

"WITHOUT JESUS, IT DOESN'T WORK":

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-ORGANIZATION
AND INTEREST-BUILDING ADVOCACY
IN A HUNGARIAN VILLAGE²

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"Because only through belief can this country become one community again. Only through belief can I make a Hungarian or a Schwab accept that a filthy Gypsy kid is God's creature, too. They may lynch me for this, but I think that no integration program has ever reached its goal, while this miserable Catholic Church has been persistently telling the Schwabs 'and forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.' Our community has to carry such a burden! I can sense the force in the Catholic Church – if it became more open, we could work within it, because the love of God is there, because everyone is God's creature." (Katika S., family social worker and leader of Caritas in K., Hungary)

"The simple Gypsy man, who does not know God, asks 'what will you give me, will you give me something?' Those who know God no longer ask what they would get; they ask how they could help. And if we organize something, this would be typical. Let me give you an example: the entire [village of] Nagyecsed has been converted. We messaged the people of Nagyecsed with

2 K. is a village located in the North East of Hungary.

details about when the Holocaust commemoration would take place. See what happened; by the time I got there, 1,500 people had gathered together – young people and the pastors, too – and I only had to go there and make a speech. This is the difference between one congregation and another: these are reliable, respectable people; you can build a movement with them.” (Lajos S., deputy chair of the Roma Minority Local Government in H. County, member of the Faith Church, and activist with We Belong Here)

“I was a confused man without a self-image, without self-awareness. Belief has given me focus, self-esteem, and the same goes for being Roma. There is so much grief and rejection we have to face in this country. It can be harmful, and yet we can recover again and again. This rejection is so depressing – that we are not Hungarians, we are Roma people, we are not part of this country. Where shall I go? Shall I kill myself or go away from here? If I weren’t a believer, I would have left the country already, but I am a Christian, a believer, I know who I am, I know my rights, I know who I am through my belief, that God wants to see me here, and there is a reason why I have been born here.” (József B., Pastor at the Faith Church in K., furniture factory worker)

The missing foundation: the village as a community

The differentiations made between Gypsies and Hungarians in K.

K. is a Hungarian settlement with 2,300 inhabitants and four different church organizations. Although it seems as if the Catholic Church has been present here for centuries and it has retained its dominant position amongst the village elite, it does not gain its power from the support of the majority of the population. According to the interviews and public

discussion I gathered during my time here, K.'s major and most disruptive village conflicts stem from the shifting use of and contradictions in the term 'majority population.'

"I must tell you that young people don't remain in the village,"

says László S., the mayor of the settlement.

"In particular, young people with a marketable profession go to the cities and oftentimes, recently, an increasing number go abroad. Those who stay in the village are mostly unskilled workers, mostly replaceable in the production process. The 'urban' drain of the village has been going on for decades, maybe centuries. The cities have been dragging away the sensible, viable, most influential residents. During the era of cooperatives, everybody had a job according to their abilities and everybody found their place and that was real integration,"

says Katika S., the local family social worker and leader of the Catholic organization Caritas Hungarica.

The widespread unemployment, in combination with high rates of poverty, for some, and the threat of poverty, for others, together with the demographic changes has resulted in a major crisis regarding the societal integrity of the village. The definition of 'integrity', according to our interviews, is specifically associated to a distinction made between the Roma and the Hungarian identity of the village, and was expressed rather differently by our Hungarian and Roma subjects.

Based on local estimates, about 40% of the population in K. is of Roma origin. In the village's traditional layout, the Roma population was mostly located along the settlement's marginal streets. However, these days, there are many families who now also inhabit houses that have been abandoned by local 'peasants'. Alongside the still rather significant spatial divisions of the two communities, differentiation between the Roma and Hungarian populations is present on the labor market, too. K. is located only 15 km from E., H. County's capital. Due to the significant amount of transit traffic,

transport between the two locations is excellent – available to the villagers until 11 p.m. daily. Highly skilled workers have job opportunities available to them in E. or even locally, at more prestigious workplaces. Some of them are self-employed in the agricultural industry and may even employ others. These examples, however, are characteristic of the ‘Hungarian’ population, while ‘Gypsies’ fill in the remaining labor market positions.

Compared to an average village in the region, K. offers more opportunities to its inhabitants. There is a furniture factory and a mushroom production plant nearby, both of which employ mostly local Roma people, while agricultural production accounts for the rest of local employment. Most social scenes are divided along the lines of Gypsy vs. Hungarian: here, the local school is almost predominantly Gypsy children, while most non-Gypsies take their children to school in E., to more prestigious institutions.

Nevertheless, this distinction seems to factor in less, or at least differently, in the case of other major institutional settings within the village. Four out of the seven members of the municipality are of Roma origin, one of the leaders of the local civil guard³ is also Roma, and Gypsies and Hungarians work together in most local organizations. When we asked about life in the village, both Gypsies and Hungarians alike listed unemployment and poverty as the major and primary problems. The mayor believes the key to the solution would be to turn the unskilled Gypsy labor force into a productive, viable work force. The village continues to apply for trainings that fit the local profile, and there is a study hall dedicated to talented, socially disadvantaged, (mostly Roma) pupils.

All in all, it can be stated that the village leadership does not advocate a division of the village into Gypsy-Hungarian factions; rather it genuinely seeks to provide better opportunities to all its citizens and this is why it came as a surprise that the far-right Jobbik and the racist and xenophobic civil militia group, the Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard) was ‘invited’ into the village to hold an anti-Roma demonstration.

3 Civil guard is a nation-wide civil organization with self-organized local branches. The aims of the civil guards are to help authorities to maintain public security.

According to interviews with ‘Hungarians,’ K. is a place that does not fulfill the physical and spiritual needs of its inhabitants, as it does not provide a livelihood and a supportive community. The “*capable*” population leaves since the village does not offer them an optimistic outlook for the future; further, there is an

“overpopulation of a certain group, which is incapable of coexistence.”

This definition – implicitly or explicitly – is the crux of the Hungarian-Roma differentiation. Of course, the “*overpopulation*” which is “*incapable of coexistence*” is a reference to the Roma, while the reference to “*capability*” is meant to describe the Hungarian population. This interpretation is valid even if most interviewees have explicitly stated

“it is not the majority of the Roma that cause a problem” or “some Roma families are more distinguished than many Hungarian ones.”

The smaller thefts, burglaries, the constant threat to peace in the private sphere, that my interviewees expounded on, were not simply daily annoyances to them but rather virtual manifestations of the integrity they felt was lacking, a proof that the village is no longer able to protect its residents; neither through common norms nor through the sanctioning of their violators. This harsh criticism is also directed at the Roma community, since it is ‘common knowledge’ in the village that these crimes are committed by Gypsies and, frequently, by Gypsy children. At the same time, there is a contradiction to every conversation – be it with locals sitting in a local bar, with people actively engaged in village social issues, or with the mayor: a contradiction between identifying the village’s major problems with its Roma community and the declaration that the Magyar Gárda’s march through town was the result of the problems made only by “*a few problematic families*”.

The intellectual burden of maintaining the village’s integrity falls most heavily on the shoulders of the local elite; individuals with more prestigious

positions in the village who, as a consequence, are existentially connected to K. Caritas, a Catholic organization, is the largest organization in K. It provides the villagers with a variety of programs designed to improve their standard of living and income. Caritas' leadership consists mostly of members of the village elite and the municipal educational director, the local family social worker, and some members of the municipality also support their work. Caritas' primary mission is the "*domestication*" of the settlement's Roma population, which they purport – as was cited in the quotations provided above – can be achieved through the integrative power of the Catholic Church.

As opposed to Jobbik's rigid perspective which centers around the differentiation between a Gypsies and Hungarians, Caritas' distinction is much more inclusive. Based on our observations, the village elite are trying to create a common basis for coexistence and are much less preoccupied with emphasizing the differences between K.'s Gypsies and Hungarians. The leading example of this is the fact that four out of the seven municipality members are Roma. This rather exceptional phenomenon and other examples of inclusiveness that characterizes the village prompt a few serious questions: First of all, how is it possible that a municipal council with a Roma majority gives Jobbik and the Magyar Gárda permission to march in the village? Moreover, how can the village that has elected a predominantly Roma representation (despite of the majority of villagers being Hungarian) tolerate the public exhibition of an openly racist party and the radical militia movement, such as Jobbik and Magyar Gárda? As a follow-up, exactly what were the mechanisms that might have operated in this particular case to bring forth this scenario?

Based on my brief research, as I will outline in more detail here later on, the answer lies in the power of a larger, hierarchical organization which overrides even the local Gypsy-Hungarian distinctions – namely Fidesz (Hungary's ruling right-wing political party with strong nationalist rhetoric). Fidesz met with an overwhelming victory in K. in both 2006 and 2010 (the second victory was in accordance with the national trends) and the four Roma representatives are also members of Fidesz. Thus, it can be supposed that their party affiliations were more important to them than their ethnic origins.

Integrative forces

In any case, as stated above, there is a strong need for more integration of the village's various groups. The village elite are dedicated to developing a stronger integrated community, one that can go beyond its various communities' cultural differences and would, at the same time, accommodate the villagers' identities. However, as we will see, the well-intended integration efforts led to more disintegration as it was envisioned to be achieved through patronizing rather than emancipating means.

The village's elite concluded that Catholicism would be the solution to arrive at integration, identifying distinctions made between Gypsy and Hungarian citizens as the main obstacle against the village's integrity. Caritas Hungarica works mainly with the local Roma community. With the mayor's support, they launched a corn seed campaign, the main goal of which was (beyond providing a basic food supply) to

“motivate the local Roma people to be self-supporting and to promote the joy of manual work.”

The campaign reached 220 people and the relative success of the program is reflected in the vegetable gardens of the Roma families in the village.

The attitude the village elite have towards, and the way they talk about, Gypsies is characterized by an intensely paternalistic vocabulary, which sees the solution to local “problems” as “taming” the “constantly proliferating”, “savage” Roma population. We can argue, that within this framework, the corn seed distribution (in support of poor Roma families) and the Magyar Gárda's march may both fall within the same agenda. While the former one teaches its subjects the way towards a ‘civilized life,’ the latter disciplines the disobedient ‘pupils’, as they deserve a slap from time to time when they trespass the ‘most elementary norms’ with their barbarianism.

“I cannot stop a lot of Gypsies with kind words”,

says one Caritas member.

"And if I cannot stop them, they will confront a stronger authority, just because they did not listen to me."

(In this case, the term "stronger authority" means Jobbik.)

Regardless of its original intentions, Caritas now undertakes this noble task of 'domestication', basing its activities on serious ideological and in strong institutional foundations. It believes it can provide more than a 'simple' civilian organization, both in terms of material and mental resources.

"I have seen several cultures from the inside," says Katika S. "because my mother comes from a Roman Catholic family and my father was a Socialist. Both are cultures, as both of them have given me values and a firm foundation. I have seen all kinds of things I wouldn't call 'culture', whatever came after the regime change was nothing. Culture gives you a future that you can plan and goals and I haven't seen any of those since the regime change. I have chosen my mother's path, because I think that Catholicism is a more solid religion. I believe that Socialism is a religion, too, but lacks the power of the centuries."

For Caritas, Roma Mission of the Church goes hand in hand with their charity work. One of the keys to fulfilling their mission is to integrate local Roma people into the Catholic Church. Every month, Father Tihamér officiates a mass specifically for Roma people.

Clearly a Catholic Mass is by definition hierarchical; everyone, great and small, Hungarian and Roma, all become the tame lambs of God within this structure. During our visit to the Roma mass, we could see the children had adapted their own approach, based on past social experiences, to the disciplining attitude here; they howl each other down while giggling. Meanwhile, the priest takes this opportunity to reach the flock:

"It is easy to say," says the priest during his sermon, "that I am a Gypsy, I am being discriminated, and wait for the miracles. No. You have got to do something for the miracle to happen!"

A Gypsy band plays religious music with lyrics in the local Romani language. After the mass, the congregation has a lunch and sits around talking and singing together.

“The most miserable people come here, the ones that are not wanted anywhere else,”

says Caritas leader, Ildi. Indeed, the participants in the Saturday mass are mostly Roma children in poor clothing, from the infamous Dankó Street neighborhood, who are open to any space that welcomes them in the spirit of inclusiveness.

“Unfortunately the village’s Hungarian community does not really accept these children. We are far from being able to have such an event on a Sunday mass,”

explains Ildi regarding the remoteness of such a ‘miracle.’

“For the people of K., even I am a rebel simply because I have five children. K. is typically an only-child village, but now we have to face the consequences – there are no young people, and the power of the family does not hold us together, so, old people have remained here, unsheltered.”

Caritas also seeks to reunite K. as a community again, yet this seems to be a distant desire. The exclusive mechanisms which drive the distinction between Roma and Hungarian are too powerful to put the established Hungarian churchgoers and the Roma children on common ground.

“Tell me,” Kati asks me “where do Gypsies and Hungarians meet? I am angry with the Faith Church [neo-Protestant] because they don’t go to the Hungarians to show them that there are good Gypsies. They have no contact with them, although they could – through religion. Hungarians have built the school, with their blood, and then had to run away from it. The Faith people take the good Gypsies away, so, the worst ones stay here in the church and the Hungarians meet only them.”

Tell me, where would they meet? Everything is so chaotic; there are so many kinds of religions. I have seen the child who has been baptized as a kid, I have seen their wedding, I have seen their daughter's wedding; we have seen each other. Yet we don't know the Faith Church people, they are apart and this is a problem; we have no common ground. In this community, you can at least meet the Dankó people. And, if it happens, they will know it was not aliens that invaded their garden and ate the fruit from the trees but it was Danika Lakatos, with whom they are in touch."

In this statement, it can be yet again seen that the main characters in this Catholic community, just as in the entire village, are the elderly Hungarians and Gypsy children.

The Hungarian elderly and the Gypsy child also represent societal positions, the absolute polar opposite of each other, and therefore their encounter creates the greatest tension. The social processes threatening the village's integrity culminate in this relationship. Our interviews with the Hungarian elderly indicate that, as a whole, they are lonely – abandoned by their children who have left in search of work and a future elsewhere. The community of their past is constantly disappearing, while they grow weaker and more vulnerable. Whereas the looting Gypsy children are protected by "their own kind" whatever they do, the Hungarian elderly have no one to turn to, as their most important connections are no longer available. Of course, nothing can replace missing family ties, but the need for a protectorate is still a central theme whether they seek it in the caring Catholic community or the Magyar Gárda.

"Look, my children have left and, if all goes well, they come home to visit once in a month," Katika summarizes. "Now it is the two of us, me with my husband, but as we know from statistics, Hungarian men don't live very long, so, I might remain here, old and alone. Who will shelter me? The Gypsies have their own people, but what can I do if they attack my garden? Whom can I turn to? They may beat me to death. But

the Catholic Church, as a community, is different. No matter if you are toothless old man or a dirty little Gypsy, we are brothers and we take care of each other.”

Local Gypsies, however, seem to be only partially susceptible to Caritas’ (slightly) hierarchical integrative intentions, even though, as the leader of the Caritas explains, religion might be a basis of common understanding. A significant number of the Roma people in K. prefer another stream of Christianity, the so-called ‘neo-Protestant’ churches.

The Faith Church and the Christian Life Centre are both popular organizations, each with around 120 members, 90% of which are Gypsy – a serious ratio in terms of the Roma community (approx. 900 people). It seems that many of the local Roma people do indeed seek spiritual answers to their problems, however, are looking for them in completely different places than the Hungarian population does.

Incidentally, the particular questions and problems that the local Roma community seeks answers to are, naturally, also quite different from the dilemmas that the Hungarians seek to solve at the Catholic Church. And, indeed, according to our interviews and interaction with the villagers, the theme of ‘integrity’ refers to something different for Roma people in K.; it is far from being the main issue on their mind, as they are occupied by many other dilemmas.

Both spatially and socially, local Gypsies have always lived on the periphery of the village. Belonging to the village has, therefore, always been a problematic issue, due to their minority position. If they move to the centre of the village, their Hungarian neighbors react with ambivalent emotions.

“If a Gypsy family with seven children moves next door to you, you won’t even be able to go shopping, they will be observing you all the time,”

say the men sitting in the bar. With the influx of Roma inhabitants, the Hungarian population faces their fear of ‘losing the village.’ Meanwhile the Roma are threatened by other dangers; living without basics rights and opportunities.

"Where might young Gypsy people go?" asks a woman from Dankó Street. "They have no money to go to E., they loiter around here and they get bored and even start using drugs."

"I would take my kids to the school in E. because they would get better opportunities there, but how could I do it?" pipes in another woman.

Unemployment and poverty are problems the entire village faces, but it affects the Roma population much more drastically as it is even more vulnerable and much more helpless to combat them. The social environment in the village is generally hostile towards them, and after Jobbik's rally and its impacts on the social relations in the village, the looming threat of conflict has turned into a daily reality. Charismatic churches are able to reposition their followers to a certain extent, placing their Roma congregation into a new context, even promising the possibility that they will be able to break out of the overriding depressing social status through a personal change, through their religious rebirth.

"As I see it, there is the Catholic Church," says the head of the Faith Church in K., József, "and there is the Caritas Association, supported even from E. They take advantage of the social weakness of the majority of the Roma population and try to attract people this way; they supply them with corn seed and organize all kinds of gatherings, which is nice. However, instead, we aim to connect with people's personalities and teach them about the real sources of life. If you realize what your main problem is and you approach it differently, you can grow out of those dead parts of your life that have caused poverty and social disadvantages; you can become stronger, more powerful. We have come here from a similar background as this community; from poverty, unemployment, broken families, and ruined lives. If you receive this and that, you won't be able to change your life. You can only do it yourself, otherwise you will always

be dependent on someone else in order to fulfill your basic needs, unless you realize for yourself what the biggest problems in your life are.”

Although the intention of this study is not to compare the Catholic conversion policy and mission with that of the neo-Protestant churches, it is important to stress a few differences that are central to the subject at hand.

Socially speaking, these neo-Protestant churches (like the Faith Church) promote a sense of autonomy to its members, advocating self-empowerment as the path out of their depressing social circumstances and something beyond the hierarchic Roma-Hungarian distinctions that they have been subjected to for centuries. Also, having attended both the Catholic Mass and the service at the Faith Church, we could observe that integration of Roma culture is handled differently at both. At the Catholic service, Roma culture is included quite naturally, almost without any transformation: the music band from Szatmárnémedi, with their traditional instruments, sing religious songs in the Romani language and the children who stay for lunch after the mass play Vlach folk songs on the guitar. The leaders have institutionally provided a space for ‘Roma culture.’ The actual mass takes place in the church and the church garden, a place that has only recently been opened up as a spiritual space for Roma people – in contrast to centuries-old practice. Those who may have had access, they were still on the margins of religious life there. In this sense, this space needs to address the same issues as the village itself, and the organizers similarly challenged: how to accommodate the ‘new’ (Roma) followers as well as the slowly (but surely) decreasing number of aging ones (Hungarians). The temporary solution has been to organizing separate events and religious ceremonies, as the Hungarians do not appear to be open to the presence of ‘Roma culture’ at Sunday Mass.

As it is a younger church with less emphasize on established historical legitimacy, the Faith Church services take place in the conference hall of a hotel in K.: a modern, neutral space, free of markings that intimate the dominance of one particular ethnic group or century-old social meanings and practices. The space is not provided by any institutional power; rent

is collected from the donations of the followers. In the neo-Protestant churches, relatively new churches where, by default, everyone is essentially 'new', its Roma members are far less likely to stick out. Joining is also far less political, as it does not imply a loss on either side, in regards to the rivalry between the traditional churches, nor does it threaten to complicate existing social relations with neighbors from any of the traditional churches. In this sense, the neo-Protestant churches do indeed provide new alternatives to and repositioning for Roma people.

It is important to note that Roma cultural inclusion is an element of both a Catholic Mass and the Faith Church service. However, the two Churches represent two different ways of approaching the 'Roma issue' – one with little or no empathy to the problems that Roma face on a daily basis (Catholic), and the other with real answers to them (neo-Protestant). As witnessed above, the priest of the Catholic Church points back to the difficulties Roma face as excuses that are used if someone is too lazy to solve their problems. In other words, he blames the Roma for their own hardships and accuses them of using their poverty and destitute as a pretext for non-action. At the Faith Church service, the Roma theme comes up less explicitly throughout the service; the Roma preacher and the followers jointly ask the Lord to protect them from unemployment, to stop the spreading of Neo-Nazi ideologies, and to "*heal the wounds of this ill society*". The leadership at the Faith Church, thus, somehow reacts to the social problems affecting its folk and their environment. This is, in fact, where József S., member of the Caritas Association in K., went to get protection from "his folks" when Jobbik, with its heavy-handed crew, was about to pay a visit to his house.

Hog-tied village or, how did the Magyar Gárda get there?

The events of Autumn 2012, when Jobbik and the Magyar Gárda arrived in the village are intimately connected to the scenario that K. has found itself in, as described in the previous sections. K. has become a village where local problems are simply unsolvable; where increasing poverty, unemployment, the lack of established common norms and conflict management tools,

as well as the exclusiveness of the distinctions between the Roma and Hungarian communities, have all lead to a point where the village could be taken over, even if only for one afternoon, by an organization that understands the situation exclusively on a racist basis.

In the autumn of 2012, Jobbik and the (at that point) banned Magyar Gárda that is associated with it, held a legally-permitted gathering on the main square of the village. They planned to march to the house of József S. on the Dankó Street within the Gypsy part of village to hand over a petition. The petition called József S., as the local Roma leader, to control the local crimes committed by Gypsies.

“I was warned on the phone,” recounts József S., *“that the Magyar Gárda would come on Saturday, and that they would hand over a petition to discipline the Roma people so that they would not steal and rob and that children would not loiter in the streets. But honestly, who is able to do that? Shall I hold each and every Roma child by the hand?”*

Villagers and the organizers have several versions of the antecedents that took place that day, however, there seems to be a consensus over the fact that a certain field guard from K. had requested Jobbik come to the village, as he had had several conflicts with local Roma people. The narratives of the events from that day, however, vary in the Roma and the Hungarian versions.

My ‘Hungarian’ informants see the Jobbik march as a result, an end-point of an on-going process.

In the past few years, the number of incidents has increased: garden thefts, robberies,” explained the mayor. *“The perpetrators, juvenile delinquents, committed them with a grin on their face because they felt they could do whatever they wanted, nothing ever happened to them, and this infuriated the villagers. Not to mention the outdoor thefts; they took everything that was not paved into the concrete. Last time, there was this elderly lady that they visited regularly and they*

almost beat her to death. The police were helpless, the lady was helpless, and everything happened out of helplessness. Many people in the settlement thought that only Jobbik could provide support, so they asked them to help."

Another local woman had this to say:

"there was a period when the elderly were constantly afraid, Gypsy kids were going in and out, and all kinds of people who had moved here from other villages. And when they beat up the old lady, many people had just had enough."

According to the Hungarians in K., the situation in the village had got to a state that they could not solve things on a local level, as there was no institutional power or a local conflict management tool that could intercede in this impossible situation. Yet, the "impossible situation" they describe is connected to all the factors described above, that for years, and even decades, the integrity of the village, the village's faith-base, and somehow its identity as a united community has seriously weakened. Whether such united community ever existed is rather questionable but villagers do believe so. Nevertheless, both the Roma and Hungarians interviewed indicated traces of faith in their testimonies. Many emphasized that the perpetrators were not local Gypsies; in other words, the threat of danger comes from outside. Despite all this, the Jobbik rally directly threatened the local Roma community, including the minority leader who had been working as an elected official in the village and was widely respected by the Hungarian community.

As mentioned above, the interviews with Hungarians exhibit notable contradictions. On one hand, they say

"there is no problem with the majority of the Roma people in K."

and, on the other, they collectively blame the Roma population for individual crimes committed by Roma people. The Roma children, who trespass and wreck havoc in neighboring gardens become "them" – the "Gypsies" who need to be disciplined one way or another. Just to underline

the strength of the above-mentioned contradiction: with one exception only, not one person I met entirely condemned the Jobbik rally. However, on the other hand, I didn't meet anyone fully supporting it either.

The differentiation between Gypsy and Hungarian can also be identified in how that day's events are described, judged, and justified. Roma informants talk less about the reasons; they are more concerned about the actual events themselves and the shocking experience of being accused of a collective crime. When asked about the reasons it happened, local Roma people most often referred to K. recent events, saying that recent crimes had provoked the Hungarian population but the elderly woman's attackers were not locals, they don't even know them, thus, the collective criminalization does not hold water.

“There were these little Gypsy kids here, immigrants, not locals; we don't even know them. They caused the trouble, they almost killed that lady, this is why we all were confronted.”

one local woman declared. Others went deeper into the possible 'reasons,' forming complex explanations for the overall situation.

“There are quite a few Roma people – not locals – who have given Jobbik reason to come, so a Roma person who is a member of the Faith Church tells me. They have this mentality, they are just susceptible to committing crime. They take anything that can be easily acquired and smaller robberies happened, etc. But it all stems from the unemployment. If an entrepreneur comes here and offers jobs, about 80-90% of the Roma people would accept it. When we had the cooperatives, Roma and Hungarian people worked together; there was nothing like this.”

The “*times when the cooperative still functioned*” is an important reference, even for those who did not live in that 'golden era'. Hungarian and Roma alike name unemployment as the main reason for the conflicts. However, while for Hungarians this reason comes up in the course of a longer discussion (or argumentation) and only in the context of an ethnic

interpretation of the events. Roma testimonies refer to unemployment and widespread poverty as the factors behind the threatening and vexing crimes taking place much more frequently. In their narratives, my Roma informants somehow seemed fairly intent to soften the shock of the Jobbik 'invitation' to the village as well as the quite controversial attitude of the village's Hungarian community. Many of them blamed the whole thing on the one field guard who allegedly called in the Magyar Gárda:

"it is one person who started the whole thing; I don't want to mention names."

There were others, however, who saw the event as proof of Hungarians' innate racism.

In general, it can be stated that the post-Jobbik rally evaluations show a strengthened discriminative and excluding differentiation between Gypsies and Hungarians – highlighted by two strikingly different narratives – and there are, in fact, subtle markers visible in each that are entirely missing from the other. In the 'Hungarian narrative,' for instance, the fears of Roma from the racist rally are hardly present. Meanwhile, the 'Gypsy narrative' does not mention any of the grievances the mayor brought up. It is worth considering the role of the mayor, who did not support the presence of Jobbik, but nevertheless showed greater sensitivity towards the grievances of the Hungarian villagers and was much less concerned about the attack on Roma villagers. All in all, it seems that an 'invitation' to the village to the extreme right brought to the surface existing divisions between Roma and Hungarian, and even reshaped them a bit.

The Jobbik March – the event

K. mayor László S. and municipal representative József S. are colleagues. They are representatives elected by the citizens, both Roma and Hungarians, to lead the village. On the Friday evening, when József S. got the phone call, somebody called the mayor, too.

“It happened too suddenly,” László S. says, “we didn’t have time to think. The police called to tell me that Jobbik was having a gathering.”

Both József S. and László S. started immediate action. The mayor got in touch with the notary and the police, while the frightened József S. called Lajos Sz., vice president of the Roma minority self-government for H. county. The two of them, however, did not speak to each other once that day.

“We got scared,” explains József S., “the Magyar Gárda people were about to come over, there were a lot of children here. What could happen? I told Lajos Sz. that Jobbik people were about to march to our house. Then, we asked for permission by the police to organize our own march, which was approved, but later on we got a phone call from the police – they withdrew the approval. We had to stay here in Dankó Street, closed up all the time.”

At that point, László S. and József S. took different paths, only meeting again after the events had calmed down.

“After such a march, the settlement will never be the same again. People remain hurt on both sides, the mayor tells me,”

recalls József S. All the same, he also thinks that after the march, despite of their shared workplace and party affiliation, they found themselves on different sides and both of them feel hurt, at least József S. does.

“He [the mayor] heard and did things differently,” József S. says. “They shouldn’t have got permission. If the mayor doesn’t allow them to march, there would have been no problems. That should have been his task and the notary’s task, to disallow the march. He can’t say he didn’t know, he should have done so, he should have been clear about his duties, he has been a mayor for six years after all!”

The role and position of the mayor are less clear to us. However, it is certain that he did not stand firmly against the Jobbik event even though he alleges he wasn't even sure what he could do about it.

"It all happened too quickly, so, we forgot to consider if we would even have the possibility to prevent it. We wanted the police protection to be appropriate, so that the Roma residents and the people in the march could not access each other."

As the researcher I, as well as the residents, have some doubts about László S.'s account of the events. Many Roma people were sure he allowed the event to appease the Hungarian population and their public morale.

"The mayor is not a racist, but he is under a lot of pressure, he does not want to lose the support of those Hungarians, he wants to satisfy them. But he should also be aware that he has been elected by Roma people, too!"

one Roma man explains. The mayor, however, had (consciously or not) given way to the angst stirring in some of the residents that then escalated to anger and racism, letting it all culminate in an extreme right, anti-Roma march.

A majority of my informants thought the march had been an overreaction and were not very happy about the presence of the openly racist, rancorous militiamen (The Magyar Gárda) most of whom were not from K. Their judgment, however, was more about the numbers of the participants; as they thought the anger was still, to some extent, understandable. Most of them questioned the appropriateness of pouring all this anger out on the entire Roma population, and still, they interpreted the problems predominantly within an ethnic framework. This doesn't mean there weren't those who supported the mission and presence of Jobbik or believed in the collective guilt of the Roma people. According to the mayor, the villagers had quite diverse attitudes in this respect.

“There were mixed reactions from the Hungarians, I was surprised that certain people supported Jobbik, but there were others of whom I knew. Some thought this was too much, while for others it was too mild: They wanted to burn down the entire Gypsy settlement. It depends on their temperament,”

László S. said. As it can be seen, the mayor indeed thinks in ‘quantitative’ terms when it comes to differing opinions. For him, the voices that called for complete destruction of the Roma community were only insignificant emotional outbursts and he does not attach great significance to them.

One of the leaders of Caritas, Ildi, thought the march was “*terrible and impermissible.*” She claims if she had been in K. at the time of the march, she would have stood by her fellow Roma and protested alongside them. There was, however, no non-Roma person to stand by the Roma; they were left on their own. József S. did not turn to the local community for shelter, either, but reached out to his minority contacts outside the community. This is how Lajos Sz., vice-president of the H. County Roma minority self-government, a member of the Faith Church, and activist of the *We Belong Here* movement came into the picture. Lajos Sz. is not a local resident and he barely has any affiliations with the place. He does know the village and the village affairs to some extent; nevertheless, his perspective is that of the county- and/or nation-wide Roma movement. He is involved in several, overlapping social scenes that explicitly or implicitly represent and advocate for Roma citizens in Hungary.

As mentioned above, Lajos Sz. is vice-president of the H. County Roma self-government as well as an ex-member of the Roma political party Lungo Drom, which has remained in contact with József S. this whole time. Lajos Sz. is in his fifties. Nevertheless, he feels like part of the Roma movement’s ‘new generation’. He distinguishes between the nationally active Roma politicians of the ‘90s and the Roma activists of the early 2010s. According to Lajos Sz., the main difference is their attitudes towards politics.

"The generational difference is that older leaders are still stuck playing party politics, but the new generation, and specifically their leader, Jenő Setét, sees the situation of the Roma differently. The old ones still believe that if they support MSZP and MSZP gets into office, they will protect the interests of Roma people. Jenő Setét is part of the new generation; he has experience with the older one but thinks completely differently. He does not think we should get close with the MSZP or Fidesz, he believes there should be a movement to mobilize and help Roma people and advocate their interests," states Lajos Sz.

Lajos Sz. has also been involved in the *We Belong Here* movement that was formed for the census⁴ taken in 2011.

"We Belong Here is different from other movements," Lajos Sz. says, *"because it does not get involved in politics, does not belong to a party, and is not motivated by politics, but wants to help without any ulterior motives. If we see a conflict forming, we use our networks and mobilize our contacts depending who lives nearby."*

The status and the definition of *We Belong Here* is rather unclear. It is a network organized on Facebook by active residents in certain settlements. In K., people haven't heard about the movement but they like its goals: primarily that Roma people should declare themselves as Roma in the census. Several people complained that Roma people hadn't been asked this question in the census at all and they suspected it was politically motivated (if they seem fewer than in reality, their representation and opportunities as a significant minority population would also diminish).

4 The aim of the movement was to convince Roma to self-declare themselves Roma in the census. Usually, due to negative experiences of discrimination deterred the majority of Roma to identify themselves as Roma. Thus, the number of Roma population in the census is much lower than the actual number. In fact, from the year 2001 (the previous census) to 2011, the number of self-declared Roma has increased by 150%. The increase is due to a complex set of phenomena.

Lajos Sz. points out what the movement (a self-financed organization) has to offer played an important role in the protest of the K. Roma against Jobbik. The basic lack of resources determines when and where they can be represented and, to some extent, how visible they are as well. As Jenő Setét expressed it, the lack of money and no ability to cover travel expenses drives the activists to get as organized as possible on the local levels first, which anyway corresponds to the principals of *We Belong Here*.

According to my research, the Faith Church is the third, but most important – as well as most complicated – social scene that Lajos Sz. is active in. Neo-Protestant churches are not political organizations. Their gatherings do not explicitly target Roma people. Their initial charm must have been that they offered a new meeting venue for Roma and Hungarians. Today, however, most village congregations seem to have a Roma majority. Yet these are not ‘gypsified’ social spaces; the Gypsy majority here seems evident but is not connected with concepts of a loss or devaluation. At the same time, the social status of Roma is not stigmatized and it is possible to step out from these small congregations to the universal, ethnically-unmarked Christian space through belief (i.e. A Roma person from K. may go to the Sunday services at a church in E. or Budapest, where Roma and Hungarian people celebrate together in the fraternity of faith). The congregations of neo-Protestant churches in K., thus, can become Roma spaces because Roma see this affiliation as less risky than other social moves, which may lead to stigmatization. In this sense, these congregations seem to be social scenes outside the normal sphere, and this is exactly why they can be that much more powerful.

The role of these neo-Protestant churches has come up in quite a few interviews, even though they don’t have a direct connection with Roma movements. Informants have explained how much their faith and their congregation gives them a sense of self-empowerment, a sense of belonging, and a space where they do not have to hide or deny being Roma. As Lajos Sz. has said, those who convert start to “*take care of their own lives.*” This is the intention of Roma movements, too. Of course, congregations, as Religious entities, are not supposed to openly discuss politics – especially

not in this social environment, where politics means party politics and not an active engagement in public affairs. What is interesting is that the Faith Church is somewhat different, as the leadership has openly taken a stand on certain issues. For example, last autumn several Roma people from K., as members of the Faith Church, went to the Parliament to protest against a statement made by Hungarian Member of Parliament Gyöngyösi.⁵

Congregations seem to have greater capacity to mobilize people.

"If the congregation calls, I would go to other villages, too, to defend Roma people,"

says one woman. The congregation is, thus, a resource that is otherwise not available. József B., for instance, was advised by the non-Roma leaders of the congregation to prepare banners for the Sunday service with the subtitle

"I am Roma, I am not a criminal."

József B., who grew up in the Roma settlement in the village, would have probably never thought about using this mode of expression.

Lajos Sz.'s last minute idea to organize a public church service at the time of the Jobbik March is a perfect example of the duality of being a universal church member and being Roma. Lajos Sz. said,

"Roma people have always drawn their strength from belief. If there is nothing left but God, than that's where our power comes from. On such occasions, many others, those who are not members of the congregation, join us because they, too, have belief."

Lajos Sz., thus, sees belief in God as an integrative force, which can gather Roma people who have been fragmented by societal positions, kinship networks, and the scrutiny of the majority, into one protective community. His expectations were more or less met, as Roma people

5 Gyöngyösi is an MP of the far-right Jobbik and after his openly anti-Semitic statement in the Parliament, an anti-racist demonstration was organized in Budapest in December 2012.

from both neo-Protestant congregations, as well as the Catholic Church, took part in the service. Moreover, people from other villages participated including Christians, ministers, priests, as well as those from other faiths and atheists. The event included a sermon but also speeches and music.

József S. and Lajos Sz. both stress another important function of the service. It also served as a distraction for the Roma residents, so that they could not hear the shouting of the Magyar Gárda during that time, due to the loud music, thus reducing the chances that a fight would break out. Several active participants emphasized that, through faith, these Roma people received greater and stronger protection.

“This also meant that, of course, these people wouldn’t attack a religious service, all Christianity would have been outraged, including the Pope and everybody else. They wouldn’t have dared to.”

“If they ruin a service, all Christianity would have protested, not only Roma Christians.”

The outdoor service could, thus, accommodate many important needs: it gathered the local Roma community together, it prevented violence, and it placed the threatened Roma into a universal community setting and protected them. All these three essential needs were met.

Gypsies from K. live in three different parts of the village: the aforementioned Dankó Street, the most infamous neighborhood in the village, Petőfi Street, and Pataki Street. There are also a few families living in the inner parts of the village, amongst the non-Roma. Roma people living in the Gypsy settlements go out of their way to differentiate themselves from the others. In particular, the other two groups wish to distinguish themselves from those living on Dankó Street. Making a differentiation based on kinship or neighborhood is a common way some try to free themselves from disadvantageous stereotypes associated with Gypsies. This is how this strategy in practice can be summarized:

“We are not those dirty, backward, thieving Gypsies that people talk about, that is them, not us.”

This strategy, the fragmentation of the Roma, can be advantageous in everyday life, but when it comes to common interests, it can become the greatest obstacle. This happened on the day of the Jobbik rally, too.

"The Magyar Gárda did not come here, they came to Dankó Street." says a woman from Pataki Street, "because those small cannibal kids beat up a Hungarian woman. We stayed in E. with my mother, we didn't even come home."

Interestingly, this woman downplayed the possible danger to herself, but at the same time – also sensing the insufficiency of this move, namely that the Magyar Gárda doesn't care at all if she is "that kind of a Gypsy" like those on Dankó Street – she decided to not even take chances by not being at home.

Kinship ties, the shared religious faith, and the commitment of being Roma, however, seemed to be enough for the other groups to go to Dankó Street on that particular day.

"Of course, I went there," says a man from Pataki Street, "we don't give in! We would have been up for a fight, too, but I didn't want a fight. Some of us would just look for trouble and I don't like that. We were there and showed ourselves."

As this man emphasized, everybody thought it was feasible that violence would breakout. Both the mayor and the organizers of the service were worried about that possibility, having witnessed the rising temper of some young Gypsies. The Roma organizers, as mentioned above, tried their best to pacify the violent reactions of the angry, frightened crowd by providing a reassuring, calming religious service and then some loud, uplifting songs of praise. However, the outbreak of violence was not only up to them; Jobbik and the Magyar Gárda ascending down Dankó Street were not opposed to a fight either.

In the end, both Mayor S. and Lajos Sz. turned to the police for help. Eventually they blocked off the entire length of Dankó Street and, during the march, it was impossible to get in or out of the Gypsy settlement.

“It was a very claustrophobic feeling, like animals closed up in a reserve,”

expressed a young man. Nevertheless, people were generally satisfied with the police department’s role.

“I felt that if the police hadn’t been here, someone could have died. The hatred and the anger was so palpable.”

Generally, the presence of the police provided everybody a sense of safety, however, the police had played a very different role in the story, too. When Lajos Sz. discovered Jobbik’s intentions, he planned to organize a counter-march along the main road of the village; however, the police would not permit it.

“In other places, Gypsies blocked their way,” says a local man, an active member of the Faith Church, *“it is a shame they let them come in here [K.]. They needed permission to come, and the mayor allowed them! Nobody asked us, and the other shameful thing is that they didn’t let us have our march; we were blocked and not allowed to come out. It was humiliating.”*

Throughout my time in the village, I heard a lot of people complaining about the humiliating feeling of being barricaded into the neighborhood during that day. Local leaders and the police alike agreed the best thing to do was to separate the “two sides” from each other, which is understandable. However, local residents felt it was unfair that Jobbik was entitled to invade their village spaces, while they – the residents of K. – were not even allowed to move freely. Many approved of the police presence around the Roma neighborhood, but they also resented that they were held within it, temporarily – but greatly symbolically – ghettoizing them.

“There was one thing we found offensive,” says József S., *“that they insulted us, they called us stinky, dirty Gypsies. They were threatening to hang us and that field guard was yelling we should get away from here because they will burn our houses*

down, and so on. It was insulting, and we couldn't protect ourselves. We couldn't go there and explain that we are not the stinky Gypsies, and the murderers, and we are not cannibals, because they were saying things like we had already eaten two Hungarian children and stuff. But we were closed up here and couldn't tell our truth!"

In this way, the police officers and the leaders of the village prevented the Roma residents from acting as their own advocates, as residents representing their own interests in the village. Most of my non-Roma informants, including the mayor, expected the Roma to be completely passive because, as they saw it, being active would only provoke more violence. While the outdoor religious service played an important role that day, additionally serving to say

"that the Gypsies answer the violence peacefully, with a service,"

many Hungarians did not particularly appreciate the gesture.

"They should rather learn the Ten Commandments,"

was a common reply.

In fact, this "witty response" was Jobbik's exact message to Lajos Sz. and the Roma of K. The mayor says he didn't like the idea either, to

"respond with a mass event to a mass event."

The mainstream media reacted similarly and most of the reports, in fact, did not even include the Roma response. In the end, the Roma community did not get the appreciation for their gesture that they had somehow expected; the much-coveted integrative force of Christianity remained unrealized.

Repercussions of the march

The Jobbik rally lasted for a couple of hours. After speeches on K.'s main square, the protesters started walking towards Dankó Street. However, the police stopped them and from that point on, Dankó Street was a ghetto

for a day. Meanwhile, outside the parameters became a dangerous place for Gypsies. There were about 100 meters between the Gypsy settlement and the bridge leading to it (where Jobbik was gathering) marking a 'no man's land' between the Roma and the Hungarians. Only the police could enter the area in between. That day, Gypsies and Hungarians existed in two separate spaces, like two disconnected entities, attempting to steer clear of each other. The great symbolism of this spatial situation and the experiences had because of it has left its mark on the life of the village. As Mayor S. put it,

“the village will never be the same again.”

“Such a march is soberly enlightening, it shows us where we stand,” says József B., “these are people we meet every day, maybe even talk to or watch football with. And then it turns out they stand with the majority and shout together with the others: Gypsies out! This cannot be seen otherwise, we walk in the street, we greet each other, we pass each other by, but now it has been shown what many people think. And this makes one sad.”

“It has disappointed a lot of Gypsies,” says József S., “there was a lady, who works in the kindergarten, and she shouldn't have been there. Afterwards, many people didn't want to let their child go to the kindergarten. I told the mayor that those who work with mostly Roma children should not have been there. If you are a racist, how can you work with Roma children? The issue was brought up at the plenary meeting. I said, this was wrong. The mayor and the leader of the kindergarten talked to them, but we haven't talked to her ever since, she hates all Roma.”

“I think,” says Mayor S., “that the normal, moderate people thought it was alright, they came and left. But if the problems remain and the two cultures don't come closer to each other, there

will always be conflicts. But the Roma know who participated and they won't forget it. The kindergarten instructor was among them, so we had a talk with her, we had to measure what was right – if someone fulfils a public duty, if it would be possible for them to cooperate with Roma children and the parents further on [in the future]. The lady even started crying. She had had no clue; she had gone there out of curiosity."

I was never able to interview the kindergarten instructor, so, we will never know what her actual reactions were. However, a few things are certain: on one hand, even if it happened a little late and only marginally, the 'Roma voice', the 'Roma perspective', was present at the municipality's plenary meeting and the mayor listened to József S. and took the necessary steps. At the same time, he took steps following the same strategy he had been employing all the time throughout events – to keep the two sides away from each other. While he urges a dialogue, at the same time, he enforces his power and does not even allow József S. talk to the kindergarten instructor. The remains of the day's events display what a large rupture in the community the march was. Although the temporary barriers may have come down after the march, there remains very little trespassing between the Roma and the Hungarian experiences and interpretations of what happened.

The mayor and a leader from Caritas published a statement saying that, since the presence of the Jobbik, public safety has increased. Although the mayor added that the increased police presence might have contributed to that. So, all in all, even the village elite believe that threatening can be efficient, after all. At the same time, an even stronger silent statement has been made; such an event is not such a big deal and it shouldn't be blown out of proportion.

Most the Roma people I interviewed shared with me a sense of estrangement and spoke of palpable tensions between Roma and Hungarians that lasted for a couple of days after the day's events. This was something they simply hadn't ever sensed before. On the other hand, rather than the overdramatic reaction I think the mayor and others may have been

expecting from the local Roma community, I really felt that most my Roma informants intentionally understated the whole issue, trying to pardon the 'Hungarian' residents and village leadership and blame the whole thing on the one field guard. Ironically, the only joint Roma-Hungarian agenda to truly come out of this whole mutual experience is that now both sides are making every effort to forget about it all and pretend that nothing really happened. Yet, as clearly documented in this piece, for better or for worse, even this slightly backward, mostly well-meaning, mutually (but separately) determined goal cannot, and will not, be achieved.