

Wave of violence against Roma in Hungary

Markus Salzmann**3 May 2011**

For weeks, neo-fascist groups have been carrying out acts of violence against the Roma minority in the northern Hungarian town of Gyöngyöspata. The unceasing wave of assaults is a direct result of the right-wing nationalist policies of Prime Minister Victor Orban and the ruling Fidesz party. The government has largely given a free hand to mobs to organise the persecution of the Roma.

Since the beginning of March, fascist groups have been terrorising the Roma who live among the 2,800 inhabitants in the municipality of Gyöngyöspata. Various uniformed “citizens militia” conduct patrols to supposedly counter the “gypsy terror”. Some of these groups are regarded as successors to the banned “Hungarian Guard”, the paramilitary arm of the ultra-right party Jobbik.

Many of the approximately 450 Roma in Gyöngyöspata have been forced to leave their homes, and are staying with friends or relatives in other parts of the country. The threats have caused enormous fear among those who have stayed behind. Many remain inside their homes and do not go out.

The deputy chair of the Roma citizens movement, Janos Farkas, told the Hungarian news agency MTI that the Roma in Gyöngyöspata have even considered approaching the US embassy to ask for political asylum.

On April 22, the Hungarian Red Cross brought hundreds of Roma to safety from the right-wing extremists. Nearly 300 women and children were removed in six buses, after the extremist Vedero (Defence Force) militia announced it would be holding a “training camp” over the Easter weekend. Participants were asked to come in uniform and bring weapons.

On Tuesday night of last week, the threats of the militias turned to open violence. In mass fighting between Roma and the paramilitary groups “Protecting

Power” and “Highwayman’s Army”, four people were injured, one seriously.

Neo-fascists armed with sticks and stones ran up to a Roma house last Tuesday and began threatening and insulting the inhabitants. After they attacked one Roma, residents began to defend themselves. The local police only intervened to separate the groups after the fighting had been going on for several minutes.

Following the escalation of events last week, several right-wing extremist organisations have used Facebook to call for further action against the Roma in Gyöngyöspata. “Everyone go to Gyöngyöspata”, it said. The authors further threatened, “If you touch just one Hungarian hair, you’ll pay dearly for it!”

The Roma have received no protection from the authorities, with a police spokesman claiming preposterously that there was little they could do against groups “patrolling peacefully”. The reason for their hands-off attitude lies in the fact that wide sections of the police sympathise with the right-wing mob. Some 30 percent of police officers are organised in a union that stands close to Jobbik. Many senior officers support Jobbik or groups sympathetic to it.

The behaviour of the Orban government towards the events is seen, correctly, by the neo-fascists as signifying silent support. The government cynically denied the real nature of the evacuation of Roma from the contested town just before Easter. A spokesman for Orban claimed it had been a long-planned “Easter holiday”. In response to events in Gyöngyöspata, Fidesz parliamentarians proposed to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate “who was spreading the lie that the action on Friday had been an evacuation”.

The opposition Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and its ex-premier Ferenc Gyurcsany publicly complained about the lack of tough government action against the racist attacks, saying, “Hungary does not

have a gypsy problem, Hungary has a Nazi problem". However, they deliberately conceal the fact it was under their rule that the Hungarian Guard and Jobbik grew considerably. During the MSZP's time in office, eight murders of Roma took place, which are only now being addressed by the courts in Budapest.

In the meantime, Jobbik deputies have cited the events as showing that the government is "incapable of maintaining law and order in the country". For this reason, a "nationwide civil militia should be established instead of the over-burdened police", which could "fight Roma criminality", said one Jobbik deputy. According to him, on Tuesday in Gyöngyöspata, "Gypsies had attacked peaceful Hungarians".

Previous pro-Fidesz mayor Laszló Tabi of Gyöngyöspata has submitted his resignation. The Jobbik party now stands the best chance of assuming control of the local administration.

There is a clear relationship between growing right-wing violence and the politics of the Orban government. After Orban secured a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections last year, he implemented a further political shift to the right. Instituting authoritarian measures, he sought to suppress opposition or channel it into a racist direction. Under pressure from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, an austerity programme was implemented that has drastically worsened the living standards of working people.

Freedom of the press has been virtually abrogated through the introduction of a new media law. A five-person-strong Media Council, comprised exclusively of Orban confidantes, has already introduced harsh sanctions against media outlets whose reporting is supposedly "not balanced". Critical press agencies and journalists are to be silenced.

Through numerous changes in the law, Orban is seeking to establish authoritarian structures that can secure his power in the long term. He has filled important posts in the administrative and justice systems with his close supporters. Shortly after coming to power, he passed a law conferring Hungarian citizenship on ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries. This encourages national tensions with Hungary's neighbours, against which Hungary has nursed territorial aspirations since the signing of the Trianon treaty.

The recently adopted Hungarian constitution is a step towards a semi-dictatorial regime. It rests upon "God, King and country", and no longer talks about the "Republic of Hungary". The addition of the word "republic" after the collapse of Stalinist rule in 1989 was supposed to indicate, at least officially, the existence of democratic state structures in the country.

The most important change introduced in the new constitution involves language curtailing the powers of Supreme Court justices. They are no longer able to hear cases concerning questions of taxation or the state budget, a sign that further austerity measures will be introduced in the near future.



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