

Hungary's future: anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism and anti-Roma?

by Annabel Tremlett and Vera Messingⁱ

Hungary has recently passed new legislation tightening asylum rules and is now building a border fence along the Serbian border to keep migrants and refugees out. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, believes Hungary cannot cope with any immigration, as it has no experience of 'multiculturalism'. But Hungary has always been multicultural, with Roma and other minorities making up 10-12% of the country's citizens. Hungary needs to face up to its past and its future as a diverse nation.

This paper is in post-print format. The published version can be found on the Open Democracy website (published 4 August 2015), at:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/annabel-tremlett/hungary's-future-antiimmigration-antimulticulturalism-and-antiro> [accessed 09/02/16]

Introduction

Viktor Orbán's campaign against migrants to Hungary was in full force before he started building a 4 metre-high fence along the 110-mile border with Serbia. In May this year, his government, Fidesz, sent a questionnaire to every household, part of a '[National Consultation on Immigration](#)' which included [skewed questions](#) clearly linking immigrants to terrorism, such as: "There are some who think that mismanagement of the immigration question by Brussels may have something to do with increased terrorism. Do you agree with this view?" Reportedly costing 1 billion forints (EUR 3.2m), the consultation bizarrely cost far more than any money put aside for [managing immigration](#)ⁱⁱ.

New waves of migration as a contemporary issue for Hungary is a fact – Hungary has become a major transit country for migrants. In the last six months alone a reportedly [71,200](#) entered the country. This article doesn't question the scale or potential problem this poses for Hungary, what it does question is the speed and force with which Orbán's governing party Fidesz have taken up an anti-immigration stance, and how this stance is being linked to anti-Roma (or anti-Gypsy) discourses. This article - born from a roundtable discussion with some of the most prominent professionals monitoring anti-Roma discourse and practices in Hungary todayⁱⁱⁱ - argues that Orbán's focus on immigration has emerged and become a diversion from the deep inequalities, extensive oligarchic type of state corruption and daily police and institutional harassment that many Hungarian citizens (whether Roma or not) are currently facing. Racism against Roma – or 'Romaphobia' - adds a particular negative political

and media sting that further destabilises Hungary's already intercultural, but frequently divisive society. Not facing these problems, we argue, will make any new migration flows and the potential for their future integration impossible to deal with.

'A monocultural and monolingual kingdom is weak and fragile'

The 'National Consultation on Immigration' questionnaire has only been one part of the anti-immigration campaign run by Fidesz. The survey was complemented by a poster campaign with various slogans demanding migrants integrate into Hungarian society: 'If you come to Hungary, you can't take jobs from the Hungarians!'/ 'If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!'/ 'If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our laws!' Many Hungarians have ridiculed the whole process – there have been protests about the National Consultation (re-naming it the 'National Insult'); posters have been [graffittied](#) (which landed two people in prison); civilians crowd-funded in order to launch a [counter-campaign](#). Originally, the aim of the counter-campaign was to collect three million Hungarian forints (about EUR 9, 700) to finance a few posters, but within a few days more than ten times that target was collected. The posters all around the country mock the original ones, using [slogans](#) such as: 'If you are the Prime Minister of Hungary, you have to respect Hungarian laws!' or 'Come to Hungary, we have all got jobs in the UK!'

Considering Hungary's precarious economic situation, one might anticipate politicians would use the popular (but frequently refuted) accusation that new migrants can create a financial burden on a country's resources. But Orbán has found a different emphasis: the apparent inability of Hungary to be multicultural. Multicultural societies, Orbán said in his annual state of the nation speech in [Brussels](#), are just a 'delusion' and Hungarians are just not capable of living in one. "The Hungarian man" Orbán said in one particularly [unforgettable quote](#) "is, by nature, politically incorrect. That is, he has not lost his common sense". Orbán's disavowal of multiculturalism ("Hungary has never been a multicultural" he also stated, "We consider it a value that Hungary is a homogenous country") and his positioning of the average Hungarian as a monocultural drone are disturbing as he negates the (albeit turbulent) multicultural and intellectual history of Hungary. Hungary, just as other nation states in the region – such as Austria and the Czech Republic - have not always presented themselves as 'pure' cultural and linguistic nations. In fact, the multiculturalism of the Habsburg Empire that once encompassed the region was the norm, and there is renewed interest in how pluralist approaches to diversity were pursued and what we can learn from them in present day Europe^{iv}. As one of the spoof posters declares in a perfect repost to Orbán's declarations of

homogeneity, “A monocultural and monolingual kingdom is weak and fragile”. This is not a phrase invented by activists, but in fact a 1,000 year old quote from King István himself – the founding father of Hungary and its first king.

Hungary’s real multicultural problem: the mainstreaming of Romaphobia in everyday life

Despite this multicultural past, Roma people have long been a target for scape-goating in the Hungarian imagination. Menyhért Lakatos, Hungary’s preeminent 20th century Romani writer, described in his 1975 epic novel *The Color of Smoke* how flagrantly prejudicial attitudes are entrenched in Hungarian society. In his powerful semi-autobiographical novel set in World War II, to be published for the first time in English in September 2015, Lakatos painfully shows how such deep-seated attitudes can result in the exclusion and dehumanization of Roma at a very early age, and how lowered ethical standards are practiced in everyday interactions towards Roma.

An insightful contemporary example of how tension – of any nature – fuels anti-Roma prejudice can be seen in the early 1990s when Hungary was in transition between state-socialism and democracy. One of the first explicit tensions in the fledgling democracy was a [taxi blockade](#). Thousands of taxis brought Budapest to a standstill, and the government became very uneasy about how to handle such opposition in a non-authoritarian way. The taxi blockade had nothing to do with Roma people – the unrest was caused by a sudden and significant increase of the price of petrol. However, by coincidence, the taxi blockade occurred during a [psychology experiment](#) being carried out by Istvan Siklaci, one of Hungary’s leading academics and social psychologists. In this experiment Siklaci was looking at the social attitudes of university students, and it just so happened that one cohort for the research took place before the blockade, and one after. There was not a huge anticipated difference between the social attitudes of both cohorts – they were all from one larger student sample. However, the attitudes towards one particular topic was surprisingly different: the question on Roma showed a dramatic change, with students participating after the taxi blockade holding much more negative views of Roma people than the ones questioned before. This example clearly shows how tensions in society – even when they are not about Roma people at all – can increase racist attitudes.

Today, in a country full of economic and political tensions, the racism against Roma people, or as we (the two main authors) call it in this article, ‘Romaphobia’ has seen an unprecedented

rise and has taken on new, disturbing forms. The 'old' racism is still there: on-going institutional discrimination and structural inequalities in education, employment and housing still keep many Roma in deep poverty. However, the new forms – such as the rise of verbal and physical attacks on Roma people and paramilitary activities along with a mainstream acceptance of the explicitness of such racism - have made us re-think the terms of racism. We use the term 'Romaphobia' here with purpose but also trepidation that is important to explain, particularly as this terminology was hotly debated in the roundtable discussion and there was no consensus. It's all too easy to want to coin a term for the purposes of attention seeking, when other terms (anti-Gypsyism, anti-Roma racism etc) already exist. Whilst all terms point to racism, 'Romaphobia', we argue, better describes the fear that has become inherent in the racism towards Roma people. Rather like the arguments for using the term 'Islamophobia'^v, so 'Romaphobia' can reflect the resentment as well as the hostility and anxiety that surfaces in many anti-Gypsy discourses and actions against them. This is not just the prejudice, discrimination or antagonism usually associated with 'racism': Romaphobia emphasises the ideologically based aversion to certain minority groups that such a term, along with Islamophobia, can more accurately represent. As sociologists Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood put it, it is "[evolved racism](#)".

This evolving racism against Roma is at the same time old, re-emerging and new. First, the old: despite a detailed legislative framework, campaigns, activist projects and raised awareness, old negative relationships between public institutions and Roma minorities are ongoing and keep structural inequalities alive. For examples: Roma children are still more likely to be seen as requiring remedial education than any other group, and make up the majority of pupils in special needs schools; only 15% of young Roma adults have completed upper-secondary general or vocational education; 60% of Roma are or have been unemployed in the past 5 years in contrast to 32% of non-Roma living in the same residential environment; 81% of Roma have income below the at-risk-of poverty threshold, in contrast to 19% of non-Roma living in the same residential environment (see [FRA Roma survey 2011](#)).

A re-emerging racism can be seen in the negative media reporting of Roma – whilst the 1990s and early 2000s saw a decrease in the overtly negative reporting of Roma minorities, the mid-2000s have seen a resurgence, as documented by media researchers Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing. There are two striking results of this [recent media research](#), which incorporates a variety of news sources in Hungary: first, whilst the 1990s saw a decline in negative media stories and a refusal to use the deemed racist term 'Gypsy criminality' that was popular in the

1980s, the 2000s have seen this practice rescinded and once again the term 'Gypsy criminality', along with suggestive racialised terms such as 'populous family' and 'noisy kindred' are used in all types of news stories in directly inflammatory ways. Second, the current research has also looked at the images that accompany news stories, and the results clearly show how images of Roma settlements and Roma people (often depicted in faceless groups and at times showing groups of children) are frequently used as backdrops to crime news stories when the perpetrators have not yet been found or convicted – thereby clearly insinuating that the perpetrators are Roma, and that these dehumanized people are threatening and mob-like.

New racisms: the rise of 'acceptable' Romaphobia and anti-immigrant racism

'New' racisms are also apparent: banal incidents of discrimination in everyday life that shows an increasing acceptance of exclusionary practices towards Roma people in everyday life. Absurd fines and micro-level monitoring of people's lives in Hungary are rising, and Roma people are getting the brunt of such scrutiny. Recent incidents collated by [the Roma Press Center](#) include: fines for having a flat tyre on a bicycle or riding a bicycle without a bell; fines for a woman pushing her baby's pram on the road instead of the pavement (which was so uneven to be unusable); a fine for a man crossing the road without using a zebra crossing, when there were no zebra crossings in the vicinity. Such punitive interventions into Roma people's everyday lives serves to keep Roma away from residential areas where non-Roma live and further alienate Roma people's trust in public institutions.

Extreme right-wing political parties and associated paramilitary groups – whilst tapping into old stereotypes of Roma people as 'other' – also use new forms to activate their racism. Jobbik ('Movement for a Better Hungary') is Hungary's fastest growing political party^{vi}, whose openly Romaphobic stance serves to authenticate the party as pro-Hungarian. Their extensive use of the term '[Gypsy-crime](#)' is one of the ways they conflate Roma people with criminality, which they say is not racist, but rather realist. Whilst the term 'Gypsy crime' is a resurgence of old racism, the way Jobbik market themselves – with slick American-style campaigns and intensive social media work – is a new way of promoting such racism. On their website they write that Gypsy-crime is a 'truism' and that they are "bringing into the public eye the problems that the Hungarian political establishment would much rather sweep under the carpet". They thus position themselves as the brave vocalists of anti-elite protest who are not afraid of breaking 'taboos' that no one else dares to articulate (and blamed on oppressive political correctness), a familiar trait of contemporary right-wing populism.

Associated with Jobbik are paramilitary groups such as the banned (but still in existence as a foundation) 'Hungarian Guards' who have been 'patrolling' villages and towns mainly populated by Roma people and intimidating local residents^{vii}. Violent racist attacks against Roma people have also risen: from 2008 to 2012, the European Roma Rights Centre recorded 61 attacks against Roma that led to the deaths of seven adults and two children^{viii}.

Furthermore, these groups are not always solely focusing on Roma minorities. The 'Outlaws Army' ('Betyársereg'), formed in 2008 with a leader who expresses an admiration of [Adolf Hitler](#) and whose initial targets were Roma, are now reportedly [hunting down refugees](#) on the border of Hungary and Serbia with the intention to physically attack them. This is a clear example of how one type of hatred is easily shifted onto another target. The Fidesz government itself has noticed this link, and has articulated it for its own means – The Hungarian justice minister, [László Trócsányi](#), recently stated that Hungary can't accept any more migrants because it must tend to the integration of its Roma minorities. Roma and migrants are thus both seen as problematic groups of 'others' that threaten the Hungarian nation. Media commentators have noted how the linking of immigration with Roma minorities is a 'genius' move from Fidesz to try to win voters away from their main rivals, the hugely successful right-wing Jobbik. Promoting racism and xenophobia are thus seen as ways of securing votes whilst diverting attention away from an unpredictable economy (nicknamed by the Financial Times as '[Orbanomics](#)') and ever more oppressive modes of governance (even Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European commission [called Orban a 'dictator'](#) in front of the media at the Riga summit).

Whilst Roma are unequivocally the focus of hatred, anyone deemed to be outside of the mainstream may be the subject of hatred in Hungary. Homophobia, anti-Semitism, any form of xenophobia, hatred against homeless or simply poor people is widespread. There is plenty of data showing how badly Hungary performs in these attitudinal questions: [TÁRKI's measurement of xenophobia](#) has shown that such attitudes have been the highest in 2015 since the start of measurement in 1992 and is extremely obvious when shown in a [European comparative perspective](#). Hungary is also becoming impoverished: the share of poor has been constantly increasing since 2009. A large part of the population (over 40%) have struggles with subsistence, almost a quarter live in [severe material deprivation](#); a large part of the employed live on or below the minimum level of subsistence and face the risk of dropping out from the lower middle class. With a social welfare net so weak that it does not provide subsistence for more than 3 months after someone loses their job, and the fact that those

unemployed have barely any chance to get back to the primary labour market, masses are at risk of ultimately becoming marginalized. In this situation, people need to feel that someone is responsible for their fragile situation. Roma minorities and migrants bear the brunt of this scapegoating, although it is certainly not exclusively Roma or migrants who are seen as 'other' in Hungarian society.

Alternative voices

So where are the alternative voices? Hungary does have a tradition of activism, and organisations such as the Roma Press Center, the European Roma Rights Centre and the Roma Education Fund – all based in Budapest - have long been involved in collating examples of discrimination and trying to provide alternative stories and images of Roma minorities. However, there is still a noticeable missing weight of resistance to Romaphobia from many left-wing commentators. In their paper on anti-Roma media, sociologists [Zsuzsanna Vidra and Jon Fox](#) give a pertinent example from a debate in the liberal minded, economic-political weekly magazine '[Heti Vilag Gazdassag](#)' (HVG – Weekly Economic News). The debate, published between October and November 2009, was called 'The Roma Integration Debate' and involved various left-wing or moderate intellectuals.

What Vidra and Fox found was that these intellectuals tried to engage with the widespread criticisms of 'political correctness' frequently argued by right-wing affiliated groups. However, by doing so, they created a new, more moderate discourse that was neither explicitly racist nor antiracist, but carefully positioned as 'realistic'. In other words, Roma people were blamed, albeit more subtly, for any impoverished or disadvantaged circumstances, and any mention of racism slipped away. In the debate, intellectuals started talking about a "peculiar Roma civilisation" that was used to blame Roma people for their apparent deliberate self-exclusion from society, and the term 'Gypsy crime' was substituted for 'Gypsy culture' – still making the link between Gypsies and criminality, but this time making it seem as a cultural necessity for survival, thereby still insisting that Gypsy crime is a particular, inherent characteristic of Roma people.

This example shows that whilst extreme right-wing parties such as Jobbik have popularised anti-Roma rhetoric, it is the mainstream media and left-wing voices who contribute to these themes remaining on the agenda, creating an environment for a kind of 'acceptable' Romaphobia, or as political theorist Huub van Baar also calls it, a '[reasonable anti-Gypsyism](#)'. We see the same pattern now occurring in the anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices spear-

headed by the government and further enforced by paramilitary organisations, with the rest of Hungary quietly getting subsumed by these poisonous fumes of animosity.

Conclusion

Migrants have always been a part of European populations and identity, and countries such as Hungary will inevitably see a change in their immigration patterns. New immigrants will want to and need to integrate into Hungarian society. But this process will be problematic, and not because of Orbán's insistence that Hungary is not a multicultural society or cannot handle living amongst different cultures. What will be problematic is when migrants try to integrate into an already divisive society in which blaming communities has replaced discussions on discrimination, racism and structural inequalities, and punitive, petty interventions into people's everyday lives is causing a further divide between the state and its citizens.

And it's not just Roma people or migrants who are suffering. The emigration in recent years of Hungarians to Western countries is currently estimated at 500,000 - more than the numbers who left as refugees after the revolution of 1956. This is one of the most obvious indictments of Hungary's political and economic situation. And the numbers are rising: the number of Hungarians deciding to emigrate [increased by nearly 50%](#) in 2014, meaning that a total of 31,500 Hungarians left Hungary in just one year.

If more migrants are going to come to Hungary, then it should be made clear that it is not (as Orbán envisages) the migrants that will bring all the problems. The problems are already endemic in Hungarian society, and any migrant would find it hard to integrate into such a discordant society. The new and evolving racisms of Romaphobia and anti-migrants needs to be tackled not only because racism and hatred are wrong, but also for the sake of Hungary and all Hungarians. Without a fair society which can admit, tackle and debate problems, then its citizens will continue to leave, whilst any new migrants will find themselves negotiating old, emerging and new tensions that they were never a part of.

ⁱ Annabel Tremlett and Vera Messing are currently working with Angéla Kóczé as editors on a special issue of *Identities* journal on the theme of Romaphobia and the media, due out in 2017.

ⁱⁱ The 2016 budget states that the immigration office will receive 50 million forints extra funding next year.

ⁱⁱⁱ This article was inspired and informed by a roundtable discussion on Romaphobia and the media which included leading activists, researchers and other professionals involved in media production and examination,

held on May 20th 2015 in Budapest, Hungary. This article does not necessarily reflect all of the participants' views, but we are immensely grateful for their contributions at the roundtable discussion and on this article via email. Our deepest thanks go to: Gábor Bernáth, Mária Bogdán, Attila Juhász, Ernő Kadét, Márton Rövid, István Siklaki and Zsuzsanna Vidra.

^{iv} See papers by Csereklye 2014, Evans 2004, Gal 2011, Rindler Schjerre 2003.

^v The Runnymede Trust Report first used it in 1991 and defined it as “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear and dislike of all or most Muslims” (see <http://crg.berkeley.edu/content/islamophobia/defining-islamophobia>)

^{vi} Support for the group doubled between 2002 and 2009, then in 2009 they had their first electoral success in the European elections, in 2010 they received 16% of the vote in Hungary's parliamentary elections (the 'second' party in Hungary, the former governing Socialists only got 17% of the vote) and in 2015 they won their first by-election, narrowly defeating the candidate from the governing Fidesz party for the Tapolca seat in Western Hungary – a victory that Gabor Vona, Jobbik's leader described as “historic”. See Vidra and Fox 2014 Mainstreaming of Racist Anti-Roma Discourses in the Media in Hungary in the Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, volume 12, Issue 4; and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/hungary/11532818/Hungarys-far-Right-anti-Semitic-Jobbik-party-wins-its-first-by-election.html>

^{vii} See also the 'Outlaws army' (Betyársereg), formed in 2008 'The Association for a Better Future Civil Guard' (formed in 2010), Pax Hungarica (formed in 2008), The Hungarian National Front (since 1989), the website Kuruc.info (formed in 2005) that propagates Hungarian supremacist ideology, racist extremism and anti-Semitism (for more details see: <http://fxb.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2014/02/FXB-Hungary-Report-Released-February-4-2014.pdf>)

^{viii} ERRC, *Attacks against Roma in Hungary: January 2008-September 2012*, 2012. <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/attacks-list-in-hungary.pdf>.