



FACT SHEET 32

Political Participation of Roma, Traveller and Sinti communities

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Introduction

Political participation is an essential requirement of functioning democratic systems; it is important that everyone plays an active role as voters, community participants, workers, activists, and political party members. However, ethnic and religious minorities are frequently excluded from political participation, and are unable to exercise their political and civil rights.¹ Political scientists often describe two types of political participation: descriptive (or symbolic) and substantive, according to Dirk Jacobs:

There is descriptive representation when the composition of a political body reflects the socio-demographic characteristics of the overall population it is supposed to represent. We talk about substantive representation when interests of subgroups of a population are sufficiently voiced and taken into account in political deliberation. It is often assumed that descriptive representation leads to substantive representation - but there is no guaranteed link between the two.²

In an ideal world the political establishment would accurately reflect the composition of the society it represents, and the issues facing all communities would be adequately reflected in the mainstream political debate. Thus in a European Union with an estimated Roma population of 10 million,³ one would expect 2% of political representatives to be from the Roma community. Likewise 16 of the 785 members of the European Parliament should come from the Roma community. However this picture is very far from reality.

Roma in Europe have always been faced with numerous social, political, and economic challenges that prevent them from fully integrating into the larger, majority society and actively taking part in politics. As a result, both the quality and quantity of

¹ For an introduction to political rights see: ENAR Fact Sheet No. 26, Political Rights (April 2006), available at: <http://www.enar-eu.org/en/factsheets/index.shtml>

² Jacobs, D (2007) The challenge of representation of minorities, in: ENARgy January 2007, available at: <http://www.enar-eu.org/en/enargy/enargy.shtml>

³ Estimated population figure in: European Commission (2004), The situation of Roma in an enlarged European Union, p. 11, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/publications/2005/ke6204389_en.pdf

Roma participation in political affairs is generally low. Racial prejudice, poverty, low education levels, sub-standard living conditions, language barriers, and other social and economic factors increase the communication and policy gap between governments and the majority population on one side, and the Roma population on the other, reinforcing mutual distrust. If Roma are to advocate for better opportunities and effective solutions, they will need to become more active participants in the political processes of their countries and of the European Union. This will require consistent, long-term efforts and assistance.

The aim of this fact sheet is to provide an overview of the key issues and challenges in securing effective political participation of Europe's largest minority, drawing out broader issues of political participation of ethnic and religious minorities. The fact sheet will conclude by outlining examples of good practice initiatives both general and specific to the Roma community, which should serve as a model for promoting the political inclusion of minorities across all EU member states.

Overview of political participation of Roma, Travellers and Sinti

Despite their numerical strength in several countries, Roma in Central and Eastern Europe remain to date un- or underrepresented in political life due to the fact that they do not stand equal chances to participate and to exercise their political rights. Romani exclusion is even more pronounced in Western Europe: the total number of public officials in European Union member states who state that they are Romani can literally be counted on the fingers of one hand.⁴

As the process of democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe has continued, the Roma have increasingly been recognised as an ethnic and national minority, and for the first time they have been offered the opportunity to exercise the same rights as other officially recognised minorities. However, the pressing need for transformation in the social and economic structures of post-communist states led to rapid socioeconomic decline and deprivation for many groups, particularly though not exclusively the Roma. After a decade of mobilisation the Roma remain underrepresented in Europe's politics.

The failure of old and new European democracies to include the Roma community is a complex phenomenon, which is not easily accounted for - both structural and individual factors must be taken into account. These include:

- **Prejudice and stereotypes:** Mainstream political actors regularly assume that members of the Roma community are not interested or do not have the capacity to engage. Given the reactions of the majority population, some believe that Roma participation will damage the prospects of mainstream political actors.
- **Lack of political experience and networks:** There is low voter participation among many Roma communities, who may have become disillusioned by existing power structures. Without exposure to networks and parties, few Roma have been provided the opportunity to participate politically.

⁴ Russinova, S (2003) Political Rights of Roma, in: Roma Rights 4/2003: Political Rights, available at: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=1310>

- **Institutional discrimination within political systems:** Many political systems are structured in a way that works against Roma participation. For example voting registers may require registration in a particular geographic location long before an upcoming election. Electoral systems can be constituted in a way which is inherently discriminatory against minorities, such as single voting districts; multi-district systems can facilitate more accurate representation between districts.
- **Citizenship and residency:** Like migrants, often Roma face barriers to political participation due to their legal status. Many Roma have no identity cards, either because their births or marriages were never registered with the state, or, in the case of many Roma displaced during the conflicts in the Balkans, because their documents are not recognised by the state in which they now live.

Political parties

As the key gatekeepers of political participation, political parties have a key role in both facilitating and undermining the political participation of ethnic and religious minorities in Europe.

One of the primary obstacles to Roma political participation is the lack of an open and fair environment that encourages their active involvement in **mainstream parties**. These parties are central to Roma political participation and yet, in most of Europe, they are ill-prepared to engage in this issue. As noted above, there is reluctance among most political parties to advocate Roma interests, appoint Roma candidates, or associate themselves with Roma, as this is generally feared to be politically damaging. Roma candidates who do make their way onto mainstream party lists are often placed so low as to be unelectable.

As a result, Roma views of mainstream parties are generally negative. Typically expressed concerns are that mainstream parties manipulate the Roma vote and are dismissive of Roma community problems. While they generally have little trust in politicians, polling and election results indicate that Roma voters favour mainstream parties over their own.⁵

Given the limited response of many mainstream political parties, new Roma political groupings could provide an effective means to promote Roma identity while articulating and advancing their human rights through political representation. However, no **Roma-based political parties** have achieved measurable success. In addition, as with all forms of identity politics, there is a risk that Roma issues could become marginalised, or that Roma parties would not fully reflect the diversity of views within their community. The Roma parties' failure to attract a substantial percentage of the Roma vote during elections indicates that Roma do not necessarily vote as a bloc, nor do they necessarily support the ethnic-based parties and candidates who claim to represent them. For example in Bulgaria during the 2005 elections, a Roma party, Euroroma, put forward a list of candidates, but none were elected.⁶

⁵ For example see: Survey on the Political Participation of Roma in Romania, available at: http://www.accessdemocracy.org/library/2056_ro_survey_080106.pdf

⁶ Lambert, P (2007) Parliamentary representation of minorities in four European Union member states, in: ENARgy January 2007, available at: <http://www.enar-eu.org/en/enargy/enargy.shtml>

Roma politicians

Despite the barriers and obstacles, some members of Roma communities have successfully participated in the electoral processes at all levels of the political system: local, national and European. Roma politicians have an important role to play, not only in providing leadership and role models, but also in addressing the substantive issues facing Roma communities across the European Union.

In general, due to the barriers described above, Roma tend to have more opportunities to engage at the local rather than national level. In some countries, Roma are exerting increasing influence in local politics, such as for example the Roma municipality Shuto Orizari, in Skopje, Macedonia. Voter turnout records and reports indicate that Roma recognise that their political interests are best represented at the local level.⁷

However Roma who are elected into office often face significant challenges in fulfilling their role. Given their limited numbers it can be extremely difficult to effect any significant change for their community. Incidents of scapegoating and racist attacks, in increasing numbers, have added new and formidable obstacles to addressing Roma problems.

Good practice in promoting political participation

There have been a number of initiatives in recent years aimed at securing enhanced political participation of ethnic and religious minorities in Europe, including a number of specific initiatives aimed at enhancing the representation of the Roma community. Responses range from hard measures such as the use of quotas and party lists, such as those which have been used to promote the political participation of women, to softer initiatives targeted at both the minority and majority populations, aimed at enhancing capacity and opportunities for change.

Examples of recent initiatives include the establishment of Roma self-government in Hungary. While such models are subject to criticism as they fail to ensure participation in mainstream decision making, can have insufficient power and competences, lack appropriate funding, and be too dependent on the support of local government structures, they have proved successful in: promoting cultural identity, highlighting Roma rights, encouraging political mobilisation, stemming assimilation, and addressing legitimacy problems among Roma from the perspective of representative democracy. The Hungarian government passed Act LXXVII on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities, the so-called Minorities Act, in 1993. According to this law, local and national self-governments will be elected and established.⁸

The **NGO sector** represents a tremendous asset and resource. NGOs dealing with Roma issues as well as broader anti-racist NGOs undertake empowerment, advocacy, monitoring and anti-discrimination initiatives to increase Roma access to education, jobs, political participation, health care, legal services, etc. There are also specific initiatives by NGOs aimed at increasing voter participation, and enhancing capacity

⁷ Project on Ethnic Relations (2006) Romani Politics. Present and Future. PER: New Jersey, available at: http://www.per-usa.org/Reports/PER_Romani_Politics.pdf

⁸ Walsh, Niahm (2000) Minority Self-Government in Hungary: Legislation and Practice. ECMI: Flensburg, Germany, available at: <http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/JEMIE04Walsh30-07-01.pdf>

for Roma participation in elections. Roma organisations have achieved success in influencing politics - for example Roma organisations in Bulgaria, together with the Human Rights Project, pushed for the “Framework Programme for Equal Integration for Roma in Bulgaria” in 1999. More recently the Resolution of the Catalanian Parliament on the persecution faced by Roma is the result of intensive advocacy by FAGIC-Federació d’Asociaciones Gitanes de Catalunya (Federation of Roma Associations from Catalonia).

The **round tables**⁹ organised in many countries provided a unique opportunity for Roma political activists and representatives of mainstream political parties to meet and engage in dialogue around some of the most pressing issues in their countries concerning Roma political representation. In addition, the round tables served as fora in which Roma groups could consider common issues and possibilities for alliances, as well as their different views on political representation and other matters.

Some political parties have made commitments to increasing their representativeness, and conducting business in a way which does not negatively impact minority communities. For example the **Charter of European Parties for a Non-Racist Society** calls on democratic political parties in the European Union to act responsibly when dealing with issues related to race, ethnic and national origin and religion. It encourages political parties to work towards fair representation of racial, ethnic, national and religious minorities within and at all levels of their party system. The Charter presents a standard to which civil society can hold political parties to account.¹⁰

Conclusion

The problems confronting Roma are many and complex. Essential to their resolution is active, widespread participation by Roma in the political process. This requires first and foremost a more open political, social and economic environment; it also requires individual skills training, enhanced political organisation, and strategies that allow for political diversity among Roma while promoting collective interests. Governments need to implement Roma development strategies in a manner that derives meaningful and measurable benefit to Roma communities in the areas of political representation, economic development, social integration and human rights protection. International organisations need to recognise that political participation is key to Roma development, and then provide the resources and oversight to ensure that progress is made. Mainstream political parties need to incorporate Roma as voters, members, candidates and eventually among their leaders.

Given the breadth and depth of the political, social and economic obstacles facing Roma, a broad, multi-faceted and long-term approach is needed to create meaningful political participation. In terms of enhancing political participation this approach must be informed by:

- A focus on change within existing political systems and institutions in order to create opportunities for engagement;

⁹ Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) (1998) Political Participation and the Roma in Hungary and Slovakia, see: <http://www.per-usa.org/reports/PoliticalPart99.pdf>

¹⁰ For the text of the Charter and a list of signatories see: www.eumc.europa.eu

- Comprehensive strategies which recognise the complexity of initiatives needed to enhance participation, including hiring Roma as public officials;
- Promote strategies in order to foster political participation of Roma communities, including self-government initiatives, as a first step towards mainstream political participation;
- Create the broader socio-economic conditions in order to facilitate political participation;
- A medium to long term view which can create the conditions for participation;
- A focus on women and younger people, as well as other groups who are most marginalised within Roma communities;
- A bottom-up approach which is inclusive of all stakeholders;
- Local and grassroots development;
- Commitment to mainstream and targeted programmes to support and build capacity amongst Roma communities, as well as to empower Roma voters;
- A desire to build trust through demonstrating integrity and openness;
- International learning and exchange.

Key documents

- Charter of European Parties for a Non-Racist Society, http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/index.php?fuseaction=content.dsp_cat_content&catid=3ef0500f9e0c5&contentid=3ef0568924fa5
- ERRC, Roma Rights 4/2003: Political Rights, available at: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=1310>
- ENAR Fact Sheet No. 26, Political Rights (April 2006), available at: <http://www.enar-eu.org/en/factsheets/index.shtml>
- ENARgy, Representation of Minorities (January 2007), available at: <http://www.enar-eu.org/en/enargy/enargy.shtml>

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ENAR is a network of some 600 European NGOs working to combat racism in all EU Member States. Its establishment was a major outcome of the 1997 European Year against Racism. ENAR is determined to fight racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, to promote equality of treatment between EU citizens and third country nationals, and to link local/regional/national initiatives with European initiatives.



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ERIO is an international advocacy organisation promoting political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing factual and in-depth information on a range of policy issues to the European Union institutions, Roma civil society organisations, government authorities and intergovernmental organisations. ERIO cooperates with a network of more than 250 organisations. ERIO promotes the inclusion of Roma into European societies and supports efforts by Roma NGOs to gain access to European Union structures. The ultimate aim of ERIO is to eradicate discrimination against Roma and social exclusion of Roma communities.