

How the media blatantly berates the Roma people

THE MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL of the Roma – Hungary's largest and most underprivileged minority – feeds widespread anti-Romani stereotypes and prejudices held by the majority society. In the early '90s, the Roma were mainly portrayed either as criminals and jobless social misfits, or talented, emotional and sensual people – characterised therefore either by negative prejudice or romantic cliché. The main themes along which the Roma appeared in the media were crime, poverty, parasitism, music, arts and politics. Despite a considerable increase in the number of articles appearing about the Roma over the last decade, the range of Roma-related coverage remains limited.

Along with representing the Roma in selective social roles, the mainstream media also generalises them as 'Gypsies', narrowly and pejoratively focusing on their ethnicity. Media openly states the ethnic origins of wanted suspects or convicted criminals. Most Roma sources do not speak for themselves. Instead, readers usually learn of Romani opinion through an intermediary.

In December 1995, a group of journalists and other intellectuals – some Roma, some not – decided to set up the Roma Press Centre (RPC), in order to diversify and improve the portrayal of the Roma in the media and to establish standards for minority reporting. Based in Budapest, the RPC is a non-governmental, non-profit news agency striving to increase public awareness of issues in the Romani community and to influence public discourse.

Partially as a result of the RPC's efforts, media coverage of the Roma has been extended, and now includes issues such as discrimination, civil rights, economic issues, traditions, emigration and assimilation. As a primary news source for most Hungarian media outlets, the RPC feels that it has had signifi-

cant impact on improving the representation of Roma in the mainstream print media. In a number of cases, the Centre was the first to alert the public to specific issues like mass evictions or the discriminatory channelling of Roma children into schools for the mentally handicapped. Going beyond its role as a wire service, in 1996 the RPC launched a programme for training Romani journalists. The RPC also developed a training scheme for Roma non-government organisations on media relations, and runs a radio wire service and a regional news exchange programme.

Yet in spite of the RPC and others' efforts, much of the bias towards the Roma in the Hungarian media continues. A brief look at some recent articles offers evidence of such.

On 10 September 1999, *Népszava*, a mainstream daily often associated with the Budapest intelligentsia, ran an article titled "Man Sold His Own Sister for Two Thousand Marks". The article offered the following story:

The Bács-Kiskun County police has taken 31-year-old Lajos K. into custody on the charge of human trafficking. The man from Kalocsa sold his 15-year-old sister Krisztina to a German Romani couple. The 'purchasers' were looking for a bride for their 17-year-old son, and got into contact with Lajos K. through a friend. The police started investigating after the case was reported by a civilian. However, presently they are only investigating the actions of Lajos K. They have not been able to obtain any information about where Krisztina is or the identity of the German couple.

The facts in the article were evidently derived entirely from police sources, and the subjects of the article were neither quoted nor, evidently, consulted in any way. Further, an inflammatory headline was appended ven-

'illegals'

Even the most established Western magazines sometimes fail 'the PC test' regarding Roma people.

'Gypsy Caesar' and Other Stories

The Roma, commonly referred to as 'Gypsies', a term highly offensive to them, are among the most favourite media targets across Europe. Hungary's Roma Press Center has been trying for the last six years to improve the Roma's representation, reports **Gabor Miklosi**.



'cheats'



Roma dance in Bucharest to promote their culture.

turing into the field of marriage, an issue fraught with misunderstanding across the Roma/non-Roma cultural border.

An article entitled "The Whole Local Government Resigned," appearing in the 22 September issue of the daily *Metro*, also dealt with the issue of Romani criminality, although no crime was mentioned:

The seven members of the local government in Felsődobsza, Borsod county, have resigned from their posts. They justified their decision with the claim that they can no longer stop the decline of public order, since one-fourth of the population are Roma, and recently a new Romani family moved into the village from Inota.

The article appeared as a short news item. No background information of any kind was provided. The connection of Roma and crime was assumed.

Articles appearing recently in which Roma were victims of crimes did not manage to avoid playing on commonly held assumptions about Roma and thereby perpetuating anti-Romani stereotypes. For example, an article called "Romani family beaten in Ózd," appearing in the 9 September edition of the daily *Magyar Hírlap*, reported:

A Romani family was attacked in Ózd, Borsod county. In the Otelep part of the town, 20-25 men got out of six cars and went into the house, where they broke and damaged the fur-

wealth of other Roma-related themes available in Romania:

Iulian Radulescu from Romania, who claims to be the emperor of all the Gypsies of the world, has passed his high school final exams successfully. The 61-year-old Gypsy sovereign was most at home in geography on the exam, and he got 8.6 point out of the maximum 10. His achievement was outstanding in history and French as well. However, he had problems in maths, where he barely passed the test. Radulescu has bestowed the title "Iulian I, Emperor of all Gypsies" upon himself.

However, the situation around his throne is somewhat confused, because he has a rival, actually quite near at hand: another self-proclaimed Gypsy king lives less than a hundred meters away from Radulescu in the same street.

Other articles reporting on Roma in foreign countries represented Roma as 'illegals' and people who take advantage of the gullibility and goodwill of non-Roma. For example, *Magyar Hírlap* reported on 20 April 1999 that Roma were "Taking Advantage of the Tragedy":

*Gypsies leaving Romania illegally and begging in foreign countries, especially in France, are taking considerable advantage of the Kosovo tragedy. According to news sources in Bucharest, the Roma begging mainly in Paris pretend to be Albanian refugees from Kosovo. They tell incredible horror stories about their alleged persecution, their suffering and adventures. They sing Romani songs they claim to be ancient Kosovar folk songs. The *Libertate Daily* in Bucharest reports that recently the income of Roma begging in Paris has multiplied tenfold.*

Hungarian media, however, are not unique in their transmission of prejudice against the Roma. Certain British tabloids often react hysterically to the influx of East-European Romani refugees to England, and even the most established Western magazines sometimes fail 'the PC test' regarding Roma people. In its April 2001 issue, *National Geographic* magazine ran an article about Roma, titled "Gypsies: The Outsiders". When entering the house of a Slovak Roma in a village of "medieval squalor", the *National Geographic* journalist observed that the home was "surprisingly neat and cosy inside," as if poverty was necessarily a synonym for negligence.

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