

PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts that were to erupt following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. PER conducts programs of high-level intervention and dialogue and serves as a neutral mediator in several major disputes in the region. PER also conducts programs of training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels.

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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE ROMA IN HUNGARY AND SLOVAKIA



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PREFACE

In most Central and East European countries, the situation of the Roma (Gypsies), who have been neglected and marginalized for decades, has become a salient issue. As the process of democratization in the region has continued, the Roma have increasingly been recognized as an ethnic and national minority, and for the first time they have been offered the opportunity to exercise the same rights as other officially recognized minorities. Meanwhile, the Roma themselves have emerged as an ethnically and politically mobilized community that is more and more aware of its rights. This is a historic change.

But the Romani community has also experienced a serious degradation of its economic and social conditions, and anti-Roma sentiments and prejudices have increased. In this environment lies the potential for violence and expressions of discrimination against the Roma to become ever more commonplace.

Confronted with these challenges, the Romani minorities in many Central and East European countries have stepped into public and political life to take advantage of reforms designed to encourage greater minority participation. Attempts to elect their own representatives to national legislatures have been undertaken as much for symbolic as for political reasons, to emphasize their demand for greater participation in the political process.

Under the Communist regimes, Romani attitudes toward elections were similar to those of the rest of the population, they were a ritual with no connection to actual results. With the changes that spread through the region in 1989, political elections regained their importance, both for politicians and for society. The hope, enthusiasm, and societal solidarity that marked the initial period of transition became part of Romani political consciousness as well and contributed to the gains of the Roma during the first round of elections in the region. These successes however, were short-lived.

There are several reasons why these early successes were not repeated. The emerging societal solidarity and tolerance vanished as soon as the difficulties of reform became apparent. In their place came a reassertion of nationalism, which left little room for multiculturalism and ethnic tolerance. The pressing needs for transformation in the social and economic fabric of the state, including what came to be unexpectedly painful eco-

conomic reforms, led to rapid socioeconomic decline and deprivation for many groups, particularly though not exclusively the Roma. Those Roma who were elected to public office were not able to effect any significant change for their community, if only because of their small numbers.

Incidents of scapegoating and racist attacks, in increasing numbers, added new and formidable obstacles to addressing the Romani problems. Fragmentation and factionalism became evident within the thin stratum of Romani representatives and activists. These forces have worked to erode Romani trust in their representatives and political elites, sharply limiting their chances in subsequent elections.

The Romani community in the Central and East European countries is large; in some of them, the Roma are among the largest minorities. The demographic factor, however, does not translate into proportionate political power, particularly in those regions with the largest Romani populations. The Project on Ethnic Relations has been engaged since its inception in efforts to raise the political consciousness of the Roma and to help them take advantage of the opportunities available in their respective countries. PER provides Romani leaders and activists with opportunities to develop and debate suitable strategies for improving their condition through participation in the political process.

By bringing together Romani representatives with representatives of majority parties, PER seeks to emphasize the possibilities for mutual gain. The procedures of democratic elections can force both sides to address the Romani issues in innovative ways. Romani voters can learn to evaluate election programs and campaign promises and support those deemed to have the most merit. As political understanding develops, the Romani leadership will find it necessary to undergo its own reforms to win back the trust of the community. These processes will benefit the Romani community and other minorities as well.

The two meetings that are the subject of this report were part of this program. The first of the two was held in Budapest, Hungary, on March 24 and 25, 1998, and the second in Kosice, Slovakia, on July 3 and 4, 1998. The report of the proceedings offers readers an opportunity to compare and contrast what are regional trends within the context of the two host countries. It is important for the reader to note that all references to the present government in the report refer to the ruling governments prior to the 1998 general elections in Hungary and Slovakia. In both cases, the general elections brought different governments to power. The report was

drafted by Ferenc Melykuti of PER's Budapest office and Peter Priadka of PER's Bratislava office. It was prepared by Jennifer Tanaka of Rromani CRISS and edited by Warren R. Haffar of PER's Princeton staff and Robert A. Feldmesser, PER's senior editor. The participants have not had a chance to review the text, for which PER assumes full responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

The attainment of Romani representation in the parliaments of Central and East European countries remains an important yet difficult task. Since the beginning of the political and economic transformations in the region, the social situation of the Romani communities has been deteriorating; unemployment has increased, and many Roma have lost even the limited comfort they previously enjoyed. For many Roma, the poverty has led to a feeling of nostalgia and to support for leftist, socially oriented parties. On the other hand, a small Romani middle class is emerging, whose members prefer that the state play a less distributive role.

In an effort to stimulate discussion of these issues, the Project on Ethnic Relations organized two roundtables in 1998. One was held in Budapest, Hungary, March 24 and 25, and the other in Kosice, Slovakia, on July 3 and 4. In each case, the first day was devoted to discussions among Romani activists and the representatives of various Romani political parties; on the second day, these participants were joined by representatives of several mainstream political parties. At the time, there were only three Romani deputies in the national parliaments of the region: one in Macedonia, one in Romania, and one in the Czech Republic. This was a decrease from the ten who had been serving in 1990, raising the question of why this had happened.

This report summarizes the proceedings at both conferences and also includes background information necessary to an understanding of the discussions: the political options open to the Roma, the experiences and strategies of three Romani political parties in Slovakia, the positions on Romani-related issues of three mainstream parties represented in the Slovak parliament, and issues related to the minority self-government system in Hungary.

OPTIONS FOR MINORITY REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

In seeking parliamentary representation, there are a number of options open to Romani political activists. These include the organization of Romani political parties, individual Roma running as independent candidates, and Romani candidates running on the party lists of mainstream parties. In addition, in some countries, constitutional provisions allow for the parliamentary representation of recognized minorities, though

this requires the enactment of corresponding legislation. These options are considered below, along with some reflections on the experiences of Roma in previous elections and their prospects in future ones.

Although there are a number of Romani political parties in Central and Eastern Europe, their participation in representative bodies has been limited mostly to the local level; they have been unable to muster sufficient electoral strength for parliamentary representation at the national level. In countries such as Poland, where the Roma are not concentrated in particular regions, parliamentary representation has been even more difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, as was pointed out at both roundtables, the participation of Romani parties and associations in national elections has played a symbolic role, serving as a political manifestation of Romani identity and an expression of the desire to participate in the electoral processes. It may also be mentioned that in Hungary, the German, Slovak, and Croat minorities have formed a political party called Nationality Forum, but the Roma, as well as other minorities, decided not to join.

A minority politician may also run independently as a candidate in a particular electoral district. However, experience with this option in Hungary has shown that a Romani candidate is likely to receive only about a third of the votes of Romani voters and is unlikely to gain many votes at all from the majority population.

A third possibility is for Romani politicians to run as candidates on the party lists of mainstream parties. Some believe this to be the most realistic option. In Hungary, two Roma were elected to parliament as candidates of mainstream parties in 1990—but only one in 1994 and none in 1998. In any case, it has been questioned whether a minority MP who gets into the parliament on the list of a mainstream party can properly represent the interests of his or her minority. During the conference discussions, a Rom from the Czech Republic recounted that his party, the Romani Civic Initiative, instead of participating in the 1998 parliamentary elections on its own, accepted an offer from a majority party, the Union of Freedom, which promised to assist the Roma in the resolution of their problems. One Romani candidate of the Union of Freedom was elected, yet the Romani Civic Union found that it was unable to influence the Union of Freedom's political program. (Minority representation under constitutional provisions and related legislation did lead to the election of a Romani representative

to the Romanian Chamber of Deputies in 1992 and again in 1996.)

In Hungary, the constitution stipulates that groups officially recognized under the Act on Minorities are to be represented in the parliament. However, the Hungarian parliamentary parties were unable to reach agreement on procedures before the general elections in the spring of 1998. During the roundtable, a participant from the Hungarian Socialist Party stressed that only four more votes had been needed to reach the two-thirds required for the parliamentary representation of minorities.

This failure of the Hungarian parliament to amend existing legislation was criticized by many participants in the discussions. Several mentioned that minority representation in parliament is expected to be an important criterion for accession to the European Union. At the same time, it was also pointed out that minimal parliamentary representation would not bring about significant change in the lives of minorities. Rather, the Roma must increase their parliamentary representation through existing mechanisms, to the point at which they were participating in the parliaments of the region on the same basis as other political groups.

ROMA AND THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN SLOVAKIA

During the first day of discussions at the July 3 and 4 roundtable in Slovakia, leaders of three Romani parties in that country reflected on their experiences in national elections, their relations with mainstream political parties, and their future election strategies. In addition, observations were made about the recently amended law on parliamentary elections and its implications for Romani citizens. (In Slovakia, there is neither a constitutional provision nor any legislation calling for the representation of minorities.) The discussions also provided an opportunity for Romani groups with different political leanings to meet and exchange views and opinions on possible election strategies and how these relate to their party approaches in dealing with the difficulties confronted by Roma in Slovakia.

Impact of the new law on elections

A representative of the Romani Intelligentsia for Coexistence Party stressed that the recently adopted amendment to the law on parliamen-

tary elections contained many problematic provisions, including one stipulating that only those citizens who are permanent residents of a municipality have the right to vote. Many Roma, he pointed out, live in the outskirts of towns and villages and do not have permanent residence there, and would therefore be unable to vote. Another problem lies in the provision that voters are to receive party lists—that is, lists of candidates—only at the polling stations, rather than receiving them at home by mail prior to elections, as under the previous law. Furthermore, he added, some 30 to 35 percent of Roma in Slovakia are excluded from the electoral process because of illiteracy and the lack of formal education among Roma. And that, he said, is the official figure; the actual number of illiterate Roma in Slovakia is much higher.

According to a representative of the Romani Civic Initiative, neither the old law nor the new one was advantageous for Roma. That was also true of the law on local elections. In the city of Kosice, where there is a Romani population of some 25,000, there are no Romani representatives in the municipal council.

A participant from the Party of the Roma Rights Protection in Slovakia criticized the passivity of Romani politicians and activists during the process of preparing the modifications to the law. None of them submitted any “Roma-friendly” proposals to the parliament, and nobody ever contacted MPs in this respect.

Experiences and prospects

A Romani political activist pointed out that in the 1994 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, more than 61,000 Hungarian-speaking Roma from southern Slovakia had supported the Hungarian Coalition. While in principle those 61,000 votes were the equivalent of three seats in parliament, none were ever offered to the Roma. Meanwhile, the coalition’s 17 deputies did not do anything for the Roma. That is what led to the establishment of the Party of the Roma Rights Protection in Slovakia. The main problem facing the party is getting Roma to vote for its candidates.

It is already clear, this participant continued, that the Roma would have difficulty even if only a single unified Romani political party were to run.

Therefore, the Roma must find another way to get representatives into the parliament, and that would be to support a non-Romani party that will guarantee, in writing, the fulfillment of the Roma's requests or at least a proposed strategy on how to achieve an effective resolution of the most serious problems confronting the Romani community in Slovakia. He concluded by saying that his party had agreed to form an alliance with the Romani Civic Initiative-Slovakia.

A representative of that party stated that before the 1994 elections, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia offered his party some places on its list, but the offer had been refused, because it was evident that the party was going to form a coalition with the nationalist Slovak National Party. He mentioned that his party was the oldest Romani political party, rooted in the former Czechoslovakia, where it used to have deputies in the parliament. However, since 1992 there have been no Romani representatives in the Slovak parliament, while the number of Romani political parties in the country has increased.

One participant questioned the strategy of forming partnerships with majority parties; he suspected that these parties were only using the Roma to gain votes. Nonetheless, a representative of the Romani Civic Initiative expressed his party's appreciation that the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had invited Romani representatives to take part in official negotiations—the only majority party to do so. If the party guaranteed at least two parliamentary seats for the Roma, then representatives of the Romani Civic Initiative would join the party list. The goal of his party, like that of the Party of the Roma Rights Protection in Slovakia, is to get Romani representatives into the parliament. He criticized other parties for not doing enough for the Roma and for not considering them as equal partners in the dialogue.

A Romani participant from the Czech Republic urged that Slovak Romani parties not “sell themselves short” when negotiating with the majority parties. The Slovak Romani parties should try to find strategic partners from among the majority parties, but it was not so important whether these partners were on the left or the right; what was important was that they learn to work together and build trust. More broadly, the majority society and the Roma should take greater interest in each other's situations.

A representative of the Romani Intelligentsia for Coexistence Party stressed that his party had proposed the creation of a Grand Council of

Roma that would consist of 17 members, 9 of whom would be the representatives of three Romani parties (3 each) and 8 would represent various cultural organizations of Roma. His party had also carried out a number of sociological studies to better understand the situation of the Roma in the regions where the party is active. The majority society, he continued, does not want to help the Roma, because they are seen as competitors. The strategy of his party is to unify the Slovak Romani parties on the principle of parity and without the support of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. As part of the opposition, his party contended that the problems confronting the Roma in Slovakia called for a change of government. The policy of the state toward the Roma could be characterized as a shift over time from “social assistance” to “charity,” which is less expensive.

The question of Romani unity

The diversity among Roma often leads to discussions regarding greater unification of Romani groups, especially in their relations with the political institutions. This issue was indeed raised in the discussions among the three Romani parties present at the roundtable in Slovakia.

A participant from the Romani Civic Initiative said that all those taking part in this discussion must be aware that a roundtable like this would not overcome the differences among Romani leaders, but it nevertheless helped to keep a dialogue going among the different groupings. His party, he continued, had initiated meetings of Romani political parties in Slovakia in order to consider the prospects for unification and alliances. He pointed out that although there are many registered Romani parties, only the three participating in this conference had attended those meetings; in effect, therefore, only these three parties really existed and functioned at the present time.

Romani unity in the defense of Romani interests does not exist anywhere; it must be built up over time.

In his opinion, the main reason for the fragmentation of the Roma in Slovakia was not the differences of opinions among the Romani leaders but the fact that some Roma wanted to play a leading role in the community without respecting the others. There was almost no difference between the programs of the Romani Civic Initiative and the Romani Intelligentsia Party. The problems of personal ambitions must be over-

come in order to make the work of both parties more effective. In the future, he added, a single party should be formed, as that was the only way to obtain the 5 percent of votes needed for gaining parliamentary representation.

Another participant observed that Roma have always been passive and disunited, often characterized as living a day-by-day existence with no perspective. Solutions should be sought within the framework of this character. It was also pointed out that some Romani entrepreneurs exploited their fellows worse than “white” entrepreneurs did. Education of itself did not guarantee devotion to the cause of helping one’s fellow citizens. On the contrary, many Roma living in bad social conditions and with little education are people of high principle. Moreover, many Roma who are not members of any political party do have political ambitions and try to realize them.

A participant from the Romani Civic Initiative said that Romani political parties do have a certain influence on the local level. For example, in Lunik IX, which is the largest Romani neighborhood in Kosice, two Romani parties were putting up 12 candidates. His party had proposed that a meeting of all relevant Romani political parties be held before the local elections.

Another participant suggested that some difficulties arose out of the fact that Slovakia has almost no tradition of democracy. Even during the most democratic period, during the first Czechoslovak Republic between 1918 and 1938, the rights of the Roma were violated and the overall situation of the Romani minority was deplorable.

A representative of the PER Romani Advisory Council stressed that the Roma had existed for less than nine years as a political body in Central and Eastern Europe, in comparison to the decades-long or even centuries-long existence of other political bodies. Romani unity in the defense of Romani interests does not exist anywhere; it must be built up over time. Alliances such as that between the Party of the Roma Rights Protection in Slovakia and the Romani Civic Initiative were encouraging signs that different Romani groups could come together around common interests. Such alliances may be more beneficial than artificial unity.

MAINSTREAM POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE ROMA IN SLOVAKIA

On the second day of the roundtable, representatives of majority parties attended the roundtable. They were the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, the Party of the Democratic Left, and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition. The forum thus provided an opportunity for majority-party representatives to present their views on Romani-related issues, and Romani participants had the opportunity to react and to explore possibilities for constructing political alliances.

According to a representative of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, the leading governmental party, his country’s Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family had done a lot for the Roma. A primary example of its efforts was the document, “Conceptual Intents of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solution of the Problems of the Romani Population under Current Social and Economic Conditions.” This document was drawn up in cooperation with experts from the Romani Civic Initiative and was intended to provide the framework for government actions until the year 2002. Priorities laid out in the Conceptual Intents focus on the following areas:

- education, child-rearing, and culture;
- employment;
- housing;
- social assistance;
- state of health; and
- prevention of anti-social activities.

Within the ministry, an Office of the Commissioner for Solutions of Problems of Citizens with Special Needs has been established. The commissioner, who was a participant in the meeting, is responsible for implementation of the policy, in accordance with the principle that special features in the value orientations and ways of life of diverse groups must be respected. Other applicable principles are the need to eradicate prejudice; the participation of all citizens in solving their own problems; individual responsibility, implying that the resolution of the Romani issue is based not solely on the declaration of their rights but also on the positive stimulation of citizens who, for whatever subjective or objective reasons, are incapable of solving their own problems; and the resolution of problems in the natural social environment of the citizens concerned.

A representative of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia said that as a government official—she was also the head of the district state authority of Kosice IV—she sought cooperation with the Roma in resolving

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their problems, as stated in the Conceptual Intents. There are between 2,300 and 3,000 Roma living in her district (in Nadžerom and Krasna), and there is one Romani expert in the Department of Social Affairs of her office. The Office of the Commissioner for Special Needs also has a branch office in Kosice, headed by a member of the Romani Civic Initiative.

She added that resolving social problems should not be understood as an ethnic issue, and this is why the term “people with special needs” is used.

A participant from the Romani Intelligentsia for Coexistence Party observed that the creation of a budget for “people with special needs”—i.e., the Roma—could be seen as a form of discrimination. The past six years had been a total failure for the Romani population in Slovakia. The new generation of Roma have not grown up integrated into society and are still dependent on social welfare. The number of economically nonactive persons among the Roma has increased, in a context of widening inequalities between rich and poor. The Roma will remain poor for the foreseeable future. Romani leaders must realize what the real situation of Roma in this country is like: society is not ready to accept Roma as equal citizens.

Representatives of the ruling party were asked why the situation has been allowed to deteriorate so badly (although it was mentioned that other parties do not speak openly about the problems or make proposals, either). A Romani Intelligentsia representative criticized the majority parties for not having the courage to make a fair offer to Romani political leaders for places on their party lists. He acknowledged that part of the difficulty is that as much as 75 per cent of the population has negative attitudes toward the Roma. This participant also said that there should be a strong group of Romani entrepreneurs and businessmen who can generate jobs for Roma, so that their dependence on the majority society can be reduced.

The representative of the Romani Civic Initiative said that not only the national government is responsible for countering discrimination against the Roma; municipalities have the main responsibility in a number of areas. Romani experts did have the opportunity of participating in the drafting of the Conceptual Intents. The Romani Civic Initiative had taken advantage of this opportunity and supports the document as a sound basis for the policy on Roma of any government in Slovakia.

The representative of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia added that the transformation toward a market economy has created rich and poor just as in other parts of the world, and so this should not be seen as a failure of the present government.

A representative of the Party of the Democratic Left, who was the chair of the party in the Kosice region and an expert on constitutional law, said that the recognition of Roma as a national minority in 1989 represented a significant and positive change in their status in Slovakia. Nevertheless, since that time, the Romani population had undergone a serious deterioration in its standard of living, an increase in unemployment, and a rising crime rate; the 1990s were a period of failure in relation to the Romani and other low-income populations.

While the Party of the Democratic Left does not have a specific policy about Roma, he continued, its political program is aimed at the defense of working people and social groups in poverty. At present, the minimum wage is at about the same level as the social benefits that everybody is entitled to. Accordingly, for many people, including Roma, it is better not to work and receive the social benefits than to work and earn the minimum wage. Between 1994 and 1998, his party did not have many opportunities to change anything, and the ruling coalition rejected all the proposals of the opposition parties.

The municipalities... have neither the power nor the tools necessary for the resolution of the most serious problems confronting the Roma.

Following the September 1998 parliamentary elections, social and economic policies could be substantially changed. The key areas of concern are education, housing, and employment. The Conceptual Intents are nice, but for the most part they remain ideas on paper. Nonetheless, as a former head of the branch office of the Presidency in Kosice, he appreciated the cooperation with the Office of the Commissioner for Special Needs on many issues, as well

as the cooperation with local nongovernmental organizations. The municipalities, he added, have neither the power nor the tools necessary for the resolution of the most serious problems confronting the Roma. In closing, he pointed out that the Roma could vote for the government parties if they were satisfied with their policies, but there were other parties to vote for if they were not satisfied.

A representative of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition asserted that the problems of the Roma in Slovakia can be resolved only with the

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help of non-Roma and that there is a need for measures of positive discrimination to end the deterioration in the Roma's standard of living. The Roma have been referred to as "citizens with special needs," but they are also a nation with a rich culture and history.

Consequently, when approaching Romani-related issues, their identity and language should be stressed rather than their social situation. Education is particularly important.

Responding to previous comments, the participant from the Party of the Roma Rights Protection in Slovakia pointed out that although the Hungarian Coalition had 17 deputies in the parliament after the 1994 elections, they did nothing for the Roma.

A representative of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia insisted that the resolution of social problems ought not be understood as an ethnic issue, and that is why the term "people with special needs" is used. Communication between Roma and non-Roma must be improved, and it must be based on tolerance and partnership. Another representative stated that it would be a mistake if the Roma did not unite like the Hungarians did before the parliamentary elections. Even those Roma whose mother language is Hungarian should support Romani parties rather than the Hungarian Coalition.

Reacting to these statements, the participant from the Hungarian Coalition said that the government's concept of integration meant integration of individuals, not of groups. He added that his party wanted to address the issues in such a way that, in situations where Roma did not solve their problems, they could return to their own people, where to be Roma was not a shame.

MINORITY SELF-GOVERNMENT AND ROMANI POLITICAL CAPITAL IN HUNGARY

The discussions at the March 24 and 25, 1998 roundtable in Hungary centered on the experiences with the minority self-government system. On July 7, 1993, the Hungarian government passed the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities Act, which guarantees the thirteen "historic" minorities living in Hungary the right to establish local and national self-governments. Under this law, these minorities could establish elected bodies that would represent their interests and serve as partners for the government at local and national levels. The primary role and authority of the minority self-governments are in the fields of education and culture, and they have a right of veto on issues in those fields at the local level. A minority self-government can address any institution of public administration regarding an issue within its scope of authority, and it may request information, submit proposals, initiate measures, and file complaints concerning the functioning of that institution or a practice or decision that it believes violates the rights of that minority.

During the first four years of the operation of the law, 10 percent of the minority self-governments ceased operations. Others, however, improved over the years, as experience was accumulated and members received training in public administration. A number of problems have become evident. One of these is the lack of county-level self-government councils. In an effort to deal with this, local minority self-governments have established associations on the county level. However, the effectiveness of these associations depends largely on the attitudes of public administrators in the counties, since there is no legislative force behind them.

Another problem has been a lack of clarity regarding the division of authority and other relationships between municipal governments and local minority self-governments. Cooperation between these bodies is often dependent on local circumstances, especially the attitudes within the municipal leadership. Lack of adequate financial resources to carry out programs has also been a frequently mentioned problem confronting minority self-governments.

Voter identity

To initiate the election of a local minority self-government, a request must be made by five persons who identify themselves as belonging to

the minority. There are no requirements to certify their identity or prove their membership in a minority organization or association. It is also sufficient to have the support or “proposal” of five citizens who are eligible to vote to put the name of a candidate on the ballot. The threshold of a valid election is also set rather low. In settlements with a population of less than 10,000, only 50 votes are needed to elect a candidate as representative of a local minority self-government. In larger communities, 100 votes are needed. Moreover, anybody can cast a vote on the list of minority candidates, regardless of his or her ethnic identity.

The size of the local minority self-governments varies according to the size of the settlement. Local minority self-governments in settlements with a population of less than 1,300 may have three representatives, while larger settlements may have a maximum of five. This latter number applies even to large cities, where the magnitude and number of tasks can be expected to be much greater.

There has been considerable criticism of the provision that allows nonminority members to vote in minority government elections. While self-identification of minority membership is often recognized as an important right, in practical terms it means that non-Roma, for example, can exert a decisive influence on the outcome of Romani minority self-government elections. Some local election results seem to justify this concern.

According to one participant at the roundtable, representatives elected by non-Roma are merely “shop-window” Roma, lacking support and legitimacy in the Romani populations. They regard themselves as being accountable to non-Romani voters rather than to any Romani constituencies. This view questions the legitimacy of present structures, aiming its critique at the ‘openness’ of elections and the vulnerability to manipulation. One prominent Romani politician supports the idea of introducing a process of registering one’s minority identity in order to be eligible to vote in minority elections. However, the present leadership of the national Romani minority self-government does not support the introduction of registration, citing the negative experience with registration in the past. Moreover, registration would be inconsistent with present laws on data protection. It would also mean that those who do not wish to register their ethnic identity would be excluded from the election process.

On the other hand, smaller minority groups tend to favor the present practice. For example, the Serb minority, which is estimated to be about

5,000, received 16,000 votes in 1994, and it is believed that the Greek and Armenian minorities could not form self-governments without large numbers of “sympathy votes” from persons belonging to the majority.

Nonetheless, there were strong sentiments that the law be amended, especially with regard to the scope of activities and relations with regular self-governments, while the meaning of minority representation should be more clearly defined.

National self-government elections

There are different rules for electing the minority self-government of the capital and at the national level. In Budapest, nine-member self-governments of each minority can be chosen in either of two ways: by an assembly of electors or by an assembly of voters. In the first procedure, the electors are the minority representatives in the capital’s districts, members of minority self-governments, or electors chosen for this purpose, in the case where a district has neither of the first two. In the second procedure, an assembly of voters is convened upon the initiative of ten citizens, and the self-government of a minority can be elected if at least 100 valid votes are cast. This latter procedure is used in districts where there is no minority self-government.

The national self-government of a minority is formed by an assembly of electors. In this assembly, votes are cast by minority representatives of municipal governments, representatives of minority self-governments, minority spokespersons, and electors from settlements where none of the others exist. The size of the national minority self-government ranges from 13 to 53 persons, depending on the number of electors. A minority can elect only one national self-government.

The method of electing national self-governments has frequently been criticized by Romani political activists from civic organizations. The election rules have made it possible for one organization to form a politically homogeneous national self-government, excluding other smaller, yet influential organizations. This has sharpened differences between broad-based Romani organizations and those organizations led by charismatic leaders but enjoying the support of only a small layer of intellectuals. Some Romani politicians at the conference said that the present national self-government does not reflect the diversity of Romani society. This problem has emerged only in the case of the Roma; other, smaller minorities managed to reach an internal compromise through negotiations prior to the election.

In 1995, Lungo Drom, a national Romani organization, won 39 percent of local elections yet managed to obtain 100 percent of the national self-government seats. To avoid such outcomes, some organizations have proposed new election methods. Phralipe, a national Romani organization led by Bela Osztojkan, suggested that the largest coalitions that put up candidates draw up 53-member lists for the election of the national self-government. The lists would then go to local minority governments, and after obtaining the support of at least 200 electors would be presented to the assembly of electors of the national self-government, who would approve these lists. Organizations would then receive seats in the national self-government according to the proportion of votes they receive in the electors' assembly.

However, such a procedure would require a consensus among Romani organizations, and Lungo Drom declared that it would not agree to any elections that were outside the boundary of the law. As a result, some continue to believe that the national self-government will be a kind of "government of the Roma" rather than a parliament representing the diversity of the Romani community.

Building Romani political, intellectual, and economic capital

One Romani participant at the meeting in Budapest said that there is a need to strengthen the common identity of Roma, through history, language, and common interests, in

There is a need to strengthen the common identity of Roma, through history, language, and common interests, in order to increase political mobilization and representation.

order to increase political mobilization and representation. There is also a need for a Romani political elite to formulate objectives and aims for the community. There should be a stronger message that Roma have to formulate a strategy to counter their exclusion from employment, housing, and political representation. Romani politics

have developed in a segregated way, outside the mainstream political life of Hungary and of other countries as well.

Finally, he emphasized that the Romani community does not have the political and intellectual capital necessary to represent its interests.

Unlike other political groups, Roma lack a significant group of intellectuals who can communicate and cooperate with other groups, nor do they have a middle class able to support the masses economically and politically. In part, the lack of political capital may be attributed to the nature of present political structures, which are rooted in those of the past. However, the last decade of Romani history has seen attempts to build such political capital to create opportunities for intellectual and economic capital as well, and to achieve better education for Romani children.

THE MAINSTREAM POLITICAL PARTIES AND ROMA IN HUNGARY

As in Slovakia, the second day of the roundtable in Hungary involved discussions with representatives of the mainstream political parties in the parliament. Present at the discussions were members of the Hungarian Socialist Party, the Hungarian Democratic People's Party, the Alliance of Young Democrats—Hungarian Civic Party, and the Alliance of Free Democrats.

The representative of the Hungarian Socialist Party mentioned the close vote leading to the defeat of the proposal for minority representation in the parliament, but he nevertheless emphasized his belief that minimal representation of minorities in the parliament would not bring significant change in their situation. For the present, the local governments and minority self-governments are the main channels to be used by Roma.

The Roma, he went on, are characterized not by ethnicity but by social problems, stemming from a prolonged disadvantage in the fields of social policy and employment. Therefore their social situation must be upgraded in such a way as to develop representation. Roma, like other minorities, must cooperate with whatever government is in power, for minority self-governments are financed from public resources. Instead of searching for conflicts and stressing crisis situations, greater emphasis should be placed on analyzing conflicts, both among Roma and between Roma and non-Roma, and on implementing medium- or long-term solutions.

Here it may be mentioned that the Hungarian government had recently announced a "Package of Medium-Term Measures Intended to Improve

the Living Standards of the Gypsies.” The package includes the introduction of measures and programs in the following areas:

- training and public education;
- employment, farming, and animal husbandry;
- welfare, health care, and housing;
- programs to restrict discrimination, primarily among the police;
- regional programs; and
- tasks for communication work in connection with the Gypsy issues.

A representative of the Hungarian Democratic People’s Party expressed her apology that the parliament had not passed the bill on minority representation. She underscored the need to increase toler-

ance toward minorities within the majority society, which is ultimately a political issue, not a legal one. Her party’s policy was to make Roma equal citizens, emphasizing a harmonization of employment and social policies. In par-

particular, there should be special programs of assistance targeted to the poorest regions and strata of the population. In addition, she stated, there was a need to elaborate an education policy based on a “catch-up philosophy,” as well as programs for increasing majority tolerance. The “catch-up” education policy has since been renamed because of confusion over its meaning. The program is now called the Roma Education Program and offers extra budgetary funding for schools to develop remedial programs for disadvantaged students.

Another participant, speaking on behalf of the Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Party, stated that since 1994, there has been no major difference among the majority parties in policies toward the Roma. But, he added, neither has there been any breakthrough in improving the situation of the Roma. One achievement, however, has been a widespread recognition that the problems of the Romani community cannot be separated from those of the majority population. Projects launched in poorer regions of the country would not have spectacular results.

As an alternative, he pointed to the system of financing for the Public Foundation for Gypsies in Hungary, of which he is a member. In the context of the current conditions of public expenditures, the amount of

money channeled to the foundation was respectable. However, in order to reach the groups most in need, the procedures for project funding should be decentralized, so that decisions are made at the level of the local communities, where not only is the local situation better understood but control mechanisms would also be more effective.

He added that if the Law on Minorities is to be modified, then the current mandate of culture and education should be considered as it provides for framework of actions, which is too limited given the current conditions. In closing, he stated that the Hungarian political elite as a whole had not achieved much in terms of the Roma.

The representative of the Alliance of Free Democrats said that his party has a general program on minorities, which includes a specific chapter on Roma. It states that a better-developed local self-government system is the cornerstone of a minority protection program, but it also acknowledges minority demands for parliamentary representation. Such representation should be based on direct elections and secret ballots, in the context of democratic competition and with lower thresholds for minority representation.

With respect to the Roma specifically, emphasis in this party’s program is placed on an end to discrimination, particularly through the education of local authorities and the enactment of an antidiscrimination law. More comprehensive regional programs should be instituted, with the participation of Roma themselves. Financial resources should be better allocated, and municipalities should assist minor-

ity groups in such matters as the renovation of low-quality flats and the creation of jobs in remote areas. There is also a need for “catch-up” education programs, but they must be designed in such a way as to promote the integration of Romani children into the mainstream educational system. Civic education for both Roma and non-Roma is also needed, and the majority should be educated to become more open to diversity.

As for Romani politics, this participant said that the national Romani self-government should not monopolize Romani issues; Romani civic associations should play an important role. In addition, the idea of

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ance toward minorities within the majority society, which is ultimately a political issue, not a legal one. Her party’s policy was to make Roma equal citizens, emphasizing a harmonization of employment and social policies. In par-

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Following the presentations made by majority-party representatives, Romani participants responded. A member of the national Romani self-government expressed the view that the claim that his organization was “monopolizing Romani issues” was unfounded, and suggestions to abandon the idea of Romani unity were based on fear of the potential political force of such unity. A number of criticisms were made of the “catch-up” philosophy of education for the Roma, arguing that it reflected the past approaches that had resulted in the segregation of Romani children. One participant said that all the majority-party policies reflected some form of corporate-type governmental control. Instead, financial independence must be developed; presently, there is practically total dependence on government funding.

Some Romani participants added that Romani-related issues do not enjoy priority in the majority-party policies, and therefore it may be expected that not much change will take place.

CONCLUSION

A notable feature of the situation of the Roma in Slovakia is the emergence of different political leanings. Disappointment with past experiences in voting for mainstream parties was expressed at the conference in Slovakia, along with the limitations of Romani politicians running on the electoral lists of other parties. But the desire for political representation in the parliament is strong, and the representatives of Romani parties expressed their intention to gain some form of guarantee for parliamentary seats when supporting a particular party. The political alliance of the Romani Civic Initiative and the Party for the Protection of Roma Rights in Slovakia was recognized as a good example of different groups working together around common interests.

In Hungary, the unique minority self-government system provides the framework for Romani political activism, and therefore much of the discussion at the roundtable there centered around the possibilities for modifying the current law on minorities to make the system more effective. The issues of who may vote for minority candidates and the procedures for electing the national minority self-governments received particular attention. For some, it was principally a matter of legitimacy and

accountability; for others, a more pluralistic national structure would ensure more effective representation. The proposals for a law implementing the constitutional provision regarding parliamentary representation of minorities, which had recently been debated in the parliament, were also discussed. While most felt that this was an important part of minority politics, others expressed the need to develop existing bodies of minority representation, while increasing Romani participation in parliament through the regular system of elections.

In both countries, Romani participants stressed the importance of local-level governance, which would create more realistic possibilities for increasing the political capital of the Roma, as a relatively young political nation. At the same time, there is a need to address the larger political climate in order to raise the priority of Romani-related issues among the political parties, recognizing that negative attitudes toward Roma among the majority populations makes this more difficult.

In terms of the mainstream political parties' positions on Romani-related issues, some differences between the two countries were identified. In Slovakia, there are important differences between the ruling Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which stresses a social approach of “citizens with special needs,” and the Hungarian Coalition, which emphasizes the importance of identity, language, and culture. The Romani parties are closer to the former than to the latter. In Hungary, the mainstream parties have similar policies on the Roma. Culture and education are the main activities of the minority self-governments. There was criticism of “catch-up” education policies, which were said to perpetuate a system of segregation. Still, in both countries, the specificity of Roma as a minority with acute socioeconomic problems was highlighted as a challenge to be met by all parties.

Both the Hungarian and the Slovak governments have adopted national policies on the Roma. Since these are relatively new, it is difficult to gauge their results, and participants had mixed opinions about them. However, the importance of Romani participation in governmental policy-making was generally acknowledged, although there was disagreement about how this participation should be organized; it may call for a combination of formal political representatives and activists from Romani civil society. Others expressed the opinion that Roma need their own economic force, to allow them to carry out actions independently. But it was recognized that this is a difficult

goal to achieve, given the widening inequalities in these societies and the fact that the Roma are the poorest segment in them.

These roundtables provided a unique opportunity for Romani political activists and representatives of mainstream political parties to meet and engage in dialogue around some of the most pressing issues in their countries concerning Romani political representation. In addition, the roundtables served as forums in which Romani groups could consider issues of unity and alliances, as well as their differences on political representation and other matters. Regardless of the strategies ultimately adopted, greater representation of Roma is seen as an important part of developing more democratic political institutions in which Roma are an integral part of their societies.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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