Roma Political Participation in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia

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NDI Assessment

Roma Political Participation

Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia[1]

I. INTRODUCTION

Roma populations have been largely left out of political and economic transitions throughout Central and Eastern Europe, discriminated against and marginalized through poverty, social ills, and, for many Roma communities, physical isolation. If Roma are to advocate for solutions to their communities' problems and socioeconomic advancement, they will need to strengthen their level of participation in the political processes of their countries. As few Roma have political experience, they will need strategies that address both external and internal barriers to Roma political participation and the development of organized Roma political leadership.

Fostering Roma participation in politics requires consistent, long-term efforts. The challenges are imposing. Political leaders across the region lack the will to encourage such participation. Political parties do not recruit Roma candidates and few Roma hold elected office. Government policies toward Roma are at best marginally effective and at worst reinforce Roma isolation. While some governments have appointed Roma to oversee Roma affairs, those positions have not been vested with sufficient authority or resources. At the heart of the problem, racial bigotry is flagrant and human rights abuses abound.

For their part, Roma communities have yet to produce effective political leadership. Political disunity, economic hardship, and social stagnation conspire to suppress political aspirations and a cohesive political identity. Many Roma political parties are viewed by Roma themselves as corrupt and unlikely to reform. Roma civic groups enjoy some degree of public support but are insufficient to solve the problems at hand. New Roma political groupings are needed to promote Roma identity by articulating and advancing their social, economic, and human rights interests through political representation.

How to remove barriers and encourage Roma to be politically active presents complex, strategic questions. There is not nor should there be one approach given varying historical, demographic, electoral, and socio-cultural factors shaping Roma communities across the region. How Roma communities find their political voices and organize their political interests depends on a host of factors and ultimately on decisions taken by Roma themselves.

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[1] Report prepared by Assessment Team Member James Denton

To help in this effort, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) assessed challenges to and opportunities for Roma political participation in three countries slated to accede to the European Union within established timetables—Bulgaria (2007), Romania (2007), and Slovakia (2004). The objective of this assessment was to develop country profiles that Roma and others can use to craft political development strategies. The assessment revealed that, while diverse, Roma communities in the three countries share similar challenges to political participation.

NDI met with a wide range of Roma and non-Roma political and NGO leaders, elected and appointed government officials, as well as policy and opinion makers, researchers, journalists, educators, political analysts, citizens, and representatives of international organizations active in Roma-related issues. The assessment team visited the capitals, as well as other towns, villages, and Roma settlements. A list of meetings in each country is found in Appendix 1.

The composition of NDI's assessment team varied with each country. Three individuals—James Denton, Michael Brown, and Rumyan Russinov—participated in the assessment in all three countries. NDI Board Vice-Chairwoman Rachelle Horowitz participated in the Slovakia Roma assessment. NDI staff Vicki Robinson, Dana Diaconu, Michael Farnworth, and Sevdalina Voynova were assessment team members during portions of the mission. Each contributed his or her experience and expertise in human rights, political organization, democratization, and Roma and related regional issues. A respected Roma leader joined the team in each country as well: Toni Tastev (Bulgaria), Iulius Rostas (Romania), and Peter Pollak (Slovakia). Biographies of each assessment team member are in Appendix 2.

Funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and in cooperation with OSI's Roma Participation Program and the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), this project reflects the interest of both NDI and OSI to raise the issue of Roma political participation with relevant international organizations and to take the first step toward initiating strategic blueprints for Roma communities to enhance their political participation, representation, and influence. This report, as well as three separate country reports that were translated, published and distributed for their home countries in Europe, offers the key findings and recommendations of the NDI assessment team.

II. BACKGROUND

Roma in all three countries are faced with numerous social, political, and economic challenges that prevent them from fully integrating into larger, majority society and taking part actively in politics. Racial discrimination, poverty, low education levels, sub-standard living conditions, language barriers, negative stereotypes, and other social and economic factors increase the communication gap between governments and non-Roma peoples on one side and the Roma population on the other. The situation is exacerbated by the poor economic conditions and communist political legacies. Despite some attempts by each government, the overall lack of political will to narrow this gap has resulted in Roma issues being inadequately addressed. Both the quality and scope of Roma participation in political affairs is generally low.

Given the region's plans for European Union accession, each of these three countries is required to improve conditions for Roma and bring them in line with the EU's general political and human rights norms. With Slovakia's accession slated for 2004, it has the most demanding legislative timetable of the three. The international community's interest in Roma issues is also driven in part by a relatively large Roma population and recent controversies over significant emigration among Roma to EU countries. As a result, the NDI assessment team observed considerable attempts at assistance to Roma communities, particularly in Slovakia, though not necessarily initiated by the government or implemented with enthusiasm or success. Improving the socioeconomic and human rights situation of Roma necessarily, in NDI's estimation, involves building their capacity to represent themselves in their country's political system.

Economic Situation. Throughout the region, the Roma's general economic situation deteriorated sharply as a consequence of the post-communist transition, reflecting – and further exacerbated by – the overall economic difficulties facing these countries.

As unemployment rates in Eastern Europe rose in the wake of communism's collapse, unemployment among Roma skyrocketed above national averages. In 1998, for example, official unemployment among Roma in Bulgaria was reputedly between 80 and 90 percent, while the average unemployment rate in Bulgaria at that time was 16 percent. The unemployment rate among eligible Roma workers in Slovakia is up to four times higher than the national average and may be as high as 80 percent of the Roma population, according to some estimates. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that Roma account for nearly one-quarter of Slovakia's total unemployed.

Economic insecurity brought on by repeated economic crises, land privatization, the closure of technologically obsolete basic industries, and the furlough of unskilled workers in many sectors has had a deleterious impact on the Roma population. Education levels within Roma communities are low and a high percentage of Roma work as unskilled laborers (for lower than average wages) in agriculture, construction, and heavy industry, such as steel production. In increasingly competitive job markets, racial prejudice has

also played a role, with common practice holding that, when applicants have similar skill sets, preference is given to non-Roma candidates.

Roma suffer from higher poverty rates as well. A recent World Bank poverty study revealed that, in 1997, more than 84 percent of Roma in Bulgaria were living in poverty compared to the national poverty rate of 36 percent; in Romania, the poverty rate among Roma is estimated at twice the national average. The economic situation of Roma in Slovakia also contrasts with the general statistics of the population. Many Slovak

The negative economic situation for Roma could worsen with economic belt-tightening as Slovakia prepares for EU membership.

Roma live in isolated settlements in the relatively poorer central and eastern two-thirds of the country.

Education Levels. Roma in all three countries suffer from significantly higher illiteracy rates than the national averages, preventing them from being competitive for employment. Few Roma receive higher education and hold high professional positions. In Bulgaria, the largely preserved communist-era educational system features two types of schools for Roma children: so-called "Gypsy schools" located in Roma neighborhoods, and special schools for mentally handicapped children where Roma children (generally not handicapped) comprise the main portion of the student body. Both types of schools *de facto* segregate Roma, a characteristic found in all three countries.

Poor school attendance related to substandard facilities – sometimes lacking such basic utilities as heat, electricity and water; abuse by non-Roma children and teachers; inability to learn in the majority language; difficulty in obtaining residence permits or birth certificates required for enrollment; and a lack of parental support have further limited already constrained education opportunities. Even the purchase of school uniforms and textbooks can become prohibitive to families with no income and no social benefits. Obstacles to education are nearly endemic in some quarters of Roma society.

Since 1997 municipal authorities in Bulgaria have been asked to selectively introduce the study of Romani language in schools and to create special groups for Roma children to help them learn Bulgarian. Some positive steps have been adopted in the sphere of education, but the problems have not been resolved, largely due to a lack of political will, compounded by a lack of unified policies and a continuing debate on the best approach to Romani education.

Slovak Roma face similar challenges related to state educational policies. With no state system to manage student attendance, absenteeism levels among Roma are high. This situation is compounded by the geographic isolation and social exclusion of Roma settlements, where there is little incentive to attend school and access to education is more difficult.

Social Conditions. Contributing to Roma economic destitution is the difficulty in gaining official recognition of Roma communities and citizens. Beyond the reluctance to self-identify as Roma, many Roma cannot obtain government identification documents; for example, 20 percent of Romania's Roma population does not have government-issued identification cards. This represents a significant obstacle in applying for employment, qualifying for social assistance, educational benefits, and, significantly, registering to vote.

In Slovakia, the ghetto-like settlements in which upwards of 130,000 Roma reside highlight housing as among the most pressing social needs of Roma communities. Roma settlements in Slovakia are home to the poorest Roma citizens and are generally located on the outskirts of villages and towns where they are segregated from the non-Roma population. They often lack basic running water, electricity, and access to health care. Infant mortality is a significant problem in these areas. In a minority of cases, some Roma prefer to live in isolated settlements to avoid integration with the majority population and the physical, at times murderous, violence that has been visited upon them at the hands of non-Roma.

Statistical data relating to health conditions among Roma is scarce. However, available reports and estimations point to significant gaps between Roma and non-Roma. One study found that only one percent of Roma in Bulgaria live beyond 70 years of age, and collectively attain a life expectancy up to 15 years' lower than that of the average Bulgarians[2]. The Roma infant mortality rate was estimated to be almost two times higher than that of other Bulgarians in the last decade. Because of inadequate access to health care, poor living conditions, malnutrition, low education levels, higher levels of smoking, drug use, and other social factors, Roma run a much higher risk for birth abnormalities than non-Roma. Studies have found that Roma are significantly more susceptible than other groups to contract such diseases as tuberculosis, Hepatitis B, and HIV/AIDS.

Participation in Political Affairs. Romani political development throughout the region was eviscerated by the Holocaust; some scholars estimate that half of all of Europe's Roma perished. During the Communist era, Roma, like other minorities,

Openness to Roma issues by mainstream political parties has been limited at best.

were manipulated in the name of advancing the socialist brotherhood of all nations. Bulgaria, for example, had a constitutional prohibition against the formation of political parties on ethnic and religious bases, which still exists today.

Since the fall of communism, few Roma-based political parties in Slovakia and Romania have achieved any measurable success with the notable exception of the Roma Party in Romania, where several other Roma-based political parties emerged in the aftermath of the 1989 reforms. In spite of this, the political organization of Roma communities by and large remains underdeveloped in Romania and throughout the region. Compared to other ethnic minorities, such as Hungarian minorities in Slovakia

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[2] This study was conducted by the foundation *Health Problems of Minorities* in May 2002.

and Romania or the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, Roma political organizations and parties are neither powerful nor well-developed.

Among mainstream political parties, openness to Roma issues has been limited at best and, at worst, is said to jeopardize the political standing of those seeking to address Roma issues. Mainstream parties of the ethnic majority have by and large failed to reach out to Roma as candidates or voters.

In Slovakia, a parliamentary election system of proportional representation in which the entire country comprises one electoral district has particularly challenged Roma to create sufficiently strong bonds to gain a political voice at the national level.

Many Roma and non-Roma NGOs working to advance Roma rights have emerged in the past decade to fill the political vacuum. Of the three countries assessed, Bulgaria seemed to have the strongest nongovernmental sector, witnessed by its ability to form a large umbrella coalition to represent Roma concerns to the government and successfully advocate for a government strategy to improve the situation for Roma. Nonetheless, many Roma organizations' efforts are hampered by the lack of focused agendas and, some say, corruption. In Romania, a UNDP study shows a general distrust of – and lack of support for – Roma-based NGOs, despite the fact that numerous NGOs have been formed since 1989 to represent Roma concerns.

The obstacles to broad-based Roma participation in the political arena are many. Primary among these, however, is the lack of an open and fair environment that welcomes Roma political organizing and encourages vigorous participation. While Roma-based parties and NGOs must seek the legitimate support of their own communities, mainstream political parties must be partners in activating Roma political participation.

Government Response to Roma issues. Each of these three governments has made its own attempt to respond to Roma needs, through strategy documents and/or designated government ministries.

The Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (or *"Framework"*) is a policy document initiated and drafted by a large coalition of Romani organizations which advocated for its adoption by the government. It summarizes an overall strategy to address and solve a myriad of broadly defined problems and challenges during the coming 10 years, in discrimination, economic development, health, education, culture, media and image, and gender equality.

Although the former government of Bulgaria (led by the Union of Democratic Forces or UDF) signed the *Framework* in April 1999, it did not undertake steps to implement it until the end of its term in office in June 2001. Neither that government nor its successor (led by the National Movement of Simeon II) has concretely supported measures outlined in the document, the goal of which is the "elimination of the unequal treatment of Roma in Bulgarian society." The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the predominant party of the Turkish minority), as a ruling coalition partner with both the

UDF and Simeon governments, similarly confirmed its commitment to the program but has done little in terms of concrete implementation.

The September 2002 statement by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education that the system of segregated schools in Roma neighborhoods should be eliminated could be an indication that the government intends to implement one of the central goals of the *Framework*, i.e. desegregation of Roma ghetto schools. The government has also drafted an anti-discrimination law, the adoption of which is recommended by the *Framework* program; however, the law has not yet been adopted.

Nonetheless, the signing of the Framework was an accomplishment for the Roma community, recognizing the major challenges facing the population and making the elimination of discrimination one of its main political priorities.

Following international criticism, the government of Romania has also taken measures to limit discrimination against Roma and increase their opportunities. *The Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of the Roma ("the Strategy")* is the final product of an evolving dialogue that took place between the Roma community and the former Democratic Convention government, and was eventually endorsed and adopted by the current government. The document articulates the government's overall strategy to achieve the goal of "improving the condition of the Roma people in Romania." The *Strategy* is designed to bring Romania into compliance with international standards for minority rights as articulated by the Council of Europe, the UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and others. In addition, it outlines a strategy to address and solve a myriad of broadly defined problems in the coming 10 years in community development, housing, health care, economic steps, justice and public order, child welfare, education, culture, communication and civic involvement.

While Romania's Constitution stipulates equality for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, the government enacted specific anti-discrimination legislation in August 2000; however, this law was not implemented for more than two years because of the failure to establish the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD), the body tasked with implementing the legislation. As this body was created in August 2002, reliable, independent data on its implementation is not yet available. According to a government report, of the 44 complaints sent to the NCCD by April 2003, four resulted in imposed sanctions. The government's efforts to link constitutional rights and legal protections have not noticeably benefited the socioeconomic situation among Roma.

The Constitution of the Slovak Republic of 1992 similarly includes a number of minority relevant provisions. Fundamental rights are guaranteed to anyone regardless of nationality or ethnic origin and no person is to be denied legal rights, discriminated against, or favored on these grounds.

Recent government policies have provided for ethnic identification and have recognized Roma as having equal status among other minorities. The Slovak government has developed an official strategy for addressing Roma-related policy and social issues,

outlining responses specific to Roma community needs. In 1998, the government established the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, headed by a Rom. This Office was formed to act as an official liaison with the government and for the Roma communities in political arenas. In contrast to her predecessors[3], the current Plenipotentiary, Klara Orgovanova, has introduced such innovations as a branch office in Kosice (a region where many Roma are located), an internship program in her office for young Romani activists, and regular trips to Roma settlements where she meets with local authorities both Roma and non-Roma alike.

Nevertheless, Slovakia, like its neighbors, has made little progress overall in addressing the needs of the Roma communities. In fact some international experts argue that it has actually been reversed. Romani disaffection with the political process may well have worsened following their disappointment with the lack of an effective government response. The government's 2003 Roma strategy notes that "the integration of minorities and their coexistence with majority society is a condition for the successful functioning of Slovakia within the EU." Recent EU reports, however, have noted slow progress in these areas.

III. ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

A. The Roma Population: Size and Diversity

A basic understanding of the size, nature, and diversity of the Roma population is fundamental not only to determine the degree to which they are under represented in government, but also to design strategies to correct this under representation.

Roma Population Size. In all three countries, the actual size of the Roma population is the subject of considerable disagreement. The official figures are as follows:

- According to Bulgaria's 2001 nationwide census, 370,000 citizens identified themselves as Roma (or about five per cent of the country's population of approximately eight million).

- The recent national census in Romania indicates that about 535,000 citizens identified themselves as Roma (or less than 2.5 percent of the country's population of about 22.5 million).

- In Slovakia's 2001 national census, about 85,000 citizens identified themselves as members of the Roma minority (under two percent of the country's 5.4 million citizens).

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[3] The previous Plenipotentiary, Vincent Danihel, was dismissed in May 2001 on suspicion of embezzlement, following frequent conflicts with the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development, Pal Csaky. His predecessor was Branislav Balaz.

Nevertheless, NGO and Roma political activists, researchers and social scientists, as well as international institutions, believe that these official numbers significantly understate Roma population in each country.

- Unofficial estimates of the Roma population in Bulgaria range from 700,000 to 900,000[4]—two or three times the official count, or up to 10 percent of the country's population.

- A 1994 Helsinki Commission report estimated that the Roma population in Romania exceeded 2,000,000—nearly four times the official count or about nine per cent of the country's population. The European Union estimated 1.1 to 1.5 million Roma in Romania's population, and current estimates put the Roma population between 1.1 and 1.5 million, or about six percent of the total population.

- Several Slovak research groups, government officials, and international organizations estimate the Roma population in Slovakia at 400,000—over four times the official count, or nearly eight percent of the country's population.

The potential size of Roma voting constituencies is such that political parties competing for parliamentary seats would do well to consider reaching out to Roma voters as a collective group—and committing to represent their interests once in office. Given the four percent threshold for entering parliament in Bulgaria and the 5 percent threshold in Romania and Slovakia, for example, the relative size of the Roma is relevant when considering political strategies, particularly at the national level. Still, with respect to this report, the reasons for the apparent undercounting rather than the actual size of the Roma population are probably more relevant.

Political and Ethnic Identities. High poverty and illiteracy rates, as well as the census pollsters' limited reach into more depressed Roma communities, undoubtedly contributed to undercounting. However, most Roma and non-Roma experts attribute a portion of the undercounting to an undocumented but widely acknowledged practice whereby many Roma deny their ethnicity to avoid the stigma of being attached to the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. While some Roma may deny their ethnicity because they consider themselves to be assimilated into society, one common belief is that many do so to enhance their prospects for improved socioeconomic status.

According to this view, the better educated, more urban and financially successful Roma—and Roma of dual ethnicity—often identify themselves with either the majority ethnic group or a non-Roma minority, the affect of which understates the Roma population, diminishes its identity, and dilutes its political clout.

> *Educated, urban and financially independent Roma tend to identify themselves as members of the majority population or non-Roma minorities.*

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[4] Jean-Pierre Liegeois' book *Roma, Gypsies, Travellers* provides an estimate of 700-800,000. The United Nations estimates the population to be approximately 900,000.

At the same time, other religious, ethnic, cultural and geographical factors can weigh heavily when identifying one's nationality. For example, informed Bulgarian government officials and Roma leaders alike estimate that Roma living in the southeastern region of Bulgaria, where the country's Turkish minority is concentrated, identify themselves as ethnic Turks. The Turkish community is the country's largest and most influential minority with a population of 747,000 (2001 census). Roma reportedly identify themselves with the Turkish minority partly because some consider themselves to be genuinely assimilated, but also because the Turks' elevated socioeconomic and political status appeals to the stigmatized Roma. Also, many Roma in this region share the Turks' Moslem faith. In this case, a reasonable assumption is that Moslem believers among the Roma claim Turkish ethnicity because they identify more closely with their Moslem faith than their Roma ethnicity. Similarly, Slovak Roma often identify themselves with the minority Hungarian population which has attained significant cultural, social and political rights within Slovakia.

Roma collective memory and the resulting fear of persecution is another factor: experiences from the Holocaust, forced population exchange, deportations, race-based imprisonment, and confiscation of goods count in the individual's decision to openly declare his or her ethnicity. In the minds of many Roma, their ethnicity remains a potential threat to their very survival.

Diversity and Divisions. The Roma share a common ethnicity, history and culture that can be traced back hundreds of years. Throughout their history, they have also shared a history of high rates of poverty, discrimination, dependency, joblessness, and, in Romania, slavery (outlawed in 1856). However, based on the interviews conducted by the NDI assessment team, Roma do not share a common sense of purpose, community or identity in the political context. Such a breakdown within an ethnic minority decreases its political representation and its ability to advance policies that expand opportunities in education, employment, and quality of life.

"After receiving an education, many Roma leave the community and don't look back," said one Roma expert in Slovakia.

Much has been written about legendary divisions within the Roma population. The NDI assessment team repeatedly heard accounts of political, family, and financial/business rivalries within Roma communities, driven and sustained by self-appointed leaders, all of which prevent Roma from developing a common sense of purpose, identity, or vision. Other differences in language, work ethic, education, as well as socioeconomic status, expectations, and self-identity further encourage this fragmentation.

Geography and Dispersal. In recent years, geographic factors, particularly in Bulgaria, have added new stress to the fabric of Roma society in ways that will instruct strategies to increase Roma political participation and influence. Unlike ethnic Turks, whose large and stable minority is concentrated in southeastern Bulgaria where they

enjoy a regionally dominant social, political and cultural presence—the smaller Roma minority's numbers are thinned out, spread more or less evenly across the country.

Although historically a relatively transient and rural group, in more recent generations Roma have established roots in the urban centers, particularly during communist rule. However, in the wake of the collapse of the regions' command economies, many of the less skilled and therefore less adaptable Roma lost their jobs in the cities (many worked in seasonal construction) and were unable to find alternative employment. Facing unemployment and rising costs, thousands of Roma had to uproot their families, abandon their homes, and resettle to less costly, mostly depressed areas outside the cities. This relatively recent dislocation severed longstanding ties among thousands of Roma, making communication and organization more difficult, and diluting the community's potential political influence.

Political Orientation and Dependency. The NDI assessment team found that, although undeveloped and largely uninformed, Roma political orientations appear to lean to the center-left, with a particular emphasis on a strong role for government; this is based, however, on purely anecdotal evidence. This seemed especially true among the older, rural, and poorer populations nostalgic for the days when government was perceived to have provided for their material needs. Young, educated and urban Roma told the assessment team that the system locked many Roma into a cycle of dependency and poverty.

Experts in Bulgaria and Romania estimate that 70-80 percent of Roma normally support a "cradle to grave" political agenda. In addition, polling data from the September 2002 national elections in Slovakia shows that some 60 percent of Roma are believed to have cast their ballots for the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) led by Vladimir Meciar and his populist rhetoric about wealth redistribution and increased benefits. (However, the reluctance of Slovakia's liberal parties to seek the Roma vote, as well as cuts in social benefits by the more centrist government of Prime Minister Dzurinda's Slovak Christian Democratic Union (SDKU) party in the years leading up to the election, were also key factors. Indeed, the clear majority of the Roma respondents to a poll following the most recent parliamentary election in Slovakia said that "the promise for jobs" most influenced their votes.

Government intervention and support are necessary to help solve institutionalized poverty, discrimination, and social ills. However, Romani appeals for governmental and international assistance must be balanced by a new understanding among Roma that they can and should address basic needs in their communities through self-help initiatives that are critical to fostering political participation.

B. Roma Political Experience

The early days of the post-communist period were among the most hopeful for Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, but quickly led to dashed expectations. Between 1990 and 1994, perhaps a dozen Slovak Roma parties and political coalitions and groups formed,

divided, dissolved and mostly vanished. In Romania, Roma registered several parties between 1990 and 1992 as a result of new, post-communist regulations. Just two months after the revolution that overthrew Nicholae Ceausescu, a group of Roma activists in Romania established the Democratic Union of Roma as a national political organization, and three Roma were included in the interim government, the Provisional Council for National Unity (CPUN). In Romania's first elections, held on May 20, 1990, candidates from different Roma political organizations ran for office, but none received enough votes to gain a seat in the Constituent Assembly. However, like other national minorities in Romania, they automatically received one seat.

Lack of political experience and differing visions among Roma activists led to a fragmentation of the newly emerged Romani movement in Romania and elsewhere. As they began to find themselves excluded from the new parliaments or with only minimal representation, many Roma oriented their interests to the non-governmental sector where it proved easier to attract resources for projects in Roma communities.

By the late 1990s, governments were becoming more sensitive to pressure from the international community to improve the situation of Roma, but their efforts were largely ineffective. They established government offices devoted to minority issues, developed national strategies for improving the situation for Roma, and adopted anti-discrimination legislation. However, these measures were insufficient for tackling the complex problems facing Roma, and Roma organizations were unsatisfied.

In Romania's 2000 parliamentary elections, the Roma Party maintained its monopoly on Roma representation, while in Bulgaria and Slovakia Roma parties have recently attempted to wage campaigns with little success. In the June 2001 election, eight Roma parties formed the Free Bulgaria coalition, which failed to reach the required four percent threshold for parliamentary representation. The coalition received less than one percent of the overall vote in an election where Roma voter turnout was reportedly around 70 percent (which corresponds to roughly 8 to 10 percent of Bulgaria's total voting population using the UNDP population estimate). In Slovakia, two Roma political parties, the Roma Civic Initiative[5] and Political Movement of Roma, together attracted less than 15,000 votes in the 2002 election.

The Roma parties' failure to attract a substantial Roma vote in these two countries indicates that Roma do not always vote as a bloc, and further do not necessarily support the ethnic-based political parties and candidates who claim to represent them. This disconnect between the Roma political leaders and their constituents was dramatically and repeatedly illustrated and substantiated by the comments made to the NDI assessment team by Roma and non-Roma alike. In Bulgaria, the low turnout also reflects the general weakness of the political system in which non-Roma voters, too, tend to feel alienated from their political representatives.

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[5] The Roma Civic Initiative is also known by the acronym ROI. This organization was founded in the former Czechoslovakia, but, following the Velvet Divorce, split into two separate organizations.

Roma Political Parties and Leadership. Slovakia currently has no Roma Members of Parliament; Bulgaria has two, only one of whom is a member of a Romani political party; and Romania has two Roma members of parliament, both from the Roma Party[6]. The Roma Party's dominance of the Roma political scene in Romania is less attributable to broad support from the Roma population than to its relationship with the ruling Party of Social Democracy (PSD)[7]. Because of its victory over other Roma parties in the elections, the Roma Party receives government subsidies, allowing it to strengthen its network and better prepare for its electoral campaign.

Other Roma political groups exist in Romania, but none has the national reach or vote getting strength of the Roma Party[8]. In Bulgaria, approximately one dozen Roma political parties and movements exist, while Slovakia boasts around 20 Roma parties in various stages of development.

Other Roma non-party but politically oriented groups include the Roma Parliament (in Slovakia) and the Council of Slovak Roma. By most accounts, the Roma Parliament is essentially impotent, anchored by internal fighting and rivalries that have characterized Romani political life in the region since self-government returned to Eastern Europe. What level of influence the untested Council of Slovak Roma will eventually have is still unclear. A formative but potentially promising group of younger and educated Roma called the New Roma Generation, has also emerged in Slovakia.

Virtually no Roma political organizations in any of the three countries are guided by an identifiable set of political or philosophical principles or values, though this characteristic is not dissimilar to many non-Roma parties within the region. Not surprisingly, the Roma organizations failed to offer political platforms in any of the recent elections. In addition, many appear to advance the business interests of individual party leaders (which are often formed around the interests of a particular family business), not the interests of the larger Roma population. One young Rom in Sibiu, Romania remarked that, "People go into politics to make money". From the number of late model luxury cars that the NDI assessment team observed among Romani political circles, it was not difficult to imagine why this remark was made.

> *NDI observed that, apart from the Roma Party, all other Roma political groups in Romania are weak. As one EU official noted, "There are many Roma voices, but only one political party."*

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[6] In the 2000 election, the candidate of the Roma Party won the seat in the Parliament reserved for the Roma minority, but another Roma Party member was elected on the PSD's list of candidates as part of an electoral agreement between by the two parties.

[7] The PSD was previously known as the Party of Social Democracy with the acronym PDSR. It changed its name in summer 2001 following its merger with the tiny Social Democratic Party of Romania.

[8] At the time of the assessment no legally registered Roma political parties existed in Romania. However, Romanian law permits all national minority NGOs to participate in electoral politics. Of the politically active Roma NGOs, the Roma Party is dominant.

In all three countries, Roma tend to be more politically active at the local level than at the national level where frustration can be particularly high.

- Voter turnout records and various reports in Bulgaria (see UNDP Regional Human Development Report, 2002) indicate that the Roma recognize that their political interests are best represented at the local level.

- In Romania, some 160 Roma serve as city councilors in local jurisdictions around the country. On a relative scale—considering there are about 3,000 councils and 39,718 councilors nationwide—the percentage of Roma councilors is insignificant. However, the numbers are increasing, and in some regions where the Roma population is concentrated, Roma councilors exercise some leverage.

- In recent years, a handful of Roma mayors and about 180 municipal councilors have been elected in Slovakia. Still, considering that there are thousands of mayors and councilors in Slovakia, much remains to be done to increase Roma political participation if the community is to be proportionately represented.

Among the relatively few local Roma candidates elected to serve in office, almost none is re-elected to a consecutive term. While this reflects a common trend throughout many parts of the region among non-Roma office-holders as well, it does suggest that Roma leaders, like many of their non-Roma counterparts, are often unprepared to govern once elected. Indeed, after meeting with nearly 200 Roma and non-Roma officials, political and NGO activists, and ordinary citizens alike, the NDI assessment team concluded that the traditional Roma political leaders—with perhaps a few exceptions scattered in a few communities—are unskilled, inexperienced, and divided.

The stark realities were apparent in one small Slovak town, where half of the population is Roma but none is one of the town's nine councilors.

As with the national scene, politics at the local level are undeveloped and are perceived by voters to be guided by the self-interests of a few leaders. One Romani woman remarked that she had worked in every local campaign since 1989 in Vidin, Bulgaria, but that in the end, "the Roma are manipulated by a small number of leaders for a small amount of cash."

Based on recent election results and the testimonies of Roma in all three countries, NDI concluded that Roma politicians and the establishment they represent have been largely discredited and, to all intents and purposes, abandoned by the Roma population, a trend not out of line with the general political landscape in the region. After 13 years of independence, little evidence can be seen that Roma parties and groups have a major following, much less deep loyalty, among the Roma constituency they claim to represent.

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[9] The Roma Civic Initiative is commonly referred to by its acronym, ROI. This organization was founded in the former Czechoslovakia, but, following the Velvet Divorce, organized efforts in each country. Although founded under the same organization and now maintaining identical names, the Czech and Slovak organizations are independent of one another.

Roma Attitudes and Perceptions. The NDI assessment team found the Roma communities' attitudes toward their leadership in each of the capital cities to be marked by a sense of alienation and, in certain quarters, betrayal. The leaders' perceived disinterest, dishonesty, and lack of a coherent and articulated agenda, coupled with complaints of corruption and broken promises, have left the Roma electorate disillusioned, detached and in a state of political disarray in all three countries.

These attitudes were best illustrated by the reply to a question posed to every Roma individual and group with whom the NDI assessment team met. The question was: "What political party, group or leader in the capital best represents the interests of Roma communities?" Except for a local leader in Lom, Bulgaria, who named an NGO and a few Roma Party loyalists in Romania, every Romani citizen the team met in the three countries replied with some combination of smirks, shrugged shoulders, and shaking heads—and the same word: "Nobody."

> *According to one Bulgarian Rom: "No one represents Roma interests in Sofia. The politicians come here before an election when they need a vote. The NGO people come here when they are preparing a proposal. And, we never see them again."*

The following account could be instructive to understanding some of the attitudes voiced by Roma about their politicians:

One non-Roma mayor in Romania met with the NDI team in the company of five or six party and community leaders, including the Roma Party president, a Roma councilor, and the local expert in charge of implementing the government sponsored *Strategy*. The mayor described his close working relationship with the local Roma community (pop. 100,000), without whose support he said he could not have been elected in 2000. The mayor explained that he met with Roma at town meetings three or four times a year. However, 30 minutes later he said that he had held only one town meeting with the Roma community in the two years since the election. The Roma Party president and councilor appeared to have an excellent relationship with the mayor.

The biggest challenge to the Roma villagers, according to the mayor, was the lack of jobs. In his district, about 80 per cent of the Roma are unemployed. When listing his accomplishments, the mayor mentioned that, since being elected in 2000, hundreds of new jobs were created in his region. The mayor explained that he had attracted five or six new businesses to his district because of government-sponsored tax incentives available to companies that invest in qualifying economically depressed regions. The mayor's region was eligible for these preferential tax holidays because of the depressed economic conditions in the Roma community. Yet, it turns out that at most, only two or three of those hired to work in these newly opened businesses were Roma.

Following the meeting with the mayor, the Roma Party president and his colleagues led the assessment team in a three-car caravan to tour a nearby Roma settlement. The local

> *Two elderly women, once out of ear shot of the Roma Party leaders, whispered, "The politicians steal everything."*

Roma Party president's car was a Mercedes Benz — offering a stark contrast between his financial status and that of his constituents whose interests he represents. Driving through this depressed village, the team immediately attracted small, curious, impoverished, but polite crowds. The uniform reply to the team's questions was that they needed jobs and better schools with more books.

In Slovakia, several Roma similarly complained to the NDI assessment team that financial resources were wasted on creating "fake" government jobs for Roma that ignore the community's real job training needs in order to satisfy structural unemployment criteria for EU membership. Especially telling in this regard, was a visit to a kindergarten under construction in Slovakia (with foreign aid funds) in the midst of one of the country's most squalid Roma settlements—with effectively 100 percent unemployment— in which six to seven carpenters were hammering away on the building, none of whom was Roma.

<u>Family Finances and Politics.</u> Studies show that a strong sense of common identity and purpose exists within the Roma family, and that family interests and loyalties are the unifying force within the community. Throughout the three-country assessment, it was evident that family links are usually at the core of Roma political interests, structures and activities. The lines that separate these political and family business interests are blurred, often to the point where the two interests are indistinguishable. Not surprisingly, where Roma are concerned, real authority within political structures flows top-down. Political legitimacy is rarely based on the votes of a constituency.

<u>Election Campaign Experience.</u> The NDI assessment team gleaned from its meetings, research, and media accounts that the Roma election campaigns in all three countries have thus far been conducted at a rudimentary level. Roma party and NGO leaders have failed to prepare or articulate a platform or agenda. But for a few rare and unique local exceptions, no organized or *ad hoc* voter education or get-out-the-vote campaigns were conducted. By all accounts, election campaign efforts in the Roma community have consisted largely of, and were derided as, base appeals for votes backed up by free alcohol, "passing around money," etc.—practices common in the world's more depressed, less organized, uneducated, and easily manipulated communities.

<u>Political Organizing Infrastructure.</u> Roma political organizations lack a developed infrastructure beyond a scattered handful of party leaders and activists who have little influence in the larger Roma community and official circles. The functional and structural links between national-level party leaders and local Roma communities are scant in Slovakia, non-existent in Bulgaria, and in Romania are reliant on the link between the local Roma Party president, the Roma advisors to the county governments, and the party leadership in Bucharest[10].

While the NDI assessment team witnessed some signs of authentic national or regional networks, associations, and grassroots organizations that promote political

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[10] The Romanian Government's <u>Strategy</u> provides for Roma advisors to the county governments on funding and implementation of anti-discrimination and Romani development programs.

development and participation among the Roma citizenry, the team also found these networks to lack contacts at the grassroots level. In Romania, only the Roma Party, in coalition with the ruling PSD and partly as a result of government subsidies, provides a sense of structure and political stability. As one observer remarked, "It is a party of local party presidents and vice presidents but few followers." In Bulgaria, a small number of narrowly focused, single-issue (and often impressive) NGO-sponsored networks exist with regional or multi-city networks.

    Mainstream Parties. Romani views of mainstream parties were generally negative in all three countries. Typically expressed concerns were that mainstream parties are dismissive of Roma community problems. As one Bulgarian said, "the parties voice token interest with token programs before elections, or when civil unrest erupts, or when the international community exerts pressure." Frequent charges were made that the mainstream parties manipulate the Roma vote in election campaigns. However, much of the perceived "manipulation" occurs when Roma politicians trade votes or endorsements with mainstream parties for their personal gain. Invariably, this deal making was typically seen as an act of betrayal or "selling-out" by an individual party leader—at the expense of Roma community interests.

    In Bulgaria the Roma with whom the NDI assessment team met were considerably less resentful of Bulgaria's mainstream political parties[11] and leaders than of Roma parties and leaders. This perhaps accounts for why the coalition of eight Roma parties, Free Bulgaria, apparently received fewer Roma votes than a handful of mainstream parties in the 2001 election[12]. Indeed, neither of the two MPs of Roma ethnicity in the national parliament, Alexander Filopov and Toma Tomov, was elected on the merits of votes for a Roma party. Filipov ran with the governing party NMS, while Tomov attached his small Roma party to the left-of-center Coalition for Bulgaria, now part of the opposition.

 Generally speaking, the Roma in Romania expressed to the NDI assessment team an openness to working with mainstream political parties, but all believed that only one party mattered, the PSD. The better educated Roma and non-Roma who identify with classical liberal values typically lament the failures of the previous Democratic Convention coalition government (1996-2000), adding that these political forces remain in disarray and cannot match the more professional and better financed ruling PSD.

    The PSD reportedly has manifested critical attitudes and actions toward Roma, which contrast with the party's espousal of European, social democratic values. According to its critics, the PSD intends to co-opt the Roma Party and treats it as the sole political voice of Roma communities. The NDI assessment team encountered widespread claims that

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[11] The four major political parties in Bulgaria, all of which are represented in parliament are the National Movement of Simeon II (NMS), Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).

[12] Although the Bulgarian constitution prohibits parties based on ethnic lines, there are parties that have an overwhelming constituency base from a certain ethnic group. The "Roma parties" mentioned here are an example of this phenomenon as well as the junior coalition partner, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which is often referred to as the "Turkish party."

Roma advisors to county government on the funding and implementation of anti-discrimination and Roma development programs are poorly trained Roma Party operatives instead of bona fide experts. A senior Roma Party official disputed this charge, saying to the assessment team that only seven of 41 experts were party members and most had university degrees.

NDI was unable to examine the veracity of the criticism. PSD representatives did not show up at a scheduled meeting with the assessment team and a subsequent meeting was not able to be scheduled. However, from limited observation and the accounts of many well-informed Romanians, the structure created to administer the government's Roma development strategy (and the accompanying international development funds) appears vulnerable to political and financial manipulation and abuse. More favorable information was subsequently brought to NDI's attention regarding a government-initiated television advertising campaign encouraging Roma children to attend school, as well as a government-sponsored Roma job fair in Bucharest in May 2003.

In contrast with Bulgaria and Romania, and with the exception of several older Roma with whom NDI met, Roma leaders and activists in Slovakia appear to consider an alignment with mainstream political parties necessary to increase their political participation. While there is little trust of politicians in general, polling and election results indicate that the Roma population favors mainstream parties over Roma parties.

However, except for an effort to articulate a Roma agenda by the new Alliance of New Citizens (ANO) Party prior to the 2002 parliamentary election[13], the other mainstream parties' support of Roma issues and candidates has been marked by tokenism at best and in some instances raw bigotry. Given that several activists with whom the assessment team met classified the Roma parties and leaders as divided and divisive, unskilled, unreliable, and neither trusted nor supported by the Roma constituency— the mainstream parties lack any enthusiasm for attaching themselves to Roma leaders and parties. Additionally, considering the negative public image of Roma, the political party that identifies with Roma fears losing significantly disproportionate support from the much larger non-Roma voting bloc. On the basis of short-term political calculations alone, Slovakia's mainstream parties have kept a healthy distance from the current Roma political leadership.

Still, generally speaking, the Slovak officials from mainstream parties seemed more open to cooperating with Roma than did the Romanian or Bulgarian mainstream parties.

<u>Roma Public Image and the Mainstream Media</u>. Roma are popularly considered to be the permanent occupant of the lowest rung of society; in an October 2002 opinion poll, 47 percent of Romanians stated that they do not want Roma as neighbors, a sentiment

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[13] ANO's suggestions for improving the Roma situation included the centralization of financial resources on Roma policy implementation, the creation of a center for Roma policy implementation in eastern Slovakia, and a state system of missionary work among Roma. This last item is said to be modeled on the Israeli *kibbutzim* model; critics claim that it reinforces stereotypes and marginalizes rather than empowers Roma.

echoed in all three countries assessed[14]. By all anecdotal and research accounts, the preponderance of the region's politicians and media reinforce this image with negative rhetoric, articles and reports that highlight the social and economic problems, and the disarray of the political life within the Roma community. Stories about Romani crime, violence, corruption, dependency, and rising out-of-wedlock birth rates dominate the media's coverage of Roma throughout the region, and are rarely countered by positive news or images of Roma. One of Romania's top journalists, an editor of perhaps the most liberal and influential newspaper in the country, said that journalists at his newspaper were "strongly" reluctant to write a positive story about Roma. NDI is aware of formal documentation confirming these anecdotal accounts that negative stereotyping is common.

Region-wide, Roma are viewed as tarnishing their country's international image and are blamed for harming their country's prospects for integration into Europe. This was aggravated last year when high profile articles appeared in the French media claiming that Romania's Roma immigrants were responsible for rising crime rates in France. Other European media followed suit. As a result, the French government imposed stiff visa restrictions that affected all Romanians, further impairing public perceptions of Roma. The French government has since withdrawn the restrictions.

In Slovakia, policy and opinion makers seemed to genuinely acknowledge that Roma stereotyping is a problem. Martin Simecka, the editor of one of Slovakia's most respected newspapers (and, himself, among the country's most respected journalists) mentioned that the Slovak government had made overtures to some in the media urging them to resist negative stereotyping of Roma. The NDI team also saw indications that the mainstream media in Slovakia is open to publishing positive stories about Roma. For example, the Roma Press Agency, in effect an NGO wire service that includes positive stories on Roma in its coverage and distributes them nationwide, told NDI that their mainstream media subscribers publish their articles regularly. However, NDI found very few Roma editors, presenters/hosts, producers, publishers, reporters, researchers, assistants or trainees present in the news rooms of the mainstream print or electronic media in any of the three countries assessed, Slovakia included.

> *In a recent poll 70% of Romanians said that Roma should be denied the right to foreign travel, even when all legal conditions are met.*

C. Opportunities and Assets

As the Roma consider strategies to increase their political participation, they would be wise to take inventory of upcoming opportunities and assets that can be mobilized. For example, several events and issues being discussed in the three countries, as well as inherent, if latent, strengths within the Roma community, could be incorporated into this strategy. The more readily apparent opportunities and assets are mentioned below:

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[14] The poll cited here is the Public Opinion Barometer that Open Society Foundation Romania conducts each year.

Electoral reform. Governments are likely to consider critical reforms to the electoral systems in all three countries. Reform of electoral systems, particularly at the local level, could introduce a mixed system of proportional and majority representation that would allow for some measure of direct representation in areas where Roma predominate. A system that allowed for preferential voting might also raise the electability of Romani candidates who are typically placed low on a party's list.

Such reform could significantly brighten prospects for Roma representation in both local government and parliament. For example, Slovakia's single district system is inherently discriminatory in limiting the ability of Roma parties and candidates to gain national office. A multi-district system in Slovakia, possibly with eight regions, could provide Roma parties and candidates greater opportunities to gain parliamentary representation through elections. Where Roma are concentrated territorially, single member districts may provide sufficient representation. Should Slovakia initiate a system of multiple electoral districts, NDI urges that the geographic boundaries be drawn in such a way as to allow representation of Roma and other national minorities proportional to their respective population sizes.

- Elections. Upcoming elections in all three countries could serve as an ideal testing ground to measure the effectiveness of short-term goals to increase Roma political participation and representation. Nationwide local elections are scheduled for mid-October 2003 in Bulgaria and spring 2004 in Romania, with Romanian presidential elections in fall 2004 and parliamentary elections possibly in early 2005. Elections of Slovakia's eight regional governments are scheduled for 2005, with parliamentary and communal elections scheduled in 2006.

- Roma NGOs. A number of Roma issues-oriented NGOs in the three countries, including more than 200 in Bulgaria, conduct empowerment, advocacy, monitoring, and anti-discrimination initiatives to increase Roma access to education, jobs, political participation, health care, legal services, etc. (NDI wishes to mention as especially impressive one of these Romanian groups, Romani CRISS and its executive director, Costel Bercus.)

Generally speaking, educated, experienced, and motivated Roma have been drawn to the NGO sector rather than political activism. This is in part because the NGO sector provides them with an opportunity to advance their cause, and in part because mainstream political structures have not been willing to integrate Roma in a meaningful way. The NGO sector has helped nurture these Roma and allowed them to develop important management, organizational and leadership skills at a safe distance from what some have described as the chaotic and corrupted political arena. Interestingly, Romanian law allows national minority NGOs to compete in elections as *de facto* parties. Though the Roma NGO sector still leaves room for much development and improvement in each country, it is one of the only places where Roma are not discriminated against and provides a strong talent pool from which to draw future political leaders.

- Municipal political representation models. The level of Roma political participation and influence, as well as some political development and infrastructure, is higher in a handful of cities and local municipalities where the Roma population accounts for a sizable portion of the community. In Lom, Bulgaria, for example, where Roma account for half of the population, the NDI assessment team met several impressive Roma NGO and political activists with seemingly relevant experience in governance, issues and message development, organization, and electoral politics. Those cities and towns with higher concentrations of Roma voters are ideal sites to incubate, develop, and launch programs to strengthen the level and quality of Roma political participation.

- Roma development strategies – Bulgaria. *The Framework Document for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society* (discussed previously) not only demonstrates the potential impact of a fully mobilized NGO community committed to reaching mutual goals, it also offers a standard by which the government may be held accountable. The *Framework* states that "groups of experts and public officials will develop the mechanisms and steps for the realization for the *Framework*'s basic principles." The National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCEDI) has contracted the Roma Parliament to draft an Action Plan for further implementation of the *Framework*. (The Roma Parliament has the legal status of an NGO and receives funding from the government.[15]) EU Phare has allocated $150,000 to study a broad array of needs in the Roma community, and reportedly will allocate another eight million euros to implement the *Framework*'s action plan once it is developed.

- Roma development strategies – Romania. *The Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of the Roma* describes and assigns responsibilities within an institutional infrastructure charged with organizing and coordinating it. However, the document offers no deadlines, no resources, and no mechanisms to monitor the progress of the implementation.[16]

  The National Council for Combating Discrimination was created to identify, prevent, and sanction discriminatory acts and practices and "to implement the principle of equality among citizens, as stipulated in the Constitution of Romania and codified by law, as well as in the international agreements to which Romania is party**."** The Council has a Steering Board, including seven people nominated by a government ministry and selected by the Prime Minister, which reports to the Prime Minister of

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[15] Members of the Roma Parliament are not elected, nor do they derive their status as Roma representatives from having been elected to any other office; they are the leaders of Roma NGOs. Formally, the Roma Parliament has consultative functions – it consults the National Council for the Ethnic and Demographic Issues, which is so far the only government structure dealing with Roma issues. Members of the Roma Parliament have publicly complained about inadequate involvement of the Roma Parliament in decision making at the NCEDI. The National Council itself is a structure with symbolic powers and is an advisory body to the government.

[16] On May 13, 2003, following the NDI assessment, the government launched "Partnership for Aiding Roma-2003," the next step in the *Strategy*. The program allocates $1.78 million for local government initiatives towards improving the situation of Roma by creating jobs, renovating housing, and providing land for agricultural endeavors.

Romania. Its mandate is broad and its authority, at least on paper, is far reaching, though the Prime Minister is tasked with ultimate decision making authority.

- Roma development strategies – Slovakia. During the NDI team's visit, Klara Orgovanova, the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Issues, was in the final stages of preparing the Slovak government's strategy to support the improvement of the Roma's situation. The NDI team has not seen this draft document, but was told that the strategy will provide a framework and guidelines, stressing "partnership and participation," equal opportunity and access, and local community empowerment.

  In its draft form, the concept was based on a four-year plan, but looking beyond to a 10-year vision. Various ministries will develop action plans within the framework's objectives and criteria, which also proposes standards of measurement and milestones by which progress will be marked and assessed. The development of a budget and the assignment of resources will be determined in follow-up action by the government. International support from the European Union is anticipated.

- International support. The international community, represented by embassies, multilateral governmental and financial institutions, and NGOs and foundations, are already keenly interested in supporting efforts to enhance the Roma's economic, social, political and cultural life and improving the prospect for the human rights of Roma. Others can likely be recruited in light of the urgency of the need and the implications that failure will have on the expansion of Europe and its economic stability. Indeed, Bulgaria and Romania's EU membership and Slovakia's successful accession to the EU will depend partly on improving economic opportunity, education, housing, and health conditions for Roma.

- Roma MPs. Bulgaria has two Roma Members of Parliament, Alexander Filipov and Toma Tomov, neither of whom was elected on a Roma-specific agenda. The NDI assessment team met Mr. Filipov, a lawyer and a member of NMS, who gave his perspective of Roma political life and a general description of his work on Roma-related issues through the National Movement for Social Policy. The team was impressed with Mr. Filipov's analysis of Roma political culture, his assessment of its needs, and his apparent commitment to addressing the needs of the Roma.

- Readiness for Change. The Roma's disillusionment with their political structures and leadership can be found at all levels, but most especially at the national level. Recognizing that these structures and leaders are weak, the Roma population appears eager to learn the political organizing skills necessary to build proper structures and talent base to replace the leadership. The soft underbelly of the existing Roma political structures and leaders is that they do not derive their legitimacy from the consent of the constituents they claim to represent. Referring to the Roma's traditional leaders, one Bulgarian analyst observed, "the Old Guard has lost its exclusivity. Today, doors are open everywhere."

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this report is to make strategic recommendations that could be incorporated into a plan designed by Roma to increase their political participation and influence. With that in mind, NDI recommends that a Roma Political Participation Initiative in each country be designed and launched to develop the human capacity, political traditions, and organizational infrastructure needed to inspire, educate and mobilize a broadly defined "Roma constituency" to advance the community's interests.

The NDI assessment team recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative have four basic, long-term objectives:

1. **A Cadre of Political Leaders, Managers, and Activists** trained and skilled in political organization and campaigns, as well as prepared to govern.

   One Roma leader in Sofia told the team, "In 1991, when communism collapsed, the Turkish community got together and decided that they would go into politics and develop political activists. The Roma decided to create NGOs and develop NGO activists. Now we have to catch up." Another added, "In NGOs, we have discovered that *we monitor and advise*. In government, we have learned that *they choose and decide*."

   The NDI team met some exceptionally talented, confident, and articulate young Roma activists. Most were affiliated with NGOs and, in Bulgaria and Romania, were located mainly in the capital cities. The enlargement of this group must be central to any strategy to increase Roma political participation and influence. NDI recommends that this training effort concentrate on a group of up to 100 young Roma and that the training, as described throughout this report, continue for at least two to three years. Over time, this talent bank will produce the candidates, campaign managers and organizers, activists and specialists to help develop the campaign platforms and themes, and deliver them to a mobilized constituency. NDI recommends that this cadre attempt to achieve a gender balance, as young activists at numerous meetings indicated this is currently a deficit that needs to be corrected.

   Training should support the development of a new class of Roma politicians, skilled in the art of the political campaign. Perhaps less obviously, training should support Roma efforts to develop realistic, practical, and achievable policy objectives—especially in local communities. Platforms should be designed that can unify and mobilize a viable constituency around achievable goals—like building or repairing a road, improving sanitation facilities, providing job training or securing new books for the local school. In addition, the proposals and the campaign themes should be developed in ways that reach out to the larger non-Roma community as well. This will have the effect of improving the Roma image—as well as enlarging the constituency and enhancing the prospects that the platform will be implemented.

At the conclusion of every meeting during the assessment, each individual present was asked to offer the most important recommendation that the team should include in the report. About 70 percent of the Romanians and Bulgarians and almost all of the Slovaks responded with "training to build capacity." One Slovak added, "And be sure to train the ones who think they do not need it."

2. **Traditions, Structures, and Mechanisms** that facilitate and encourage on-going community outreach and education to develop an informed constituency and a coherent political culture. The defining characteristic of Romani political life is the disconnection between so-called Roma political leaders and the constituency they claim to represent. If Roma are to develop a coherent political culture, this gap must be bridged by a set of traditions, structures, and mechanisms that link Roma leaders with their communities. For example, the Roma Party in Romania does not appear to derive its legitimacy from genuine support among its Roma constituency. One local Roma Party President expressed this vulnerability when he explained to the NDI team, "On the national level, the Roma Party has good support from the country's president. But, the party does not have such good support at the local level."

These outreach vehicles could take various forms, but some general observations and suggestions that seem appropriate in the three countries are mentioned below.

'Town Meetings'. Regular town meetings that establish open, two-way communication between the community and their elected (and non-elected) Roma and non-Roma leaders would be an appropriate beginning. In advance of local elections, for example, civic groups could organize a series of educational forums to better inform the public, as well as introduce a new cadre of Roma political activists and candidates mentioned above.

A New Political Party? Given the disjointed and divided political environment, the lack of capacity, and the Roma's public image, the NDI team believes that the establishment of a new Roma political party is at best premature. The conditions are poorly suited, and the NDI team fears such an effort would fail—and, indeed, possibly create new rivalries and divisions among the new generation—setting the Roma movement back years.

The overall need in the region is for parties to become more grounded in political ideology and less formally identified by ethnicity or other special interests. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms in Bulgaria, for instance, is attempting to move beyond its label of "the Turkish party" to attract multiethnic support.

Roma Caucus in Parliament. Bulgaria has two Members of Parliament, one from the governing party. Similarly, two MPs in Romania are Roma; one of these is elected, and the other appointed as a minority representative. NDI recommends that consideration be given to approaching these MPs and exploring means of cooperation. One concrete proposal, for example, might be to form a Roma Caucus of MPs in each Parliament, inclusive, therefore, of non-Roma members, which could serve as a more or less permanent body to represent and advance

Roma issues, providing a critical link between the Parliament and Roma. In addition, such a caucus might inspire the Roma legislators to aggressively advocate for Roma issues and produce concrete results, introducing a sense of expectation, measurements, and accountability between elected Roma leaders and their Roma constituents, which does not exist today.

NDI recommends that a similar caucus be created in Slovakia. Though there are no Roma MPs in the National Council of Slovakia, those MPs with an interest in issues affecting Roma could provide this link between the Parliament and the Roma community. The team further recommends that Roma and non-Roma MPs use intra-regional cooperation and lessons learned, providing a regional dimension with increased networking. MPs could establish best practices for enhancing the quality of life of Roma in each country. These exchanges could be tied to a central issue of concern for Roma, such as desegregation of schools.

Roma Coalition. NDI recommends that Roma in Romania and Slovakia (a coalition exists in Bulgaria) consider establishing a nationwide, membership-based organization comprising politically active and like-minded individuals and NGOs—primarily representing a new generation of Roma. Such a coalition could support the Roma Political Participation Initiative's planning, training and education effort to build the political leadership and organizational capacities within the ranks of the Roma community. In addition, and most importantly, such a structure should serve as a forum and networking vehicle to exchange ideas among new Roma leaders and the community, to develop an informed and coherent political culture and to link like-minded Roma groups around the country.

NDI proposes that such a coalition of politically active Roma NGOs be:

a. formed by a written charter that clearly articulates a commonly held vision, along with a set of common philosophic values, principles, purposes, and achievable goals that unifies the members;
b. nationwide in its reach and inclusive of key non-Roma NGOs that share the charter's expressed vision and values; and
c. democratic in all respects, with all leaders, officers, or representatives elected by the larger membership.

Although conditions and circumstances could change in the coming two or three years, at this time, the NDI team recommends that the coalition of Roma NGOs in Romania remain independent of the Roma Party.

3. **Roma Issues Placed on the Mainstream Agenda and Broadened the Constituency** to increase the quantity and quality of Roma representation in government and reach the critical mass necessary to achieve the community's public policy objectives. The NDI assessment team believes that the Roma's challenges are the nations' challenges and that the issues of Roma concern should be developed and

articulated in that framework, whenever possible. Likewise, NDI recommends that Roma politicians seek political office not as "Roma candidates" per se, but generally speaking as candidates with a well-defined political ideology and platform (e.g., Social Democrat, Christian Democrat, Liberal), who happen to be Roma.

As noted, given the size, the diversity, the divided political culture and the tensions discussed throughout this report, NDI recommends that the Roma not create ethnic-based or other new political parties at this time. Rather, NDI urges the Roma to first build political leadership and organizational capacities within their own ranks as well as a functioning political infrastructure and coherent political culture. After political capacities increase, the Roma constituency expands, as the new political leaders meet with campaign and governance success, and perhaps as the electoral reforms become law—the time may come to reconsider this strategy.

NDI believes that this pluralistic approach, working with and through existing mainstream parties, such as the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) and other parties with platforms sympathetic to social issues, will raise the country's (including the Roma's) common sense of purpose and identity to a higher plane. The team also believes this approach will appeal to the better instincts of the citizenry and, in the long term, ease tensions between the country's different ethnic groups, help de-stigmatize the isolated Roma, and help preclude potential civil strife. Practically speaking, NDI believes that this is in the Roma's self-interest because of the likelihood that over the long term it could help consolidate opinion among this plan's target group—the more progressive Roma among the urban, better educated, under-40 generation.

Of course, NDI recognizes the complexity of this issue and that the stigma of being Roma is deep-rooted in centuries of discrimination that persists today. (The team heard reports of job openings in Romania still openly advertised with "No Gypsies Need Apply.") Thus, the recommendations set forth in this report should be seen as merely a first step in designing the strategy to overcome these obstacles – not the least of which is the mindset of both majority and minority ethnic groups. The effort to mainstream Romani issues and reach out to those Roma who deny their ethnicity will require decades, not years, to reach its full potential and will require efforts targeted at the majority population as well.

> The Role of Mainstream Political Parties. Given their importance in political life and their own development needs, mainstream political parties are at once central to Roma political participation and yet, in most of the region are ill-prepared to engage on this issue. Indeed, political parties throughout Eastern Europe are still developing into modern organizations.
>
> As a result of their own incapacity, coupled with a lack of political will, the majority of democratically oriented parties in the region have done little to incorporate Roma political interests into their long-term policy platforms. Few have reached out to Roma as potential members who can genuinely be integrated into party structures or as voters whose interests will truly be heard. Fewer still

have recruited Roma as candidates with equal standing among their non-Roma peers. Some parties have resorted to vote-buying and other fraudulent means to secure Roma votes. Few party leaders recognize the need for and benefits of incorporating Roma into their parties as supporters, members, and elected representatives. Many are concerned by the perceived political stigma of associating with Roma.

As noted above, the NDI assessment team found a consistent and dismaying reaction among most political parties to the proposition of seriously engaging with Roma communities in the political process. The role of political parties in fostering Roma political participation must change. It is up to the party leadership to encourage, support, and welcome those Roma who seek to be active in the political process. This means making room for them on party electoral lists, increasing their presence in executive bodies, and encouraging policy discussion within the parties on issues related to Roma rights.

Moreover, NDI strongly urges the political leaders of these three countries to vigorously condemn human rights abuses against Roma whenever they occur and to use the "bully pulpit" of their positions to promote non-discrimination in society at large. Their active engagement with Roma civic groups will allow the genuine interests and needs of Roma communities to be understood and represented at decision-making levels. Similar exhortations to political parties in Europe's established democracies are perhaps also needed.

Public Opinion Research. The anecdotal information received by the NDI assessment team, while helpful in illustrating important themes, belies the apparent dearth of methodological research on Roma views in the context of political participation and representation. NDI sees public opinion research, in the form of polling and focus groups, as essential, and indeed a likely first step, to building strategies for Roma political participation. Mainstream parties and Roma themselves must obtain a clearer understanding of the attitudes of these communities and the factors that motivate or deter Roma from voting, running for office, or supporting various political agendas. Governments and international organizations would benefit considerably from a structured recording and analysis of Roma views on economic, social, and human rights issues.

NDI's limited experience in public opinion research with Roma, particularly in Slovakia prior to the 2002 elections, suggests that focus groups may be a preferred mechanism to polling and that isolating focus groups by gender is advisable. Roma themselves must also be trained as survey implementers and focus group moderators. Sensitivity to cultural customs will enhance the integrity of data and information yielded through public opinion research.

4. **An Enhanced Roma Identity, Public and Self-Image** through a combination of political positioning, policy agenda development, media outreach, training, and

integration, implementation of self-help projects, and recruitment of high profile Roma political candidates.

In the political arena. The generally negative and stereotypical image of Roma that is held by many non-Roma serves as a handicap when entering the political stage at any level. In order to overcome the entrenched prejudice against them, Roma need to groom and promote their best and brightest. When a new generation of young, progressive, and articulate political leaders emerges who can formulate thoughtful public policy agendas that define and link the Roma's interests to the larger interests of their countries, they will be better positioned to appeal to larger segments of non-Roma society.

High-visibility candidates. NDI recommends that respected and articulate Roma be recruited to run for highly visible public offices, such as mayor of Kosice, Slovakia, or other cities where Roma make up a significant portion of the electorate. This candidacy, regardless of "long odds," could enhance the Roma's popular image, "mainstream" Roma issues, and create a national sense of purpose that incorporates Roma issues. The candidate could come from academia, the cultural or literary world, as well as politics. The ideal candidate will be prepared with a professionally developed platform agenda intended to highlight the needs and promote the positive image of the Roma community.

Given the cultural barriers facing Roma, the current context is not one that would guarantee impressive victories for Roma candidates in any of the upcoming elections. An assumption that the number of Roma represented in these parliaments would rapidly increase would be misguided. Rather, Roma would benefit most from the opportunity to learn how to wage effective electoral campaigns while affording them decent visibility in the elections. At this stage, what is important is that Roma begin to be viewed as capable leaders and valuable partners from which government and political parties would benefit.

Media. NDI recommends that current efforts to balance the press coverage of the Roma community be evaluated based on results, and that these efforts be replaced or redoubled as appropriate. The NDI assessment team recommends a creative and proactive approach that, at a minimum, does the following:

1. provides the mainstream media with alternative news sources on Roma;
2. trains and places young Roma to work as professionals in mainstream media; and
3. sets a minimal level of minority hiring at larger media broadcast and publishing outlets.

NDI is encouraged by the efforts of Memo98, a Slovak civic organization that currently monitors and publicizes the ongoing stereotyping and stigmatization of Roma in the media.

NDI recommends that a cooperative effort, supported by respected domestic activists and members of the international community, be launched to quietly encourage print and broadcast media owners and executives, editors and producers, and filmmakers to end the stereotyping and balance reporting of Roma. Part of this initiative must be to urge these executives to assist in the effort to train and hire qualified Roma journalists to work in their newsrooms and studios—all as a matter of the national interest.

Self-help programs. The NDI team visited several congested villages and settlements where the living and health conditions were particularly impoverished. None of the roads was paved, electricity and running water were limited, and unemployment was virtually 100%.

> *Garbage clean-up, home repair, job training and other projects could also be organized by the community, in some cases without outside support.*

Certain basic self-help programs could likely improve services and conditions, as well as give the community a sense of accomplishment and pride. For example, access to simple medical services could be dramatically improved by a program (organized by a Romani community-based NGO, for example) that recruited a handful of medical professionals to visit a clinic for a morning once a month. Garbage clean-up, home repair, education-related job training and other projects could be organized by the community itself, in some cases without outside support. NDI recommends that emerging Roma political and civic leaders be trained in the organizing skills needed to develop such programs as a means to instill a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and identity in a community.

VI. PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT ROMA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

As the Roma Political Participation Initiative is designed and structured, the NDI assessment team recommends that it be guided by the following principles and priorities:

- **Holistic Approach.** Like the political development and participation challenges before the Roma, the team recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be comprehensive, while at the same time carefully targeted to grassroots political organizing, strategic planning, civic education, community organizing, issue advocacy, and governance – all well known to those institutions with relevant training experience in the emerging democracies, such as NDI.

- **A Long Term View.** Assuming continued progress along a defined timeline, the team proposes that the Roma Political Participation Initiative be sustained for at least five years in Bulgaria, six in Slovakia and seven in Romania. This term is necessary to conduct the program's development and training efforts through a local and national election campaign cycle. Given the political and economic development needs of the Roma community, and that the community has been practically left out of comparable training since the democratic revolution of 1989, this six-year term is reasonable as well as necessary.

- **Focus on the Younger Generation and Women.** NDI recommends that, without being exclusionary, the younger generation, under 40, be targeted in this initiative. This group is generally more motivated and open and less tainted by and obliged to the past. NDI believes that the younger generation represents both the ideal and the only viable group upon which to base the reorientation and the increase of Roma political participation, and to bring it to a coherent level.

In this connection, the NDI assessment team met several representatives of the formative but untested New Roma Generation, a group of young Slovak Roma dedicated to advancing Roma initiatives. While the assessment team was unable to assess this specific organization's capacities or plans, it believes that their approach is appropriate and should be strongly encouraged. In Romania, a prominent member of the Senate in the Hungarian Democratic Federation of Romania (UDMR) suggested that politically active Roma from the younger generation should consider ways of cooperating with their counterparts in the UDMR.

> *Women need to be included in projects advancing Roma political participation.*

Romani women in all three countries find themselves doubly discriminated against as Roma and as women. Besides being morally wrong, prevalent misogynist attitudes simply lead to a waste of obvious and considerable individual talent. Roma women already have established tremendous cross-border networks in the region, many of them funded by the Soros foundations. These networks would provide an ideal starting point for regional cooperation.

- **Promotion of New Leadership.** Nothing more distorts the Roma political culture than the degree to which "informal leaders" – those who are appointed or anointed — claim to represent Roma interests without any legitimacy based on having been approved by an electorate. At every opportunity, the Roma Political Participation Initiative should reinforce openness and competition, and the notion that political legitimacy and the right to claim "representative" or "leader" status must be derived from the consent of those being represented or governed.

- **Prioritize Local and Grassroots Development.** NDI recommends focusing first on the local level where a concerted effort to provide basic political education, organizing and leadership training will inject competition into the political arena. A successful training and education campaign would quickly reorient the

traditional and distorted top-down political formulas that have poorly served the Roma population. Ideal sites to launch a sustained training and organizational effort will be cities and towns with a relatively high density of middle income and educated Roma.

These localities will likely have a clan-like political hierarchy already in place; however, NDI believes these structures are vulnerable and will yield to a genuine grassroots education, development, and organizing effort. In addition, when choosing the localities to organize, it would be wise but not essential to seek those with Roma media outlets (Presov and Kosice in Slovakia, for example) that are not obliged to the local political family.

The NDI assessment team believes that the most lasting contribution and the quickest return on investment for the Roma Political Participation Initiative will be at the city and town level. The next round of local elections in each country provides an early and promising opportunity to test concepts, strategies, and plans. Given the shortness of time in Bulgaria, the prospect of waging a comprehensive nationwide campaign to elect *and prepare* Roma for local councils in October 2003 is unrealistic. However, maximum effort should be made in each country to identify and target those localities where the Roma have adequate population density, political leadership and organizing talent, and infrastructure.

- **Governance.** NDI recommends that, for the purposes of this program, the goal of increasing Roma political participation be defined more broadly than merely increasing the number of Roma voters or elected representatives in parliament, regional, city and town councils.

  Promoting existing Roma talent. Few Roma professionals serve as local government staff, including in localities with disproportionately large Roma populations. The major reason may be that relatively few Roma are properly trained. However, qualified Roma are also not likely to apply, perhaps because they face widespread discrimination in hiring.

  NDI recommends that the Roma Political Participation Initiative work to recruit and identify qualified Roma who could serve effectively in public administration and foreign service posts. In addition, a dialogue to encourage and assist government officials to proactively recruit and hire qualified Roma to serve their country in these professional capacities would be appropriate.

  Preparing candidates and elected Roma to govern. The NDI assessment team was told by Roma and non-Roma that many of the mayors and local councilors recently elected in Slovakia are unqualified to govern. Several were reportedly functionally illiterate and without a secondary education. Clearly, the newly elected Roma in all countries, especially at this moment, must be prepared to govern effectively**.** This is especially true in Slovakia where considerable

governmental authority is decentralized (or in Bulgaria, where it soon will be), placing a larger burden and accountability on local governance. If Roma officials fail in their new positions, the goals of this initiative will be severely set back.

In addition to developing political campaigning and related skills, NDI recommends that Roma training include basic governance and public administration, legislative process, town budgeting, "enterprise zone" theory, public-private economic development partnerships, the art of compromise, and constituency relations. (In Slovakia, the Vice Chairwoman of the governing SDKU party and the Vice Chair of Parliament, concerned that the newly elected Roma mayors and councilors might fail and attract undesirable negative media in the process, urged NDI to help train recently elected Roma local council members.)

NDI recommends that training also include public policy theory that could underpin future policy agendas and campaign platforms. This training could be university-based. Also, several exceptionally capable economic, security and social policy research institutes exist in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, representing a vital indigenous training resource. These groups should be recruited to support the objectives of the Roma Political Participation Initiative. Besides assistance and support in training and developing agendas for Roma candidates' campaigns, small grants could be awarded to these think tanks to sponsor substantive internships for up and coming, bright Roma students.

- **Establish a Reputation for Integrity and Open Competition.** Given the fragmentation, the potentially corrupting role of family and financial ties, the private deals, and the levels of mistrust that characterize Romani politics—the Roma Political Participation Initiative must set the highest standards of professionalism, transparency, and openness. The recruitment and selection of training participants, for example, will be critical to the program's integrity, public perception and success. The NDI team recommends that the training opportunities and selection process be publicly announced, open and competitive. The team further recommends that neutral international sponsors and organizers take a leading role in interviewing and selecting candidates for training.

- **Incorporate International Supporters, Institutions, and Experience.** The broad consensus is that international pressure is key to the government's interest in addressing Roma issues. Clearly, continued international support and engagement from foreign governments, multilateral institutions, and NGOs will be critical to achieve the goals of this program. At a minimum, this support should take the following forms:

    a. Coordinated international *financial and technical support* will be indispensable to launch and sustain the comprehensive effort described herein.

b. *Extensive international training and expertise* will be needed to conduct the program successfully. An essential component will be the trainees' participation in political campaigns in Europe, Canada, or the United States. In addition, the Get Out The Vote (GOTV) program experiences from Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, and Croatia all would be instructive to the Roma political leaders and activists. The western campaign and Eastern European GOTV experiences should be integrated into the Roma training program. In addition, Roma participation in visitor, study, and professional internship programs abroad in public administration and governance—and as otherwise discussed herein—is equally necessary

c. Continued international *political, advocacy, and diplomatic support* will be critical to advance specific issues and agendas that could contribute significantly to this program's objectives. For example, representatives of the international community could appropriately encourage discussion to reform Slovakia's electoral system to enhance prospects for greater representation of minorities. As mentioned previously, representatives of the international community could also encourage media executives to assist in the effort to help train and then hire qualified Roma, including where foreign owners have an interest in a particular media outlet.

d. NDI strongly recommends that an *International Donor Committee* be established among those international governments, multilateral institutions, and NGOs willing to support the Roma Political Participation Initiative with financial, technical, or political/diplomatic support, or some combination thereof.

e. Many Roma and non-Roma in Romania claim that the restrictive criteria, confusion and abuse of the existing national identification card system disenfranchises large numbers of Roma. In addition, the NDI team was told that large numbers of Roma votes are being annulled apparently because of confusion over voting procedures with a significant impact on local elections in Romania. (One Romanian mayor told us matter-of-factly that 400 of 600 Roma votes cast in the recent local election were annulled.) Appropriate *voter education and election monitoring* should be adopted to investigate, expose, and correct this reported abuse.

- **Judicious Advocacy.** There is no shortage of critical issues challenging the Roma community that could make its way onto a Roma candidate's political agenda and platform. The economic, housing, social, educational, and health needs are staggering. The stagnant world and regional economies, and the scarcity of financial resources available from government limits the funds and possibilities. And, while they could be extremely helpful, the anticipated EU assistance funds for the Roma community fall well short of that needed to solve even the most basic problems.

In order not to exacerbate the mistrust and disillusionment already in the Roma community, NDI cautions against developing overly ambitious political agendas that will raise unachievable expectations that could widen the trust gap that divides Roma leaders from their constituents.

While this report does not propose to develop a Roma political agenda, the team recommends that Roma consider the following priorities as such an agenda is prepared and evolves:

1. Reform the electoral system with the intent of adopting more mixed systems that will be more advantageous to Roma candidates, as opposed to closed-list or single district systems;

2. Form an ethnically mixed Roma Issues Caucus or Committee in the parliaments of all three countries, as feasible;

3. Introduce local level self-help programs that could improve quality of life for Roma and build political momentum;

4. Examine existing tax incentive and micro-lending programs to ensure that the Roma benefit proportionately and appropriately, particularly where their community's poverty has created the condition that makes the tax benefits possible;

5. Seek permanent representation on Romania's National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) and develop a comprehensive strategy and plan to use this potentially powerful mechanism to expose and eliminate discrimination against Roma; and

6. Monitor the funding, implementation, and accomplishments of government initiatives, such as the *Framework Document for Equal Integration* in Bulgaria, the *Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of the Roma*, and Slovakia's Plenipotentiary for Addressing Problems of the Roma National Minority. A number of Roma and non-Roma experts in all three countries expressed considerable concern that international aid funds for Roma programs were being wasted or stolen. They frequently added that domestic and international oversight was at best negligent, and at worst complicit. Funding to implement many of the governments' initiatives in each of three countries represents an unprecedented opportunity to improve the prospects for Roma on a wide front. If these resources were to be mismanaged by bureaucracy or diverted by partisan interests as a means of consolidating power, it would deal a significant blow to reform efforts within any of the countries. Therefore, financial oversight of such funds should be handled with the utmost caution. Monitoring governmental funding of Roma initiatives could be a principal focus of one or several Roma civic groups.

The NDI team notes with cautious optimism that Slovakia's Plenipotentiary initiative could succeed in establishing a concrete national agenda around which the government and the country could mobilize to help improve the Roma's opportunities. In order for the strategy and program to succeed, it will require committed support at the highest level of government, as well as strong institutionalized political backing. Indeed, this initiative is an ideal opportunity for Slovakia's national leadership to set an international standard by summoning the country to unite in extending benefits and opportunities enjoyed by all Slovaks to the Roma.

Likewise, the strategy and program will require the cooperation and participation of the Roma community. Roma NGOs and the Roma Political Participation Initiative could play a critical role in shaping, further refining, and fostering implementation of the government's strategy.

VII. CONCLUSION

The problems confronting Roma are many and complex. Essential to their resolution is active, widespread participation by Roma in the political process to represent their communities strategically. This requires a more amenable political, social and economic environment. It also requires individual skills training, enhanced political organization, and strategies that allow for political diversity among Roma while promoting collective interests imbued in their status as citizens.

Governments in the three countries assessed and throughout the region 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 organizations need to include political participation among the key goals to Roma development strategies, 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 the Roma in each of the three countries assessed, NDI believes that a nationwide, multi-faceted, and long-term approach to create meaningful political participation is needed. The recommendations in this report represent a first step toward Roma ownership of the future of their communities through democratic means.

Appendix 1
Assessment Team Meetings
Bulgaria

Government
Simeon Blagoev, Ministry of Culture
Mihail Ivanov, Secretary, National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues at the Council of Ministers
Kancho Kantardjiiski, Ministry of Work
Aleksandar Krachalov, Stara Zagora district government administration
Georgi Mikov, Sofia district government association
Hristo Nikolov, Sofia district government association
Yosiff Nunev, Ministry of Education and Science
Lachezar Toshev, MP, Chair of Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Religions

Political Parties
Alexander Filipov, Roma MP, National Movement of Simeon II (NMS)
Toma Tomov, Roma MP, Coalition for Bulgaria

Non-Governmental Organizations
Vasil Chaprazov, "United Roma Community" in Sliven
Petar Georgiev, Roma Confederation "Europa" and former BSP Roma MP
Mikhail Georgiev, Romani Baht
D. Goergiev, Human Rights Project
Anton Karagyozov, Coalition Stolipinovo
Stela Kostova, Association Romska Mladejka Organizacia
Georgi Markov, Roma Educational Center
Dobromir Milev, member of district government, Buro za Samopomost-Stolipinov Foundation
Zlatko Mladenov, Roma public council "Kupate" in Sliven
D. Nuneva, Edelvays
Donka Panayotova, DROM Foundation
Petar Stefanov, Nov Pat
Asen Slavchev, Roma-Lom Foundation/Pakiv
Biserka Yourdanova, Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives (SEGA)

Media
Kremena Boudinova, Roma host, 7 Days TV Channel
Danail Danov, Media Development Center
Dimitar Sotirov, Bulgarian Media Coalition

Bulgarian and Roma experts from the following organizations: Human Rights Project, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, SEGA, Center for Intercultural and Minority Studies (IMIR), Open Society Institute, Studii Romani, Political Academy, Roma Information Project, Foundation Roma's World, Pakiv European Roma Fund, and Equal Access Foundation.

Romania

Government
Alexandru Coman, Mayor of Filipestii de Tirg, PSD
Peter Eckstein Kovacs, MP, formerly delegated to the prime minister on issues of ethnic minorities
Lucian Gaman, Roma Councilor at BJR Prahova
Mariea Ionescu, Head of Phare Roma Unit, Ministry of Information
Dan Oprescu, Former Head of the National Office for Roma
Mircea Silvestru Lup, Councilor for Roma Issues in Sibiu County
Madalin Voicu, Councilor of Prime Minister for Roma Issues[17]

Political Parties
Vasile Burtea, Alliance for Roma Unity
Ilie Dinca, Roma Party
Tudor Gheorghe, Prahova District Counselor

Non-Governmental Organization
Costel Bercus, RomaniCriss Foundation
Ioan Bidia, Community of Roma Ethnics
Simona Botea, EU Commission
Florin Cioaba, King of Roma, Christian Roma Center
Eugen Crai, UNICEF
Delia Grigore, Aven Amentza Foundation
Vasile Ionescu, Aven Amentza Foundation
Cristian Jura, National Council for Fighting against Discrimination
Florin Moisa, Roma Resource Center Cluj
Christian Parvulescu, political analyst
Iulian Radulescu, Roma Emperor, Ion Budai Deleanu Foundation
Mircea Toma, Academia Catavencu Media Monitoring Agency
Renate Weber, Soros Open Network

Media
Ioana Avadani, Center for Independent Journalism
Iulian Dinca, Roma News

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[17] Though this meeting was scheduled for Friday, February 14, 2003, Mr. Voicu failed to show up or indicate that he needed to reschedule.

Slovakia

Government
Vladimir Belis, Plenipotentiary Office
Albin Cina, Roma Councilor from Zborov
Councilors of Bystrany
Councilors of Lunik IX
Frantisek Gulas, Council of Slovak Roma
Anna Koptova, Formal Roma MP at the Slovak Parliament
Joszef Kvarda, State Secretary at the Ministry of Culture, Party of the Hungarian Coalition
Jana Kviecinska, Section of Human Rights & Minorities, Slovak Government
Zuzana Martinakova, Slovak Christian and Democratic Union, vice-chair of parliament
Martin Molcan, Association of Roma Settlements in Bardejov
Alexander Musinka, Association of Roma Settlements in Presov
Laszlo Nagy, MP for the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee of Human Rights, National Minorities, and the Status of Women
Klara Orgovanova, Government Plenipotentiary for Addressing Problems of the Romani National Minority
Frantisek Pacan, Roma mayor in Bystrany,
Maria Sabolova, MP for the Christian Democratic Party
Ladislav Sana, Roma mayor of Lunik IX
Attila Szep, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Roma expert on the Visegrad
Agnesa Ulicna, Mayor of Svinia
Frantisek Ziga, Deputy Mayor of Bystrany

Political Parties
Erika Kvapilova, Social Democratic Alternative, vice-chair
Ivan Macura, Alliance of New Citizens, Roma expert
Ivan Mako, Association of Young Roma

Non-Governmental Organizations and International Community
Maros Balog, Ghandhi Schools
Tunde Buzetsky, World Bank
Edo Conka, Levoca Community Center
Roman Estocak, Open Society Institute
Ladislav Fizik, Roma Movement
Renee Freedman, United Nations Development Program
Marek Harakal, Open Society Institute
Denisa Havrlova, Romano L'il Nevo
Daniela Hivesova-Silanova, Romano L'il Nevo
Andrey Ivanov, United Nations Development Program
Balazs Jarabik, Freedom House
Viera Klementova, Open Society Institute
Anna Klepacova, Head of pre-school facility at Lunik IX
Alena Panikova, Open Society Institute

Miroslav Pollak, Environmental Training Project
Amalia Pompova, Community Centre in Levoca
Peter Priadka, Project on Ethnic Relations
Peter Razus, Coordinator of 3Steps project, GOTV
School officials at Svinia
Ivana Skodova, PHARE
Martina Slobodnikova, Regional Association of Roma Initiatives
Natasa Slobodnikova, Roma Movement
Michal Vasecka, Institute for Public Affairs

Media
Ivan Hriczko, Roma Press Agency
Kristina Magdolenova, Roma Press Agency
Martin Simecka, Editor of Sme (Newspaper)

Appendix 2
Assessment Team Members

Michael Brown is an independent political consultant based in Richmond, VA. Mr. Brown has an extensive background in campaign management and consultation and specializes in developing campaign strategies for African-American candidates. Recently he advised the campaigns of candidates to the 2003 House of Delegates and Virginia State Senate. From 1979-1985 Mr. Brown held the office of Deputy Executive Secretary of the Virginia NAACP Conference of Branch. During his tenure with the NAACP he conducted voter registration drives and workshops on political organization. From 1980-1983 he was the statewide coordinator for the Congressional Black Caucus, and in 1984 he participated in the Dick Davis Study Committee on Increasing Voter Registration. Mr. Brown has served on the Virginia State Board of Elections. While serving as secretary to the State Board of Elections he instituted new training manuals for Officers of Election, General Registrars and Electoral Boards.

James Denton is an international commercial, public, and government relations and communications consultant specializing in strengthening relations between former East Bloc governments, NGOs, and businesses with their counterparts in the United States. Since 1985 Mr. Denton has played a leadership role in developing US-supported programs that promote democratic and market reforms in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. From 1997-2001 he served as executive director of Freedom House, a Washington, DC-based non-partisan organization that promotes political and economic freedom worldwide. Mr. Denton has traveled extensively in Eastern Europe, Central America, and much of the former Soviet Union where he has created and sponsored training and support programs for thousands of new leaders in politics, media, business and NGOs. He is a member of various international organizations, including the Council on Foreign Relations.

Dana Diaconu is the director of NDI's civic programming in Romania. Prior to joining the NDI staff in her home country of Romania, Ms. Diaconu oversaw NDI's election monitoring program in Kosovo. In addition to providing local insight on the Roma situation within Romania, she also coordinated the assessment operations in Romania.

Michael Farnworth has worked as NDI's resident representative in Bulgaria since April 2002. He brings extensive experience as an elected official at the municipal and provincial levels of government in Canada. From 1997 to 2001, he served as Minister to four high-profile ministries in his home province of British Columbia. In addition to his legislative experience, Mr. Farnworth has broad campaign and political party expertise, having participated in several local and national campaigns as a volunteer, manager, party member, candidate, and governmental minister. He has worked and traveled extensively in and outside of North America.

Rachelle Horowitz was the political director of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 until 1995. During that period she served on the Executive Committee of the Democratic National Committee and was a member of the party's platform drafting

committees in 1988 and 1992. She began her political activity while a student at Brooklyn College, participating in the civil rights movement. She was on the staff of the Council of Federated Organizations in Jackson, Mississippi during 1963-64 and helped draw up the plans for the formations of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Peter Pollak serves as the Advisor for Roma Communities to the Head of the District Office of Government of Spisska Nova Ves in Eastern Slovakia and is a member of the New Roma Generation. As a local expert on Roma in Slovakia, he provided local insight and context to the delegation prior to and following each of its meetings.

Vicki Robinson came to the National Democratic Institute in 2000 as a trainer for the women in politics program in Serbia. More recently she acted as senior program manager for the Mobilizing the Women and Roma Vote program in Slovakia. In this capacity, she specifically trained potential Roma candidates and activists throughout the region. Ms. Robinson has extensive experience designing, implementing and delivering training programs both nationally and internationally; prior to working with NDI, she worked as a program coordinator and trainer for Women Against Violence Against Women. From 1997-1999 Ms. Robinson acted as the executive director of the Hollyhock Leadership Institute, which provides leadership training & strategic support for people working towards environmental and social change.

Iulius Rostas served as a local expert on Roma in Romania, he provided local insight and context to the delegation prior to and following each of its meetings.

Rumyan Russinov is director of the Roma Participation Program for the Open Society Institute in Budapest. Part of his portfolio includes the initiation of projects to desegregate schools in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary. While acting as the Director of the Monitoring and Advocacy Program for the Human Rights Project from 1997-2000, Mr. Russinov participated in the drafting of "For Equal Participation of Roma in the Public Life of Bulgaria," the first document to highlight strategic measures to be undertaken by the Bulgarian state to accomplish equal status and non-discrimination for the Roma minority. He also coordinated a nationwide media campaign to create a positive image of Roma. Mr. Russinov earned a Master's degree in Economics from the University of Sofia in Bulgaria.

Toni Tashev is a 30-year-old lawyer from Vidin and former employee of the Human Rights Project in Bulgaria. He served as a local expert on Roma in Bulgaria, providing local insight to the delegation prior to and following each of its meetings.

Sevdalina Voynova, deputy director of NDI's program in Bulgaria, served as an NDI representative on the assessment program and as a translator for external meetings. She also accumulated background material on Roma in Bulgaria for the assessment mission.