

Marginalisation and Segregation of the Romanies in Budapest

Előadás, elhangzott az OCIFE Dobogókői konferenciáján, 1995. márc. 18. Magyar nyelven nem jelent meg. Angolul in: European Vision. Brussels, 1995/40 no. 38 - 43 p.

Compared to Hungary's other national and ethnic minorities, the Gypsy (Romany) ethnic group is a negative exception to the general rule in almost every sense. To gain a clear understanding of the specific situation and the processes involved, we need to look at the whole picture.

Among the specialists, and within the Gypsy community itself, the prime consideration is to find out whether the best way to solve their many problems lies in being isolated or, on contrary, in integrating themselves into the urban social environment. It seems that in their case, the ethnic dimension has a social character, while the correlations between these two aspects at the international level are becoming ever clearer (cf. the paper drawn up by experts and presented to the Copenhagen Summit.) However, the specialists and researchers investigating the problems of the Gypsies tend to draw a distinction between the issue of socio-cultural handicaps and that of ethnicity. Without disputing the fact that the Gypsies are in an unfavourable situation, they are of the opinion that attention in some areas should be focused not primarily on the weaknesses but rather on the particular features.

Housing conditions of the Gypsy population

Let us take as a basis the global survey conducted in 1992 and 1993 at the request of the Budapest Municipality's Urban Planning Unit. The survey draws inter alia upon the territorial data collected from the 22 districts of the Hungarian capital.

The Gypsies tend to live dispersed around the edges of a district, but their distribution is rather patchy. Their situation presents very great differences, for the ethnic group is heterogeneous. Internal stratification is not only by reference to certain ethnic peculiarities, but also by reference to social and economic polarisation. In the districts – especially the peripheral ones – where they live in quite small numbers, and where they live dispersed and have been integrated for decades as 'authentic' residents, their presence generates no tension at all, in fact quite the reverse. Their housing conditions are no different from those of the others in their environment. In some cases, though not very many, they even have the external trappings of wealth.

In the districts where the gypsies tend to be present in larger numbers, the municipal authorities are well aware of the islands, sections of streets or buildings where they gather, in response to a sort of 'spontaneous' segregation, and where groups of them jointly fill in declarations of residence. Close studies of interviews have yielded details of the types of urban and housing situations characterised by this tendency to form groups, and made it possible to identify the problems arising and growing more serious as the numbers have grown. The same sorts of problems are mirrored in all the districts concerned.

Characteristics of the 'Gypsy districts'

The Gypsy population, which has traditionally and spontaneously been isolated, can be found in many places, in districts which can be clearly delimited and within more compact communities in Budapest. These districts can be classified into four types:

- Gypsies are to be found living in less isolation but in large numbers in certain cheap public sector flats. In the wake of the programme to construct rented flats belonging to the local councils or mayor's departments, and as a quite deliberate policy, there are no Gypsies among the tenants in the public sector flats in certain districts;
- In residential areas, in single-story houses, around single-family homes with garden (especially in the peripheral areas, where they live dispersed as original inhabitants);

- in rented flats in older buildings with open corridors; in dilapidated houses which were originally tastefully constructed (the works of famous architects such as Miklós Ybl) in inner-city districts where the existence of lower levels of comfort and a poorer standard is 'accepted' by this 'class', while people with a certain educational standard are fleeing these districts. In addition, the Gypsies, who have a traditional inclination towards trade are (also) attracted by the conditions existing in this respect in the inner-city areas;

- in the slum districts, houses and buildings occupied by squatters. They fit the same pattern everywhere: flats and buildings that are stripped bare and in a state of disrepair, urban slum districts, extremely run down, virtually derelict buildings, old urban districts and condemned buildings waiting for demolition and apartments waiting to be made fit for habitation.

One of the main factors in the growth of numbers is the exodus from the land. A regional redistribution is underway and it would be interesting to continue research into matters such as their spheres of attraction, and their starting points and motivation. Depending on the individual districts, they have established their own nuclei of immigrants, with the newcomers to the towns all arriving from the same places. This migration process is generally on the increase, although in some cases a stagnation or stabilisation in numbers has been recorded. In this connection, the population changes and is replaced; faced with the struggle against worries and the difficulty of putting down roots, some people return to their home region and continue their wanderings. It is true that local stability is fragile, but after declaring residence, many people do 'survive' five years in poor housing in order to be entitled to apply for a flat. In the majority of cases, groups coming from the same place are bound by close family ties; in some districts, there have even been cases where thirty or so people have been found to be living in one small room.

In view of the proportion accounted for by this process of immigration to the capital, one urgent matter would be to analyse the situation and seek solutions to the social, economic, cultural and socio-psychological issues it raises. What is crucial is not only to contribute to the integration of rural populations in the urban environment, but also to find a solution to the difficulties involved in putting down roots, of which housing is one example, and the situation of the squatters a particular case.

The occupation of buildings is on a different scale in different districts. Whereas in one inner-city district, there might be 200 flats being squatted in (in the majority of cases, the door to a run-down, disused building is forced), another district might have ten or even fewer. The 20 or 30 people who have lodged their 'declaration of residence' papers in the case of a cramped space, plus the newcomers intent on staying in the capital at any price, in conditions which are sometimes inhuman, often pay too high a price for this bid to climb up society's ladders. This initial description might thus be concluded by commenting that the conjunction of a number of factors leads to the reproduction of these 'units'.

We know, from our territorial data and from other sources, that in Budapest at the moment, a continuous ghetto covering a large area is in the process of building up, populated by people with low social status, right in the centre of the capital. Budapest's urban renewal scheme sets great store by the conservation of the city's architectural heritage and its restoration. But it likewise indicates the sociological process which, given the restructuring of the population, even though to a different degree (primarily) in the southeast of Budapest), is being reinforced by the presence of the marginalised groups moving in. „Whereas starting in the thirties, those with the lowest social status tended to be concentrated into 'micro-segregation' units and to settle in various parts of Budapest where they formed sectors which were not coherent from the territorial angle,” what we are seeing today is a radical transformation of the patterns of segregation in living areas. „The run-down sociological, technical and aesthetic state of the interiors, the devaluation and deterioration of the flats, the irreversible environmental degradation caused by the explosive development of the motor car, the outdated, polluting, heating systems and industrial technologies, and the lack of green spaces, have driven out a large part of the urban population who have greater purchasing power, and they have moved out to houses with gardens in residential districts located on the outskirts of the city”.

The better-off classes have headed towards more prestigious areas. „The fact that the more wealthy

are leaving the inner-city areas, and the poorer are gathering there, is contributing to the deterioration of sizeable swathes of the centre, to the transformation of these districts into slums, and to a structure that is unfavourable to habitation (there are many flats which have just one room, no bathroom and no inside toilet, and many emergency lodgings), and is having an impact upon the technical and aesthetic aspect of the building stock and the incidence of environmentally damaging effects (air and noise pollution, etc.)." "It is in those parts of the Hungarian capital today where there is an exacerbation of certain social problems —such as aging, low levels of resources, deviant behaviour and difficulty in escaping from it because of low educational levels – that there is a high proportion of members of the Gypsy ethnic group.

Urban architectural, technical and aesthetic revival is confronted with tasks which are of particular importance in those very districts where the Gypsies live. When the programmes are being framed and implemented, the human factor will be crucial. The urban renewal programme offers two visions for the future: the pessimistic one sees the funding of expensive rehabilitation work coming up against obstacles. In that case, the negative trends we have described will persist and grow worse.