

Engaging the Roma community in the political party process in Slovakia

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Abstract Establishing cooperation between the Slovak majority and the Roma minority within the political parties in Slovakia is a demanding and complicated process. Many political parties ignore this ethnic minority in their programmes or pay very little attention to it. This article aims to provide information about the development of the political ambitions of the Roma minority in Slovakia in the period leading up to 1989, the first steps taken by the post-revolution government for the advancement of the Roma nation and an analysis of the current involvement of the Roma minority in the decision-making processes.

Keywords Roma · Integration · Participation · Local politics · Education

Introduction

It is difficult to estimate how many Roma live in Slovakia; when the census is taken many Roma say that they are of Slovak or Hungarian nationality. In 2013, a special census by the UN Development Programme produced the *Atlas of Roma communities in Slovakia 2013*, which estimates that there are 400,000 Roma living in Slovakia, representing 7 %–8 % of the total population of 5.4 million (Mušinka et al. 2014).

Furthermore, the *Atlas* indicated that Roma communities live in 1,070 municipalities and towns in Slovakia, approximately 37 % of the total number. Some Roma live in impoverished groups in settlements, while others form part of the majority society. According to Marcinčin (2013), in many municipalities today Roma represent the majority of the population, and in many districts

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Roma births form the majority. Overall, the Roma population represents close to 15 % of the working-age population in Slovakia.

Yet despite the relatively high presence of Roma in Slovak society, their representation in the different levels of politics is very low. A Roma representative was elected to the national Parliament of the Slovak Republic for the first time in 2012. At the local level, fewer than 2 % of the elected deputies are Roma, the result of the most recent local authority elections in 2014. The level of participation of any minority—in this case the Roma—mostly depends on the circumstances (in terms of education, communication and societal tolerance and acceptance) determined by society and by politicians (Orgovánová 2013). How should society respond to this situation, and what might be done by government?

The journey of Slovak Roma towards political and legal equality

The first systematic attempts to organise the Roma go back a long time (Hancock and Jurová 2008). A pan-European Roma conference took place in Kisfalú, Hungary as early as 1879, but, even then, such activity was not welcomed by the government.

In the twentieth century most Roma associations in Slovakia were cultural and music societies and guilds. Their first significant political moves were made after the Communist takeover in February 1948, but the political goals of the Association of Slovak Gypsies (Združenie Slovenských cigánov) were not recognised by the newly installed political power (Jurová 1967).

The socialist regime of the Czechoslovak state did not officially recognise the existence of a Roma minority although other minorities were recognised in law. This was because the Roma did not know where they fitted in—they were organised to some extent but had no institutions of their own. The exception to this—the Association of Gypsies—Romany (Zväz Cigánov–Rómov)—was established 20 years after change of the regime, in 1969 in Brno in the Czech Republic. During its existence this association was quite successful in achieving support for Roma employment, but it was disbanded by the state and party organs in 1973. At the time, the organisation had about 8,500 members (Orgovánová 2013). Scheffel (2013) described the consequences of following the socialist ideology thus: despite the slogans and plans of the socialist and post-socialist eras regarding the integration of Roma into society, the abyss between both groups did not decrease—rather the tension increased.

A number of experts see the period 1989–92, the final three years of Czechoslovakia's existence, as one of the most positive for the Roma in the two decades leading up to the country's division (Orgovánová 2013). It was a period during which many non-governmental non-profit organisations, new institutions and political associations were established that focused on Roma issues, and in some cases included Roma among their representatives. The government of Slovakia was open to this because dealing with the problems of ethnic minorities was a condition for entry into the EU.

Politically, the Roma were acknowledged as an ethnic minority in the early 1990s. The document *Principles of Government Policy of the Slovak Republic for*

Roma of 1991 indicated that policies regarding Roma should be based on ‘the legislative system, starting with the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, to acknowledge the ethnic independence of the Roma on the same level as that of other ethnic minorities living in Slovakia—this means “. . . to acknowledge Romany as a nationality and thus ensure the political and legal equality of these people” (Slovakia 1991).

In 2003 the next fundamental government document was prepared—*Basic positions of Government Policy on the Integration of Roma Communities* (Slovakia 2003)—which established measures to ensure equality. By accepting these measures, the Slovak government acknowledged that a large group of people that live in Slovakia were not in the same position as other inhabitants, and that if they were to attain approximately the same approximate level, the government would have to take measures to help them (Orgovánová 2013).

In early 2012, in response to an incentive from the Council of the European Union for Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs, the Slovak government prepared the *Strategy of the Slovak Republic for Roma Integration to 2020* (Slovakia 2012), which received a European Commission award. It was conceived under the direction of Miroslav Pollák, then representative of the Slovak Republic for Roma issues. The strategy presented four action plans—on education, employment, health and housing.

Currently, the Committee on National Minorities and Ethnic Groups and the Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Non-governmental Non-profit Organisations Operating in Slovakia are responsible for matters relating to minorities. In 2001, the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Communities was established. In addition, dozens of non-governmental, non-profit organisations are active within the third sector—with the goal of supporting and developing the Roma minority in Slovakia. Churches also play a substantial role in supporting integration.

Despite these developments over the past 20 years, many specialists agree that at the beginning of the 1990s, much more could have been done to promote the political representation and participation of the Roma community in Slovakia. (Barany 2002). However, the Roma topic was frequently overshadowed by other, more serious political issues, such as the split of Czechoslovakia and accession to the EU and NATO.

Political euphoria and a hard landing

In the first free elections, which took place in 1990, Roma representatives were included on the candidate list of the party Public against Violence (*Verejnost proti násiliu*) and also, later, on that of the Civic Forum (*Občianské fórum*) and were thus elected to the legislative organs of the Czechoslovak Federation. Thanks to the work of these representatives, the early 1990s saw the establishment of the globally unique Romathan Roma theatre, the Roma Academy of Music in Košice and the Department of Roma Culture in the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra (Kökény 2013).



However, the attempt to create an independent ethnic party called the Roma Civic Initiative (Rómska občianská iniciatíva) failed. In the June 1992 elections, as well as those in the autumn of 1994, the party received just 0.7 % of the vote. In Slovakia, no other Roma party gained more than 1 % of the vote (Štatistický Úrad Slovenskej Republiky 2014) and the euphoria created by participation in the election process quickly dissipated. This failure rested on the fact that the majority of Roma did not vote for Roma candidates and that the votes for Roma candidates that were cast were split among too many parties.

By the end of the 1990s, there were 27 Roma political parties in Slovakia. The Roma political scene was highly fragmented and the parties were unable to unite. In 2004, after a shake-up of the rules transformed the party scene, the Roma Initiative in Slovakia (Rómska iniciatíva Slovenska) was the only party that qualified for re-registration. Currently, there are three Roma political parties—the Party of the Roma Community (Strana Rómskej komunity) and the Party of Roma Union in Slovakia (Strana Rómskej únie na Slovensku) have both formed since 2004. Roma political participation on the national level has remained virtually non-existent. The existing Roma parties do not have any regional organisations and do not have a systematic approach to working with communities. The Roma living in settlements do not feel that these parties defend their interests and do not vote for them.

Roma and different levels of politics

For many Roma, being elected into local or regional representative bodies is an achievable goal. In 2005, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs carried out a survey on the political participation and views of Roma communities. It found that these communities achieve their greatest successes in local politics. The survey was carried out by Tomáš Hruštič, a researcher with the Institute of Ethnology at the Slovak Academy of Science. Through the National Democratic Institute, he also led a training course for Roma political candidates in Slovakia. He speaks fluent English and Romany.

As shown in Table 1, there is a positive growth in the number of candidates and elected deputies in local elections in every election period. In terms of the representation of women, in 2014, approximately 20 female Roma deputies were

Table 1 Number of Roma candidates and elected deputies and mayors during the local authority elections, 1998–2014

	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014
Candidates	254	756	1,600	3,200	3,300
Elected deputies	56	158	220	330	390
Female elected deputies	*	*	11	20	20
Mayors	6	11	19	29	33
Number of municipalities	*	55	95	130	*

Sources: Data from Magdolenová (2015), Hruštič (2013), Pečinka (2009) and Šebesta (2002).

* Data not available.

Table 2 Share of elected Roma candidates in the local authority elections in 2014

	Total number	Number of Roma/%
Elected mayors/lord mayors	2,909	33/1.1
Elected local authority deputies	20,753	390/1.9

Sources: Data from Štatistický Úrad Slovenskej Republiky (2014) and Magdolenová (2015).

elected. Out of the total number of elected Roma representatives on local authorities, this figure represents only 5 %. Hrustič (2013) explained the low proportion of female representatives as a result of the traditional position of women within Roma communities, where they primarily play the role of mother and educator. Compared to the position of women within the majority society, Roma women have a weaker position in the political sphere. In 2010, the first female Roma mayor was elected in the municipality of Lomnička.

The numbers included in the table were estimated by the National Democratic Institute and Slovak Roma newspaper *Romano nevo Lil*. No official statistics were available, so the mapping of the ethnic membership of political candidates is based on detailed data collected in the field through cooperation with Roma media and local Roma communities, as well as non-Roma non-governmental organisations. These estimates, therefore, likely represent the lower limit of the number of Roma candidates and many Roma candidates will have been left out as they considered themselves to be of Slovak or Hungarian nationality (Hrustič 2013).

Table 2 shows that only 1.9 % of mayors and 1.1 % of deputies elected in 2014 were from Roma communities. According to the *Atlas of Roma Communities 2013* (Mušinka et al. 2014), Romany people represented 7 %–8 % of the population, so we can see that they are still very much underrepresented.

In the 2009 elections for the regional parliament only one Roma representative, from the Party of the Roma Community, was elected; and in 2013 again only one candidate won a seat, on behalf of the Bridge (Most–Híd) Party.

At the national level, the first elected Roma representative after the division of Czechoslovakia (in 1993) was Peter Pollák, who was elected in 2012. He ran for parliament on the list of the Ordinary People (Obyčajní ľudia) and gained 6,000 preferential votes—more than double the number received by the most successful Romany political party. Pollák currently works as the government representative for the Roma communities.

Strengths and weaknesses

During municipal elections Roma settlements can become centres for vote buying or other efforts to influence election results. However, Hrustič (2013) notes that this is a problem everywhere in countries with a concentrated level of poverty. This situation has changed slightly since 2010, when vote buying was made a criminal offence not only for the person buying votes but also for the person selling his or her vote.



Concern is frequently cited that elected Roma mayors may misappropriate public resources, or have insufficient education or ability to fulfil the needs of the office to which they have been elected. This situation is even more noticeable in segregated Roma villages, where the Roma community represents the majority but the educational opportunities are few, leading to individuals not being suitably prepared to take on the position of mayor.

In extreme cases of long-term differences between the majority and the minority, the situation can escalate, even culminating in an exodus of the majority to other cities or villages, consequently further isolating the minority from the community, as is the case with the segregated Roma communities. The results of such isolation are terrifying zones of social and economic disaster, marked by disintegrating housing, unmaintained roads, abandoned schools, and inhabitants living on social benefits and criminal activities (Scheffel 2013).

On the other hand, several Roma councillors and mayors have been elected thanks to their high-quality programmes and well-prepared campaigns, which successfully mobilised Roma voters. And moreover—also positive news—several of these Roma politicians also received votes from non-Roma voters in their municipalities (Hrustič 2013). This did not happen in the past.

This positive increase in the number of elected Roma candidates can also be partially attributed to the long-term activities of several organisations working with Roma leaders in Slovakia, as well as the generally increasing awareness of the importance of political participation among the Roma population. A further factor which should not be ignored is the increasing Roma population in certain municipalities and the greater experience of candidates who have run several times. In general, the rule remains that a Roma candidate must put in double the effort in order to achieve the same result as a non-Roma candidate (Hrustič 2013).

Education as a way forward

As Marcinčin (2013) notes, an adequate education system is a basic precondition for a successful future for Roma representatives. Providing an effective primary education in a language which they understand and setting up special schools which will educate them for the jobs market should be the first steps. Furthermore, it is necessary to offer the option of pre-school preparation as a part of the education system, as this is a vital development period in an individual's life.

Many young people, including Roma, who have studied at the secondary and tertiary levels, have taken up positions in politics (Orgovánová 2013). During the past 23 years the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra, as well as other institutes of higher education have offered many students, including Romany ones, the option to study cultural, educational and social work in Roma communities, and many of them currently work in these fields (Kökény 2013).

Conclusion

The Roma minority is gradually achieving greater representation in the political life of Slovakia. Political parties cannot neglect this issue forever and sooner or later will have to deal with the question of systematic cooperation with the Roma minority—including within the party structures. Thus far, however, political parties based on ethnicity or nationality—such as the Magyar parties in Hungary—do not appear to have been needed to politically motivate the Roma community. In contrast, Roma candidates are increasingly proving their ability to win non-Roma votes, especially at the national and European levels. Thus the majority society must seek a way to increase the intensity of the dialogue with Roma parties interested in public engagement and offer them scope to realise their goals in municipal politics. A quality education enriched by acquired experience will make it possible to put forward qualified Roma politicians on the national as well as the European level. This will not happen overnight, but despite the less than optimistic estimates of several experts in this field, I am sure that the sooner the political parties intensify work in this direction, the more advantageous it will be for society. In this way, we can prevent many misunderstandings and encourage a common dialogue between the two nationalities with different cultures that live in the same country.

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