



Roma Participation in the 2005 Slovak Regional Elections

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SUMMARY:

On November 26, 2005 voters in Slovakia went to the polls to elect representatives to the VUC¹ (regional) governments. An increasing number of Roma candidates used this opportunity to showcase strong political skills through the execution of professional and well-organized campaigns. Some Roma parties and politicians also increased their cooperation with mainstream parties and with each other.

While no Roma candidates were elected to any of the eight regional parliaments, five Roma candidates garnered more than 1,000 votes each, as compared to only one candidate achieving this level of support in the 2001 elections. One Roma candidate, Peter Pollak, was 178 votes shy of being elected, finishing eight in a district that elected seven representatives. This makes him the first alternate in the event of an opening, and the closest a Roma candidate has come to winning elected representation above the municipal level.

The regional government is of particular importance to Roma due to its competencies over policy areas such as education and housing. Representation in this level of government offers the best means for Roma to address the pressing problems facing their communities. While Roma showed significant advancement in these elections, they must increase their political skills and cooperation with mainstream parties if they are to be successful in the future.

SLOVAKIA'S REGIONAL LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT

These were the second regional elections since the creation of this level of government in 2001 as part of the decentralization of public administration. Slovakia has eight regions and 2,891 municipalities. Each region is composed of several electoral districts, with each district assigned a specific number of mandates, ranging from two to thirteen, based on its population size.

Parties develop separate electoral strategies in each region, choosing to form coalitions or run independently. Within each district, the party or coalition nominates candidates corresponding to the number of mandates per district. Coalitions and parties also nominate candidates for the head of the VUC to be elected on a separate ballot. Both ballots list the candidates' names in alphabetical order with party affiliation mentioned along with other information about the candidate (age, profession and permanent residence). Voters select candidates by circling a number next to the candidate's name. They may select up to as many candidates as mandates available in their district, but cannot circle more.

The first VUC elections in 2001 were marked by low voter turnout (26.02 percent) and general confusion regarding the competencies of the relatively new regional level of government. The most successful party was the HZDS², at that time the governing party under Prime Minister

¹ Higher territorial units

² **Explaining the acronyms:** Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU), Christian Democratic Party (KDH), Hungarian Coalition (SMK), the New Citizen Alliance (ANO), Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), Direction-social democracy (Smer), the Movement for Democracy (HZD), the Free Forum (SF), the Slovak Communist Party (KSS). Other parties are the Slovak National Party (SNS), Democratic Party (DS), Left Block (LB), United Slovak National Party (ZSNS), Real Slovak National Party (RSNS), Roma Civic Initiative (ROI), and Romani Intelligentsia for Coexistence (RIS).

Vladimir Meciar. It independently secured 18.95 percent of all seats and received an additional 12.96 percent of seats through coalitions. The SMK received 14.96 percent of the seats and the rest of the mandates were split among single parties, their coalitions and independent candidates³. While a high number of Roma candidates ran in the election (126), none came close to being elected.

2005 REGIONAL ELECTION RESULTS:

In 2005, the trend of low voter participation continued with a turnout of only 18 percent. The coalition of three right-wing parties—DS, KDH, and SDKU—won the most seats, securing 23.5 percent of seats across all regions, followed by SMK with 12.86 percent and independent candidates with 9.46 percent. Individually, the most successful party was KDH, which secured 87 seats⁴, followed by Smer with 70 seats, SDKU with 64 seats and SMK with 54 seats. HZDS, the overall winner of the 2001 regional elections, lost in every region, with the exception of Nitra. The Communist Party, despite holding seats in the national parliament, failed to win seats in any of the regional parliaments.

Independent candidates improved their performance from the 2001 elections due partly to the often chaotic formulation of coalitions by political parties. The most illustrative of these coalitions among unlikely partners was the so-called “Slovak coalition” in the Nitra region. The coalition consisted of Slovak parties, including arch-enemies Smer and SDKU, and KDH and HZDS, and had the sole aim of keeping the Hungarian SMK (who won a majority in 2001) out of government. Alliances on the regional level did not reflect the situation on the national level, leaving voters confused and discouraged.

Other factors contributing to the low turnout were bad weather and a lack of information about the regional self-governments. After four years, voters were still largely unaware or disapproving of the purpose and relevance of the VUCs, despite their increasing competencies and budgets. Some commentators also linked the absence of campaigns, direct voter contact and political platforms to the low turnout.

ROMA CANDIDATES:

There were 39 Roma candidates in the 2005 regional elections: six were women, seven were independents, 22 were running with the Roma Coalition Party, and nine were running with mainstream parties⁵. While this is a decrease from the 2001 regional election, in which 126 Roma ran, it signals a positive trend. As there were fewer candidates, there was a smaller split among the Roma vote, which in previous local and regional elections severely hampered the success of Roma candidates. While there was a decrease in quantity, there was an increase in the quality of Roma candidates, as many were community leaders with strong reputations and leadership experience. Sixteen of the candidates ran in Banska Bystrica, fifteen in Kosice, seven in Presov and one in Zilina region. Five graduates of the NDI political skills building program and one current program participant of the second round ran as candidates.

³ Together independent candidates won 4.48 percent of the seats in the regional parliaments

⁴ They had only 35 seats in 2001

⁵ Five of the nine ran for the ANO party.

Five Roma candidates garnered more than 1,000 votes as compared to only one candidate in the 2001 elections.⁶ The most successful Roma candidate, NDI participant Peter Pollak, finished eighth in the Spisska Nova Ves district where the top seven candidates received seats in parliament, making him the first alternate if an MP resigns or is elected to higher office. Pollak received 1,757 votes (15 percent), only 178 votes from receiving a seat. This is the closest a Slovak Rom has come to being elected to public office above the municipal level. While no Roma candidate was elected, the campaign and results of the top Roma candidates marked a significant improvement from the previous election and indicate a positive trend toward future electoral success.

Improvements in the Campaigns of Roma Candidates

Cooperation with Mainstream Parties: Well in advance of the elections, two Roma parties—RIS and ROI—began negotiations with mainstream parties. ROI organized an official election coalition with HZDS in Presov and *Smer* in Kosice with the parties adopting ROI's policy idea to create a Roma office with the VUC governments. This was the first official coalition agreement between a Roma and mainstream party in Slovak post-communist history. Unfortunately, ROI failed to conduct the necessary paperwork to reregister under Slovakia's new law on political parties and was erased from the party registry. However, ROI's two candidates remained on the coalition's list and its logo was included on coalition campaign posters. RIS successfully negotiated with ANO for its support of several Roma candidates. In return for ANO including these candidates, RIS agreed not to field candidates for the elections. The agreement was not official and most of the details of the agreement between RIS and ANO are unknown. However a positive outcome of the cooperation was that RIS nominated fewer candidates, thereby lessening the split of the Roma vote.

Fewer Roma candidates: In comparison to the first regional election in 2001, the number of Roma candidates dropped from 126 to 39, which resulted in less of a split among the Roma vote. In 2001, 49 Roma candidates ran in Kosice region, 41 in Presov region, and 21 in Banska Bystrica region. In 2005, the most significant drop in Roma candidates occurred in the Presov region with 34 fewer candidates in 2005. Several factors may have contributed to such a dramatic decrease: the overall failure of Roma candidates to get elected in 2001 and the resulting disappointment with regional politics; a decrease, in the number of active Roma parties; and agreements between parties to support each others candidates.

Quality over Quantity: The quality of Roma candidates improved in 2005 from 2001. This year, all three Roma parties (ROI, RIS and the Roma Coalition Party) moved away from their previous approach of quantity over quality, instead endorsing fewer candidates, but ones with good reputations and experience working for their community as mayors, NGO activists, or informal community leaders. NDI's March 2005 public opinion research on Roma political attitudes found that the reputation of candidates was one of the most influential factors for Roma when casting their vote.

Get Out The Vote: Some Roma candidates understood that being Roma would not automatically secure enough Roma votes for victory. For the first time, Roma candidates realized the necessity

⁶ 1000 votes represents at least seven percent of valid votes in a district.

of effective campaigning to earn the support of their community and to convince people to turn out to vote on election day. More candidates ran serious campaigns, with a platform and message, communication strategy, direct voter contact and get-out the vote activities. One candidate, Peter Pollak, mobilized more than 70 volunteers throughout the twenty districts of the Kosice region, conducted three rounds of door to door voter contact, produced targeted campaign literature for Roma and non-Roma voters and successfully raised more money than any previous Roma candidate. Pollak's GOTV efforts resulted in an estimated Roma voter turnout in his district significantly higher than that of the district average (36 percent of Roma turned out, as opposed to an overall district turnout of 17.7 percent).

Increased Cooperation Among Roma Candidates: Some Roma candidates and parties made an attempt to cooperate with each, rather than discredit other candidates, as is often done. For example, in one of the Kosice districts where voters could choose up to eight candidates, and five Roma were running for office, candidate Josef Cervenak organized a cooperation among the Roma candidates to increase all of their votes.

Areas for Improvement and Lessons Learned

Need for More Strategic Thinking– While some Roma politicians began to think strategically about their campaigns and cooperation with mainstream and Roma parties and candidates, many Roma candidates decided to run without a program or a strategy because they were approached by Roma or non-Roma political parties.

Need for More Advanced Campaign Skills– More Roma candidates need to employ direct voter contact and GOTV activities. Those candidates that did use these mechanisms, and as a result received a significant number of votes, must fine tune their skills and techniques in such areas as targeting Roma outside of settlements, so that they can win a seat in the next elections.

Need for Strong Platforms and Messages– The election results showed that without a program and strong campaign messages, Roma candidates cannot attract Roma voters. This is significant as many Roma did not believe that Roma voters could be attracted without “buying” their support. The campaign of Peter Pollak and others helped to illustrate the importance of a professional campaign and clear message.

2006 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

For Roma to have a chance at gaining representation in the parliamentary elections, it will be critical for them to partner with mainstream parties. While only two Roma parties are currently registered, and the split of Roma votes will likely decrease from previous years, NDI polling shows that Roma parties, even if united, are unlikely to pass the five percent threshold. The relationships built between mainstream parties and Roma candidates and parties during the regional elections will help foster future cooperation, though gaining Roma representation in parliament is a long-term goal and should not be expected in 2006 without significant changes to the current electoral system.