

A EUROPEAN MINORITY: INTENSIFICATION OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS RELATED TO THE ROMA/GYPSIES

EURÓPA KISEBBSÉGE: A ROMA, AVAGY A CIGÁNYSÁGOT ÉRINTŐ ETNIKAI KONFLIKTUSOK ERŐSÖDÉSE

In my publication I wrote my thoughts on the difficulties of the roma ethnic group's together living with other populations. In the last decades the news of the press, television or the radio inform us dissimilar way from the same ethnical conflict, make a difference of opinion in the cases.

It is an undeniable phenomenon that in some regions of Hungary, mostly where people have difficulties in making ends meet, more often appear the social problems of living together between the roma and not roma people.

Look out of the social politics of the other countries, we must to state that this phenomenon is not only a hungarian specific. The lifestyle and behavior of the roma minority makes big reactions not only in many european but in he overseas countries. These different sized conflicts in the socials of Europe and Canada created hard argues and rows of ethnical- type protests with sharp political speeches.

In my publication you can read about these over- countries phenomenons as a social problem of the whole Europe.

Publikációmban a roma etnikum és más népcsoportok együttélési nehézségeiről fogalmaztam meg gondolatokat. Az elmúlt évtizedben az írott sajtón, a televíziós vagy rádiós műsorokból élénk táruló hírek egy- egy etnikai jellegű konfliktust más szemszögből mutatnak be, eltérő véleményt alkotva a fenti témában.

Tagadhatatlan viszont azon jelenség, hogy Magyarország olyan régióiban, amelyekre jellemzőek a megélhetési nehézségek, egyre többször felszínre kerülnek a roma- nem roma együttélés okozta társadalmi konfliktusok.

Kitekintve más országok társadalom politikájára, meg kell állapítanunk, hogy e jelenség nem magyarországi specifikum. A roma kisebbség életvitele és viselkedése számos európai, de akár már tengeren túli országban is visszhangot váltott ki.

Ezen eltérő mértékű konfliktusok Európa és Kanada társadalmaiban egymással vitába szálló, gyakran politikai indíttatásuktól sem mentes nyilatkozatokat generáltak és etnikai jellegű tiltakozási hullámokat indítottak el.

Az olvasó ezen országhatárokat átlépő jelenség, mint egyszerű nyilatkozatokon túlnövő összeurópai társadalmi probléma vonatkozásában ismerhet meg gondolatokat.

For the European countries recent decades have brought lots of social, political and economic changes which have continued to fundamentally exert an influence on the prospects for the employees and employers up until now. In 1989–1990 a regime change took place in Hungary: state socialism was replaced by a multi-party parliamentary system, and the former Soviet-style planned economy turned to a market economy. The nationwide employment re-stratification and its related urbanization process during the recent five decades have not left the Romani ethnic untouched either.

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Since the 1960s the Soviet style labour market based on mass production has been able to receive large crowds of people, so a significant number of low-qualified Roma and non-Roma have moved to the capital or some big industrial cities such as Ózd, Salgótarján and Miskolc.

During the urbanization process the proportion of urban Gypsies increased from 13.3 % in 1893 to 41.1 % in 1986. Meanwhile, however, the proportion of urban Gypsies living in their traditional regions remained low, i.e. leaving their birthplaces the Gypsies moved to towns outside their county. [1]

Considering that in the 1990s two thirds of the people employed for shorter or longer periods rightly worried over their potential unemployment and one fifth of the employees lost their jobs for a shorter or longer time, it can be stated that mass unemployment is "the result" of the economic transformation triggered by the regime change. As a consequence of the termination or transformation of former companies and cooperatives, the economic activity of the Hungarian population has significantly decreased. It is obvious today that the economic changes occurring in Hungary from 1990s onwards have mainly affected the social stratum of the less educated members. Mostly these education-related differences account for the fact that in 1993 the labour offices registered five to seven times more Roma unemployed people than they did among the members of the majority society. Conversely, in 1983 some 85 % of Roma men fit for work were employed, even if they were less educated than their non-Roma counterparts.

As in the period of socialist industry, after the regime change the employment rate was again a key factor in the alteration of the situation of the Roma. Following the termination of the total employment, the majority of Roma people have become more poverty-stricken than the members of the Hungarian average or even the poorest non-Roma stratum. These social relations have led to the intensification of prejudices against the Gypsies and to the Roma segregation generating further disadvantages for this ethnic group. So, a vicious circle has been created whereby one factor strengthens the other. [2] This phenomenon may induce another unfavourable process e.g. involvement in crime /violence or participation in black / grey economy.

At places in Hungary where the Roma presence is today as considerable as in the Borsod region, the Hungarian – Roma tension overwrites any other conflicts. The non-Roma tend to automatically attribute any problems typical of the region - poverty, unemployment, crime and other failures (even in private life) - to the Roma. So, the issue of social cohesion and ethnic conflicts is becoming more and more important, and the tools of communication can motivate further dialogue between the diverse social strata.

The infamous case known as "Pásztor affair" can easily prove the importance of communication. To everyone's knowledge, on 30th January 2009 dr. Albert Pásztor police colonel and police commissioner of Miskolc held a news conference, which was also broadcast on the Hungarian television. Speaking about a series of thefts and robberies, he made an ethnic-related statement: *"... the robberies at public places – violent crimes - have demonstrably been committed by gypsy people. Actually, while a Hungarian might rob a bank or a petrol station at worst, I must say that the Gypsies are to be blamed for all the other robbery cases in Miskolc."* [3] The police commissioner was relieved of his post. His statement and its consequences have divided the society. Some people think that Pásztor simply made some facts public, so he should be supported instead of being relieved of his post. Others, however, consider that the solidarity and sympathy demonstration for the police commissioner is a mockery of Hungarian democracy. Eventually, following a disciplinary procedure the police commissioner of Miskolc was given a formal warning from the national police commissioner, but - under social and political pressure - he was reappointed to his original post.

For the past few years the criminal presence of the Roma population has been allowed to be statistically measured only indirectly, so Pásztor's unfortunate utterance gives reason for concern. His statement and the following controversial and argumentative, often politically induced ideas sparked an ethnically motivated wave of protest in the region, and the happenings have already exceeded the significance of the police commissioner's remark on serial

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crimes. The case in the Borsod region has brought to light several social conflicts caused by difficulties (typical also of other areas in the country) in making ends meet and by Roma and non-Roma coexistence.

A recurring problem concerning the flats in the panel houses of Avas district in Miskolc is that hundreds of households do not pay their overhead expenses and the joint housing costs either. These families have not been able to adapt to the community and their behaviour has shocked the local people. The focal point of this latent social conflict was that in October 2012 the alleged perpetrator of the Domonyvölgy murder (a case that had been in the lime-light of media for days) was caught up in the Avas housing estate.

In October 2012 the local Roma minority self-government organized a demonstration in the Avas housing estate in Miskolc. Some seven hundred demonstrators chanted their slogans: *"We're at home!", "Work and bread!", "Opre romane!"*(Roma, rise!) and they were carrying banners with slogans: *"Proper life for humans!", "We'll freeze starving!", "Hungarian Roma want to live at home!"* [4]

This demonstration took place in the same district of the city where and on the same day when "Jobbik", the Hungarian far-right party was holding a demonstration protesting about the increasing number of crimes in the region. Zsolt Egyed, a Member of Parliament, who also marched among them proclaimed in the news conference: *"People have run out of patience... There's no public security in Hungary today..."* [5] The intensity of the conflict can be characterized by the threats made against the Roma leaders and the whole Hungarian Roma population from behind the police cordon.

A few days later Jobbik demonstrated in Kerecsend. According to the speakers the Roma are to be blamed for the current crime wave in their community, and the Roma leaders are responsible for the failure of the remedial programs. Except for the party announcing zero tolerance policy, the other parliamentary parties are convinced that the demonstrations with the aim of making a public appeal usually do harm to the local population, because they can evoke even more social tensions. The Roma leaders, however, reckon that Gypsies should prove their strength against the instigators and force them back. *"Clearly, we have been left to ourselves, our community has hardly any allies, yet, we all think that we will be strong enough to sweep out the Nazi ideas"* – alluded Aladár Horváth, the civil right activist to the openly anti-Roma political forces. [6]

The public resistance to the Roma is not a Hungarian peculiarity as it can be proved by the actions against the Gypsies arriving in Canada, France or Italy. Since the obligatory visa system was repealed in 2008 the Canadian government has been monitoring the migration wave worrying about the increasing number of refugee applications submitted mostly by the Roma from Hungary. In 2009 Canada introduced obligatory visa system against the Czech Republic because of the high number of the Roma asylum seekers. The action led then to a diplomatic scandal between the two countries.

At first, Ottawa contemplated the possible restoration of the obligatory visa system because of the high number of the Hungarian emigrants as well, but instead, a reformed refugee policy was soon launched with the intention to accelerate the lengthy application processing related to the asylum-seeking citizens from the safe countries of the European Union – so from Hungary, too. Contrary to the procedures that usually lasted up to 1000 days before, the new reform makes it possible to refuse the asylum-seekers in 45 days. In this way, the refugee claimants cannot spend years waiting for the official decision and receiving the benefits due to them for that time. A middle-aged Roma man, who used to work as the only Roma employee for a nappy-making factory in Hungary and now lives in Toronto on his disability benefit of 2,500 Canadian dollar (569,000 Hungarian forints) made a statement to the Hungarian newspaper "Népszabadság": *"Here we are free. In Hungary we always felt a certain tension in the streets and at our workplaces"*. Incidentally, the Roma arriving in Canada do not mind illegality either. According to a report given by Canadian border guards hundreds of Roma have opted out of the refugee program made up specifically for them and decided to disappear in the country without a trace. [7]

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In October 2012 some two hundred Roma from Romania living in Lille, France were made to fly back to Temesvár, Romania at the expense of the French government in the framework of the "voluntary return" programme initiated by the French government and constantly criticized by civic organizations which deal with the social integration of the Roma. *"France cannot welcome all the misery of the world and of Europe"* – said the French Interior Minister Manuel Valls in connection with the case and announced that seven thousand Roma would have been removed back to Romania and Bulgaria by the end of the year. The repatriated Roma seem to be satisfied with the incentive of €100-300 and with the flight to Romania financed by the French government, but many of them are planning to return to France very soon. [8]

The lengthy application procedures related to the Roma immigrants and the way they are treated have been causing great anxiety also in Italy for a long time. Italians receive the Roma immigrants arriving mostly from Romania with a negative attitude, and there is general anti-Roma sentiment in the Italian common talk and media too. The cause of this antipathy towards the Roma living usually in tents of illegal camps on the outskirts of some settlements is the fact that the Italians blame them for the deterioration of public security. In 2008 the social opposition reached the point where the police had to rescue some Gypsies when hundreds of youngsters armed with sticks gathered around a Roma encampment near Naples, threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the huts some of which were even set alight.

The Italian government also wanted to be harder than ever on the Roma, so they were planning to keep a record of each Roma immigrants' fingerprints and photos. According to the Italians the strong measures exclusively serve the aim of crime prevention considering that most crimes in Italy are committed by people of Romani origin. This internationally controversial step is expected to facilitate the expulsion of the unwanted Roma for the Italian government. [9]

The ethnic/social tensions in the recipient countries are even more intensified by the circumstances where transitional aid, accommodation and provision provided to the Roma immigrants or their getting back home all are financed by the state, which is disapproved of by the local taxpayers and considered downright waste of public money.

The social conflict associated with the Gypsies exists even in the regions with Hungarian population in the neighbouring Romania. According to a report published in the Transylvanian Krónika (The Chronicle) feelings were running high in Alsórákos (Brasso county) as a confrontation between the members of the Roma community of nearly 1500 and the local inhabitants came to blows. After the Gypsies had bullied three local young men, several villagers armed with tools set out for the Gypsy slum area to revenge for their grievances. In the end, lynching was prevented by increased police force called out to Alsórákos. The Gypsies were expecting the attack, and they threw stones at the crowd restrained by that time and also at the security forces. The mayor Tamás Gáspár claims that the Roma went to his house following a false rumour circulating in the Gypsy slum that the number one person of the village had assaulted a Roma woman. To prevent similar incidents, members of a private security firm also patrolled the streets for several months.

The opposition between the villagers and the Romanian speaking Roma community, who understand Hungarian as well is not a new phenomenon. The residents of the small settlement in Brasso County (where Hungarians outnumber Romanians) claim that several members of the gypsy community have been terrorizing and robbing the villagers of their possessions for years. The embittered inhabitants are helpless against mugging, burglary, incidental thefts and vandalism. They reached the point where they decide not to sow their fields, let their orchards get lost, do not keep domestic animals, fit shutters on their windows and keep watch in turn after dark. The Hungarian speaking Roma community living in the village are also afraid of the gangs. The majority of the local men work abroad, so the women staying at home lock themselves in their houses and watch helplessly how their unprotected yards get raided. A few of them offered the raiders half of their lands, but the Roma were not cooperative saying that they have nothing to cultivate lands.

Some of the Romanian speaking Gypsies living in Alsórákos have admitted regular stealing. They claim they are compelled to commit crime because of the lack of jobs and state benefits. Children from groups specialised in stealing keep watch from the crest of the hills and noticing the approaching police they alert the others and if required, they come and help each other within minutes. *"We are jobless, we have no income but our children still have to eat, so we can't help but steal. If I'm sent to prison, I'll at least know that my wife and children won't die of hunger"* – as a local man gives an account of their possibilities of making a living to the correspondent for Krónika (The Chronicle).

In recent years there have been several village meetings held in Alsórákos, where the locals made a resolution to change the situation evolved, but in the end nobody has done anything. Tangible tension can be felt between Roma and non-Roma, even between Roma and Roma inhabitants respectively because today both the honest and dishonest members of the community generalize stereotypically. [10]

It is obvious that the social conflicts with the Roma population drifted to the periphery of society because of their subsistence difficulties, cross cultural or value discrepancies are present in several countries. It can be stated that the highest ethnic tensions of recent years have been and expectedly in the near future will remain linked to the Romani ethnic group.

To deal with minorities is always considered as an important task by each government in power, but a resounding success in true partnership has not been achieved yet. During the two decades after the change of regime some opposing guidelines have been developed to arrange our mutual matters with the minorities, particularly with the Roma. The differing principles generated countless debates, which have only deteriorated the conflicts, so the Roma issue has become a sore political subject. Thus it is necessary to examine the previous measures for reducing the ethnic tensions and analyze their efficiency or failure. To overcome the prejudices it is indispensable to reveal the real problems related to the coexistence of the majority society and the ethnic minorities and provide alternatives for solving them within the country concerned.

I strongly believe that there is definite demand for preventing or sorting out the conflicts among the population. Propositions free from selfish political interests should be worked out involving as many members of the community as possible irrespective of origin so that the whole society can benefit from them.

Keywords: roma, ethnical conflict, rows of protest, social problem

Kulcsszavak: roma, etnikai konfliktus, tiltakozási hullám, társadalmi probléma

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