

## Romani electoral politics and behaviour

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## **Romani Electoral Politics and Behaviour**

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After a decade of effort, the Roma remain grossly underrepresented in local and national political bodies. However, the relatively small number of elected Romani officials does not accurately reflect the substantial increase of Gypsy presence in East European politics. This article discusses the problems that impede the Roma's electoral achievements, examines the relations between Gypsy and mainstream political organizations, and briefly investigates Romani voting behaviour and electoral results.

## **I. Factors Hindering Electoral Success**

Some of the reasons for the lacklustre electoral performance of Roma are rooted in the East European states' occasional efforts to contain Gypsy mobilization. Especially in the early 1990s, when Romani activists were inexperienced and ordinary Roma were easily deceived, state authorities and mainstream party officials frequently intimidated would-be Gypsy voters. During the June 1990 Bulgarian parliamentary elections, for instance, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) successfully manipulated the Gypsy community by spreading rumours and influencing their voting (see, for instance, *Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Gypsies of Bulgaria*. Helsinki Watch Report, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991). More recently, reliable sources have noted that Slovak officials managed to deceive Romani candidates at the 1998 mayoral election in the Gypsy-majority district Lunik 9 in the city of Kosice (Jakob Hurlie 1998: 13-15.) Another problem is that for Romani parties and coalitions, it is very difficult to obtain the minimum 3 to 5 per cent of the votes, the electoral threshold necessary for a party to gain parliamentary representation. Romania is the only East European state in which all ethnic minorities, including the Roma, have a guaranteed seat in the legislature.

It would be unreasonable to expect diverse Romani communities to field a single party. At the same time, the fact that Gypsy political organizations routinely divide between themselves the Romani vote has reduced their parliamentary representation. For instance, at the September 1992 Romanian elections, five different Romani organizations split the nearly 120,000 votes, which could have translated into four representatives. As a result, Gypsies had to settle for the one seat guaranteed by the constitution. (Interviews with Varujan Vosgian, member of the parliamentary group of ethnic minorities, and Gheorghe Raducanu, a Romani MP, Bucharest, 13 and 14 March 1995). No fewer than thirteen Romani political parties registered prior to the 1998 Slovak national elections but eventually no Gypsy party ran

candidates for parliament on its own (Michal Vasecka 1999a). They were unable to form effective electoral coalitions with each other or with mainstream parties. Notwithstanding the fact that the Roma constitute nearly one-tenth of Slovakia's population, they failed to place a single member of parliament (MP) in the Bratislava national legislature.

In order to combine their strength, Romani groups in every East European state, time and again, have formed or attempted to form electoral coalitions and umbrella organizations with other Gypsy organizations. There are literally dozens of examples. As early as December 1990 diverse Romani groups in Hungary rallied together in the Romaparlament, with the explicit goal to gain parliamentary seats. In 1993, seventeen Slovak Gypsy parties and groups formed the Union of Slovak Roma. In 1996, a handful of Gypsy activists formed the Union of Roma Associations in Slovenia and, in the same year, Stanislaw Stankiewicz organized the Highest Council of Roma in Poland. The majority of these umbrella organizations and coalitions have come up against the very same problems as individual Gypsy associations: mutual disdain and suspicions, infighting, and a marked inability to reach compromises.

There are some counterexamples, however. Partida Romilor (PR), the largest Gypsy formation in Romania, succeeded in forming an alliance with eleven other Romani groups prior to the 1996 local elections in which 132 Gypsies were elected. Although PR was unsuccessful in national competition it still received by far the most Romani votes, approximately 80,000 (interview with Nora Costache of the *Young Generation Society of Roma*, Bucharest, 23 May 1996). One of the most promising recent developments has been the 1997 collaboration agreement between the PR, the Centrul Romilor Pentru Interventie Sociala i Studii (Center for Social Intervention and Studies, CRISS), and the Funda ia Aven Amentza (Come with Us Foundation) "for the realization of the Roma's common objectives" for a five year period (*Conventie-Cadru* [Framework Convention] document between the three organizations, Bucharest, 1 August 1997; and interview with Nicolae Paun and Ivan Gheorghe of the PR, Bucharest, 5 November 1999). PR, CRISS, and other Romani organizations have also succeeded in creating a Working Group of Romani Associations in 1999, to work together with the Romanian government's Department for the Protection of National Minorities in developing a strategy to improve the Gypsies' conditions (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1999a).

## II. Relations between Romani and Majority Political Organizations

Building relations with the political parties of the majority population has been an objective of several East European Romani organizations given their failures to gain political representation on their own. Mainstream parties have seldom formed electoral coalitions with Gypsy parties primarily because appealing to the Romani community has generally not been an important consideration for them for two reasons. First, the proportion of the Gypsies in the general population is relatively small and their voting participation has been typically far below that of the majority. Second, and more important, putting a Rom on a party's list has been widely recognized as a liability given widespread societal biases against Roma. Therefore, offering Gypsies, however well known and admired, spots on electoral lists takes courage that few parties have. In many cases Gypsy politicians are put on mainstream party rosters but they are placed so low on the list that they have little chance of winning. Parties have often shied away from disclosing that one of their fair-skinned candidates was a Rom lest they should scare away potential voters. When during the 1992 Czech electoral campaign Klára Veselá-Samková, then spokesperson of the Romani Civic Initiative (Romská Občanská Iniciativa, ROI) tried to put her party under the wing of Václav Klaus' Civic Democratic Party, she was told that "they were sorry, but they simply didn't want to risk the white vote." (Veselá-Samková cited in Paul Hockenos 1993: 231.) According to László Lengyel, a noted Hungarian political analyst, for mainstream parties one Romani vote means the loss of two others. ("Ki bazsevál jövre a cigányoknak?" *Népszava*, 24 August 1993; in conversations with Zdenek Matjka, Secretary General of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, 23 August 1999; and Yonko Grozev of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee voiced the same opinion, Sofia, 11 November 1999.)

In general, mainstream parties have found other ways of courting Gypsy voters. They have tried to appeal to Romani groups on the local level and have asked well-known Romani personalities to campaign for them in their communities. For instance, during the 1996 national elections Ion Iliescu's then ruling Party of Democratic Socialism in Romania (PDSR) used Ion Cioab to garner the substantial Romani vote in Sibiu. (*OMRI Daily Digest* 2:6, 9 January 1996, citing a Reuters report.) Several East European parties resorted to the more direct approach of buying the Romani vote. Many observers claim that parties of all political hues have paid for Gypsy votes with cash, food supplies, or bribing Roma with festivals and conferences. Given the nature of these acts, they are difficult to prove, but reports are

especially widespread concerning Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) in Slovakia and the BSP in Bulgaria (see, for instance Kate Dourian's report for Reuters, Sofia, 18 June 1990; interviews with Rumyana Kolarova, Sofia, 6 March 1995; Krassimir Kanev, Sofia, 6 March 1995; Elena Marushiakova, Sofia, 9 March 1995; Yonko Grozev, Sofia, 11 November 1999; Klára Orgovánová, Prešov, 13 June 1994 and Bratislava, 7 September 1999; Peter Huncik, Bratislava, 15 August 1996; Michal Vaseka, Bratislava, 15 August 1996; and Ingrid Baumannová, Bratislava, 6 September 1999).

Normally, mainstream parties seek to coopt the Roma through short-term political calculations rather than a prospective electoral programme. According to Yonko Grozev, an official of the Bulgarian Helsinki Commission, the average politician's view is that he cannot rely on Gypsy votes because the Roma are so easy to manipulate. Thus, it does not make sense to devise a long-term electoral campaign with the Roma in mind, because two days before the election the rival party's representative can show up in the Romani community to distribute some money, food, or promise a festival and the Roma will vote for his party. (Interview with Grozev, Sofia, 11 November 1999.) At times these electoral machinations have actually backfired. For instance, prior to the 1998 national and the 1999 presidential elections campaign workers of two major parties distributed food in the Romani suburb Shuto Orizari in Macedonia, but the Gypsies voted for another party, the social democrats, that totally ignored them in their campaign (interview with Emilija Simoska and Mirjana Najcevska, Center for Ethnic Relations at the Institute for Sociological Research, Skopje, 23 November 1999).

Perhaps the first serious electoral agreement between a major mainstream political party and an important Romani organization was the "protocol" targeting the 2000 national elections between the Ion Iliescu's PDSR and the Partida Romilor, concluded at the PR's October 1999 national congress (see "Ilie scut támogatják a romák," *Szabadság* [Cluj], 25 October 1999; the protocol's text is published in the PR's newspaper, *Asul de trefla*, no. 80, 1999: 17-19; and Zoltan Barany forthcoming 2002). According to the PDSR-PR concord, the PR would support the PDSR's campaign and encourage Roma to vote for Iliescu's party. In return, the PDSR offered to extend social help to the Roma and involve some of its members in policy-making. Participants explained to the author that the ambience at the congress was similar to Ceaucescu-era functions: lots of thunderous applause during Iliescu's speech at the end of which the Roma chanted "I-li-es-cu, I-li-es-cu" for minutes. Critics of the "PDSR-PR

protocol,” like Dan Pavel, the Bucharest representative of the Project on Ethnic Relations, are quick to point out that the Roma’s conditions under Iliescu’s six -year reign (1990-1996) were far worse than in 1996-2000, under the presidency of Emil Constantinescu (interview with Dan Pavel, Bucharest, 2 November, 1999).

In contrast, PR president Nicolae Paun explained to the author that the PDSR -PR protocol was beneficial for the Roma for three reasons. First, for the first time in their history, an important political party was willing to engage the Romanian Gypsies in substantive discussions and to sign a policy agreement with them. Second, the PDSR committed itself to try to solve the Roma’s social problems through a national strategy to be elaborated by the PR. Finally, the PDSR agreed to coopt the PR into the governing process and promised two important places in the government: a state councillor at the President’s Office for Roma affairs and a governmental minister responsible for dealing with the Roma. Within weeks of its December 2000 electoral victory PDSR delivered. It appointed PR leaders Gheorghe Raducanu to the former, and Ivan Gheorghe (with the rank of deputy state secretary) to the latter post. Moreover, Madalin Voicu became an MP in the PDSR’s colours. Paun became Voicu’s successor as the MP for the Roma in the constitutionally allocated parliamentary seat. Perhaps inspired by the PR’s success, eighteen Bulgarian Gypsy organizations joined forces in December 2000 to call on political parties to pledge to improve the Roma’s conditions. Rumian Sechkov, head of the recently created National Council of the Roma, vowed that Gypsies would support only those parties in the April 2001 elections that agreed to put Roma on their lists and promised to increase Gypsy employment and support Romani language television programmes. Unfortunately, however, the results failed to materialize as no Roma (self-identified as such) managed to gain a seat in the legislature.

### **III. Gypsy Voting Behaviour and Electoral Results**

Some aspects of the electoral campaigns of Romani parties have been fairly similar to those of mainstream parties. Gypsy activists visit Romani communities, organize meetings and speak with constituents, put up electoral posters, and advertize themselves and their organizations in the Gypsy media. In exceptional cases wealthy Romani candidates, like Amdi Bajram in Macedonia in 1997, might distribute food or money among their constituents. The majority of campaigns have been fairly disorganized, however, suffering from the lack of focus, cohesive leadership, and money. In recent years, as Romani mobilization has matured in

some states, like Romania, campaigns have become more sophisticated and attracted more volunteer campaign workers (interviews with Nora Costache, Bucharest, 23 May 1996; and Ivan Gheorghe, Secretary General of PR, Bucharest, 5 November 1999). In the case of those Romani political organizations affiliated with mainstream parties, campaigning for that party – or against a particularly objectionable rival party – has been at the centre of pre-election activities (see, for instance, interview with Kanev, Sofia, 6 March 1995; and Eva Kekes, “Gypsy Leader Urges Roma to Vote Against Extreme Right”, *AP* Budapest, 19 May 1998). Some mainstream NGOs (such as the Slovak NOS Foundation for Civic Society) have helped Gypsy candidates with training programmes and workshops (interview with Baumannová, Bratislava, 6 September 1999).

Traditionally the Roma have kept their distance from politics, which many conceive of as a *gadje* (non-Romani) concern and endeavour. Gypsy leaders often complain of the difficulty they face in persuading Roma to cast their ballots since most of them have no confidence in the electoral system. Another problem that is partly the fault of Romani leaders is that a large percentage of ordinary Gypsies are unaware of their organizations (90 per cent in 1994 in Hungary) (Gábor Havas, Gábor Kertesi and István Kemény 1995: 80). Yet another difficulty is that many Roma simply do not know how to cast their ballots properly. Activists have documented numerous cases in Romania when the *bulibasha* or local Gypsy leader went to vote for the entire Gypsy community (interviews with Nicoleta Bitu, Bucharest, 23 May 1996; and Géza Ötvös, Cluj, 26 October 1999). There have also been many instances when the Roma's votes were invalid because they voted for all, rather than for one, Gypsy organizations on the ballot. In addition, Roma who are illiterate or do not possess registration cards attesting to their permanent residency are not allowed to vote. Exogenous factors, like the restrictions of the Czech citizenship law, mainstream party manipulation, and the intimidating behaviour of the authorities have also prevented thousands of potential Romani voters from exercising their rights (Dan Ionescu 1990 : 40).

Several patterns of Romani voting behaviour can be identified. First, the majority of Gypsies have tended to cast their votes for the party in power at the time of the election or for the party that is expected to win (“Gypsies Miss out as Eastern Europe's Democratic Caravan Hits the Road”, *The Guardian*, 21 June 1990; “A Parlamentbe készül a Magyarországi Cigánypárt,” *Népszabadság*, 15 June 1992; “Cigányvoksok”, *Magyar Narancs*, 23 September 1993; and interview with Trajko Petrovski of Skopje's *Marko Tsepenkov Institute*, Arlington, Texas, 27



March 1998). Second, a disproportionately large number of Roma have voted for the successors of former communist parties (see for instance, Dan Pavel, “Wanderers”, *The New Republic*, 4 March 1991, 13; and interviews with Rumyana Kolarova, Sofia, 6 March 1995 and Nikolai Gentchev, Sofia, 7 March 1995). This is a logical manifestation of many Gypsies’ nostalgia for the relative security and prosperity they associate with the socialist era. Third, though other large ethnic minorities like Hungarians in Slovakia or Albanians in Macedonia tend to vote along ethnic lines, Gypsies often do not because they have little confidence in their own. According to a recent analysis, “a Romani candidate is likely to receive only about a third of the votes of Romani voters and is unlikely to gain many votes at all from the majority population” (Project on Ethnic Relations 1999b). Fourth, the voting participation rate of Gypsies – given the factors outlined above – is far below that of the majority population. According to reliable estimates, less than 15 per cent of Roma participate in elections (see, for instance, interviews with János Báthory, an official at the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities, Budapest, 9 June 1994; Gheorghe Raducanu, Bucharest, 14 May 1995; András Bíró, Budapest, 26 July 1996; Peter Huncik, Bratislava, 15 August 1996; and Ivan Gabal, Prague, 24 August 1999). In the 1994 Gypsy self-government election in Hungary, for instance, 8 per cent of the Roma cast their ballots (“Minket ne válasszanak külön!” Amaro Drom, March 1995: 5).

Considering their proportion in the general population, there should be dozens of Romani MPs across the region. Instead, in late 2000 there were six: Monika Horáková in the Czech Republic, Madalin Voicu and Nicolae Paun in Romania, Asen Hristov in Bulgaria, and Amdi Bajram and Djulistana Markovska in Macedonia. Of the six, Bajram was elected on his own, Horáková, Hristov, Markovska, and Voicu on mainstream party lists, and Paun held the seat guaranteed by the Romanian constitution to the Gypsy minority. Paun’s predecessors in the Bucharest legislature were Voicu (1996-2000) and Gheorghe Raducanu (1992-1996). With the exceptions of ROI in Czechoslovakia in 1990 (it placed five MPs in the federal, five in the Czech, and one in the Slovak legislatures), and the Party for the Total Emancipation of Roma (Faik Abdi) and AROM (Bajram) in Macedonia at least one of which has had an MP since 1990, Romani parties have not succeeded in sending any candidates to national legislatures (interview with Holomek, a former MP in the Czech legislature, Brno, 1 September 1999). It is important to note that in 1990 ROI ran in a coalition with the victorious Civic Forum in the Czech Lands and the Public Against Violence in Slovakia. There are only a handful of other, now former, Romani MPs, all elected on mainstream party tickets: Manush Romanov (Union

of Democratic Forces, 1990-1991); Petar Gheorgiev (BSP, 1994-1996), and Tsvetelin Kanchev (Euroleft, 1996-2000) in Bulgaria; Ladislav Body (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and Left Bloc, 1990-1996) in the Czech Republic; and Antónia Hága (AFD, 1990-1998), Aladár Horváth (AFD, 1990-1994), and Tamás Péli (Hungarian Socialist Party, 1992-1994) in Hungary (in February 2000 Kanchev was sentenced to six years of imprisonment for theft. Correspondence with Ulf Brunnbauer of the University of Graz, 2 March 2000). Only a fatal automobile accident (a month before the November 1998 elections) prevented a Rom, Jan Kompus the leader of ROI in Slovakia, from gaining a parliamentary seat on the HZDS' list. An often forgotten point is that there might actually be quite a few more Roma in East European legislatures who do not openly identify themselves with their ethnic heritage.

There has been progress in Gypsy mobilization and this progress is most clearly measurable in the growing number of Romani elected local officials. On the local level – especially in areas where Gypsies make up a substantial proportion of voters – Romani activists have improved their electoral record with each successive local election. In Romania, for instance, voters elected 106 Gypsies as local council members in 1992, 136 in 1996, and 160 (and four county council members) in 2000 (see *The Legislative and Institutional Framework for the National Minorities of Romania*. Bucharest: Romanian Institute for Human Rights, 1994: 100; e-mail correspondence with OMRI archivist Karolina Jakab, 26 November 1996; interview with Dan Oprescu, Head of National Office for Roma, Department for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities, Bucharest, 2 November 1999; and e-mail communication with Lena Cruceru of the Project on Ethnic Relations, 13 June 2000). In Macedonia, their number had increased from fifteen in the 1990 municipal elections to twenty-three in 1996. In Slovakia Roma elected fifty-six Gypsy council members and six mayors in the 1998 local elections (Michal Vasecka 1999b: 404). In Bulgaria relatively few Romani local officials were elected until the October 1999 local elections. For the first time, two Romani parties (Svobodna Bulgariya and the Democratic Congress Party) – though not registered as ethnic parties – managed to get ninety-two of their candidates elected (Interview with Petar Atanasov, Secretary of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers, Sofia, 15 November 1999). Again, in addition to these Roma, dozens of others have succeeded in local elections representing mainstream parties and, quite likely, dozens more who do not openly identify themselves as Roma. In sum, there are now hundreds of

Gypsy local council people and perhaps a dozen municipal mayors and submayors across Eastern Europe.

Poland, where there are no known Romani council members, and the Czech Republic – where according to Holomek there are at most five – add little to this total and the obvious question is why this is the case. In Poland, the Roma are so widely dispersed that they only make up a tiny proportion of the electorate in most electoral districts. For instance, the population of Kraków is 600,000 of whom only 600 are Gypsies (interview with Adrezej Mirga, Kraków, 29 July 1996). The deficiencies of Gypsy mobilization, combined with more acute anti-Romani prejudices and the low geographical concentration of Gypsies, are the most important reasons for the small number of elected Romani officials in the Czech Republic.

Hungary is a special case given its minority self-government system that provides opportunities for minorities to form their own administrative bodies locally and nationally. In the three elections held for minority self-government since 1994, Hungarian Roma elected an increasing number of local assemblies: 416 in 1994 and an additional 61 in 1995 (supplemental elections had to be held because some localities were not prepared), and 765 in 1998 (after 1998 two self-governments ceased to exist, therefore, their number in 2000 was 763. See Csaba Tabajdi, *Láttelel a magyarországi cigányság helyzetéről* Budapest: Miniszterelnöki Hivatal, 1996: 12; “Helyi nyer?” *Amaro Drom*, November 1998: 3; and correspondence with Edit Rauh, 12 April 2000). In 1995, a Budapest-wide, and in the same year and again in 1998, national Gypsy self-government were also elected. Although many observers have criticized both the electoral rules and the elections themselves, the important point is that thousands of Hungarian Roma have not only been involved in the electoral process but have also served in different capacities in their own self-governments.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The regime change from socialism to democracy afforded the Roma the opportunity to alleviate their political marginality. After a decade of mobilization, however, the Gypsies remain woefully underrepresented in Eastern Europe's polities. Their weak ethnic identity, infighting, poor leadership, the proliferation of organizations, the relative absence of ethnic solidarity and substantial resources, and low voter participation have thwarted their collective action and impeded their ability to affect state policies. It is important also to underscore the

diversity of Romani communities and their minimal political experience. Thus, the initial failings of Romani politics should not be unexpected.

Institutions – primarily NGOs and to a considerably lesser extent political parties – constitute the backbone of Gypsy mobilization. Romani political organizations receive a poor grade when evaluated by Samuel Huntington's criteria of institutionalization: they tend to be rigid and unadaptable; have simple structure (usually few if any subunits) and few, often ill-defined, objectives; and are marked by disunity. On the other hand, most Romani political organizations tend to be highly independent (see the discussion on the criteria of political institutionalisation in Samuel Huntington 1968: 12 -24). As Gypsy associations and their leaders mature by virtue of their protracted participation in political processes, they are likely to achieve a higher level of institutionalization and become more effective.

Notwithstanding the fact that Gypsy mobilization is still in its infancy, the past decade has brought some important successes. In the last few years the Romani movement has become more mature, better organized, and more assertive across Eastern Europe. There is somewhat less squabbling and more willingness to compromise. An increasing number of Gypsies are in positions of decision-making on the local level and thousands have become involved in public life, whether as volunteers working for NGOs or as the representatives of their communities. In sum, in the past decade the Roma have gained a political presence that states and societies have had to accept as legitimate. Undoubtedly, this presence will continue to expand with the growing number and increasing effectiveness of Romani NGOs and organizations.

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## Biographical Note

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