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## **Supposed Ways of Allusion to Ethnicity and Social Status in the Crime News Released by the Police**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to investigate whether the news released by the Hungarian Police (and published on its official website, Police.hu) include any information – either explicit or allusive on the ethnicity (first of all: Roma ethnicity) of those in the stories. According to the results of the study, based on the method of content analysis, e.g. the term “Roma” is almost never used in crime news. However, the phrasing of news may convey messages to the audience, through the application of certain linguistic clichés, regarding the (Roma) ethnicity of the (low) socio-economic status of those mentioned in the crime stories. This communication practice is obviously worrisome from the aspect of social inclusion. Moreover, it should be mentioned that another type of police news, reporting on crime prevention initiatives, quite often includes references to Roma national self-governments as partner organizations of the Police. In the cases of these news, it is not the phrasing itself that gives rise to concerns but the phenomenon of “securitization”, reflected in the concept of these joint initiatives; i.e. minority self-governments are originally mandated to represent the collective interest of a minority group (first of all in the field of language and cultural rights), thus the question is why these kind of organizations participate (and what kind of roles they play) in crime prevention projects.

*Keywords:* Hungary, police, communication, minority groups, ethnicity, socio-economic status, securitization, content analysis

### **Introduction**

The research presented below concerns the *social* aspect of security, as certain social issues may be covered in political discussions as security issues due to the low efficiency of the efforts towards social inclusion and the ethnic framework attached to social tensions, to the detriment of the human rights approach. Political philosopher Will Kymlicka considers the

avoidance and reduction of “securitization”<sup>1</sup> as one of the most important pre-requisites of democratic operation in multi-cultural societies besides the human rights consensus in the relationship between minorities and the state (KYMLICKA, 2010: 43–44.). The media may play an important role in building social stability, easing the cohabitation of different ethnic groups and promoting the social integration of minority groups through equitable media representation of minorities but, as Teun Van Dijk also pointed out in his book published on the turn of Millennium examining the correlation between “new racism” and news media, a considerable part of the “white” (i.e. majority) public may feel counter-interested in improving the media image of minorities (VAN DIJK, 2000: 37.). With regard to Hungary, the Roma minority and the political and public political approaches, as well as social attitudes to the Roma minority may be mentioned in relation to securitization and negative media representation.

## The importance of police communication

The research aimed at examining whether information of ethnicity (primarily Roma ethnicity) appears allusively in the Hungarian news media primarily in relation to crimes and thereby how can the media convey hidden messages to the audience in relation to the presented stories. The case study looks into the practice followed by the Hungarian Police on its online news platform *Police.hu* and examines a (quasi) medium for which objectivity and neutrality are requirements based on the principle that the police must serve the members of society without any discrimination based on ethnic or other grounds. The monopoly position only enhances the responsibility of the authors of police communication: in relation to certain topics or cases the police news represent the exclusive and primary source of information. Concerning the internal norms of the Hungarian police, it is worth mentioning that the National Police Order issued in 2013 on the rules of information that may be supplied to media content providers defines the principles to be applied by the police communication bodies, i.e. the National Police Communication Service and communication officers of police headquarters not seated in Budapest as follows: “The basic requirements for communication bodies and the communication activities pursued by them are as follows: a) fast response, b) authenticity, c) uniformity, d) consistency, e) clarity and f) impartiality” (ORFK, 2013: Section 24).

What makes *Police.hu* especially important is that, as already shown by other research and analyses, many Hungarian journalists and editors look at police communication as a source of news without criticism. The research report published by Mónika Füstös in 2012, assessing police communication in relation to the illustration of the problems of prostitution not only pointed out that *Police.hu* is an outstanding source of information for the media, but also made a proposal that the police news should reflect complex problems of society with a great deal of sensitivity and attention (FÜSTÖS, 2012). The analyses published by Független Médiaközpont (Independent Media Centre) in 2014 examining the presentation of

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<sup>1</sup> It also needs to be noted that the English term *securitizationization* is also used in finance, although it refers to a different notion there. In this latter case, the Hungarian equivalent of *securitization* is “értékpapirosítás” (securitizationization).

female and male roles in media also concluded that the mechanical adoption of police news was a phenomenon that existed widely in the Hungarian media (Független Média Központ, 2014: 42). Similar conclusions were reached in 2015 by Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing, studying the *Police.hu* articles in relation to the news covering refugees and migrants: while in this area the police news represent one of the most important sources of information, at the same time the police media is also “one of the main sources of vague categories” (BERNÁTH–MESSING, 2015: 12.).

## Framework of the case study

The case study is based on the content analysis method (KOHLBACHER, 2006). The modern content analysis combines the qualitative and quantitative approaches; according to Klaus Krippendorf “[a] content analysis is a research technique with the help of which repeatable and valid conclusions may be drawn from data about their context” (KRIPPENDORF, 1995: 22.) – “context” refers to both a verbal narrative context and situation (social, political or cultural environment) (KRIPPENDORF, 1995: 32–33.).

The concept of the research relies to a great extent on the conclusion of the research report published by Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing in 2012 under the title of *Push the side*, according to which the use of the expression *kinship* (“rokonság” in Hungarian) in the Hungarian media, either as a consciously or unconsciously applied instrument may be used for or allow the identification of the actors of a story as Roma by the public (BERNÁTH–MESSING, 2012: 50.). To the question of why this expression may be suitable as an instrument of suggestion, there are a number of responses. We can rely in good faith on the ethnography and cultural anthropology literature, which pays outstanding attention to the traditional role of the group of kinship in relation to the Hungarian Roma communities (SZUHAY, 1999). It may, therefore, be assumed that the association of the importance of the relationships of kinship with the Roma ethnicity is part of the public awareness. According to a more suspicious assumption, there may be social psychological factors behind the association: the perception based on racial categories and essentialization of “difference” (i.e. that “they have the same blood in their veins”, also “make them” biologically different “from us”). Beyond the conclusion of the Bernáth–Messing study referred to above, this statement was also another key point while this case study was being planned, according to which “occasionally the police also actively forms the media image” (BERNÁTH–MESSING, 2012: 16.).

The research question was whether this phenomenon, i.e. the suggestion of the Roma ethnicity of the actors, may be observed drawing on the reference to their relationships as “kinsman” and if so in what manner and to what extent in the official news website of the police. What makes this issue relevant is partly the fact that *Police.hu* is considered a major source not only by various media, but often news are taken from there without any modification (BALOGH–FÜSTÖS, 2015). On the other hand, the examination of *Police.hu* seems obvious because this platform presents crime news in concentration which, in light of persistent presence of “Roma criminality” in the public thinking as a concept for the reasons of a crime (BÁRSONY, 2013), presumably constitute a hotbed of the phenomenon intended to be observed. To further illustrate why police communication is important in terms of the media representation of the Roma and in general why the assessment of the police approach

may and has always been important in terms of the social position of the Roma, we should quote a remark by cultural anthropologist Patrick Williams: “The police archives are the richest source for historians studying the Roma [...] society has always and is still sending out police forces when they notice any Roma anywhere” (WILLIAMS, 2010: 265.).

*The hypothesis consists of two parts:*

1. Sometimes the news also refer to the kinship of the actors when that background information is not required for understanding the story, when there is no need to know that certain actors are relatives or that certain actors have relatives unless the additional information is specifically aimed at conveying the message complex that those actors are Roma, (i.e., according to the allusive message ethnicity and their involvement in crimes are essentially related in their case).

2. Sometimes the expressions of *kinship* may also have an allusive effect when reference to the relationship of the actors is justified in terms of the story but the author of the article would use a different synonym if the actors were not Roma. It should be noted that given the nature of the problem there are certain epistemology limits that restrict the potential proof. To confirm an assumption one should know which news are about Roma and which are not, but this is exactly what the readers can theoretically not be aware of and this is the aspect that could be understood only from various (assumed) suggesting factors.

The relevant news were identified, i.e., the sample was built by using the search engine of the Police.hu website by specifying a search period and search expressions. The analysis focused on the news published between 1 June 2013 and 31 December 2014 (19 months). In total five expressions were used as search words in relation to the hypothesis, with the following order in terms of the strength of the hypothesis and the assumed suggestive effect: the strongest is *kinship*, followed by *kinsman*, and *family member*, and the weakest (assumed as neutral) was the *relative*. The term of *head of family* can also have a suggestive role, although it does not fit the group for conceptual reasons. Only news related to criminal and police actions were included in the pattern. The analysis only covered news published by county headquarters, the Budapest Police Headquarters and directly by National Police Communication service, but it did not include articles, reports or other documents documented with photos that were published on Police.hu, but under the auspices of *Zsarú Magazin (Cop Magazine)* (which also belongs to the Hungarian police as a weekly paper distributed by news agents and also as an online version). On the basis of the criteria listed above in total 448 articles were included in the analysis.

The analysis of the news included in the pattern began with categorization (it should be noted that certain news could be classified into more than one category, while there were duplicates and triplicates as well, i.e., news that covered the same case in various phases of the procedure, with the same text). The actors of the criminal stories can fundamentally be classified into the following groups: perpetrators (including perpetrators and suspects of crimes, offences and misdemeanours – 236 cases); victims (including actual and assumed victims in civil law and criminal law cases – 102 cases); and police officers performing actions and witnesses (as members of “other” categories – 3 cases).

In the categories of perpetrators and victims the news had to be classified further not only because of the high number of items but due to the complexity of the events: the second level of the categories was established based on the role played by the relatives mentioned in the news in the story. Consequently, the first category can be divided into the following

sub-categories: relative of the perpetrator as a victim (122 cases); relatives as accomplices (56 cases); relatives playing another role with the perpetrator in the story (58 cases). (It needs to be mentioned that the assumption in the background of the analysis, according to which police news occasionally refer to the background of the actors with additional information or specific expressions was the strongest in relation to this category, i.e., perpetrators.) The sub-categories of the second category are as follows: victims as relatives (37 cases); relatives as assistants of victims (20 cases); relatives of victims as reporting persons (23 cases); relatives appearing in other roles on the victim's side (58 cases). The establishment of a third level also seemed justified in the categories focusing on perpetrators and victims. At this level categorization was mostly based on whether the news covered an act against property or it was aimed against life, physical safety or integrity. In some sub-categories the third level of categorization was established on the basis of a further breakdown of the rule of the category. In the third category (news mentioning relatives of policemen and witnesses) no further categorization, i.e., establishment of sub-categories was established or justified due to the low number of cases.

A relatively small part of the news included in the pattern were not about crimes but about security measures taken by the police. Those news constitute the fourth category of the analysis (87 cases) and there were also news on accidents and unclear deaths, forming the fifth category (6 cases). (It also needs to be noted that in these categories some news covered events in relation to which it could not be excluded that a crime occurred in the background.) The fourth category can be broken down into sub-categories according to the type of the case in which the policemen included in the news performed security measures: assistance in providing emergency care (7 cases); assistance in relation to elderly people and ill people (47 cases); missing children (20 cases); assistance to intoxicated individuals (8 cases); prevention of suicide (5 cases). In the fifth category (accidents and unclear deaths) no comparison could be made according to sub-categories given the low number of cases.

At the micro level of the analysis, i.e. during the review of the occurrence, context and connotation of the search words the expression assumed to be stronger constituted the basis of the category of the news which contained more than one search words. (If, for example, one news article contained the words *kinsmen* and *relatives*, the particular article was analyzed among the articles that contained the expression thought to be stronger.)

## Results of the analysis

The analysis of the 19 months did not refute any component of the hypothesis, i.e., pointed out that certain elements of the practice of Police.hu relating to the defined criteria could be suitable for conveying allusive messages to readers about the ethnic background of the actors involved in the news or suggesting a position about the embeddedness and weight of certain social phenomena.

A few articles seem to confirm part of the hypothesis of the analysis according to which in the case of Roma the criminal news occasionally refer to the relationship between the actors when that information is not required for understanding the story. In the case of acts committed by accomplices (or more than one suspect) such news provide information on the fact that the people are kinsmen, while the other details of the cases (e.g., the location

or type of the act) also strengthens the probability that the reader will decode the text, i.e., will see Roma actors in the story. However, the limits of the content analysis method occur in the assessment of this element of the hypothesis, i.e., that everything which is outside the categories is lost of the analysis even if it is otherwise relevant. Within the framework of this case study the coding was based on five search expressions, although there may be some articles that also provide unreasonable information about the relationship between the perpetrators and thereby convey an allusive message about the Roma ethnicity of the persons, but it is indicated by a different expression and not by one of those listed above (e.g., *sibling, father*).

According to the other part of the hypothesis in criminal news there may be a correlation between the use synonyms relating to the relatives, and whether or not the actors are Roma. During the analysis a presumption developed that even if this tendency exists, it does not necessarily relate to the (assumed) ethnicity of the actors but also to their social status. In other words, there is a greater probability that certain synonyms will appear in the stories in relation to actors with low social economic status and/or Roma actors, while other synonyms will be used more often in relation to middle class and/or non-Roma actors.

Concerning the individual search words, according to a statement of the Bernáth–Messing research which inspired the hypothesis, it was general practice in the Hungarian media to use the expression *kinship* in order to suggest that the actors involved in the story are Roma. In the reviewed period the expression *kinship* occurred only in two articles on the police news portal. One of the articles covered an event in relation to which the police launched an investigation for the misdemeanour of vandalism: “In response to the lot of noise, the kinship of the victim ran out from the yard of the property of whom R.P. shook and pushed to the ground one woman.” (Csongrád County Police Headquarters: *Befejezett ügy Csongrádon [Closed case in Csongrád]*, 16. 07. 2014). The incident presented in another article was classified by the police as collectively committed vandalism: “[...] four men had a fight in Ady Endre utca during a family celebration. The drunken fighters were separated by the kinship” (Hajdú-Bihar County Police Headquarters: *Rendőrségi hírek Hajdú-Bihar megyéből [Police news from Hajdú-Bihar county]*, 09. 06. 2013). Considering the social expectation for the neutrality of policy communication (which is also a basic principle according to the applicable internal policy of the police), both articles are problematic, especially when their wording is compared to the wording of other news: this is when it becomes obvious how much the objected wording pushes into the background the individualisms of the actors by depicting them as creators acting in mass.

Of the expressions that were examined the word kinsman showed some sort of correlation with Roma ethnicity and lower social status and various types of deviance. This correlation was observed not only in relation to the perpetrators but also to the victims and other persons plying a role in the story. Another observation must also be mentioned, according to which the more outrageous and bizarre a story is, the higher probably it that the story will include the expression of kinsman instead of the relative or family member. It also applies to stories where nobody is “innocent”, at least according to the article on Police.hu. These include cases classified as group vandalism, for which an example is as follows: “due to their former hostile relationship they attacked and beat up a male kinsman at a [...] fuel station who arrived there to fill up. They hit the victim on a number of occasions and, once he was on the ground, they also kicked him and then they also began to fight with a

male acquaintance who wanted to defend the victim.” (Nógrád County Police Headquarters: *Csoportos garázdaság Salgótarjánban [Group vandalism in Salgótarján]*, 21. 03. 2014).

An interesting image evolved around the expression *head of the family*, which was also involved in the analysis. According to the signs, this expression could convey a value judgment in police news: in the majority of cases it refers to negative actors, fathers and men who abuse their power position or have other dysfunctions. Examples of the use of the expression in that context: “In the heat of the argument the head of family broke plates and invited his son to fight.” (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Police Headquarters: Szabálysértési őrizetben [*In misdemeanour detention*], 16. 09. 2014). However, in other cases, when the victims are assumed to be Roma and/or low social status individuals, the same seemingly archaic expression has a special positive meaning: as if the emphasis of the role of the parties concerned in the family and community were included in the text in order to enhance the sympathy of the reader. This can be observed in the following text: “[...] they broke into the home of a couple in Ács, hurt them and threatened them to burn their house. One the head of family put the children into safety, he went to the [...] Police Headquarters and asked for assistance from the police” (Komárom-Esztergom County Police Headquarters: Előzetesben a gyanúsítottak [*Suspects in prior detention*], 18. 10. 2013).

On the basis of the analysis another tendency can also be detected, namely that in relation to graver crimes and cases of greater importance more neutral synonyms appear more frequently; mostly the expression the *relative* is used. In addition, it is also generally used in relation to crimes, whose perpetrator should be clearly sentenced and the victim cannot be blamed according to the news. It may be stated that the expression *relative* is used mostly in news that cover the presented story objectively and seriously, (i.e., in a way which would be generally expected in the case of police communication). The following part of a news article is an example for this: “According to the statements, the usurers threatened their debtors and their relatives to be beaten up in case they failed to make the repayments” (Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Police Headquarters: Őrizetbe vették az uzorásokat [*Usurers arrested*], 23. 04. 2014).

The indication of the relationship of relatives is not the only way to suggest the Roma ethnicity and/or low social status of actors or to convey hidden messages or undisguised attitudes. The role of the titles of the articles may be emphasized here, which on Police.hu often want to create a sensation. This indicates a major misunderstanding of the rule of the police officers who word the news and let their tabloid journalism ambition lose rather than following relentless objectivity, which is expected from the institution they represent. Here are a few examples of this phenomenon: Women’s Day party ends in a loss (Veszteséges nőnap multság, Békés County Police Headquarters, 17. 04. 2014); Looked for mother in the henhouse (Anyját kereste a tyúkólban, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County Police Headquarters, 13. 02. 2014); Dispute settled with fists (Ökölrel rendezték le a vitás ügyet, Győr-Moson-Sopron County Police Headquarters, 11. 06. 2013); Multiple guilt (Sok van a rovásukon, Komárom-Esztergom County Police Headquarters, 29. 12. 2013); Thief in love (Szerelmes rabló, National Police Communication Service, 30. 10. 2014); Unfortunate thief (Peches tolvaj, Pest County Police Headquarters, 16. 07. 2013); Biting burglar caught (Tetten érték a harapós betörőt, Pest County Police Headquarters, 16. 05. 2014); Theft of a sibling’s car (Testvére autóját „lovásította” meg, Zala County Police Headquarters, 15. 11. 2014). At this point we may recall the conclusion of the Bernáth–Messing research, which

inspired this case study according to which “tabloidization may be observed in Hungary for a long time, not only in the dynamic increase in entertainment programmes but also in the transformation of the news” (BERNÁTH, 2012: 48.).

## Conclusion

During the assessment of the results of the content analysis it should also be mentioned that none of the news articles involved in the analysis included the expression *Roma*. Based on the *Roma* search word, only one criminal news was found on Police.hu during the 19-month period, according to which: “The perpetrators were 160–165 cm tall, chubby, good-looking men, aged 25–30, who communicated not only in Hungarian but also in Roma language” (Komárom-Esztergom County Police Headquarters: “*Újabb trükk, ami bevált: idős asszonytól lopták el a pénzét a trükkös tolvajok*” [New trick that works: tricky thefts steal money from an old lady, 17. 09. 2013]. In this news article the indirect reference to ethnicity is primarily of forensic science, i.e., investigation importance and not of criminology nature.

However, apart from the case discussed above, the expression *Roma* is also included in a number of articles not dedicated to criminal events; as an example, it is included in the news on the scholarship system that assist young people of Roma origin to join law enforcement agencies or the establishment of strategic cooperation between the police and Roma minority self-governments. In relation to the latter, a conceptual question is raised: why a minority self-government, i.e., an organization whose mandate involves the collective representation of identity-related rights (primarily language and cultural rights) of a particular national or ethnic minority group has any role in crime prevention, or in any area of social integration and what role it can play there (PAP, 2015). However, this issue goes far beyond the scope of police communication or the police. On the one hand, the mixing up of the legal and public political framework system of identity politics and social integration in relation to the Hungarian Roma could already be observed in the process of joining the European Union (VIZI, 2013); on the other hand, the phenomenon of securitization can also be detected in this tendency and, from the aspects of human rights and based on international experience, all this raises concerns about the attainment of the objective of social inclusion.

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