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## **Increasing Roma Political Participation is Key to Solving Roma Development Issues**

### *Opportunities Evident To Increase Roma Political Participation in Slovakia*

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) today releases a report on Roma political participation in Slovakia that calls for inclusion of Roma into Slovakia's democratic political system as a sustained means to solve problems facing Roma communities.

The report is based on a NDI assessment of Roma political participation, conducted in March 2003. Similar assessments were conducted in Bulgaria and Romania. This project has been supported by the Open Society Institute.

“Largely absent in Roma development strategies are initiatives to strengthen Roma political involvement—as voters, advocates, and activists—as well as Roma political representation in governing bodies, such that Roma themselves can address their problems through the political process”, said Robert Benjamin, NDI Director for Central and Eastern Europe. “With Slovakia’s pending accession to the European Union, the time has come for Roma to have the skills and the space to integrate into Slovak politics. This task is as important to Slovakia’s democratic well-being overall as it is to the country’s Roma citizens.”

A multinational NDI delegation of political experts teamed with Roma interviewed approximately 60 individuals throughout Slovakia, and found that the obstacles to greater political involvement, such as disaffection from Roma organizations and disassociation from mainstream political parties, can be surmounted by training and encouraging a large pool of talented Roma, mainly young and many women, to become involved in political life.

“The challenges to Roma political participation are evident, but I am heartened by the interest of many young Roma to be part of the political process to solve their communities’ problems”, said delegation member and Slovak Roma activist Peter Pollak.

Present in 60 countries worldwide, and having worked in Slovakia since 1993 on civil society, parliamentary, political party, and electoral system development, NDI has experience in supporting minority political participation. “We stand ready to work with Roma colleagues and others in a long-term effort to strengthen Roma political participation in Slovakia and throughout Central and Eastern Europe”, noted Mr. Benjamin.

## **1. SUMMARY OF REPORT FINDINGS**

- Roma are largely removed from political life at present but seek meaningful engagement--as seen by voter turnout rates that track with overall levels. Roma see local government as a principal source of solving their problems.
- From a political perspective the Roma community is quite diverse. While a degree of political coherence among Roma is important, greater inclusion of Roma into Slovak politics is likely to be accomplished through multiple political affiliations.
- Greater political participation among Roma has been frustrated by a lack of political and governing experience among Roma communities, deficient connections between Roma and Roma political organizations, insufficient inclusion of Roma in mainstream political parties, negative bias in mainstream media, and to an extent systemic barriers, such as Slovakia's purely proportional representation election system at the parliamentary level.
- While daunting, these challenges can be surmounted by capitalizing on opportunities to build greater political representation.
  - A large, talented group of people—many young, many women—capable of becoming effective political activists and leaders.
  - Growing political activism, in voter education, human rights advocacy, and other areas, that can reach out to grassroots Roma communities.
  - The government's updated Roma development strategy, which can push for greater political inclusion and devote resources to that end.
  - The next round of elections that can be used to amplify Roma political representation—particularly at the local level.

NDI has identified several directions that Roma and mainstream political organizations should consider for bringing more Roma into the political system:

- Public opinion research, to attain a better and consistent understanding of Roma views, ideas, aspirations, and their evolution over time.
- Political skills training for Roma activists at the grassroots level, in election organizing, community organizing, legislative/issue advocacy.
- Civic and voter education, so that Roma can understand their roles as citizens.
- Governance training for Roma prior to their tenure as elected officials.
- Structured debate and discourse within the Roma community about political goals and strategy that at once reaches for political coherence as a constituency and builds on diversity to chart multiple avenues toward political inclusion.
- Electoral reform that recognizes the importance of Roma political representation as key to their inclusion in the political system.
- Assistance to mainstream political parties to speak knowledgeably on Roma issues, propose solutions, and include Roma into their organizations as activists and candidates.

## **2. BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARIES OF PANEL MEMBERS (attached)**

## **3. NDI PROGRAMS IN SLOVAKIA (attached)**