

Right-wing pogroms against Roma in Hungary

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5 September 2012

Violent attacks against the Roma minority in Hungary are continuing unabated. It is increasingly clear that the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Victor Orban, which works closely together with the neo-fascist Jobbik party, is deliberately provoking such attacks in order to divert attention away from the country's huge economic and social problems.

On August 20 members of the paramilitary "Hungarian Guard" marched against Roma families in the city of Cegled, southeast of the capital, Budapest. More than 400 mostly uniformed guardsmen and their supporters marched through the Roma settlement on the outskirts of the city of 40,000 inhabitants. They shouted slogans such as "dirty gypsies, we will kill you." Right-wing radio stations and Internet portals issued appeals for the fascists to come to Cegled in order to participate in the action.

The media reported eyewitness accounts of the intimidation of the town's residents. It is also alleged that shots were fired. All this took place in front of the police, who were on the spot and permitted the fascists to carry out acts of intimidation before forcing them to withdraw.

Journalists from the HVG weekly magazine reported that at a nearby farm several hundred right-wing extremists welcomed a parliamentary deputy from the extreme-right Jobbik party who expressed his support for the fascist mobilisation. The "Hungarian Guard" is regarded as the paramilitary arm of Jobbik and has repeatedly mobilized against Roma. In early August around a thousand fascists marched through the village Devcser in western Hungary.

Against this backdrop many Roma have concluded they have no future in Hungary. In the course of the last six months about 1,000 Hungarian Roma have asked for political asylum in Canada alone.

The immediate trigger cited for this latest witch-hunt of Roma is the murder of police psychologist Kata Bandy in July. An unemployed Roma was arrested in connection with the murder. He lived in extremely precarious conditions, had been previously convicted for theft and had spent several years in prison. Media outlets close to the government immediately denounced the suspect as a "Gypsy murderer". Calls were raised for "a final solution to the Gypsy question", thereby deliberately inciting violence against Roma.

The Roma activist Jenő Setet summed up the mood of the Roma: "The murder of Kata Bandy is terrible, but more terrible is the fact that we have been declared collectively guilty and the state institutions do nothing to protect us, citizens of this country."

In a press release the parents of Kata Bandy expressly appealed to the media and political circles to refrain from "using the name of our daughter as a pretext for incitement, hatred or the reintroduction of the death penalty"—but to no avail.

Both Jobbik and the ruling Fidesz party are using the murder of Bandy to agitate for the introduction of the death penalty. Jobbik, which won 17 percent of the vote in the 2010 elections, has organised a major campaign for the death penalty. Jobbik leader Gábor Vona justified the demand for the death penalty with completely bogus claims that 90 percent of all murderers are "Gypsies", while 100 percent of all

victims are Hungarian.

A number of politicians from the ruling Fidesz party have also called for the introduction of the death penalty, which would be in contravention of the Hungarian Constitution and EU law. The issue is now to be discussed by the Fidesz faction in early September.

Attacks upon and intimidation of Roma have been taking place for several years in Hungary. In 2008-2009 a number of Hungarian Roma were injured and six killed, including an infant, in a series of murderous pogroms. In each case the murders took place after marches by the Hungarian Guard through Roma settlements. The trial of four members of the Guard suspected of involvement in the murders has been going on for over a year.

In a more recent case, last year fascist groups terrorized the Roma living in the village of Gyöngyöspata over a period of months.

The ruling Fidesz is increasingly relying on the country's extreme right. Prime Minister Orban has declared that the anti-Roma campaigns are unacceptable, but with the next breath insists that the Roma are obliged to integrate.

Following a motion from Jobbik, the Hungarian parliament recently amended the country's Criminal Code, to make any slander of the "Holy Crown" and state symbols such as the anthem, the national flag and the coat of arms punishable by one year in prison. Fidesz has a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

The increase in right-wing violence, tolerated and/or supported by the governing party, is a response to the deepening economic and social crisis in Hungary. The country is in a recession and experiencing rising inflation. In July, the inflation rate stood at 5.8 percent, well above analysts' expectations. The main cause of the high inflation is a dramatic rise in food prices.

Living conditions for the majority of Hungarians are increasingly intolerable due to the drastic cuts imposed by the Orban government and the high inflation.

According to data from the Hungarian National Bank at the end of June, 16.3 percent of all loans held by households were considered "non-performing", which means that the debtors were at least 90 days in arrears with at least one payment. A year ago this figure stood at 11 percent.

The main reasons given by the Hungarian National Bank for the increase of "bad loans" were high unemployment and the declining disposable income of most debtors. This income has fallen due to rising taxes, the impact of the country's flat tax on low-income earners and increasing inflation. If the forint continues to fall further against the euro, the situation will continue to worsen.



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