

While Roma comprise a sizeable percentage of the population in Central and Eastern Europe - up to 10 percent in some countries - for the most part, they have been left out of the region's democratic rebirth. Openly discriminated against and often physically isolated in ramshackle "settlements," they have largely been ignored and occasionally co-opted by the mainstream political parties, leaving them with few political options to improve their economic and social standing.

In April 2004, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched a program in Slovakia and Bulgaria to increase the participation of Roma in electoral politics and representative government; NDI plans to expand the initiative to other countries in the coming year. This program builds on the Institute's past work with Roma political and civic activists throughout Central and Eastern Europe and on an Open Society Institute-funded assessment of the political challenges and opportunities facing Roma. This newsletter highlights the Institute's efforts to assist Roma, not only in Bulgaria and Slovakia, but in NDI's other programs throughout the region.

BULGARIAN PRESIDENT DISCUSSES POLICY WITH NDI PARTICIPANTS

For most participants in NDI's Roma program in Bulgaria, the highlight of their experience was a special meeting with Bulgarian President Parvanov. They discussed the most important issues facing the Roma community: education, employment, social services and housing policy. At the meeting, President Parvanov made the unexpected announcement that he will establish an ethnic council within the presidency, as well as a special national forum on April 28, to discuss Roma education. Both the council and the forum will include Roma from NDI's program.



Participants meet with Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov

The Bulgaria component of NDI's Roma program began with a six-month political leadership school for 25 young

"I celebrate the program of NDI for Roma political participation skills. I hope however that this is the first of many working meetings between us, and that after the end of your program the meetings will be initiated by us independently and we will be inviting NDI as a guest of honor."

- President Georgi Parvanov

Roma activists nominated by all mainstream political parties, major Roma parties, and media outlets. The trainees completed their course in March 2005; the next training series, for a new group of Roma, will begin in the fall.

The curriculum included an orientation on the political process and six modules on political party development, public policy formation, outreach and voter contact, campaigns, communication and media,



Popular TV anchor Ivo Indjev moderates a candidate debate simulation during a training seminar in Bulgaria.

and negotiation and coalition building. Each training featured North American, European and Bulgarian experts, including political analysts, university lecturers, NGO leaders, and popular media figures. As part of the training, participants conducted individual projects to use their newly acquired skills, which included conducting political party membership drives, developing a community profile, holding outreach activities, creating a campaign message, and attracting media attention. These projects also provided practical assistance to Roma communities and political parties.

In addition to the skills training, the participants met with the leadership of all mainstream political parties. Most of these discussions centered on the parties' positions on issues most important to Roma, including education, health care and employment. In addition, The Human Rights and Religions Committee invited the participants to the Bulgarian Parliament. During the visit, the group spoke with parliamentary caucuses and committees about the work of the parliament and parties on Roma issues.

In March 2005, NDI fielded the first poll ever conducted in Bulgaria on Roma political attitudes. Survey questions probed opinions about Roma parties, Roma communities, mainstream parties' Roma policies, social and economic priorities, and national and local government performance. Using a sample of more than 2,000 respondents, NDI was able to compare the responses of Roma and non-Roma. The results of the poll can be found at www.ndi-bg.org.

In reaction to a racist comment made by a Bulgarian member of parliament about Roma, a group of participants, using skills and knowledge gained from NDI's training, drafted a memorandum to the leader of the party requesting a response. As a result, the party pledged not to include the individual on its party list for the June 2005 parliamentary elections.

As a result of NDI's program, some of the Roma participants established a National Association of Roma in Public Administration. The participants have also made significant advancements within their parties and attracted considerable positive media attention, demonstrating the skills and confidence gained through the program.

SLOVAK ROMA: IN THE EU BUT NOT IN PARLIAMENT

Although Slovakia became a member state of the European Union in May 2004, the treatment of its Roma minority remains the single most pressing human rights problem. One of the factors contributing to the situation is the under representation of Roma in central, regional, and local level politics.

Assistance to Roma in Slovakia over the past 15 years has been abundant, but few initiatives have sought to politically empower Roma, rather than provide humanitarian assistance and highlight human rights abuses. Some of these projects, though, have encouraged the emergence of local community leaders, organizers, and NGO activists who have both the vision and the ambition to become elected representatives on the regional and national level. What these leaders lack is political experience and the support of political parties.

In an effort to address this situation, NDI is working with a group of more than 20 emerging political and civic leaders to help enhance their political skills. Due to the lack of political programs for Roma, NDI's initiative in Slovakia was welcomed by most of the Roma leaders at an introductory consultation held on February 19 in Poprad, Eastern Slovakia.



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Roma activists provide input into the program's design during NDI's meeting in Poprad, Eastern Slovakia

NDI's Roma Political Participation Program in Slovakia began with a public opinion survey of Roma, which was fielded in early April 2005 by the Institute of Public Affairs (IVO). The survey was the first of this kind to be done in Slovakia and was only possible because of IVO's sociographic mapping program of Roma communities in Slovakia. The results of NDI's survey will be available in mid-April and will be presented to mainstream political parties, Roma parties, NGOs, and the media.

Like its counterpart in Bulgaria, the Slovakia program has as its centerpiece a series of political leadership seminars for Roma activists. The participants are a mix of local elected representatives, civil servants, and NGO leaders from various regions of Slovakia. The first training was held in Kosice on the first weekend of April, covering various aspects of constituency relations and local governance. The training included a visit to the Kosice regional government and a discussion with its representatives on Roma issues.



Photos © Romano Nevo Lil

Ivan Mako and other members of Young Roma Generation during their awareness raising campaign, holding banners "We are not in the parliament, but we are here" in front of the Office of the Government in 2002. There are currently no Roma in the Slovak National Assembly.

Finally, NDI is offering technical assistance to different Roma groups on an *ad-hoc* basis according to their expressed needs. One of the groups that has already approached NDI is the Young Roma Generation, which was established by Ivan Mako, Maros Balog, Peter Pollak, and Eduard Conka, all participants in NDI's previous Youth and Politics program. All four are now actively involved in shaping the discourse of Roma politics and have already created a wide network of collaborating organizations and individuals.

ALBANIA ROMA RAISE AWARENESS IN TIRANA COMMUNITIES

In Albania, NDI is supporting the development of a diverse new generation of emerging leaders and equipping ordinary Albanians - as individuals and in organized community groups - with the skills to more fully participate in their country's democratic process. Through the Institute's Civic Forum program, citizens actively monitor local governments to ensure transparency and to hold officials accountable to their election campaign promises. A further program, Engaged Citizens, trains the most active and motivated Civic Forum participants on such topics as teambuilding, strategic planning and local budget monitoring. The Institute has also helped participants

brainstorm ways to identify allies and opponents and led a discussion on how the participants can use community resources, both financial and material, to their advantage.

In June 2004, Shaqir Hasantari, a participant in the Engaged Citizens program, and his fellow Roma citizens worked to raise awareness in the Roma community in Tirana as to why they should register with the local authorities. He and his colleagues conducted two meetings with 25 heads of households to impress upon them that their rights can only be fully secured if they are officially registered. Hasantari convinced 15 heads of households to register themselves and their clan, and he continues to reach out to others in the Roma community to do the same. Hasantari and the NGO he works with, AMARA DROM, are also planning a Roma voter education initiative in advance of July's parliamentary elections.

MACEDONIAN PARLIAMENT REACHES OUT TO ROMA

Parliamentary Internships

Since the Institute launched its parliamentary internship program in 1999, four Roma have participated in the program. Two Roma interns worked for Macedonia's two largest parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) in parliament, while the other two interns worked for a Roma member of parliament (MP) from the United Party for Emancipation.

Constituency Office Assistance Program

In June 2004, NDI helped Roma MP Nezdet Mustafa open a constituency office to allow for greater outreach to citizens in his district. Mustafa is a member of the United Party for Emancipation, the only Roma party represented in parliament.

The office was opened in Suto Orizari, a predominantly Roma suburb of Skopje, and staffed with a Roma constituency assistant. In the short time the office has been open, more than 100 citizens have come to meet Mustafa and raise issues they face. The most common areas of concern have been employment and education. In addition to these visits, the constituency assistant, who was trained by NDI, organized five meetings with representatives from NGOs dealing with Roma issues. The meetings focused on The National Strategy for Roma, government decentralization, and various constituents' problems.

Election Campaign Simulation

In early February 2005, NDI organized the Local Election Challenge, a cross-party election simulation, in six areas of Macedonia. The simulation brought together representatives from nine political parties to work in multi-party teams on campaign



NDI Macedonia organizes a cross-party election simulation exercise.



NDI's Local Election Challenge promotional brochure was translated into five languages, including Romani.

management, decentralization and code of conduct issues for the 2005 local elections. Promotional materials for the Local Election Challenge were published in five languages including Romani.

More than 50 party representatives from the Roma party, the United Party for Emancipation, took part in the simulation exercise. Party representatives attended all six regional events and were also present at the final session, which was held in Skopje.

ROMANIAN NGOS EDUCATE ROMA VOTERS

With support from NDI's small grants program in Romania prior to the general and presidential elections in fall of 2004, two partner organizations educated Roma about the electoral process. The Romanian Association of Young People with Initiative (ARTI) conducted a pre-election project aimed at increasing the turnout of youth and Roma in the judet of Dolj through educational seminars and material distribution. ARTI held six voter education seminars for more than 400 Roma and youth, organized election knowledge contests and events and spoke to young people in internet-cafes and cafeterias about the importance of voting. They also distributed a comprehensive leaflet in Romani explaining the importance of voting and the main objectives of the candidates running for parliament in that district.



ARTI distributes a voter education leaflet in Romani.

The campaigns produced visible results, reducing the number of canceled ballots in targeted polling stations

from five percent to two percent in comparison to the previous election. In the judet of Constanta, the Romanian Association Against AIDS (ARAS), an organization working on health issues and HIV/AIDS education, organized a peer-to-peer voter education campaign for youth and the Roma community.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

With parliamentary elections scheduled for June in Bulgaria, NDI plans to train Roma candidates and Roma party pollwatchers. Following the election, Roma from Slovakia will travel to Sofia to take part in a lessons learned seminar. This will be particularly useful as Slovakia heads into regional elections in the fall. The first year of NDI's Roma initiative will culminate with a regional leadership academy in summer 2005, bringing together the most advanced participants from the training series in Bulgaria and Slovakia, as well as select promising Roma activists from other countries in the region. The academy, which will likely take place in Macedonia, will provide advanced leadership training to supplement the political skills developed during the previous six months. The event will also provide a forum for Roma from different countries to exchange information and ideas, and to strengthen their collaboration.

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