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The rise of the extreme right in Hungary and the Roma question

The Radicalisation of the Media Discourse

Zsuzsanna Vidra and Jon Fox

In Hungary the **success of the far right is to a large extent due to their effective exploitation of Roma issues**. The first electoral success for Jobbik (Hungary's main far right party) came in the European elections in 2009; a year later they captured 16% of the vote in parliamentary elections in Hungary. At the same time a growing number of extra-parliamentary and sometimes paramilitary groups have also become active, some with close links to Jobbik. **Support for the radical right doubled between 2002 and 2009**. There are numerous factors behind the rapid rise and success of the far right in Hungary: mistrust toward democratic institutions, the state, and politics in general. Xenophobic attitudes rooted in the dominant definition of the Hungarian nation as mono-cultural and mono-ethnic can also be viewed as a determinant (but also as an effect) of the rise of the extreme right. More generally, economic decline, poor governance, interethnic tensions and the media's handling of the issue have contributed to strengthening the radical right. **The mainstream political actors and the media have responded to Jobbik discourses on Roma, but often in ways that fail to challenge some of the fundamental assumptions about the Roma.**

Two murders in two villages in Hungary have come to encapsulate the problems surrounding the media's coverage of the Roma. In the first village, Olaszliszka, the Roma were behind the murder of a non-Roma man; in the second village, Tatárszentgyörgy, a Roma man and his son were killed by non-Roma. These cases were watershed events that gave new currency to the notion of 'Gypsy crime'.

The media responded to them by promising to 'break the taboos' of political correctness and **make 'Gypsy criminality' a widely accepted concept**. Our study aimed at illustrating how far right discourses on Roma have spread into mainstream public discourses and how different media in Hungary have responded to the rise of radical and racist discourse. We compared media coverage of these two murder incidents in sources with different political orientations. We analysed the **radical web-site kuruc.info.hu**, the **conservative daily Magyar Nemzet** and the **left wing daily Népszabadság**. We also analysed public **debate on the question of 'Roma integration'** that

What accounts for the radicalisation of the public discourses? How 'Gypsy crime', 'born criminals', 'Gypsies terrorising the majority', etc. become so widely accepted?

It began with prejudiced talk about 'being Gypsies' ('cigányozás'), and became more widespread, penetrating public and everyday talk as well.

followed the Olaszliszka incident. This third case saw a mainstream and liberal economic-political weekly (**HVG**) joining in the 'breaking of taboos' and abandoning politically correct language.

Our analysis of media and public debate discourses revealed important and interrelated developments:

- **racist language was increasingly unchallenged,**
- **voices of tolerance have been increasingly marginalized.**

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Case no. 1: The murder in Olaszliszka

The incident: in October 2006 a middle aged teacher was driving through a small village with his two daughters when he accidentally hit a girl crossing the road. As the man got out of his car to help the girl, a group of local people gathered around, concerned for the girl's wellbeing. The driver was brutally attacked, and died on the spot as a result of his injuries. His two daughters witnessed their father being killed from where they sat in the car. The attackers were Roma. The girl, who had been hit by the car, had not been injured. Within two days, the police had arrested the perpetrators.

Following the incident the Roma were characterised in the media as 'wild and barbarian', having 'blind family attachments', an 'inclination to vigilantism', whilst exhibiting 'uncontrolled aggression' and 'different norms of behaviour from that of the majority'.

For the far right website, **kuruc.info.hu**, '**Gypsy crime**' was a fact: deficient Roma attributes explained their criminal behaviour, and this in turn justified their continued exclusion:

The Gypsy mob lynched a teacher to death. Another victim of Gypsy terrorism: It is a shame that the Gypsies, after having fucked over the possibility for peaceful coexistence, are still free and attacking us. Us, peaceful Hungarians. (<http://kuruc.info/r/2/6487/>)

However, the mainstream conservative right wing newspaper **Magyar Nemzet**, also adopted a similar type of rhetoric (though somewhat less vitriolic): **they also presented the murder as an example of 'Gypsy crime'**:

We need to recognise the existence of Gypsy crime. The majority society must be informed about Roma issues without hiding the facts and the Gypsy society must be made to realise that in Hungary they also have to obey the laws. (<http://mno.hu/migr/jobik-olaszliszka-utan-uj-romapolitika-kell-473660>, 16.10.2006)

The mainstream left-wing newspaper **Népszabadság** applied different strategies in its reporting on Olaszliszka. **'Gypsy crime' is used as a negation**, with the claim that no such phenomenon exists:

This is not a Gypsy issue, but a criminal case. (<http://nol.hu/archivum/archiv-421067>)

To sum up, the Olaszliszka incident thus opened the door to a new discourse on 'Gypsy crime', a door that some of the mainstream media also stepped through.

Case no. 2: The murders in Tatárszentgyörgy

The incident: A series of murderous attacks against the Roma that began in 2008 were later revealed to be racially motivated. The victims all lived in houses situated on the edges of small villages, and the villages were all close to major roads that helped facilitate the gunmen's escape. The gunmen prepared meticulously for their attacks, choosing the village, street and houses carefully. Each attack took place in the middle of the night or at dawn. The actual victims, however, were chosen randomly. This sent the message that Roma people do not deserve recognition as individuals, but rather share collective guilt for their 'Gypsy crime'. In August 2009 four men were arrested by the police on suspicion of murder. The police found neo-Nazi symbols in the suspects' houses, establishing the racial motivations of the crimes.

The radical web-site, **kuruc.info.hu**, reported on this event by portraying **majority Hungarians as the victims, targets of anti-Hungarian attacks and humiliation**.

Hungarian humiliation in the Sunday Times. The sinful nation committed a murder against poor, honest, hard working Gypsies. (...) We know that we Hungarians shot, stabbed, raped, threatened our dark skinned friends on a daily basis. Not the other way around, that's for certain. (<http://kuruc.info/r/20/36261/>).

In the two mainstream papers, the murder was framed as one of two possible but competing interpretations, either 'a racial hate crime' or 'a non-racial hate crime'. **Magyar Nemzet** consistently argued that it was '**not a hate crime**':

Is it out of the question that racists committed the murder in Tatárszentgyörgy? No, this cannot be excluded, but it is the least likely scenario. Racist attacks everywhere in the world are committed by terrorists who are proud of their deeds and they want their victims to be afraid of them. They make their voice heard somehow, they want publicity. (MN 25.04.2009).

The left-wing newspaper **Népszabadság** in contrast supported the argument that the murders in Tatárszentgyörgy were a '**hate crime**'. Expert opinions were published in the newspaper to support this view:

It is possible that the family in Tatárszentgyörgy was attacked as a result of a previous conflict, but it is also possible that racism was behind the killing. According to Németh [the chief police investigator], the murderers believed that they were omnipotent and that they knew the truth about everything. It is likely that they have families and jobs and that they are not from underground criminal groups. (NSZ 23.02.2009).

Case no 3: Down with political correctness!

Together the two incidents generated important public debate. The mainstream economic-political weekly, *HVG*, hosted one of these debates on the theme of "Roma integration" by giving the floor to various mainstream public intellectuals from both left and right.

The main themes in the debate, however, resonated very closely with the themes that had already emerged in earlier reporting: one called for the 'end of political correctness' and the other focused on the 'peculiar Roma civilisation/culture'. Those calling for the '**end of political correctness**' **argued** that political correctness was an impediment to talk about real problems:

From the very beginning, intellectuals acting in the name of "political correctness" have tried to suppress debate about real problems. With the anti-liberal revolution there's no longer any obstacle getting in the way the Gypsy question for the social and political centre (Németh: http://hvg.hu/velemeny/20091029_ciganyvita_felzarkozas_integracio_akadaly).

The second strain focused on the Roma's '**peculiar civilization**'. This debate in the mainstream, moderate, and even left oriented media featured a new approach on the Roma that gave increasing legitimacy to the idea that **Roma culture is derived from nomadism**. From this view, the **Roma's intentional self-exclusion** can be seen as a feature that explains the Roma's current condition. In so doing, discourses like these both drew on and reinforced widespread stereotypes that the Roma still want to be outsiders because it is **their culture's essence not to want to integrate**.

The Roma constitute not only a distinct ethnic group, but also a peculiar and particular civilisation that evolved during the long centuries of nomadism; this is a culture of "deliberate outsiders". This culture included a very thrifty life style that provided very low and modest living conditions that would have been unimaginable for the majority society. At the same time, it also offered security for the community, united as they were in poverty by solidarity.

(Romano Rác: http://hvg.hu/velemeney/20091014_roma_cigany_integracio)

In sum, our analysis of the **two murders** and the more general '**Roma integration**' debate that followed highlighted a number of related discursive tropes: 'Gypsy crime', 'hate crime', 'the end of political correctness' and 'the peculiar Roma civilisation'. While **Magyar Nemzet** considered it important to write openly about 'Gypsy crime' in order to **break taboos**, **kuruc.info.hu** treated 'Gypsy crime' as **self-evident** and therefore not requiring further elaboration or justification. In the **integration debate** in HVG we found similar strategies be employed, albeit with less vitriol: the 'end of political correctness' is used to **break taboos** of not talking about the true nature of 'Gypsy difference'. But whilst **kuruc.info.hu** and **Magyar Nemzet** invoked **biological and genetic differences**, these differences featured in the integration debate as **cultural differences**.

For both **kuruc.info.hu** and **Magyar Nemzet**, the Roma were consistently depicted in adversarial terms. They were not alone, however: left-liberals, the liberal media, and civil rights activists were also part of a larger leftwing conspiracy to cover up the truth about the Roma. And in the **integration debate**, social scientists joined this growing list of adverseries for their complicity with the liberals to hide the truth. In **Népszabadság**, in contrast, it was the Hungarian Guard, the rightwing media and the institutions responsible for not putting an end to discrimination that were consistently evaluated negatively.

Victims also featured in the reporting as well. For **kuruc.info.hu** and **Magyar Nemzet** the **Hungarians** were the victims; in **Népszabadság**, it was the **Roma**.

Key Findings

- **There is a growing tendency of non-tolerant public discourse** in Hungary spreading to **almost all types of media**;
- The rise of **radical racist language** is linked to the political **success of the far right party, Jobbik**;
- **Jobbik has been setting the political and media agenda** by thematising the **'Roma question'**;
- **Mainstream media** from both the left and right **fail to offer** a viable alternative to the radical right version of events;
- **Mainstream media** agreeing to acting as partners in 'breaking taboos', **thus becoming complicit in legitimating non-tolerant discourses**;
- **Cultural difference is 'recognised' in these media discourses** but as a basis for justifying exclusion.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

One of the most important conclusions of our study is that the rise of the radical right is linked to the media coverage of these events. In Hungary the **media** as well as the **political elite** have become **complicit in this spread of intolerant discourses**. This complicity takes the form of **silence** and **indifference** (not condemning racist or intolerant discourses) and **collusion** (appropriating, typically in only superficially reworked version, the intolerant discourses of the radical right).

To date, Jobbik and the media outlets associated with it have effectively set the agenda on the 'Roma question'. This needs to end. To challenge the rise of **racist and intolerant language** and derail Jobbik on the 'Roma question', **mainstream political parties must join forces to mount a sustained anti-racism campaign:**

- A more robust **stance against racism** must be taken **by all mainstream political actors**. Not only must these politicians of parties refrain from adopting intolerant discourses on the Roma, **they must speak out clearly and collectively against all instances of intolerance vis-à-vis the Roma**.
- **Enforcement of hate speech offences** in the media and public life more generally is crucially needed.
- The **media authority (the Hungarian Media Council) should punish stereotyped and biased representation of Roma** (and other minorities) based the regulation on balanced and objective media coverage.
- Besides the need of the more active involvement of the Media Council in punishing biased representations of minorities, the **media need to adhere to their code of ethics** and monitor their own reporting on Roma issues. The code of ethics is prepared by the media outlet itself and it is in the competence of each newspaper, television or radio channel to implement it during their daily work.

Methodology

Four Hungarian media sources were analyzed three of which served as a basis for case 1. and case 2., and the fourth for case 3. For the first two cases we included the following media: **kuruc.info.hu**, one of the most important radical right-wing internet web-sites in Hungary, the left-wing but mainstream **Népszabadság**, and the right-wing (also mainstream) **Magyar Nemzet**. For our third case we compiled a database by choosing one particular debate published in a weekly political and economic magazine, **Heti Világgazdaság** (HVG).

Kuruc.info.hu is one of the leading internet web-sites of the radical right. Its editors use pseudonyms and it is operated from an American server. It is openly racist against all minorities. The site is constantly in the focus of debates on hate speech and efforts have been made to ban it.

Népszabadság is the largest national daily with left wing orientation. It used to be the Communist Party's official paper. Since 1989 it has enjoyed the continued support of the Social Party.

Magyar Nemzet was founded in 1938 and has always been a conservative paper. After 1989, the newspaper emerged as an independent and moderate/conservative paper. In 2000 the paper was merged with a more extremist right wing paper. Although it is still considered mainstream, since the merger it has adapted a rather radical voice.

www.hvg.hu: According to the self definition of the magazine, HVG is a liberal minded, economic-political weekly not linked to any political parties. It publishes articles regardless of political party interests.

For case 1. and 2. we conducted **keyword searches** – looking for the name of Olaszliszka and Tatárszentgyörgy – in both papers and the website to compile a dataset containing **all relevant articles published since the incidents occurred**. For case 3, we used **all articles** of one particular **debate** launched by the editors of hvg.hu entitled: Why don't Hungarian Roma integrate? From the dataset we selected **opinion articles** and analyzed **discursive strategies** such as construction of enemies, attributions of negative and positive traits, arguments of justification, and racist, anti-Semitic, nationalist or ethnicist utterances.

Project Identity

- Acronym:** ACCEPT PLURALISM
- Title:** Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
- Short Description:** ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.
- Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.
- In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.
- The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.
- Website:** www.accept-pluralism.eu
- Duration:** March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
- Funding Scheme:** Small and medium-scale collaborative project
- EU contribution:** 2,600,230 Euro
- Consortium:** 17 partners (15 countries)
- Coordinator:** European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
- Person Responsible:** Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
- EC officer:** Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer

