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## **Roma Political Participation in Slovakia**

*National Democratic Institute for International Affairs  
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### I. Introduction

Roma populations have been largely left out of political and economic transitions throughout Central and Eastern Europe, discriminated against and marginalized through poverty, social ills, and, for many Roma communities, physical isolation. If Roma are to advocate for better opportunities and solutions to their communities' problems, they will need to strengthen their level of participation in the political processes of their countries. As few Roma have political experience, they will need strategies that address both external and internal barriers to Roma political participation and the development of organized Roma political leadership.

In February and March 2003, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted assessments in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia to analyze the salient challenges and opportunities to increase Roma political participation. Funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and in cooperation with OSI's Roma Participation Program and the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), this project reflects the interest of both NDI and OSI to raise the issue of Roma political participation with relevant international organizations and to take the first step toward initiating strategic blueprints for Roma communities to enhance their political participation, representation, and influence. Three separate reports will offer the key findings and recommendations of the NDI assessment team in each country; this report covers the Slovakia assessment.

During the two-month assessment period, NDI teams traveled to the three countries and met with a wide range of Roma and non-Roma political and NGO leaders, elected and appointed government officials, as well as policy and opinion makers, researchers, journalists, educators, project leaders, analysts, and ordinary citizens. The group also met with representatives from international organizations that are active in Roma-related issues. The assessment teams spent at least one week in each country, visiting the national capitals, cities, towns, villages, Roma communities, and settlements. The team often divided into smaller groups in order to broaden their scope and perspective given the limited time available. The list of the meetings scheduled during the three country visits can be found in Appendix 1.

The membership of the assessment teams varied with each country visited. There were three core team members who participated in the assessment in all three countries—Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. These core team members each contributed their unique experience and expertise in human rights, political organization and strategy, democratization, and Roma and related regional issues. In each of the individual

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<sup>1</sup> This report was written by NDI assessment member James Denton

countries where the assessment was conducted, this core group was supported and augmented by two to three in-country team members who provided relevant local experience, expertise and knowledge. This approach was intended to provide the individual country reports a broader sense of context, continuity and perspective.

The Slovakia assessment was conducted from March 2-8, 2003. The team visited Bratislava, as well as Kosice, Presov, Levoca, Svinia, Bardejov, and Bystrany. Members of the team included Michael Brown, James Denton, Peter Pollack, Vicki Robinson, and Rumyan Russinov, as well as local support from John Macauley, and Laura Dyttertova. Brief biographical sketches can be found in Appendix 2.

## II. Background

Given the certainty of European Union accession in 2004, Slovakia has a rigorous legislative timetable by which to improve conditions for Roma communities and to bring them in line with the EU's general political and human rights norms. The NDI assessment team observed considerable attempts at assistance to Roma communities in Slovakia—driven in part by a relatively large Roma population and recent controversies over significant emigration among Roma. Improving the socioeconomic and human rights situation of Roma necessarily, in the assessment team's estimation, involves building their capacity to represent themselves in Slovakia's democratic political system.

Roma Population Size. The population of Roma in Slovakia is difficult to measure. According to official census figures in 2001, Roma account for 1.6 percent of the overall population of 5.4 million people, or approximately 89,000 people. However, this number is based on self-identification of respondents. Unofficial estimates put the number of Roma at close to 8 percent of the population, or roughly 400,000. Additionally, the demographics of the Roma population contrast with those of Slovakia as a whole. Although the birth rate among the general population is declining, reflecting a demographic trend observed throughout Europe, the Roma birth rate is increasing and the Roma population has a markedly higher percentage of young people. The physical location of Roma communities also sets Slovakia apart from other countries of the region, as most Roma live in isolated settlements mainly concentrated in the rural and underdeveloped eastern third of the country.

Economic Conditions. The economic situation of Roma contrasts with the general statistics of the Slovak population as well. The unemployment rate among eligible Roma workers is up to four times higher than the national average and may be as high as 80 percent of the Roma population, according to some estimates. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that Roma account for nearly one-quarter of the total unemployed.

*The overall negative economic situation for Roma could be compounded by new economic measures being brought into law for EU accession.*

Education Levels. Roma face challenges related to state educational policies. The overall education level among Roma is low, with only an estimated eight percent of the population having completed skills training and far fewer having attended secondary or university level schools. So-called “Gypsy schools” located in Roma neighborhoods or settlements are populated entirely by Roma children, resulting in *de facto* segregation. These schools are generally far below the standard of schools located in non-Roma areas.

With no state system to manage student attendance, absenteeism levels among Roma students are high. This is compounded by the geographic isolation and social exclusion of Roma settlements, where there is little familial or community incentive to attend school and access to education may be more difficult<sup>2</sup>.

Social Conditions. Overall, Roma populations lack information and education on government policies, as well as access to social benefits like health care. Part of this is due to the difficulty some Roma face in proving residence or providing the necessary documentation for official identification. (This lack of official status also affects government efforts to document Roma communities and obtain accurate figures on population.) The ghetto-like settlements in which upwards of 100,000 Roma reside highlight housing and health care as among the most pressing needs; Infant mortality remains a significant problem in these areas. Government information campaigns to Roma communities, which might resolve some of these issues, are virtually non-existent.

Political Participation. Romani political development was essentially eviscerated by the Holocaust; some scholars estimate that half of all Europe’s Roma perished during that time. Under the Communist system, Roma – like other minorities – were manipulated in the name of advancing the socialist brotherhood of all nations.

The governments that assumed power following Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution in November 1989 were guided by two broad civic movements—the Civic Forum (OF) in Prague and Public Against Violence (VPN) in Bratislava. Four months later, the first Romani political party, the Roma Civic Initiative (ROI), was established. The first Roma MPs were elected into in June of 1990 – six Roma were members of the newly constituted Czechoslovakian Federal Parliament, four more were in the Czech National Parliament, and one in the Slovak National Council. All were elected on the lists of larger non-Roma parties – the Czech-based Civic Democratic Forum, VPN in Slovakia and the Party of the Democratic Left.

In the whirlwind of political change in subsequent years, Czechoslovakia split apart in the Velvet Divorce, establishing two independent states: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The euphoria of democratic change was overtaken by the realities of governance and power politics, leading to a dissolution of the loosely formed OF and VPN umbrella groups. They divided into different parties and groups along competing

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<sup>2</sup> Roma settlements in Slovakia are home to the poorest Roma citizens and are generally located on the outskirts of villages and towns where they are completely segregated from the majority population. Roma living here have often been forcibly removed from their towns and lack basic running water, and electricity. In a minority of cases, some Roma prefer to live in isolated settlements to avoid integration.

political, philosophical, and, too often, personality lines. Since 1992, Roma have remained completely out of the parliament and in disproportionately low numbers in local and regional governments.

The isolation of Roma settlements and the attendant economic and educational constraints exacerbate the already limited political and civic participation among Roma in Slovakia. An electoral system of proportional representation in which all of Slovakia comprises one electoral district has further challenged Roma communities to find political bonds sufficiently strong to gain a political voice at the national level. The next round of regional elections in Slovakia will occur in 2005; parliamentary and local elections are slated for 2006.

Government Response. The Constitution of the Slovak Republic of 1992 includes a number of minority relevant provisions. Fundamental rights are guaranteed to anyone regardless of nationality or ethnic origin and no person is to be denied legal rights, discriminated against, or favored on these grounds.

Recent government policies have provided for ethnic identification and have recognized Roma as having equal status among other minorities. The Slovak government has developed an official strategy for addressing Roma-related policy and social issues, outlining responses specific to Roma community needs. In 1999, the government established the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, headed by a Roma. This Office was also formed to act as an official liaison with the government and for Roma communities. In contrast to her predecessors<sup>3</sup>, the current Plenipotentiary, Klara Orgovanova, has introduced such innovations as a branch office in Presov (a region where many Roma are located), an internship program in her office for young Romani activists, and regular trips to Roma settlements where she meets with both Roma and non-Roma local authorities.

Nevertheless Slovakia has made little progress overall in addressing the needs of the Roma communities; in fact some say it has actually been reversed. Roma disaffection with the political process has in some ways been worsened by their disappointment with the lack of an effective government response. The government's 2003 Roma strategy notes that "the integration of minorities and their coexistence with majority society is a condition for the successful functioning of Slovakia within the EU." Recent EU reports, however, have noted slow progress in these areas.

### **III. Major Findings**

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<sup>3</sup> The previous Plenipotentiary, Vincent Danihel, was dismissed in May 2001 on suspicion of embezzlement, following frequent conflicts with the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development, Pal Csaky. His predecessor was Branislav Balaz.

### *A. The Roma Population: Size and Diversity*

A basic understanding of the size, nature, and diversity of the Roma population is fundamental not only to determine the degree to which Roma are under represented in government, but also to designing strategies to correct the under representation.

Roma Population Size. Like in other Eastern Europe countries, there is considerable disagreement in Slovakia about the actual size of the Roma population. According to the country's 2001 national census, about 89,000 Slovaks identified themselves as members of the Roma minority (under two percent of the country's 5.4 million citizens). Nevertheless, NGO and Roma political activists, researchers and social scientists, as well as international institutions, believe these official numbers significantly understate the country's Roma population. Several Slovak research groups, government officials, and international organizations estimate the Roma population at 400,000—over four times the official count, and nearly eight percent of the country's population. Given the five percent threshold for entering parliament in Slovakia, the relative size of the Roma is relevant when considering political strategies, particularly at the national level.

Still, with respect to the purposes of this report, the reasons for the apparent undercounting rather than the actual size of the Roma population are probably more relevant.

Roma Political and Ethnic Identities. The Roma share a common ethnicity and culture that can be traced back hundreds of years. Throughout their history they have also shared a long and deep tradition of poverty, discrimination, joblessness and dependency that continues today. However, in spite of the hardships that Roma have in common, they clearly do not share a sense of purpose or identity in the political context, especially at the national level.

The Roma's high illiteracy rates, and perhaps some failures in the census process, have undoubtedly contributed to the undercounting of the Roma population. However, most Roma and non-Roma experts attribute a portion of the undercounting to an undocumented but widely acknowledged practice whereby many Roma deny their ethnicity to census takers to avoid the stigma of being attached to the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. While some Roma may deny their ethnicity because they consider themselves to be assimilated into society, one common belief is that many do so to enhance their prospects for improved socioeconomic status.

Roma collective memory and the resulting fear of persecution is another factor: experiences from the Holocaust, forced population exchange, race-based imprisonment, and confiscations of goods count in the individual's decision to openly declare his or her ethnicity. In the minds of many Roma, their ethnicity remains a potential threat to their very survival.

Diversity and Divisions. While a history of poverty is the Roma common denominator, diversity does exist within the population. Some Roma receive an

*“After receiving an education, many Roma leave the community and don’t look back.”*

education, succeed in business, and escape the cycle of poverty. Many among the poor, but especially those Roma who are better educated, more urbanized and financially independent—and, those of dual ethnicity—identify themselves with either the Slovak majority or another non-Roma minority, the affect of which understates the Roma population and diminishes its identity. In a democracy, such a breakdown within an ethnic minority decreases its political leverage and representation, as well as its ability to advance public policies that expand opportunities in education, employment, and quality of life.

Political Orientation and Dependency. Although largely undeveloped, uninformed and almost certainly tenuous, Roma political orientation leans to the center-left. Certainly, this was the view of the mainstream center and center-right parties. In addition, polling data from the September 2002 national elections shows that some 60% of Roma are believed to have cast their ballots for the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) party led by Vladimir Meciar and his populist rhetoric about wealth redistribution and increased benefits. However, the reluctance of most liberal parties to seek the Roma vote, as well as cuts in social benefits by the more centrist government of Prime Minister Dzurinda’s Slovak Christian Democratic Union (SDKU) party in the years leading up to the election, were also key factors.

Overwhelmingly, the Roma with whom the assessment team met said repeatedly that their most important need was jobs. Several Roma complained that financial resources were being wasted on creating “fake” government jobs for Roma that ignore the community’s real job training needs in order to satisfy structural unemployment criteria for European Union membership. Indeed, the clear majority of the Roma respondents to a poll following the most recent parliamentary election said that “the promise for jobs” most influenced their vote.

And yet, when the assessment team visited a kindergarten under construction (with foreign aid funds) in the midst of one of the country’s most squalid Roma settlement—with effectively 100% unemployment—it found that of the six to seven carpenters hammering away on the building, not one was a Romani worker.

The older, rural, and poorer Roma populations—who are nostalgic for the days when the government is perceived to have provided for their financial needs—gravitate to the left-oriented “cradle to grave” political agenda. Indeed, committed government and outside investment and intervention will be necessary to help solve the institutionalized poverty in Slovakia’s Roma settlements and towns. Still, the assessment team heard many Roma call for more government and international assistance when basic needs could be addressed, and steps could be taken by basic self-help community efforts.

## ***B. Roma Political Experience***

*Few Roma candidates have been placed on the country’s mainstream party lists and all in low positions.*

Roma Political Parties and Leadership. Between 1990 and 1994, perhaps a dozen Slovak Roma parties and political coalitions and groups formed, divided, dissolved and mostly vanished. Today approximately 20 Roma political parties exist in various stages of their development cycle on the political stage. Many of these are now part of two Roma political parties, the Roma Civic Initiative and Political Movement of Roma. Together these parties attracted less than 15,000 votes in the 2002 election, a very small percentage of the Roma turnout. Clearly, the Roma parties and political leaders have difficulty attracting the votes of the constituency that it claims to represent.

Other Roma non-party but politically oriented groups include the Roma Parliament and the Council of Slovak Roma. By most accounts, the Roma Parliament is essentially ineffectual, hampered by internal fighting and rivalries that have characterized Roma political life in the region since self-government returned to Eastern Europe. What level of influence the untested Council of Slovak Roma will eventually have is still unclear. A formative but potentially promising group of younger and educated Roma called the New Roma Generation, has also emerged.

Neither the Roma parties nor the political organizations is guided by a clear set of political or philosophic principles or values. And, not surprisingly, the parties have failed to offer a political platform in any election. In addition, individual or family business interests—not a set of values or the interests of the larger Roma population— frequently seemed to be central to the groups’ agenda and existence.

The Roma exert increasing influence in local politics. In recent years, a handful of Roma mayors and about 180 town and city councilors have been elected. Still, considering that Slovakia has thousands of mayors and councilors, much remains to be done to increase Roma political participation if the community is to be proportionately represented and if Roma related issues are to be addressed.

The stark realities were apparent in one town where half of the town’s population is Roma but none of the nine councilors is. In a conversation with the town’s non-Roma mayor about the Roma’s 100% unemployment in the town, he said that no job training programs were in place for Roma. The mayor has never seen a government, NGO or church program that had shown any results in addressing the troubled Roma employment, education, or poverty problems. When asked whether Roma representation on the town council might make the council more enthusiastic and creative in developing initiatives to solve these problems, he replied that, “These problems cannot be solved on the local level.”

*The stark realities were apparent in one town where half of the town’s population is Roma but none of the nine councilors is.*

Sadly, even after ten years of independence, little evidence can be seen that the Roma parties and groups have a following, much less any loyalty, among the Roma constituency it claims to represent. Besides the Roma party leaders’ poor showing among the Roma electorate in Slovakia, various polling data and studies confirm what the NDI



assessment team heard repeatedly from Roma in the cities it visited—that the Roma population mistrusts its national leaders.

Roma Attitudes and Perceptions. Roma attitudes towards their political leaders were marked by a sense of alienation and betrayal. These attitudes were best illustrated by the reply to a question posed to every Roma group with whom the assessment team met during the visit. The question was: “What political party, group, or leader best represents the interests of the Roma community in Bratislava?” The consistent reply was that no one represented the Roma’s interests, and that the politicians steal the international aid intended for Roma. The Roma leaders are perceived to be disinterested, dishonest, and manipulative. Their lack of a coherent and articulated agenda, coupled with complaints of corruption and broken promises, have left the Roma electorate disillusioned, detached and in a state of political disarray.

Family Finances and Politics. Studies show that a strong sense of common identity and purpose exists within the Roma family, and that family interests and loyalties are the unifying force within the community. Throughout the three-country assessment, there was anecdotal evidence of ties between family interests and Roma political structures and activities—including in the NGO sector.

The lines that separate these political and family business interests are blurred, often to the point where the two interests seem indistinguishable. The result is a clan-oriented political structure that is unified by the leadership’s common desire to advance specific family interests, rather than being unified by a set of common philosophical/political values with a corresponding agenda intended to advance the common good. Not surprisingly, where Roma are concerned, real authority within political structures flows top-down, and political legitimacy is rarely based on the votes of a constituency—especially at the regional or national level.

Elections Campaign Expertise. Based on interviews as well as various research and media accounts, it appears that Roma election campaign politics in Slovakia are conducted at a rudimentary level. As best the NDI assessment team could ascertain, the Roma parties and groups have failed to articulate a platform or to develop an effective pre-electoral strategy since the fall of communism.

*The Roma parties have not organized any consistent or systematic voter education or get-out-the-vote campaigns at any level.*

Political Organizing Infrastructure. Overall, the Roma political organizations lack a developed infrastructure beyond a handful of party leaders and activists who have limited influence in the larger Roma community. The functional and structural links between the Roma party leaders and the local Roma community are largely non-existent. The NDI assessment team found no authentic national or regional networks, associations, or grassroots organizations that promote or enhance a sense of identity, political development, communication, organization, mobilization, or participation at any level among the Roma citizenry.

Mainstream Parties. With several exceptions of older leaders with whom we met, the Roma leaders and activists seemed to recognize that they needed to align with mainstream political parties in order to fully participate politically and advance their issues successfully. And, while there is little trust of politicians in general—the polls and election results clearly indicate that the Roma population favors mainstream parties over their “own” Roma parties.

However, except for an effort to articulate a Roma agenda by the new Alliance of New Citizens (ANO) Party prior to the 2002 parliamentary election<sup>4</sup>, the other mainstream parties’ support of Roma issues and candidates has been marked by tokenism at best and in some instances bigotry. Given that several activists with whom the assessment team met classified the Roma parties and leaders as divided and divisive, unskilled, unreliable, and neither trusted nor supported by the Roma constituency—the mainstream parties lack any enthusiasm for attaching themselves to Roma leaders and parties. Additionally, given the Roma’s negative public image, the political party that identifies with Roma fears losing significantly disproportionate support from the much larger non-Roma voting bloc. On the basis of short-term political calculations alone, Slovakia’s mainstream parties have kept a healthy distance from the current Roma political leadership.

Still, generally speaking, the Slovak officials from mainstream parties seemed more open to cooperating with Roma than did either the Romanian or Bulgarian mainstream parties.

Roma’s Public Image and the Mainstream Media. The Roma community is popularly considered to be the permanent occupant of the lowest rung of Slovak society. The Roma’s public image was said to have improved little in the past 13 years. By all anecdotal and research accounts, the preponderance of the country’s media reinforce this image in articles and reports that highlight the social and economic problems, and the disarray of the political life within the Roma community. Stories about Roma crime, violence, corruption, and dependency dominate the media’s coverage of Roma, and are rarely disturbed by positive news or images of the community.

The NDI team also found very few Roma editors, presenters/hosts, producers, publishers, reporters, researchers, assistants or trainees present in the news rooms of the mainstream print or electronic media that could help balance the Roma’s public image and diminish stereotypes.

However, policy and opinion makers seemed to genuinely acknowledge that Roma stereotyping is a problem. Martin Simecka, the editor of one of the country’s most respected newspaper (and, himself, among the country’s most respected journalists)

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<sup>4</sup> ANO’s suggestions for improving the Roma situation included the centralization of financial resources on Roma policy implementation, the creation of a center for Roma policy implementation in eastern Slovakia, and a state system of missionary work among Roma. This last item is said to be modeled on the Israeli *kibbutzim* model; critics claim that it reinforces stereotypes and marginalizes rather than empowers Roma.

mentioned that the Government had made overtures to some in the media urging them to resist negative stereotyping of Roma. The NDI team also saw indications that the mainstream media is open to publishing positive stories about Roma. For example, the Roma Press Agency, in effect a NGO wire service that includes positive stories on Roma in its coverage and distributes them nationwide, told NDI that their mainstream media subscribers publish their articles regularly.

### **C. Opportunities and Assets**

As the Roma consider strategies to increase their political participation it would be wise to inventory the opportunities and assets that can be mobilized in behalf of the effort. For example, several upcoming events and issues being discussed in Slovakia, as well as strengths within the Roma community, could be incorporated into this strategy. Some of the more readily apparent opportunities and assets are mentioned below:

- The government is considering reforms to Slovakia's electoral system that would allow proportional representation in multiple districts. This, or other proposals for constitutional reform of the electoral system, could significantly increase the prospects for Roma representation in parliament and/or at the local level. For example, where Roma are concentrated territorially, single member districts may provide sufficient representation. Some form of preference voting, where voters rank candidates in order of choice, may further facilitate Roma representation. Should Slovakia initiate a system of multiple electoral districts, NDI urges that the geographic boundaries be drawn in such a way as to allow the equitable representation of Roma and other national minorities.
- Regional elections are scheduled for 2005, with national and communal elections scheduled in 2006. These elections could serve as an ideal testing ground to measure the effectiveness of short-term goals to increase Roma political participation.
- A number of Roma NGOs in Slovakia conduct empowerment, advocacy, monitoring, and anti-discrimination initiatives to increase Roma access to education, jobs, political participation, health care, legal services, and so on. Generally speaking, educated, experienced, motivated Roma have been drawn to the NGO sector rather than political activism. This is in part because the NGO sector provides them with an opportunity to advance their cause, and in part because mainstream political structures have not been willing to integrate Roma in a meaningful way. The NGO sector has helped nurture these Roma and allowed them to develop important management, organizational and leadership skills at a safe distance from what some have described as the chaotic and corrupted Roma political arena.
- Roma political participation and influence, as well as some political and social development and structure, is at a higher level in a handful of cities and local municipalities where the Roma population accounts for a sizable portion of the community. These cities and towns with higher concentrations of Roma voters, particularly those with middle income Roma, will be the ideal sites to incubate,

develop, and launch programs to strengthen the level and quality of Roma political participation.

- During the NDI team's visit, Klara Orgovanova, the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, was in the final stages of preparing the Slovak government's strategy to support the improvement of the Roma's situation. The NDI team has not seen this draft document, but was told that the strategy will provide a framework and guidelines, stressing "partnership and participation," equal opportunity and access, and local community empowerment.

In its draft form, the concept was based on a four-year plan, but looking out beyond to a ten-year vision. Various ministries will develop action plans within the framework's objectives and criteria, which also proposes standards of measurement and milestones by which progress will be marked and assessed. The strategy is designed to bring Slovakia into compliance with various international agreements of the Council of Europe, the United Nations, and the OSCE. The development of a budget and the assignment of resources will be determined in follow-up action by the government. International support from the European Union is anticipated.

- The international community, represented by embassies, multilateral governmental/financial institutions, and NGOs/foundations, are keenly interested in supporting efforts to enhance the Roma's economic, social, political and cultural life and improving respect for the human rights of Roma. Others can likely be recruited in light of the urgency of the need and the implications that failure will have on the expansion of Europe, and its economic stability. Indeed, while Slovakia's entry into the EU is not dependent on its ability to satisfy certain criteria and expectations for improving economic opportunity, education, training, housing, health, etc. for the Roma community, its success as an EU member will be partly dependent on meeting these criteria.
- The Roma's disillusionment with their political structures and leadership can be found at all levels, but most especially at the national level. While Roma citizens recognize that these structures are weak and impotent, at the same time, the Roma population appears eager to learn the political organizing skills necessary to build proper structures and talent. The soft underbelly of existing Roma political structures is that they do not derive their legitimacy through affirmation by Roma constituents. f

#### **IV. Objectives, Guiding Principles and Recommendations**

The purpose of this report is to recommend key strategies that could be incorporated into a plan designed by Roma to increase the community's political participation and influence in Slovakia. With that in mind, NDI recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be designed and launched to develop the human capacity, the political traditions, and an organizational infrastructure that can provide the leadership and mechanisms to inspire, educate and mobilize a broadly defined "Roma constituency" to advance the community's interests.

**1. Objectives.** The Roma Political Participation Initiative should have four basic, long term objectives:

- **A Cadre of Political Leaders, Managers, and Activists** that is trained and skilled in political organization and campaigns, as well as prepared to govern.

The NDI assessment team met some talented, confident, and articulate young Roma activists. Most were affiliated with NGOs. It is essential to enlarge this cadre as the central part of the strategy to increase Roma political participation and influence. If such a cadre can be developed, over time this talent bank will produce the candidates, campaign managers/organizers, policy makers and analysts, activists and specialists to develop the campaign platforms and themes, deliver them to a mobilized constituency, and implement them in the public policy arena.

Training should support the development of a new class of Roma politicians, skilled in the art of the political campaign. Perhaps less obviously, training should support Roma efforts to develop realistic, practical, and achievable policy objectives--especially in local communities. Platforms should be designed that can unify and mobilize a viable constituency around achievable goals--like building/repairing a road, improving sanitation facilities, job training, or new computer and internet hook-up for the local high school. In addition, the proposals and the campaign themes should be developed in ways that reach out to the larger non-Roma community as well. This will have the effect of improving the Roma image—as well as enlarging the constituency and enhancing the prospects that the platform will be implemented.

At the conclusion of every meeting during the assessment, each individual present was asked to offer the most important recommendation that the team should include in its list of recommendations. Among the Slovaks who were interviewed, virtually all responded with “training to build capacity.” One added, “And, be sure to train the ones who think they do not need it.” The NDI team concurs with these views.

- **Traditions, Structures, and Mechanisms** that facilitate and encourage on-going community outreach and education to develop an informed and connected constituency and a coherent political culture.

The defining characteristic of Romani political life in Slovakia is the disconnect between so-called Roma political leaders and the constituency they claim to represent. If the Roma community is to develop a coherent political culture, this gap must be bridged by a set of traditions, structures, and mechanisms that links the Roma leaders with the community. These vehicles could take various forms, but some general observations/suggestions that seem appropriate to the Roma condition in Slovakia are mentioned below.

Town Meetings. Create a tradition of town meetings that establishes an open, on-going two-way communication link between the community and elected and non-

elected Roma and non-Roma leaders. Leading up to elections, civic groups could use this opportunity to launch this tradition, by organizing a series of educational forums to better inform the public, as well as introduce a new cadre of Roma political activists and candidates.

A New Political Party? Given the disjointed and divided political environment, the lack of capacity, and the Roma's public image, the NDI team believes that the establishment of a new Roma political party is at best premature. The conditions are poorly suited, and the NDI team fears such an effort would fail—and, indeed, possibly create new rivalries and divisions among the new generation—setting the Roma movement back years. Further, the overall need in the region is for all parties to become more grounded in political ideology and less formally identified by ethnicity or other special interests.

Roma NGO Coalition. The NDI team proposes that the Roma NGO community establish a nationwide, membership-based organization or association of like-minded and politically engaged Roma NGOs—representing the new generation of Roma. Such a coalition could support the Roma Political Participation Initiative's planning, training and education effort to build leadership and organizational capacities within the ranks of the Roma community. In addition, and most importantly, such a structure should serve primarily as a national and relatively open forum and networking vehicle to exchange, develop, and promote ideas among Roma leaders as well as link them to the Roma community. Such a mechanism could be an important step to developing an informed and coherent Roma political culture around the country.

NDI proposes that such a coalition of Roma NGOs be:

1. formed by a written Charter that clearly articulates a commonly held vision, along with a set of common philosophic values, principles, purposes, and achievable goals that unifies the members.
2. nationwide in its reach and inclusive of key non-Roma NGOs that share the Charter's expressed vision and values.
3. democratic in all respects, with all leaders, officers, and/or representatives elected by the larger membership.

Put **Roma Issues on the Mainstream Agenda and Broaden the Constituency** to increase the quantity and quality of Roma representation in governmental councils and to reach the critical mass necessary to achieve the community's public policy objectives. NDI believes that the Roma's challenges are Slovakia's challenges; and, that the issues of Roma concern should be developed and articulated in that framework, whenever possible. Likewise, the team believes that Roma politicians should seek political office not as "Roma candidates" per se, but generally speaking as candidates with a well-defined political ideology and platform (e.g., Social Democrat, Christian Democrat, Liberal), who also happen to be Roma.

This pluralistic and practical approach, which will require demonstrating to the mainstream parties the value of Roma participation, has the potential to raise the country's (including the Roma's) sense of purpose and identity to a higher plane. NDI also believes that this approach will, in the long term, ease tensions between the country's different ethnic groups, help overcome stereotypes, and de-stigmatize the Roma population and help preclude potential civil strife.

Practically speaking, NDI believes that this approach is in the Roma's self-interest because of the likelihood that it will help shape and consolidate a coherent public policy agenda among the urban, better educated, under-40 generation. But, at the same time, the NDI assessment team suspects that this broader approach—and the public policy agenda that it produces—will also broaden the Roma constituency, extending to the many Roma who reportedly deny their ethnicity and/or consider themselves assimilated into Slovak society.

The Role of Mainstream Political Parties. In general, political parties aggregate and represent social interests and provide a structure for political participation. They train political leaders who will assume a role in governing society. As electoral contestants they assume control of government or serve in an opposition capacity that directly affects government actions. Exercising political power in government means participation in political parties.

Given their importance in political life and their own development needs, mainstream political parties are at once central to Roma political participation and yet, in most of the region are ill-prepared to engage on this issue. Indeed, political parties in Slovakia are still developing into modern organizations.

As a result of their own incapacity, coupled with a lack of political will, the majority of democratically oriented parties in Slovakia have done little to incorporate Roma political interests into their long-term policy platforms; few have reached out to Roma as potential members who can genuinely be integrated into party structures or as voters whose interests will truly be heard; fewer still have recruited Roma as candidates with equal standing among their non-Roma peers. Some parties have resorted to vote-buying and other fraudulent means to secure Roma votes. Few party leaders recognize the need for and benefits to incorporating Roma into their parties as supporters, members, and elected representatives; many are concerned by the perceived political stigma of associating with Roma.

As noted above, the NDI assessment team found a consistent and dismaying reaction among most political parties to the proposition of seriously engaging with Roma communities in the political process. The role of political parties in fostering Roma political participation must change. It is up to the party leadership to encourage, support, and welcome those Roma who seek to be active in the political process. This means making room for them on party electoral lists, increasing their presence in executive bodies, and encouraging policy discussion within the parties on issues related to Roma rights.

Moreover, NDI strongly urges Slovakia's political leaders to vigorously condemn human rights abuses against Roma whenever they occur and to use the "bully pulpit" of their positions to promote non-discrimination in society at large. In addition, their active engagement with Romani civic groups will allow the genuine interests and needs of Roma communities to be understood and represented at decision-making levels. Similar exhortations to political parties in Europe's established democracies are perhaps also needed.

Public Opinion Research. The anecdotal information received by the NDI assessment team, while helpful in illustrating important themes, belies the apparent dearth of methodological research on Roma views in the context of political participation and representation. NDI sees public opinion research, in the form of polling and focus groups, as essential, and indeed a likely first step, to building strategies for Roma political participation. Mainstream parties and Roma themselves must obtain a clearer understanding of the attitudes of these communities and the factors that motivate or deter Roma from voting, running for office, or supporting various political agendas. Governments and international organizations would benefit considerably from a structured recording and analysis of Roma views on economic, social, and human rights issues.

NDI's limited experience in public opinion research with Roma, particularly in Slovakia prior to the 2002 elections, suggests that focus groups may be a preferred mechanism to polling and that isolating focus groups by gender is advisable. It is vital that Roma themselves be trained as survey implementers and focus group moderators. Sensitivity to cultural customs will enhance the integrity of data and information yielded through public opinion research.

- **Enhance the Roma Sense of Identity, Public and Self-Image** through a series of careful political positioning; policy agenda development; media outreach, training and integration; the implementation of self-help projects; and, the recruitment of qualified, respected, high profile Roma political candidates.

In the political arena. The generally negative and stereotypical image of Roma that is held by many Slovaks serves as a handicap when entering the political stage at any level. In order to overcome the entrenched prejudice against them, Roma need to groom and promote their best and brightest. When a new generation of young, progressive, and articulate political leaders emerges who can formulate thoughtful public policy agendas that define and link the Roma interests to Slovakia's interests, they will be better positioned to appeal to larger segments of Slovak society.

*Even though the candidate might lose the election, his/her candidacy will serve to enhance the Roma's public image in ways that help give the community a sense of pride, dignity, and identity.*



High-Visibility Candidates. NDI recommends that respected and articulate Roma Slovaks be recruited to run for highly visible public offices, such as mayor of Bratislava, Kosice, or other cities where Roma make up a significant portion of the electorate. This candidacy, regardless of “long odds,” could enhance the Roma’s popular image, “mainstream” Roma issues, and create a national sense of purpose that incorporates Roma issues. The candidate could come from academia, the cultural or literary world, as well as politics. The ideal candidate will be prepared with a professionally developed platform agenda intended to highlight the needs and promote the positive image of the Roma community.

Given the cultural barriers facing Roma, the current context is not one that would guarantee impressive victories for Roma candidates in any of the upcoming elections. It is misguided to assume that Slovakia would quickly increase the number of Roma in parliament. Rather, Roma would benefit most from the opportunity to learn how to wage effective electoral campaigns while affording them decent visibility in the elections. At this stage, what is important is that Roma begin to be viewed as capable leaders and valuable partners from which government and political parties would benefit.

Media. NDI recommends that current efforts to balance the coverage of the Roma community be evaluated based on results, and that these efforts be replaced or redoubled as appropriate. The NDI assessment team recommends a creative and proactive approach that, at a minimum:

1. provides the mainstream media with alternative news sources on the Roma community.
2. trains and places young Roma to work as professionals in mainstream media.
3. links public licensing reviews to a minimal level of minority hiring at larger media broadcast and publishing outlets.

NDI is encouraged by the efforts of Memo98, a local civic organization that currently monitors and publicizes the ongoing stereotyping and stigmatization of Roma in the media.

NDI also recommends that a cooperative effort, supported by respected Slovaks and members of the international community, be launched to quietly encourage print and broadcast media owners/executives, editors/producers, and film makers to end the stereotyping and balance reporting of Roma. Part of this initiative must be to urge these executives to train and hire qualified Roma journalists to work in their news rooms and studios—all as a matter of the national interest.

Self-help programs and identity. The NDI team visited several congested villages and settlements where the living and health conditions were particularly impoverished. None of the roads was paved, electricity and running water were limited, and unemployment was virtually 100%. Certain basic self-help programs could likely improve services and conditions, as well as give the community a

sense of accomplishment and pride. For example, access to simple medical services could be dramatically improved by a program (organized by a Romani community-based NGO, for example) that recruited a handful of medical professionals to visit a clinic for a morning once a month. Garbage clean-up, home repair, education-related job training and other projects could be organized by the community itself, in some cases without outside support. NDI recommends that emerging Roma political and civic leaders be trained in the organizing skills needed to develop such programs as a means to instill a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and identity in a community.

**2. Activities and their Guiding Principles.** As Roma Political Participation Initiative activities are designed and structured, the NDI assessment team recommends that they be guided by the following principles and priorities:

- **A Holistic Approach.** Like the political development and participation challenges before the Roma, the team recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be comprehensive and carefully targeted to grassroots political organizing, strategic planning, civic education, community organizing, issue advocacy, and governance -- all well known to those institutions with relevant training experience in the emerging democracies, such as NDI.
- **Long-Term View.** Assuming continued progress along a defined timeline, the team proposes that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be sustained for at least six years in Slovakia. This term is necessary given the needs of the Roma population, and the considerable training and development necessary to build a cadre of Roma leaders in the country. In addition, a long-term program will be necessary to conduct development and training efforts through a regional and national election campaign cycle in 2005 and 2006 respectively. Given the political and economic development needs of the Roma community, and that the community has been practically left out of comparable training since the Democratic Revolution of 1989, this six year term is reasonable as well as necessary.
- **The Younger Generation and Women.** Although it should not be exclusionary, the NDI team recommends that the younger generation, under age 40, be targeted in this initiative. This group is better educated and trained, more motivated and open, and less corrupted and tainted by and obliged to the past. NDI believes that the younger generation represents both the ideal and the only viable group upon which to base the reorientation and the increase of Roma political participation, and to also bring it to a coherent level.

In this connection, the NDI assessment team met several representatives of the formative but untested New Roma Generation, a group of Roma young people dedicated to advancing Roma initiatives. While the assessment team was unable to assess this specific organization's capacities or plans, it believes that this group's approach is appropriate and should be strongly encouraged.

In addition, Slovak Roma women stand out as a target group, as they often find themselves doubly discriminated against in a largely patriarchal society. Besides being morally wrong, the barriers against women's equal participation result in wasted talent. The NDI assessment team found, throughout the three-country assessment mission, that the Roma women were among the most talented activists and officials. Every effort should be made to ensure that women are sought out for inclusion and Roma advancement in the Roma Political Participation Initiative.

- **Legitimacy Derived from Consent.** Nothing more distorts the Roma political culture than the degree to which “informal leaders” –those who are appointed or anointed—claim to represent the Roma's interests without any legitimacy based on having been approved by an electorate. At every opportunity, the Roma Political Participation Initiative should reinforce the notion that political legitimacy and the right to claim “representative” or “leader” status must be derived from the consent of those being represented or governed.
- **Integrity and Open Competition.** Given the fragmentation, the corrupting role of family and financial ties, the private deals, and the levels of mistrust that characterize Romani politics—the Roma Political Participation Initiative must set the highest standards of professionalism, transparency, and openness. The recruitment and selection of training participants, for example, will be critical to the program's integrity, public perception and success. The NDI team recommends that the training opportunities and selection process be publicly announced, open and competitive. The team further recommends that neutral international sponsors and organizers take a leading role in interviewing and selecting candidates for training.
- **Local and Grassroots Development** where a concerted effort to provide basic political education, organizing and leadership training will inject competition into the political arena. A successful training and education campaign will quickly reorient the traditional and distorted top-down political formulas that have poorly served the Roma population. Generally speaking, the ideal sites to launch a sustained training and organizational effort will be local cities and towns with a relatively higher density of middle income and educated Roma.

These localities will also likely have a clan-like political hierarchy already in place, however, NDI believes these structures are vulnerable and will yield to a genuine grassroots education, development, and organizing effort. In addition, when choosing the localities to organize, it would be wise but not essential to seek those with Roma media outlets (Presov and Kosice) that are not obliged to the local political pressure.

NDI believes the most lasting contribution and the quickest return on investment for the Roma Political Participation Initiative will be at the local city and town level. The upcoming 2005 regional elections and the local elections in late 2006 will provide an early and exceptionally good opportunity to jump start this initiative, and to test concepts, strategies, and plans. Maximum effort should be made to identify and target

those localities where the Roma have adequate population density, political leadership and organizing and governing talent, and infrastructure.

- **Governance.** NDI recommends that for the purposes of this program, the goal of “increasing Roma political participation” be defined more broadly than merely increasing the number of Roma voters or elected representatives in parliament, regional, city and town councils.

Promoting existing Roma talent. Few Roma professionals serve on local government staffs, including in localities where there are disproportionately large Roma populations. In addition, few, if any, Roma serve in the civil or foreign service, or in public administration posts in the national government in Bratislava. The major reason may be that relatively few Roma are properly trained. However, qualified Roma are also not likely to apply because they face widespread discrimination in hiring.

The NDI assessment team recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative establish an effort to recruit and identify qualified Roma who could serve effectively in government public administration, civil/foreign service posts. In addition, it would be appropriate to open a dialogue to encourage and assist government officials to proactively recruit and hire qualified Roma to serve their country in these professional capacities.

Preparing candidates and elected Roma to govern. The NDI assessment team was told by Roma and non-Roma that many of the mayors and local councilors recently elected are unqualified to govern. Several were reportedly functionally illiterate and without a secondary education. Clearly, the newly elected Roma officials, especially at this moment, must be prepared to govern effectively. This is especially true in Slovakia where considerable governmental authority is decentralized, placing a larger burden and accountability on local governance. If newly elected Roma officials fail in their new positions, the goals of this initiative will be severely set back.

NDI recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative look beyond the horizon, and anticipate that newly elected Roma politicians will require preparation and some institutional support. Therefore, in addition to the fine art of political campaigning and related skills, NDI recommends that Roma training include basic governance and public administration, legislative process, town budgeting, “enterprise zone” theory, public-private economic development partnerships, the art of compromise, and constituency relations. (In meetings with the assessment team, the Vice Chairwoman of the governing SDKU Party and the Vice Chair of Parliament, concerned that the newly elected Roma mayors and councilors might fail and attract undesirable negative media in the process, urged NDI to help train recently elected Roma council members.)

NDI also recommends that training include the substance of public policy philosophy/theory and alternatives that can help form the basis of a coherent set of policy prescriptions that could underpin future policy agendas and campaign platforms. This training could be university-based. Also, several exceptionally capable economic, security and social policy research institutes exist in Slovakia—among the best in Central Europe—representing a vital indigenous training resource. These groups should be recruited to support the objectives of the Roma Participation Initiative. Besides assistance and support in training and developing agendas for Roma candidates' campaigns, small grants could be awarded to these think tanks to sponsor substantive internships for up and coming bright Roma students.

Given the depressed economic conditions in so many Roma neighborhoods, the need for entrepreneurial and business development is clear. Public-private partnerships might be appropriate means to generate commercial activity. If so, Roma and relevant non-Roma leaders, policy makers, analysts and activists should be provided the opportunity to study relevant public-private redevelopment sites in EU and the US, and innovations in housing, health and educational development programs. The US Embassy's International Visitor Programs would be an ideal mechanism. Other Bratislava-based Embassies could organize similar visit programs to showcase successful public-private development, volunteer and self-help initiatives in their respective countries.

- **Judicious, Strategic Selection of Issues to Pursue.** There is no shortage of critical issues challenging the Roma community that could make its way onto a Roma candidate's political agenda and platform. The economic, housing, social, educational, and health needs are staggering. The stagnant world and regional economies, and the scarcity of financial resources available from government limit the funds and possibilities. And, while they could be extremely helpful, the anticipated EU assistance funds for the Roma community falls well short of that needed to solve even the most basic problems.

Therefore, in order not to exacerbate the mistrust and disillusionment already in the Roma community, the Roma Political Participation Initiative should caution against developing overly ambitious political agendas that will raise unachievable expectations that could widen the trust gap that divides Roma leaders from their constituents.

While this report does not propose to develop a Roma political agenda, the team offers the following observations that might be considered as such an agenda is prepared and evolves:

The Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities. The NDI team notes with cautious optimism that this initiative could succeed in establishing a concrete national agenda around which the government and the country could mobilize to help

improve the Roma community's opportunities on a wide front, as well as their quality of life.

In order for the strategy and program to succeed, it will require committed support at the highest level of government, as well as strong institutionalized political backing. *Indeed, this initiative is an ideal opportunity for Slovakia's national leadership to set an international standard by summoning the country to unify in a noble effort to extend the benefits and opportunities enjoyed by all Slovaks to the Roma.*

Likewise, the strategy and program will require the cooperation and participation of the Roma community. Roma NGOs and the Roma Political Participation Initiative could play a critical role in shaping, further refining, and fostering implementation of the government's strategy.

Finally, a number of Roma and non-Roma experts expressed considerable concern that international aid funds for Roma programs were being wasted and/or stolen. They frequently added that domestic and international oversight was at least negligent, and at worst complicit. As one leading journalist advised, "Be sure to follow the money." International observers expressed the same caution. Given that the government's strategy will likely attract considerable foreign assistance, funds should be tracked to assure that money is being spent on appropriate needs.

Roma Caucus. No Roma are Members of Parliament. Still, NDI recommends that consideration be given to approaching potentially interested MPs and exploring different means of cooperation. One concrete proposal, for example, might be to form a Roma Caucus or Committee that could serve as a more or less permanent body to represent and advance Roma issues, providing a critical link between the Parliament and the Roma community.

Electoral Reform. The potential to increase Roma representation in national and perhaps local parliaments/councils are considerable through reforms to Slovakia's electoral system. The adoption of a more "mixed" system, which provides for the direct election of representatives, is of primary importance to the Roma political participation effort. This opportunity should be addressed by a comprehensive effort.

- **International Supporters, Institutions and Experience.** The broad consensus is that international pressure is key to the government's interest in addressing Roma issues. The same is true of most countries in the region. Clearly, continued international support and engagement from foreign governments, multilateral institutions, and NGOs will be critical to achieve the goals of this program. At a minimum, this support should take the following forms:

- a. Coordinated international *financial and technical support* will be indispensable to launch and sustain the comprehensive effort described herein.
- b. *Extensive international training and expertise* will be needed to conduct the program successfully. An essential component will be Roma participation in political campaigns in Europe, Canada, or the United States. In addition, Roma participation in visitor, study, and professional internship programs abroad in public administration and governance—and as otherwise discussed herein—is equally necessary
- c. Continued international *political, advocacy, and diplomatic support* will be critical to advance specific issues and agendas that could contribute significantly to this program’s objectives. For example, representatives of the international community could appropriately encourage further discussions to reform Slovakia’s electoral system to enhance prospects for greater representation of minorities. As mentioned previously, representatives of the international community could appropriately and quietly encourage media executives to train and then hire qualified Roma, including where foreign owners have an interest in the particular media outlet.
- d. NDI strongly recommends that an *International Donor Committee* be established among those international governments, multilateral institutions, and NGOs willing to support the Roma Political Participation Initiative with financial, technical, or political/diplomatic support, or some combination.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The problems confronting Roma are many and complex. Essential to their resolution is active, widespread participation by Roma in the political process to represent their communities strategically. This requires first and foremost a more amenable political, social and economic environment; it also requires individual skills training, enhanced political organization, and strategies that allow for political diversity among Roma while promoting collective interests imbued in their status as citizens.

The government of Slovakia, like others in the region, needs to implement Roma development strategies in a manner that derives meaningful and measurable benefit to Roma communities in the areas of political representation, economic development, social integration, and human rights protection. International organizations need to include political participation among the key goals to Roma development strategies, and then provide the resources and oversight to ensure that progress is made. Mainstream political parties need to incorporate Roma as voters, members, candidates, and eventually among their leaders.

Given the breadth and depth of the political, social, and economic obstacles facing the Roma in Slovakia, NDI believes that a nationwide, multi-faceted, and long-term approach to create meaningful political participation is needed. The recommendations in this report represent a first step toward Roma ownership of the future of their communities through democratic means.

# Roma Political Participation in Slovakia

## Appendix 1

### Assessment Team Meetings

#### **D. Government**

Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities –  
Office in Bratislava and Regional office in Presov  
Elected Leaders and citizens of Roma communities and towns in Eastern Slovakia  
Former Roma MP at the Slovak National Council  
Ministry of Culture  
Slovak Government - Section of Human Rights & Minorities  
Members of Slovak Parliament  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

#### ***Political Parties***

Christian Democratic Party  
Social Democratic Alternative  
Alliance of New Citizens  
Party of the Hungarian Coalition  
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union  
ROMA Movement

#### ***Non-Governmental Organizations and International Community***

Gandhi Schools  
World Bank, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Levoca Community Center, Slovakia  
United Nations Development Program, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Open Society Institute, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Freedom House, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Pre-school facility at Lunik IX, Slovakia  
Environmental Training Project, Kosice, Slovakia  
Project on Ethnic Relations, Bratislava, Slovakia  
District Development Agency, Presov, Slovakia  
School officials at Svinia, Slovakia  
Delegation of the European Commission in the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Regional Association of Roma Initiatives, Banska Bystrica, Slovakia  
Club of Roma Women in Slovakia, Banska Bystrica, Slovakia  
Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Association of Young Roma, Banska Bystrica, Slovakia  
Council of Slovak Roma, Kosice, Slovensko  
Association of Roma Settlements in Bardejov and Presov, Slovakia  
Community center ZOR, Kezmarok, Slovakia

#### ***Media***

Roma Press Agency, Kosice, Slovakia  
Sme, Bratislava, Slovakia  
Romano L'il Nevo, Presov, Slovakia