

***Roma as Active Citizens:
Closing the Gap between Political Elites and Local Communities***

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Victimized by violence, segregated in settlements, deprived of education, healthcare, and jobs, and routinely denied their rights as citizens, Roma are also excluded from the political arena where they could attempt to address these problems. As a result, many Roma no longer seek to participate in politics or civic life at any level, persuaded that it is a losing proposition. This reticence is seen by some in the majority population, as a simple, and false, solution to “the Roma problem:” if they are ignored, eventually they will go away.

However, the impact of the Roma’s disaffection is immense. Countries with large Roma populations, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe, court social instability and enormous economic costs as these impoverished communities grow larger and more distant from the state apparatus. Last year’s expulsion by France of Bulgarian and Romanian Roma migrants suggests that even established European democracies—and the European Union as a whole—are ill-prepared to grapple with this growing population that is living not as part of the state but parallel to it. These events have shown that until Roma, as a community, become active, participatory citizens who can use the political process to resolve issues, secure resources and obtain services, democracy in Europe will remain an unfulfilled promise.

Despite myriad assistance strategies to improve their legal and material conditions, little effort has been made to position Roma to help their own cause through political participation. Roma must organize their communities to gain effective political representation and hold governments accountable. It is in everyone’s interest for Roma to amass this power to solve their problems peacefully before violence and extremism take hold.

Active Citizenship: What is it?

Citizenship implies a relationship between people and their government that includes a set of rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate in decisions that affect the public welfare. Citizens are essential to democratic governance. They give life and meaning to democratic principles and to the institutions designed to create accountability and set limits on government power. Without the active involvement of citizens, government power can be abused to benefit only a narrow segment of society.

Citizen activism is a democratic right and responsibility that can constructively influence state behavior and socioeconomic development. To exercise this right, Roma must first understand and embrace the concept of citizenship. They also need knowledge to make decisions about policy choices, along with the skills to voice their concerns, act collectively and hold public officials accountable.

Civil society is a vehicle, like political parties, through which Roma can aggregate their interests, voice their preferences and exercise the power necessary to affect change. Civil society can amplify citizen voices and bridge the divide between Roma and the state. Civil society organizations come in various shapes and sizes, from large, urban-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to small, community-based social groups. Among these are organizations that interact extensively with citizens and, more often the case with Roma, those with very limited interaction, even though they may claim to be working on their behalf. Political decisions on complex socioeconomic challenges, such as Roma inclusion, require broad-based citizen participation, so it is essential that engaged civil society organizations truly involve Romani citizens in their activism.

As many of Europe's newest democracies transformed into democratic societies, assistance strategies typically placed a strong emphasis on developing civil society with much less attention paid to the direct political engagement of individual citizens. In the case of Roma, this has impeded civil society's potential to ensure that government responds to tangible citizen needs. Efforts to strengthen civil society's political power must include involving a broader section of Roma citizens more directly.

Barriers to Active Participation by Roma in Civic and Political Life

In 2009, the National Democratic Institute (NDI or The Institute) conducted an assessment to evaluate the persistent barriers that prevent Roma from actively participating in political and civic life. Romania was selected as a sample based on the size and diversity of its Roma population and the significant funding and effort that has been expended there. Setting aside barriers associated with extreme poverty – illiteracy, poor infrastructure, lack of resources – NDI examined legal, structural and social barriers, using a combination of desk research, public opinion research and personal interviews. Some of the findings are highlighted below; the full report can be found on NDI's website, www.ndi.org¹.

Following centuries of isolation and persecution, and in light of the culture's hierarchical clan-based traditions, it is unsurprising that NDI found virtually no informal or spontaneous local organizing among Roma to address community needs. Such efforts, where they exist, have no support or resources on which to draw.

National and international NGOs that attempt to represent Roma and their issues are often disconnected from local Romani communities. Most of these NGOs are not membership driven, nor do they enjoy widespread support among Roma themselves. As a result, Roma NGOs (and their non-Roma counterparts) typically lack clearly identifiable supporters, a deficit that deprives them of political credibility and the ability to influence policy decisions.

Many NGOs, Roma and otherwise, also lack a clear legislative agenda, making more “noise” than discernible progress. In the face of vote-buying schemes, for example,

¹ http://www.ndi.org/Assessment_of_Barriers_to_Roma_Political_Participation_in_Romania_09_09

the response is more likely to be a public awareness raising campaign with little chance of success, rather than a serious attempt to change electoral fraud legislation or lobby for greater enforcement of existing laws.

While some NGOs have demonstrated success and have clearly discernible supporters, NGOs generally lack a strong funding base, making them vulnerable to collapse or compromise. Without a diverse base of support through private contributions and membership fees, NGOs rely on government and international funding, which can drive their agendas. This pushes civil society to respond to a narrow field of donor interests, sometimes very specific and politically driven, rather than the broader interests of their beneficiaries or constituents. Thus, many “Roma NGOs,” particularly in Eastern Europe where traditions of philanthropy and volunteerism are still weak, find themselves being held accountable to their donors rather than to Roma communities.

As with civil society, Romani citizens are almost entirely disconnected from political parties. Widespread mistrust of political parties, which cuts across all ethnic lines, is amplified among Roma, particularly in segregated communities. One cause is the lack of meaningful outreach to Roma by political parties of all ethnic stripes, who generally visit only during campaigns, with no follow up after elections.

The lack of strong platforms, policy proposals or even statements on Roma issues reinforces the notion that political parties, regardless of ideology or ethnicity, are not strong Roma advocates. Although Roma could potentially force their issues onto a party platform, the incentive for them to become active members or even supporters of any political party is extremely low.

Allegations of vote-buying, electoral fraud, intimidation, and other irregularities, are widespread in Roma communities. These offenses are perpetrated by both mainstream and ethnically-based Roma parties. Roma communities, and particularly their leaders, are complicit in these transactions. Financial destitution is a motivator, but political exclusion contributes to the choice by many Roma of short-term economic gain over long-term representation, since they have little faith in the system.

These factors add up to a system in which Roma communities at the grassroots are disconnected from political elites – both their own and those in the majority population. Romani citizens lack the wherewithal and incentive to seek political solutions to their problems. Even when they can access critical resources and power structures, they are not often heard by their own leaders, much less by those in the majority population.

This gap between political elites and local citizens is perhaps the greatest barrier to Roma empowerment and inclusion.

Recommendations for Grassroots Empowerment of Roma Citizens

For both civil society and political parties, the keys to overcoming the barriers noted above are **representation and accountability**. Roma communities need to elect officials who will genuinely represent their interests, and whom they can hold accountable. While Roma need to be present in the halls of parliament, more important is that their concerns be addressed by those who represent them.

Similarly, the presence of Roma NGOs and advocates is not nearly as critical as the presence of Roma issues on the political agenda – which will happen only if NGOs that act on behalf of Roma can legitimately claim they represent a clearly defined constituency. Very few Roma NGOs carry a significant membership base with genuine electoral influence. In contrast, the *bulibasha* (traditional Roma clan leader) can deliver an entire neighborhood's vote on election day, making him the local power broker, often to the detriment of the community.

Roma voters will continue to be pushed aside if they allow their votes to be brokered and bought rather than earned by those who are committed to better education policy, healthcare facilities or jobs. **Though** illegal, vote-buying among impoverished Roma flourishes, distorting their political voice. Roma need to use their numbers and their votes to demand results from those they elect, otherwise they lose their power over those who claim to represent them.

In short, they should demand that democracy delivers for them.

If Roma citizens are to be truly empowered at the grassroots level, governments, mainstream political parties, and the international community must provide fertile ground in which activism can grow. Political parties and civil society organizations need to do a better job of connecting Roma with their elected representatives so they can make their priorities known, have a say in divvying up resources, and hold candidates and governments accountable at the ballot box and in the press. Specifically, they should provide three things:

- 1. Skills building programs** for Roma activists and local elected representatives so they can communicate with and engage citizens, advocate for priority issues, and develop realistic legislative and policy options. This will require more projects to enhance the skills of grassroots activists as well as broad-based civic education. NGOs must train and cultivate young Roma leaders and conduct local civic education projects for Roma.
- 2. Financial and other resources** to help activists educate and mobilize Roma through public awareness and information programs, advocacy campaigns and community development projects.
- 3. Access to elected office**, most notably through mainstream political parties that must not only open the door to Roma but actively invite them in. Parties must have better outreach strategies and designated liaisons to Roma communities and NGOs. They must publicly and meaningfully address the situation of Roma

through platforms, policy proposals and legislation. These things will only happen when parties make Roma inclusion a priority for all of society at all levels. European party groups, and in particular the S&D group as the party of social justice and equality, should encourage their members to recruit Roma, promote their development as future leaders and place their issues on party platforms.

Once the ground is fertile, the seeds of activism need to take root and grow within the Roma communities. For this to happen, Roma political and civic leaders need to provide three things to their communities:

- 1. Platforms**, not platitudes. Roma need real policies and legislative agendas that address genuine everyday needs. Ethnic parties that claim to represent Roma must win back their voters by drafting substantive platforms and strategies.
- 2. Representation** by elected officials who place community needs over self interest. They must reinvigorate their parties with a new generation of supporters, candidates and leaders who will demonstrate their commitment to public service.
- 3. Cooperation** by civil society around common concerns and through coalitions among Roma and with non-Roma who can amplify their political voices. Civil society organizations of all ethnic stripes should develop community organizing projects that bridge ethnic lines and seek constructive engagement with parliaments to promote broadly supported, clearly defined legislative agendas – and then hold them accountable for their passage.

A donor to the Roma cause once asked what it would take to get 10,000 Roma out in the street to demand equal rights and better government. The answer is the same thing it would take to get 10,000 votes for a Roma parliamentary candidate or 10,000 Roma registered to vote.

It takes grassroots organizing by skilled activists who listen to people in the community, offer clear and credible solutions to everyday problems, and inspire and train volunteers to work on their behalf. It takes integrity, honesty and dedication to public service. It takes willingness to work with others from outside one's own ethnic group.

It takes leadership, on the part of both Roma and majority populations. It takes political leaders who are willing to make the unpopular issue of Roma inclusion a genuine priority at home, not merely political rhetoric in Brussels. But in equal measure it takes Roma leaders who can inspire and mobilize their communities to participate in civic and political life so they can demand more from government and elected officials.

NDI's Response

With support from the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute, and in cooperation with European bodies, NDI launched an initiative in 2003 to increase Roma political participation in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, which has since

expanded to Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia. NDI has provided training, public opinion and comparative research, and real-time assistance to approximately 1,500 Roma in governance, electoral participation, political representation and policy advocacy.

NDI has trained hundreds of Roma to contest elections as candidates and organizers, representing Roma parties and incorporated into mainstream parties. In 2010 Slovak local elections, more than 330 Roma were elected to local office (including almost 30 mayors), a 50 percent increase from the previous elections. Notably, some Roma candidates attracted non-Roma votes. The Institute also supports voter education campaigns in Roma communities, nonpartisan monitoring in polling stations on election day, and post-election surveys of Roma voters. A priority has been Roma women, most of whom face disproportionately high barriers to participation.

Increased political engagement is enabling Roma to advocate on their own behalf. NDI is supporting Roma groups as they work to gain a thorough understanding of the issues afflicting their communities, communicate those issues to the public through media strategies, and master national and local legislative and fiscal processes so they can push for government action. For example, in its annual report card on government performance on Roma issues, Slovakia's Roma Public Policy Institute called for concrete measures—such as demographic and economic data collection—to better inform policies.

NDI has done this work throughout the region, helping young Roma leaders to bridge the gap between political institutions and local communities. NDI is opening politics and government to Roma and developing skilled active Roma citizens who can take advantage of these opportunities. Given the severe depredations experienced among Roma, this is a long-term initiative for incremental but promising change.

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