

Public briefing of the Commission on the Security and Cooperation in Europe

*Hard Times and Hardening Attitudes: The Economic Downturn and Rise of Violence
against Roma*

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Mr. Chairman, Ambassadors, Distinguished Audience, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to testify before you today. It is a privilege to speak to you about the situation of Roma in Hungary.

As the economic meltdown is gradually turning into a larger social crisis across Europe, insecurity is bringing dormant fears and prejudices out in the open in often violent forms.

The past two years have seen more than 50 violent attacks¹ against Roma in Hungary, ranging from heavy beatings in broad daylight to murders by arson or shootings, attacks which the Roma consider are based on racist motives.

According to the most common NGO estimates, there are about 12 million Roma in Europe. In Hungary, there are about 800 000 Roma, meaning that one Hungarian citizen in 15 is Roma.

In Hungary, more than a hundred thousand Roma live in slums on town and city outskirts, separated from the rest of the population. There are at least 630 segregated, Roma-only classes in Hungarian schools, where the quality of education is much lower than for other children. Statistically, the average percentage of mentally challenged in children within the Hungarian population is 20%, while Roma children represent 60% of the mentally challenged young population and are consequently placed into institutions for the mentally retarded.

When it comes to employment, around 80 percent of Roma are unemployed and are therefore excluded from Hungary's employment market. Constant fear of discrimination, harassment and violent attacks mean that Roma from all strata of our society live in a state of constant terror and are forced to exclude themselves from the mainstream society. Racism against Roma is widespread in public discourse. While there is only so much a state can do to regulate private actors, the public authorities are not without responsibility in creating this situation.

While Romaphobia/Roma racism is common in European societies, the outburst of its most violent forms on a regular basis is directly linked to the hardening tone of Hungary's political and social discourse regarding Roma. The murder of a popular handball player, Marian Cosma², by a few Roma men led to extensive media coverage stressing the ethnicity of the

¹ Hungarian Press Agency Report by Attila Hidvegi Balogh 2008-2009 attacks on Roma communities in 2008-2009 Annex I.

² The Cosma Case blogs

http://forum.hirfal.hu/cosma_gyilkossag_ket_gyanusitottat_keres_a_rendorseg_20090208-535405.html,
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6457752.ece>.

suspects and ultimately to the radicalization of the whole social discourse about crime in Hungary. As the story of the murder itself was progressively disappearing from front pages, the debate about "Gypsy crime" remained at the centre of Hungary's public discourse. In a deeply polarized political climate in which extreme vilification of the "other", in terms of political choices, is the norm, and with the effects of Hungary's economic crisis being increasingly felt on a day to day basis, the outburst of anti-Roma sentiments were set to take increasingly violent forms. The debate about "gypsy crime" was accompanied by the implementation, in a growing number of villages with many Roma inhabitants, of a regulation under which social benefits are granted only for a given amount of communal work. The debate around the constitutionality of the measures was accompanied by the wide appearance in the media of another division in our society: that of the worthy and the unworthy poor, the Roma being stereotyped as "welfare cheats", Roma women being accused of breeding for profit.

The extreme polarization of our country's political discourse and the effects of the economic crisis have resulted in everyday discrimination being accompanied by bouts of deadly attacks on Roma, including Roma children.

In the United States, you have known a militant organization whose avowed purpose was to protect the rights of and further the interests of white Americans by violence and intimidation, an organization which had a record of using terrorism, violence and lynching to murder and oppress African Americans, Jews and other minorities. While Ku Klux Klan militants were wearing white costumes and conical hats, our country's Hungarian Guards march through towns and villages wearing black military-style uniforms, professing to promote public safety by curbing "gypsy crime" and defend the interests of "the physically, psychically and mentally defenseless Hungarians" against Roma, Jews and other minorities. In the past year alone, there have been 7 deadly attacks on Roma in Hungary. The Ku Klux Klan used to burn crosses in public spaces to intimidate their victims. Two weeks ago, in Hungary, gasoline was poured and put to fire in the shape of a huge swastika in front of a Roma family's house.

These intimidation tactics which have particularly traumatic psychological effects on the Roma, who were systematically persecuted and murdered during the Holocaust, accompanied by deadly attacks on private houses typically occurring during the night have thrown Hungary's Roma into a state of hopeless terror³. While it became clear to the authorities, during the past months, that the murders of Roma in different parts of the country were

³ Let us take the example of the case of Robert Csorba and his 5-year old son. At half past 12, on February 23, in the middle of the night, a Molotov cocktail was thrown on the house of the Csorba family. Robert Csorba was holding his 6 year old daughter, Bianka, by the hand and holding his 5 year old son, Robi, in his arms as they were escaping the fire. Him and his son were shot dead in front of his daughter. The first to arrive to the scene were not the fire department, the ambulance or the police but a local TV network. Then the police arrived, followed by the fire brigade and, an hour later, an ambulance. All of these units knew that the neighborhood was a Roma one. According to the family, little Robi was still alive when the paramedics arrived and could have been saved, had the ambulance arrived earlier. The fire department's first assessment on the morning following the attack was that the fire had been caused by an electric short-circuit. Neither the police nor the paramedics reported the bullet wounds on the bodies. In the morning, while the police was publicly excluding any suspicion of homicide, family members were drawing attention to clear signs on the scene that a Molotov cocktail had been thrown on the house and that bullets had been shot at Robert Csorba and his son. Only when Roma member of the European Parliament Viktoria Mohacsi pushed for an investigation to open were the authorities forced to act. For more information about this case, please read the detailed evaluation of the European Roma Rights Center.

connected to each other, we still have no information whatsoever as to the backgrounds of the Tatárszentgyörgy⁴, Tiszalök, Pátka or Nagycsécs gun and Molotov cocktail attacks.

The failure of the authorities to effectively investigate these crimes and to protect the safety of villages and neighborhoods where death threats are constantly being issued against Roma are leading Roma communities to form their own defense and patrol the streets to protect their homes and their lives.

Mutual fear of the other on each side of this conflict and the feeling, on all sides, that the public authorities are unable to deal with a worsening social crisis, are leading to a situation in which trust in Hungary's politicians and even the country's institutions is quickly disappearing. But while according to the most recent polls, the Hungarian Guard and its political wing, the Jobbik party⁵, have growing support in the population and can rely on an extensive network of ideologically like-minded civil organizations, the Roma hardly have the means to organize and represent their interests on any institutional level. The increasing of social conflicts in Hungary means that we find ourselves on a slippery slope towards severe damage to Hungary's democratic credentials.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The trust of Roma in our institutions depends on the ability of Hungarian authorities to fully enforce requisite legislation that underpins the democratic principles upheld in our constitution. And the proper functioning of Hungarian democracy depends upon a robustly vibrant Romani community representation with empowered Roma civil organizations that can hold governmental and state agencies accountable for the apparent deficits in doing their jobs properly.

To this end, Hungary must implement an effective law enforcement and political response to acts of violence and hate speech directed against Roma. Public officials engaging in hate speech must be dismissed. Private actors engaging in hate speech must be condemned.

Hungary and the European Union have to take joint responsibility for ensuring the protection of the Rights of Roma and their social and economic integration. The European Union must recognize that the problems faced by Roma communities are a legacy of hundreds of years of government policies fostering discrimination and exclusion, some of which continue to this day.

Hungary should end *de facto* segregation in schools of Romani children in schools; and end the segregation of Romani men and women in health care facilities.

Hungary must design, fund and implement effective programs to ensure that school completion rates, employment levels and health indicators of Roma people rise to the same level as the majority population.

⁴ ERRC: **REPORT** on the circumstances of the double murder committed at Tatárszentgyörgy on 23 February 2009 and conduct of the acting authorities (the police, ambulance and fire services)
7 May 2009 Budapest Annex II.

⁵ Hungarian Radical Party Jobbik won (with the idea in their campaign fighting against "gypsy crime") 15% on the recent European Parliamentary elections.

United States should:

United States should consistently condemn acts of violence and hate speech directed against Roma.

United States should offer law enforcement support to investigate and prosecute hate crimes against Roma.

United States should consistently refer to Roma issues in its bilateral discussions, particularly with regard to Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the Czech Republic.

The United States should engage through the USAID in the development of a stronger Roma civil society voice for a effective Roma representation at both national and pan-European level.

Thank you.