



ROMA REGIONAL NEWSLETTER

March 2006

Volume 1, Issue 3

In April 2004, the National Democratic Institute launched a National Endowment for Democracy (NED) funded program in Slovakia and Bulgaria to increase Roma participation in electoral politics and representative government, and is currently expanding the initiative into Romania. This newsletter highlights important news from NDI's program participants and Roma activists from throughout the region.

ROMA SCORE RECORD GAINS IN SLOVAK REGIONAL ELECTIONS

On November 26, 2005, five Roma candidates for regional parliament each garnered more than seven percent of the vote (1,000 votes), marking the most successful showing for Roma in any Slovak election. One candidate, Peter Pollak, secured more than 15 percent of the electorate's support in his district, receiving more votes than a sitting member of the national parliament. Falling only 178 votes shy of securing a seat, Mr. Pollak now serves as the first alternate if a current member cannot fulfill his or her term.

Pollak's success is largely due to his relentless efforts to mobilize and educate Roma voters. The organization and enthusiasm of his campaign team of more than 70 people allowed for the successful implementation of Get Out The Vote (GOTV) activities, door-to-door can-

vassing and voter targeting. Through his campaign efforts and ability to rally voters, Roma turnout in Pollak's region was higher than the national average – an impressive 36 percent compared to an overall turnout of only 17.7 percent throughout Slovakia.

The Slovak Roma campaigns marked significant strategic improvements from previous efforts. Picking up on skills gained during NDI training, Roma party leaders arranged to run fewer candidates, invoking a “quality over quantity” approach. This tactic avoided significant splits of the Roma vote, allowing for increased cooperation among Roma candidates and less confusion for voters on Election Day.

The two major Roma groups also agreed to collaborate, running candidates in differ-

Continued on Page 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

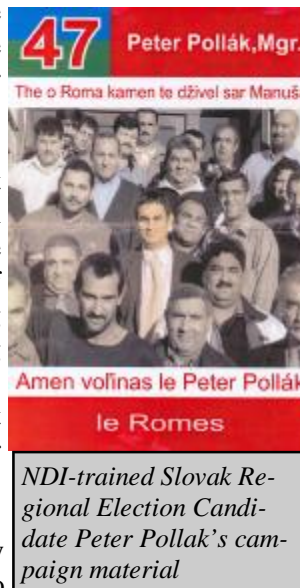
NDI Bulgaria Program Participants Present Survey Results 2

European action on Roma issues— Direct 3

NDI Slovakia Program Participants visit Slovak Parliament 3

Roma Personal Stories: Spotlight on NDI Roma Program Participants 4-5

Roma Happenings Around the Region 6



NDI-trained Slovak Regional Election Candidate Peter Pollak's campaign material

BULGARIAN PRESIDENT COMMITS TO IMPROVED ROMA EDUCATION

On January 26, 2006, Roma activists met with Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and several of his top officials. In his second meeting with a group of NDI participants, Mr. Parvanov committed to convene a special session including Ministry of Education officials, Parliamentary Education Committee members, and Roma activists to discuss possible amendments to the pending education legislation.



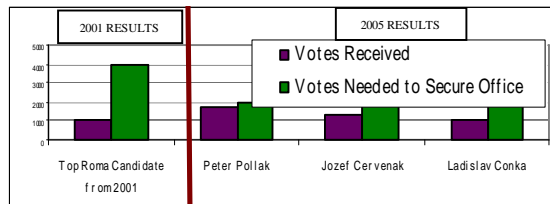
President Parvanov speaks with NDI Roma participants on Romani education.

The group presented the President with 15 “best practices,” citing proven methods of addressing Roma education deficiencies. The examples from localities across the country, offered the President creative and original ideas to bridge the gap between Roma and mainstream education standards. Mr. Parvanov promised to visit as many schools across Bulgaria as possible to promote the good practices.

CONT'D: ROMA IN SLOVAK ELECTIONS

ent districts and supporting each others candidacies. As a result, the individual candidates focused on devising effective campaigns and reaching voters instead of discrediting each other. These strategies, coupled with enhanced relationships with mainstream political parties and more refined GOTV techniques, demonstrated that when organized and trained, Roma represent a significant political force.

Also of significance was the greater realization among Roma leaders of the important competencies of



Graph depicting top three Roma vote getters in 2005 Regional Elections.

the regional level of government. Roma elected to this level would be able to better address issues such as education, health care, and housing—the most pressing issues facing Roma communities today.

While this election season proved the best yet for Roma candidates, NDI will continue to work with them on enhancing strategic thinking, devising stronger platforms, and conveying clearer messages. Although elected office was not secured by the Roma candidates, their progress made in this election cycle will give Roma a more advantageous starting point in the local elections in late 2006 and the next regional elections, scheduled for 2009.

GRASSROOT SURVEYS IDENTIFY KEY ISSUES FOR ROMA IN BULGARIA



Roma activist conducting public opinion research in his community.

In a testimonial to the development of their political acumen, NDI program participants in Bulgaria successfully designed and conducted public research surveys this past January. The research topics addressed hot-button community issues with an aim to identify the Roma communities' priorities and suggestions for action. Surveys of particular note addressed: employment opportunities, local challenges and preferred solutions; an assessment of Roma Party local councilors; and a measurement of a Roma community's sense of empowerment. This exercise is an important step in developing public policy that specifically addresses the demands of the community. For more information or copies of survey results, contact NDI Bulgaria (see page 6 for contact info).

Below are examples of participant survey results:

Employment Opportunities Survey by Emilia Kovacheva Strelcha Municipality

- 60% — Identify themselves as unemployed
- Primary reasons:
 - “Lack of employment opportunities”
 - “Insufficient qualifications”
 - “Racial discrimination”
- 80% — Favor employment in state-owned institutions or companies.
 - Private sector and entrepreneurship are notably less popular
- 75% — Never applied for a job
- 20% — Apply for a job once a year or less
- 90% — Would like to receive training to improve their qualifications

Roma Party Local Councilor Review Survey by Dragomir Mihaylov Vidin Municipality

- 50% — Satisfied with work of councilors
- 40% — Undecided about work of councilors
- 10% — Unhappy with work of councilors
- Large undecided bloc indicated Roma group must be more active and visible.
- Greatest weaknesses of councilors
 - “Lack of initiative”
 - “Insufficient experience”
 - “Insufficient teamwork”
- Vote for the Roma Party in next elections?
 - 70% — Yes
 - 5% — No
 - 25% — Undecided

REPORT FROM BRUSSELS

By Leo Spaans

In 2005, NDI opened an office in Brussels, Belgium to further strengthen the Institute's relationships with the European institutions, development agencies of EU member states, the party internationals, and other European organizations interested in democracy promotion.

In the nine months I have spent as NDI's Resident Director in Brussels, I have learned a great deal about the European-wide effort to address not only Roma social exclusion but also the roadblocks faced by Roma trying to break into mainstream politics. Inspired and supported by NDI's Roma team working in Bratislava, Sofia, Bucharest, and Washington DC, I am working to inform the wide variety of NDI partners in Brussels of the Institute's program to enhance the political skills of emerging Roma leaders in Central and Eastern Europe. I engage in dialogue with like-minded organizations, politicians and European-level officials on Roma activities throughout the region in hopes of



NDI Brussels Resident Director Leo Spaans pictured at EU Parliament.

building foundations for future cooperation.

I have been in close contact with Members of the European Parliament that have expressed a significant interest in Roma issues. One in particular, Els de Greun, submitted to the EU Commission several parliamentary oversight questions drawn up by NDI's Bulgarian Roma participants. I also see building momentum among top leaders in Brussels to address Roma issues. At the recent Roma Diplomacy International Conference I attended, 30 members of the European

Parliament (EP), representatives from the European Union Commission, diplomats, academics, and human rights activists were all in attendance. Leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Mr. Graham Watson and President of the EP Mr. Josep Borrell were just a few of the notable speakers.

It is my hope that the NDI Brussels office will afford yet another inroad into the European-wide discussions and events taking place to open the mainstream political arena to Roma. From my vantage point, I see mounting enthusiasm for putting Roma concerns near the top of the European agenda. Whether in statements from the EP Party Groups, or in Roma-specific internship opportunities within the EU Commission, the momentum is shifting toward greater political representation of Roma.

Feel free to contact me at lspaans@ndi.org or + 32 (0)2 401 68 46.

ROMA INSIDE THE SLOVAK PARLIAMENT

Roma activists met with several high-level Slovak political leaders on a recent study trip to the Slovak Parliament. President of the Parliament Pavol Hrusovsky (Christian Democratic Party), Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) Caucus Chair Milan Hort, and Chair of the Committee on Human Rights, Minorities, and the Status of Women Laszlo Nagy spoke to the group about ways to increase their participation in mainstream parties

and the government as a whole.

The NDI participants held one-on-one conversations with the politicians, and in a step toward enhanced collaboration, exchanged contact information. In fact, a number of cooperative efforts have already begun to take shape as a result of these meetings, including plans for program participant Jozef Gabco to open an SDKU club in the municipality of Janovce and participant Roman Estocak

to present his employment study to Mr. Hort.

The group also traveled to the official training facility of the Slovak Parliament outside Bratislava to attend presentations on various aspects of parliamentary procedures. The legislative process, roles of individual MPs, and how citizens themselves can influence the parliamentary decision-making process were some of the topics covered.

The study visit garnered significant media coverage, portraying the group as a new generation of young Roma leaders aspiring to create an improved image of Roma politicians. Two par-



NDI Roma Slovak participants meeting with then President of the Parliament Pavol Hrusovsky.

ROMA PERSONAL STORIES: SPOTLIGHT ON NDI PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

ONE ROMA DREAM CAME TRUE

By Ivaylo Marinov

From 1995 to 1998, the Roma community passionately discussed the establishment of Roma foundations and associations. People saw in them hope for a better life. In the beginning, I also thought that this was the way for the community to become involved in society – by creating some kind of local structures that would take responsibility, protect us, and work for increasing the social status of Roma. I say vaguely “some kind of local structures” because I wasn’t sure myself what should be done. When gathering with friends in our neighborhood club, we discussed the problems facing the community. These discussions led me to realize more and more clearly that Roma foundations cannot resolve all of our problems.

In the end, the first Roma political party was established, appropriately named, *Roma*. The insecurities of the community naturally provoked a skeptical attitude towards it. One time, as we gathered in our neighborhood club, I suggested the creation of a working group to establish contact with the national headquarters of the party. Two months later, we already had a working party structure on the municipal level. The meetings I held in Roma neighborhoods in an effort to gain party supporters were seeing varying success. I had no problems with the young people, as they were inspired by the idea, but the older ones were difficult to persuade.

Over the years, I have been asked many times whether it makes sense to

deal with politics. To be completely honest, I have to say that

I was asking that question myself sometimes and was not sure whether my undertaking would have any future. Fortunately, my optimism spread to many other people. In 1999, we had local elections and our organization made a commitment to the Roma community to participate in them. We met



Ivaylo Marinov at a recent NDI training session.

again in our neighborhood club, but this time it was full of people. There were people of different ages, with many people making suggestions – the best of which were written down. At that meeting I saw for first time real joy in the eyes of the people. It was a time when the Roma were saying out loud their dreams to have their own mayor, municipal councilors, football team and theatre. These dreams came true thanks to their own efforts. After the local elections in 1999, *Roma* won three seats in the local parliament. It is phenomenal for our village with 500

Roma and 2,500 ethnic Bulgarians that we had a Roma elected for mayor.

“It is phenomenal for our village with 500 Roma and 2,500 ethnic Bulgarians that we had a Roma elected for mayor. This was a person with public support from all ethnicities.”

This was a person with public support from all ethnicities. Afterwards, we created a Roma theatre, formed a football team and had community representatives in the departments for social care, as well as in the municipal administration. The public services became significantly better – one Roma dream came true!

However, Roma should continue working hard. The problems in education, healthcare, and unemployment need to be addressed not only at the local level, but also nationally. Roma need to develop their skills to enhance their successes and have a say in the state-wide domestic policy process.

Currently an NDI program participant, Mr. Marinov served as municipal councilor from 1999-2003 in the town of Kozloduy.



Ms. Radicova works with a fellow Roma activist to organize a gathering of GOTV canvassers.

GETTING OUT THE ROMA VOTE!

By Gabika Radicova

On November 20, 2005, before the regional elections, I organized a working session of two Roma civil movements, social workers and Roma entrepreneurs in the town of Hnúšť'a.

Ten people gathered and agreed to support Roma candidates in regional elections and find ways to motivate the Roma community to vote. We decided to print flyers and organize a political meeting between civil society representative and voters. By the next day we had 1,200 flyers

Continued on Page 5

ROMA PERSONAL STORIES: SPOTLIGHT ON NDI PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

ROMA IN POLITICS— DREAM OR REALITY?

By Valentina Sandeva

Not long ago, if someone had told me I would become interested in politics and that I would be working on Roma community problems, I would have looked at them in disbelief. I was well-integrated, educated, not living in a ghetto, and had many non-Roma friends – though this did not mean I was not still Roma myself. I have never concealed my origin or felt ashamed of it, and yet working on such critical Roma issues is something I have never dreamed I would be doing, especially not for so long.

Working for a state or municipal institution is difficult – nothing is up to you and although you can submit whatever proposals you like, what actually passes is only what someone else deems the most convenient. I realized this fact after many attempts to pass a regional program on Roma integration. Even though it was complete with concrete activities, a timeline, and identified people in charge, it took me three years. Finally,

after much dedication to seeing it passed, my bosses agreed to adopt it because elections were approaching.



Valentina Sandeva (middle) with fellow NDI program participants.

I have learned to speak extensively and persuasively on the problems facing the Roma, so persuasively that decision-makers eventually internalize the proposed ideas and start implementing them.

I have had a hard time with the local media as well. Their articles on Roma issues always depict us in such a way that we are to blame for something. It took them a long time to realize these were important issues concerning not only the Roma community but society at large, and that ultimately it was in their best interest to support our efforts towards real integration.

I have tried to direct leaders' energy in a positive direction – and I think I have succeeded. However, I am not sure how long, or until which elections, they will last. At least they give their support for stipends for young people, and have started

declaring that education is the most important issue for progress. I find a significant improvement in these attitudes, for only a few years ago these same people considered the phrase “university graduate” an insult.

Today, there are many young Roma holding a university education. My hopes for future Roma progress are with them. They are the ones who will change the way of thinking within the community, run in elections, apply for work in state agencies, and not whimper or give up with the first disappointment.

The duty of those like me, who have already realized the need for Roma participation in the government of the country, is to support these young people and continue striving for a better future – for us, for them, and for our children.

Things in life do not simply happen – they happen as a result of activity and hard work.

A current NDI program participant, Ms. Sandeva currently serves as a junior expert in the Pernik district administration and on the executive council of the Association of Roma Experts.

printed with the names and numbers of the Roma candidates. We distributed the flyers in Hnúšť'a to the offices of civic organizations, community workers, on the streets and to mailboxes. We also distributed them in the surrounding villages where the majority of segregated Roma live. On the same day we made two announcements of the date and time of the meeting in the local radio, explaining that the meeting was to discuss the regional elections. We explained to

the 58 people who attended why they should vote, the election day procedures, and the advantages of voting for a Roma candidate.

On election day, I was worried that the segregated Roma would not vote due to the distance to the polling stations. To address this we organized a second visit to the towns to mobilize the voters. As a result, the segregated Roma community produced a turnout of 100 percent (all 74 registered voters came to the polls). This campaign has

helped me identify who is likely to vote and which people I should target when I run for municipal elections in December 2006.

A current NDI program participant, Ms. Radičová is a member of the Decade of Roma Inclusion advisory board in Slovakia. Her ambition is to run in the 2006 municipal election in her hometown of Hnúšť'a.

FIRST-EVER PUBLIC HEARING IN MACEDONIA ON ROMA ACCESS TO PUBLIC EDUCATION

In a significant step toward enhancing the quality of Roma education in Macedonia, the Committee on Education, Science and Youth conducted its first off-site public hearing on Roma access to quality primary education. The highly-anticipated event, held in the city of Stip, attracted an impressive audience of 30 people, including parents, students, teachers and members of the media.



Public hearing on Roma education in Stip, Macedonia.

The hearing addressed two recently released reports that identified significant obstacles facing Roma students within two Stip-area schools. Witnesses to the hearing included Stip mayor Pande Sarev, the Goc Delcev primary school principal, school officials, and representatives from local NGOs. Witnesses testified on their views of the state of Roma education in Macedonia and cited possible causes, such as poor economic status

of Roma, limited government education budgets and high unemployment among Roma. The witnesses' testimony and the report's recommendations will be compiled into a report for the Ministry of Education and pertinent NGOs.

NDI assisted in the organization of the public hearing including creating a draft action plan, identifying and preparing witnesses, and securing media coverage. NDI continues to provide guidance in formulating the final report from the hearing and helping to identify possible financial assistance for the primary school in Stip.

**NDI 2nd ANNUAL REGIONAL ACADEMY
BUCHAREST, ROMANIA
APRIL 7-10
INTERNATIONAL ROMA DAY**

NDI's second annual Roma Regional Political Leadership Academy takes place on International Roma Day. The Institute has invited standouts from its Roma Political Skill Training Series in Bulgaria and Slovakia, emerging Roma leaders from Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, and governing officials from throughout Europe.

CONT'D: SLOVAK PARLIAMENT

Continued from page 3

ticipants, along with Hrusovsky, were interviewed by the major national television news program.

In all, the trip was a notable achievement and helped break down the barrier between Roma and all mainstream party leaders, as well as increased the probability of future cooperation.

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