



The rise of the right: Hungary's Jobbik party rallies supporters in Budapest.

GENETICS

# Genome test slammed for assessing 'racial purity'

*Hungarian far-right politician certified as 'free of Jewish and Roma' genes.*

BY ALISON ABBOTT

Officials in Hungary united this week to condemn ongoing ethnic violence and anti-Semitic attacks, including an assault on the former Chief Rabbi on 5 June. But a cause for further soul-searching has emerged: a scientific scandal recalling discredited notions of racial purity.

Hungary's Medical Research Council (ETT), which advises the government on health policy, has asked public prosecutors to investigate a genetic-diagnostic company that certified that a member of parliament did not have Roma or Jewish heritage.

The MP in question is a member of the far-right Jobbik party, which won 17% of the votes in the general election of April 2010. He apparently requested the certificate from the firm Nagy Gén Diagnostic and Research, which rents office space at the prestigious Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. The company produced the document in September 2010, a few weeks before local elections.

The certificate — with the MP's name blacked out — emerged on the web last month and was seized on by the Hungarian media. One of Nagy Gén's financial partners, Tibor Benedek — a three-time Olympic water-polo gold medalist and a member of a prominent Jewish family — immediately pulled out of the company.

The ETT's secretary, József Mandl, chair of medical chemistry at the Semmelweis University in Budapest, says that the certificate is "professionally wrong, ethically unacceptable — and illegal". The council discussed the issue on 7 June and concluded that the genetic test violates the 2008 Law on Genetics, which allows such testing only for health purposes.

"The council's stand is important," says Lydia Gall, an Eastern Europe and Balkans researcher at civil-rights group Human Rights Watch, who is based in Amsterdam. In Hungary, "there have been many violent crimes against Roma and acts of anti-Semitism in the past few years", she says. Politicians who try to use genetic tests to prove they are 'pure' Hungarian fan the flames of racial hatred, she adds.

Nagy Gén scanned 18 positions in the MP's genome for variants that it says are characteristic of Roma and Jewish ethnic groups; its report concludes that Roma and Jewish ancestry can be ruled out. The certificate adds: "For an interpretation of the test result and for genetic consultation relating to the family-tree research, please contact us as soon as convenient."

Nagy Gén did not respond to e-mail and telephone requests from *Nature* for comment. But a statement on its website claims that newspapers had reported the story "incompletely" and points to the certificate's recommendation

for further consultation. It argues that the company "rejects all forms of discrimination, so it has no right to judge the purpose for which an individual will use his or her test result, and so for ethical reasons it could not have refused to carry out the test".

The certificate first appeared on a right-wing website, which described the intention behind the gene test as "noble", although it questioned the science. After the news blog *Petőfi utca* republished the certificate on 14 May, the Hungarian Society of Human Genetics issued a statement condemning the test. István Raskó, director of the Institute of Genetics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Szeged, and the society's vice-president, says that it is impossible to deduce origins from genetic variations at a few places in the genome. "This test is complete nonsense and the affair is very harmful to the profession of clinical genetics," he says.

Nagy Gén's rental contract with Eötvös Loránd University ended this month, says György Fábri, a university spokesman. "The university is not commenting publicly on the affair because it is not our business — our researchers had no contact with the company." In a written statement he added that the university "fully rejects" the abuse of scientific results to promote discrimination or hatred. ■

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