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Antigypsyism in mainstream politics - the Hungarian government's narrative on Roma

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According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 41 percent of Roma in CEE countries felt discriminated against at least once in the past five years.¹ A study conducted by the Pew Research Centre on religious belief and national belonging in Central and Eastern Europe shows that 54 percent of respondents in Hungary would not be willing to accept Roma as members of their family, 44 percent as neighbours, and 27 percent as citizens of their country.² As stated in the European Parliament Communication on the mid-term review of the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies, *"fighting antigypsyism and stereotypes by targeting majority society is a precondition for generating political will and for the success of any Roma inclusion intervention."*³ Antigypsyism goes beyond the legal concept of discrimination. In essence, antigypsyism is the root cause of Roma exclusion. It has many different dimensions and manifestations, including stereotypes, school and housing segregation, hate crimes, and hate speech from the public, media and political representatives.

According to the working definition of the Alliance against Antigypsyism: *"Antigypsyism is a historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism against social groups identified under the stigma 'gypsy' or other related terms, and incorporates:*

- 1. a homogenizing and essentializing perception and description of these groups;*
- 2. the attribution of specific characteristics to them;*

¹ "Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Roma – Selected findings" European Agency for Fundamental Rights, Publications Office of the European Union, 2018. <https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_en.pdf#page=11>.

² "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe", Pew Research Center, May 2017, <<https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/05/15120244/CEUP-FULL-REPORT.pdf>>.

³ "Midterm evaluation of the EU framework for NRIS", European Commission, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-and-eu/mid-term-evaluation-eu-framework-nris_en>.

3. *discriminating social structures and violent practices that emerge against that background, which have a degrading and ostracizing effect and which reproduce structural disadvantages.*"⁴

Based on In 2017 the European Parliament adopted a report on the "*Fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration in the EU: fighting anti-Gypsyism*",⁵ highlighting the persistent antigypsyism in politics and societies across Europe, despite the efforts undertaken under the EU Roma Framework and the legislative framework against discrimination, hate speech and hate crime.

In this short introduction of the Hungarian government's narrative on Roma and anti-Roma sentiments, I illustrate that the negative narrative overwhelms the positive initiatives, and the Hungarian government has been using antigypsyism as a political tool in its communication.

It is well-known that politicians, especially governing party representatives are an elite group that control or have access to many types of public discourse, have the largest stake in maintaining white group dominance and are usually most proficient in persuasively formulating their ethnic opinions.⁶ The OSCE participating States acknowledged that political representatives can play an instrumental role in "*taking the lead in combating intolerance and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding*".⁷ As van Dijk points out,⁸ in the same way as professors control the scholarly discourse, journalists media discourse or lawyers legal discourse, politicians control policy and other public political discourse. Those who have more control over more discourse are also more powerful.

By using my previous research findings from a qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis I would like to provide a glance at how the Hungarian government talks about roma in the context of antigypsyism in government-issued press releases⁹ between 2012 and 2020. I identified major topics in the press releases that emerged during my research, such as symbolism; denial; prejudices against Hungary and the government. Symbolism as a theme is a broad concept that covers issues that might have little tangible importance, but evoke intense

⁴ Alliance against Antigypsyism - a reference paper, June 2017
<<https://seureservercdn.net/192.169.221.188/abv.a52.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Antigypsyism-reference-paper-16.06.2017.pdf>>.

⁵ "European Parliament resolution of 25 October 2017 on fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration in the EU: fighting anti-Gypsyism", Strasbourg, 2017. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0413_EN.html>.

⁶ Teun A. van Dijk: "Discourse and Denial of Racism." In *The Discourse Reader*, edited by Adam Jaworski and Coupland, 179-93. London: Routledge.

⁷ OSCE Ministerial Council. 2009a. "Decision No. 9/09 Combating Hate Crimes." OSCE Ministerial Council.

⁸ Teun A. van Dijk: "Critical Discourse Analysis." In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton. Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

⁹ Official information homepage of the Government of Hungary

emotions. Symbolism in the context of Roma involves topics like commitments against hate crimes, condemnation of and rejection to certain acts, taking actions against certain phenomena, providing protection.

Denial simply cover cases when the political elite create a framing in which the existence of antigypsyism is denied either implicitly or explicitly. Lastly, we would assume that prejudices would connect to historically oppressed minorities, but in the government's narrative the phenomenon of prejudice almost exclusively arises against the Hungarian government and Hungary.

In the following, I provide an insight into the government's narrative on Roma and antigypsyism through these identified topics in two-year periods.

2012-2014

From the symbolical point of view it is important that the government occasionally acknowledges that the majority takes a negative stance towards Roma, but at the same time they were reinforcing the negative narrative on Roma by making statements such as Roma culture is considered the possible tool to overcome *"the everyday negative experiences, in which we can find prejudices, as well as truth about"* Roma.¹⁰ However, the impact of acknowledgement is highly questionable, when the reproduction of antigypsyism is built in the very same acknowledgement.

In this period, denial closely interconnects with the lack of acknowledgment. According to van Dijk¹¹ transferring the charges to others is a typical form of denial. Instead of admitting the existence of racism, or admitting a party's members' racism, political elites tend to acknowledge the existence of racism by attaching them to another political actor, as it happens in the case of Jobbik. Blaming one group for antigypsyism also creates a narrative that antigypsyism belongs to one group and not a social problem.

2014-2016

In the second investigated period, all the previously mentioned themes intensified. Hungary took over the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) chairmanship (2015), which significantly influenced the government communication about hate motivated acts and the Holocaust. The positive outcome of the chairmanship is the acknowledgment of Roma victims of the Holocaust. However, the discourse is quickly overtaken by the xenophobic, anti-refugee

¹⁰ A kultúrának a romaintegrációban betöltött híd szerepéről beszélt Balog Zoltán Franciaországban, 2013. október 5. <<http://2010-2014.kormany.hu/hu/emberi-eroforrasok-miniszteriuma/hirek/a-kulturanak-a-romaintegracioban-betoltott-hidzereperol-beszelt-balog-zoltan-franciaorszagban>>

¹¹ see van Dijk, 1999.

campaign. The government developed a frame in which the reason for rejection to EU quotas for refugees is that Hungary cannot receive “migrants”, because the country has to take care of the integration of 800,000 Gypsy people. This kind of discourse is the opposite of the discourse about Roma that appears in relation to the IHRA Chairmanship. While in the latter context Roma appear as untapped resources, in the context of migration they are framed as a problem for the country that must be solved first.

Denial is a very strong feature of the discourse in the frame of the third Orbán government’s communication. The connection between denial and Jobbik exists in this period and is more explicit. According to the government’s narrative Jobbik members are racist, they talk about Roma with full of hatred, they create a discourse that incites hatred. But at the same time they hold that most of the Hungarians turn away from those and their followers, who support and share racist, exclusive and anti-semitic views.¹² This kind of discourse obviously transfers the charges of racism to Jobbik, while distancing the government further away from the phenomenon. The interesting part of this discourse that relating statements mostly appeared in the frame of international conferences and other events, related to the IHRA Chairmanship, and in interviews to foreigner journals.

Lastly, this is the period when the third identified topic prejudice emerged. Surprisingly, prejudices as a theme did not appear against Roma, but against the Hungarian government and Hungary. Actually prejudices are not even mentioned by the government in the context of Roma people. According to the political narrative, it is difficult to overcome the prejudices against Hungary, and Hungary is unfairly treated by the international community.

2016-2018

This period was overwhelmingly dominated by the government’s anti-refugee campaign. All the previously identified topics and narratives intersected somehow with “migration”. The government seemed to seize every opportunity to talk about the “illegal migrant agenda”. The government tends to continue the adverse communication about Roma. For instance, while introducing a good practice in the field of employment the most pronounced achievement of the program was that Roma “do not have to live on social assistance”, but finally can earn their income.¹³ It does not require explanation why it is extremely contraproductive to communicate

¹² Az államnak kötelessége megvédenie minden polgárát, 2015, <<http://www.kormany.hu/hu/belugyminiszterium/hirek/az-allamnak-kotelessege-megvedeni-minden-allampolgarat>>.

¹³ A felzárkóztatás egyetlen útja a munkavégzésen keresztüli esélyteremtés, 2016, <<http://www.kormany.hu/hu/emberi-eroforrasok-miniszteriuma/szocialis-ugyekert-es-tarsadalmi-felzarkozasert-felelos-allamtitkarsag/hirek/a-felzarkoztatás-egyetlen-útja-a-munkavégzésen-keresztüli-esélyteremtés>>.

about a good example while emphasizing the most widespread and harmful stereotypes.

Furthermore, "*illegal migration*" narrative basically utilized Roma to reinforce both rejection of refugees and the stereotypes about Roma. First of all, the primary consideration was that the integration of Roma is such a demanding task in the country that it hampers the integration of refugees. Given the weight of the anti-refugee campaign and the clearly negative messages around it, connecting it to the Roma - while considered as a burden - creates an obviously antigypsyist narrative.

Denial and the "not we, but them" narrative kept dominating the discourse about antigypsyism. In this period, the government considers Jobbik and migration as primary sources of racism and anti-semitism. The discourse is continuously dominated by a strategy of positive self-representation of the government. It is stated that Hungary is the only one country in which the far-right did not strengthen due to the refugee crisis.¹⁴ However research shows¹⁵ that the far-right did not only strengthen, but also had been rearranged. As a result of the refugee crisis Jobbik centered itself on the political scene, while Fidesz moved to the radical right.

This time period also drastically changed the narrative on prejudices. Prejudices as a topic is only present against Hungary, against the government and the prime minister himself. Moreover, the prejudices escalated into hatred in the narratives. Hungary and governments appear as the primary target of hatred and prejudices. Nils Muiznieks - Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner - had raised serious concerns in relation to Hungary's anti-immigration campaign. The official response questioned the Commissioner's concerns on a basis of prejudice against Hungary, as well as stated that the Commissioner's ignorance and hatred against Hungary is staggering.

2018-2020

The intensity of anti-migration narrative had abated, while antigypsyism was unequivocally the strongest in this time period in the government's narrative in the context of the Gyöngyöspata school segregation case. In January 2020, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán reacted to the judgement of the Debrecen Court of Appeal that concerned the compensation of Romani families and their children who were forced to study in segregated school settings.¹⁶ He created the narrative around the

¹⁴ Különbséget kell tenni migráns és migráció között, 2016, <<http://www.kormany.hu/hu/emberi-eroforrasok-miniszteriuma/hirek/kulonbseget-kell-tenni-migrans-es-migracio-kozott>>.

¹⁵ Kerekó Péter and Juhász Attila, *The Hungarian Far Right - Social Demand, Political Supply, and International Context* (ibidem Press, 2017) <https://bookline.hu/product/home.action?_v=Kreko_Peter_Juhasz_Attila_The_Hungary&id=4378971&type=200> [accessed 29 April 2018].

¹⁶ "Open letter to the EU about the climate of racism in Hungary", European Roma Rights Centre, 18 February 2020, <<http://www.errc.org/press-releases/open-letter-to-the-eu-about-climate-of-racism-in-hu>>.

compensation that focused on “unearned revenue”, claiming that Roma people gain money without work in the form of compensation. The prime minister also criticized the court’s ruling as deeply unfair and he stated *“I don't yet know exactly what to do now but this cannot remain like this for sure. We need to give justice to the Gyöngyöspata people”*.¹⁷ Later in a radio broadcast, Orbán dismissed *“the whole thing as a provocation”*, and pointed out that *“the Hungarian people are not racist, and do not reject the Roma as a matter of course; however, the Hungarian people will never accept giving money for nothing”*.¹⁸ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also reacted to the final judgement of the Supreme court in the case. He criticized the highest court of Hungary stating that the court has no understanding about what is going on in Gyöngyöspata, and promised that the government would find justice for the Hungarians in Gyöngyöspata. He also made a promise that the government will amend the law so similar cases will not happen again. In the same interview, he said that *“it is a question whether Hungarians can feel home in their own country and if Hungary is a place where a minority can force its will on the majority.”*¹⁹

In the 8 years period, the narrative on Roma was undoubtedly reinforcing antigypsyism in indirect (denial) and direct ways. There were also attempts for moderate acknowledgement of anti-Romani sentiments or finding positive narratives to shape the current negative ones on Roma. However, the conservative attempts on a positive narrative were outweighed by, moreover erased by the cases in which Roma were used as political means, either for the rejection of refugees or questioning the decision of the Supreme Court. The government turned the narrative dangerously to the radical right, in the year of the pandemic, when people were desperately looking for scapegoats. In parallel with the diminishing returns from the demonising migrants the government prompted antigypsyism, and pointed the finger at another enemy. Nevertheless, the new enemy unless the previous ones indeed live in the country. Roma people live next to those, who are now incited to blame Roma, in a country where almost every second people already do not want to live next to a Roma person.

¹⁷ Orbán Viktor a Kossuth Rádió “Jó reggelt, Magyarország!” című műsorában, 31 January, 2020. <<https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-a-kossuth-radio-jo-reggelt-magyarorszag-cimu-musorabanqq>>.

¹⁸ Soros is the world’s number one oligarch, 17 January, 2020, <<https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/news/soros-is-the-world-s-number-one-oligarch>>.

¹⁹ Orbán Viktor a Kossuth Rádió “Jó reggelt, Magyarország!” című műsorában, 31 January, 2020. <<https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-a-kossuth-radio-jo-reggelt-magyarorszag-cimu-musorabanqq>>.