The Romani movement: a love and vocation — Jenő Setét’s reflections on a life of activism

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Editor’s introduction

Jenő Setét is one of the most prominent and experienced Romani civil rights activists in contemporary Hungary. In this edited piece, Jenő reflects on why and how he became an activist, and his hopes and aspirations for the Romani movement and people in Hungary and Europe in these challenging and troubled times.

Starting out

I have been working in this field since my youth, and it was a conscious choice after finishing high school to become an activist. So, after initially working as a decorator, I embarked upon a course for social workers at Tündérhegy, which I graduated from in 1992. Today, the programme I attended operates as a social work department at János Wesley College.
in Budapest. Becoming part of a social movement is like love: we do not think why it happens, it just does. My whole life is wrapped up around Romani emancipation. Why? I do not really know, but this is the aim of my life, my vocation.

Through the Romani movement, I discovered another world; for instance, in the movement, I became aware of my identity. At the summer camps of the Romani movement, I became familiar with the Romani language and culture. A notable influence was Aladár Horváth. Aladár played a huge role in establishing the entire Hungarian Romani movement, defining a clear set of values centred on social justice and community action. A decade ago, my fellow campaigners and I established a non-formal movement, and in 2017, we became an association, Ide tartozunk (‘We Belong Here’). Its mission is to build a new type of leadership in the Romani human rights and emancipation movement. We are involved in advocacy and cultural promotion (we organize Roma Pride, a peaceful march and public demonstration around the richness of Romani culture), we provide capacity building for the community, we participate in research to investigate and understand Romani exclusion, we conduct monitoring, and we also undertake casework.

To me, Romani emancipation means ensuring equality of opportunities and social acceptance in terms of community relations and institutional practices towards Roma. So, Romani emancipation is not just an abstract sociological construct, but rather an indispensable ingredient to achieve a better life for communities. Emancipation is multifaceted and it is needed to happen in many spheres of Romani life, such as political, cultural and economic representation of the Roma.

Emancipation is measurable not only in sociological terms, but also in the presence or absence of a political, cultural and economic representation of the Roma. This is a central belief of our association.
We Belong Here association

Our association disproved many stereotypes, such as, for example, that the Roma are unable to self-organize or act without donor support. For more than a decade, we were an informal movement; we could prioritize our community ideas and interests, and value our own aims and plans. We did not care about tenders, indicators and accounting deadlines, which can often endanger creativity and stifle the community voice. However, in recent years, we became a formal organization, and this granted us the levers for change and more legitimacy for entering into negotiations with the authorities. However, all this was at the expense of flexibility and innovation in community action.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is where my work is based, which is a non-profit organization founded by the US State Department to promote democracy and develop civil society; the Open Society Foundation (OSF), the organization of George Soros, provided a support framework for start-up organizations and we got a small grant from them that was enough to create a tiny basic infrastructure, meaning we have an office, laptops and so on. One thing everyone needs to know: we remain guided by healthy principles and we prioritize the ideas and demands of our community centred on social justice and respect for Romani culture. If someone does not agree with our ethics, they should not fund us.

Activism and ethnicity

I think the pro-Romani organizations (non-Roma-led organizations) that help Roma are in a stronger position than Roma-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They have stronger economic power and ability to exert pressure, and their lobbying power is much more effective as well. The empowerment of the Roma-led NGOs is needed because,
otherwise, Romani emancipation cannot be achieved, but there is no way that an equal opportunity movement can be created without a more professional, stronger representation of the community itself. It is not normal that the interests of Roma are not represented by Roma-led organizations.

On the other hand, we do have Roma-led structures that need to be reformed. I would talk about the current ‘minority self-government’ system, which, in our view, is incapable of representing the interests of the community as it is functioning in practice more as a ‘governmental branch organization’ disconnected from community realities and part of political games.

In order to change the quality of Romani self-organization, the participants need to be more honest, more resilient and better prepared, breaking with the previous political practices. Second, instead of the current paternalistic system, Romani self-organization needs to be able to attract resources without state supervision and control. Otherwise, if you pay me, I owe you a debt. If you do not pay me, but instead I raised the money, then you cannot control me. So, the Romani movement must break with the habit of expecting all resources from the state, while, at the same time, formulating its criticism of the government that runs the state. The Romani movement must create its own resources in order to have that autonomy in formulating and representing the interests of the community.

We need more social allies working alongside us. Sometimes, we Romani activists put on an ethnic robe but we also need to find common ground that connects us to non-Romani people. A social coalition and broad-based collaboration can be formed, and we need to move forward in this.

**Győngyöspata protest**

Hungary is going through difficult times as the government under Viktor Orbán has become increasingly authoritarian and Hungary is becoming a pariah among European democracies.
Orbán’s system is twofold; there is a ‘showcase’ part, whereby its allied Romani organizations and actors benefit, namely, those in control of the local and national Romani self-government, they are his puppets! One of the Hungarian Roma supporting Orbán and the FIDESZ is the MEP Lívia Járóka, now Vice-President of the European Parliament. At first, we welcomed this as no Romani person has held such a high position since the existence of the European Union (EU). We were happy and wished her a lot of success. However, we have also seen with regret in recent years that party loyalty is stronger to her than her Romani identity. I find it terrible when instead of meaningful speeches or statements, she prefers party propaganda and is an apologist for what is happening in Hungary.

Since the point of Orbán’s political agenda is to extract revenues from the poor and distribute it to the classes above them, the reality is that the system as a whole tends to push Romani communities downwards on an ethnic or social basis. However, it does even more damage in that they have made hatred part of the daily political routine to increase prejudice against Roma, and to create and maintain a stigmatizing and intimidating social climate against Roma as a whole, which I believe is extremely conscious political behaviour. We Belong Here organized a national protest in Budapest in February 2020 for solidarity with the Romani children of Gyöngyöspata (who have been scarred by segregation) and for the protection of an independent judiciary in Hungary. The Gyöngyöspata case relates to a Romani settlement in a rural village that attracted international attention when it suffered from far-right paramilitaries in 2011. The village has also suffered forms of segregation, leading to a court ruling that the community should receive compensation on account of school segregation. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated that the ruling violated the nation’s ‘sense of justice’ and added:

[O]f course, if someone is ethnically ranked in a class, it is obviously segregation. But let’s say that classifying
someone on the basis of their capacity for education, their capacity to absorb knowledge – where there are obviously more Gypsy children in such a village – this is not segregation but catching up. (Rorke, 2020)

This was an attempt to justify segregation before the final decision of the Supreme Court had finalized its position; fortunately, despite this meddling in the legal process, the Supreme Court upheld the decision in May 2020. (For a fuller discussion of Gyöngyöspata and the state of democracy in Hungary, see Chapter Four by Rorke.)

I am old but I have never seen any movement by Roma for Roma in such huge numbers. Since the regime change in 1989, this was one of the largest civil actions made by Roma. According to media estimates, the mass protest had around 4,000–5,000 people; this is unprecedented in Hungary. We are very proud of it – that we were the ones who could achieve it – moreover, with Roma and non-Roma together.

Let us clarify what a demonstration is for. A demonstration is not a solution, but an expression of the position of a particular community’s will in a given situation. We must decide whether to remain silent and thus passively assist in such an offence to human dignity and the rule of law, or we assume that we will speak out and even become a target. We Belong Here decided to take action; we wanted to express the view that a politician, neither of the Left nor of the Right, should have the right to intervene in an ongoing lawsuit. Judicial independence is such a fundamental value for us that we are determined to defend it against anyone.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

We have been living in a transformed world for weeks now with the COVID-19 pandemic (time of interview, March 2020). We do not know what impact the epidemiological situation will have not only on people, but on society as a whole and on
the political world. We do not know what we are up against. If the country’s economy and political structure collapse, it will be similar to the post-Second World War period. I cannot estimate what impact this unprecedented situation will have; people are absorbed in their own fears and dreads, and not the question of political and social justice. Should we forget about these? No! We should not, but we need to sense that the priorities are shifting. I say this because I may have protested against the government in February but, today, I say that in this epidemiological emergency, we can do nothing but follow the government’s instructions with reference to measures to save lives – however, in the long term, we must ensure our democracy is not a victim to the pandemic.4

I will support this government when it comes to disaster relief – be it a flood or an epidemic. However, it is also a certainty that the government cannot be disciplined by me or social movements, but the social majority can curb and shape the government and will have its chance in the 2022 election. This is something the present government should reflect upon.

The EU

There are three levels of government: local, national and international. I do not think we can ignore any of them. Given that Hungary is an EU member state, the EU has a decisive role in determining what values, what goals, it represents and how it shapes its policy.

The 2004 accession of Hungary to the EU brought with it the chance and the hope that the social exclusion, injustices and disadvantages of the Roma would be alleviated or eliminated. Sadly, the EU has proved to be weak in asserting its own democratic political and social values in the member states, and has even become a major financier of existing social inequalities by providing EU funds without human rights conditionalities and/or proper oversight of the correct use of funds, and has proven to be weak in countering state-supported racism,
pogroms or hate policies. It is incredible that despite explicitly ‘anti-Brussels’ rhetoric, Hungary still has unhindered access to the EU’s billions. It is an astonishing sin that the resources ostensibly directed at eradicating inequality are, in reality, being used to strengthen segregation and racism.

For example, in Hungary today, schools that segregate Romani children can easily and do receive EU financial support via the Hungarian government’s distribution of EU funding. If the EU, even though its values uphold equality, provides financial support to schools that segregate on the basis of ethnicity, something needs to change as there seems to be a mismatch between actions and values. The role of the EU cannot be left out, neither on the basis of democratic values, nor in the system of resource allocation.

Europe does not exist without nationalities, and we cannot accept a politics that does not address the Romani community. We are European, Hungarian and Roma. If you recognize only one of our three identities, we take it as a serious offence. The EU must also address the specificities of Romani communities and not cover up our existence and our problems under the authority of some kind of generalized EU ‘colour-blind’ social strategy because, for example, when Romani people suffer discrimination, they suffer on account of being Roma, even if they are otherwise EU citizens and if it conflicts with the EU’s own directive on equal treatment. The Romani movement and the Roma have a constructive attitude towards the EU but, at the same time, we must defend our own interests very strongly vis-à-vis the EU and a New Social Europe.

**Editor’s conclusion**

The interview with Jenő Setét demonstrates the passion and dynamism at the Romani grass roots but also support for the concepts and principles promoted in this book, namely, the need for the empowerment and self-organization of
marginalized citizens and solidarity in these challenging and turbulent times.

Notes

1 The modern Romani movement in Hungary was started in 1957 by Mária László, who sought to fight against racial discrimination and for equal rights through cultural means. Between 1978 and 2008, János Bársony and Ágnes Daróczi, respected activists working for Romani rights, as well as several others, organized cultural camps for the Romani community, which aimed to strengthen Romani identity.

2 See: https://idetartozunk.org/we-belong-here-association/

3 In Hungary, there is a system of local Romani minority self-governments and a national one that was established in 1993 and funded by the state. These give largely advisory platforms to the Roma. It is dominated by a pro-Orbán faction called Lungo Drom. Critics have complained about state interference and a lack of capacity building and internal democracy (Kovats, 2000).

4 The Orbán administration assumed unprecedented powers in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, allowing the current FIDESZ government to rule by decree and the possibility of being imprisoned for up to five years for spreading disinformation, a measure tantamount to an attack on free speech and independent journalism.

5 The Central European Roma Civil Monitor reported in its 2020 synthesis report that EU funding has been given to schools that uphold segregation in Hungary.

References

