“Human to Human”
The Politics of Recognition in the Rural Local Contexts of Hungarian Roma Exclusion/Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Roma in Hungary have been overrepresented among the socioeconomically disadvantaged as a result of centuries-old discriminatory social structures. This fact has caused serious misunderstandings and obscurity in the policies aimed at "integration," "assimilation," "catching up," or "inclusion." This thesis departs from Szalai's normative argument that conceptual clarification and the disentanglement of the Roma "question's" socioeconomic and minority circumstances depends on "recognition." Through a case study of a Northeast Hungarian village, it investigates rural local Roma politics and the potential of recognizing Roma as equal human beings for clearing this conceptual fog. The study finds that although recognition does appear in some actions and manifestations, the systematic exploitation of local Roma governments and socioeconomically vulnerable Roma voters hinders recognition and the development of a language that could turn into political action against anti-Roma social structures.

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FETE - Emerging Settlements

HNSIS - Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy

ORÖ - National Roma Self-Government

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

The comprehensive segregation and exclusion of Roma persons have been present in Hungary, Europe, and beyond ever since Roma or "Gypsy" identity exists. In her seminal work, Szalai (2000) highlights that there is a *social* (i.e. sociopolitical and socioeconomic) and a *minority* "circumstance"[1] or aspect present in what she calls the "Gypsy question." These interact in a complex – if not inextricable – network of societal causations and realities. This thesis is interested in how the two circumstances enter the political realm.

When Hungary transitioned from an authoritarian communist sociopolitical system to a capitalist liberal democracy at the turn of the 1990s, the "social circumstance dissolved in the minority circumstance" (Szalai 2000, 539, own translation). In other words, the social circumstance, which drove or informed the communist rhetoric and policy of aggressive assimilation, was replaced by a social, cultural, political, and economic system in which questions of identity, majority-minority relations, and multiculturalism are relevant, important, and even dominant. According to Szalai, to unravel and separate the two circumstances, thereby overcoming the conceptual obscurity inherent in politics (dynamics and processes), policy, and the polity (structures and institutions), the key is "*recognition*," an abstract ideal that implicates notions of autonomy, empowerment, and reconciliation within the minority and with regards to majority-minority relations. Although the 2011 Act on the Rights of Nationalities opened a new chapter in minority law and parallelly, the government took a strong majoritarian and illiberal turn, the general political attitude towards the "Gypsy question" and the obscurity of policy regarding its social and minority aspects has not changed.

[1] Here, "social" is used in the sense of "noting or relating to activities designed to remedy or alleviate certain unfavorable conditions of life in a community, especially among poor people" ('Social' 2012).

Rather than articulating normative arguments or thoroughly analyzing the Hungarian government's policies, this thesis investigates the nature of Roma politics in the local political arena through a village's case study. A rural local focus is necessitated by, on the one hand, Hungary's minority representation system's big potential: local minority populations can elect local nationality self-governments the presidents of which delegate representatives to a national nationality self-government. However, empirical literature (e.g., Kállai 2015; Roma Civil Monitor 2022, 15; Vizi 2015) show that they misfunction. On the other hand, empirical evidence regarding local Roma politics is rare. In "recent years, there have been no researches based on empirical data collection, so our experiences can only be formulated on the basis of statistical sources and non-representative opinions of Roma communities" (Kállai 2015, 110, own translation).

My research investigates influential local actors'[2] diagnoses of and potential solutions for Roma exclusion. I am interested in a) the vertical relationship between the local and national levels, that is, the local political level's independence from national politics'/policies' influence; b) the horizontal relationship between each local actor; and c) whether "recognition" as an ideal within the multiculturalist discourse and the "struggle for recognition" (Szalai 2000, 552) – the "coefficient" of a successful Roma policy safeguarding minority rights (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016, 119) – appear in local actors' political imagination. I intend to shed light on the relationship between theory and practice and between the macro and the micro levels in a conceptual and operational framework that tries to retain focus on the structure as well as the agent. In this sense, my research is informed by multiple disciplines' approaches, foci, and scholarly traditions, including anthropology, sociology, and political science.

In Chapter 2 I explain how the politics of recognition relates to the local aspects of Roma politics; review how state policies toward Roma integration, assimilation, catching up, inclusion, etc. have

[2] I use "actor" not only to refer to "people who participate in politics" (Daddow, Jones, and Norton 2018, 13) but institutions, bodies, organizations, etc., which exercice collective influence, too.

changed since the 1980s; and critically analyze Hungary's minority representation system, arriving at the hypothesis that the sheer constitutional existence of local nationality governments does not guarantee autonomy or recognition. After explaining my research's methodology, I provide information about my interlocutors and "influential" local actors and describe local Roma persons' problems and opportunities (or lack thereof), particularly but not exclusively through influential actors' viewpoints. Then, I explain how the overlap or conflict of the "Gypsy question's" social and minority circumstances in the jurisdictions, spheres of influence, and strategies of a government-related "catching-up" initiative and the local Roma nationality self-government results in a local political contest. Lastly, I conclude by assessing the local Roma government's possibilities and its place and role in minority and social policies, elections, and the polity.

CHAPTER 2 – ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Politics of Recognition

According to Taylor (1994), "due recognition is … a vital human need" (26). Trying to reconcile communitarian and liberal approaches to identity and multiculturalism, he argues that an ideal political community ensures the rights of individuals but at the same time, allows individuals to freely choose their identity. He points out that identity is dialogical: one's identity is also determined by the community (cited in Kóczé 2016). Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 2003) criticizes the liberal approach of Taylor, Kymlicka (1996), and Honneth (Fraser and Honneth 2003), arguing that redistribution and intersectionality are aspects overlooked by the liberal school.

The politics of recognition was first introduced to Hungarian scholarship by Szalai (2000). According to her – echoing Honneth's and Fraser's "redistribution or recognition" debate –, there is a *social* and a *minority* circumstance present in the question of Roma's integration. While "social" refers to the overrepresentation of Roma among the socioeconomically disadvantaged, the "minority" circumstance concerns the fact that the Roma community is not recognized and/or is misrecognized by the majority. On the one hand, recognition seems to be an important step toward ending the effectively second-class citizen status of many Roma persons. On the other hand, as Vajda (2018) points out, cultural differences between the perceived groups of an envisioned multicultural society should not be overemphasized and individuals should not be categorized and stigmatized based on their essentialized group identities. Szalai argues that essentially, it is the interweave of the social and minority circumstances that have hindered successes in tackling exclusion (Szalai 2000, 538–39). While Szalai identifies "recognition" as the key to successful conceptual clarification, Vajda (2018) warns that the politics of recognition, and especially the liberal-multiculturalist approach to it, might go too far in stressing cultural differences through affirmative action thereby risking being essentializing in its understanding of cultural traditions.

The politics of recognition is about the "struggle for recognition," a collective, community-centered claim connected to the identity of individuals. Importantly, recognition's subjects are interpersonal and intercultural relations: "The stake of recognition is the quality of our relation to others" (Szalai 2000, 555). However, its ultimate goal is to build "self-confidence", "self-respect", and "self-esteem" (555) in the individual or collective psyches of oppressed minorities. This is how their grievances can subsequently be articulated and this is how a language can be created which allows the minority to insert these into the political discourse. Only then can the two circumstances of the "Gypsy question" be disentangled.

To concretize, this overlap happens when the meanings of "Roma" and "poor" are treated synonymously. However, the fact has to be underlined that while only 7% of the non-Roma population lived in "severe material deprivation" in 2020, nearly half (46.3%) of the Roma population did (Hungarian Central Statistics Office cited in Roma Civil Monitor 2022, 8). Therefore, although Roma people are overrepresented among the poor, the conflation of policies targeted at, or the politics related to Roma persons and those living in severe material deprivation may exaggerate the size of the intersection where the set of materially deprived persons and the set of Roma persons meet (Figure 1.).

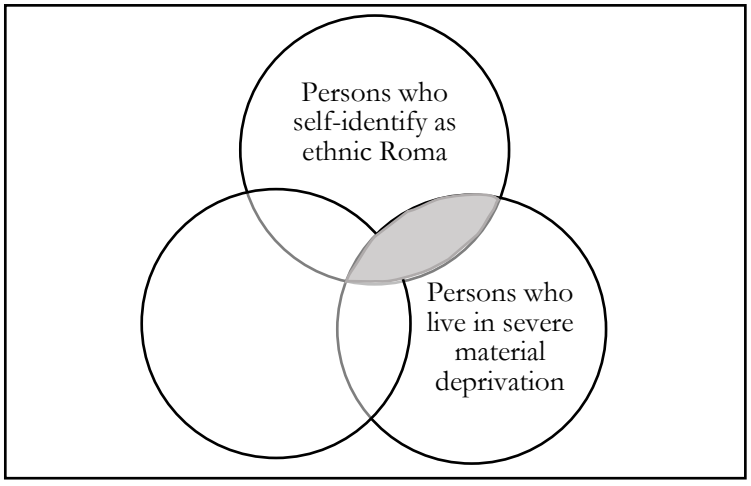

Figure 1. The intersection of the groups of Roma and materially deprived persons

2.2 Historical Paradigms in Hungarian Roma Policy

During the state socialist era, collective rights, as defined in the Western human rights regime, were deemed redundant, collective identities other than class were prohibited, and ethnic minorities were being pushed, if not forced, to assimilate (Csepeli and Örkény 2015; Majtényi and Majtényi 2016; Szalai 2000). In this sense, the "minority circumstance" of Roma exclusion was virtually absent from policy or politics and exclusively focused on the "social circumstance" (Szalai 2000).

The regime change of the late 1980s and early 1990s was a paradigm shift in three ways. Firstly, a liberal human rights regime was adopted. The 1993 Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities declared the right of the individual to choose their own national or ethnic identity. Furthermore, it established the right for ethnic and national minorities to create national-level and local self-governments which were to be the "organizational manifestations" (Kállai 2015, 63) of cultural autonomy, the Act's self-described ideational foundation. Although the law has been criticized as a political tool rather than a genuine example of multiculturalism (Szalai 2000; Kállai 2015; Majtényi and Majtényi 2016), it was an important step towards (legal) autonomy. Secondly, the concurrent shift to free market capitalism led to the closure of redundant factories and the abandonment of vulnerable social groups, among whom Roma persons were overrepresented due to preexisting anti-Roma social structures. To illustrate, sixty-nine thousand Roma (about one-third of the Roma population) lost their jobs between 1985 and 1993 and 55% of positions filled by Roma people ceased to exist. The rate goes down to 30% if non-Roma people are counted as well (Kemény, Jánky, and Lengyel 2004, 97). Thirdly, regarding the "minority circumstance", the "second coming of nationalism" thawed anti-Roma rhetoric and violence and pushed Roma people further to the margins of society (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016), culminating in a series of anti-Roma hate crimes in the late 2000s. In a study from 1994, 70% of respondents said that an increase in the Roma population is a danger to social security (Enyedi, Fábián, and Sik 2004). Hence, the social and minority aspects have been in constant interplay with each other.

The latest paradigm shift came with the politics of illiberal majoritarianism in 2010 and the 2011 Nationalities Act which overwrote the 1993 Act. The Orbán-governments' Roma policy/politics is self-contradictory when it comes to unraveling social and minority aspects. On the one hand, the regime's majoritarian and ethnonationalist logic constantly reinforces the idea that democracy is the rule of the majority and accordingly, government belongs to the ethnic and political majority. For instance, after a court ruled that restitution should be given to the families of sixty-three Roma children who had been unlawfully segregated on one suboptimal, underendowed school floor, the prime minister said: "it is unacceptable for the majority to feel alien in its homeland, and while I am prime minister, this will not happen" (radio broadcast quoted in Csuhaj 2020, own translation). He added that he will do anything in his power to change the law so that such rulings would be prevented in the future ('Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Quality of the National Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Hungary' 2022, 18). Furthermore, while Roma party politics has been dominated by the pro-Orbán *Lungo Drom*, the governing parties' "illiberal anti-multiculturalist agenda" (Körtvélyesi 2023, 251) permeates the Roma community's internal politics, limiting its capacity for self-determination (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016; 'Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Quality of the National Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Hungary' 2022).

On the other hand, the social aspects of exclusion are often overemphasized and the "Gypsy question" is often conceptualized as equal to the issue of poverty ('Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Quality of the National Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Hungary' 2022, 8). The 'Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy 2030' (2021), Hungary's self-described national Roma strategic framework, purportedly aligned with the *EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation* (2020), reflects a logic that classifies the Roma community under materially deprived groups rather than treating it as a community the exclusion of which is a result of a complex set of factors and as such, should be looked at from multiple angles ('Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Quality of the National Strategic Framework for

Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Hungary' 2022, 8). Thus, while the symbolic level of politics bases its diagnosis on the minority circumstance (ethnonationalist majoritarianism), the official policy *misrecognizes* the Roma community as synonymous with the poor (social circumstance).

2.3 Roma Representation and Politics on the National and Local Levels

Although Hungary's minority representation system seems to be an unusually strong guarantee for autonomy by European standards (Pásztor 2019), thus an important terrain for the country's minorities to act in and voice their interests, decades of experience have dissolved this illusion.

According to Political Capital ('A választási rendszer tarthatatlanságára is rámutatott az ORÖ kaotikus közgyűlése' 2022), a leading think tank, the meaningful representation of Roma in parliament has been precluded since the very existence of the 2011 Nationality Act. First, if a Roma voter decides to vote for the nationality list rather than choose between national party lists, there is only one option left because the National Roma Self-Government (ORÖ), whose representatives are nominated by directly elected local Roma self-governments' presidents, puts up only one nationality list. Second, a powerful political force can easily influence a potential nationality representative's actions and votes in parliament as it was the case with the German nationality representative who closely cooperated with Fidesz throughout the previous election cycle. Similarly, Roma politics is highly divided along the party-political fault line. Although the Roma community had the right to put up a nationality list for the 2022 general election, the pro-Fidesz Lungo Drom, the ORÖ's biggest nominating organization, and independent candidates would not accede to nominating a leading candidate from the other side. Consequently, the ORÖ could not put up a list, and they lost their chance to have a nationality representative in parliament with a right to vote. Thus, there are currently no institutional guarantees for meaningful minority representation on the national level.

Another factor that precludes the ability of the Roma community to unite politically on the national level is that the different Roma groups – Beas, Olah, and Romungro – living in Hungary do not necessarily see their interests align to an extent which would justify them taking a stand as a unitary political community. Although Beas and Olah speak Hungarian, they are seen as less assimilated than Romungro ("Hungarian Roma"). Because their interests and grievances may translate into politics in different ways, fulfilling the majority society's unjustified demand to unite as one minority is problematic (Szalai 2000, 560-561). This demand is manifested in censuses that do not distinguish between the different subgroups, or in the constitution which mentions Roma as a unitary ethnic minority.

Although the national-level representation and general political empowerment of Roma are hindered by multiple factors, it could be argued that in the local political arena, especially where they form a local majority, Roma should have a bigger level of autonomy and influence. However, since national political dynamics and processes influence voting behavior less outside cities (Kákai 2015, 224), the extent to which local political actors can take direct, independent, and meaningful actions is far from clear. Because consequently, local Roma politics cannot be described as a miniature of national Roma politics, I employ a micro-level and rural focus in the following.

2.4 Methodology and Ethical Considerations

To investigate these considerations empirically, I discuss a case study of Patakmező[3], a village in the northeastern Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county. Patakmező is legally a "large village" (*nagyközség*) which means that it has a population size above 3,000. It is not particularly isolated: the nearest city is seven kilometers away and there are direct bus lines to Budapest and Miskolc, the county's capital.

[3] The village's and its streets' name(s) are AI-generated pseudonyms. To preserve the anonymity of an interlocutor who spoke on terms of anonymity, I do not provide any specificities about the geography, demographics, etc. of the village, so their identity remains untraceable.

I conducted four interviews in Hungarian in person between May 2-7, 2023. They were recorded and transcribed. As my interlocutors are politicians and social workers affiliated with multiple powerful organizations, they are not members of particularly vulnerable groups to whom my research could cause significant harm.

The most significant ethical question that arises is connected to the fact that I am a non-Roma person researching a topic connected to Roma persons. If research, and especially anthropological research, is done about the Roma community, its members have to be involved to the fullest extent possible. I believe that although this is an important question to raise, this research is not necessarily research *on* those persons that are for some reason or another disadvantaged; it is about those influential political actors who have a say in this matter. Whether I cite sources who do not identify as Roma is not because my research did not follow these ethical guidelines. It is because my research is not exactly targeted at those persons who are socially excluded because of their Roma identity; it is targeted at the ideas, thoughts, or opinions of those actors I label as "influential."

CHAPTER 3 – ANALYSIS

3.1 Influential Local Actors

My interlocutors included the mayor, the local Roma self-government's president, and two social workers from *Jelenlét*.

Jelenlét ("Presence") is a model program run by a Christian order in Patakmező. The country-wide program was developed by the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (or the Order of Malta), incorporated into and – since 2019 – coordinated by a government program called Emerging Settlements[4] (FETE) overseen by the Ministry of Interior. FETE's main coordinator is the Prime Minister's commissioner and the Order of Malta's vice-president Miklós Vecsei. Although there are currently 178 participating settlements, the first ones were all operated by the Order of Malta. The Patakmező Jelenlét program currently receives funding from their order, private donors, and EU funds including the Next Generation EU recovery fund.[5]

The mayor started her third cycle in 2019 when she received two-thirds of votes cast as a candidate of Fidesz-KDNP, Orbán's governing coalition. The Roma president, also a Fidesz-KDNP representative in the local government's representative body, was nominated by the pro-Fidesz Lungo Drom for the 2019 local nationality local government elections. There are three Fidesz-KDNP representatives in the body (including the mayor and the Roma president) and four independent representatives.

[4] The original Hungarian is *Felzárkózó Települések*. While *települések* translates to "human settlement", *felzárkózó* has been translated in various ways. Although the official translation is "emerging" ('Emerging Settlements' n.d.), many have translated it as "catching-up" which implies an ideal developmental state *to which* one has to "catch up." "Emerging" does not necessarily reflect the ethnocentricity ('Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Quality of the National Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Hungary' 2022) or paternalism (Kende 2023) inherent in *felzárkózó*.

[5] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.

3.2 The Local Roma Population's Situation

First, although the decision to choose Patakmező as a case study reflects a conviction that it is a Roma-majority village, only c. 20% selected "Gypsy(Roma)" (*cigány[roma]*) ethnicity in the 2011 census. Estimations put the share of the local Roma population above at least 40%: a 1992 estimation at c. 50% (Kertesi 1998, 341–52), another 2003 estimation by the Gypsy Minority Government[6] at c. 45% (Kállai 2004, 128–29), and all of my interlocutors say the number is certainly above 50%, but more likely to be around 60-70%. Estimations are, of course, based on phenotypically, sartorially, culturally, etc. racialized external presuppositions of those people who, for any reason, regard a person or a household in their surroundings Roma. However, as Kertesi (1998, 15–16) points it out as well, it is the context of interpersonal or intergroup relations *between* Roma and non-Roma persons in which serious social problems, such as discrimination, prejudice, or segregation, arise and which "renders the study of the Gypsy community as an ethnic group reasonable" (16, own translation). Hence, lacking better evidence, this study departs from interlocutors' subjective viewpoints in accepting that at least 50% of Patakmező's population is ethnic Roma and as such, it is a Roma-majority village.

Another fact that makes Patakmező a relevant case study is the striking examples of segregation. There are two streets, Szépliget Street and Aranyvölgy Street, on the two sides of the main road, both at the edges of the village, which are heavily segregated. The mayor thinks that in terms of (self-)identity, there is a sense that being segregated or living in a segregated area means, implies, or goes together with being Roma for many locals.[7]

Both these streets are severely underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure. In Aranyvölgy Street, for example, there is no running water in either of the approximately fifty households, only four public

[6] The ORÖ's precursor.
[7] Interview, May 2, 2023.

wells. Moreover, there is no sewage system, only in a short section visible from the main road.[8] Aranyvölgy Street has a remarkable history of segregation on its own. Before the Holocaust and Porajmos, it was inhabited by a Jewish community (a small Jewish cemetery is still there) and the Roma population lived further in the forest. After the Jewish population was deported, those Roma who survived moved into the abandoned houses. Although during the second half of the 20th century, Roma and ethnic Hungarians lived together on the street, ten-twenty years ago non-Roma inhabitants started to move out to the main road or away from Patakmező. The street is next to a hill that became a slide after its soil loosened as a result of the street's inhabitants cutting out the trees on top for firewood. Locals say the slide can fall onto the street within an instant in the next five-ten years, toppling down all the buildings. Szépliget Street, where the Roma self-government's president[9] as well as one of the Jelenlét interlocutors are from, has fewer houses, and visibly better but still suboptimal living conditions. The road and the sidewalks are, for example, concreted. Segregation is, however, omnipresent in all aspects.

It is believed that out of the four hundred pupils in the elementary school, "a hundred percent are Roma"[10] or only one-two are non-Roma.[11] An issue that has been underlined by the mayor, the Roma self-government's president, as well as both Jelenlét employees is education. The school is operated by the Klebelsberg Center central office under the Minister of Interior (since 2022). Thus, except for catering,[12] for example, the local government has limited powers in the school. Because the school is suffering from many hardships, including a serious deficit in teachers and other professionals, there is a possibility that the order operating Jelenlét will take over the school.[13] Many graduating elementary school pupils have to start working at the age of fourteen or below because

[8] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 2, 2023.
[9] Interview, May 3, 2023.
[10] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.
[11] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 2, 2023
[12] Interview with the mayor, May 2, 2023.
[13] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.

their parents can no longer pay for their expenses. Most of those who do graduate go to vocational training schools.

However, it is safe to say that there are no job opportunities in Patakmező that they could take. To paraphrase the mayor, undereducated people cannot find "normal" jobs, and most of them "get stuck in public employment." In the early 2010s, a system of general relief ceased to exist and got replaced by a politics of "workfare" (Vida and Vidra 2015, 69) which includes certain mandatory elements. Providers of public employment can be the local government, the local nationality self-government, and even ecclesiastical legal persons. It is a general and country-wide criticism about the program that many are stuck in the program because there are no alternatives in the open labor market. On average, 60-70% of those employed in this scheme eventually stay there according to the estimates of district offices (*járás*). Moreover, most of the mayors reported that their capabilities to develop the social situation of inhabitants are highly limited, while the responsibilities pushed onto them by the government and the public administration increased to a level that exceeds their capacities ('A közfoglalkoztatás hatása a helyi gazdaságra, helyi társadalomra' 2018, 6–7).

The mayor, the Roma self-government's president, and one of the Jelenlét interlocutors, all having direct experience from before 1990, said that employment was not an issue before the regime change. The mayor even contemplated during the interview that reintroducing the communist policy of full employment and the criminal offense of "publicly dangerous work evasion" (*közveszélyes munkakerülés*) would help the situation[14]. Before the turn of the 1990s, the primary source of employment was a nearby metallurgic plant factory, employing more than ten thousand people. After then, unemployment rose, and many moved away from the village. Today, most locals work in a nearby factory of a multinational engineering company, at a likewise multinational whirlpool company, in an ammunition factory, or in many cases, in agricultural seasonal works in vineyards, often illegally. It has to be noted that the Roma self-government's president is also an

[14] Interview, May 2, 2023.

employer through his bar – a socially, economically, and politically important place – and forestry company.[15]

The main and automatic source of local employment remains the different public work programs operated by the local government, which mostly include garbage collection from public spaces. To quote the Roma self-government's president, "those participating in public employment are useful factors because they collect garbage. They collect the garbage that others threw away to keep cities and villages clean. Otherwise, there would be chaos." He added, however, that Roma persons are overrepresented in the program because employers from the labor market would not hire them: an employer would rather hire a less educated non-Roma person than a skilled Roma worker.[16]

This leads us to the omnipresent issue of anti-Roma discrimination. Except for the mayor, everyone mentioned discrimination in multiple aspects of life, including the labor market, public healthcare,[17] or nightclubs.[18] A Jelenlét social worker, for example, said that a Roma woman turned to him once because a small stone got stuck in her son's ear. They went to a hospital in Miskolc but the doctor – talking to the non-Roma Jelenlét employee – turned them away saying "there is no foreign body to be found". Going to a hospital in the city closest to Patakmező, the pediatrician, before any inspection happened, turned them away in a "terribly condescending manner." "We had luck an otorhinolaryngologist happened to be there. Lo and behold, the stone was there which she then removed."[19]

[15] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.
[16] Interview, May 3, 2023.
[17] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.
[18] Interview with Roma self-government's president, May 3, 2023.
[19] Interview, May 7, 2023.

3.3 How the Two Circumstances Overlap

3.3.1 Jelenlét/FETE

The conceptual obscurity that Szalai (2000) mentions as the main hindrance to a successful policy solving the "Gypsy question" returns in the FETE program on all levels. Its direct goal is "to facilitate the catching-up of the 300 most disadvantaged settlements of Hungary" ('Emerging Settlements' n.d., 3), thus it appears to be a social or economic development program. However, Viktor Orbán commissioned Miklós Vecsei to coordinate FETE as "the Prime Minister's commissioner responsible for coordinating the preparation and implementation of a diagnosis-based *Roma catching-up strategy*." Hence, again, it is not clear whether the program is intended to be a social policy, a minority policy, or both. If both, then the Roma nationality is regarded as a special case, somehow different from other officially recognized nationalities; not because it is not a national minority but because it is seen as *the* underdeveloped, poor segment of society.

Looking at the everyday activities of the Patakmező Jelenlét, we see that for most of the activities that they do, ethnicity or culture is irrelevant. The only subprogram where culture arises is *Szimfónia* ("Symphony") which enables local children and teenagers to learn music and/or dancing. Traditional Roma and Hungarian songs and choreographies dominate the program.

The everyday activities of Jelenlét are wide-ranging. There are several ongoing FETE-Order of Malta model programs including the *Focus on the Child*, *From Conception to Employment*, *Responsible Animal Husbandry*, and the *Small Garden Program*. The first two create the main part of what Jelenlét is doing. The so-called "family mentor system," within the framework of which around five-six family mentors – all of them local Roma women – "get into the family's life,"[20] and maintain a sense of presence, or to put it simply, develop a sense of trust in the family that they can count on Jelenlét. The "Baby-mom" and Maternity Clubs and a playing room within the house equipped

[20] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.

with educational toys serve to create a community and relatedly, to maintain the children's healthy neurodevelopment. According to a social worker, this is the most important step because without Jelenlét, many households could not have access to the infrastructure, socializing scene, and in many cases, information necessary for upbringing. He pointed out that

> people coming from such [underdeveloped] circumstances enter the labor market immaturely. It turns out they also go to school prematurely, you take a step back, kindergarten: they are premature. So, underdevelopment can be traced back somewhere to conception. It is housing, nutritional, educational, and family dynamic conditions that cause it (Interview, May 7, 2023).

When I pointed out that although there is no related ethnic particularity to most of these activities, the order – like most of the ecclesiastical legal persons coordinating other settlements' Jelenlét programs – calls the local program a "Gypsy mission" (*cigánymisszió*), he replied that it is probably because most of the people who turn to them are Roma. He said he would rather call it a "Gypsy mission" than an "integration program" because "integration" is "very-very ethnocentric." As an idea, "integration says – and this is also reflected in the term 'catching-up,' as in FETE – 'come and settle in, integrate!'" Conversely, he argues, "mission" does not force people to "become me." At the same time, however, the project's description on the Patakmező Jelenlét's website does not mention "Roma," "Gypsy," or anything that would allude to the fact that this is a "Gypsy mission."

3.3.2 Local Roma Nationality Self-government

As mentioned above, nationality governments' legal sphere of influence is limited to a) upholding "cultural autonomy," the so-called "public affair of the nationality" (*nemzetiségi közügy*) and b) advocacy and representation. Roma governments' perception of this may differ, however.

Before reviewing Patakmező specifically, it is worth mentioning some of the local leaderships' voices collected in Kállai (2015) concerning their opinion on the *de facto*, *de jure*, and ideal tasks, responsibilities, and rights of local Roma governments. In a representative study (N=500) from 2000, Koulish (cited in Kállai 2015, 82) found that although 90% would oppose the discontinuation of Roma governments, 46.6% think they work insufficiently. He adds that generally, they would rather see them active in the enforcement of social rights, workforce training, social assistance,

housing, and discrimination cases. In Molnár and Schafft's (cited in Kállai 2015) highly representative 2001-2002 study (76% of Roma governments filled out the questionnaire), most of the Roma governments, "contrary to their prescribed identity-building tasks, considered it their task to alleviate social problems, improve living conditions, and promote the education of the younger generation" (Kállai 2015, 82). According to Váradi's (cited in Kállai 2015, 83) 2002 report, Roma governments are rather trying to ease the social conditions of the Roma population. In his 2007-2008 study, Kállai (2015) concluded that "expectations … clash with legal possibilities" (88). Although local leaders who participated in the study mentioned facilitating integration and advocacy several times, none mentioned cultural autonomy or cultural heritage preservation as parts of Roma governments' ideal or realistic responsibilities. Although no representative study is available for the post-2011 minority representation and general sociopolitical system, Kállai argues that these bodies are still unable to reconcile what is expected legally and on behalf of the local population.

Advocacy did not appear in the Patakmező Roma self-government's work during the fieldwork. The Jelenlét employee who accompanied the Roma woman and her son to the hospital pointed out that although the case would have been a textbook example of a discrimination case where the Roma government should have exercised its powers to act in and represent the woman's interests, she did not turn to the Roma government. Besides the possible reason that it is not clear what the Roma government is for, a likely factor is the lack of possibility to communicate with them. The mayor[21] pointed out that although the Roma government got a new building from the local government the construction of which was completed about one year ago – thus there is theoretically no obstacle –, they don't have regular consulting hours. The Roma government is not using the building because, according to the president,[22] they have not furnished it yet. It is

[21] Interview, May 2, 2023.
[22] Interview, May 3, 2023.

important to point out that the main points of contact with the Roma president are informal channels. People mostly meet and talk to him in his bar.[23]

The Roma self-government has had several initiatives beyond its jurisdiction defined in the 2011 Nationality Law. One resolution, for example, read "the representative body of the Patakmező Roma Nationality Self-government decided to distribute *chickens* as support to the *needy population* in the framework of the 2021 'Family Porta Program – Social Land Program' tender." When I brought up this as an example, both the mayor and the Roma president[24] claimed that local Roma governments are free to participate in social projects but cannot use state subsidies for such expenses.

Besides organizing "Roma days" and cooking competitions, the Roma self-government's president said, "we collect data, I go to trainings [further education] and national conferences, and look for grants," summarizing the body's *modus operandi*. They "started a process in 2015," after he was elected: "children were taught to say hello," they invited "hygienic professionals" (such as a district nurse, a pediatrician, or a gynecologist) and other professionals such as a police lieutenant colonel or a forester, and visited career orientation sessions, people working in public employment, "assembly line workers" in factories as well as a homeless shelter and a prison. The self-government's biggest current project allows them to give away seeds, seedlings, flowers, and chicken to forty chosen families from the appr. $5800 worth of available grant funding. In a previous sentence, however, he claimed that the Roma self-government is not allowed to subsidize. "We cannot give. If they would be begging for ten kilograms of flour, we couldn't give. What I usually do in these cases is pay for these from my own pocket."[25] A tendency can be detected in the Roma president's words that cultural initiatives are deemed redundant relative to extracurricular education and orientation or subsidies and material relief.

[23] Interview with Jelenlét employee, May 7, 2023.
[24] Interviews, May 2-3, 2023.
[25] Interview, May 3, 2023.

3.4 The "Arrival" of FETE/Jelenlét and the Roma Self-government's Significance

Because the social and the minority circumstances interweave in both FETE/Jelenlét and the local Roma self-government, the two actors' jurisdictions, spheres of influence, and responsibilities overlap. Indeed, they are in conflict. What is clear from all the interviews is that Jelenlét has certainly taken over most of the responsibilities and tasks as well as the social standing of the Roma self-government. All my interlocutors, including the Roma president, agreed that Jelenlét has more significance among actors relevant to social and/or minority initiatives related to Roma people. The Roma president said the above-mentioned "process" they started in 2015 was effectively interrupted by the arrival of Jelenlét because – according to him – Roma people "went over" to them. There are several possible reasons for this.

First, it is clear that the government's main partner in their "Roma strategy" is FETE's coordinator, the Order of Malta. This means that the ORÖ and local Roma self-governments are seen by the government as less able to deliver the intended results outlined in the HNSIS. In the first rounds of tenders to establish local Jelenlét programs, only those organizations could participate that were invited by the government. While the first settlements "went to" the Order of Malta, other churches, orders, and ecclesiastical organizations were also invited later, including the one operating the Patakmező Jelenlét. The most recent tender, this time financed mostly from EU funds, opened applications to foundations, associations, and foundations operated by local governments, but not to local nationality self-governments. Many have noted the HNSIS's "overemphasis on churches and charity foundations" ('Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Quality of the National Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Hungary' 2022, 15). Patakmező's Roma president argued that because "the government doesn't even provide us with opportunities in such larger social inclusion programs" as FETE, the Roma government "cannot achieve

anything." "We cannot help because the annual budget of the Roma self-government is approximately equal to the monthly salary of Jelenlét's director."[26]

In this sense, Kállai's (2015) argument that "due to the legal status of nationality self-governments, the local and national authorities consider these bodies as their primary partners" is no longer valid. However, his diagnosis that nationality self-governments' support and legitimacy among local nationality communities are in decline seems to have been recognized by the government. This is also true for Patakmező: Jelenlét employees as well as the mayor highlighted that there is more trust toward Jelenlét than the Roma self-government. A process seems to have started that points toward the further deterioration of Roma self-governments as meaningful actors in the government's "Roma catching-up strategy." Jelenlét's ethnic Roma social worker[27] has pointed out that the local Roma self-government has never really been a significant actor and "it should be removed root and branch" because it "did more harm than help."

The question that remains is what purpose is there left for nationality self-governments and why they remain despite decades of failures. A possible answer from the viewpoint of political elites' power techniques is the usability of vulnerable Roma voters. There is evidence (e,g, Balassa 2022) that socioeconomically vulnerable Roma voters have been bribed, blackmailed, and threatened in exchange for votes. "Fidesz is always giving away potatoes" – a Jelenlét employee says. Moreover, he personally witnessed that the coalition of united opposition parties offered appr. $6 worth of forints in exchange for a vote during the previous general elections in April 2022. The fact that multiple opposition parties have offered positions for the Roma president[28] implies special political importance for him. According to the Jelenlét employees I interviewed and further locals whom I spoke to, the Roma president not only has significant authority among most of the Roma population which can be turned into charismatic power used to influence local voting behavior but

[26] Interview, May 3, 2023.
[27] Interview, May 2, 2023.
[28] Interview with Roma self-government's president, May 3, 2023.

is allegedly a major node in the local network of illicit financial transactions, including usury and debts accumulated in his bar. Even if these pieces of information are false, both sides of the political elite seem to view the Roma president as an actor that has to be absorbed into their camp in order to win elections.

CHAPTER 4 – CONCLUSION

An ethnic Roma employee of Jelenlét, born and raised on Patakmező's Szépliget street, said that the underlying, fundamental and "most pressing problem" is that "we don't understand each other." When a non-Roma child from a "normal orderly family in a very beautiful apartment" with all modern conveniences and a child from a "Gypsy family which has been going to the public well for water all their life" meet in school, both will

> talk about what they bring from home. And when they meet, neither of them will understand what the other is talking about. And what happens? Tension. Both sides will start searching for a scapegoat. Non-Roma people will say that "you are responsible for this because you have never worked in your life." The Roma family will say "you have looked down on me all my life, and now too, you don't *recognize* me *(nem fogadsz el)*" (interview, May 2, 2023).

This is what I think recognition means. The word "politics" in "politics of recognition" may be misunderstood as an indication that when we are thinking, talking, and acting about recognition, we do it in the media, the parliament, or the local Roma self-government's consulting hours. The above quote's source has mentioned the phrase *embertől emberig* ("human to human" or "person to person") several times throughout the interview. When criticizing the mayor's or the Roma president's political agenda or attitude, he said they should not think of themselves as politicians to locals/voters/citizens/etc., but as a person to persons, or as a person to another person. The manifestations of persons, institutional actors, or political actions that recognize Roma as equal human beings – the common denominator, the foundation of the "Gypsy question's" circumstances – are stomped into the ground by political methods and tactics utilizing a ghettoized ethnic group's socioeconomically vulnerable position to acquire and retain power. To quote Zsigó (2005), "so far, every government has proven to be incompetent in the Roma issue. Now it's time

for Roma people, who as self-aware citizens, could finally bring about change after many years in this situation."

I have attempted to shed light on how the social and minority circumstances of what Szalai (2000) calls the "Gypsy question" interact in a rural local political arena, thereby explaining how the theory of recognition manifests itself in practice through a very particular case study. This thesis intends to serve as a scholarly effort to conduct theory-informed qualitative research involving human- and community-centered anthropological methods. The study is, of course, not representative due to the low number of respondents. Although it would exceed this thesis' capacities, systematic research on the laws or other archival documents concerning the context would elevate the research's quality and accuracy. Further empirical research should be conducted on Hungary's minority representation system and how the systematic exploitation of Roma politicians and voters happens in rural villages, with particular emphasis on election fraud and local Roma governments' role in it.

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