

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Testimony of Timea Junghaus
“Human Rights Situation of the Romani Minority”
Education and Culture in Hungary
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The Romani population in Europe today is variously estimated at between eight and twelve million people.¹ Precise demographic data are not available, due in large part to “the reluctance of many Roma to identify themselves as such for official purposes, and the refusal of many governments to include Roma as a legitimate category for census purposes.”² The May 2004 enlargement of the European Union meant that approximately 1.5 million Roma became EU citizens. The forthcoming accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 will mean an additional 3 million EU citizens of Romani origin.

According to the 2003 representative national study, the number of Roma living in Hungary is between 520,000 and 650,000.³ Approximately 41% of the Roma population lives in villages and disadvantaged areas of the country. In the past ten years isolated Roma settlements have rarely been established, but the number of villages and settlements with a Roma majority is increasing. Segregation according to place of living is characteristic of every third of the Roma-dwelt settlements.⁴

12-15% of the Hungarian population live on an income which is less than half of the average, and one third live under the minimum subsistence wage.⁵ 56% of Roma households belong to the lowest income tenth of the population, they are poor, in the worst sense of the word, and cannot even obtain food of the necessary quality.⁶ Only 28% Roma men aged 16-64, and 15 % of the women, are employed. 70% of Roma work as unskilled laborers.

The Hungarian Roma community is strongly polarized. The process of emerging into the middle class has started among the Roma, too, and today one fifth of the Roma live at or above the social average level. This, however, is extremely difficult to track and measure, as educated and wealthy Roma tend to opt for assimilation and the relinquishment of their cultural heritage. As OSI Chairman George Soros put it, “it is a very natural inclination to try not to be Roma, to meld into the general population, to assimilate. And therefore what

¹ Roma Inclusion: Lessons Learned from OSI’s Roma Programming. Edited by Bernard Rorke, Andre Wilkens, OSI, June 2006.

² European Commission, The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union, 2004, http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/fundamental_rights/pdf/pubst/roma04_en.pdf

³ Kemény István , Jánky Béla: National Roma Research 2003

⁴ Endre Sík at al.: Report for the TÁRKI Data bank of self-governments, Budapest, January 2004. The data was collected in the autumn of 2003.

⁵ Bass, Ferge, Márton: *Gyorsjelentés a szegényedésről, 2000-2003*. [Report on Poverty]. Budapest: Szocialis Szakmai Szövetség, 2003.

⁶ István Kemény, Béla Jánky: “A cigányok foglalkoztatottságáról és jövedelmi viszonyairól” [Employment and Income of the Roma]. *Esély*, 2003:6.

is left, what the rest of the population sees, are the disenfranchised, the underclass. And that is the stereotype that prevails in society.”⁷

There is meanwhile a growing underclass, which is not constituted exclusively by Roma, but in which they are strongly overrepresented.⁸ Because of this, researchers and many acknowledged sociologists have concluded that “Roma” does not simply mean an ethnic category, but refers to a particular class, which is excluded due to its lifestyle and appearance. According to this argument, everybody is a Roma who is like a Roma.⁹

This conclusion recognizes the Roma on the basis of a superficial stereotype, and fails to acknowledge the Roma cultural identity. As Roma intellectuals have joined the social and cultural debates, this conclusion was declared offensive and unacceptable. It basically means that the Roma who have repressed their identity during communism, will now suffer cultural oppression.

Cultural identity and the cultural rights of the Roma minority have appeared on the agenda of NGO’s, civic organizations, and even the government.

In October 2004, Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany opened the exposition of the government program by saying: “Zhanav kejekh Ungkriko them si: le romengo thaj gazengho them” – “There is only one Hungary: The common country of both Roma and Hungarians.”¹⁰ It was a historical moment: Gyurcsany was the first politician to address the Hungarian Parliament in Romani. The government program strengthened the new Ministry of Equal Opportunities, and fostered the formation of a Roma political elite, which participates in public administration. As a result of the empowerment process, Roma strategic advisers assist the ministers at the Ministries of Education, Cultural Heritage, Agriculture, and Foreign Affairs. (Some of these results were initiated back in 2002, during the Medgyesy administration, whose strategic advisor was Aladar Horvath, the internationally acknowledged Roma rights advocate.)

In the light of all these developments, one might think that Hungary is a role model in the Central and Easter European region for recognizing the Roma minority that this is a place where Roma empowerment is in progress, where the number of educated Roma is growing, desegregation in education, health and housing has begun. Hungary may in fact have advanced furthest in its “experiment” on the Roma minority, trying to keep up with the external expectations of the EU authorities while doing a juggling act of containing the pressure from its minority communities.

⁷ At the conference Decade of Roma Inclusion, June 30, 2003. www.romadecade.org

⁸ Underclass is understood as a group of the population which is economically in a more disadvantaged situation than any other groups of the society, while it is excluded from the body of society.

⁹ János Ladányi, István Szelényi: *A kirekesztettség változó formái*. [The Changing Forms of Exclusion]. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2004.

¹⁰ László Néző: “Egy földön, egy hazában” [One land, one home]. *Amaro Drom Roma Magazine*, October 2004.

The most stirring case of the past years was that of segregated education in Jaszladany,¹¹ where “the predominantly non-Romani Gypsy Minority Self-Government [...] did not protest the establishment of a local private school created to segregate the local Romani children from the non-Romani children, and the school started operating in the autumn of 2003. By comparison, the previous Gypsy MSG – composed of Roma – fought against the establishment of the private school with all the legal powers available to it, and had effectively blocked (or delayed) the establishment of the school.”¹²

According to the Year 2000 Report of the Hungarian Institute of Public Education, “strong segregation tendencies were experienced in the education of Roma children, both among schools and within schools. The report found that 29% of Roma children attended schools with a Roma majority. The data also showed that the Roma children only learn in schools whose prestige is the lowest in the given settlement, and which accommodate the poorest children of the neighborhood.”¹³ In 2003, increasing segregation in primary schools was confirmed. Although desegregation programs were initiated in 2003 by the Ministry of Education, the rapidly increasing social segregation and the schooling regulations based on place of residence hindered the desegregation process. The most comprehensive legal framework for education policies is provided by Act CXXV of 2003 on the Promotion of Anti-Discrimination, and the amended Act LXI of 2003 on Public Education. Neither of them empowers the Ministry of Education to sanction discriminative educational practice.¹⁴ Since 2005, there is an affirmative action program for the enrollment of disadvantaged candidates at universities, who must be accepted if they score at least 80% of the points necessary for admission. The tuition fee is covered by the state.¹⁵ In the past decades, the most remarkable index of the Roma’s failure in education was the number of dropouts in the early phase, in primary school. Today this figure is negligible; the most significant inequality now emerges at the point of starting secondary education. One important reason why Roma children are at a disadvantage when trying to enter secondary education is that many of them study in special needs primary schools (ones for “the handicapped”), or second rate classes, which offer no chance of going on to secondary education.¹⁶ *“The separated education of Roma children is treated by the experts concerned, as if a child coming from a Roma family of multiply disadvantaged situation and showing by the age of 6-7 symptoms characteristic of mentally slightly disabled children needed the same special education as mentally disabled children with organic damages. This is the case because this way of education cannot be supported by any professional or legal argument, what is more, the*

¹¹ Viktoria Mohacsi, Strategic Consultant on Roma Education for the Minister of Education, and Aladar Horvath, President of the Roma Civic Rights Foundation, played a central role in settling the dispute and solving the problems in Jaszladany.

¹² Savelina Russinova: “Political Rights of the Roma.” European Roma Rights Center, www.errc.org

¹³ Havas, Kemény, Liskó: *Szegregáció a cigánygyermekok oktatásában* [Segregation in the Education of Roma Children]. Budapest, 2001.

¹⁴ János Zolnay: *Szakítópróbák. A roma tanulók közoktatási integrációjának esélyei* [Strength Tests. The Likelihood of Integrated Education for the Roma]. Manuscript published by the Roma Eucation Fund, Country Reports, Hungary.

¹⁵ Roma Education Fund, Needs Assessment Study for the Roma Education Fund Background Paper, December, 2004.

¹⁶ Gábor Halász, Judit Lannert: *Jelentés a magyar közoktatásról.* [Report On Hungarian Public Education.] Országos Közoktatási Intézet, 2003.

phenomenon contradicts both the declared integrative aims of the educational system and basic human rights,” concludes Roma education expert Anna Kende.¹⁷

Sophisticated, new questions are posed to the authorities by the young Roma intellectuals, scholars, academics, the new Roma elite of pop stars, actors, artists, media experts and the Roma participants of public administration.

Roma intellectuals point out that the majority societies in Central and Eastern Europe consider the culture of the Roma folk or “low” culture. This is the case because of a prejudiced preconception on the part of the majority society, the lack of an infrastructure necessary for the production, representation and promotion of cultural products, and the general social exclusion and poverty. The majority effectively represented Romani productions as being not the works of individual authors, but rather as collective facts of nature which only become concrete representations when presented in some way by the art collector or folklorist. Changing this practice, effecting a society-wide inclusion of Roma culture, is the common responsibility of society – and the chief goal among those aiming for the democratisation of culture. The social inclusion of the Roma people is not possible without cultural recognition and inclusion.

The structure of the majority cultures excludes the literature, music, visual and performing art of the Roma communities. The Roma do not have the opportunity for self-representation, cannot fight stereotypes and discrimination. Having the space, equipment and support for cultural practice is not a luxury. It is a basic human right.

“(...) individuals belonging to minorities should not be denied the right, in community with members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to practise their religion and speak their language (...) Although the rights protected under article 27 are individual rights, they depend in turn on the ability of the minority group to maintain its culture, language or religion.

Accordingly, positive measures by States may also be necessary to protect the identity of a minority and the rights of its members to enjoy and develop their culture and language and to practise their religion, in community with the other members of the group(...) The protection of these rights is directed towards ensuring the survival and continued development of the cultural, religious and social identity of the minorities concerned, thus enriching the fabric of society as a whole.” (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, The Rights of Minorities, Article 27.)

Culture has never been on the agenda of Roma politics and Roma social reform, while changing negative attitudes towards the Roma and stopping the spread of negative stereotypes are the key priorities of many recent initiatives. As a consequence of exclusion, the majority societies form their views of Roma (culture) in accordance with their own preconceptions. Almost all representations are laden with stigmatisation about the Roma – their “men are simple and beastly,” “the women are lecherous and

¹⁷ Anna Kende: “Együtt vagy külön? A szegregált iskolarendszer és a speciális oktatási szükségeletek megállapításának problémái” [Together or Separately? The segregated schooling system and the problems of defining the needs for special education.] *Iskolakultúra*, 2004:1.

promiscuous,” “children don’t like to study and wash,” “the only way for a Roma to success is music and dance”; and we could go on ad infinitum with these ridiculous but seriously held opinions.

Roma artists, cultural agents and institutions are best enabled to stop the spread of prejudiced stereotypes with their own practice, and to act as models before the majority society, as well as the Roma, by confuting these statements, and representing the Roma as a group of civilized, successful individuals, whose dignity is complete and worthy of acknowledgement.

Culture receives a much wider publicity than reforms of the social services, and could consequently have a greater impact on the self-confidence of Roma people, could actually lead to a new Roma consciousness,¹⁸ a state when successful, wealthy and well-educated Roma proudly acknowledge their origin, rather than opt for assimilation and the relinquishment of their cultural heritage.

Vision has a crucial role in cultural and political debate at any level, and images are at least as influential and informative as written or spoken language. In today’s world of electronic media, images reach out to more recipients than any written discourse.

In 2002, two young Roma artists, Norbert Szirmai and Istvan Révész made a 15-minute documentary film entitled “*Fradi is Better*.¹⁹” The film shows the fans (a crowd of more than 500 persons) of the football team in their Budapest stadium, singing and cheering with racist rhymes and songs. It is a shocking and frightful document of extreme racism and anti-Roma sentiment. The film is well known in Hungary, Romania, Austria and the Czech Republic. It has been an important tool in generating solidarity, evoking empathy and making Roma hatred visible in the region.

Another example of the effect of images disseminated in the cultural scene:

“‘Oláh Action,’ an Internet game with the objective of killing all Roma in Hungary could be accessed on the Internet despite previous police action to remove the game. The game, in which Hungary is declared “clean” and turns white after all Roma are killed, first appeared in February 2005. The game received over four thousand visitors.”

The Roma Press Center reported that the police dropped the investigation. Lieutenant Colonel Ferenc Toth was quoted as having stated that the game does not fall within the legal concept of incitement, while admitting that the language and content of the game demonstrate contempt for the Romani community and that the pop-up text is abusive. Police ordered the game to be removed from the host server, but RomNet reports that it is still available on many websites.”

For a healthy, proud and educated future for the Roma, it is essential that they consciously play with their identity,²⁰ and create their own representations. The youngest generation of Roma intellectuals are the last generation to be able to interact with the survivors of the Roma holocaust. This is the last chance to collect oral history, and to

¹⁸ I introduce the term in the wake of Gloria Anzaldúa, one of the greatest theoreticians of Chicano studies. In her writing, “LA conciencia de la Mestica: Towards a new consciousness,” she describes the state when instead of revolt, resistance and anger, the Chicanos’ consciousness is characterized by pride and peace, which are stimulated by the esteem and respect of the majority society.

¹⁹ Fekete Doboz Alapítvány [Black Box Foundation], 2002

²⁰ Nicolae Gheorghe suggests that the representation of Romani identity is a process of ethno-genesis, which involves the Roma self-consciously playing with their identities.

create representations of the Roma holocaust which involve the survivors. Artists play an integral role in the processing of these traumas of societies and in preserving these memories and lessons, in handing them down to the future generations. It was in 2004, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Holocaust, that Roma contemporary artists could enter Műcsarnok, the temple of Hungarian contemporary art, and create, together with established European artists, works that reflected on the Roma holocaust.

These artistic expressions encourage broad debates. The Roma claim the recognition of their culture. This recognition will create pride and empowerment. At present, Roma culture is a victim of ghettoization, and is damned to stay within the walls of marginal cultural centres, self-governments, and Roma NGO's. There is a need for a Roma Museum in Central and Eastern Europe, which can take up the mission of collecting the fragments, and represent the pluralism and diversity of European Roma Culture.