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## The Roots of Hate

*Michael J. Jordan*

HEVES, Hungary—The past few years have been turbulent for Szabolcs Szedlak, far worse than most Hungarians could have imagined two decades ago, when they tore a hole in the Iron Curtain and changed their world. Szedlak, 34, came of age during the tumult of the post-communist transition from dictatorship to democracy. Back then Hungarians were told, and many believed, they'd become like neighboring Austrians—a BMW in every driveway. Just don't remind folks of those daydreams in this bleak corner of northeastern Hungary.

Szedlak and his family live in Heves, a small, quiet town of 11,000 on the great Hungarian plains. Szedlak was born here, in the heart of the country's most depressed region. Twenty years ago, the sudden and unexpected exposure to free markets ravaged the state-controlled

mines, industries and agriculture that were staples of the communist system—especially in this region. Successive governments have failed to fill the void with new jobs or re-training. Unemployment in the region now approaches 50 percent among those aged 25 to 40, feeding widespread anger and disillusionment with Hungary's brand of "democracy." As joblessness soars, so has support for a new style of politics that harkens back to a bygone era, snuffed out by communism: Right-wing extremism is on the rise. According to one survey, it has doubled here since 2003. Hungary, once dubbed the "happiest barrack in the Soviet camp," is arguably the unhappiest of the 10 ex-communist members who have since joined the European Union.

Count Szabolcs Szedlak among the disgruntled.

For ten years, Szedlak toiled in a furniture store before deciding to chase the capitalist dream. He bought the store from his boss in 2005, but high taxes choked the life out of his business. It folded in June 2008. At the same time, his wife gave birth to their first child. With a second on the way, this spring he found a job as a maintenance man at a local kindergarten. Unable to afford their own place, the couple now lives with Szedlak's parents. Szedlak has taken whatever work he can find, from painting houses to selling watermelons. Despite family and financial pressures, Szedlak still finds the time to volunteer. Politics has become his passion, and his bitter disenchantment led him to help form the Heves chapter of Jobbik, the most dynamic new far-right party in all of Europe.

The anti-western, anti-minority Jobbik boasts a red-and-white-striped symbol—known as the ancient Hungarian “Arpad” coat of arms—that also resembles the emblem of the murderous Nazi-era Arrow Cross Party. This group, which briefly held power from 1944-45, was responsible for killing thousands of Hungarian Jews and Gypsies, and deported tens of thousands more. Jobbik maintains a militant arm, the *Magyar Garda*, or Hungarian Guard, which has marched through minority neighborhoods in black jackets and black boots sporting the Arpad insignia. In April, Jobbik capitalized on popular fury over the country's faltering economy, winning 16.7 percent of the vote in national elections—the greatest performance so far for the ultra-right in any of the EU's former communist states.

“I was just trying to provide for my family and my baby,” Szedlak explains, tapping his cigarette ashes into an empty beer can. “But after she was born, I saw that sitting and yelling at my TV doesn't do any good. I don't want her to grow up in such a lousy world.”

### *Not Your Father's Economy*

To many Hungarians, and tens of millions of other Central and Eastern Europeans, this is no ordinary economic crisis. The whipsawing booms and busts of the free market are still novelties that enrages folks like Szedlak, who find themselves all but helpless in the face of a vicious economic downturn and joblessness. Nothing like it has occurred in these parts since the Great Depression, which led to the rise of Hitler and the Nazi movement. It's hardly surprising that Hungary now pulsates with its most powerful far-right sympathies since World War II. This dramatic shift to the right has seeped into a part of the world that, until two decades ago, saw the state wield total control over both society and economy. The roots of democracy have grown, but they haven't burrowed so deep that they cannot be shaken.

For 40 years, families like the Szedlaks were insulated from the economic cycles of the West. Though far from affluent, they were rarely wanting. Most families could even afford at least one modest holiday a year. Then the Wall came down. A corrupt brand of “Wild West” capitalism ran rampant through an authoritarian corner of the globe, one with little or no tradition of democracy or rule of law, and no experience with any economic infrastructure resembling a free market. As a result, the entire post-communist transition in Central and Eastern Europe has been one grand experiment, with Hungarians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Bulgarians and many others serving as guinea pigs.

Some have flourished, but many have not. Nearly everyone has been scarred in some way since their pre-democratic world was flipped upside-down. Last fall, a Pew survey of economic attitudes reflected upon the trauma and growing nostalgia among ex-communist states. Topping the list were the Hungarians. A whopping 72 percent said they are economically “worse



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Szabolcs Szedlak's bitter disenchantment led him to Hungary's far-right Jobbik party.

off" today, never mind the dictatorship, censorship and police repression of the old order. "But Hungary's malaise is not all about economics—most are frustrated with politics too," Richard Wike, associate director of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, explained in his analysis of the results. This frustration has only accelerated the swing toward extremism. According to research by the Budapest-based think tank Political Capital, hard-right support in Hungary more than doubled, from 10 percent in 2003 to 21 percent in 2009. In Poland, however, support for right-wing politics dropped by almost a third. Over that same period, anti-establishment anger in Hungary that "everything and everyone is bad" soared from 12 percent to 46 percent.

Jobbik exploits the disillusion and thrives on it. The party's 33-year-old president, Gabor Vona, leads its new faction in Parliament. His cabinet chief, Marton

Gyöngyösi, told me what has made his party so popular: "More and more Hungarians realize the parties that emerged from the communist system were not representing the interests of Hungarians or Hungary, and made more compromises than they should have." As the highest-ranking Jobbik member of the Parliament's foreign-affairs committee, Gyöngyösi pushes to reorient Hungarian foreign policy eastward, toward Russia and the Middle East. He's called for the withdrawal of Hungarian troops from the NATO coalition in Afghanistan, though Hungary eagerly joined the NATO military alliance in 1999.

"This establishment running Hungary is some kind of grand coalition, changing hands every four years, and they don't like anyone else entering the system," Gyöngyösi explains. "The majority of our supporters think even now it's not too late to get off this path,

to take our own fate into our hands, for what's in the best interests of Hungary, not what's best for the IMF, Brussels, Washington or the World Bank."

### *A Beacon Extinguished*

The 1990s seem so long ago, when Hungary—home of Liszt, Bartok and a disproportionate number of Nobel prize-winners for its population—was a beacon of newly democratic Eastern Europe, a darling of foreign investors, praised by the West for its economic, social and political reforms. After leading its neighbors into NATO in 1999, Hungary entered the European Union in 2004. As recently as the 2006 national elections, Jobbik and its politics of resentment could barely muster 2 percent of the vote. Four years later, everything has changed. Hungarian self-confidence is rattled, especially when they see their neighbor nations leapfrogging them into the regional pecking order. For example, the Slovaks to the north, to whom Hungarians have long been condescending, have adopted the Euro and are prospering, buying homes in cheap Austrian and Hungarian villages and turning them into Slovak suburbs.

An increasing number of Hungarians, stirred by hate speech, are fed up with what they see as a flood of broken promises, corruption and incompetence by their mainstream left and right. They see themselves betrayed by Brussels, the World Bank and the IMF. They even feel betrayed by capitalism and democracy. For these Hungarians, Jobbik alone stands untainted. The party rails against the establishment and has identified a host of scapegoats—anyone it deems harmful to Hungarian interests, ranging from multinational corporations and foreign investors (with an obsessive focus on Israeli businesses) to neighboring states that abuse their large ethnic-Hungarian minorities.

(Slovakia, for example, passed a 2009 law preventing the Hungarian language from any government-underwritten actions, even between a doctor and patient.)

An equally maligned target is the despised minority group that has lived among Hungarians for centuries, the Roma, who stand accused of both bleeding the welfare system and of *Cigánybűnözés*, or "Gypsy criminality." Earlier this year, the Jobbik magazine *Barricade* published a drawing of a dark-skinned man on its cover, wearing a gold chain around his thick neck. Above him, a headline screamed *Gypsy Criminality! Over!* Another issue of the same magazine featured the statue of St. Gellert overlooking the scenic panorama of Budapest and the Danube. In this rendering, though, the saint held a Jewish *menorah*. The headline read, *Wake Up, Budapest! Is This What You Want?*

Not surprisingly for a political party whose rally cry is *Szebb jövőt!* (A Brighter Future!), it's younger Hungarians who are heavily responsible for Jobbik's recent success. In the April elections, exit polls showed nearly a quarter of all ballots were cast by voters aged 18 to 29. "It's a replication of the 1930s," says Hungarian economist Laszlo Csaba, of Central European University in Budapest. "When young people feel alien to this brave new world, that parliamentary democracy and market economy don't care about them, why should they care about it? They revolt. They look for something outside the limits of the parliamentary system. Jobbik is a protest movement."

### *Back to the Future*

Even in the early days of post-communist transition, there was a degree of incongruity in Hungary's melding with the West. While Hungary was rewarded for its integration—investment eased travel restrictions, and brought membership in

western institutions—Hungarians were becoming increasingly disillusioned. Western promises of prosperity seemed a mere mirage. Society was being crudely divided into winners and losers. On one side were those profiting from old communist connections, cutting inside deals and soaring to unfathomable wealth. There were also young and talented graduates who spoke foreign languages, went to work for western multinationals, or proved enterprising enough to set out on their own. On the other side were legions of poorly paid state employees, doctors, teachers and civil servants, newly laid-off industrial workers, hand-to-mouth peasants and communist-era retirees stuck with humiliatingly low pensions. While the privileged few could enjoy new air-conditioned mega-malls and take in the latest Hollywood blockbuster, most young Hungarians had grandparents suddenly forced to decide whether to buy medicine or to heat their apartment. Ordinary folks often spoke wistfully of communism—an era when they certainly had to keep their heads down and mouths shut, but always had just enough to get by, with a cradle-to-grave welfare state that guaranteed their jobs and livelihood. And back then the neighbors were in the same boat with none of these capitalist *nouveaux riche* to rub their noses in newfound wealth and power.

### *Ubunga for Ubungans*

The spunky Hungarian magazine *Hetek* (Weeks) is headquartered in a bright new office park in a quiet, leafy suburb of Budapest. During this year's election campaign, the newsweekly created quite a buzz with a cover featuring three snarling knuckleheads—likenesses of Jobbik's three most powerful players: EU parliamentarian Krisztina Morvai, party president Vona and vice president Zoltan Balczó. Above

them floated a banner spoofing the Jobbik poster slogan, "Hungary for Hungarians," which instead stated in gibberish: "Ubunga for Ubungans." A blown-up version of the cover hangs on the office wall of *Hetek* reporter-photographer Laszlo Somorjai, suggesting where his sympathies lie. He's visited the towns and villages of northeastern Hungary and documented their plight.

## If there's one topic that unites all Hungarians, it's that Trianon was unjust.

Their anger, he says, is not so black-and-white.

Somorjai traces the roots of today's virulence well beyond the past two decades, even beyond the Great Depression and Nazi movement. Indeed, he goes back as far as 1919 to the Versailles Conference that ended World War I, and the Treaty of Trianon signed a year later that formally broke up the Austro-Hungarian Empire. If there's one topic that unites all Hungarians, it's that Trianon was *igazságtalan* (unjust). The accord singled out Hungary for perhaps the stiffest punishment of any nation on the losing side: two-thirds of Hungarian land, including five of its 10 largest cities, and one third of its people, were sawed off and handed to its neighbors, whose post-war leaders had spent the war in exile, carefully cultivating relationships with those who would ultimately draft the peace terms.

Even today, 90 years later, each of the seven nations that border Hungary is home to Hungarian minorities: the three largest being Romania, with 1.5 million ethnic Hungarians; Slovakia, with another half-million; and Serbia, with up to 400,000. The treaty's retribution—the fragments of nations it created—laid the seeds of



economic and social destruction. Barely a decade after Trianon, with the pain still fresh, Hitler offered Budapest a chance to recover the lands it had lost, repudiating the hated Trianon process and the rapacious reparations that accompanied it. His pitch came at a crucial moment. The Depression that began in the United States in 1929 spread rapidly across Central Europe, impoverishing much of the region. So Hungary made another fateful decision and joined the Nazi movement. Caught in the middle were Hungary's Jews and Roma. Hungarian gendarmes, then later the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, would collaborate with the Nazis to cleanse some 600,000 Hungarian Jews, exterminating thousands of Roma as well. In 1945, in the final months of the war, the Soviets, invading from the East en route to Berlin, drove out the Germans and backed the takeover by Hungarian communists. For 40 years, the communists suppressed any talk of what had happened to the nation's pursued and decimated minorities.

Somorjai insists that this history is deeply relevant because so few Hungarians have confronted their past, leaving them largely ignorant of the dangers posed by extreme nationalism, or the potency of hate speech. At the same time, even today, most Hungarians say they know someone who has been the victim of a pick-pocketing, break-in, or mugging. In their telling, the perpetrator is always a Roma. And of course, Jobbik claims Jewish investors from Israel are destroying the nation's economy, while Germany is the country's largest investor. It can be tough to separate fact from hearsay, but many Hungarians still feel vulnerable, sensing that poorly paid, unmotivated police can't protect them, while the government is either unable or unwilling. Enter Jobbik. "A small flame can cause a great firestorm," says Somorjai. "I'd like to see things change in the Hungarian heart and mind, where ev-

eryone is treated the same. But people are so angry. Then some demagogue tells them he'll solve all their problems."

### *A New Breed of Demagogues*

Demagoguery is nothing new here. In the early 1990s, Jozsef Antall, Hungary's first post-communist, democratically elected prime minister, sparked fear among the nation's neighbors when he proclaimed himself premier of "15 million Hungarians." Since modern-day Hungary numbers just 10 million, Antall was clearly alluding to Hungarian minorities outside the borders. Later, Hungary prepared to enter NATO, which many Hungarians saw as joining the "winning side" of the Cold War, ensuring future security should the Russian appetite for expansion return. Yet the far-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party [MIEP], when not ranting about various Jewish conspiracies or waving flags of pre-Trianon "Greater Hungary," clamored for Swiss-style neutrality—hardly a realistic goal, given the blood-soaked history of the region straddling the crossroads between East and West.

But the MIEP was no fringe movement. By 1998 it was winning at least 5 percent of the vote and gaining seats in parliament. Among other moves to co-opt MIEP popularity, Viktor Orban, the new right-wing prime minister, floated the notion of dual citizenship to ethnic Hungarians across borders. With inter-ethnic bloodletting in the former Yugoslavia still fresh in the mind of many Eastern Europeans, Hungary's neighbors found Orban's idea particularly provocative. During his four-year term, Orban also allowed members of his own party, Fidesz, to pander to MIEP's far-right voters with comments about "traitors," "cosmopolitans" and "communist Jews." With the lines of decency breached, hate speech proliferated in the media and on the floor of Parliament. When the

Hungarian Socialist Party—heir to the old Communist Party—ousted Fidesz in 2002, the acrimony divided society more than ever. The with-us-or-against-us rhetoric intensified, in some cases turning families and friends against each other. And then Jobbik arrived on the scene.

For the next eight years, having joined forces with MIEP in 2005-2006 as a “third way” in Hungarian politics, Jobbik bided its time, growing rapidly in strength. After elections this spring, Orban returned for a second stint as prime minister with an even stronger mandate than in 1998. One of his government’s very first moves—a blatant co-opting of one of Jobbik’s campaign pledges—was to offer ethnic Hungarians dual citizenship, wherever they might live. The measure promptly sparked a nasty tit-for-tat with Slovakia, as lawmakers there threatened to revoke the citizenship of anyone who claimed a Hungarian passport.

Throughout this period of left-right musical chairs, the economy—saddled by budget deficits, long-term debt, overspending and businesses hamstrung by red tape—sputtered to a halt. Even before the global credit crunch hit in 2008, unemployment was on the rise across Hungary. In 2005, one year after it entered the EU, unemployment was 6.1 percent. By 2008, it was 7.8 percent. Today, it stands at 11.8 percent despite a 2008 bail-out package from the IMF and EU of €20 billion. All these swirling influences—historical, economic, psychological—help explain today’s trauma and frustration throughout Hungary. Nevertheless, it took two incandescent moments to harden the attitudes of a broader swath of Hungarians. The first was marked by lies; the second, by murder.

In 2002, Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany—a communist youth boss who became one of Hungary’s first post-communist oligarchs—returned to lead the Socialist Party [MSZP]. Inheriting the

machinery of the old Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party, MSZP had already steered the country from 1994 to 1998, enduring countless bumps and bruises. Gyurcsany was named prime minister in 2004, and the Socialists remained in power through the bitterly contested 2006 election, which turned on Hungary’s economic situation. During this campaign, Gyurcsany and his

## How far can such populism take a party?

ministers painted an overly rosy picture of the economy. The stark reality emerged soon after the vote, when the MSZP government was forced to launch a series of budget cuts and austerity measures demanded by the IMF and EU. “There was a choice for the Socialists to tell the truth, but they promised an easy, soft adjustment from the previous years, to make the country healthy and wealthy, and many people had bought that,” says Csaba, the Budapest economist. “Against that rhetoric, they started to put on the brakes, instead of giving it the gas, which then delivered stagnant growth. That created disenchantment on a social scale,” quickly leading to political bedlam.

### *Lies and Audio Tape*

On September 17, 2006, the nation’s media aired an audio tape of Prime Minister Gyurcsany speaking to a room of supporters. He conceded that his Socialists won re-election by lying to voters “morning, evening, and night” about the nation’s economic health.

The uproar was immediate and unprecedented. Thousands took to the streets of Budapest, and Orban branded the government “illegitimate.” Some extremists confronted riot police, who waded with little apparent restraint into

the crowd, flailing with their truncheons. The images on television shocked many Hungarians. Szedlak says he jumped in a car and rushed to the city to participate, “because I felt I should be there.”

Round-the-clock protests in front of Parliament went on for weeks, as Jobbik’s use of the red-and-white stripes emerged as an enduring banner under which the right would now march. For Jobbik, the public rage in 2006 was a godsend. Months earlier, the elections had suggested the party, which polled barely 2 percent, was little more than a blip on the nation’s political radar. Gyurcsany’s obscenity-laced mea culpa was a gift. Better still, Gyurcsany refused to quit, angering even moderate Hungarians who expected him to do the decent, democratic thing and fall on his sword. Gyurcsany, in fact, hung on until 2009, when he resigned after five years—post-communist Hungary’s longest-serving premier.

### *The Murder*

On the evening of October 5, 2006, barely three weeks after release of the Gyurcsany tape, a young Hungarian biology teacher, driving through the northeast village of Olaszliszka, struck a Gypsy girl with his car. Though there was some dispute if she was actually hit, let alone injured, an enraged mob of local Roma beat him to death in front of his two daughters. His killing unleashed a geyser of anti-Roma vitriol.

Jobbik rode this momentum into the summer of 2007, when in August, Vona unveiled the *Magyar Garda* at a public initiation ceremony. As president of both organizations, Vona told the crowd, “The Hungarian Guard has been set up in order to carry out the real change of regime and to rescue Hungarians.” The Guard, essentially a militia group not dissimilar from Hitler’s *Freikorps* before they embarked on the reign of terror that became their legacy, began marching through Roma neighbor-

hoods, railing against the *Cigánybunözés*. Half a dozen Roma were murdered across the country, their killers roaming free, and the Guard has never been implicated in the deaths or indeed in any overt violence. Still, their marches through Roma neighborhoods were deeply intimidating, and the Roma threatened to create their own self-defense forces. Although the Guard was banned by a Budapest court in December 2008, it still makes public appearances. In June, when the worst flooding in years struck the northeast, guardsmen—conspicuous in their black caps and vests—were among those tossing sandbags, winning positive publicity.

By mid-2009, many in the right-leaning media were openly campaigning against *Cigánybunözés*—in effect laying collective blame for petty crimes committed by some Roma on the entire Roma community, an estimated 500,000 people, or 5 percent of the population. Jobbik leaders, seizing a wave they clearly needed to ride, criss-crossed the country, preaching directly to ordinary folks, accusing the establishment of tiptoeing around the Roma issue, pledging to crack down and restore order and discipline. And the strategy worked. In the June 2009 elections for Hungarian representatives to the European Parliament, Jobbik hauled in an astonishing 14.8 percent of the votes. Jobbik was now a serious player, not only at home, but across Europe. It quickly reached out to ultra-right parties in Italy, Britain, Belgium and Sweden. This past April, in the latest Hungarian parliamentary elections, Jobbik did even better. While Viktor Orban and his center-right Fidesz Party returned to power with 52.7 percent of the vote, Gabor Vona and his Jobbik party surged to 16.7 percent. In the previous parliament it had no seats; it now has 47. And in its bastion in the northeast, in towns like Heves, it has truly become a force to reckon with.



*My, What Big Teeth....*

Heves is just a 90-minute drive from Budapest, reachable by a highway that cuts across the *puszta*, the storied Hungarian plains. The road winds through tidy, pastel-colored villages where locals lounge roadside on wooden benches. Rickety bicycles are the main mode of transportation here. An old woman rides past with a hoe slung over her shoulder, while an old man follows with a fishing pole on his back. Heves, given its industrial and agriculture traditions, was once a stronghold for the communists, and more recently the socialists. Each pandered to Heves's constituency: workers and farmers. Now they've swung to the right, and embraced Jobbik.

The revolt in Heves is as dramatic and illuminating as anywhere in Hungary. In the April balloting, a remarkable 32 percent of voters threw their support to Jobbik's candidate—well behind Fidesz's 53 percent, but double the result of the third-place socialists. Heves is a sleepy but clean little town, spared much of the graffiti that mars big-city Budapest. Off to the right of its leafy downtown is the boxy, communist-era town hall. Adjacent is a pleasant park with historic monuments, and a gazebo for larger events. Across the street sits the turn-of-the-century *Zeneiskola* (music school) with classical columns. The local pub is dark and smoky. Several young, jobless men play cards with the older barmaid. It's a weekday, mid-afternoon, and most of them sip the local beer, Borsodi. This wood-paneled *kocsma* is like thousands in Central Europe, though with uniquely Hungarian details. On one wall is a framed print of what they call the *Honfoglalás*—the Magyars settling the land 1,100 years ago. On another is a map of "Greater Hungary," the 64 counties that comprised the Hungarian Kingdom until Trianon broke it all apart. Such images were rare in the 1990s, but thanks in part

to Jobbik, they're on bumper stickers, posters and t-shirts.

A young, bespectacled brunette with a scorpion tattoo on her left shoulder watches the card game. She's a teacher, and has taught for 13 years in a local primary school that's entirely Roma. Among Roma advocates, such schools are notorious in Hungary and elsewhere in Central Europe—young Romani children are typically shunted to special classes and described as mentally disabled. Many

It's always easier to kick someone who's weaker—and the Gypsies are weak.

teachers burn out, says this woman, because of the "certain patterns of behavior that are sociologically coded into Romani children from an early age." While she has "learned to cope," frustrations multiply for those teachers who don't manage to adjust. They earn barely \$400 per month. "People are sick and tired of the same promises that life will get better," she says, adding that Jobbik now "gives them some hope, some new promises that something can finally change." The card-players are half-listening to her comments, but pipe up with their support for the fresh energy of Jobbik, its agenda of "national radicalism," the youth-dominated leadership, and their promise of *Szebb jövőt!* (a brighter future). They say they want jobs and to live a "normal" life. But somehow, the conversation keeps returning to their local Roma, clearly their greatest source of daily irritation. In provinces like this, poor Hungarians and Roma are chasing the same crumbs. Jobbik, at least, makes proud Hungarians feel they deserve better.

Suddenly, a voice rises above the din. "Jobbik isn't the solution," says Gabor Pal.

He's wearing a tank-top, sporting a Che Guevara tattoo on his left shoulder. "They only give one-word answers, and slogans aren't the answer. Jobbik has no concept for how to improve things. It's easier to destroy the old than to build the new." Pal speaks more like a sociologist than the unemployed truck driver he is. He says he often argues with these friends about Jobbik. Despite his own struggle for employment, he musters empathy for Roma. "Anyone with a sense of morals does not vote for Jobbik," Pal says quietly, seated away from the card game. "Common sense tells you that pulling a machine gun on anyone is not a solution. It's always easier to kick someone who's weaker—and the Gypsies are weak—than it is to help someone. The Gypsies are the scapegoats for Jobbik. People are tired and frustrated from their work, their life, their own problems. They don't want complex answers and hard truths. They want simple solutions, and that's how Jobbik communicates, so people don't have to dig deeply into these issues."

A few blocks away, an ice cream parlor with a red awning provides some shade on a blazing hot day. There, an older man in dirty blue overalls licks a chocolate cone. My interpreter introduces me. The man is immediately suspicious. "Is he with the left-liberal media? Because I won't speak with him." I ask why he feels that way. The man, who tells me his name is Gabriel, opens up despite himself. "With every issue, from a little mouse, the leftist media makes an elephant," he says. "Ninety percent of the Hungarian media is owned by them. If a white beats a Gypsy, all TV stations would cover it. If the opposite happens, the leftists cover it up." I ask him what he does for a living. "*Paraszt vagyok*," he says, smiling. "I'm a peasant." For good measure, he adds in both German and English: "*Bauer*. Farmer." He grows grains and cereals, just outside town. It takes very little coaxing to have him ex-

plain how Jobbik won him over. "It's the only party that takes up the problem of *Cigánybunözés*," he says. "They said they'd add 3,000 police to set up more security offices nationwide." I ask what he thinks of my plan to visit the Roma neighborhood nearby. "I don't recommend it," he says. "You wouldn't come out in one piece."

### *Listening to the Roma*

One of the very last streets off Heves' main road is the Roma quarter, distinguished by the sudden change from pavement to a dirt track. It's the only unpaved road around. If Hungarians are frustrated with their lot, they should speak with their Roma neighbors. The residents of the Roma quarter are eager to share their side of the story.

With fields and farm animals behind them, a whiff of manure hangs over the neighborhood, home to some 2,000 people. Half the houses boast a relatively fresh coat of yellow, orange or blue paint, while others seem to be slowly crumbling. Crowding the middle of the rocky, rutted road, Roma men recall the old days of communism, when buses pulled onto the street collecting workers for factories, mines, or manual-labor, or for women to pick fruits and vegetables during harvest. Those opportunities evaporated when state-run industries collapsed in the early days of capitalism. Whatever menial jobs remain are generally handed out to Hungarians, not Roma, who are mostly low-skilled workers, and must scrape by on the bottom rungs of society's ladder.

Indeed, the Roma form the group most nostalgic for the communist era. Party-imposed full employment meant all had jobs and a minimum standard of living. In the post-communist years, Roma were all too often the first ones fired, the last hired. In some of their communities, joblessness runs as high as 80 or 90 percent. Some resort to petty crimes, or worse. But these



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“Jobbik isn’t the solution,” says Gabor Pal.

problems clearly cross all cultural and ethnic lines. Though discrimination does exist for the Roma, for the broader Hungarian population, too, there are simply none of the traditional jobs left.

“When we go for a job, many look at us and say, ‘No work,’” says Laszlo Molnar, 36, a Roma who earns money by cutting grass in town. “We all feel this on our skin. Youngsters here want to work. Ask my 16-year-old son. He wants to build homes. His friend wants to be a carpenter.” Talk of Jobbik and the Hungarian Guard elicits heated reactions like, “They want to finish the job of Hitler” and “burn and kill people.”

“I don’t know what they mean by ‘Gypsy criminality,’” says Jenő Hegedus, 60. “Perhaps stealing vegetables for something to cook and eat. But that’s because we don’t have any jobs or money.” Ferenc Konkoy adds, “We’re not afraid of the

Guard, because the government and police are on our side. If the Guard came in here, they wouldn’t get out. Should we let them do what they want with us? We don’t have weapons, but we have lots of shovels.”

### *Heves and Beyond*

After finishing his maintenance job at the kindergarten, Szedlak agrees to meet in the party’s new, still under construction office space. Bits of plaster and cigarette butts are strewn across the unfinished floor of what will be the main meeting room. In one corner sits a huge mound of clothes, food and cleaning detergent collected by Jobbik, which they will deliver to flood victims. Jobbik has 53 chapters in this county alone, and while Szedlak says the Heves chapter has just 18 active members, this room looks big enough to hold an audience of hundreds.

The past four years of socialist rule, coupled with Gyurcsany's lies, finally forced many Hungarians "to pay attention to what's really going on," Szedlak says. A kitschy plastic clock, cut in the shape of pre-Trianon Greater Hungary, hangs above the door of his office. Szedlak suggests that negotiations with his nation's neighbors should result in peacefully redrawing the border and recovering these lands—an unrealistic, unimaginable scenario for the neighbors.

When the 2006 demonstrations failed to oust the government, he says, "We realized we needed a more democratic tool—a party—to change things from within the parliament." Even Szedlak is surprised to see how quickly Jobbik gained popularity. How much higher it climbs (or if it proves a flash in the pan) depends on three variables: an economic rebound; Orbán's ability to deliver on Fidesz's promises; and Jobbik's own performance in Parliament.

The new government has already rattled world markets. In June, one Hungarian official warned that the nation's leaders were working to avoid "the Greek road" to financial ruin. These remarks triggered a Hungarian currency crisis, and the official was swiftly rebuked for exaggerating. In July, Hungary broke off talks with the IMF, which may have bolstered Orbán's tough-guy stance among his voters and those further to the right, but sent another unsettling signal to the markets. In August, though, his government predicted the economy would expand by 0.6 percent of the next year, triple what the socialists had projected.

Meanwhile, analysts expect Orbán to take a series of steps to undermine his muscular new rival on the right and lure Jobbik supporters into his camp. Since the elections, Jobbik leader Vona has already accused Orbán of scheming to "eliminate" the party. Orbán, in turn, is now pushing to classify the *Magyar Garda* as "desert-

ers" who represent a direct challenge to the country's formal defense forces. (He's also taking legislative strides to cripple opposition parties that has centrists and liberals further worried about the erosion of Hungarian democracy.)

While an economy on the mend would neutralize Jobbik's appeal, analysts say the party must eventually show that it stands for something—not merely against everything. Jobbik's supporters have come to the party battered, abused and angry. It's as if a parent beats a child, but the child would never dare, or is unable, to strike back. Desperate for empowerment, the child turns to kick the dog. Support for Jobbik-style radicalism is more than vote-the-bums-out virulence. As the Hungarian economist Laszlo Csaba says, it's "about breaking the necks of those governing."

Szedlak remains optimistic, as he and his colleagues build for the future. "All the people on the streets and in the pubs are talking about the same problems—and only Jobbik is talking about them, too," he says, lighting another cigarette. "Hungarians don't see other politicians carrying through with their words and deeds. Only Jobbik does what it says it'll do."

But how far can populism take a party?

The Budapest think tank Political Capital estimates the Hungarian thirst for radical-right extremism tops out at around 20 percent of society—just a few percentage points above Jobbik's April election results. This is not dissimilar to radical-right politicians' drawing power in other major European nations. Even France's volatile right-wing leader Jean-Marie Le Pen managed to draw just 17.8 percent of the vote when he made it, astonishingly, into the final round of French presidential elections against Jacques Chirac in 2002, with Chirac pulling down 82.2 percent. Le Pen's vote in the final round was little different from what he

managed against 15 opponents in the first round. Fearing the consequences of a far-right victory, however, socialists, communists and centrists of all stripes held their noses and bolted for the moderate-right Chirac in the final round.

Hungary's case may prove to be somewhat different, for many reasons that cut to the heart of what it means to be Hungarian—a small, landlocked, newly democratic nation at the crossroads of Europe. As political capital analyst Alex Kuli puts it, “How is Jobbik going to keep its anti-establishment zeal when it's now in fact part of the establishment itself? When Fidesz begins those difficult, unpopular decisions that any government has to make, then that's Jobbik's chance to go into action. The party still has room

to grow.” If Jobbik's popularity hits that ceiling and the economy improves, Hungarian democracy may indeed dodge a bullet. Only temporarily, though.

An underlying trait of the Hungarians will remain unchanged: the tendency to blame everyone but themselves for whatever ails. Spasms of hatred will remain a cyclical phenomenon, rearing its ugly head during tougher times—and exploiting a Trianon wound that will never heal. Hungary certainly has legions of those who defend democracy and human rights. But illiberal forces seem increasingly to outnumber them. When the finger-pointing and scape-goating begins anew, too few are speaking out. As the Hungarian journalist Laszlo Somorjai says, “Everything is possible if I don't act against evil.” ●