

FACT SHEET

Roma political participation and representation

Introduction

Throughout history, Roma have been discriminated against and their rights constantly violated. Despite being Europe's largest minority and their significant demographic presence in the EU, this community continues to be denied the right to access decision-making processes and institutions and are still not represented in political life.

In 2007¹, with the European Network against Racism, we identified the need to promote the political participation of Roma. More than 10 years later, many developments at EU and national levels have taken place with the aim to improve the lives of and ensure the equal treatment of Roma across the EU. Unfortunately, these policies and actions have not yet proven to be successful in making a tangible positive difference in the lives of many Roma. As such, we believe that it is now urgent to ensure Roma are politically active and represented in mainstream politics as this can ensure the success of Roma related policies. By political participation, we mean taking part in the political system by running as a candidate for a political party.

This fact sheet aims to raise awareness of the exclusion of Roma from mainstream politics and sensitise key stakeholders about the importance of Roma's political participation. The fact sheet provides a general overview of participation of Roma in political structures at local, national and European levels. It also includes arguments for the importance of Roma political participation and representation as a guarantee to ensure success of Roma related policies and

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http://cloud2.snappages.com/ecc3fa83da15cf423fe3aaa342f545fa355b24f3/Roma%20political%20participation_may2007.pdf



actions. Recommendations are also provided on how to ensure and promote political participation and representation of Roma.

Why Roma political participation and representation is important

There are a number of reasons why Roma remain under-represented in politics. Some factors include:

- **Discriminatory political systems** with a structure that works against Roma participation. For example, voting registers require residential registration before an upcoming election. Many Roma live in precarious, sometimes inhumane housing conditions, often without residential registration.
- **Lack of registration documents** is an additional barrier to political participation of Roma since many have no identity cards, because their births or marriages were never registered or because their documents are not recognised by the state in which they now live (in the case of displaced Roma during the conflicts in the Balkans).
- **Prejudice and stereotypes** of mainstream politicians who often assume that Roma lack the capacity and interest to get involved in politics. Additionally, Roma participation and representation might be seen as a potential damage to mainstream politicians.
- **Lack of political experience and disillusionment with politics** among Roma leads to low voter participation among many members of this community. The lack of experience and exposure to parties reduces Roma's opportunity to politically participate.

However, how important is it to have politicians who reflect the people they serve? Electing Roma politicians is a symbolically and socially important component for the inclusion of these communities. In addition to strengthen democracy, Roma political representation will give to these communities a sense of belonging and a sense that they will be treated fairly from official institutions. Electing Roma candidates can also mean a better representation of the interests of Roma constituents and a genuine interest to improve their lives.



In order to guarantee the rights of Roma, it is essential to ensure their genuine political participation so they are adequately represented in local, national and European decision-making structures. The “*For Roma with Roma*” motto should be genuinely applied at all levels.

As stressed in the Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the member states², empowering Roma by promoting their political participation in society is critical to advance the process of Roma inclusion and essential to the success and legitimacy of policies tackling the discrimination of Roma communities. Roma’s political participation is closely linked to their inclusion enabling them to be involved in decision making processes concerning the design, implementation and evaluation of Roma related programmes and policies. It will further ensure the effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies at national and local levels.

Roma need to be empowered to become democratic and participatory leaders in the process of Roma inclusion. To ensure this, conditions have to be created to grant them with equal opportunities to be represented in decision-making institutions. More investment is needed in political training and education aiming at Roma’s active political participation at local, national and European level. Roma political participation is closely linked to their inclusion enabling them to be involved in decision-making processes concerning the design, implementation and evaluation of Roma related programmes and policies. It is crucial that Roma stop being passive recipients of policies affecting them and become equal participants in society.

Overview of Roma political representation in political structures

European level

With approximately 6 million Roma living in the European Union, we could expect 2% of political representatives to be from the Roma community. Similarly, with 751 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), 15 should be Roma. Sadly, the reality is very different and disappointing since currently only two MEPs are representatives of the Roma community:

² Council of the EU. 2013 Council recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the member states. Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/139979.pdf



Damian Drăghici (Social Democratic Party, Romania) and Soraya Post (Feminist Initiative, Sweden). Up to 2014 only three representatives of the Roma community had won seats since direct elections to the European Parliament began in 1979. The few Roma MEPs are however very active in representing their community and lobbying for greater political participation of Roma by informing the public and their colleagues about the Roma issues through available channels. They work hard to provide Roma with great role models of what can be achieved through political representation.

The first Roma MEP was Juan de Dios Ramírez from Spain (1986-1999), followed by Livia Járóka (2004-2014) and Viktória Mohácsi (2004-2009) both from Hungary. Nevertheless, the number of Roma candidates for the European Parliament seems to be rising throughout various parties in Europe, which shows some prospects for the future of Roma political representation at the European level.

National level

Member states have the main responsibility to improve the lives of Roma, thus they should be the first to take action to support these communities. Lack of success of EU member states in ensuring equal political participation of Roma is a complex phenomenon. So far, the number of elected Roma in national parliaments is well below their demographic proportion. However, some member states are implementing policies to improve the situation. Some have adopted different forms of formal Roma participation at the national level by creating special political bodies.

Some examples include: Council for National Minorities and Ethnic Groups and the Council for Non-governmental Non-profit Organisations (Slovakia), Delegation for Roma Issues (Sweden), Roma Community Council (Slovenia), Advisory Board on Romani Affairs (Finland), Joint Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities (Poland), Minorities Consulting Council (Latvia), State Council for the Roma (Spain), National Roma Agency



(Romania), National Gypsy Minority Self-Governments (Hungary) and many other forms that enable better political representation.

Establishing Roma specific bodies and parties in order to improve Roma political participation empower Roma. They should be seen as a first step towards Roma's mainstream political participation. However, their influence in mainstream decision and policy making is limited. Since the lack of political will regarding the implementation of Roma inclusion policies is a serious problem both at the national and local levels of government, Roma should better organise themselves politically in order to present a constituency that could pressure the government to do more to address the discrimination of Roma in everyday life.

Local level

The bulk of the challenge in achieving considerable political participation for the Roma community remains the active involvement of Roma at the local level. We would expect that Roma political representation at the local level, be it mayors or members of local councils, should be higher in certain municipalities with a ratio of Roma populations significantly higher than at the national level. An example of this is the Šuto Orizari Municipality in the Republic of Macedonia where according to the 2002 census Roma represented almost 80% of the population.

Success in achieving better political participation on the local level is correlated to the level of organisation of the Roma communities. It is important to note that although there was not much progress regarding the representation at both European and national levels, the situation on the local level has improved. There are now Roma mayors and members of municipality councils in most Central European countries.³

3 Márton Rövid. 2013. Roma Rights 2012: Challenges of Representation: Voice on Roma Politics, Power and Participation Available at: http://www.errc.org/en-research-and-advocacy-roma-details.php?article_id=4174&page=1

What can be done to increase Roma political participation and representation?

- More investment is needed in political and campaign training and education aiming at Roma's active political participation at local, national and European level. This training should also target Roma elected politicians to prepare them to perform once in office;
- Mainstream political parties should have a fair representation of Roma at all levels, and recruit Roma as candidates and members, and potentially as leaders;
- An inclusive electoral system needs to be created by carrying out initiatives to ensure voter registration of Roma, and create opportunities for engagement;
- Appropriate mechanisms have to be developed to improve representation of Roma, including women, in mainstream politics since this is essential for the effective implementation of policies affecting them;
- Problems related to the lack of basic documents need to be solved. Governments need to ensure that Roma have all the necessary documents, including birth certificates and identity cards;
- Roma should better organise themselves politically in order to present a constituency that could pressure the government to do more to address the discrimination of Roma in everyday life;
- Governments should combat electoral malpractices such as vote-buying and ensure that Roma vote in a free and informed way.

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The **European Roma Information Office (ERIO)** is an international advocacy organisation which promotes political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing information to the EU institutions, civil society and governments. Through its wide network, it aims to combat racist discrimination against Roma through awareness raising, lobbying and policy development.

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