



The Situation of Roma in Hungary

- Executive summary of the Policy Solutions study -

I. Historical reasons of the disadvantageous situation of the Roma in Hungary

Roma constitute the largest minority both in Europe and in Hungary. There are an estimated 569,000 Roma in Hungary (5.7% of the total population), though their regional distribution varies widely. In the eastern counties of Hungary their ratio of the population ranges as high as 11-16%, while in the west it is generally under 5%.

The Roma community in Hungary is not socially integrated and is characterised by considerably worse indicators on most crucial socio-economic, demographic and other key measures than the population at large. Moreover, the trend has been one of disconcerting decline since regime transition in 1989/1990. Historically, the roots of the recent divergence in lifestyle and living conditions of the Roma and non-Roma communities began with modernisation and the introduction of compulsory education in the 18th-19th century. These developments largely passed the Roma by, thus cementing their exclusion from society. This was exacerbated by bans on Roma holding land, which excluded the Roma community from both a common source of income and a socially accepted way of life. A change came with the decision of the communist regime in the 1960s to pursue the forced assimilation of Roma. This policy forced Roma both into employment – overwhelmingly as unskilled labourers in heavy industry and construction – and into the educational system. While only a third of Roma were in official employment before the 1960s, by 1971 the employment of Roma men stood at 85%, virtually on par with the majority community.

Regime transition in 1989/90 marked both the end of Hungarian heavy industry and of compulsory employment. The places where Roma worked became either defunct or shed the least skilled or socially least protected/esteemed workers, who were disproportionately Roma. Within four years, employment among Roma men dropped from 85% to 39%, while that of women went from 53% to 23%. While ethnic discrimination was less influential than lack of skills as a cause of the mass layoffs in the early 1990s, it plays a major role in the pervasively low rates of Roma employment since then. In the 20 years since transition the political leadership of all stripes has failed to counter the alarming trend of growing social separation and decline, with the result that ethnic tensions make integration much harder than at the time when shared workplaces provided some connection between majority and minority communities.

The state socialist period in Hungary also marked the rise of literacy and improved housing conditions for Roma, since these were part of the state's assimilation programme. Though many improvements very achieved in these areas, in relative terms the educational and housing situation of the Roma community began lagging behind even more than previously,



as its amelioration failed to keep pace with the progress of society at large. The explosion in secondary school completion and higher education failed to extend to the Roma, who were generally stuck at the primary level. Housing policy for Roma was not thought out. Though new housing was constructed en masse, it was segregated everywhere, laying the framework for pervasive ghetto-like communities today. Though some Roma began to move, their appearance in poorer non-Roma communities – the only places where they could afford housing – often resulted in “white flight”, thereby creating new ghettos.

2. The situation of Roma in the 21st century

The trends that emerged immediately after transition continue to define the situation of Roma in Hungary. Few are in employment, and those that are (38% of men and 20% of women) overwhelmingly perform unskilled manual labour, with a mere 7% in white collar employment and only 24% in jobs that require skilled labour. This also has the effect that even the few Roma that are employed work in highly volatile jobs with unreliable income. Moreover, even the low employment rates disguise high turnover rates: 43% of employed Roma leave the labour market annually, with the result that even though many Roma get a job from time to time, few of them are in stable long-term positions. The low levels of labour market activity are not wholly explained by lack of education. Comparing Roma with the segment of the total population that has 8 years of school training or less, employment levels in the latter group are twice that of Roma, while employment stability is significantly greater. These differences are best explained by discrimination.

The low education levels of Roma and their segregation in schools are exacerbated by the Hungarian education system’s predilection for educating problematic children separately, usually under worse conditions. This cements differences and lack of opportunities. 85% of students in special schools are Roma. Although teaching students with a different background separately has succeeded in some countries, in Hungary this approach has been a total failure – there is no alternative to integration.

Since such information is not collected on an ethnic basis, little is known about the income of Roma families. It is estimated that some 50% of the families in the lowest decile in terms of income are Roma. Though the most recent national survey on how much Roma earn is from 2003, it showed that 56% of Roma families had an income around the UN defined poverty line of two dollars a day, which tends to be common in developing countries.

Roma also participate little in politics. Though there are legally enshrined Roma councils in many municipalities, they wield little influence. Apart from the specific Roma institutions, there are very few Roma politicians in local councils or in the Hungarian Parliament (between 1994-2002 there were none in the latter). The health and demographic indicators of Roma also mostly resemble developing world indicators, that is they have low life expectancy (20.2% of the general population are over 60, but only 3.9% Roma live past that age), high infant mortality and much higher birth rates than the general population. Smoking is a major problem, with 70% of Roma men and 61% of women smoking (38% of non-Roma do).



Many of the municipalities with a high share of Roma residents are also loci of ethnic tensions. The generally poor non-Roma who – mostly because of a lack of resources – do not leave such communities often feel disturbed or even threatened by their fellow Roma residents. Though studies have not shown that crime rates among Roma are significantly higher than in the general population, many citizens are convinced that it is, a sentiment that is exploited by the far-right.

3. Roma policies of the government and opposition parties

In the following, we will briefly review governmental measures in the realm of Roma policy since 2002.

The policies of the second Orbán government

In its government programme in 2010, Fidesz argued that the previous, social-liberal coalition was to blame for the situation of Roma because they „had treated the problem as exclusively one of poverty”. The programme identifies education, employment and health as areas of intervention, though its precise statement on them is brief and very general. Though the government is theoretically committed to the integration of Roma, its measures afflicting the poor (reduction in the amount of welfare and harsher eligibility requirements, reduction in the amount of workfare benefits) also have a negative impact on Roma. The reduction in the age of compulsory education from 18 to 16 years is also problematic for this minority community.

The government’s policies are contradictory. Governing politicians clearly distance themselves from racism. On a rhetorical level they emphasise their commitment to integration and their conviction that it is a key strategic issue. The government also wishes to support Roma from underprivileged backgrounds. At the same time, however, it is also foreclosing avenues of mobility and has transformed education and social policy in a way that cements social stratification. Upward mobility is making way for a policy of strengthening the “national middle class”.

European Roma Strategy

The most important measure of Roma integration under the Orbán-government is the European Roma Strategy, which is designed to serve as a framework for national strategies. The strategy treats discrimination as a pre-eminent area of concern, but emphasises lack of access to education, employment, healthcare, as well as the improvement of housing conditions, as the key areas. It sets out the following goals in education:

- quality and integrated education for Roma - every Roma child should complete at least primary education;
- programmes offering a second chance for adults with insufficient education;
- pre-school education for small children;
- improving teacher training and designing innovative methods.



The EU further wishes to redress disadvantages in the labour market, especially for women, and to provide access to vocational training and instruments of self-employment, as well micro-credits. The two main problems in healthcare are the low life expectancy of Roma (10 years below the EU average) and the high rate of infant mortality. In terms of housing, the document wishes for modern housing appropriate for the 21st century with equal access to public utilities.

Though the strategy addresses the most important problems, it leaves the details to member states that have already proven incapable of handling them. Since a lack of transposition cannot be sanctioned, compliance is likely to be patchy at best.

The government has also drafted a document entitled “National Social Inclusion Strategy – extreme poverty, child poverty, Roma”. The greatest flaw of the document is its failure to consider popular attitudes and discrimination against Roma, and consequently also its failure to address the implication thereof for any policy seeking to foster integration. It also views labour market disadvantages primarily as a supply-side problem (i.e. Roma not putting enough energy into seeking work), without considering that the employment crisis is rooted in the dearth of jobs.

MSZP's Roma policy

MSZP's 2010 programme devotes a separate chapter to the issue, though it does not address it in great detail. It assesses the achievements during the party's eight years in government (2002-2010) but provides few details. Its proposals are similarly general in nature: the expansion of kindergarten care; developing that “Tanoda” programme that offers activities to Roma children outside the classroom; a special health programme; developing the most underprivileged regions and the elimination of ghetto settlements; improving employment for low-skilled labourers. MSZP also stresses cultural exchange, action against discrimination and the need for integrated education.

As a mass party, MSZP was internally divided over this issue. Its terms in government mixed sensitive, earnest policy efforts aimed at ameliorating the situation of Roma with harsher social policy measures. MSZP comprises both, a liberal wing focused on minority rights and a more law-and-order oriented segment, which placed contradictory pressures on the government.

Similarly to the Orbán government, the second Gyurcsány cabinet instituted both supportive measures (scholarships, hate speech legislation, 9% of development funds for backward regions designated for projects targeted at Roma) and also measures encumbering access to welfare, such as the Road to Labour programme, which made welfare conditional on work. Due to its short term in office, which was devoted to crisis management, the Bajnai cabinet hardly addressed the issue.



Jobbik's Roma Policy

Jobbik's 2010 election manifesto devotes an entire chapter to Roma issues. It blames the political elite, in particular the left-liberal parties, and the Roma for the situation. Its main proposals are the following:

- a comprehensive review of the situation of Roma;
- to lead the Roma back into the world of "laws, employment and education". The programme fears a lack of interest in the Roma community and calls for increased policing and workfare rather than welfare;
- transforming social benefits from cash to a card with designated expenditures, benefits for the third child to be paid as tax credits and tying benefits to school attendance;
- strengthening Roma education, by integration or segregation, if necessary
- abolishing the National Roma Self-Government, a new arrangement in its stead
- elimination of "Gypsy crime"
- more involved churches and civic organisations

Recent developments have seen some further radicalisation in Jobbik's rhetoric.

LMP's (Politics Can Be Different) Roma policy

LMP drafted a separate document before the elections to present its Roma programme, which was the most detailed of all political parties. LMP's proposals are the following:

- tax reform to reduce labour costs;
- scholarship programme for Roma;
- integrated education with special programmes for young kids;
- better salary for new teachers and for teachers dealing with children from underprivileged families;
- guaranteed minimum income;
- efficient action against usury;
- creation of community policing;
- more funds for eliminating ghettoised Roma settlements;
- an end to forced evictions;
- teaching minority culture and history in schools;
- support for minority self-governments.

Among the parties in Parliament, LMP is most decisive in terms of addressing the problems of the Roma.

Successful local initiatives

The programme referred to as the "Hódmezővásárhely model" is one of several successful local projects. The programme is based on the assumption that segregation afflicts extremely underprivileged (so-called HHH in Hungary) children from all ethnic backgrounds. To prevent segregation, student spots in schools were pooled and a map was created with the



distribution of HHH children to ensure that their distribution within the school district would be roughly equal.

4. Policy recommendations

In addition to reviewing the current state of affairs, the present study also makes policy proposals to halt the falling behind of Roma and to help them break out of the vicious cycle of extreme poverty. We are working under the assumption that the problems of a community whose situation is typical of developing countries cannot be addressed only with methods established in the European Union.

There is a significant debate in the academic literature on how the problems of the developing world might be overcome. One school is best exemplified by Jeffrey Sachs, who believes that the reasons behind lacking development are historically rooted and best mitigated by major cash donations directly given to those in need. William Easterly and Dambisa Moyo stand in for another school of thought, which argues that direct aid distorts markets and the economy, making recipients more interested in pleasing donors rather than focusing on the market. This creates dependency, corruption and a perpetuation of halted development.

Our proposal will foremost pertain to the elimination of segregation, but we also propose that those in extreme poverty be included in the decision-making process concerning arrangements that pertain to them, as well as in the supervision of spending directed at them. We focus on proposals that we believe might affect significant change already in the short and medium term.

All policies must be based on recent and pertinent information, which is why we urge to renew earlier, state-funded regular biyearly studies on the situation of the Roma. All programmes aimed at convergence ought to be preceded by a preparatory phase of no less than two years, which designates clearly what criteria of success must be met to expand the project nationally.

Education policy proposals

Creating equal opportunity and access to quality education is key. Eliminating segregation is not enough, however. The tradition that Roma follow the educational changes in society only with a delay of several generations must also be done away with. We suggest a separate programme for training teachers who are equipped to handle students from families in extreme poverty. For the duration of their service, these teachers should be given free housing in a ghetto neighbourhood. Those private initiatives that have already shown success in this regard ought to become demonstration schools attached to teachers' training colleges, thereby securing their long-term funding and ensuring the mainstreaming of their successful models.



In light of the low levels of foreign language skills among Roma, all schools in disadvantaged regions should focus on language education and digital literacy, which would make the institutions more attractive to middle-class parents as well. Internet use and a medium level state certificate in a foreign language should be a minimum requirement for any student graduating from secondary school.

The underrepresentation of Roma in the civil service and in the police is a serious problem that should be addressed with a scholarship programme that offers 200 young Roma annually the chance to complete a vocational school that trains police officers. As a result, within ten years 2000 Roma officers could enter into service. A similar programme at the National Public Service University could support 100 Roma annually who would become future local councillors.

The educational participation of Roma should be helped by a cash aid programme modelled on the Mexican PROGRESA. The families of those participating receive a freely disposable sum of cash upon successful completion of an academic year. Though the costs would be high, so would the effectiveness. Estimates suggest that it could reduce dropout rates by 8% annually. The programme should also be extended to kindergarten. To combat segregation, we propose to apply nationally the successful model introduced in the town of Hódmezővásárhely.

Increasing political participation

To supplement the current system of minority local councils that have proven ineffective, we suggest to establish separate local councils for segregated neighbourhoods to ensure participation in decision-making affecting all areas. Such councils should be established pursuant to a decision by the local municipality, but since establishing such a council would often be contrary to the latter's interests, local referenda on this issue should be allowed to force the local government's hand. In parallel, Roma candidates should be prepped for local elections with training offered by civic organisations and/or party foundations. Elected candidates can later serve as the core of a national cadre of qualified Roma representatives.

Improving housing conditions, opening up ghettos

Programmes aimed at reducing residential segregation have thus far focused on getting ghetto residents to move, generally with little success. Our proposal focuses on improving conditions in the ghettos and segregated neighbourhoods. Though eliminating segregation ought to be a priority, it is a long-term goal at best, and in the meanwhile improvements must be attained in the unworthy living conditions of those residing in such communities. We do not recommend grand-scale residential building programmes, since experience shows that these have always reproduced segregation.

One of the greatest problems for ghettoised regions is their lack of accessibility. Hence we recommend that the roads leading to ghettoised settlements be renovated by the state to improve the competitiveness of these areas.



Health

Smoking is a major health problem in the Roma community and if it were reduced that would also free up considerable financial resources in the community, in addition to the health benefits. Campaigns seeking to scale back smoking should be based on co-operation with the general practitioners. As a target we recommend that in the age group under 20 nicotine dependence be reduced by a third within 10 years, and also to double as compared to the current 10% the ratio of adults who gave up smoking.

Supervision

Supervision of funds from competitions and subsidies constitutes a dual challenge. Though strict supervision is called for, it is also important to keep in mind that excessive administrative requirements constitute a burden precisely for those most in need of support. Moreover, administrative costs draw funds from the intended beneficiaries. The compromise we suggest is to apply a uniform guideline in distributing funds and evaluating competition. It would be enough to learn a single guideline. It is important that such a guideline be adopted only after detailed deliberation and that it only be subjected to minor changes thereafter. This would lead to the emergence of a reliable system of competition. We recommend that the beneficiaries definitely be involved in the supervision. This necessitates the simplification of the over-bureaucratized system, of course, but it is worth keeping in mind that accounting and evaluation must include feedback by the beneficiaries.