

Ethnicity in Hungarian Housing Policy: A study of small town media discourse

Zsuzsa Vidra

PhD candidate: Atelier-Hungary, EHESS-France

Hungarian Roma were forcibly settled in the sixties, and have been vulnerable to the politically driven housing policies of local governments ever since. Focusing on the town of Ozd (40,000 residents) in North Hungary, the following article explores interethnic political discourse and its role in public policy decisions concerning the town's "housing problem" - i.e. the appearance and persistence of local ghettos inhabited by Roma. The article summarises a wider study of local newspaper stories, exploring the roots of ghettoisation, the solutions offered, and the political stances articulated by relevant Roma and non-Roma actors. Clearly the representation of Roma in local newspapers - their objectivity or (more often) bias - is a crucial element, but beyond this, the debate framing the "Roma issue" provides a window on the discourse prevalent throughout Hungary used to justify practices of a prima facie discriminatory nature.

Assimilation policy

In the 1960s, the central Communist government ordered the dismantling of Roma settlements around the country, and the resettlement of inhabitants in council flats in towns. This policy of open assimilation had the long-term goal of eliminating the "Gypsy lifestyle". The authorities hoped that lifting people from their usual habitat and placing them in a new environment would encourage them to abandon old habits and adopt a new life. [1] The flaws in this totalising logic were most apparent in the unprecedented power the policy offered local governments to determine the living conditions of this generation of Roma. Moreover, the "newcomers" were rejected in many neighbourhoods by ordinary Hungarians, unused and unprepared to tolerate different lifestyles. The "Gypsy settlement abolition program" has since been evaluated as an unqualified failure. Roma and non-Roma populations remained separated: the former were brought only "geographically one step closer to the majority population." [2]

In 1989, new local governments inherited the result. To this day, a significant percentage of the Roma population live in appalling housing conditions, which, in the absence of municipal maintenance, are constantly deteriorating. When conditions become uninhabitable, some Roma families occupy vacant flats elsewhere illegally, sometimes leading to conflicts with their new neighbours. But even legal Roma tenants are often considered undesirable, due to their different customs and traditions. This population is mainly unemployed and lives on social welfare. This is insufficient to their rent and utility bills, and so they accumulate debts. This situation is typical of the whole country - and local governments everywhere face similar difficulties and find similar "solutions": the eviction of debtors and illegal inhabitants and the destruction of "problem buildings".

Technical issues

In the socialist era, Ozd was situated in a highly industrialised region. Today the area is one of the most depressed in Hungary, with high unemployment and low rates of investment. It has the highest proportion of Roma in the country.

Until the mid-1990s, as reported in local newspaper articles, [3] the local government treated housing as a purely technical issue: orders, decrees and political discussion generally centred on the condition of buildings. Political viewpoints oscillated between two alternatives: whether to destroy buildings or renovate them, both discussed in terms of cost effectiveness. The situation and social background of the inhabitants - most of whom were Roma - were not mentioned. Local politicians and committee members did not investigate why people living in these "problem houses" could not pay their rent and bills. The decision-making process about the fate



of these shabby, rundown buildings was protracted (from 1990- 1996/7) and resulted in the most inhumane conclusion: several buildings were destroyed, the inhabitants were evicted without being provided with new shelters. The local government claimed the inhabitants had outlawed themselves by not paying rent or by moving in illegally, and therefore the town had no legal obligation to take care of them. One town representative put it this way: *"The situation is intolerable. With those who have lived here for more than four years, the town will make a contract. But those who haven't lived here that long, should go back where they came from, and if this is not possible they should take to the street."* [4]

New political voices

In parallel with these events, other changes were taking place in Hungary. In 1993, in a measure partly intended to induce protection of the significant Hungarian populations in neighbouring countries, Hungary introduced a "Minorities Act". This unique piece of legislation bestowed significant cultural rights on minorities, including the Roma minority, to be implemented through a system of "minority self-governments". [5] Before this law, Roma interests were protected only by small, relatively powerless, groups and organisations. In Ozd, these groups had tried to make their voice heard in the early nineties, either through support for local government decisions (*"Gypsies sign a declaration in agreement with the destruction of the buildings"*), [6] or the threat of withdrawing support (*"if anybody is evicted we will go into opposition"*). [7] Notwithstanding the questionable effectiveness of such tactics, none of these petitions were ever heard or answered.

With the election of the town's first local minority self-government, the new Roma representatives submitted proposals to the local government for consideration, claiming to have a better acquaintance with the socially disadvantaged population. Although they emphasised their good contacts with the Roma community at every possible forum, [8] their proposals to the local government were regularly quashed or ignored. Nevertheless, by the mid-late 1990s, partly due to the efforts of the minority self-governments, the way Roma issues were discussed in Ozd had changed. Gradually housing problems were viewed not merely as technical issues, but as increasingly as social in nature. Even so, as we shall see, the minority self-government was constrained to deal with the problem.

Troublemakers

In the meantime, conflict increased. The local press, in the period following the introduction of the Minorities Act, turns increasingly to dramatic warnings of ethnic tension. Headlines such as *"the ethnic bomb is about to explode"* [9] or *"the town is turning into a Gypsy camp: its irreversible"* [10] typified the new political atmosphere. The local government had no solutions to hand, and instead claimed whenever possible that these conflicts were not ethnic. The remarks of one official are characteristic: *"There is a district where one day a new family moves in, let's say illegally, and tries to enforce its life-style onto the whole community. It immediately burns everything, including the house's wooden floor. The neighbours are threatened but nobody dares say a word. However, without being hypocritical, I can say, this is not an ethnic question since Gypsies are not the only troublemakers."* [11]

By 1996 a new term had entered the political lexicon: *town rehabilitation*. This became the catchword for politicians wishing to rid the town of certain "sick and ulcerous" spots in the name of development. Concretely, this meant the destruction of buildings inhabited in the main by Romani people. Politically, it allowed the local governments to resolve "interethnic conflicts" in certain neighbourhoods. However, no reference to an ethnic dimension ever appeared publicly, despite the fact that the great majority of affected people in the razed houses were Roma. Indeed, through use of the term "rehabilitation", any adverse effects suffered by the Roma population as a result appeared as unfortunate "collateral damage".

It was (and is) in the interests of the local government to treat the housing issue as *social* rather than *ethnic*, as they could thus justify ignoring the views of elected minority leaders. The Minorities Act provides minority self-governments with no concrete means to influence decisions not directly affecting the minority. The Act focuses on cultural issues such as minority education or minority signposts, and does not recognise housing as a minority issue. Furthermore, combating discrimination is not explicitly within the mandate of minority self-governments. Since minority self-government are dependent on local governments for a budget, their ability to affect situations actively supported by the local government is minimal. By refusing to acknowledge an ethnic dimension of the housing problem in Ozd, the local government could effectively and legally ignore Roma representatives.

Nevertheless, the recognition of ethnicity began to filter through, if only to confirm the prejudices of decision-makers and the town majority alike. Gradually, references to Roma people in the discourse of politicians, and indeed journalists, began to distinguish between the "bad" (troublemakers) and the "good" (those who try to integrate). "Good" Roma paid their rent, kept their flats tidy, did not cause "trouble", and thus deserved better treatment. They were offered council flats. "Bad" Roma, the great majority, were described by both journalists and politicians as "*deviant elements*", [12] "*destructive forces*", [13] "*the undesired segment of the ethnic group*" [14] or "*uninvited guests*". [15]

Townspersons and some politicians increasingly made claims such as the following (from 2000): "*it would be hypocritical not to admit that these "troublemakers" (who upset neighbourhoods with their behaviour and life-style) are mostly Gypsies*" and "*in fact, it is a Gypsy question since the destruction is done by Gypsies who have moved in, who are unable to integrate, and who settle down very quickly here and, as it is their very nature, they destroy everything around them.*" [16] This is the rhetorical backdrop to the continuing eviction and abandonment of Roma families in Ozd today.

Convergence

Unable to influence the political status quo, in a bid for an audience the minority self-government has increasingly adopted the political discourse of the local government. Thus the divisive language of "good" and "bad" Roma began to appear in their speeches and interviews also: "*the interest of the Gypsies should also be understood, but we insist that assistance be given only to those who deserve it, or at least do not destroy their environment*". [17] The dilemma was succinctly encapsulated by one Roma leader, who explicitly noted that it was against the interests of the minority self-government to represent "bad" Gypsies: "*if the minority self-government represents the interests of those who have outlawed themselves, it puts its political strength and its potential to influence local political life at risk*". [18]

Whereas during the socialist period, policies concerning Roma offered a choice between outright assimilation or total exclusion, today a moderated path of integration with preservation of ethnic identity is at least theoretically available, through the Minorities Act. However, in practice the Act appears to offer Roma ethnic identity at the price of political representation. As in the Socialist era, a minority of Roma achieve acceptable integration; the majority becomes increasingly disadvantaged. Discriminatory housing policy is not yet recognised as such. And a viciously divisive political discourse continues to pronounce Roma as good/integrated or bad/non-integrated. In effect, minority self-governments increasingly represent only the "integrated" Roma - the rest have no practical benefits accruing from the Minorities Act, which should apply to all individuals who identify themselves as members of the minority community. Today, Roma continue to be evicted at a higher rate than others, local governments continue to vilify them in Ozd and elsewhere, and protection from minority self-governments continues to be inadequate or non-existent.



Footnotes

- [1] Katalin Berey, "A cigánytelepek felszámolása és újratermelődése" in *Ciganyélet*, MTA PTI, 1999, p. 107.
- [2] Bela Jankay, "Lakóhely-változtatások a cigányok körében" in *A cigányok Magyarországon*, MTA, 1999. p. 94.
- [3] The local weekly newspaper underwent several restructurings and name changes in the nineties: *Új Ózdi Vasas* (1990-1992); *Ózdi Maholnap* (1992); *Maholnap* (1993-1996); *Ózdi Hírlap* (1996-1997), *Ózdi Hírek* (1998-present).
- [4] *Maholnap* 14 October 1994.
- [5] ACT LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities ("Minorities Act"), Art. 5.
- [6] *Maholnap*, 15 October 1993.
- [7] *Maholnap*, 28 October 1994.
- [8] One representative is quoted as saying: "We have a good relationship with people living on the Gypsy settlements. I am not afraid of taking a walk there anytime." *Ózdi Hírlap*, 12 July 1996.
- [9] *Maholnap*, 4 November 1994.
- [10] *Maholnap*, 4 November 1994.
- [11] *Ózdi Hírlap*, 25 April 1997.
- [12] *Ózdi Hírek*, 10 July 1998.
- [13] *Ózdi Hírlap* 13 November 1997.
- [14] *Maholnap* 5 April 1996.
- [15] *Ózdi Hírek*, 3 February 1998.
- [16] *Ózdi Hírek*, 21 April 2000.
- [17] *Maholnap*, 29 November 1996.
- [18] *Ózdi Hírek*, 8 October 1999.