



## ROMA REGIONAL NEWSLETTER

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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. In 2006 the Institute expanded its core Roma programming to Romania with funds from the Open Society Institute. This newsletter highlights important news from NDI's program participants and Roma activists from throughout the region.

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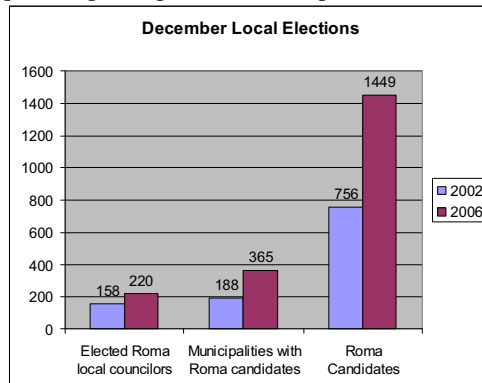
## ROMA ADVANCE IN SLOVAK LOCAL ELECTIONS

The December local elections in Slovakia resulted in a significant increase in both the number of municipalities in which Roma ran and the number of Roma elected to office. This increase is in large part due to direct candidate training and recruitment by NDI as well as the large scale media campaign waged by NDI's partner New Roma Generation.

The impressive results were highlighted by the election of 20 Roma in large towns (i.e. a population greater than 5,000) compared to 13 in 2002. Of those elected, nine were trained by NDI or program graduates. NDI's 12 past and present participants who competed in the elections challenged themselves to



NDI participant Andrea Buckova (left) ran as part of a coalition of independents.



run in larger towns and municipalities with smaller Roma populations that had never before elected a Rom to office. While only one was ultimately elected, others came close, even securing more votes than a former deputy prime minister.

In addition to the increase in direct representation of Roma, these elections indicated the ability and willingness of Roma to work successfully with non-Roma candidates and parties and to gain the support of non-Roma communities. NDI's comprehensive elections report and analysis is available online at: <http://www.accessdemocracy.org>

## NDI GRADUATE LEADS LOCAL ELECTION OUTREACH

By *Albina Cina*,

Two civil society associations, *Člověk v tísni* (People in Need) of which the author is a member, and *Roma Budúcnosť* (Roma Future), have joined efforts on a project to track and support local Romani leaders in the District of Bardejov in eastern Slovakia. The project, entitled Roma Duties in Local Politics, was supported by the Open Society Foundation (OSF). The initiative's aim was to provide Roma greater skills and knowledge of local self-governing tools that they could then use not only to serve the interests of their local Roma community, but also those of the entire municipality in their capacity as local councilors or mayors.

The project sought to present Roma candidates with voter outreach tactics aimed at increasing participation not only during



NDI program graduate Albina Cina (far right) observes participants in a voter-outreach role play at a training workshop in Bardejov, Slovakia.

the elections, but in the long-run as well. With that in mind, NDI worked with candidates to formulate effective outreach strategies based on awareness of voter interests. In four of nine villages, the Romani constituents capitalized on the opportunity and elected Roma. Major success was achieved in Petrová, a village that elected one Romani mayoral candidate, Dušan Bilyý and four Roma local councilors. Lenártov village, with one Romani councilor, Frička village with three, and Cigeľka village with three Roma elected candidates, were other successful examples. NDI is hopeful that during the next four years the elected Roma candidates will continue to lead their communities by addressing the needs of their constituencies and thus serving as role models to other Roma municipalities.

## FEBRUARY POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY LARGEST YET

From February 23 to 26, 2007, the National Democratic Institute held its third annual Regional Roma Political Leadership Academy in Bratislava, Slovakia. The event, which marked the completion of the third year of NDI's regional Roma Political Participation Program, brought together 27 Roma political and civic activists from ten countries for advanced political skills training and an opportunity to network with their peers. Sponsorship by the Council of Europe allowed NDI to include four participants from Albania, Belarus, and the Czech Republic.

Participants were greeted at the opening session by NDI's Central and Eastern Europe Director, Robert Benjamin; Deputy President of the Slovak Parliament Mirsolav Ciz; the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for the Roma Communities, Klara Orgovanova; and U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia, Rodolphe Vallee.

**Save the Date**

**Roma Regional Academy  
November 2007  
Sofia, Bulgaria**



*Left, Slovak participants prepare their mayoral candidate for a media interview, followed by a town-hall style debate in the campaign simulation.*

*Right, Lenka Sarmirova (left) from the Slovak government and Kosovo participant Sakibe Jashari discuss election campaign plans.*

Academy participants attended seminars on effective policy-based advocacy, election campaign strategies, ethical behavior during elections, and the municipal budget process. The Academy concluded with a half-day election campaign simulation to provide participants with an opportunity to gain first-hand experience with the challenges, rewards and uncertainties of election campaigns.

The Academy proved to be a unique opportunity for participants to engage with and learn from peers across the region and thus improve their ability to represent and advocate for Roma throughout Europe.

A full report on the Roma Academy is available online at: <http://www.accessdemocracy.org/>

## MACEDONIAN ROM FINDS PATH TO ACTIVISM IN EDUCATION

By **Ferki Demirovski**

I come from the small village of Trabotiviste, Macedonia. Supported by my family, I had the opportunity to attend high school in Skopje. Following my enrollment, I gained more knowledge than I had ever thought possible, which opened my eyes to the possibilities the world had to offer. When I graduated, I was proud of what I had accomplished, but realized how much I wanted to learn. My family's financial struggles, however, made my academic aspirations difficult to achieve.

Refusing to give up, I struggled to continue my education. My persistence and hard work eventually enabled me to enroll in Southeast Europe University. Along with my education, I continued to build my personal skills through assisting, and later managing, projects that aimed at improving the situation of my people. I succeeded because of my furious motivation to include other youth in the sea of possibilities and chances for success that I had found.

Since college I have been focusing on helping young people realize the opportunities education has to offer. My first NGO activity began in 2001 with the Center for Sociological, Political, and Judicial Research in the Department for Refugees and Forced Migration. Additionally, I later worked with the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) interviewing Roma refugees from Kosovo.

As an advocate for community renaissance through education, I joined OSI's *Romaversitas* program as a Program Assistant. The program aided Romani students from across Macedonia by offering scholarships and academic training. I was happy with what I was doing until I met a Fulbright student from Chicago whose research

on minority representation in the media forced me to face the reality of the stereotypical and prejudiced portrayal of Roma in the mainstream media. Together, we decided to initiate the Program for the Education of Roma Journalists which began on September 15, 2005. As the coordinator, I organized the first group of 12 journalists whom we trained through the Macedonian Institute for the Media (MIM) over a nine-month period. We then infiltrated them into the media as advocates for improving the image of Roma.

Soon after, I was offered a position at the Ministry of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) where I am now the advisor to the Minister. My position allows me to advocate for my community and to lobby for its development. But it takes more than one person to make a difference and find solutions to the Roma's many problems. We must embrace education and integration to experience all the possibilities the world has to offer equally to all humankind. We need each other's qualities in order to effectively develop our community.



*Ferki Demirovski (above right) attends NDI's 2007 Roma Regional Academy. Below, Ferki discusses Macedonian initiatives with a Bulgarian participant at the Academy.*



## ROMA WIN INCLUSION IN BULGARIAN HR DEVELOPMENT

By Dejan Kolev



*Dejan Kolev is an NDI program graduate and led the HRDOP campaign.*

*Center Amalipe* and 46 other Bulgarian Roma NGOs succeeded in advocating for the incorporation of measures to include Roma in the country's Human Resources Development Operational Program (HRDOP). The HRDOP draft, approved by the Council of Ministers on March 1 and submitted to the European Commission on March 5, contained most of the points sought by the Roma community, though these same points had previously been rejected by the institutions engaged in HRDOP preparation.

Such measures included: identifying unemployed Roma as a separate target group within the Priority 1 Axis of an inclusive labor market; complementing the target group vulnerable ethnic minorities with a specific reference to Roma; and adopting new measures for assistance in the chapter on Roma. HRDOP is a framework for the absorption of 1,214,000 Euro from the European Social Fund in addition to co-financing from the Bulgarian state budget. In fact, HRDOP will define important trends in the development of education, employment and health care for the next seven years.

The campaign to gain the adoption of these measures target-

ing Roma inclusion in the HRDOP was initiated by *Center Amalipe* in the first half of 2006. Forty-six other Roma NGOs from throughout the country, as well as some national think-tanks (such as Open Society Institute – Sofia) also joined the campaign. During two special meetings in October and December 2006, the Roma NGOs elaborated a platform with concrete requirements. They received the support of dozens of NGOs in Europe (European Roma Grassroots Organization, Cordaid, Minority Rights Group International, Spolu, and so on), as well as that of several MEPs including Hungarian Romani MEP Livia Jaroka.

The Roma requirements were the subject of discussions with the HRDOP working group and the European Programs and Projects Directorate in the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. The initiative also gained the support and contribution of the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities at the European Commission. One remaining measure, namely the incorporation of a Roma NGO representative within the HRDOP's monitoring committee, is pending the outcome of current negotiations, and seems likely to be approved soon.

The successes achieved through this campaign indicate that Roma NGOs' can influence the formation of public policies when they unite around a common platform. Roma NGOs thus have the capacity to foster, in certain ways, the integration process despite the fact that the commitment of Bulgaria's state institutions for Roma has decreased.

## ROMA DISCUSS EDUCATION POLICY WITH THE PRESIDENT

On March 28, 2007, Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov met with 22 young Roma to discuss recent developments and issues in education and their impact on the Roma community. This was one in a series of meetings, joint events and activities of the Bulgarian president and the participants in NDI's Roma political skills building program focusing on Roma education

The young Roma brought to the President's attention the disturbing school dropout statistics: of the 25,000 children who left school prematurely last year, two-thirds identified as Roma. Intercultural education, changes in the school curricula, and parents' involvement are some of the avenues for positive change proposed by the Roma, together with increased eco-

nomical support to include children in elementary school as well.

*Though the problem of integration is greater than that of dropping out from school, this is a worrisome tendency which needs to be reversed without delay!"*

~Kadrin Hasanov,  
NDI Program Participant

The President and the Roma participants agreed on a broad spectrum of follow-up activities, including a national forum on Roma education under his patronage, database development of Roma NGOs to assist their involvement in policy devel-

opment, and meeting with the owners and managing directors of leading media outlets to engage them in featuring young and successfully integrated Roma. "The fact that you are highly valued in your organizations, your communities, your parties is good. It would be even better if your stories and examples become known to all Bulgarians through the media thus combating still existing stereotypes in public attitudes," suggested Georgi Parvanov. The President and the young Roma agreed to meet more often and to discuss a broader range of issues. "To discuss openly issues that concern our community and hear the direct response of the Head of State of Bulgaria was an exceptional opportunity for us," said participant Atanas Stoyanov.



*Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov meets with NDI's program participants to discuss Roma concerns in education policy and propose solutions.*



## NDI ASSESSES HUNGARY'S MINORITY SELF-GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

While not designed primarily for Roma or intended as a tool for integration, Hungary's minority self-government (MSG) system has become a controversial mechanism for protecting Romani rights and promoting civic and political participation. As other countries consider the use of similar systems, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), with funding from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), has assessed the effectiveness of the MSG system in Hungary in regard to its effect on Romani political participation.

Created in 1993, the MSG system in Hungary allows for any of the country's 13 recognized minorities to establish local, regional, and national self-governments. These elected bodies, which are parallel to mainstream institutions, have the right to make decisions on local education, language use in public institutions, printed and electronic media, and the protection of their traditions and culture. In 2005, the Hungarian parliament passed a set of amendments to address problems inherent to the system. In 2006, 1,118 local Romani MSGs were formed.

NDI's assessment found that, while the amendments resulted in improvements, they did not and could not address inherent problems in its design. The MSGs rather marginalize Romani issues by depositing them in a parallel, fairly powerless, quasi-governmental structure rather than addressing them through established governing bodies. These bodies also lack the funding necessary to carry out even basic tasks.

NDI's full report can be found at: <http://www.accessdemocracy.org/>

## ALBANIAN ROMA WORK WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO BUILD ROMANI SCHOOL

The education system plays a very important part in the integration of the Roma community in Shkodra, Albania. However, securing a new elementary school for Roma children was a challenge, requiring the community to develop of a clear strategy in collaboration with the local government. This cooperative relationship resulted in the creation of a useful dialogue between the Roma community and local government which eventually led to the establishment of the Romani school.

NDI worked with three Roma community groups to increase their advocacy skills through training on issue-based research, strategic planning, local budgeting, and tailored techniques for advocacy and negotiation with local administrations. By raising their voice on an issue important to them, the Roma community took a proactive approach to break down barriers and initiate a series of meetings with the local government to explore their options and put the new school on the agenda.



*Roma's successful advocacy gained local budget funds for a fully equipped classroom.*

Utilizing the local budget process, in June and July Roma presented a budget platform, including a request for funds for a school, to the Mayor of Shkodra, Artan Haxhi, in the presence of local media. The ability of the community to advocate effectively through budgetary proposals and their willingness to cooperate with the local administration led to the government's provision for funding of the school in the local budget.

Construction of the school began in



*The first class of Roma children gather outside their newly constructed school in Shkodra.*

September 2006 and was completed in December 2006. In January 2007 the school, named Freedom, was opened to students. The classrooms includes all necessary educational materials as well as two rooms used as a kindergarten for children under six years old.

The school's inaugural ceremony was attended by Prime Minister Sali Berisha, Albanian Speaker of Parliament Jozefina Topalli, Education Minister Genc Pollo, and Shkodra Mayor Artan Haxhi.

The school currently services 135 children from kindergarten through fourth grade, including 55 under the age of six. Next year, the school hopes to expand to the ninth grade.

This successful advocacy effort will strengthen and empower the Roma community in the future, demonstrating that they can achieve their objectives by taking an active part in local decision making. A Roma woman from the community, Mili Shatza, said: "We appreciate NDI's support. Through training and group discussions, you returned to us our courage, and made us believe in ourselves by showing us that we have the capacity to advocate in a democratic and legal way for a community issue, and I'm so happy to now have a beautiful school for our children. It would be useful to cooperate in the upcoming local budget drafting to resolve other community issues." One child from the Roma community said: "I am very happy that like all the other children at my age, I am attending the school, even though I started the first class at nine years old."

## ROMANIAN ROMA PURSUE NEW ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

### FLORIN MANOLE

*NDI Program Graduate*



In June 2006, when applying for the NDI Roma political participation program, as part of my expectations, I included my desire to establish acquaintances and connections that would be useful in initiating future projects. And indeed, through the five training courses and three months of internships with the National Liberal Party (PNL), I had the opportunity to learn many things about the political realities in Romania, about how political parties work and in what ways politicians can be engaged in Roma minority projects.

With the knowledge gained during these months, I convinced the government to establish a commission for studying and acknowledging Roma slavery. I conducted an advocacy campaign to raise awareness about the Holocaust against Roma in Romania and as a result the Romanian Prime Minister, Calin Popescu Tariceanu, established a governmental commission to study Romani slavery. The conclusions and recommendations of this report will be adopted by the Romanian Government and will be followed by educational and legislative programs. The commission will also draft a set of recommendations for the incorporation of Romani culture and history into the education curriculum.

The relationships I was able to build with my fellow NDI participants, NGOs, and the PNL all helped me implement a successful advocacy campaign.

### CRISTINELA IONESCU

*NDI Program Graduate*



Cristinela Ionescu is an active member of the Association *Thumende Jiu Valley*, and the manager of *Thumende TV* which produces live weekly television discussions. Broadcast in Romanian and Romani languages, the program focuses on issues such as citizen participation, youth activism, Roma youth and education, and minority rights. The program also features an overview of weekly Roma events, field reports from Roma communities, and interviews or discussion with civil society or political experts. *Thumende* serves an important function in informing the Roma community and providing a unique view of Roma to the wider public to combat stereotypes. For example, from September 2006 to March 2007, *Thumende* worked to co-produce a documentary film chronicling the life of a Romani survivor of the WWII Transnistrian deportation, which was shown at the OSCE High-Level Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding (June 7-8, 2007) in Bucharest.

The author also organized a roundtable on February 20 in Petrosani between Roma representatives, the local administration and the mayor to commemorate the abolition of slavery in Romania. Subsequently, in March, Cristinela led an extensive GOTV campaign to mobilize Roma voters in Petrosani to take part in mayoral elections. Consequently, the newly elected mayor appointed the vice-president of *Thumende* as his personal

### STEFAN FLORIAN: A LETTER FROM ROMANIA

*NDI Program Graduate*

There is today, at the European level, a trend towards the promotion of the rights of national and ethnic minorities with an emphasis on Roma political participation. But to what extent can we talk about the political voice of the Roma, as long as the Roma themselves do not know their roots and history? To what extent can we speak to the non-Roma as long as our society is saturated with misconceptions and stereotypes? Our history is kept silent and its tragic periods are often forgotten – both slavery and the Holocaust – a trend which will continue as long as the education of our children is still only a dream.

We want and need more, such as representative leaders fully devoted to the future of this ethnic group. We need a pool of elites to represent us, which is why I strongly believe that all the efforts aimed at the involvement of Roma in politics would not succeed without the strong pillar of education being placed at the heart of all efforts. I cannot but fight and hope that the education gap will be covered. I hope that both political parties and NGOs will fully understand the role of education for the creation of a representative elite of the Roma minority who can design and implement policies in this respect.

For example, after honing my skills in NDI's political participation program, I was promoted to vice-president of the Social Democratic Party's (PSD) Arad branch and the party's board for equal opportunities and anti-discrimination, where I am able to promote policies addressing the needs of Roma. In this position, I am able to communicate with senior party leadership and represent the party on Romani issues and local development. NDI's program aimed at raising Roma's political participation represents a good effort and practical model which should be continued and expanded. There is potential in Roma communities. The youth I met during the program – either the colleagues in Romania, or those from Central and Eastern Europe more broadly – make me optimistic of the project's success. For the Roma in Europe, 2005 was a new beginning, a beginning of a Decade of Social Inclusion.



## SOLUTION TO ROMA ISSUES IN SERBIA LIES IN POLITICS

By **Osman Balic**,  
Deputy Chair, Serbian Roma Union



Osman Balic addresses participants at NDI's 2007 Roma Academy.

The underdeveloped political culture and lack of a strong political leadership have prevented Roma in Serbia from effectively participating in politics. The rise of strong Romani parties would demonstrate to Roma that politics is the arena where the fate of issues such as poverty, minority status, ethnic rights, and the organization of the state is being determined.

While many Roma are still not fully aware of their strength as a voting block, there is growing awareness of their voting power and a realization that they are being neglected by mainstream parties. Thus Roma need to, through their own political elite, increase pressure on the mainstream parties by asserting their rights more force-

fully and embracing their responsibility to participate in politics. What is also lacking is a long-term perspective on Roma participation in politics, as well as the definition of our long-term goals after the election season, as our efforts remain unspecific and unsystematic. However, a path has finally become visible by which we can structure our political interests by building coalitions between Roma parties, and collaborating with the NGO and academic community to find solutions. It is only with this approach that Roma visibility will increase and ensure that the government acknowledges them. In this integration model, I believe there can be no success without a distinct political culture and a strong political role for Roma.

To achieve these goals, Roma political parties and NGOs need to cooperate and coordinate. Additionally, training programs are needed for party leaders focused on developing policies, organizing campaigns and handling management functions. In this way, Roma parties would win the trust of the Roma population and increase the level of engagement of youth and intellectuals. Mechanisms of communication are also needed in order to exchange opinions and ideas between Roma parties, the Roma population, the government, and the media. The government's

creation of education programs to aid adults and youth in becoming skilled activists are also of great importance. Cooperating with both Roma and non-Roma NGOs on issues of multiculturalism and tolerance, securing financial support for Roma organizations and providing for greater education of elected Roma are essential.

**I** believe there can be no success without ...a strong political role for Roma!"

Specifically, cooperation grounded in the principles of the Decade for Roma Inclusion, liberal democracy, ethnic and national tolerance, the protection of human rights, European integration, and the Serbian constitution is essential. Only with this kind of focused and unified effort can Roma increase their effectiveness in the political and civic sectors and begin to make a difference in their communities.



Osman Balic describes his party's parliamentary election campaign to Roma activists.

### NDI OFFICES WITH ROMA PROGRAMS

Sofia, Bulgaria  
159 Rakovski Et. 2,  
Apt. 5  
1000  
+359 (2) 980 7760

Bucharest, Romania  
54 Frumoasa Street  
Apartment 6  
010988  
+40 (21) 315 6132

Bratislava, Slovakia  
Partizanska 2  
81103  
+421 (2) 5464 3034

Washington D.C.  
2030 M St. NW  
5th Floor; 20036  
Ph: 202-728-5670  
Em: Roma@ndi.org

### NDI ROMA ADVISORY BOARDS

#### SLOVAKIA

Michal Vasecka  
Laco Oravec  
Denisa Havrlova  
Peter Pollak

#### ROMANIA

Mariana Buceanu  
Gruia Bumbu  
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