

## “HE’S GOT A BIT OF A JOBBIK GENE”:<sup>6</sup>

### CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES AND THE CHALLENGES OF RECONCILIATION IN A HUNGARIAN TOWN

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In the autumn of 2012, the extreme right-wing political party Jobbik held a rally in the town of Gy. dedicated to the issue of public safety. When an elderly non-Roma man was killed – presumably by Roma youngsters – in D., a local settlement, the local deputy of Jobbik announced their intention to organize a torchlight procession there. In the end, the procession was cancelled and a demonstration was held in the city center instead. Still, the negotiations behind the events highlighted the complicated relationship between the Roma residents of D. and the local representatives of Jobbik. In this piece, we would like to, first of all, introduce the town of Gy. and the Roma settlements located there. Secondly, we would like to provide an overview of the most extreme predicaments that these communities presently endure and the ways in which these are connected to both local conflicts with the extreme right as well as to issues of civil and political participation. The protagonist in our study is a local Roma leader who served as our main informant during our visits to Gy. We believe her case to be an insightful cautionary tale: a vignette on the prospects and pitfalls of Roma mobilization at a grassroots level.

6 To quote the original statement made in Hungarian by one of our informants: “Benne van az a kis Jobbikos vér”.

## The Roma of Gy.: settlements and communities

Approximately 90% of Gy.'s Roma population is Romani-speaking Vlach Gypsy. As is also the stereotype, Vlach Gypsies form a rather 'traditional' community, maintaining a particular set of ethnic customs despite the pressure to abandon them in favor of assimilation to the majority culture. For the Roma, these features of their community life are often also seen as their means of resistance 'from below', specifically in regards to state policies and bureaucratic institutions.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as we discovered during our research, some of the perspectives coveted by local residents within these Roma settlements can even be quite hard for the Roma activists themselves, individuals otherwise deeply engaged in strengthening their own ethnic community's mobilization, to reconcile with.

There are two zones in Gy. that are largely inhabited by Roma, one is the aforementioned D. settlement with 7-800 inhabitants, the other is the neighborhood known as the Th., populated by 200-300 people. The majority population in both settlements is Vlach Gypsy. Romungros form about 10% of the town's overall Roma population and are scattered throughout. The boundary between Vlach Gypsies and Romungro is a serious division between the Roma of Gy., followed by many secondary types of distinction – such as the one between the D. and the Th. settlements, the Masari and Lovari subgroups amongst the Vlach Gypsies, and, above all, the distinction between Gypsies who are 'strangers' and those who are kin. As Krisztina Cz., a local minority representative and member of the 'We Belong Here' Roma network told us in reference to the D. and the Th., the latter is the

*“more ordered one...there is at least some cohesion amongst the people. It's completely different from D., you will see, there are also nice tidy houses, which are bigger.”*

D. is recognized as the place where the poorest Roma in town are concentrated. As Krisztina put it,

7 Stewart, M. (1993). *Daltestvérek, a cigány identitása és közösség továbbélése a szocialista Magyarországon* (Brothers in Song: the persistence of Gypsy identity and community in socialist Hungary, translated by T. Sajo et al. Budapest T-Twins Kiadó.

*"many of them are coming from families where they already represent the third jobless generation. Under such conditions, they just lose all their skills for making their own initiatives".*

Th.'s composition has remained about the same for decades, while D. has seen a constant flux of people in the last ten years. As it's a more affluent area, Th. carries higher prestige and this is reflected in the high self-esteem of its residents. As one man living in the Th. put it,

*"real Gypsies are living here, those ones are just hybrids. We speak the purest Gypsy language, the Masari. Here, everyone are relatives, pure Gypsies, they have pure Gypsy blood."*

Cz. also made a similar comparison between the Th. and the D. settlement:

*"You'll see, the Th. is really different. There are nice, tidy houses and there is still some sense of community. A Jobbik deputy would not even be able to enter there!"*

Though we will return to this topic a little later on, for now it's enough to say that D. bears many of the features typically attributed to 'Gypsy settlements' in the Hungarian media, especially according to right-wing extremist publications. This particular settlement, in fact, is given lavish coverage in the right-wing extremist press, depicted as one of the most dangerous and threatening Roma settlements in present-day Hungary. That said D. is not a fully segregated residential area. The local Roma majority lives together with some non-Roma families, too, mainly elderly people. In anti-Gypsy discourse, this population composition – an aging Hungarian population and a Roma majority – is used as a symbol of the impending threat that the Roma population represents to the 'Hungarian nation'; one day they will wake up a minority in their own land. According to many local sources, one of the reasons Gy. is a hot spot for the Hungarian extreme right is that one of the most important leaders of the Jobbik party was born here. In the 2010 elections, Gy. nominated him for Member of the Parliament, another reason why he might very well consider this town his home roost.

## **The role of a local Roma leader**

Krisztina Cz. is an energetic person, fully dedicated to the work she does for the Gy. Roma communities. We first made her acquaintance downtown, in the Roma Minority Self-government's local office where we arrived right in the middle of business hours. During our interview, a stream of mostly Roma women were coming in and out of the office, asking for her help with daily matters: for instance, how they could move their kid to a better prison; how to get housing subsidies; how to manage their high debts from electricity bills; how to combat rapidly spreading drug-abuse amongst local youngsters. All the while, in the waiting room, her 'clients' sit and chat amongst themselves in the Masari dialect of Romani language, a language that neither we, nor Krisztina (who is Romungro), can understand.

As is apparent from their rapport, Krisztina has cultivated intimate, well-established relationships with many of the members of the local Roma communities. Our tour of the D. settlement included frequent stops so that residents could discuss with her their current problems or simply discuss the general state of affairs in the settlement. Krisztina is a trusted member of the community, something she attributes to her constant, visible presence and regular visits to constituents, which she deems an essential part of her work as a local Roma representative. Interestingly, her cultivation of these familiar relations and general approach stuck us as in complete contrast to that of her superior, Mr. V., president of the local Roma Self-government. During our time in their office, we saw the president on many occasions, coming in and out of the room, giving tasks to Krisztina and making the impression that their relationship was clearly that of a boss and a secretary. When we interviewed him, he was quick to blame the current government of Hungary for failing to fulfill the promises that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán personally made to the people of Gy. on stage during his 2010 election campaign. As we came to discover, V. has been immersed in local politics for quite a while and at this point he has aligned himself with both the left- and right-wing parties, depending on which one was in power. Switching allegiance from the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) to the currently governing Fidesz, his declared disillusionment suggests he might

be interested in switching back again (although MSZP might be a closed door for him following his previous switch). As V. departs from the office, Krisztina tells us he represents the kind of 'dilettantes' that made her give up all consideration of a career in local politics. She decided it is better to minimize the social settings where she is to obliged interact with such actors. While she is involved in politics and decision-making at a countywide level, in this office, she is still in an officially subordinate position to V. During our interview, after giving her several tasks to complete in the office, V. again calls Krisztina over, right in the middle of a response she was giving to us. As if she hadn't heard a word he said, Krisztina continues on with her answer to us, ignoring his call and indicating that he was due a lesson in manners.

After meeting Krisztina, we could easily imagine her work in the community as a prime example of good practices of an exemplary Roma leader. When it comes to the issue of Roma representation, the settlement's residents often spoke about the particular interests at stake, the interrelated agendas in which "*everyone is looking after his/her own*" (that is, following personal interests, the needs of close family members and kin are always considered). On the basis of the accounts we heard, it seems that any initiative can be doomed to failure in this environment if there is any break in the web of trust. Krisztina appears to be an exception in this respect. When we asked residents about her, they all responded similarly: "*She's all right, she always helps*". However, we also heard another common statement, which complicates this confident image: "*Kriszti Cz. is Hungarian!*" This awkward declaration has several explanations. When pressed for a clarification, one Roma woman corrected what she just said, explaining that Krisztina is in fact Romungro, but not a Vlach Gypsy. Apparently, the woman does not make a clear distinction between the categories of 'Hungarian' and 'Romungro', as the heart of the matter is that a 'clean-cut Gypsy' is someone who is Vlach Gypsy. Another woman said that Krisztina has spent so much time amongst the Gypsies and she got to like them so much that she has now been accepted – even adopted – by them. However, she is still, originally, Hungarian. On a related note, one of Krisztina's closest colleagues in the local minority self-government office is a Vlach Gypsy woman, who was

introduced to us (by another Roma) as ‘unique’ because she “*looks like a Hungarian,*” due to her light skin color and general appearance. Due to this, Gypsies who don’t know her personally sometimes ask her for help with the kind of official affairs that Krisztina also offers to them. Still, behind the ‘mask’ this woman is also ‘truly Gypsy’ and also speaks Romani. The special interrelations between the minority self-government office and the settlements and between the local Roma representatives and the people they serve represent a fluid boundary that all the actors are aware of and wary of, even if it can sometimes be transgressed in certain regulated ways.

In terms of her own identity, Krisztina is confident: she identifies herself as a Gypsy. During the last national census, she worked ardently for the ‘We Belong Here’ movement, which focused on getting Hungarian Roma to declare their identity on the national census as well as building pride in their ethnic identity and culture. Any distinction between the Romungro and Vlach Gypsies made in our conversations with her only occurs when we directly ask her to make one and it is only when she is pressed on this topic does she then tell us her own family’s origins. Krisztina has been living in Gy. since she was nine, but she never lived in one of the town’s Gypsy settlements. Despite the internal divisions between the various Roma communities in Gy., Krisztina sees her role as a minority representative and Roma activist who works “*for [all] the Gypsies,*” paying no heed to the complex plane where the aforementioned distinctions are made. In fact, it is those distinctions that make her appear ‘Hungarian’ in the eyes of the local Vlach Roma and the way that some in her community deprive her of a core element of her activist identity. Regardless, local Roma do seem to genuinely recognize her aptitude and interact with her under the framework of a kind of trust that is notably lacking from their relations with other officials. In a wider context, it seems as if it is often the case that someone who aims to represent ‘the Gypsies’ is obliged to be in a position wherein his/her own Roma identity or ‘Gypsiness’ will ultimately be put under scrutiny and often disputed.

## Community Welfare: Poverty, unemployment, and drug-abuse

Just as in many other Roma communities in Hungary, Roma settlements in Gy. also face debilitating levels of unemployment: all our respondents mentioned this – as well as the resulting poverty – as their biggest challenge. Before the changeover from Communism, local Roma had been employed by factories in Gy. – mostly in the parquet industry – or by the slaughterhouse. Most of the Vlach Gypsies in Gy. also pursued private commercial activities outside their official workplace. After the transition, many people became entrepreneurs, however, most of these enterprises went bankrupt due to administrative complications. The most reliable business throughout most of the post-socialist period has been the construction industry. At the beginning of the 2000s, what was called ‘social policy housing subventions’ (*szocpol támogatás*) boosted many local business ventures. The poorer residents in these settlements contracted their housing development needs over to wealthier and more resourceful Roma, who built them cheap houses out of low-quality raw materials and kept the difference in the subsidy for themselves, as profit. “

*I have to add,” points out Cz., “that the nice houses in Th. were also built from of these same funds. This is how they got rich. But, thank God, nobody was ever handed over an uninhabitable house, at least not here in Gy.”*

The unregulated practices that evolved out of the ‘social policy housing business’ (*szocpol biznisz*) resulted in messy property relations, which, in turn, created further complications for many families when making legitimate demands for social benefits later on. Ultimately, this social policy housing system was doomed to fail and, in some cases, things went so sour that legal proceedings were even initiated against some of these entrepreneurial constructors. Nevertheless, the Roma in Th. – considered ‘more cunning’ and resourceful than most – are now living in visibly better conditions than those in D., even if poverty is common in both communities. For instance, some of the newly built ‘fancy’ houses in the Th. settlement have also had their electrical supply shut off for months on end.

Apart from poverty, the other main problem these settlements face can be attributed to high levels of local substance abuse: these include juvenile delinquency, theft, and violence. Locally, the type of substance abuse that has taken hold in these communities is foremost involving ‘designer drugs’, which are traded without any of the legal obstacles that used to characterize the trade of ‘classic’ drugs. These products have become available in shops in town and can be ordered over the internet, leading to a dramatic epidemic mainly amongst the local youth as well as, in some cases, even respected men in the community becoming drug users. In fact, casual substance abuse seems to be widespread. One father of two in Th. said,

*“OK, I won’t deny that I’ve also tried it...when there was some party going on. But what the youngsters are doing is already like a degeneration.”*

We later discovered that his 18-year-old son is one of the youngsters he was referring to:

*“He is not going to school; he is not interested in girls, only drugs. He is skinny, like my finger, and we don’t know what to do with him. I’ve beaten him several times, alas, because he is also stealing from us. I’ve slapped him many times, but with no results. We’ve been to the doctor. Now he is assigned to a hospital in Budapest, but the doctor said it doesn’t make sense if he doesn’t want to stop. He’ll just run away from there.”*

The boy’s mother continued:

*“I don’t know how to prevent this. The police are not doing anything, although everyone knows who sells these things. They just go to the herb shop or wherever and they buy that bio-grass and the police are only glancing over without doing anything. We have been everywhere, but couldn’t do anything about it.”*

An elderly lady then added:



*"Of course these herb shops, where this stuff is sold are all the property of the vice-police commissioner, so, he just takes his cut from this; do you think he'll be the one who prohibits it?"*

From here, the mother continued again:

*"Although they should also know what acts these dazed youngsters have committed. My son also has a case like the thefts that they do while they are on drugs."*

The recent spread of designer drugs amongst the local youth is one of the most pressing issues the community faces and almost all the other problems can be linked to it. During our visits to her office, Krisztina was constantly visited by women asking for help with drug-addicted children. Krisztina, just like most of the residents, feels helpless in this respect:

*"We can visit the families, but the parents are helpless with their own children. These drugs can be ordered even over the Internet. The postman brings it to their door, in a box. It's his obligation, so he must deliver it, whatever is in the package. If not from the Internet, they can just buy it from the herb shops, like that one at the end of this street. The parents might not dare to report the case because they are afraid of the outcome. Their child might encounter collateral damage if the person they report decides to take revenge. My feeling is that the police know precisely the people who are into this activity, but, still, they are not taking action. I can't suspect anyone's ulterior motives, but there must be something going on if it's so obvious whom these people are and yet nothing is happening to them. There must be something. The youngsters are skinny like skeletons; they are destroying themselves and their environment. There are more and more thefts, and more serious crimes might also happen."*

One man explained drug-abuse in the following way:

*“It’s about boredom, that their lives have no meaning and there is no future for them. There are no clubs here in Gy. where they can go to have some fun or, if there are places, Roma are not allowed to enter – it’s just for the elite...maybe not even for those. They are not going to school. They are not working, as there are no jobs. There is no future. This is what makes them doing such things.”*

During this discussion, everyone seemed to agree that drugs, and other substances that are used like drugs, have clearly entered the local economy – providing sources of livelihood at various levels. Krisztina continued:

*“Women sell tranquilizers that they get with doctors’ prescriptions. Pills can be bought for a few hundred forints and then they are just taking it like candy. And this is only on the small scale, not the one where you get rich. There are people who take over the stolen goods [from the users] and sell it on. It’s one thing that they make a young man a drug-consumer, but it’s not enough and then they also take the things he had stolen for the drugs. The Roma destroy themselves – this is the sad thing about it.”*

As these distraught comments suggest, drug-abuse has had devastating consequences on this community and its outcomes also seem to be totally out of the control of the community. It is not the only phenomena in recent years with such repercussions. The spread of drug use amongst the Roma bears many characteristics similar to the features of other problematic phenomena. In spite of their different targets and mechanisms, the briefly aforementioned ‘szocpol business’, or money lending at high interest rates (*kamatos pénz*) – usury –, can also be described as a way in which “*Roma destroy themselves*”. Once these phenomena become widespread, they become active, almost live autonomous forces within the community, setting up their own rules and rearranging the social relationships into which they are embedded. As an outcome, the lives of these Roma communities are distorted in such a way as if they existed in totally abandoned, isolated

environments without any alternative means or resources. Under these conditions, the surplus that one person possesses invariably seems to be equal to the amount that someone else is lacking. Drug-dependent Roma youth carry on as if no one is able to either defend or stop them anymore. They are left alone with a problem that destroys their communities, their environment, and their own mental and physical health. According to our research, drug use amongst juvenile Roma has not been successfully curbed following intervention by any caring authority, doctors, the school, or even their own parents. When desperate parents turn to the police and ask them to do something to combat access to drugs, they rarely get any official response: the police will pay attention to their children only once they are criminal offenders. Not surprisingly, drugs re-enforce criminal activity: thefts, burglaries, and violent crimes go up, engaging individuals it may not have otherwise. With the additional factor of substance abuse related behavior, these illicit activities spiral even more out of control. One grandmother in D. told us that her grandson had stolen from her to get the money for another dose. Her only recourse was to indignantly drive away the postman who delivered the postal packages of drugs to the young man.

Although drug consumption is present in both the Gy. Roma settlements we visited, they present slightly different challenges to the residents of each. In Th., drug abuse is considered a family issue and it is handled within this social unit. Conversely, the impact of drug use in D. seems to go far beyond the limits of the family structure and concerns the entire local community as a whole. For example, when drug-affected youth begin to commit more crimes, they are more easily pinned as the 'potential perpetrators' of local crimes, causing the social tensions that provide fodder for Jobbik when it looks to capitalize politically by expounding on 'Gypsy crime'.

### **The challenges of intervention by the extreme right**

In Autumn 2012, an elderly Hungarian man was murdered in D. One Roma woman had the following to say about the homicide that provoked the Jobbik Party rally, which followed shortly after:

*“He was a nice old man; he was always giving candy to the children. I’m sorry for [what happened to] him, it weren’t us [who committed the homicide], but those from Jobbik are blaming us all together. Shall I say, than, to any Hungarian, that you are a killer and so on just because one Hungarian killed someone? What does he have to do with it?”*

To put it another way, the events that took place in the D. settlement became a ‘public affair’ involving the Roma residents there, as the message transmitted by the Jobbik demonstration translated into their collective stigmatization. In response to being addressed this way, the Roma then replied in collective terms.

Although we don’t have exact data on this, our impression has been that the extreme right continues to maintain a solid basis of support in town. In certain bars, right-wing extremist journals were put out on the counter, just like any other public reading material. Moreover, some of the popular, widespread symbols of Hungarian nationalism could be found in Gy., such as stickers on the doors of many shops downtown featuring the Hungarian coat-of-arms and the caption *“Hungarian-owned business”*. As the popularity of such signs intimate, the current economic uncertainty had made the public susceptible to these extreme right-wing or nationalist articulations, just as it has in many other European states.

As was mentioned earlier, Jobbik initially intended to organize a march in the D. settlement; however, they later gave up this plan following pressure from the city’s municipal government. Jobbik’s local deputy did not support the idea either, which may have been part of his own ‘special policies’ regarding the area and its residents, but we will return to that later. After being informed of the planned march, Krisztina Cz. and Jenő Setét (founder of the ‘We Belong Here’ Roma Community Network) organized a public forum to discuss modes of peaceful resistance on behalf of the Roma. Only a few people came to this meeting. According to the Roma residents we met, most people had envisaged an open confrontation, should there be a Jobbik march. When we asked Roma from the Th. settlement about what they would do in such a situation, they all expressed the same reaction.

A middle-aged man put it this way:

*"If they would come here and we would stand up to them; would they dare come against us? Hey, we would just cut them up here! When there was that Jobbik rally, there was a small and thin man, like this, explaining something to the others. Poor thing, he would be finished once he gets punched. Is this Jobbik? Such people? What do they want? But they are not daring to come here, just to D."*

The question of "*what do they want?*" also arises in D. The settlement is a popular fixation of the extreme right-wing media and they use it as an example of the general decay, misery, illness, and dirtiness that is stereotypically attributed to Gypsy settlements in extreme right-wing discourses. D. became a symbolic location for them; several short videos about the area circulate the Internet, attempting to exhibit the "*animal-like nature of the Gypsies*". Indeed, from a certain point of view, the level of development and the current prospects in this settlement makes it fit the image they are looking for. There was even one occasion when European MP and Jobbik Party member Krisztina Morvai, along with the mayor of Érpatak village, Mihály Zoltán Orosz, – (in)famous for his sympathy for the extreme right and his personally-developed 'model' for Roma integration, which included the criminalization of Roma and their severe punishment –, visited the settlement together. Their trip was also presented in a 40-minute documentary film. The film describes how the previous inhabitants of D. were non-Roma Hungarians and it was, at that time, considered to be one of the most nicely located areas in town. However, throughout recent decades, the local government began to resettle an increasing number of Gypsy families from other settlements, which were far worse off in comparison. They then mention the low-quality housing built using social housing benefits (*szociálpolitikai támogatás*) saying that, although the respective families got new houses through this program, their social environment hardly changed, compared to the one they left behind in their previous residences. Today, it explains, the remaining non-

Roma Hungarian residents live a few streets closer to the city center, while the rest of the area is taken over by the Roma, who now represent a strong majority in the settlement.

This film claims to belong to the genre of investigative journalism. The extreme right media presents it as a daring exposé in defiant opposition to the ‘liberal crap’ produced by the mainstream media. The introduction of the settlement and summary of its most serious problems are followed by recommendations for intervention according to a far right approach. These include methods of discipline, sanctions, and selected forms of punishment. Core images are of run-down houses owned by the local government and garbage dumps located along the bank of the irrigation canal. A considerable part of the documentary is dedicated to the suffering of non-Roma Hungarian residents who still live in the settlement. Morvai and Orosz (the latter dressed up in a traditional national costume) are walking through the Roma settlement undisturbed, while they introduce to the viewing audience the “*animal-like living conditions*” of the Roma that crippled the lives of the local non-Roma. Probably the most disturbing and cynical aspect of the film is that all these claims are then reiterated by the interviews with local Roma residents. Morvai and Orosz walk casually into the homes of local residents, shake hands with them, listen to what they have to say and then present this in the film as all illustrations of why Jobbik has the most appropriate ‘solution’ to the ‘Gypsy question’. In summary, relying on the partial assistance of local Roma residents – as procession men for this display – D. soon became an iconic location for the extreme right media; a symbol of the righteousness of their cause.

Alongside these media representations and occasional visits by extreme right-wing leadership, the local Jobbik deputy, Ké., has also been striving to develop his own personal link to the D. settlement. According to Krisztina Cz.:

*“The Hungarians are, in fact, like him, while to the Gypsies he simply says that his party will straighten up everything here. The problem is that the Gypsies are receptive to him. He is coming with all his promises, that he will arrange housing and so on, and the Gypsies believe this because he visits them personally. He uses the phrase ‘my Gypsy friends’, so, I asked*

*him 'what kind of friend is that who represents a party which is claiming that Gypsy men must be put into containers and Gypsy women must be made infertile?' I ask him sometimes, what kind of a friendly relationship is that...is this what you say to the families that you are visiting? And he says, 'no, not at all.' I can believe that it's not necessarily his personal opinion, but he is still a member and a deputy of a party that propagates these ideas. From then on, he cannot be exempt from all this. Still, he is not saying these things himself to the Roma. The only thing they see is that he visits them and that he is concerned with them. Unfortunately, misery and hopelessness go together with a terrible ignorance. Many of them don't even know what Jobbik is, or that the Magyar Gárda [Hungarian Guard] is related to this party. It's all in vain if we try to inform them. Disinterest and the lack of motivation are overwhelming in the D. settlement and it's truly disappointing. This is what the local deputy of Jobbik utilizes for himself; he visits the families, drinks coffee with them, gives them promises, and, unfortunately, many of them believe what he says."*

Upon our arrival to D., we met up with a woman of around 25 years of age. She gave us a rather direct illustration of Krisztina's previous statements:

*"Ké. visits us. He is a nice man; he is normal with us. If someone is nice with me, I should be also nice, isn't it like this? Ok, he's got a bit of a Jobbik gene, it's there in him, but he acts normally with us."*

People's categorization according to their 'blood'(or genes) popped up in our other conversations, too. For example, as one of our Roma interlocutors put it, the crimes that have shaken the life of the settlement might be explained by 'blood mixing', in other words, the merge of Roma and non-Roma Hungarians. One man says the community has lost the true Roma heritage, which he attributes himself and his Vlach Gypsy peers and relatives with. He explained it to us like this:

*“the main problem is that the blood got mixed here; there is no clear Roma blood here. People moved here from all over and it’s degeneration that is going on here; the drugs, the killing, Roma committing crimes...because you don’t have the original Roma blood here anymore.”*

Regarding Ké., the personal relationship he has cultivated with some local Roma seems to overwrite national level political distinctions. Yet, his ‘blood’ – as an essential human property – still cannot be changed and he remains a member of Jobbik anyhow.

Those Roma who are more engaged in politics – and who condemn the activities of Jobbik – would also surely welcome the efforts of local politicians to maintain personal contact, beyond the usual rituals of electoral campaigns. Yet, this is something that no other political actors have done, apart from local Jobbik deputy Ké. As one Roma man put it, *“at least he is dealing with us.”* Although this man, like others, also condemned Jobbik’s rhetoric and activities, he considers it important to also make other Roma think the same. On one occasion, a large group of Roma residents gathered around us to discuss politics on one of the streets in D. This group included men, women, and children. The heightened sense of awareness residents had concerning the spotlight put on their neighborhood could be exemplified by the way they appeared to perceive us in the beginning: First of all, they thought we might be proselytizers from a church and their second thought was we might be activists from a political party, aiming to win their allegiance. As this street discussion unfolded, it was clear they shared a common position regarding Jobbik as a Nazi organization that is threatening the Roma. They seemed to concur that, if Jobbik should get into power, the Roma would not have any other choice but to defend themselves – even by armed force, if necessary.

However, at the time the march of the Magyar Gárda was still very likely to take place, rather than preparing weapons, Roma residents in the settlement resorted rather to their arsenal of debate skills and interpersonal network resources. As they explained us, at that point, they contacted Ké. himself, who then came to visit them in the settlement. They had a discussion



with him and they told him that it's not a good idea to march around D. because "*there might be blood*". As they saw it, a counter-demonstration was the only viable form of resistance, however, in their opinion, this would have inevitably led to a violent clash. Since they wanted to avoid violence, they had to give up the idea of resistance. In the end, the march of the Magyar Gárda was turned into a rally held in the city center, which did not hold the same level of concern for the Roma of Gy., even if they were still prepared for a potential attack. Regarding further events during that occasion, no one in the group felt it necessary to express any further discontent.

### **The politics of interest groups and the limitations of local mobilization**

For most the Roma in Gy., the prospects of advocacy are identified either as negotiations at a personal level or as the collective demonstration of physical power. Many of them expect that, most of all, it is political parties that will mediate their common interests. As this case study suggests, this latter expectation appears to be rather unsatisfied. Those who we spoke with could not name a single political party that they would rely on to truly improve their situation. Their all-pervasive disillusionment in politics and difficulty in choosing amongst the existing political parties has further contributed to their constant state of uncertainty. In another discussion with a large group of Roma residents on a street in D., many people said they expected us to give them advice regarding the dilemma as to whom to vote for. At one point, one man said, "*there is no other choice but to return to MSZP*<sup>8</sup>!" The others echoed his statement claiming that they'll all 'return' to the former governing party. However, similarly supportive affirmations were made shortly after, when another member of the crowd started praising the merits of the current government and the party in power, Fidesz.

In general, both these people's widely-shared attitudes about party politics and their political engagement are ultimately motivated by personal interests – be it in regards to a political organization or their family. Kopi, a man around 30 years old, put it in the following way:

8 The Hungarian Socialist Party, which was in power between 2002 and 2010.

*“I’ve helped B. [the vice-mayor of Gy.]. I brought him a lot of votes, since he was promising us everything. He said he’ll do this and that for the Roma and for D., but he needed me only for this, to bring him the votes. He hasn’t even come to D. ever since!”*

Kopi seems to be someone who tried in his own way to represent the interests of the local Roma and the D. settlement at the local political level. His bitter experience is hardly any different from the ones shared by those who had been active at the national level. As Krisztina Cz. noted, the last few decades have demonstrated that Roma advocacy, as mediated through party politics, is a failure – even though possible alternatives remain unclear:

*“I think that in Hungary today, Jenő Setét is the most trustworthy person possible to represent the Gypsies and who is also by in large accepted by them. But he wants to stay away from politics, even though many had approached him. But he doesn’t want to get into this because he learnt from others how big the failure can be. For example, Aladár Horváth has been a Member of Parliament, is from the liberal party, was an advisor to the prime minister, but he couldn’t achieve anything real. One person is not enough for all that is there to be done. Real advocacy might be to have parliamentary representation for the Gypsies, if their voice could be articulated at that level. But the way I see it, Jenő rather thinks about a sort of an umbrella-organization. Party-politics can take advantage of the kind of leaders who move according to their own interests, not caring about their community, just about what they can get for themselves. Jenő keeps on repeating this point, he says that these kind of people are needed in party politics. The minority self-governments are ineffective; they have neither resources nor decision-making power. We are good for filling in documents. Politics will always find those who can be controlled by personal interests.”*

Being motivated by one's own interests seems to be the primary motivation for a wide range of actors and not just in the narrow field of party politics. As it was explained to us, most community initiatives in D. failed for this precise reason. Like a lot of other Roma settlements throughout the country, neo-protestant churches have begun to appear here, too. On one occasion, French Roma Pentecostals arrived in the settlement. They managed to mobilize many of the local residents. However, people grew suspicious when they started taking a lot of photos and accusations were made that these people had come from France only to document their achievements for a project that pays them well. Although it was never revealed whether these suspicions were true or false, the French Pentecostals gradually disappeared from the settlement. On another occasion, a Sri Lankan priest managed to establish a congregation in D. and started to hold worship services in a house that he rented. In the beginning, the local Roma seemed to be receptive to this initiative as well. Still, in a few months time, the owner of the house submitted an electricity bill that was unrealistically high and the priest could not (probably also did not want to) pay it. This is how this initiative also came to an end.

According to Krisztina Cz., a major obstacle for initiatives espousing Roma self-organization is this ongoing suspicion that can easily arise during any initiative, simply based on a claim that the organizational effort serves only someone's selfish personal interests. As Krisztina asserts:

*"Whatever event we organize, very few of them come. For example, last February, we lit some candles here in front of the office to commemorate the victims of the Tatárszentgyörgy murders<sup>9</sup> but the people were only saying 'what for? What kind of use can I make out of it?' And if someone still tries to do something, than they start saying: 'look, they just want to take advantage of you!'"*

9 In 2009 a Roma father and his son were murdered in Tatárszentgyörgy by a number of Hungarian men who were later discovered to have neo-Nazi leanings.

A real or claimed motivation of self-interest can potentially discredit any initiative designed to facilitate local Roma mobilization. This mechanism has had a devastating effect in D. This is another great difference between Gy.'s two Roma settlements: in the Th. settlement, where nearly all the residents belong to the same extended network of kinship, there is an organizational unit that is able to cover almost all the local circles, individual and group interests.

As was mentioned before, the concept of 'blood' refers both to being part of the Vlach Gypsy heritage and to the possession of kinship ties. According to those from Th., the shortcomings of local Roma advocacy are related to the fact that the members of the local minority self-government are Romungro, who they do not consider to be real Gypsies as "*they don't have the real Gypsy blood*", thus, they cannot represent the Roma. For the men in Th., an authentic Gypsy leader is embodied in an influential Vlach Gypsy male head-of-the-house with extended kinship ties, what some might call a 'Voivod' (vajda). This 'Voivod' represents the Gypsies in a way that automatically translates into kinship networks. As one man pointed out to us, he is planning to run for the presidential position at the minority self-government as he thinks that the current leaders take into consideration only their own interests; they are in favor of their 'own kind', their own kin. However noble this sentiment sounds, following the aforementioned abounding prevalence of self-interests above all else, his election might prove to be much more to the benefit of his family interests, instead of others. This rational suggests, on the one hand, that each and every Roma leader acts only according to his self-interests. On the other hand, it allows individuals to act as 'real leaders' in the face of all those who count as members of their extended kinship networks.

The residents of Th. seemed to have only vague memories about the Jobbik march. Mostly, they could recall that members of the Magyar Gárda wanted to go to the D. settlement, since they almost all have relatives or acquaintances there. However, the demonstration that finally took place in the city center was hardly of interest to any of them. At the same time, some of the men went to the village of Gyöngyöspata when incidents took place

there,<sup>10</sup> as they considered it their duty to defend their relatives. This trip was made in the name of a shared 'Gypsiness', much like the mission of the activists from the 'We Belong Here' group, who made visits – at their own expense – to many other settlements under the threat of the Magyar Gárda, too. However, otherwise, the two groups and their trips, their purposes, and principles were quite different. After all, it is not so surprising that Krisztina Cz. managed to mobilize only a few for the 'We Belong Here' network or for the local Roma self-organization of the Gy. settlements. Those who have joined have mainly been women, many of them divorced or widowed; hence, they are not under the control of male partners. Since the national census, the initial target of the 'We Belong Here' movement has passed. In fact, it is difficult even for the core members to account for their purpose. As Krisztina puts it,

*"there are only a few of us, but we are a solid core, people who are always there!"*

This pretty much sums up Krisztina herself, as she is "*always there*" whenever someone needs help, either in Th. or in D. Our Roma informants referred to her as a real local leader; despite of the fact that she is like a 'Hungarian', then again, maybe it's for this exact reason.

One of the main analytical challenges of understanding these local responses to the challenges posed by the extreme right by members of Roma communities is being able to distinguish two, highly diversified dynamics in the local communities. Roma activists like Krisztina often criticize the passivity or ignorance of people they serve, claiming that their miserable living conditions keep them from even realizing the very threat they are exposed to. One widespread assumption in Roma civil society circles was that the recent wave of attacks against Roma, as well as the general threat of anti-Gypsy mobilization by the extreme right, might result in some sense

10 During the first week of March, 2011, the New Hungarian Guard carried out a symbolic attack against Roma Hungarians in Gyöngyöspata, a village of an app. 2800 people in Northern-Hungary. The operation was designed to wage a symbolic battle against the Roma community. The Guard was successful in humiliating the community. Athena Institute (<http://www.athenainstitute.eu/en/news/read/128>)

of self-awareness amongst potential victims – as members of the victim community. Civil activists thought this might reinforce solidarity – if not a total ethnic consciousness – amongst the Roma in Hungary. However, the persistent fragmentation of these grassroots communities, which we also documented in our research, seems to suggest the opposite. Interestingly, the observed forms of ‘inaction’ – such as the efforts made to avoid physical violence in interethnic conflicts – might very well be a deliberate choice, the result of a sort of collective decision-making processes. The accounts we provided in this report seem to support such a claim. The unique processes that led to the formulation of a cohesive local individual and group opinion might be too subtle to be discerned (and utilized) by leaders and policy makers, yet they provide us with enough solid evidence to make the argument that Roma in these communities are indeed participating in a political discord of their own, choosing together the option of preventing any further escalation of violence in their community.

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