

We're Staying in Miskolc. Political Radicalism and Roma Rap

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Miskolc and the Roma

Miskolc is the fourth-largest city in Hungary, spread out enchantingly at the foot of the eastern part of the Bükk Highlands and separated from Budapest by a distance of less than 190 km. Famous for the Barlangfürdő thermal bath– the only aquapark of its type in Europe, created in a natural karstic cave, located in the health resort of (Miskolc-)Tapolca. Notwithstanding the fact that tourism plays an ever greater role in the life of the city, Miskolc until recently remained an important Hungarian industrial center. The first factories and steelworks were built in the eighteenth century, and dynamic development of industry took place in the mid-nineteenth. At that time, the Miskolc Town Hall was built, the county headquarters, theater, and several schools and churches. The city

was not destroyed in the First World War, and its infrastructure was preserved intact. Hungarian government policy of the 1930s was favourable to further industrial investment, mainly geared toward promoting heavy industry and arms manufacturing. Only towards the end of World War II did Miskolc become a city on the frontline and suffer intensive damage.

After 1945 the process of rebuilding Miskolc was initiated. Hungary's Communist government built new factories and the city began dynamically expanding. Miskolc was merged with Diósgyőr and Hejőcsaba to create Greater Miskolc, while in subsequent decades several other towns were also integrated into the agglomeration. The fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe brought about the closing of most Miskolc's enterprises and factories in the early 1990s. The introduction of a free-market economy brought with it the loss of livelihoods and a rise in unemployment in the city. Changes of regime, politics and economics affected Miskolc particularly severely—the restructuring of the economy was slow to take place, while in the social sphere conflicts and mutual feelings of prejudice grew.

Miskolc currently has over 185 000 residents. The majority of the population consists of ethnic Hungarians (approximately 95%), while the Roma constitute its largest ethnic minority. To a certain degree, Miskolc's demographics are representative of the general situation in Hungary. It is estimated that the Roma comprise between 4% and

10% of the country's entire population. That means that in Hungary overall the Roma represent the largest recognized minority.¹ At the same time, it should be remembered that they do not constitute a homogeneous group, and lines of division have been drawn among the Hungarian Roma since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Miskolc, like other regions of Hungary, has been home to Roma for centuries. Their forced assimilation, implemented in keeping with the policy of the Hungarian socialist government, led to a significant rise in the number of Roma living in cities in the 1970s. In Miskolc, as in other Hungarian cities, they have been settled mainly in multi-storey apartment blocks at the outskirts of urbanized areas. The Roma, largely unskilled workers, found jobs in industry and construction. After the change of social system, they were the first to become unemployed. The time of transformation laid bare the complete failure of the Socialist policy of Roma assimilation. In Miskolc as early as the 1990s manifestations of discrimination against the Roma population were noted in the spheres of labor, education and housing. As a result, the Communist apartment blocks inhabited by the Roma were transformed into isolated housing developments and quickly underwent a process of ghettoization. The cultural divide between the Roma and non-Roma populations thereby grew, and social antagonisms visible before the transformation deepened still further.

¹ K. Wójcik, *Sytuacja prawna i społeczna Romów na Węgrzech*, Wrocław 2011, p. 1, <http://www.bibliotekacyfrowa.pl/Content/38629/007.pdf> (1.10.2016).

Radicalization of Government Roma Policy

In 2010 the right-wing Jobbik party advanced a program of building closed camps for Gypsies (in their rhetoric, the term Roma is rarely used). It should be remembered that at that time, policies toward Roma populations were becoming noticeably radicalized in other European countries besides Hungary. In France, around the same time, the government of Nicolas Sarkozy began deporting Roma. Exclusion of unwanted minorities became an important instrument of political gamesmanship and took brutal forms. Stereotypical depictions of the Roma as criminals, beggars, jobless, uneducated, and degenerates became prevalent. The same strategy was applied in Italy, and Silvio Berlusconi's calls for fighting street crime in practice translated into a war on Roma begging. Evictions and bulldozing of Roma camps began on the outskirts of Naples, Rome, and Milan.² Hungary's Jobbik often referenced the actions of Sarkozy and Berlusconi in order to gain legitimacy for its own ideas. The political campaign in Hungary acquired more justification on the broader European scale, and Gábor Vona, the chair of Jobbik, argued that segregation of the Roma was the best solution for Hungarian society.

Jobbik's slogans found fertile ground in Miskolc. Márton Szegedi, a mayoral candidate, put forward a proposal during his rallies with supporters for the deportation of the Roma from Miskolc. For his part, Jobbik vice chairman

² C. Radu, "Governmentality and the Deportation of Eastern European Roma in Italy and France," *Student Pulse* 4(3)/2011, <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/513/governmentality-and-the-deportation-of-eastern-european-roma-in-italy-and-france> (15.09.2016).

and EU deputy Szegedi Csanad stated that the Roma, who had a problem with the law, should not only be deported, but placed in specially created camps for public order. In his opinion, the Roma population, if subjected to close supervision and enclosed within walls, would cease to constitute a threat to the rest of society.³ At the same time, Szegedi Csanad asserted that such public order camps would give the Roma themselves a chance to return to “civilized” society. Forced participation in public works programs and compliance with the requirement to educate their children would lead the Roma to abandon the path of criminality and become full-fledged members of Hungarian society. Csanad simultaneously warned that people who did not adapt to those rules would spend the rest of their life in the camps.⁴

Xenophobic solutions to the so-called “Gypsy problem” in poor regions of Hungary, such as the municipality of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, in which Miskolc is located, have found their advocates. Words have been turned into deeds. A statement by the chief of police, for example, correlated with Jobbik’s radical political views. The police chief made an official announcement that the perpetrators of all burglaries and robberies in Miskolc were exclusively Roma.⁵ It is a fact that the majority of the Roma population of Miskolc are unemployed and extreme poverty is pushing them onto a path of crime. The lack of alternatives places them

³ J. Pawlicki, *Cyganie do obozu*, Wyborcza.pl, 9.09.2010, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8351451,Cyganie_do_obozu.html (12.09.2016).

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ M. Szewczyk, *Cyganie też chcą gdzieś mieszkać...*, “Nie „pa Rromanes” ale o Romach,” <http://romowie.blogspot.com/2014/10/cyganie-tez-chca-gdzies-mieszka-c-w.html> (9.09.2016).

at the bottom of the ladder of the local community, while the “non-productivity of Gypsies” becomes transformed into an inability to adapt to modern Hungarian society.

Segregation policies have become a reality in Hungary. Though the Roma housing developments are not bounded by walls and fences, their residents rarely go outside those developments, while ethnic Hungarians avoid such places. The Avas development, to name one, is an example of a contemporary urban Roma ghetto whose boundaries are defined by poverty, unemployment and its residents' lamentable everyday living conditions.

There is also unofficial discrimination that takes place in the education system. Separate classes are being created for Hungarian and Roma children under the pretext of the Roma children's low level of education. As a result of action taken by the Chance for Children Foundation, a suit was filed against the City Council of Miskolc. The city government had decided to close a few elementary schools, causing children of Roma origin to experience significant difficulties in accessing education. The foundation suspected city officials of being responsible for incorrectly determining the regionalization of six schools, as a result of which segregation of Roma pupils occurred, in violation of their right to equal treatment in the realm of education. In the end an appeals court ruled that the Miskolc City Council had infringed the rights of Roma pupils to be treated equally regardless of ethnicity. The verdict can be said to have represented a turning point, because analo-

gous suits concerning discriminative segregation practices have been filed against other cities, including: Nyíregyháza, Hajdúhadház, Jászládány, Kerepes, Kaposvár, Győr.⁶

Political populism, radicalized by ethnic hatred, has also been transferred to projects relating to social housing. In July 2014 several hundred Roma families received orders to abandon their apartments. This was because a month earlier, the Miskolc City Council had passed amendments to the regulations on communal apartments. According to the new rules, persons living in buildings below a certain standard would be forced to leave their homes. They were to be compensated for this resettlement by a one-time sum of damages amounting to 2 million forints. This decree was aimed primarily at the city's Roma, from whom a declaration was also demanded stating that they would not return to Miskolc for five years and would not require any help from the city. In this way, the local authorities legally recognized the possibility of forced resettlement of the Roma population.

The Roma of Miskolc began openly protesting such decisions. Many Roma organizations, as well as Hungarian and international NGOs involved in human rights issues, supported their position.. Amnesty International, for example, called upon the Miskolc authorities to “engage in genuine consultations with residents, explain to them the reasons for resettlement and the alternatives they face for where to live, as well as making it possible for them to question the decision in the courts, and offering an alternative place of

⁶ K. Wójcik, *Sytuacja prawna...*, p. 151.

residence with guaranteed access to education, transport, health services, and water, and that meets appropriate conditions of sanitation, and will not constitute racial segregation but will take place in conditions identical to those of residents from other areas of the city; in the event of resettlement, guarantees to provide adequate damages.”⁷ This situation shows in a particular way how the Roma essentially have no political voice. Even if their voice sometimes makes itself heard in public discourse, given the poverty and exclusion they face it is merely a despairing demonstration that “we are here” and “we wish to stay here.”

Roma Rap – Music Against Discrimination

After the announcements by local authorities concerning the mass resettlements, the Roma came out into the streets of the city. The most eloquent slogan of their protests was *Miskolcon maradunk* (“We are staying in Miskolc”). The Roma struggle for the right to live in the city was supported by Roma associations, and several human rights, civil rights, and minority rights organizations. There were actions organized in solidarity with the Roma on social media. Finally, one instrument of resistance became Roma music, especially Roma rap.

Influenced by these events, MC Szigfrid, a Roma rapper who makes no secret of his admiration for the music of Snoop Dogg, recorded a song entitled “Miskolcon maradunk,” and put up a video clip for the track on the YouTube

⁷ “Węgry: burmistrz Miskolca musi zatrzymać przymusowe wysiedlenie Romów,” Amnesty International, 21.07.2014, <https://amnesty.org.pl/w%C4%99gry-burmistrz-miskolca-musi-zatrzymac%C4%87-przymusowe-wysiedlenie-rom%C3%B3w/> (12.12.2016).

site. The protest slogan turned into the name of a song. The text, in Hungarian with some Romani language interwoven, tells about what it means to be “a Gypsy in Miskolc.” It begins with the words:

*Let's take a drive, and this time I will be the guide.
I'll take you to my city, through a long tunnel.
I'll state the dose, take it boldly, intravenously if
necessary.
Listen to me, ignore the chatter of others.
Why is the gypsy nation rising up? Why does my
blood boil?
Because my city, my fatherland lied to me and
betrayed me.
My accursed forebears can't be buried in the earth of
slaves.
My nation moved west for a better life, do you get
that, man?
My song could tell how everything is cool here,
But the fate of my nation is doubtful,
and our voice has been stifled [...].*

As Katalin Kovalcsik has observed, Roma rap is a result of Roma emancipation and the spread among them of the consciousness of belonging to a minority differentiated by skin color, language and customs. It should be seen in the same categories as urban American rap, and thus as a kind of folk culture of urban racial and subcultural ghettos. Perhaps, as Kovalcsik has written, this similarity is the most important reason why the Roma have turned their

attention to hip-hop and started also making music in this genre.⁸ Rap as a form of protest music and an expression of social frustration could effectively take root in Roma communities deprived of the chance to improve their lot.

MC Szigfrid's text nicely illustrates the moods of the Roma in Miskolc, above all, their shame and distress:

*People who were born here, who lived here all their
lives,
Who studied and got old here, their shame is their
wine.
People who changed careers, those who once were
heroes,
Who for a job well done used to hear a thank you.
Two thousand fourteen was a year truly accursed.
Why did you give birth to a sinful child, I curse Eve.
Wagon tracks, tracks of poverty, tabor on the edge of
town.
Streets of Lyukó paved with gold? You'll flee the
place in seconds.
Inhuman surroundings and degraded life.
What once used to be joy now is torment.
Dreams are woven here, goals today impossible,
But willpower like a steel lock won't cry uncle.
Ruined houses, fallen walls, panes smashed in
windows.
My rap born in beggary is a message to you [...].*

⁸ K. Kovalcsik, "Muzyka Romów na Węgrzech: przeszłość i terażniejszość," trans. S. Kapralski, *Studia Romologica* 3/2010, pp. 189–190.

There is a whole pantheon of Roma rappers in Miskolc in addition to MC Szigfrid. Thanks chiefly to the internet, their music enjoys popularity well beyond Miskolc's ethnic ghetto. Their work is nonetheless above all an integral part of contemporary Roma culture. More than a mere musical style, it is an authentic means of expressing one's identity, particularly the identity of the younger generation of Roma. Though rap has already accustomed us to hearing stories of "social ills" through its medium, the Roma version also provides a specific political metacommentary. MC Szigfrid expresses the views of his own milieu, commenting on important political events and relevant issues which directly affect the Roma and arise out of historical accretions and tensions with the Hungarian majority. The following words from the song "Miskolcon maradunk," relating to the Roma community's sense of ties to Miskolc and Hungarians, are powerfully eloquent:

Burned bridges, empty houses, high-rise jungle.

*Good fortune teller, don't disappear!
I'm none other than a Gypsy,
Whose soul is stirred and disturbed.
I, too, learned the Anthem, I recited the National
poem,
Walked proudly through the gate, I was always
a Magyar
I'm proud of my blood, of my background.
Many brothers swore oaths and gave their blood for
the impossible.
All that means I'm helpless with my own nation.*

*My pride and everything I believed in is smothered.
I took a long road, I saw my people's tears.
I open the Bible, I read the book of Moses.
I don't understand law, just feel it in my skin.
All my sins are my stigmata, the shame of Gypsiness.
Closed factory doors, former places of work,
Doomed to condemnation, a big
stain on the city's heart [...].*

Though some may criticize Roma rap for excessive simplicity, use of off-color language and off-handed poetic devices, it is precisely those traits that endow it with unparalleled communicative power. Listening to Roma rap, we cannot determine what causes Roma isolation: society's antipathy toward these "troublesome neighbors" or the alienation the Roma population themselves feel. For audiences of this music listening from outside, it is hard to resist the impression that Miskolc rap is ideally suited not only to the dominant realities of that Hungarian city, but also to the larger political situation in Hungary and Europe, whose societies today are having problems coping with multiculturalism. The final lines of the song by MC Szigfrid quoted above leave no doubt about the fact that Miskolc is, in its own way, the "little fatherland" of the Roma who have lived there for centuries:

*We'll never leave, we're staying in Miskolc, it's our
home, it's our city.
We'll never leave, we're staying in
Miskolc, it's our home, it's our city.*

translated by Timothy Williams