in 2008, President Barosso declared, “The Commission strongly rejects any stigmatization of Roma. In the European Union every man, woman and child has the right to live a life free from discrimination and persecution. This is an issue of European and universal values, as well as an issue of fairness, social solidarity and democracy.”¹⁹

Some of the rhetorical and at times inchoate clamour for “Europe” to do more to address the current crisis seems oblivious to the limitations of the competencies of the various institutions and prone to a wider misconception that European supranational institutions can provide a panacea for ailments that are altogether more intimate. There is a danger that many have succumbed to what Tony Judt called “the grand illusion”:

If we look to Europe as a catchall solution, chanting “Europe” like a mantra, and waving

¹⁷ Tony Judt, “Austria and the Ghost of the New Europe”, *The New York Review of Books* 43, no. 3 (1996), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1634> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁸ EU Roma Policy Coalition, “Council Conclusions on Inclusion of Roma”, 2914th General Affairs Council meeting, 8 December 2008, <http://roma.wieni.be/news/article/council-conclusions-inclusion-roma> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

¹⁹ José Manuel Durão Barroso (president of the European Commission), “European Roma Summit”, (speech, European Roma Summit, Brussels, Belgium, 16 September 2008), <http://www.romadecade.org/portal/downloads/General%20Resources/Barroso%20Roma%20Summit%20Speech.pdf>.

the banner of “Europe” in the face of recalcitrant nationalist heretics, we may wake up one day to find that far from solving the problems of our continent the myth of Europe has become an impediment to recognizing them [...] The mere invocation of the promise of a united Europe could substitute for solving problems and crises in the present. To be sure there is a certain self-fulfilling advantage in speaking of Europe as though it already existed in some stronger collective sense, but there are some things it cannot do, problems it does not address. Europe is more than a geographical notion but less than an answer.²⁰

While the Euroscepticism may be overstated for many tastes, 13 years after this caution was written it seems ever more pertinent. And it serves as a timely reminder that as far as practical politics is concerned, the primary locus of democratic accountability stubbornly remains *within* the nation state. To paraphrase Richard Rorty, the governments of our nation states will remain, for the foreseeable future, the principal agents capable of making any real difference in the amount of selfishness and sadism inflicted on fellow citizens.²¹ It remains the case that demands for justice, recognition and redistribution to promote Roma inclusion and combat prejudice

matter most when a national government can be called to task to meet its democratic obligations towards its most disadvantaged citizens. It is here that the oft-maligned EU has a role to play, on the one hand taking Member States to task when they fail to meet their obligations, and on the other assisting them to coordinate their efforts to promote Roma integration and to defend human rights.

In his address at the EU Roma Summit, President Barroso declared, “There is no place for a laissez-faire or business-as-usual approach.”²² The boundless cupidity and reckless stupidity cultivated by laissez-faire, free-market fundamentalism has plunged the economies of Europe into severe crisis. If one is to draw an analogy between economy and society it is that in either sphere nobody can credibly contemplate “business-as-usual”. A laissez-faire approach to integration of Europe’s largest ethnic minority could precipitate a profound and deeply corrosive crisis that negates the liberal content of representative democracies. There is nothing inevitable about this coming to pass. The threat posed by radical populism needs to be faced and countered in every democratic polity. The task of progressive politics to shed light upon and to dispel prejudices has acquired a new urgency if Romani communities are to be spared another century of exclusion.

²⁰ Tony Judt, “Europe: The Grand Illusion”, *The New York Review of Books* 43, no. 12 (1996), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1469> (accessed: 20 July 2009).

²¹ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²² Barroso n. 19 above.