



# Extremists increase their influence over society

*Analysis 2008*

A study commissioned by the Hungarian Anti-Racist Foundation  
and prepared by Political Capital Institute

Summary

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The past two years have brought a quality change in anti-Semitic and racist public discourse in Hungary. Far right activism since the autumn of 2006, racist reactions to the incident at Olaszliszka and the emergence of the Hungarian Guard have crossed lines in Hungarian public life that in the past for the most part managed to check the public articulation of prejudices. These developments have greatly increased the far right's potential social base and political scope for action. Increasingly open anti-Semitism entering the public arena continues to be a major identity-building force for the radical right. With all that, steadily rising tension between the Roma and non-Roma populations, clearly the country's major social conflict, represents a much larger threat in Hungary. Increasing conflicts between a majority and a minority are often an inevitable concomitant (and catalyst) in the struggle for social equality. However, the current situation does not point in the direction of a solution thanks simultaneously to the head-in-the-sand policies followed by parliamentary parties, the lack of adequate government programs, the aggressive symbolic actions of the Hungarian Guard, as well as the weak identity of Hungary's Roma population and a resulting low organizational level.

## Assessment

### Radicalism as a fashion statement - from the periphery to the centre

**In the past year, in many respects domestic public discourse has been held hostage by a far right agenda.** A number of concepts introduced by the radical right (e.g. "our kind", "hatred of Hungarians" and "Gypsy crime") coalesced into a world view, some of its components seeped into the public mind and have come to dominate some areas. As its terminology becomes common currency the far right's definition of the enemy becomes widely accepted, and the extremist community justifies its existence and radical actions precisely by referring to enemies threatening the Hungarian people.

**Moreover, the tolerance level of the general public, the media and law enforcement agencies (the police, the prosecutor's office and the courts) has been raised extremely high when it comes to hate-mongering and incitement, which also promotes to spread this ideology.** The situation is further aggravated by the total lack of a common stance taken by the political elite, a political consensus against the extremists. This is clearly demonstrated by the contradictory political

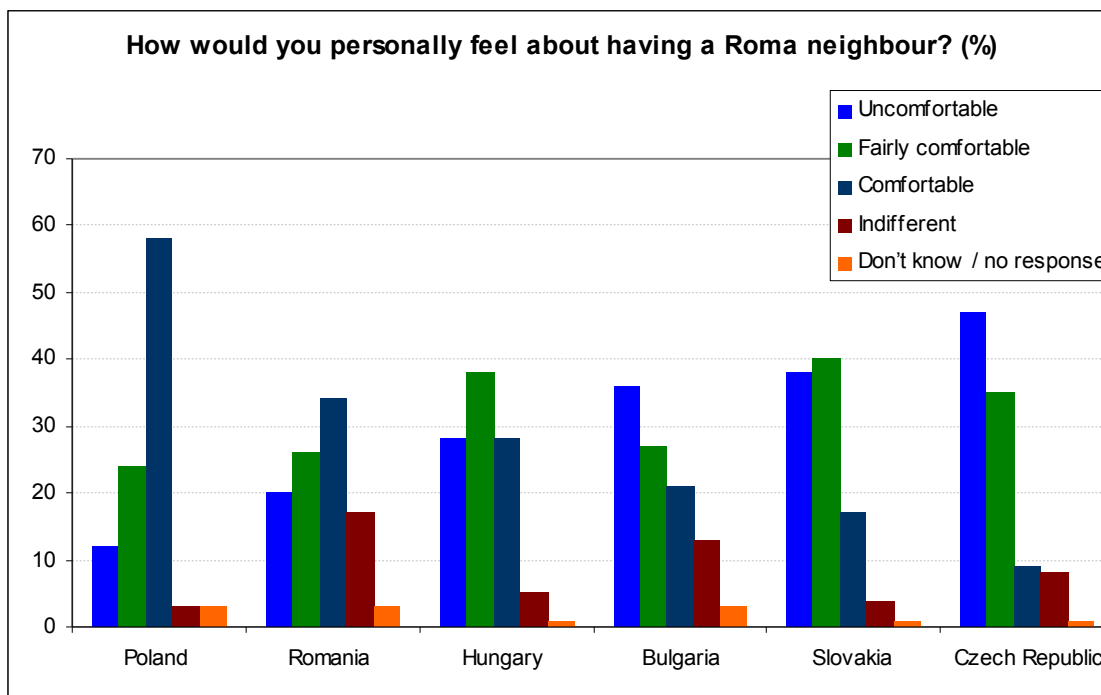
reactions and a quick abandonment of potential consensus in connection to the 'Tarka Magyar' initiative. **In the absence of a unified and effective counteroffensive constitutional bodies appear to be in a state of paralysis when faced with the far right, which, in turn, only lends further encouragement to radicals.**

**Based on the above, is not surprising that, according to recent surveys, fundamental precepts of far right thinking, e.g. glorification of authoritarian policies, prejudice and anti-establishment posturing, by now have entered and become palpable in the thinking of the "middle-classes".**

**At the same time, far right radicalism spreads as an ideology and a model behaviour pattern as well.** It offers a chance to revolt, and thus becomes a fashion trend appealing primarily to young people. Today the radical subculture not only has its own ideology, but it also has its own musical bands, night clubs, dressing code, festivals and an intellectual elite playing the role of mediator. With the deliberate use of the media, leaders of the radical community become widely known and in some groups gain large popularity, becoming genuine stars for an audience receptive to their ideas.

### Anti-Roma hostility versus anti-Semitism

**In Hungary the largest ethnic problem is clearly represented by anti-Roma hostility, an easily mobilized sentiment openly admitted by the majority of the population.** Moreover, the perception of the Roma population promoted by the far right is increasingly negative: earlier generalizations, relatively innocent stereotypes (e.g., loud, temperamental, hedonistic and musical) have deteriorated. Increasingly, the Roma are described as an aggressive, dangerous, threatening and criminal minority, providing radicals justification for action. **For instance, the Hungarian Guard explains its existence with "Gypsy crime" and its marches through towns as its duty to "protect the majority", actions aimed to provoke violent clashes.** Incidentally, Hungarian anti-Roma feeling cannot be considered extremely high in the region: in the Czech Republic and Slovakia hostility to the Roma population is even stronger than in Hungary.



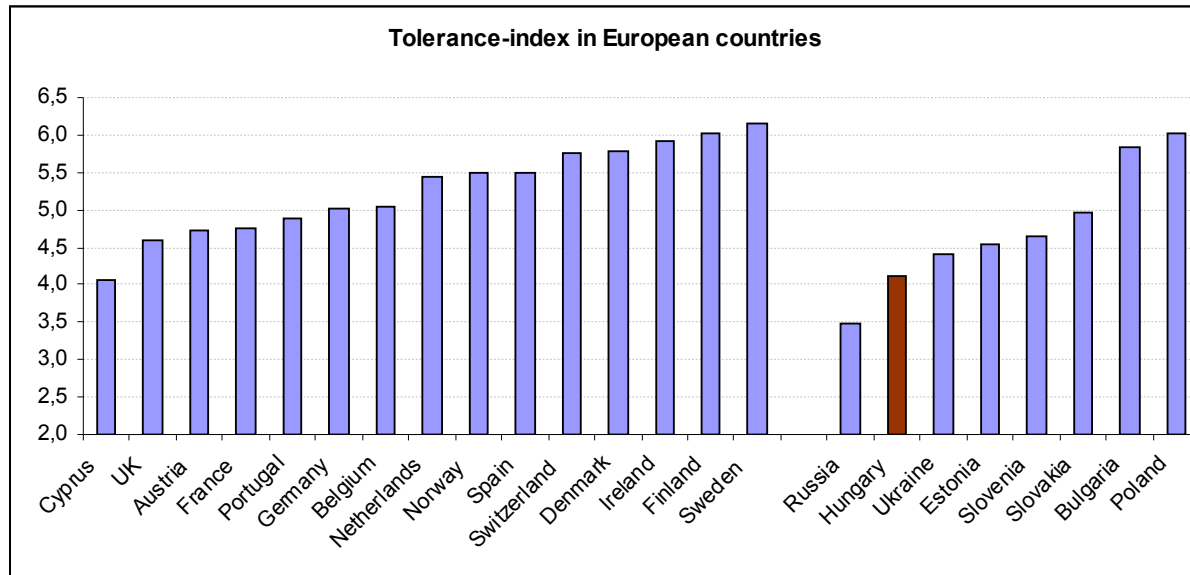
Source: Special Eurobarometer 296, 2008

**While in the past few decades the perception of the Roma has undergone considerable change, stereotypes of the Jews is mainly characterized by a large**

**degree of consistency.** The social base of anti-Semitism and hostility to the Roma is also quite different: while anti-Roma feeling is seen mainly among the rural population, anti-Semitism is mostly an urban phenomenon. **Open anti-Semitism affects only a small segment of society (approximately 1/10), although a coded form of anti-Semitism is prevalent in mainstream media and the equivocal statements of leading politicians.** And this will continue to serve the right as a unifying and self-justifying force (as anti-Jewish prejudices are closely tied to a rejection of modernity, liberalism, capitalism, the United States and globalization).

### Opposing immigration - without immigrants

**As there is no significant immigration in Hungary, stereotypes of immigrants are not shaped by foreigners but by a fear of the unknown, as well as the image of the immigrant emerging in public discourse and political debates. In the past few years the political elite has actively contributed to rising fears related to migration.** In 2002 MSZP, from the position of the opposition, envisioned the arrival of 23 million Romanian jobseekers, and in 2004 again MSZP, in connection to the double-issue referendum campaigned against foreign labour. In the past few years the right has regularly sounded the alarm against the arrival of non-European immigrants, primarily from China. In this light it is not surprising that **a majority of the Hungarian population is extremely prejudiced against immigrants in respect to public safety, the labour market and cultural identity.** As a result, Hungarians' tolerance for immigrants is one of the lowest in Europe. Once concrete 'evidence is provided', the as yet unfocused prejudice may prove to be a perfect breeding ground for a successful anti-immigrant policy. **Hungary may be susceptible to the Italian example, where a tough stance against immigrants brought unprecedented popularity for Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.**



Source: own calculations based on European Social Survey, 2006 database.

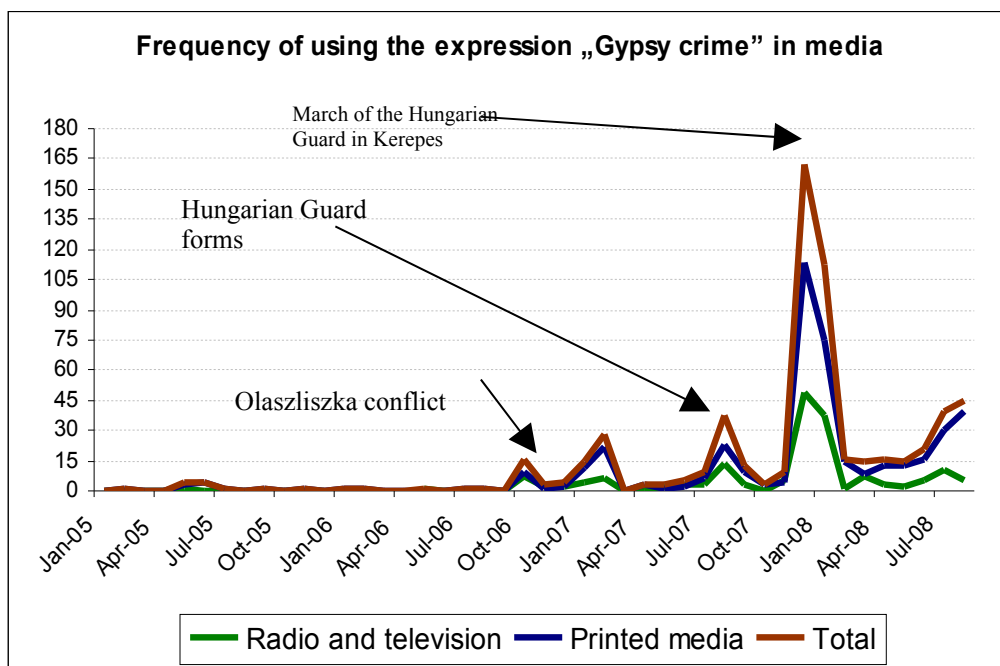
*The scale is the result of the averaging of three statements: "Immigration benefits the country's economy", "The country has become a better place with the settlement of immigrants", "Immigrants enrich the country's cultural life".*

## Extremists in the media

**In the past few years the media's handling of the far right has changed for the worse. For one thing "passive prejudice" in the media has increased:** after 2006 the media provided radicals an ever larger platform to express their vulgar ideas directly without challenge, making radical thinking and ideology 'palatable' to the general public. Due to the novelty of far right actions and an understanding of the journalist's role locked in the logic of infotainment, in most cases the media is unable to assist the viewer in analyzing events and interpreting information.

On the other hand, **in some media "active prejudice" has gained acceptance, i.e., in media outlets not specifically targeting a radical audience, reports, opinions and comments generating discriminating and racist attitudes are becoming increasingly common.**

**The main weapon of a resurgent far right is precisely a deliberate and effective use of the media meeting current needs,** aside from its sympathizers, addressing mainstream society. Thanks to the success of media-savvy actions the social role of the far right points far beyond the actual potential of specific organizations and personalities. The figureheads of the radical scene make a deliberate use of mainstream media; with a good sense of proportion they had identified a tone in delivering their extremist ideas just this side of being banned from the television screen. For them public appearance is not only a means of disseminating ideas and concepts they consider important (e.g., "Gypsy crime"), but it is also a tool of political power: **individuals embraced by the media find it also easier to have themselves accepted within the radical community.**



Source: our own estimates based on Observer's database

## Recommendations

In formulating our recommendations we start out with the assumption: **prejudices are learned social “products” that can be modified and mitigated; their emergence can be checked. The frequently heard pessimistic/fatalistic perception of intensifying prejudices in Hungary is unjustified. With coordinated socio/political programs, if not completely eliminated, the problem can be significantly reduced.**

### Public discourse and setting the agenda

- Improving the conditions of Roma people is simultaneously hindered by two traditions in public discourse: a racist attitude blaming gypsies in general and a hypocritical “politically correct” public rhetoric avoiding real problems. **The conditions of Roma can only be improved with a frank identification of problems and complex policy programs focusing on the key issues of integration.**

### Improvement of public security in rural areas

- The success of the Hungarian Guard's nationwide recruitment campaign is explained by the fact that the organization effectively exploits the fears of the rural population concerning public safety. **The reinforcement of police and civil guard forces in villages** (made possible by a force increased following the Schengen integration) **could significantly allay such fears and limit the scope of extremist policies based on these.**

### Law enforcement and legislation

- **Instead of modifying existing legal regulations, mounting an effective force against extremists would require clear and firm decisions by law enforcement bodies ( the police, the prosecution’s office and the courts).**
- In the past few years physical and verbal attacks tied to extremists have visibly embarrassed prosecutors and the courts alike. As a first step in the direction of a unified administration of justice there is a need for a critical assessment of practices followed by law enforcement agencies since 2006. A critical document of this type could provide the basis for the **High Court to issue a law harmonisation decision or recommendation (as a minimum) to the courts.**
- **Concurrently, the legislation could contribute to the promotion of social peace through the extension of legal right.** This is demonstrated by the Spanish example where tolerance for homosexuals has increased after the approval of gay marriages.

### The role of education

- To counter often hostile family influences, **education based on racial/cultural tolerance should start as early as in the kindergarten.** In addition to the inclusion of various ethnic considerations in the curriculum, in grammar and especially in middle schools the mandatory integration of prejudice-relief sessions in small classes (“tolerance training”) could be an effective tool, where civic organizations could play a major role in the development and administration of these programs.
- In itself, integrated education may lead to spontaneous segregation. This can be effectively prevented only when in mixed classes teachers facilitate communication between children of different ethnic background by using special educational methods (one of these tools could be mandatory problem-solving based on the “mosaic-method”). This requires special curricula and the employment of psychologists in classes with a high rate of Roma students.
- **One effective method of preventing school dropouts, common among Roma children, is tying the disbursement of family assistance and**

specific welfare benefits to school attendance (a method used in the past).

### Open dialogue on immigration

- **The government must support programs (campaigns shaping attitudes and personal encounters in the framework of school training, etc.) promoting the larger social visibility of minorities (especially of immigrants and homosexuals).** Direct experience with minority groups may bring positive results; based on international research, where the number of immigrants integrated in society is high, rejection tends to decline.

### Work programs

- **Public work programs often provide short-term solutions and do not contribute to the integration of the Roma population.** Artificial job creation increases Romas' dependence on the state, and does not assist them in adjusting to market condition.
- By itself the government is unable to handle Roma unemployment, while resolving the problem is in the eminent interest of the business community as well. **One opportunity to reduce structural labour shortages affecting certain occupations would be educational and adult training programs designed to teach specific skills and offered by government agencies in cooperation with the private sector.**

### Media

- **Taking Western examples, journalist schools should be recommended to make the coverage and presentation of extremist incidents an integral part of the curriculum.**
- As demonstrated by positive examples (e.g., the success of a Roma actor in the television series 'Barátok Közt'), the objective presentation of Roma problems does not necessarily generate rejection among viewers, i.e., giving roles to Roma characters in television series, programs and advertisements should be encouraged.
- **Public media should play a major role in the fight against prejudices** through the deliberate employment of Roma editors and reporters, and the presentation of the Roma in roles that defy social stereotypes.
- **In one solution, the political and civil society could assist in training Roma journalists, who later could hold their own in the media market** and could enter the profession by dint of their own abilities and skills.
- Without regard to their racial origin, a much higher number of Roma could be featured in public-interest advertisements and promotional materials.