

ASSESSMENT OF BARRIERS TO ROMA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ROMANIA



September 2009

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NDI would like to thank the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute for their financial support.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

APD	Pro Democracy Association
BJRs	County Offices for Roma
CeRe	Resource Center for Public Participation
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EC	European Commission
ECHR	European Court on Human Rights
EU	European Union
MP	Member of Parliament
NAR	National Agency for the Roma
NCCD	National Council for Combating Discrimination
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NDI	National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OSI	Open Society Institute
PDL	Democratic Liberal Party
PES	Party of European Socialists
PNL	National Liberal Party
PSD	Social Democratic Party
RPPE	Roma Party Pro-Europe or Roma Party
UDMR	Democratic Union of Hungarians
UN	United Nations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Roma comprise the largest minority in Central and Eastern Europe, yet they remain the most impoverished and socially marginalized group, largely left out of the region's political and economic development. Although the capacity of Roma to engage in political and civic life has noticeably increased over the past decade, they still face considerable obstacles in achieving political influence. In Romania, where the Roma population is roughly one million¹ – the largest in Europe – they face tremendous challenges with regard to political participation, despite significant steps taken toward greater inclusion. Other countries face similar, if not greater, challenges, with anti-Roma attitudes prevalent throughout the region.

In order to better understand the motivational and institutional barriers to Romani inclusion and political participation, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted an assessment in Romania between March and July of 2009 with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Open Society Institute (OSI). This initiative was a follow-up to NDI's 2003 assessment missions to Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, from which it crafted development strategies for Roma political inclusion. The findings and recommendations of the 2003 missions formed the basis of subsequent NDI programming across the region, which has aimed at providing Roma with the tools necessary for engaging in political and civic life.

For the 2009 assessment, NDI drew upon a variety of quantitative and qualitative tools, including desk research, public opinion polls, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and a field assessment in Romania. Using this data, NDI sought to evaluate the advancements made over the past six years, as well as remaining barriers to political participation, and to formulate recommendations to increase Roma influence on policies that take into account and address these barriers.

In assessing the barriers to Roma political participation, NDI examined five subject areas: 1) the legal frameworks that protect and guarantee minority participation; 2) access to government and legislative structures; 3) the role of political parties in aggregating and promoting Roma interests; 4) civil society as a vehicle for advocacy and legislative activism; and, 5) public opinion among Roma and non-Roma, as well as social structures within the Roma community. The following were among NDI's findings:

Romania's system of legal protection for human rights is well established and does not appear to be the primary barrier to political participation or socio-economic advancement among Roma. However, questions surrounding compliance, implementation, and enforcement do hinder the quality and quantity of Roma participation. For example,

¹ The official number of 535,000 Roma is based on the 2002 census, but problems with under-reporting are widely acknowledged. Unofficial estimates range as high as two million, according to the Helsinki Commission. For purposes of this report, NDI will use the figure of one million, which is near the European Union (EU) estimate of between 1.1 and 1.5 million. With Romania's population currently numbering over 21 million, this makes the Roma minority equal to roughly 5 percent of the total population.

provisions within Romania's constitution entitle ethnic minorities to have at least one representative in the parliament; however, subsidiary laws regarding party registration, elections, and funding for national minority organizations have a combined negative impact on the ability of Roma to gain representation more proportionate to their population size. These laws also inhibit open political competition for Roma votes, lessening accountability of the party that holds the single Roma seat, in this case the *Partida Romilor Pro Europa* (Roma Party), which has monopolized the Romani legislative mandate for well over a decade.

The 2008 reform of the laws surrounding Romania's parliamentary elections, which changed from a party-list proportional representation system to a proportional system in single member constituencies,² has not yielded significant benefits for Roma wishing to run for office. Nor, however, has it presented a major barrier to their quest for elected representation. It may, over time, result in closer connections between Roma communities and their elected representatives – regardless of ethnicity – who must now look to the votes of a single district for their re-election.

Romania's National Strategy,³ drafted in 2001 in response to international criticism and dialogue with the Roma community, articulated the government's overall strategy to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Roma. Its ultimate goal was to bring Romania into compliance with international standards for minority rights, as articulated by the Council of Europe, the United Nations (UN), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Unfortunately, due primarily to a lack of funding, institutional ownership, and consistent leadership, the Strategy has not been implemented as fully as many Roma had anticipated. Nor has it been utilized effectively as a catalyst for public policy development and executive oversight. Likewise, many Roma have been disappointed with progress made under the National Action Plan, part of Romania's commitment to the Decade of Roma Inclusion,⁴ another underutilized policy development tool.

In terms of its government and legislative structures, Romania is a stable democracy with the requisite political institutions and a parliament that is relatively open and transparent. However, at every level, perceptions of corruption and lack of accountability persist. Although local councils may be more accessible to Roma candidates, activists, and

² In Romania's proportional representation system, political parties proposed closed lists of candidates to be elected, and seats were allocated to each party proportionally according to the number of votes they received. In the new system, individual candidates are elected by voters to represent single constituencies. However, in a second phase, in constituencies where candidates did not win 50%+1 of the votes, the seats are allocated proportionally according to the number of votes received by all the parties that passed the threshold in each county and throughout the country.

³ Formally, the Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of the Roma.

⁴ The Decade of Roma Inclusion is an international initiative launched in 2005 to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma. Bringing together 12 governments of Central and Eastern Europe, Romani civil society, and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, the Decade seeks to accelerate progress toward improving the welfare of Roma in four priority areas (education, employment, housing, and health) while taking into account the cross-cutting core issues of poverty, discrimination, and gender mainstreaming.

constituents than national or *judet*⁵ structures, their effectiveness in serving the interests of Roma communities is uneven.

Numerous entities exist within the central public administration tasked with addressing minority affairs. The National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) oversees compliance with the laws surrounding equal treatment for all citizens and has proven to be a credible institution. Unfortunately, it remains underutilized as a venue for Roma to resolve their complaints and achieve systemic change. Individual ministries responsible for education, health, and labor among other policy areas, also deal with minority issues and with Roma specifically, but generally lack coordination. Likewise, the National Agency for Roma (NAR), responsible for the oversight of the National Strategy, has been unable to effectively fulfill its role due to a highly politicized leadership that has suffered constant turnover, a subsequent lack of long-range strategic planning, underfunded mandates, and lack of authority within the government. The County Offices for Roma (in Romanian, BJRs), have been tasked with organizing and carrying out activities to support the Strategy, but vary in performance due to over-politicization and lack of support from the national level.

A more effective bridge between local government and Roma communities has been the education and health mediators, who focus on day-to-day issues within the communities and work closely with appointed Roma experts in mayoral offices. Coming from the Roma community, they enjoy high levels of trust and are perceived to be less political. Unfortunately, heavy loads of casework coupled with a lack of ongoing support and professional development have limited their impact.

Among the mainstream political parties, one of the greatest challenges in assessing Roma participation is the lack of data, since no mechanisms exist to track the number of Roma elected to local office, the size or distribution of Romani support, or the effectiveness of outreach to Roma communities. Moreover, a larger problem with mistrust and negative perceptions of political parties cuts across all ethnic communities in the country, Roma and non-Roma alike. Parties conduct very little in the way of substantive outreach to Roma communities and are seen as the purveyors of widespread corruption and vote-buying. Even the Roma Party has lost support among Roma and lacks a strong platform to regain voters from the minority it represents.

Mainstream parties do not seem to run large numbers of Romani candidates, although without hard data that can only be speculated. Further, the mainstream parties appear reluctant to throw their full support behind those Romani candidates who do run on their behalf, for fear of alienating their base of non-Roma voters. While NDI's focus groups showed that a candidate's ethnicity was a point of contention for some, most respondents felt that ethnicity was not as important as the candidate's ability to perform the job he or she was elected to do.

Civil society, here defined primarily as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), offered some promising examples of political participation with the potential to break down

⁵ A *judet* is an administrative division in Romania, commonly translated to English as "county."

existing barriers as they concern the Roma communities. However, the existing Roma groups generally lack funds as well as broad public support for and involvement in their activities. Moreover, they are not utilizing professional networks to share best practices, and have yet to build strong issue-based coalitions, particularly across ethnic lines, to effectively promote clear legislative agendas.

Finally, one of the most formidable barriers to Roma political participation is the overall negative public attitude toward Roma, which results in both real and perceived discrimination. The lack of action on behalf of the authorities and the politicians in combating intolerance in general and racist speech in particular contributes to a continuous exclusion of Roma, resulting in their victimization. These factors, combined with rampant rates of poverty and illiteracy and the lack of civic culture in Roma communities, create a cycle of exclusion that may take generations to break.

Based on the above findings, NDI developed a set of recommendations not only for the Roma community, but also for the government and parliament of Romania, political parties, civil society, and the international community. The recommendations highlight the importance of cooperation between ethnic groups, sharing of information across sectors and borders, provision of adequate financial and human resources to the tasks at hand, and above all the prioritization of Roma inclusion on political agendas at all levels. Specific recommendations include:

- The Government and Parliament of Romania should strengthen the mandate, neutrality, and resources of the NAR as a means to improve coordination between the various ministries and other governing bodies dealing with Roma issues.
- The NCCD should be more broadly promoted as a public service agency not only for Roma but for all groups that suffer discrimination.
- Funding to civil society by the Romanian government as well as the international community should be increased for projects to boost political participation, enhance civic activism and education, and promote issue-based advocacy.
- Romania's mainstream political parties need to more publicly and meaningfully address the dire situation facing Roma, by utilizing their platforms, substantive policy options in line with the National Strategy and Action Plan, and legislation that takes into account the interests of all ethnic groups. Moreover, they should develop effective outreach strategies with designated liaisons to the Roma communities and Romani NGOs.
- The Roma Party should seek to win back the Romani voters it has lost by reassessing its platform and strategy, and reinvigorating the party with a new generation of supporters, candidates, and leaders who will demonstrate their commitment to public service.
- Civil society should play a larger role in breaking down the barriers preventing Roma political integration by drawing on a variety of approaches that include training and cultivation of young Roma leaders; civic education projects targeted at both Roma and non-Roma; community organizing projects that bridge ethnic lines; and constructive engagement with Parliament and government to promote a broadly supported, clearly defined legislative agenda.

- Finally, the European Union (EU) and the international community should continue holding Romania accountable for its legal obligations with regard to human rights and anti-discrimination, promoting cultural diversity in its member states, and funding programs targeted at increasing Roma political inclusion.

NDI's assessment revealed that, while definite progress has been made in a number of areas throughout the past six years, much remains to be done before Roma can be considered full and active participants in Romania's political system. Although an increasing number of Roma have begun speaking out on issues that concern their community, examples of success tend to be singular rather than systematic. Despite attempts by the government to institute policies and provide mechanisms for addressing Roma issues, implementation is inconsistent. Some of the barriers to Roma participation are structural, as they relate to elections and parliamentary representation, the effectiveness of the NAR, NCCD, BJRs, and local mayoral experts. These can be addressed in large part through budgeting or legislative reform, provided the political will exists. However, social attitudes toward and among Roma present more significant barriers that inhibit robust party outreach and policy debate as well as civic engagement on the part of Roma themselves. These attitudinal and motivational barriers will require a long-term commitment to address and resolve. In sum, continued attention must be paid to Roma issues and projects crafted that respond to the recommendations noted in the report.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Assessment Goal and Objectives

Roma have long comprised Europe's largest but most impoverished and socially marginalized minority. In 2003, the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) conducted assessment missions to Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia to determine how Roma could more effectively use the political process to address longstanding issues of social and economic exclusion. Over the past six years, using the 2003 missions' findings and recommendations, NDI has conducted programs throughout the region¹ to increase Romani capacities to engage in political and civic life.

While progress has been made, the overall political influence of Roma remains limited as they struggle to achieve sustained political breakthroughs. To better understand the developments necessary to achieve such breakthroughs or even long-term visible change, this year NDI conducted a follow-up assessment of the motivational and institutional barriers to Romani political participation with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Open Society Institute (OSI). NDI examined political participation in terms of:

- competing for and serving in elected office;
- engaging government institutions in the provision of public services;
- aggregating community priorities through political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs); and,
- creating an informed citizenry that is active in civic and political life.

NDI approached the assessment with the following objectives:

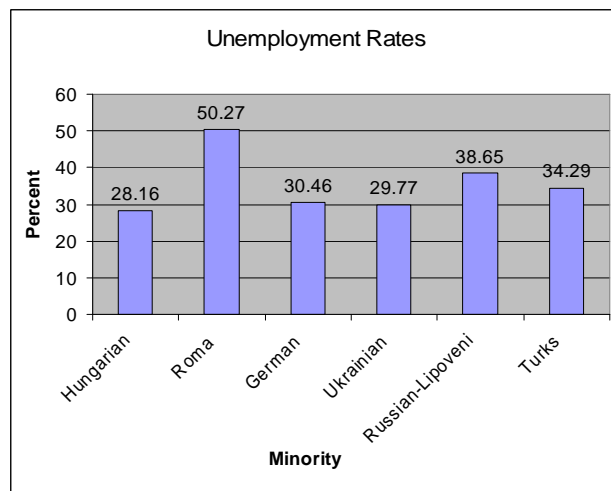
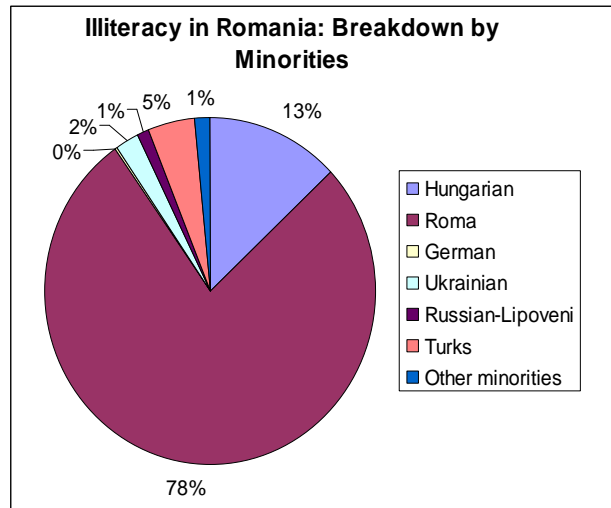
- identify structural and attitudinal barriers limiting Romani political participation and develop strategies and produce recommendations that would help Romani activists increase their impact on Roma-related policies and assist the Romanian government and political parties in addressing institutional barriers;
- develop and disseminate recommendations that inform the design of Roma programming conducted by NDI and other assistance providers in Romania and throughout the region; and,
- build capacity among Romani activists to analyze and use public opinion research in their electoral, governance, and advocacy initiatives.

NDI intends to use the 2009 assessment findings and recommendations, detailed in the following pages, to develop strategies and program approaches to assist Romani activists in addressing institutional and attitudinal barriers to increase their impact on decision-making. The study will inform the Institute's future programming and provide valuable

¹ NDI's Regional Roma Political Participation Initiative, funded primarily by the National Endowment for Democracy, currently provides technical and financial assistance to Roma political activists from Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. For more information on this program, please see Appendix 1 or visit NDI's website at www.ndi.org.

data and recommendations to Romani civic and political activists, appointed and elected officials, and donors and program implementers. The Institute invites other development and funding organizations, political parties, governmental bodies, and intergovernmental agencies to review the findings and recommendations to develop coordinated strategies to address the long-term disenfranchisement of Roma and improve living conditions for Europe's poorest and most vulnerable communities.

This assessment focused on Romania due, in part, to the size and diversity of its Roma population, the largest in Europe. Of Romania's total population of about 22 million, its March 2002 census identifies approximately 535,000 "Gypsies," or 2.5 percent of the total population. Independent estimates, including one completed in 2004 by the European Commission, which is used by Romania's National Agency for the Roma (NAR), claim the real number to be as high as 2.5 million, or 11 percent of the total population. Large Roma communities exist in various *judets* (counties) throughout the country. Although some Roma are integrated into mainstream society, their numbers are hard to track and traditional Roma communities tend to remain marginalized. Rates of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment are much higher among Roma than any other ethnic group in the country. In this regard, Romania should not be seen as a special case, but as an example from which other countries and Roma communities might draw meaningful lessons. Governments throughout Europe face challenges with the inclusion of Roma and may benefit from a deeper understanding of Romania's experience.



2002 Romanian Census

B. Political and Program Context

NDI's 2003 assessment, funded by OSI, led to the 2004 launch of the Institute's region-wide initiative to foster greater Romani political participation, guided by the principle that skilled elected Romani officials and actively engaged Romani citizens would help to address pressing needs in their communities. NDI's work has concentrated on building

the capacity of Romani activists to run successful electoral campaigns, govern effectively, and advocate for public policy solutions. Building off the 2003 assessments, and subsequent NDI programming, this report provides some basis for evaluating advancements in the last six years, along with more comprehensive analysis of barriers to participation through the use of additional research tools that were not employed in the earlier study.

This assessment also comes in the wake of three important developments in Romania's policies towards Roma. The foundational National Strategy on Roma² was drafted in 2001 as a result of international criticism and dialogue between the Roma community and government. The document articulates the government's overall strategy to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Roma, with the ultimate goal of bringing Romania into compliance with international standards for minority rights, as articulated by the Council of Europe, the United Nations (UN), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In addition, it outlines a strategy to address and solve broadly defined problems in the areas of community development, housing, health care, justice and public order, education, civic involvement, and economics, among others.

Then, in February 2005, Romania joined the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an unprecedented initiative to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma.³ As part of its commitment to the Decade, the Government of Romania presented a National Action Plan for Roma in February 2006, which focuses on monitoring mechanisms to track goals and progress milestones to achieve under the Decade's priority areas. Taken together, the National Strategy and the Decade's National Action Plan form the basis for most of Romania's policies on Roma-related issues, along with institutions tasked with implementing them. With several years of practice upon which to draw, NDI wanted to examine the impact that these two critical documents have had on Romania's public institutions and the level of Roma participation in political life.

Finally, this assessment comes two years after Romania's accession to the European Union (EU), which, through the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, aligns Romanian legislation on human rights, among other things, with European standards. Now that Brussels has lost the prospect of European integration as leverage in influencing domestic policy toward Roma, NDI sought to determine what impact EU membership has had on Romania's treatment of its Roma minority, what mechanisms exist to allow European engagement on Roma issues in member states, and how best to utilize them.

² Formally, the Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of the Roma.

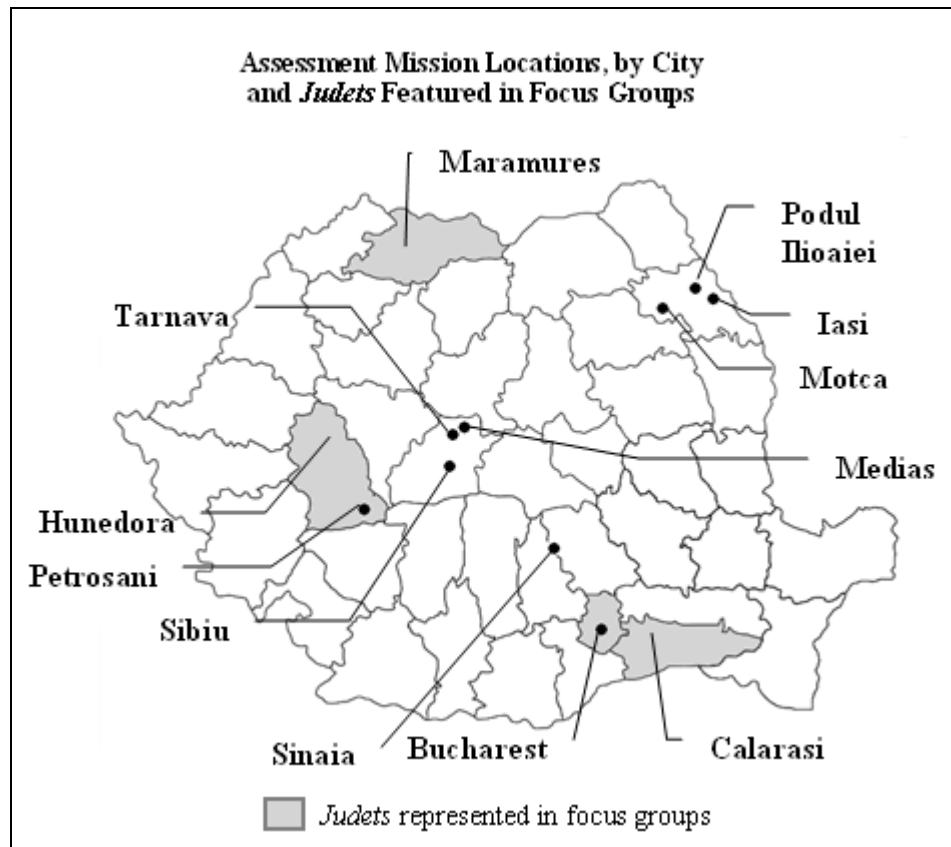
³ The Decade of Roma Inclusion is an international initiative to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma. Bringing together 12 governments of Central and Eastern Europe, Romani civil society, and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, the Decade seeks to accelerate progress towards improving the welfare of Roma in four priority areas (education, employment, housing, and health), while taking into account the cross-cutting core issues of poverty, discrimination, and gender mainstreaming.

C. Approach and Methodology

In conducting the assessment, NDI brought to bear its experience of marrying political research to development goals, as well as its relationships with key political actors in Romania, in the Roma community, and in the international community. Utilizing its commitment to work that is simultaneously cooperative, international, interethnic, and non-partisan, the Institute sought to garner a wide range of perspectives. To date, no study of this magnitude or focus has been conducted in Romania or the region.

The assessment drew upon quantitative and qualitative tools, including desk research, public opinion polls, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and an assessment mission in Romania, featuring topical experts. The desk research, conducted at the onset of the program, included a review of state documents, political party platforms, and electoral laws, among other documents. Public opinion polls were then conducted throughout Romania to gauge motivational barriers within the Roma community and to answer strategic questions related to political participation and awareness. Focus groups followed, which further explored how citizens (both Roma and non-Roma) make political decisions, what motivates citizens to take a more active role in their community, and how their associational life patterns can be better used to foster civic and political participation. In response to the focus groups, NDI then conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Romani political and civic activists, senior political party and government representatives, and donors and program implementers to elucidate the findings of the focus groups.

Finally, NDI carried out a six-day field assessment with a team that included former Member of the European Parliament Jan Marinus Wiersma of the Netherlands; Eugen Stefan Florian, a Romani political activist from the city of Arad, Romania; Iulian Stojan, LL.M., executive director of the Roma Civic Alliance; Monica Caluser of the Ethnocultural Diversity Resource Center in Cluj, Romania; Catherine Messina Pajic, NDI's deputy regional director for Central and Eastern Europe; and Alice Ratyis, NDI's resident representative in Romania. The assessment team, which traveled to Bucharest and other cities around the country, met with political party officials, civil society organization leaders, government representatives, and activists to gauge the level and impact of Roma political participation. Based on its findings, the team formulated recommendations for Roma to increase their influence on policies that take into account and address the barriers limiting such participation.



Although NDI has been ambitious in adopting its objectives for this assessment and holds out high hopes for its effect on informing Roma-related policies, the Institute acknowledges that even small changes take time. As such, NDI's position is that attitudinal and institutional modifications, as well as behavioral change, will not happen immediately. Nonetheless, the Institute encourages the use of this assessment's recommendations to find forward-thinking, long-term solutions.

II. FINDINGS

A. Legal Framework

Constitutional Protection and International Standards for Human Rights

Romania's constitution guarantees equal treatment of all citizens and extends special protection to designated national minorities. Article 16 states that "citizens are equal before the law and public authorities, without any privilege or discrimination." Article 4 more explicitly states that, "Romania is the common and indivisible homeland of all its citizens, without any discrimination on account of race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, sex, opinion, political adherence, or social origin."

As a member state of the European Union, Romania is subject to various human rights agreements and legal protections that govern citizens within EU territory. One such example is the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights on human rights and fundamental freedoms, adopted in 2000. In addition, several European Commission (EC) directives cover equal treatment regardless of racial or ethnic origins, and equal opportunity specific to employment.

Romania is a signatory to the European Convention of Human Rights, an international treaty under which the member states of the Council of Europe promise to secure fundamental civil and political rights to everyone within their jurisdiction irrespective of, for example, sex, race, nationality, or ethnic origin. It expressly prohibits various forms of discrimination and guarantees the right to vote and stand for office, among other basic human freedoms.

Romania is also a party to the Universal Human Rights Declaration, and all subsequent UN conventions⁴ relevant to human rights and social welfare, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The Romanian Constitution gives precedence to international covenants and treaties on fundamental human rights, stating in Article 20, "Where any inconsistencies exist between the covenants and treaties on fundamental human rights Romania is a party to, and internal laws, the international laws shall take precedence" except where the Constitution or domestic legislation provides for higher standards of protection.

As a member of the OSCE, Romania is obligated to uphold commitments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, stemming from the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and as established in the "human" dimension of the OSCE's three-pronged scope. OSCE standards apply to all participating states; as all decisions are taken by consensus, a participating state cannot claim exemption. Further commitments to the protection of

⁴ Among the treaties Romania has ratified are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol; and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

human rights are outlined in the 1990 Copenhagen Document, which establishes the protection of human rights as one of the basic purposes of government and specifically introduces far-reaching provisions regarding national minorities. Expanding upon this document, members of the OSCE are specifically obligated to protect the human rights of both Roma and Sinti as put forth in several agreements, including those taken at Geneva in 1991, Budapest in 1994, Istanbul in 1999, and Maastricht in 2003.⁵

Romania's system of legal protection for human rights does not appear to be a barrier to political participation or socio-economic advancement among Roma; the problems arise when laws are not respected, executed fairly, or fully enforced. Nonetheless, this assessment was by no means an exhaustive legal study, so further research would no doubt yield better information regarding Romania's compliance with European and international law, particularly governing minority rights.

Party Registration and Guaranteed Political Representation

Article 63 of Romania's constitution guarantees representation in the parliament for all recognized national minorities through set-aside seats. Specifically, each minority that is not able to win a seat outright is awarded one in the Chamber of Deputies. In nearly two decades, only one Romani Member of Parliament (MP) has been elected to parliament outside of the reserved seat.⁶ Further, each minority's guaranteed representation is the same, so the Roma, with an estimated one million citizens,⁷ and the German minority of only 60,000 have the same number of seats - one.

The constitution decrees that each national minority is entitled to representation by only one organization. The incumbent Roma Party currently holds that distinction, having gained entry to the parliament in 1992, where it continues to hold the single Roma seat. The laws governing political party and nongovernmental organization (NGO) registration have ensured that in the case of nearly every ethnic minority, the first organization to win representation has held a monopoly on the community's national political representation.

According to the Law on Political Parties, 25,000 members are required to register a party, with at least 700 members each in 18 of the country's 41 *judets*, plus Bucharest. Further, the party can lose its status and be forced to re-register if it fails to win 50,000 votes in two consecutive elections. Although political parties based on ethnicity are not prohibited by law, the criteria set forth in the Law on Political Parties, which a national minority must meet, are so severe that it proves almost prohibitive for minority

⁵ For more information on the specific agreements of the OSCE, please see http://www.osce.org/publications/odihr/2005/09/16237_440_en.pdf.

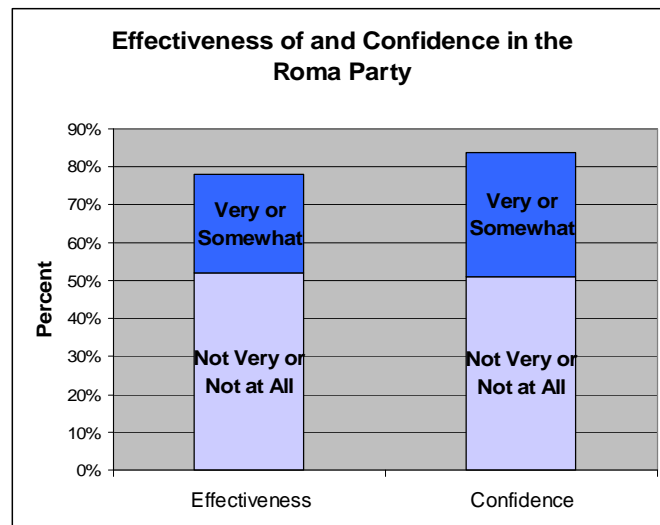
⁶ A Roma Party candidate was elected on the Party of Social Democracy list in 2000 when the two parties were in coalition.

⁷ The official number of 535,000 Roma is based on the 2002 census but problems with under-reporting are widely acknowledged and the number is likely much higher. Unofficial estimates range as high as two million, according to the Helsinki Commission. For purposes of this report, NDI will use the figure of one million, which is near to the European Union estimates of between 1.1 and 1.5 million. With Romania's population currently numbering over 21 million, this makes the Roma minority equal to roughly 5 percent of the total population.

organizations to present candidates for election lists. The European Commission for Democracy through Law, also known as the Venice Commission, reports that the conditions facing national minorities are so onerous as to virtually exclude minorities from forming their own parties and running in elections.

NGOs representing ethnic minorities may also participate in elections;⁸ however, the challenges to field candidates are still great. The laws on local and parliamentary elections mandate that minority NGOs wishing to field candidates must either demonstrate a membership of 20,000 (with 300 members each in 15 *judets* plus Bucharest)⁹ or be “officially recognized minority organizations” with membership in the National Council for Minorities¹⁰ – a body composed of NGOs, like the Roma Party, that have elected representatives in parliament. Thus, if an organization cannot meet the stringent membership requirement it can field candidates only if it is already in parliament – a provision that has effectively protected the Roma Party’s status since it first entered parliament before the law was passed. Its incumbent status not only gives it name recognition and access to funds that non-parliamentary parties and organizations do not enjoy, it also locks out other minority NGOs that cannot sit on the Council for lack of representation in parliament.

By limiting the Council to those organizations already in parliament and then requiring membership on the Council to run for a seat in parliament, newcomers are effectively prohibited from challenging the Roma Party. This lessens the Roma Party’s incentive to perform on their behalf. Thus, although Roma are guaranteed representation and have continuously had one MP in parliament, the consistent decline in votes for the Roma Party (from 300,000 votes in 1992 to 60,000 votes in 2008, according to the party leader), indicates that it has lost credibility with Roma voters. NDI’s opinion poll revealed, that only 26 percent of Roma



CURS Public Opinion Poll, 2009

⁸ This is the case with the Roma Party, which according to law is not a political party, but an NGO, despite its name. The Roma Party is the officially recognized minority organization for Roma, with membership in the National Council for Minorities.

⁹ According to Law 35/2008 on parliamentary elections, the 20,000 member requirement is for minorities with more than 20,000 citizens declaring themselves members of that group. Smaller minorities need to demonstrate a membership of 15 percent of the number of citizens declaring that nationality. Law 67/2004 on local elections requires 25,000 members for minorities with a population of more than 25,000.

¹⁰ According to Article 2 of Government Order No. 589/2001 on establishing the Council for National Minorities, the Council consists of representatives of the legally constituted organizations of citizens belonging to national minorities that participated in the September 27, 1992 general election.

respondents found the Roma Party effective and only 33 percent had confidence in it. The party leader claimed that Roma voters were opting for mainstream parties, which might indicate an overall dissatisfaction with the notion of set-aside seats.

Electoral Reform

In 2008, Romania reformed its electoral legislation, changing from a party-list proportional representation system¹¹ to a proportional system in single-member constituencies.¹² The law was amended in response to a public campaign initiated by the Pro Democracy Association,¹³ an NGO that advocated for a system that would bring elected officials closer to their constituents by having them represent single districts, but that would also proportionally represent the interests of all Romanian citizens.

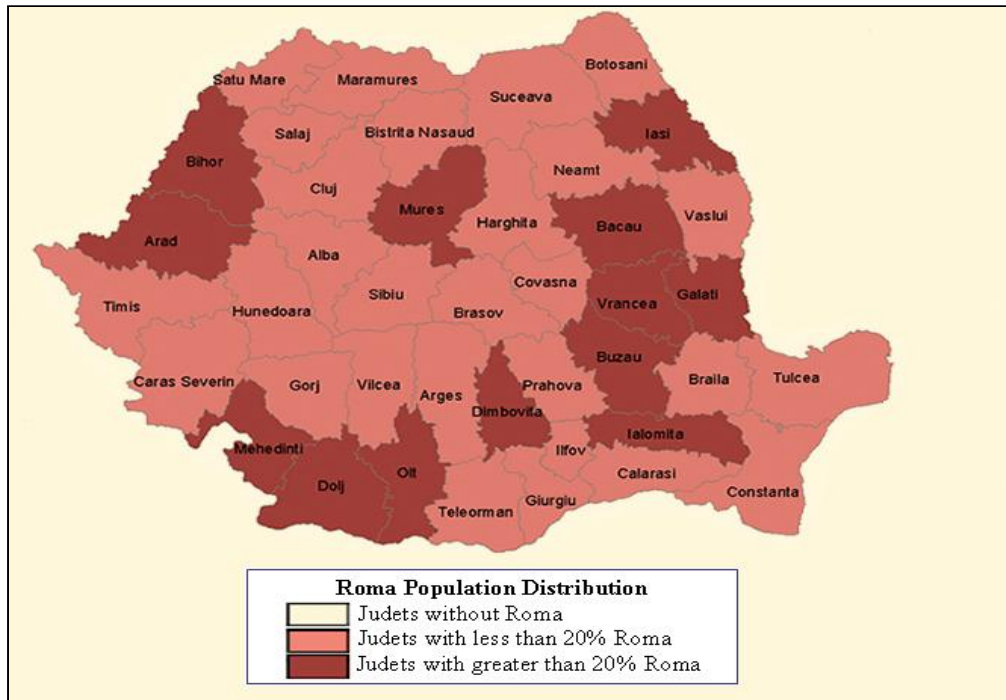
In NDI's 2003 assessment, one of the Institute's recommendations was the establishment of direct representation through a mixed system, combining national party lists and single-member constituencies, in order to ensure proportional representation and create a closer relationship between elected MPs and citizens. In addition to electing 50 percent of MPs in single-member districts to incentivize responsiveness between parliamentarians and constituents, NDI recommended that the remaining 50 percent be elected on national party lists, which would secure the proportional representation of all voters, whose parties pass an electoral threshold. The recommendation underscored the notion that Roma could more likely earn the right to run as candidates for a mainstream party in an electoral constituency where they were well known, than in a national list where they would have difficulty securing enough support to climb to the top of the list.

The 2008 parliamentary elections – the first under the new proportional system in single-member constituencies, saw three prominent Roma running for parliament representing mainstream parties – the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD). However, none was elected and only one garnered a percentage of votes in double digits. Overall, the law has not yielded significant positive results for Roma, partly because their population may be too dispersed to win a single district. Further, the system that Romania adopted for redistributing votes cast for candidates, who did not achieve a majority of votes, is extremely complicated and it confused even seasoned party members who ran. Several candidates speculated that it may have led to fraud or manipulation of votes.

¹¹ In Romania's proportional representation system, political parties proposed closed lists of candidates to be elected, and seats were allocated to each party proportionally according to the number of votes they received.

¹² In the new system with single member constituencies, individual candidates are elected by voters to represent single constituencies. However, in a second phase, for seats where candidates did not win 50%+1 of the votes in their constituencies, the seats are allocated proportionally according to the number of votes received by all the parties that passed the threshold in each county and throughout the country.

¹³ Asociația Pro Democratia (APD) was established in 1990 as a non-governmental, non-profit, non-partisan organization with the mission of strengthening democracy at the national and international level by encouraging civic participation. Today, APD has 30 clubs with more than 1,000 members and volunteers. More details on the history and programs of APD may be found at www.apd.ro.



Government of Romania, Department of Interethnic Relations

Roma might benefit more from such an electoral system at the local level, where they could gain votes in a district with a concentrated Roma population. However, local councils are still elected through the old, closed list proportional representation system, where Roma fall to the bottom of the lists. Although no hard statistics are available, Roma representation on local councils appears to be disproportionately low considering the size of their population.¹⁴ No provisions for set aside seats or other forms of beneficial mandates exist for election to local councils.

Another issue raised by some Roma was the national threshold (5 percent) required to gain a seat in parliament (outside of the guaranteed minority seats). Although this issue was not addressed by the recent reform, some believe it should have been, considering that a 5 percent threshold may be too high for the Roma minority to meet. On the national level, in the 2008 parliamentary elections, the Roma Party gathered 0.06 percent of the vote, but did so while competing for the parliamentary seats reserved for minorities. In 2008 elections for local councils, the same party received between 1.70 percent of the vote in Mures and 0.02 percent in Caras-Severin. These figures indicate that the threshold would need to be significantly lower in order to make a difference for Roma candidates, though even a lower threshold, and any resulting seats, would not guarantee greater influence in parliament. Regardless, without ethnic data, reliable census figures, or clear indications of Roma election turnout patterns, one cannot say whether Roma might be

¹⁴ Another possible explanation for disproportionately low Roma representation on local councils is that some Roma lack forms of identification, which are necessary to vote. Currently, several Phare projects are aimed directly at rectifying this problem through providing Roma citizens with identity cards.

able to meet such a threshold if they voted as a unified bloc. It is questionable whether a lower threshold for minority parties would help Roma gain seats, even if party registration requirements were amended to allow new parties to participate and challenge the incumbent.

Overall, the 2008 electoral reform could not, as of yet, be considered a major advancement for Roma political participation. Nor is it, however, the primary obstacle to Roma seeking office or otherwise engaging in legislative politics. Although no dramatic improvement in constituency relations has been apparent since the new parliament of single-district MPs was formed, the new system may, over time, yield a legislature more closely tied to its public, including Romani constituents. In light of the widespread political disaffection noted by Romanians of all ethnic groups in NDI's research, closer connections between MPs and constituents would be a positive development.

The National Strategy and Decade of Roma Inclusion

The National Strategy (as discussed in the introduction section) describes and assigns responsibilities within those institutions that are charged with organizing and coordinating its implementation. However, according to a report from the Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers,¹⁵ “insufficient budgetary mechanisms for funding the Strategy often results in a lack of coherence in the implementation of sectoral and inter-sectoral measures, of sustainability of the measures initiated with Phare funds, as well as in a lack of relevant initiatives at the local level.” Likewise, inconsistent leadership and a lack of institutional ownership have both contributed to implementation failures, causing many Roma to remark on its ineffective utilization as a catalyst for public policy development and executive oversight.

Although a comprehensive monitoring and evaluating system was developed in 2008 to assess the impact of interventions on Roma communities, measuring the outcomes and benefits of the Strategy remains problematic for several reasons. Among these reasons is the policy of ministries and local authorities to pursue socially inclusive rather than Roma-specific measures. Many Roma with whom the assessment team met were disappointed that the Strategy has failed to meet expectations, viewing it as a government fig leaf to avoid more rigorous engagement on issues where political will may be lacking.

Romania also joined the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an international initiative launched in February 2005 to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma. A year later, as part of its commitment to the Decade, the Government of Romania presented a National Action Plan for Roma, which focuses on monitoring mechanisms to track goals, targets, and indicators of progress in each of the Decade's priority areas. The Plan focuses on strategic milestones, as well as projects in the sectors of public administration and community development, housing, social security, health care, economic progress, justice and public order, child welfare, education, culture, and

¹⁵ Under the authority of the Council of Europe's Committee on Migration, the Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers is instructed, among other things, to analyze the implementation of policies and practices of member states concerning Roma and Travellers.

communication and civic involvement. These targets emphasize concrete achievements, from setting up the National Council for Combating Discrimination to encouraging projects for job creation for Roma women, rather than structural and procedural measures. The Decade commits the Government of Romania to ensure the effective participation of Romani civil society in a working group to implement and monitor the National Action Plan, and includes a stipulation to strengthen the capacity of Romani organizations. The Government is responsible for the Action Plan's implementation through the National Agency for Roma, which last year sent the Action Plan to parliament to be adopted as a law, with a budget associated. To date, parliament has not responded.

Compared to the National Strategy for Roma, the Action Plan is narrower in scope, concentrating on the Decade's four priority areas and three cross-cutting themes. Activities associated with the Decade receive financing through the Roma Education Fund¹⁶ and from the Romanian government through the National Plan for Development 2007 – 2013. As such, they are funded separately than activities that are purely associated with the National Strategy. The National Action Plan also differs in that it does not control the formation of institutions, but rather focuses on monitoring mechanisms to track goals, targets, and indicators of progress to achieve during the Decade. Although the National Action Plan is intended to complement (not duplicate or replace) the Strategy, in practice many of the achievements of the Strategy programs are also reported as achievements under the National Action Plan. Anecdotally, the team learned that many Roma, particularly in civil society, consider the National Strategy and the Decade Initiative to be major disappointments, falling far short of expectations.

B. Government and Legislative Structures

Romania is a stable democracy with the requisite governing structures in place, but the functioning of those institutions, i.e., the informal aspect of democracy, is less consistent and vulnerable to practices that threaten the public trust. Roma are part of the country's democratic framework, but are hampered by a lack of skills, financial resources, and political will on the part of nearly all relevant actors, Roma and non-Roma alike.

Parliament and Local Councils

Compared with many of its neighbors, Romania's parliament is open and transparent. The public can view proceedings through webcasts and visit their representatives in established constituency offices. NGOs may be present in the chamber and some monitor parliament regularly. However, access is not the same as influence, which civil society, as agents of the public interest, appears to lack. NGOs can submit bills to parliament through Citizen Legal Initiatives but collecting the 100,000 signatures is a challenge that very few organizations can meet and is nearly prohibitive for Roma.

¹⁶ The Roma Education Fund was jointly funded by the Council of Europe, OSI, the UN Development Programme, and the World Bank. Thus far, no assessment of the Fund's impact has been conducted; however, a call has been launched for hiring an expert to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs funded.

In addition, Romania shares with many European neighbors, particularly the post-Communist democracies, the tradition of a weak parliament. Romania's parliament provides little oversight of the more robust executive branch and is still developing its role as a legislature. As noted above, minority representation is guaranteed but, aside from being disproportionate to each group's size, reserved seats are often underutilized.

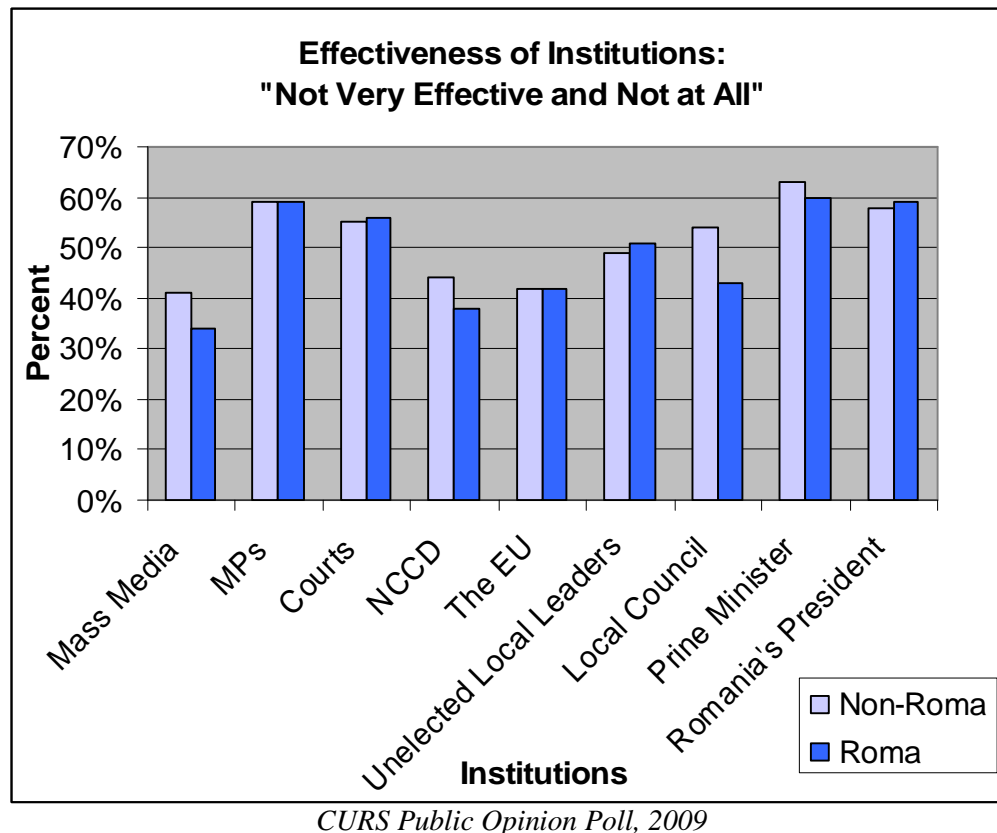
Nicolae Paun, the leader of the Roma Party, has held the single Roma seat in parliament since 2000. According to the Romanian monitoring group, the Institute for Public Policy, he places in neither the top nor bottom 15 MPs in terms of legislative activity.¹⁷ He chairs the Committee for Human Rights and Minorities, which did not appear to the assessment team to be a successful advocate for Roma. As one of the smallest committees in parliament, with only 12 members, the committee's low level of activity on issues related to Roma may be understandable, though data is not available on the committee's specific discussions and debates. The Minority Caucus, led by a representative of the Armenian community, also did not appear notably effective in advancing a Roma (or broader minority) legislative agenda. Both the Committee for Human Rights and Minorities and the Minority Caucus could also more actively promote their activities on Roma issues. In NDI's public opinion poll, only 11 percent of Roma responded that MPs were effective or very effective in dealing with the biggest problems facing their community, while 59 percent of Roma indicated that their MPs were not at all effective at addressing problems. The parliament as a whole ranked even more poorly, with 76 percent of Roma indicating that it was not very effective at addressing problems in their communities.¹⁸ As they stand now, taken as a whole, these circumstances result in a democratically elected parliament that is functional on paper but fails to adequately address the issues of concern to its most vulnerable citizens.

Local councils do not appear to be any more effective at serving the interests of Roma communities, regardless of whether Roma are elected members. Based on its meetings, the assessment team concluded that many of the Roma who are elected to local councils are not active or effective representatives. In many cases, this is because the Romani councilors comprise only a small minority on the councils, a fact that can cause their concerns to be easily marginalized by the remaining councilors. The assessment team heard complaints from local councilors that their requests were frequently ignored and the agendas for council meetings were kept from them, giving them little time to prepare arguments.

¹⁷ Since his current mandate began in December 2008, he has made three speeches in plenary, introduced one legislative initiative (a bill on kindergartens that was initiated by a group of 22 MPs and is currently in committee), and asked two questions or interpellations. He has been present for 50 percent of the votes in parliament, which ranks him at 256 out of 334 deputies.

¹⁸ Though the public criticizes the parliament's effectiveness, the parliament has granted wide access to citizens to monitor the activity of MPs, view voting records, and track debates on bills through such avenues as parliamentary website broadcasts of committee hearings and legislative sessions, public access for CSOs to committee meetings, and public access to legislative sessions. Further, every citizen and/or CSO has the right to ask questions in the constituency offices of MPs, although no tracking system exists to identify issues brought by Roma citizens.

Romani citizens, with whom the assessment team met, particularly in more isolated communities, were wary of approaching their council with complaints and were even less likely to come forward with suggestions, judging their efforts to be pointless. In one town, requests for speed bumps on a major thoroughfare that ran through a Romani neighborhood were repeatedly ignored, according to the villagers. Although Roma in rural communities are more likely to know and interact with their local elected representatives than those in large cities, NDI polls and focus groups indicated that public institutions at all levels generally ranked low in terms of trust and effectiveness, a view shared by all ethnic groups.



European Courts

Although Romania's laws do not generally appear to be out of alignment with international standards for human rights and minority protection, the Court of Justice of the European Communities offers a vehicle through which Romanian laws may be overturned if they are found to be non-compliant with overarching EU laws. Based in Luxembourg, this Court ensures compliance with EU law and rules on the interpretation and application of the treaties establishing the EU. Roma in the Czech Republic were able to achieve their own "Brown v. Board of Education" victory in the Court of Justice when they challenged the government's "separate but equal" argument and persuaded the court to mandate de-segregation of schools.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is an international court with jurisdiction to rule, through binding judgments, on individual and inter-state applications alleging violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. Under the Convention system, each member state of the Council of Europe has a duty to ensure that everyone within its jurisdiction enjoys the rights protected by the Convention. If this is not the case, any individual, group of individuals, or NGO that considers that it has been a victim of a violation may, subject to certain conditions, apply to the court.

Although it took more than 15 years and pro bono assistance from a Canadian law firm, one group of Roma used the ECHR to win a settlement of nearly \$900,000 and an admission from the Romanian government that it was responsible for breaches of the European Convention. A 1991 pogrom in the town of Bolintin Deal had left 24 Romani families beaten and forced to flee their homes. The court accepted the government's admission that it failed to live up to its agreement to prohibit torture and to provide citizens the right to a fair trial and to respect for private and family life, an effective remedy, and prohibition of discrimination. The Romanian government also agreed to take steps to battle discrimination and raise living conditions for the Roma community.¹⁹

National Government

With much of the decision-making authority for the state in the hands of the executive branch, the assessment team looked at which government bodies were addressing minority – or more specifically Roma – issues. In fact, minority affairs are dealt with in several ways and through a variety of entities.

The National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) was established in 2002 to guarantee adherence to the laws surrounding equal treatment for all citizens. The Council is an autonomous body led by a president and a nine-member steering committee, who are nominated by the Romanian parliament. The NCCD, which reports yearly to the parliament,²⁰ has seen its caseload consistently grow to cover a wide range of complaints by all types of social and ethnic groups and does an effective job of representing citizens. It earned credibility and some notoriety in 2007 when it brought a complaint against the President of Romania for off-the-record remarks in which he referred to a hostile reporter as a “stinking gypsy.” Although President Basescu was merely admonished²¹ by the

¹⁹ The ECHR charged the government to adopt the following measures: enhance educational programs for preventing and fighting discrimination against Roma within the school curricula in Bolintin Deal; create programs for public information and for removing stereotypes and prejudices against the Roma community in public institutions; initiate programs of legal education with members of Roma communities; support positive changes in the public opinion of the Bolintin Deal community concerning Roma on the basis of tolerance; stimulate Roma participation in the economic, social, education, cultural, and political life of the community through community development projects; implement programs to rehabilitate housing and the community environment; and, identify, prevent, and solve conflicts likely to generate inter-ethnic violence.

²⁰ Long noted for being ineffective due to a lack of independence, the NCCD was moved from under the supervision of the Government to under parliamentary supervision in 2007.

²¹ The NCCD sanctioned Basescu with a public warning and asked him to promote the principles of equal opportunities and non-discriminatory language. Basescu responded by taking the Council's decision to court, where he lost his case, as he objected to a private conversation becoming the subject of analysis of a state institution.

Constitutional Court, the fact that a government agency could bring a suit against the president without reprisal demonstrated the Council's neutrality and raised its public profile. Still, even though the NCCD's budget and human resources have increased since its establishment, the number of total complaints submitted to the NCCD has not increased at the same rate, and the Council fails to be utilized as effectively as it could be by the target communities.²² Indeed, NDI's public opinion poll indicated that the NCCD was among the least known public institutions by Roma and non-Roma respondents alike.

Budget, Human Resources, and Case Load of the NCCD			
Year	Financial Resources Allocated (in lei)	Number of Employees	Number of Cases
2002	603,000	24	134
2003	1,699,000	25	473
2004	2,196,000	43	382
2005	2,556,000	37	432
2006	2,475,000	41	353
2007	4,250,000	54	836
2008	6,303,000	65	837

Although not formally part of the government, the president presents the public face of the nation. President Basescu, whose term in office ends this year, recently brought an Advisor on Minorities into his cabinet. As an advisory post, it carries no authority or financial resources, but could have an impact on how the president interacts with Roma and how their issues are perceived and presented by the head of state, particularly during the upcoming campaign. That this post was finally created is an important statement, particularly in light of this president's anti-Roma remarks noted above. However, the appointment within scant months of the next presidential election raises questions as to how much of an impact this advisor might have on long-term policy toward Roma.

The government itself has several means of setting policy and addressing minority issues broadly and Roma issues more specifically. Among these is the Department for Interethnic Relations, directed by a state secretary and tasked with promoting good relations between the communities. Although headed by an ethnic Hungarian, the Department's existence and the effectiveness of its activities, while limited, are an unequivocal positive for Roma, particularly regarding its work to improve school curricula to raise awareness and tolerance of Romania's many ethnic communities.

The assessment team heard some talk about resurrecting the Ministry of Minorities, which was done away with in 2000 when the Hungarian party lost its position in the

²² The European Roma Rights Center describes access to the NCCD as limited, in part due to the fact that it has only one office, located in Bucharest, which presents logistical barriers to an impoverished ethnic group that may not be able to travel or make long distance calls to submit claims. This issue is further exacerbated by the bureaucratic ladder, which, even after submitting a claim to the NCCD, requires a victim to take the NCCD's ruling to a court in order to receive compensation.

governing coalition. The ministry, traditionally headed by an ethnic Hungarian, had a much larger portfolio than the Department and more authority, but the team found no indication that it was an effective advocate for Roma.

What is notably lacking is effective coordination of the many individual ministries – Labor, Education, Health – whose work has a direct impact on Roma populations and that are the front line for implementing the National Strategy for Roma. These ministries typically do not design special programs for Roma (or other minorities) but fall back on the National Strategy as the established vehicle to advance Roma interests. However, the Strategy merely articulates goals and is meant to be implemented by the ministries, which claim that they have no funds. While Romania’s budget certainly has fallen victim to the global financial crisis, no ministry seems to have made implementation of the National Strategy a priority, and the available structural funds from the EU often go unused.²³

The National Agency for Roma, established by an executive order in 2004, is explicitly responsible for coordination and oversight of the National Strategy. However, it is unable to fulfill this role effectively because of its position in the government, being at a lower level than ministries and carrying no authority over them. Despite its position as the institution most directly responsible for implementation of the National Strategy, it is largely unknown both to Roma and the general public, according to NDI’s poll, leaving it vulnerable to marginalization within the government. Another challenge to the NAR’s effectiveness is its leadership, which has changed hands four times in the five years since it was established. The post is highly political, being appointed by the ruling party with the Roma Party and a plethora of Romani NGOs all claiming an interest in who fills the position and what activities are undertaken. Partly for this reason, the NAR appears to lack a long-term approach to implementing the National Strategy and suffers from the constant loss of expertise after each election when a large number of its positions turn over. This is not unique to the NAR but is a larger issue that Romania will want to address if it is to establish an effective civil service to keep government operating smoothly, despite political turnover.

County and Municipal Level Government

Established in the same executive order as the NAR, the County Offices for Roma (BJRs) are tasked with organizing and carrying out activities in support of the Strategy. The BJR fall under the Ministry of Public Administration and are housed in the office of *judet* Prefect. Based on what the team learned, the BJR appear to be a highly inconsistent mechanism for engaging Roma communities, with performance differing dramatically from one *judet* to another based on individual personalities. Some have strong leaders who motivate and assist the Roma who live in their *judet*, while others have never visited the communities they are supposed to serve.

²³ For example, in August, the EU suspended payments for a program that provided Romania with 150 million euros (\$220 million) in farm subsidies annually, citing faults in the country’s management of the funds.

The reasons for this uneven performance are many. First, the Ministry that oversees them does not necessarily have a strong interest in supporting the BJRs and, according to one Roma expert, does not evaluate BJR activities or employees. The employees themselves, the team was told, do have not clear job descriptions and the *judets* have no action plans or project calendars. The NAR makes some attempt to support and coordinate their work but has no supervisory authority over them, nor funds to distribute. The BJRs are allocated funds for staff salaries, but not for specific projects, so they have little ability to conduct activities that would address the issues raised by Roma in their *judet*. Finally, not all BJRs have been established or are functioning.

They are also highly political and fall prey to the same ills that plague political parties, as outlined in the section below. Though not political appointees, most Prefects leave office with changes in government administration, and thus are less accountable to their public and, according to many local officials interviewed by the team, sometimes use the BJRs for cutting political deals. Prefects were also said to use the BJRs as a way to sideline Roma issues that they would rather not have to deal with. The team found that many times when the Prefects passed issues off to the BJRs, the BJRs did not have adequate resources to address the problems.

The BJRs are required to establish “mixed committees,” whose members are to represent different ethnicities and policy sectors. These are, essentially, working groups on poverty that are intended to collect data on labor, education, health, and other programs for Roma at the *judet* level. However, the examples of “mixed committees” that were shared with the assessment team did not appear to be effective, attributed by some to ill-chosen political appointments by the Prefects. In one *judet*, the team heard reports that the committee meetings often have no agenda, and that they consist of a lot of talk with little to show for it. A member of one of these committees, who eventually stopped attending out of frustration said, “They make action plans, but there’s no action, just planning.”

NDI’s poll revealed that most Roma have never used the BJRs. Only 15 percent of Roma were familiar with the office and only 7 percent had used its services. The good news is that those who had used the BJR generally had positive experiences, due to punctual responses, with securing social assistance, as well as finding help with gaining employment, seeking housing, and obtaining ID cards. Of Roma respondents in NDI’s poll, 81 percent who had contacted their BJRs sought out these services, including general access to social services. Those most familiar with the BJRs tended to be more integrated²⁴ Roma who reported making enough money to earn a decent living. In other words, Roma who most need the BJR services are the ones least aware of its existence.

At the local level, the executive order mandated the inclusion of a Roma expert in each mayor’s office to serve as a mediator between public officials and Roma communities, and to develop and fund projects. These experts are appointed based on a community’s request to the mayor, available financial and human resources, and the individual mayor’s responsiveness to the community. These experts can and often do play a positive role in

²⁴ In NDI’s public opinion research and in this resulting report, “integrated Roma” are defined as Roma who have at least a primary school level of education and are employed.

the Roma communities but have no real authority, funding or other resources to draw upon and in some cases represent a vehicle for marginalizing Roma issues. It was noted in some towns that these experts can become a barrier themselves, serving as a gatekeeper for the mayor, who personally appoints them rather than hiring them through an open, transparent, and competitive application process.

A generally more effective bridge between local government and Roma communities is the health and education mediators found in many towns and cities. Appointed and funded by the Ministries of Health and Education,²⁵ these individuals, who are Roma themselves, focus on day-to-day issues in the community and work closely with the local Roma experts in the mayors' offices. Perhaps because they are perceived as less "political," the mediators often are able to explain issues effectively and credibly to their communities while still accomplishing the objectives of public officials, for example, to increase the attendance of Romani children in school or to ensure regular medical check-ups. The mediators are generally well regarded by both sides and often accomplish things that public officials alone are not able to do. Originally conceived as a civil society project, the mediators are now paid and trained by the state, serving as a good example of how the private sector can jump start programs for the government to adopt. Transfer of the mediators program to the government has not been entirely smooth, however. The assessment team was told that the mediators are not well supported, particularly following their initial training, are over-tasked, and lack adequate resources to handle the issues brought to them.

C. Political Parties

Challenges to Mainstream Political Parties

The primary challenge in assessing Roma participation in the mainstream (or national interest) political parties is a lack of data, as neither the parties nor the government, nor

"Romania is the way it is due to politicians, who do not care about ordinary people... Politicians and rulers only care about themselves or about other people at the top of the hierarchy."

– Non-Roma man, Bucharest
NDI's Focus Group, July 2009

civil society for that matter, track the number of Roma elected to local office, the size or distribution of Romani support for each party, or the effectiveness of outreach efforts to Roma communities. Collection of ethnic data remains a controversial topic among Roma

whose resistance to self-identifying is largely owed to their history. The Roma population's general experience with authorities wishing to track their number and whereabouts has not been a positive one. Further, it is prohibited by law to gather certain types of ethnic data. This lack of data in itself presents a barrier, hindering the parties – and Roma themselves – from effectively measuring improvement in Roma participation in the political process. Nonetheless, NDI's public opinion research found Roma who were willing to self-identify and answer questions about their voting patterns, civic behavior, and attitudes toward public institutions; the political parties could conduct

²⁵ Additionally, some school mediators are paid by the local government.

similar polls and access this information themselves. To date, NDI is not aware of parties researching these issues on their own.

However, political parties face a more critical challenge that presents barriers not only to Roma participation but to the parties' broader legitimacy and support: widespread public dissatisfaction with political parties by all ethnic groups. While public trust in political parties is low in many places around the world, the trend for Romania was clear in NDI's polls and focus groups and reinforced during the assessment mission. The general attitude in Romania is that politicians are not to be trusted and do not work in the public's interest,²⁶ with distrust of parties even higher among non-Roma than Roma. According to NDI's poll, distrust of political parties was the reason most frequently cited by both Roma and non-Roma who said they would not vote in the next election – 35 percent and 54 percent, respectively; whether this will bear out in November's presidential election remains to be seen. In the 2008 parliamentary elections, voter turnout dipped down to 39.2 percent from 58.49 percent in 2004, but without disaggregated data, one cannot say how Roma fit into that trend.

While this dissatisfaction may stem at least in part from the global economic crisis and its impact, party leaders must combat the perception that they lack vision and are not delivering to their constituents. Public opinion research and anecdotal evidence shows that voters have little trust in political parties and feel that their interests are not being served. Although political parties have matured substantially in the two decades since Romania began to hold competitive elections, politics remain highly personalized, seeming to focus more on personal squabbles than on solutions to public problems. Even the largest, most developed political parties have yet to become genuine aggregates of public interest, seen by many voters as little more than campaign machines that propel their leaders to wealth and privilege. Door-to-door contact during the campaign is common practice – nearly two thirds of both Roma and non-Roma reported contact with parties around election time – as are messaging and polling, but ongoing public outreach of a substantive nature is much less common.

Addressing Roma Issues

Across the board, party platforms tend to be vague, but are particularly so in addressing Roma issues. They make little or no mention of the need to resolve the poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and poor health that disproportionately plague Roma communities, usually incorporating Roma interests as part of a broad reference to minorities and human rights. Certainly, no mainstream party has made Roma socio-economic advancement a general priority for the country or offered concrete proposals to address this critical segment of the population; in fact, no mainstream party even references Roma in its platform.

According to NDI's poll, a party's position on minority rights is more important to Roma voters than whether it explicitly represents their ethnicity, suggesting that mainstream

²⁶ NDI's poll showed that Romania's political parties, regardless of ethnicity or ideology, uniformly rank near the bottom of the list in perceived effectiveness compared to other public and civic institutions.

parties with a strong platform on minority issues stand a good chance of gaining their votes. The same poll found that 34 percent of Roma and 65 percent of non-Roma felt that minority issues are best represented by mainstream parties. Young, urban Roma are more likely to prefer national interest parties to ethnic ones, and the governing Social Democratic Party polled highest of any political party among Roma in general. Clearly, political space exists for the parties not only to address Roma issues but also to benefit from doing so.

This would also indicate that the Roma Party needs to offer a strong platform and track record, rather than assume support from Roma voters based on its ethnic make-up. However, the Roma Party appears, in fact, to be less developed in platform and policy development than its mainstream counterparts. Indeed, a cursory scan of the websites of both mainstream parties and the Roma Party reveals that mainstream parties highly advertise their platforms and activities, while the Roma Party has little to share with an inquisitive voter. Further, observations from the assessment team also indicated that the Roma Party lacks a well-developed or coordinated national action plan, though this may be attributed to a dearth of resources necessary to synchronize local branches.

Corruption, Vote Buying, and Outreach

According to NDI's research, Roma and non-Roma alike overwhelmingly ascribe to political parties such negative terms as "corrupt", "out to make money," and "out of touch." That parties lack bottom-up input and participation in decision-making only feeds the widespread perception of corrupt party patronage. Candidate selection is generally not transparent and, as with government appointments, is seen by many as a vehicle for doling out favors rather than rewarding merit or competence.

This is directly tied to the almost universal reports of vote-buying, intimidation, and fraud that NDI's focus groups yielded among both Roma and non-Roma, which were echoed in the assessment team's interviews. One prominent NGO leader asserted that under the new electoral system, rather than the party buying votes, the candidates buy votes directly from the public. While prospective candidates are no longer beholden to party leaders for a high place on the list, the same NGO leader asserted that the parties are more likely to assign the best districts to the candidates with the deepest pockets. Although the assessment team was not able to verify these assertions, it encountered similar comments from other civic and political figures during its interviews, which were in line with NDI's public opinion research.

While few incidents of vote-buying are reported to authorities, most people who spoke with the assessment team did not trust the system to hold anyone accountable for voting irregularities. The leader of a civic group in Bucharest, who estimated that as much as 25 percent of voter turnout was directly tied to vote-buying, agreed. As he put it, "Even when party officials get caught, they're not punished." According to NDI's poll, Roma were more likely than non-Roma by more than a two-to-one margin to report being offered money for their votes. Two of the Romani candidates who ran in the 2008 parliamentary elections (and lost) asserted that, although they talked with voters about

“When politicians need our vote, they contact us. They give us plastic bags with cooking oil, sugar and flower ... but if you will try to contact them after elections, they won’t answer you.”

– *integrated Roma woman, Bucharest
NDI’s Focus Group, July 2009*

substantive issues and tried to run a clean campaign, vote-buying by their opponents proved to be an overwhelming obstacle.²⁷

International reports, from sources including the European Commission, Freedom House, and the OSCE, continue to criticize

Romania for a political environment laden with corruption, making this anecdote unsurprising.

Regardless of the veracity of vote-buying allegations, parties clearly have failed to engage voters other than during the campaign. Only 28 percent of Roma and 38 percent of non-Roma who responded to NDI’s poll reported that political parties have visited their communities outside of election time.

While parties do a poor job of conducting meaningful outreach to voters across the board, they are particularly negligent toward Romani constituents. In April 2009, the youth branch of the PNL voted to establish a new department focused solely on Human Rights, under the supervision of a vice president of the organization. Though this new department has developed an action plan, it has yet to identify strategic plans for targeting and incorporating minorities. Another party, the PSD, does have a Department of Equal Opportunity, with similar departments at the *judet* level, though not in every *judet* and with varying degrees of activity. The leader of the department’s subcommittee on Roma issues resigned several years ago, citing a lack of support and inactivity, and a replacement for his position is now under negotiation. It is hoped that a new Romani activist may take this position, bringing renewed enthusiasm to the post. One PSD branch in Galati, with funding from the *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, conducts training for Romani elected officials but has not developed a database to track Roma members, elected officials, or activities targeted at Roma. This is a missed opportunity to engage a potential block of voters in a meaningful way.

Support for Roma Candidates and the Roma Party

As far as NDI could tell, only two mainstream parties ran Roma candidates in the 2008 parliamentary elections, the PSD and the PNL. Among the challenges these candidates faced was securing a “winnable district.” One Romani candidate, the former head of the National Agency for Roma and a high profile political figure, was slated to run in a district of Bucharest with a large Roma population, although it was not his home town. Educated, sophisticated, and integrated, he was perceived as an urban outsider who had a hard time gaining trust from the district’s poor, largely illiterate population. Another Romani candidate reported getting little to no help from party headquarters, particularly in terms of training and resources. One observer speculated that the mainstream parties view Romani candidates as a risk with their base and do not want to draw too much

²⁷ After reports of vote-buying in 2008, Interior Minister Cristian David launched an investigation, claiming that there was “real evidences that the vote was influenced.” No charges resulted from this investigation.

attention to them. They allegedly view these candidacies as favors to individual Roma and do not seriously assist in getting them elected.

When it comes to local elections, the story is not significantly different. Although the team was told that mainstream parties ran “many” Roma candidates, men and women, for local council seats, no hard numbers are available to back up this claim. Further, the success rate of Romani candidates at the local level is questionable. Although the Roma Party saw two mayors and 202 local councilors win office in 2008, many communities with majority Roma populations do not have majority representation at city hall.

Some branches of the Roma Party, including a branch that NDI worked with in Braila, are quite active at the local level. For example, with NDI’s assistance, the Braila branch of the Roma Party developed a *judet* strategy for organizational management and membership recruitment. Following this, they completed an advocacy campaign, with additional aid from Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe),²⁸ to encourage local involvement in community development projects. However, this success story stands out against other local branches, where strong leaders have hindered the success of various branches by hoarding power. In many cases, this has alienated Roma, and resulted in Roma joining and even forming local branches of other political parties and competing against the Roma Party in elections. What remains unclear is how much support these local branches get from party headquarters and to what degree they are used by the party to compete for Romani votes.

In NDI’s focus groups, both Roma and non-Roma respondents were divided as to the importance of a candidate’s ethnic background. Some deemed it less relevant than a candidate’s track record, while others felt that it was a distinct positive or negative. Some Roma felt that a Romani candidate would better understand their problems and would be able to better communicate with them. Other Roma claimed they would rather vote for a Romanian, perceiving their own ethnic group as more corrupt. And some non-Roma respondents found it unacceptable to vote for a Roma candidate, preferring an ethnic Romanian or even Hungarian, noting that “Hungarians are educated people.”

Based on the respondents’ underlying rationale for voting choices, both ethnic groups would seem to be willing to overlook a Romani candidate’s perceived negatives were the right candidate to run in the right district for the right party. In other words, an educated,

“[Ethnicity] doesn’t count; all that counts is the candidate ... if s/he did something good in the past.”

– Non-Roma woman, Petrosani
NDI Focus Group, July 2009

known, and trusted Romani candidate who ran with a mainstream party that was able to articulate a clear position on the issues important to voters might stand a chance of being successful among Roma and non-Roma alike.

²⁸ CeRe supports NGOs and public institutions in Romania in supporting public participation. In CeRe’s vision, NGOs, citizens, and public institutions assume responsibility for public participation. For more information, please consult their website at <http://www.ce-re.ro>.

In this context, mainstream parties might consider more seriously the prospect of running Romani candidates in certain districts, while the Roma Party would benefit from reviewing both its candidate lists and its platform to ensure its responsiveness to the party's supporters and voters. Although the Roma Party remains the second most popular party among Roma, it edged out the PDL by only one percentage point in NDI's poll.²⁹ It is losing votes, according to party leader Paun, who cited a steady decrease in turnout over the five elections during the past 16 years. In the 2008 parliamentary election, the Roma Party received less than 10 percent of what Paun claimed were 700,000 potential Roma votes.

The party believes that it is losing votes to mainstream parties, a claim backed up by at least one Romani NGO leader, who believes that rampant vote-buying among all the parties has increased voter turnout among Roma, as well as diversified their votes. The introduction of the new electoral system also may have contributed to the loss of Roma Party votes in the most recent election, as Roma are widely dispersed across numerous electoral districts. Nonetheless, the party's declining numbers even in local elections indicate a significant loss of support for the party among its base.

D. Civil Society

Civil society³⁰ offers some of the most promising examples of political participation across the board and has the most potential to break down existing barriers as concerns the Roma community. Some standout organizations include CeRe, Pro Democracy, and *Romani Criss*,³¹ all of which have gained national prominence, are financially sustainable, and have had significant impact on their defined constituencies. Local service providers also are doing a good job to fill in the gaps left by government and improve living conditions. Nonetheless, civil society generally and Roma groups more specifically either lack or do not fully utilize professional networks to share best practices and lessons learned and avoid overlap. Issue-based coalitions, particularly among Roma and with other ethnic groups, are neither prevalent nor generally effective. Finally, Roma civil society needs to do a better job of politically engaging in a representative and constructive manner.

Based on the assessment team's research, few Romani NGOs have any legislative influence to speak of – the result of numerous factors. First, most seem to focus on public awareness and service provision, rather than advocating and influencing policy. Second,

²⁹ This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the PDL ran no Romani candidates in parliamentary elections in 2008 and has done, perhaps, the least outreach to Romani voters of any national interest party. Presumably, the party could better capitalize on its popularity among Roma were it to make a concerted effort to address their issues or run more Romani candidates.

³⁰ Although the term "civil society" refers to a broad range of formal and informal associations among citizens, this assessment's focus was largely limited to NGOs. NDI recognizes that informal citizen participation is a vital part of a democratic society, but was unable to examine this subject more broadly due to constraints of time and resources.

³¹ *Romani Criss* is a Romanian NGO that seeks to protect the rights of the country's Romani minority and to prevent discrimination against Roma. It conducts projects to improve the situation of the Roma, largely with a focus on education and health care. Please see <http://www.romanicriss.org/> for more information.

they often lack genuine constituencies, focusing their efforts on building a client base among donors rather than broad-based support among voters on whose behalf they could speak. Finally, their lack of political clout stems at least in part from their inability or unwillingness to form effective issue-based coalitions that could present a more powerful force with a unified message.

“Romania does not have any real civic education. They need to start in the schools to change people’s mentality and teach the values and responsibilities of citizenship. Our educational system does not teach critical thinking.”

– NGO leader, Bucharest
NDI Assessment Mission, July 2009

Further, the assessment team noted a strong preference among many NGOs, Roma and non-Roma alike, not to be “tainted” by engagement in what they perceive as politics – virtually any activity that requires them to partner with public officials. Endorsement

of candidates is anathema; although both of the Romani candidates who ran with mainstream parties in the 2008 parliamentary elections had come from civil society and had strong connections there, they were unendorsed and virtually unassisted by any Romani NGOs, including the ones that they once led.

Nor did the assessment team find many civic activism programs around political participation. The assessment team found little evidence of widespread or effective GOTV and voter education campaigns conducted by Romani organizations either to inform Roma of the electoral reforms or to counter the pervasive vote-buying that has been alleged.

Perhaps partly because of their low profile, NGOs are a largely unknown quantity to the Romanian public, regardless of ethnicity. According to NDI’s poll, roughly 25 percent of non-Roma and more than 50 percent of Roma did not know how to describe NGOs. Approximately 90 percent of both Roma and non-Roma indicated that they had rare or very rare contact with NGOs. In the past year, more than 80 percent of all respondents had not belonged to or participated in any community organizations, including trade unions, youth groups, interests groups, and NGOs. Only a few of NDI’s focus group participants indicated that they volunteered in NGO programs, with Roma less inclined to be involved. Yet, the overall majority of respondents claimed that, if asked, they would volunteer for children’s programs, educational and cultural programs, and animal protection programs.

This suggests that civil society is underutilizing volunteers and would benefit from more effective outreach to both Roma and non-Roma. It also suggests that NGOs are not focusing on the issues that matter most to the public, which attributes to the firmly held perceptions found in NDI’s public opinion research that NGOs are “corrupt” and “only out to make money.” NGOs that address Roma problems were perceived positively by Roma focus group respondents, with *Romani Criss* and Association *Thumende*³²

³² Association *Thumende* Valea Jiului is a multiethnic nongovernmental organization established in 2001 in Petrosani in western Romania. *Thumende* is dedicated to civic activism among Roma, providing human

specifically mentioned as good examples. Roma respondents were able to cite several successful cultural and educational programs and programs for children, but felt that NGOs should be more involved in their communities and visit Roma neighborhoods more often.

Romani NGOs, like many CSOs, are challenged by a lack of financial and human resources and spend a lot of time chasing funds. They are particularly challenged to fund operational costs, which are often excluded from grants. The 10 percent cost-share requirement to receive EU structural funds presents a major restriction, rendering many groups unable to take advantage of available resources.

Furthermore, Romania, like many countries in Europe, particularly in the east, does not have a strong tradition of either volunteerism or public giving, or a strong enough economy to support significant contributions from the private sector. This leaves civil society – particularly organizations with less public appeal such as those delving into political participation issues – almost entirely dependent upon foreign grants or government funds.

Finally, as noted above, Romani NGOs have yet to master the art of forming strong issue-based alliances in order to speak with a unified voice. Disunity characterizes the few efforts that have been made to assemble a cross-sector, nationwide coalition that would demand the attention of the wider population and usher in a genuine civil rights movement. One well-funded attempt to unite Roma NGOs in a single alliance to influence legislative and electoral politics, has suffered numerous leadership turnovers and changes in direction, with its potential yet to be realized. The group's young leaders, even with outside assistance, have been unable to articulate a common vision, much less decide who is most qualified to carry it out. One Roma activist joked that Romani cars need a steering wheel for every passenger, as no one wants to relinquish control.

Nor have they had better success working with non-Roma organizations. Their issues seem to be marginalized, despite the fact that they might find common cause on a number of issues with children's advocates, women's rights groups, health care organizations, and the like. The ability to work across ethnic lines and to find common ground on specific issues would multiply the impact of groups on both sides immeasurably and would go a long way toward demonstrating the benefits of inter-ethnic cooperation.

E. Public Opinion and Roma Communities

Attitudes toward Roma

According to the head of the Department for Interethnic Relations, a pair of surveys that it conducted in 2007 showed that hostility toward Roma is “not spreading wider but growing deeper.” In other words, the number of people who feel hostile toward Roma has not increased, but the hostility is more intense. While this information may be outdated,

rights education, encouraging respect for human rights, and advocating for Roma issues before local government institutions.

trends throughout the Central and Eastern European region suggest some validity to the claim. The general impression among both Roma and non-Roma who participated in NDI's focus groups was that relations between the ethnic groups are getting worse.

"We need innovative solutions to prevent conflict and anticipate problems, bringing together Roma and non-Roma on the local level."

– Public official, Bucharest
NDI Assessment Mission, July 2009

Although relations between the ethnic groups are not good, no one with whom the assessment team met believed them to be as bad as in countries to the north. Everyone with whom the team met insisted that the type of neo-

Nazi demonstrations and targeted violence against Roma that have occurred in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia would not happen in Romania. Even the recent episode in Harghita County, in which ethnic Hungarians clashed with Roma, was perceived by some experts to be more of a localized incident than a harbinger of widespread extremism on the rise.

The assessment team's experience in the town of Petrosani demonstrated that working together toward shared interests can play an important role in easing ethnic tensions, in this case a mining community where survival underground depends upon cooperation. Still, the ethnic tensions between Roma, Hungarians, and ethnic Romanians must not be ignored, particularly in times of increasing economic hardship. While Romania has had less of the violent conflict seen elsewhere this past year, the *Financial Times* speculated in August 2009 that it "may have a full-blown social crisis to contend with if the current trickle of Romanians returning home from Italy and Spain becomes a flood as the construction industry in southern Europe goes sour."

Based on the NCCD's caseload and research conducted during this assessment, discrimination against Roma remains persistent in Romania. In NDI's focus groups, many Roma participants felt discriminated against in the job market, access to education,

"They call you 'gypsy' everywhere you go. When you get on a bus, they avoid you and take precautions, they say, 'A gypsy got on the bus!'."

– Roma man, Soldanu
NDI's focus group, July 2009

and public health institutions. The main reason for being discriminated against, in their view, was "simply being Roma." Improving the overall sense of equality and social acceptance among Roma is a critical

component to improving their political participation. If Roma children start their lives feeling – and perhaps genuinely being – unwelcome in the classroom, one cannot expect that they will ever feel welcome in the parliament.

Attitudes and Values among Roma

One of the greatest barriers to Roma participation in political and public life comes from within the community itself. The legacy of distrust, following centuries of slavery, discrimination, and deportation to concentration camps, cannot be underestimated. The

community often isolates itself, understandably, from governing institutions that do not always work in its interest and other communities that have historically shunned it. A collective pride in their culture and traditions, as well as the sort of individual pride that avoids social rejection, often keep Roma communities on the margins as they refuse to assimilate, integrate, or subject themselves to humiliation or servitude by others.

The traditional social structure of Roma communities presents a further barrier to those who do wish to integrate. Women, who are often under-represented in public life throughout Eastern Europe, are at a particular disadvantage. Traditionally regarded as subservient to men, Romani girls are often deemed to have no need for education and no right to choose their husbands, a distinct handicap given most women's dependence on their spouse and the general tolerance for domestic violence. Interestingly, some of the most accomplished civil society leaders and advocates in the Roma community are women who have obtained an education and come from more integrated communities.

In traditional Roma society, the informal leader, or *bulibasa*, rules the community, doling out justice and serving as a chokepoint for information flowing into and out of the community. Public officials as well as civil society and party activists generally deal with each community through the *bulibasa* who, according to some sources, decides which way the community should vote and at what price. One Roma civic leader indicated that some *bulibasi* had lost the trust of their people through vote trading that had failed to benefit their communities. However, they are the exception rather than the rule. With so much power, the stranglehold of the *bulibasa* over the community is difficult to break. The assessment team met several *bulibasi* who had been elected to local councils and could be identified by their large houses and luxury model cars.

In one Roma neighborhood outside of Iasi, the assessment team learned that the community was literally split down the middle to accommodate the two *bulibasi* who exercised distinct claims over territory and clans. This division is symptomatic of another barrier that Roma face within their own community – crippling disunity among leaders. Repeated interviewees, including many Roma, bemoaned the lack of organization and solidarity seen in other minority communities, most notably the Hungarians and Jews.

Finally, Roma in poorer, more isolated communities often fail to understand the connection between government services and participation in the system. One MP noted that his Romani constituents come to him with complaints that they have no electricity, not realizing that by building their homes without proper permits, the electric company may not even realize they are there and may not be able to service their homes. This pattern tends to further distance Roma from public institutions, as they perceive that they are not being served fairly, as opposed to acknowledging their own responsibility to take part in the system. This has an even deeper effect on more abstract political expression, such as voting, joining a political party, or attempting to influence public policy. Aside from believing that they are not being served by their government, Roma communities, not unlike citizens of all ethnicities throughout the post-communist world, feel they have no stake in it. Decades of life under a welfare mentality, with an expectation and even preference for the state to anticipate and take care of a citizen's every need, often prohibit

Roma from being more active initiators of public policy debate. When they interact with government or political parties, it is largely in the form of more direct bartering, asking their MPs to get the lights turned on or trading votes for oil and sugar.

Other Factors

The connection between poverty and political participation is a crucial one, since Roma have significantly higher poverty and illiteracy rates than any other demographic group in Romania. Clearly, poverty is a barrier as the struggle to earn a living and feed one's family, sometimes just to take care of basic hygienic needs, drains energy and detracts from a person's ability to engage in political activities that may not yield immediate benefit. Poverty leaves an already disenfranchised community more isolated and vulnerable to political manipulation. Unequal access to education, employment, housing, and health care complicates efforts to boost political participation, a critical element to solving the problems of Roma communities living on the margins of society.

Romania has demonstrated progress in the areas of education and health initiatives for Roma, but successful projects seem to be hit-or-miss rather than approached strategically and systematically. A former government official gave an example of one community in which he had required showers to be installed in the elementary school, despite a significant increase in maintenance costs, bearing in mind the Romani students coming from homes with no indoor plumbing. He presented the idea as a public health as well as an education issue and calculated the long-term cost-savings that would result. However, this success, as far as the official was aware, had not been repeated elsewhere in the county or possibly in the country. The assessment team's impression was that such successes are not necessarily shared systematically across the government, introduced as standard practice or policy, or proposed as legislation. In part, this is because Romania lacks system-wide channels of communication for comparing and standardizing best practices, but it is also partly due to a political culture that has not traditionally valued the sharing of information.

One of the barriers that had been noted in previous assessment reports in Romania and elsewhere was a lack of official documentation on the part of Roma who were reluctant to interact with the state. However, Romania has made significant progress in this area, and NDI found that 96 percent of Roma questioned in the poll possessed identity cards. While the lack of registration cards and other documents is still an issue, particularly with property deeds, building permits, and business licenses, the number of Roma who are completely off the official radar screen seems to have decreased in the last few years.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on a study of the existing public and official documents available at the time the assessment was conducted, as well as the assessment team's discussions and interviews. Across the board, the team recommends that efforts be continued by public and private entities on two fronts: to promote cooperation and understanding between the ethnic groups, particularly through shared interests and to make the alleviation of poverty and improvement of living standards among Roma a top priority. This is of paramount importance to staving off short-term tensions between Roma and other ethnic groups while building long-term self-sustainability within Roma communities.

More specific recommendations for domestic and international bodies follow below:

A. The Government and Parliament of Romania

Effective coordination between the various ministries regarding the drafting and implementation of public policies for Roma is essential. The Prime Minister should either be actively involved in the coordination of the inter-ministerial committee or nominate a high level official to do so.

Further, the Government of Romania should make the National Strategy a law, and uphold compliance with this law, to enhance the effectiveness of the Strategy and transform it into a valuable tool for addressing Roma issues.

All levels of government should increase funding to civil society to carry out the projects that they cannot or should not be conducting, and to augment government services, as with the health mediators program. This may require finding creative solutions for collecting revenue. Nonetheless, the government needs to establish mechanisms for safeguarding the autonomy of implementing NGOs that receive state funds and for ensuring transparency in the grant-making process.

Finally, the government needs to better promote the NCCD as a public service agency not only for Roma but for all groups that suffer discrimination. Other government agencies dealing with Roma inclusion, such as the NAR and the BJRs, should also be better resourced and better monitored.

Specific recommendations for individual ministries are as follows:

- The Ministry of Education should introduce enhanced civic education programs for all students, to better define the citizen's roles and responsibilities in a democratic state and to encourage broad-based political participation. The Ministry should also conduct its own assessment of schools in areas with high Roma populations, especially regarding the quality of the education, to cull best practices and begin institutionalizing them across the country. Other ministries (Labor, Health, etc.) should follow suit.

- The Ministry of Health, along with the Ministry of Education, should follow the Health and Education mediators' initial training and preparation with additional resources and development programs. These individuals serve as important community leaders and would benefit from better networks and support.
- The Ministry of Minorities is not necessarily in need of reestablishment in the view of the assessment team. Rather than a ministry to focus singularly on the situation within minority communities, the assessment team recommends that the government direct its attention toward developing campaigns that promote diversity and multiculturalism not only among citizens, but also among public administration staff. The Department for Interethnic Relations can play this role.
- The Ministry of Administration and the Interior should better evaluate, support, and coordinate the work of the BJRs and encourage, if not require, the more effective use of the mixed committees. It should also strengthen and build the capacity of the BJRs to take initiative and make decisions and use external auditors to evaluate their work. Finally, increased outreach to the Roma public, in coordination with the National Agency for Roma, is needed to make the target communities more aware of the BJR's services.

The National Agency for Roma

The NAR is in need of both resources and restructuring, both internally and as part of the government, if it is to fulfill its mission of coordinating and supervising the implementation of the National Strategy and the government's commitments under the Decade of Roma Inclusion. More specifically, the assessment team recommends that the NAR:

- Revises the National Strategy and actively promotes the government's commitment to public policy measures within the Strategy, in consultation with civil society. For this, a long term strategy is needed that will outlast the tenure of a single leader. It should also actively use the existing methodology and tools for evaluating and monitoring the progress of policies for Roma.
- Be given the authority and budget to supervise the work of other ministries in regard to implementing the Strategy. While some have recommended that it report to parliament, the assessment team would not concur with that recommendation as it would potentially increase the politicization of the NAR's leadership.
- Be endowed with staff stability through a system of civil service appointments that may be part of a broader administrative reform in the government.
- Engages in more partnerships with civil society and local public administration, particularly as a means of bolstering the authority and resources of the local experts in the mayors' offices.
- Provides structured support for the local experts in the mayors' offices, particularly a channel of information to combat their isolation and to share best practices.
- Considers initiating voluntary collection of data regarding the number of Roma who run for and attain elected office, hold voter registration cards and other official documents, and trends among Roma in regard to civic participation.

Parliament

The Minority Caucus is an underutilized resource in the parliament that could do more to promote Roma issues in the context of broader minority interests. Among the ways it could better serve the Roma community are the following recommendations:

- Utilize issues of common interest to forge temporary alliances with mainstream parties and build broad-based support for legislative proposals and actions.
- Initiate additional and more effective legislation on frontline issues like education, health care, and housing that are of primary concern to Roma voters.
- Propose the reform of party registration and election laws in order to encourage competition for reserved minority seats and allow “minority organizations” to become genuine political parties. The current ban on “ethnic parties”, which effectively exists already through the minority NGOs that run candidates, should be re-examined with a critical eye. NGOs, when they stand in for political parties, are at odds with their role as public interest watchdogs.

B. Political Parties

Mainstream Parties

Romania’s largest political parties uniformly demonstrate a lack of political will to resolve or even acknowledge the gravity of the problems facing the Roma community. Aside from the most superficial treatment or extreme nationalist statements, most parties ignore Roma and their issues. The time has come for political parties to pay genuine attention to this large and growing constituency and to respond to the needs of Roma, not only as voters but as citizens. The crippling poverty and underdevelopment in Roma communities affects the entire population and needs to be made a priority.

The next general elections will not take place until 2012, which gives the parties a long lead time to win back disenchanted voters of all ethnicities by demonstrating their commitment to public service rather than private gain. They can do this in several ways:

- Develop strategies for more effective outreach to supporters and constituents outside of campaign season to develop long-term dialogue. While this should be done with voters across the board, special attention should be paid to Roma communities that have noted particular lack of communication between elections. This should include grass-roots canvassing in Romani neighborhoods, along with high-level leaders addressing prominent Romani civic organizations.
- Designate a respected party member to be responsible for liaison to the Roma communities and Romani NGOs, taking a cooperative approach to problem solving and reporting back to leadership. This position should be given resources to do the job and be held accountable for performance.
- Begin tracking both voting and membership demographics to better target Roma supporters and potential members and candidates.

- Devote time and resources to researching public opinion and policy options on various issues concerning Roma communities.
- Create planks in their platforms that respond to Roma issues with serious and well crafted legislative and policy solutions.
- Identify talented, educated Roma to run for office in their home districts, particularly for local elections, and support their campaigns.

The Roma Party

If the Roma Party wishes to reverse its trend of declining support, it will need to convince Romani voters that it does not take them for granted but, rather, genuinely represents their interests. While the party may continue to hold the one set-aside seat for Roma, it will never gain greater representation and may, at some point in the future, face challenges from another Roma party, should the electoral laws change or enough Roma band together to present a serious challenge. Romani politicians, regardless of their party affiliation, will need to develop more responsive policymaking if they are to gain or win back the waning support of voters. They can do this in several ways:

- Develop more robust constituency outreach efforts that go beyond election campaigns to genuinely listen to voters' concerns through surveys and town hall style meetings.
- Reinvigorate the party with new members and branch leaders, seek their input, and involve them more actively in decision-making at the center.
- Look to the younger generation for candidates, particularly at the local level, and find training opportunities for them.
- Serve as a more vocal champion of Roma communities through the Human Rights Committee, calling for legislative or investigative hearings in cases of discrimination, government wrongdoing, or interethnic conflict.

C. Civil Society

Civil Society, including both Roma and non-Roma NGOs, has an important role to play in breaking down the barriers that prevent Roma from fully engaging in political life. Among the recommended actions that it can take are the following:

- Open the debate on voluntary ethnic data collection, as has begun to happen in Slovakia and other countries. Decisions on whether and how to collect such information needs to be made by Romanians, of all ethnicities, but requires a catalyst to spark the discussion, gather broad public input, and provide comparative examples from which to draw.
- Develop civic education projects targeted at Roma communities, highlighting a citizen's rights, roles, and responsibilities, in order to counteract attitudes within the community about leadership and participation. Roma NGOs should develop programs that particularly encourage shared leadership and community decision-making, rather than dependence upon a single leader with unchallenged authority.

- Train young and educated Roma in the skills of negotiation, communication, advocacy, policy making and governance to develop a new generation of leaders.
- Develop more vigorous outreach to tap into potential volunteers for involvement in local projects, particularly those that directly benefit the community.
- Conduct local development and community organizing projects that bring together Roma and non-Roma to demonstrate the practical benefits of inter-ethnic cooperation and help to prevent conflict.
- Review and propose reforms to the electoral law's required membership in the National Council for Minorities for minority organizations wishing to field candidates, along with the eligibility criteria for a seat in the Council. This would open the way for broader competition among minority organizations and reinvigorate minority participation.
- Engage constructively with parliament, local councils, and government agencies at all levels by clearly articulating policy options and utilizing citizen initiatives to promote a defined legislative agenda.
- Coordinate and network more effectively, both among Romani NGOs and across ethnic lines, to share best practices and lessons learned, maximize resources, avoid duplication of projects, and develop more effective issue-based coalitions.
- Provide venues for political leaders to address Roma constituents through town hall meetings, public debates, and membership meetings.
- Work within international networks and coalitions to examine the laws of Romania and their application; determine potential conflict with the laws of the EU, Council of Europe, and the UN; and make full use of international courts in Luxembourg, Strasbourg, and The Hague to challenge those laws, correct wrong doing, and gain financial or other concessions from the Romanian government.
- Provide targeted training for Roma elected to local office, particularly but not only those serving their first term. This should include tools for good governance, better understanding of how local councils work, and the role and responsibility of a local councilor, as well as skills building in areas such as drafting, debate, coalition building, strategic planning, and so forth.

D. EU/International Community

The assessment team recognizes that many EU member states, not only new ones, along with countries around the world, share these challenges regarding minority communities and Roma in particular. Thus the approach from the international community needs to be one of collaboration with a view toward problem solving and joint development.

Among the most important things that the international community can do is simply to stay engaged. When one Roma local official was asked what the international community could do to help, her response was, "Do this, what you're doing now. Just come here and see what is happening. That way we know that someone is paying attention."

Some of the more concrete recommended measures that the European Union and members of the International Community can take include the following:

- The EU must continue to hold the Romanian government accountable to the treaties and agreements it has signed regarding human rights and freedoms.
- The EU should formulate guidelines and benchmarks for structural funding with a view to improving accessibility and strengthening the impact on Roma inclusion in a way complementary to the Decade of Roma Inclusion. It should specifically address the low absorption of available funds in Romania.
- The EU should examine the possibility of making an exception in the case of Roma to the subsidiary principle that is applied to minority policy in member states, noting that Roma are a special minority due to the trans-border character of their population and their lack of a homeland.
- The proposed European Commission portfolio for fundamental rights and anti-discrimination, should this be confirmed, should be tasked explicitly with coordination of policies for Roma Inclusion.
- European party groups should work with sister parties on sharing best practices, both broadly (in terms of platform development, policy research, and internal democracy) and specific to minorities (targeted outreach, policy examples). Something like the proposed PES pro-minority charter, for example, can play a stimulating role in encouraging political parties to be more inclusive and to take clearer positions on minority issues.
- Donors should fund projects – through domestic and international NGOs – to improve Roma inclusion as well as living conditions, with special emphasis on reducing the identified barriers to political participation.
- Donors should balance the need to take risks on innovative projects that may fail against a more rigorous approach to evaluation and oversight of expenditures. Reports and written bench-marks are not enough; regular site visits are needed to verify the effectiveness of projects and the efficiency of funds spent.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the six years since NDI conducted its 2003 assessment of Roma political participation, definite progress can be seen in a number of areas. A growing number of Roma at all levels speak out on issues that concern their community, and have more resources from which to draw. The government has put into place institutional mechanisms to assist Roma, which, even if they are not functioning as they should, at least provide a starting point for addressing Roma issues. The National Strategy and the Decade's National Action Plan are also a net plus, despite problems with implementation.

However, much remains to be done before Roma can be considered full and active participants in Romania's political system. While a lot is happening on the ground, examples of success largely appear to be singular rather than systemic, individual rather than institutional. Implementation of policy, particularly around the Strategy, is inconsistent. Standards and best practices are applied erratically.

Some of the barriers to Roma participation are structural, as they relate to elections and parliamentary representation, the effectiveness of the NAR, NCCD, BJRs, and local mayoral experts. These can be addressed in large part through budgeting or legislative reform, provided the political will exists. However, social attitudes toward and among Roma present more significant barriers that inhibit robust party outreach and policy debate as well as citizen engagement on the part of Roma themselves. These attitudinal and motivational barriers will require a long-term commitment to address and resolve.

Although this assessment was specific to Romania, the issues are hardly unique to one country. This report should be examined in a regional context and recommendations applied where applicable to countries throughout the region and in wider Europe.

Most important, this assessment will only be as useful as the follow-on work that comes next. Continued attention must be paid to Roma issues and projects crafted that respond to the recommendations noted above.

Appendix I

ROMA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



Democratic Challenges and Opportunities

The Roma comprise a sizeable and growing percentage of the population in Central and Eastern Europe—up to 10 percent in some countries—but are grossly under-represented in politics and government. Since the collapse of communism, Roma have been unable to participate in their countries' democratic institutions to solve widespread economic, social, and human rights problems that disproportionately afflict their communities. Active political participation—voting in elections, securing government representation, and advocating for their interests—offers the best way for Roma to improve their social status and material conditions.



Anti-Roma remarks by Romania's leadership led to peaceful protests that earned widespread media coverage and elicited a public apology. NDI is assisting Roma across Central and Eastern Europe to advocate for anti-discrimination measures and stronger government action on policies affecting Roma communities.

NDI's Democracy Support Program

Since 2004, NDI has implemented a regional Roma initiative, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, with supplementary support provided by the Open Society Institute and the Council of Europe. The aim of the initiative is to develop a skilled group of Romani activists who can add political expertise to parties, government and civil society and use elected and appointed office to influence policies affecting Roma. The initiative is centered in Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia.

The initiative's core component has been a political leadership training series in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, respectively, extended to Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia in 2008. NDI is also training Romani candidates and elected officials; providing technical assistance to Romani NGOs on how to advocate constructively on their issues before parliament and ministries; organizing Roma student internships with national legislatures and political parties, conducting comparative and public opinion research on Roma political integration; and encouraging events that connect political and government officials and Romani activists to discuss policy ideas. To enhance cross-border knowledge sharing, NDI holds annual regional training events for skilled activists. NDI estimates that some 400 Roma activists have passed through the initiative.

Roma working with NDI are increasingly using the political process to address problems in their communities. In Slovakia, 2006 local elections resulted in an almost 40 percent increase in the number of Romani local councilors, many of whom were trained by NDI or program graduates. Aided by NDI, *Amalipe* in Bulgaria and the Roma Public Policy Institute in Slovakia, have successfully advocated for more effective policies and greater resources for Roma-related assistance. In Romania, a number of NDI's training series graduates led voter outreach to Romani communities for mainstream party candidates in 2008 parliamentary elections. As a result, the elected MPs are cooperating with these Romani activists to craft local development strategies to improve the situation of Roma in their communities.

For more information on NDI's Roma programs, please contact Catherine Messina Pajic at cpajic@ndi.org or Nadia Mouzykina at nmouzykina@ndi.org

Appendix II

ASSESSMENT TEAM BIOGRAPHIES

Jan Marinus Wiersma is a former Member of the European Parliament (1994-2009). A member of the Dutch Labor Party and vice-chair of the Socialist Group, he sat on the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs. Wiersma was also a European Parliament Rapporteur for the accession of Slovakia to the EU (1999-2004). From this position he actively pushed for the recognition of Roma issues in the accession process of Slovakia and all other then EU candidate member states. With a Masters degree in History from the University of Groningen, Wiersma has written extensively on Roma issues and been a long-term advocate for Roma rights in the European Parliament. Over the past eight years, Wiersma has focused on improving the quality of recently formed democracies in Central Europe and Eastern Europe. In 2008, he published a publication entitled *Democracy, Populism and Minority Rights* (ed.) with co-vice chair of the Socialist Group Hannes Swoboda, which among others addresses Roma issues. At present, Wiersma is a Research Fellow at the Wiardi Beckman Foundation, President of the Spolu International Foundation to improve the socio-economic position of Roma communities, and Treasurer of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity.

Monica Călușer is a Program Coordinator at the Ethnocultural Diversity Resource Center in Cluj-Napoca, which focuses on improving Romania's interethnic climate and promoting the principles of ethnocultural peace and justice. Călușer has professional experience with public opinion polling, and has concentrated on Romanian politics, voting behaviors, and prejudice. Specifically, she participated in a national conference on "Stereotype and Discrimination: The Image of Roma in Print Media." Călușer has a B.A. in Political Science from Babes-Bolyai University and an M.A. in Politics and Political Economy of the Post-Communist Transition from Central European University in Budapest, where she wrote her thesis on "The Electorate of the Extreme Right: The Case of Greater Romania Party."

Catherine Messina Pajic is the Deputy Regional Director of Central and Eastern Europe programs at NDI. In this capacity, Pajic has focused largely on Roma issues, while also overseeing programs to strengthen democracy throughout the region. Before joining NDI in 2002, Ms. Pajic conceptualized, designed and managed a portfolio of international exchange programs throughout the region for National Forum Foundation (which has since joined forces with Freedom House). She lived for two years each in Warsaw and Belgrade, where she worked as a free-lance consultant for international as well as domestic organizations. In addition, she has experience as a fundraiser and development officer for an animal rights advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. She earned a B.S. in mass communication from Boston University, and an M.A. in Russian Area Studies from Georgetown University.

Alice Ratyis is the resident representative of NDI in Romania. Ratyis graduated with a degree in journalism and gained experience in effective communication and strategic planning while acting as an NGO activist for many years. After graduating, she worked as a councilor of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, where she learned the inner-workings of a political organization. Working for NDI as a political party

trainer and later as a freelance consultant, she also gained experience working with political parties from Romania and throughout Europe. In addition, she has experience in campaigning in Romania, Hungary, Macedonia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Florian Eugen Ștefan is a Romani political activist from Arad, Romania, involved in addressing Roma issues at the local level since 1997. An NDI alumnus with numerous initiatives concerning the local Roma communities, Ștefan is also a founding member of the political party Alliance for Romania, and has held several leadership positions both locally and nationally within the youth and senior structures. In 2000, Ștefan joined the Social Democrat Party (PSD), serving as the leader of the organization at the Arad county level, and also as a member within the PSD Committee on Equal Opportunities. Ștefan is currently the President of the Millennium Center Association from Arad, which emphasizes the importance of youth and their aspirations in the Romanian society, as well as promotes democracy by focusing on human rights and anti-discrimination.

Iulian Stoian is the Executive Director with the Roma Civic Alliance of Romania, an advocacy network of 16 Roma NGOs active in the field of Roma inclusion, acting as Decade Watch under the initiative “Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2010.” Formerly he was a Programs Director within NDI Romania, piloting for two years the Roma Political Participation Program. He also has a rich professional experience in EU affairs, while serving as a Public Service Coordinator and Public Information Officer within the Information Center of the European Commission in Romania. Stoian holds a B.Sc. in Chemistry, post-graduate specialization in Project Management and a Masters’ degree (LL.M.) in EU Law, with a focus on the European Social Law and EU Social Policy. In the last 10 years he was involved extensively in various European projects as well as in delivering training programs for Romani NGOs in Romania. A dedicated human rights activist, he volunteered for some NGOs dealing with vulnerable groups, such as LGBT and Roma minorities, within several advocacy projects in the field of anti-discrimination.

Appendix III

ASSESSMENT MISSION MEETINGS AND TARGETED INTERVIEWS

<i>Nongovernment Organizations:</i>	<i>Representative:</i>
Asociatia Pro Democratia	Cristian Pirvulescu, President
Center for Independent Journalism	Ioana Avădani, President
Center for Urban and Regional Sociology (CURS)	Catalin Stoica, General Manager
Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe)	Ioana Popa, PR Coordinator
	Cristina Tătaru, Consultant
E-Civis	Ana-Maria Moşneagu, Director
Împreună Agency for Community Development	Gelu Duminică, Executive Director
National Council for Combating Discrimination	Dezideriu Gergely, Member
NDI	Florin Manole, Advisory Board Member
Roma Education Fund	Costel Bercuş, NDI alumnus, former PSD candidate
Romani Criss	Magda Matache, Executive Director
Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities	Iulius Rostas, Researcher
	Georgeta Stanciu, NDI alumna
Romanitin – Roma Students and Youth Association	Dinu Iulian, President
Thumende Association	Cristinela Ionescu, NDI alumna
	Sorin Vana, NDI trainee
Ursari Roma Association	Viorel Motaş, President
<i>Government:</i>	<i>Representative:</i>
BJR Sibiu	Iulian Preda, Councilor
	Florin Cioabă, King of Roma
	Mariea Ionescu, Freelance consultant
Community Association Amaroilo	Daniela Rusu, President
Constituency Office of Cristian Adomniţei (PNL)	Mădălina Tudose, Councilor, Staff Member
Constituency Office of Raluca Turcan (PDL)	Mirela Baltoiu, Councilor, Staff Member
Department for Interethnic Relations	Attila Marko, Secretary of State
Judet Agency for Employment Iaşi	Florin Mantu, Career Adviser
Judet School Inspectorate	Elena Motaş, Scholar Inspector for Roma
Local Council Târnava	Giuliano Cojocar, Independent Local Councilor, NDI alumnus
	Adrian Biri, Roma Party Local Councilor

	Găban Nicolae, Mayor of Tarnava
Mayor's Office Iași	Remus Sava, Expert on Roma issues within the Mayor's Office
	Feri Stănescu, Roma leader
	Ferdinand Stănescu, Roma leader
Mayor's Office Moțca	Arteni Costel, Mayor
	Gigi Cercel, Expert within the Mayor's Office on Roma issues
	Nicoleta, Health Mediator
National Agency for Roma	Laurențiu Iapornicu, President
	Grigore Mihai, Expert
Prefecture Iași	Victorel Lupu, Prefect
	Romeo Chelaru, Director of the Prefect's Office
	Mihai Popescu, Câtea Vasile, Directors
	Ferdinand Stănescu, Roma leader
Presidential Administration Department for Minorities	Peter Eckstein Kovacs, Presidential Councilor for Minorities
<i>Political Parties:</i>	<i>Representative:</i>
PDL Iași	Maria Cabalău, President of Women branch
	Laura Balanovici, Local Councilor, PD-L
PNL Bucharest	Ben-Oni Ardelean, PNL Chamber of Deputies and MEP candidate
	Theodora Bertzi, Deputy Secretary General
PNL Iași	Cristian Adomniței, MP, Chamber of Deputies
	Former Minister of Education and Youth
PSD Bucharest	Maria Lazar, Secretary General of PSD Women and Head of PSD Equal Opportunities Department
PSD Mediaș	Viorel Arcaș, MP, Senator
	Ilie Lața, Local Councilor, Vice President PSD local branch
PSD Petroșani	Cristian Resmeriță, MP, Chamber of Deputies
PSD Sibiu City	Gheorghe Suditu, President Sibiu City Branch
	Ciobică, Member, Advisor to President Geoană on minority issues
Roma Party Iași	Roman Ștefan, President of Județ Iași Branch
	Dumitru Chiriac, President of Târgu Frumos Branch

Roma Party Pro-Europe Bucharest	Nicolae Păun, President
	Ilie Dincă, Secretary General
	Iulian Paraschiv, Councilor of Mr. Păun
UDMR Bucharest	Verestoy Attila, MP, Senator
<i>Other:</i>	<i>Representative:</i>
Local School, Moțca	Vasilica Borș, Headmistress

Appendix IV



Center for Urban and Regional Sociology

CURS

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NDI's Roma Assessment Study 2009: The Analysis of Focus-Groups Main Results

July, 2009

FOCUS-GROUPS' ANALYSIS: MAIN RESULTS

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1. METHODOLOGICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Roma are one of the largest and most marginalized ethnic minorities in Europe and the second largest ethnic minority in Romania. In Romania (among other countries) Roma suffer disproportionately from chronic unemployment, segregation and discrimination that limit their access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare. All of these problems have also been triggered by Roma's lack of a strong political class and severe under-representation in political structures, particularly in elected office.

In 2004, NDI launched a multi-year regional initiative to increase Roma's political participation, which was expanded to include Romania in 2006. The program's long-term goal is to build a critical mass of Roma in each country able to effectively integrate into and participate in local, national, and regional politics. This project aims to assess the institutional and motivational barriers to Roma political participation by means of survey and qualitative research. At the request of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the Center for Urban and Regional Sociology conducted 12 focus-groups within NDI's Project "Roma Assessment Study: Romania, 2009".

The focus-group agenda (or script) was developed by NDI's expert Carlo Binda and it was discussed with CURS' experts and moderators on June, 24, 2009 in Bucharest. The major themes included in the focus-group agenda dealt with general evaluations of Romania's current situation, identity and inter-ethnic relations, civic participation, political participation, voting behavior, perceptions of public institutions, political leaders, and NGOs.

The target groups for this qualitative study were defined by NDI's representative in Romania Alice Ratyis and by NDI's survey expert Christine Qurik based on the results of a nationwide opinion poll conducted by CURS for NDI in March and April, 2009, within the same program.¹ Specifically, our target groups were:

- 1) integrated Roma (defined as Roma who have at least primary school and are employed);
- 2) non-integrated Roma;
- 3) non-Roma (Romanians and ethnic Hungarians, living in communities/cities along with Roma).

CURS' interviewers selected the participants to the focus-group discussions based on the criteria mentioned previously. The locations for conducting these focus-groups were chosen by NDI's representatives and included both urban and rural areas, in different Romanian regions. The focus-groups were conducted between June 25 and June 28, 2009 and they were moderated by CURS' experts. Table 1 presents the composition, dates, and locations of the focus-groups.

¹ The survey was conducted on two nationwide samples as follows: 1) a sample of 600 adult non-Roma respondents; 2) a sample of 800 adult Roma, living in compact communities (i.e., communities with at least 20 Roma living in a compact area). The sampling methodology is described in the report submitted to NDI for the quantitative component of the NDI's Roma Assessment Study, 2009.

Table 1. Locations, Composition, and Dates of the 12 Focus-Groups (Romania).

<i>Location</i>	<i>Composition</i>	<i>Dates</i>
Bucharest (Urban)	Integrated urban Roma (men), age 35 years and older; 8 participants;	June 25, 2009
Bucharest (Urban)	Integrated urban Roma (women), age 35 years and older; 7 participants;	June 25, 2009
Bucharest (Urban)	Non-Roma mixed (4 -males, 5- females), age 35 years and older; employed; 9 participants	June 25, 2009
Soldanu (rural), Calarasi County	Non-integrated, Roma men; younger than 35 years; 10 participants;	June 26, 2009
Soldanu (rural), Calarasi County	Non-integrated Roma women, younger than 35 years; 10 participants	June 26, 2009
Soldanu (rural), Calarasi County	Non-Roma mixed (6-males, 5-females) under 35 years; 11 participants;	June 26, 2009
Petrosani (Urban) Hunedoara County	Non-Roma mixed (4-males, 4-females) under 35 years, residents of Colonie neighborhood; 8 participants;	June 28, 2009
Petrosani (Urban) Hunedoara County	Integrated Roma men, under 35 years, residents of Colonie neighborhood; 8 participants	June 28, 2009
Petrosani (Urban) Hunedoara County	Integrated Roma women, under 35 years, residents of Colonie neighborhood; 10 participants;	June 28, 2009
Colțâu (Rural) Maramureș County	Non-integrated Roma men, over 35 years; 11 participants;	June 28, 2009
Colțâu (Rural) Maramureș County	Non-integrated Roma women; over 35 years; 12 participants;	June 28, 2009
Colțâu (Rural) Maramureș County	Ethnic Hungarians, mixed (6 males, 6 females) over 35 years; 12 participants	June 28, 2009

2. GENERAL MOOD

Most if not all participants in all our focus-group discussions hold negative views of the current situation in Romania. These views are consistent with the results of the nationwide public opinion poll conducted by CURS for NDI. Specifically, 59% of non-Roma respondents in our poll consider that the country is headed in the wrong direction, whereas only 13% of non-Roma respondents think the country is headed in the right direction; 25% believe the direction is mixed and 3% did not answer. In the same poll, 73% of Roma respondents think that the country is headed in the wrong direction, 10% believe Romanian is going in the right direction, 13% think that the direction is mixed and 4% did not answer this question. A recent poll (i.e., June 2009) conducted by CURS on a nationwide sample of 1070 adult respondents found that 78% of respondents believe that Romania is headed in the wrong direction. As mentioned previously, most participants in our focus-group discussions also think that Romania is headed in the wrong direction.

For some respondents in our focus-groups, “wrong direction” referred to the numerous political scandals that seem to plague the country’s politics. For other respondents (e.g., ethnic Hungarians from Colțâu or Roma and non-Roma from Petroșani) “wrong direction” meant the poor state of the national economy and the current global financial crisis.

The terms used repeatedly by our focus-group participants to describe Romania’s current situation include “deplorable,” “extreme poverty,” “ordeal,” “disaster,” “chaos”. Overall, most respondents – both Roma and non-Roma – deemed Romania’s current situation worse than it was a year ago. Reasons that might explain the worsening of Romania’s and respondents’ situation are the lack of jobs, prices hike, and low wages – all related to the current global financial crisis. Other dysfunctional aspects mentioned by respondents include the corruption within the healthcare system and the poor quality of Romania’s education system. Some Roma respondents (males, in particular) also mentioned the discrimination they face on the job market due to their ethnicity. According to our Roma respondents, as compared to Romanians, Roma face more barriers in getting a job and they are the first to get fired from their jobs in case of economic downsizing/restructuring.

When asked about the problems faced by their local communities, many respondents (irrespective of their ethnic background or region) invoked issues related to the poor infrastructure of their cities and villages (e.g., roads, water system, heating system, sewer system etc.). In urban areas (e.g., București and Petroșani), crime and delinquency seem to be a problem, especially in some neighborhoods. Also, neighborhoods inhabited predominantly by Roma seem to face more numerous and severe problems in terms of infrastructure (e.g., lack of water, electricity, sewer system) and access to good quality education.

According to our respondents, the main culprit for the current difficult situation of Romania is the country’s political class. Elected officials at local or central level (MPs, that is) are perceived as profoundly corrupt and uninterested in citizens’ “real problems”. The data from all our focus-groups and from our nationwide opinion poll indicate that there is sharp divide or a chasm between Romania’s political class and ordinary citizens, with the latter deeply distrusting the former.

3. VOTING AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

3.1 Interactions/experience with political parties' representatives

Respondents' interactions with political parties' representatives, other than during election campaigns, are rare and mostly negative, for both Roma (be they integrated or non-integrated) and non-Roma. After electoral campaigns, respondents interact mostly with local elected officials (e.g., mayor, city/village counselors etc.) and less if not at all with MPs or national leaders of political parties.

Contacts with political parties' representatives. Most participants stated that they were contacted by parties' representatives only during electoral campaigns, when political parties' representatives visited the cities/villages where we conducted the focus-groups (especially the poorer cities/neighborhoods/villages), and gave eligible voters gifts, usually foodstuffs, and seemingly listened to their problems.

"When politicians need our vote, they contact us. They give us plastic bags with cooking oil, sugar, and flour... 'Good day! I'm so and so, vote for me and ...so on!'. But if you will try to contact them after elections, they won't answer you." [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

"They listen to your problems, take notes...but after that... what?! Nothing!!! [no result]." [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

"After election campaigns, [politicians] do not contact us, they only contact us during electoral campaigns." [non-Roma, woman, Bucharest]

"[Politicians and candidates] ask for our opinion, they never mention voting, they ask what problems we face, they listen to us, take notes yet [our problems] remain on a piece of paper [unsolved]." [non-Roma, woman, Bucharest]

"They only contact us when they need our votes. During election campaigns they contact everyone... they go from door to door and promise you everything." [non-integrated Roma, woman, Soldanu]

"[Politicians] usually come during electoral campaigns. They contact person 'X', they know there are some 10 families that are very poor and they go to them before voting and give them one bottle of cooking oil, some sugar and those family members think 'oh, yes, if this man gives us something now he will always give us something, and they vote for that party' representative. After elections, for 4 years in office, politicians do what they please!" [non-Roma, man, Petrosani]

Invitation to join a political party's branch office. There were no cases of invitations to join a party's branch office among focus-groups participants. Our respondents explain this situation by invoking their status, for example *"we are uneducated, poor, [and politicians] are not interested in us"* and stating that *"they are interested in wealthy and therefore powerful people, in highly educated people, people that are community leaders"*.

Approaching a party on a specific issue or concern is not a common behavior among our respondents because they have little confidence in political parties and in their representatives. Moreover, our respondents are very disappointed by political parties' representatives because they claim that politicians have no real interest in the problems of ordinary citizens. This is

why, when confronted with the option of approaching a political party with a specific concern, most (if not all) respondents prefer not to do it.

“You cannot find or reach them [political parties’ representatives]... Yes ... they have more than one office and when you look for them at one office you are told that they are at another office or on the field and your problems are not solved. They say to sing up on a waiting list [for meetings] but before you turn comes up they had finished their term in office...” [integrated Roma, man, Bucharest]

“I have never contacted a political party. They are all liars and they haven’t done anything to approach me.” [integrated Roma, man, Bucharest]

“We know how to contact them but they ignore us after elections...” [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

“Yes, I have tried to contact some politicians... I was treated like I was a nobody, I was ignored and I didn’t like this. Although I was claiming my rights, she a member of the local council] should have helped me because she was in charge of solving problems such as mine. [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

“I didn’t contact them. I don’t dare to approach them. I don’t dare...they always tell you ‘come tomorrow’, and tomorrow...you feel discouraged.” [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

“We don’t have the courage because we know is worthless. They’re all liars.” [non-Roma, woman, Petrosani]

3.2 Reasons to vote or not to vote.

Most respondents did not vote in the last three elections. Yet, as compared to Roma, fewer non-Roma voted in the last three elections. Respondents who did not vote explain their behavior by the disappointment they feel in regard to Romanian politics, by the lack of choice in elections or by claiming that all politicians are liars and thieves, who are interested exclusively in their own well-being:

“I haven’t voted since Constantinescu [a former President of Romania between 1996 and 2000] was elected because he disappointed me.” [integrated Roma, man, Bucharest]

“I knew the candidates but I thought it is worthless to vote. Because you couldn’t make a choice, none of the candidates deserved our vote.” [non-Roma, woman, Petrosani]

“I didn’t have who to vote for, they all are running for office to make money and not to do something for me or for others like me”[non-Roma, woman, Petrosani]

“I didn’t want to vote for some thieves.” [integrated Roma, man, Petrosani]

Respondents who voted motivate their behavior by invoking their duty as citizens or by believing that voting would lead to a better standard of living. It is important to note that some

respondents answered that they voted because they were afraid of some sort of penalties such as being denied access to social or administrative services by local bureaucrats.

“We voted because we have been somehow forced to vote, because if we go to the city hall with some problem or for social services the authorities scold us for not voting. [integrated Roma, woman, Petrosani]”

However, there were some cases when Roma respondents stated they voted in exchange for money:

“I voted because they promised me 300 LEI” [approximately 100 USD, integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]”

3.3 Factors and traits considered when deciding to vote

The main things that impact our respondents' voting choices are, in order, a political party's policies/political program, followed by a candidate's personal qualities, and finally a candidate's political party affiliation. On this point, there is, however, a difference between Roma and non-Roma. Non-Roma respondents tend to give more weight to a candidate's political party affiliation whereas Roma respondents claim they take into account first and foremost a political party's policies.

“I think is like football, first: the party counts, I mean the team you support, so people say they will vote for that party because they support that party, secondly you think about the candidate, and finally about the party's policies, although I believe the order should be reversed.” [non-Roma, man, Bucharest]

“It counts to keep your promises; it doesn't matter which party one represents.” [non-integrated Roma, woman, Soldanu]

“A candidate personal qualities and promises [count]. If he does his best, he can convince you to vote for him.” [integrated Roma, man, Petrosani]

The importance of traits as **gender** or **ethnicity** seems to vary in different degrees when deciding to for whom our respondents would vote. For instance, Roma women seem to be more willing to vote for a woman and they explain this by statements such as “a woman is the housekeeper”, “a woman will be more oriented towards children's and women's issues/concerns”, “a woman understands better the concerns of a single mother or of a housewife”. Favorable opinions towards women running for political office were also expressed by non-Roma respondents:

“Until now, only a few women were promoted in politics and only bad things happened. Let's give women a chance and maybe things will be better”.

“I think a woman is smarter than a man, is cleverer and works harder than a man ...she knows better how to raise children and she will understand better both men and women.” [non-integrated Roma, woman, Soldanu]

As regards a candidate's ethnic background, some respondents deemed it less relevant when deciding for whom to vote:

“[A candidate’s ethnic background] doesn’t matter; we’ve been living here as a community for a long time. [Ethnicity] doesn’t matter; [politicians] should do something for children...for everyone, not just for us [Roma]... Life is the same for all.” [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

“[A candidate’s ethnic background] doesn’t matter; he or she must behave like a proper human being.” [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

“I think [ethnicity] doesn’t count; all that counts is the candidate... if s/he did something good in the past.” [non-Roma, woman, Petrosani]

For some Roma respondents (non-integrated Roma, in particular), a candidate’s ethnic background is important.

“If the candidate were Roma, maybe I would vote for him because non-Roma people discriminate against us. If the candidate were Roma like us, it might make a difference. Maybe the Roma candidate faced the same problems like us in his childhood.” [non-integrated Roma, woman, Soldanu]

“Yes, I would vote for Roma candidates because they know better the problems that Roma people are facing.” [integrated Roma, woman, Petrosani]

“[I would for a Roma candidate because] you can speak to him even if you are not educated. He speaks your language!” [integrated Roma, woman, Petrosani]

“If I would have a Roma representative as a choice, I would gladly vote for him. Because he is from my ethnic group and he has to represent us, to solve our problems more quickly. [integrated Roma, man, Petrosani]

There were, however, a few instances in which Roma respondents claimed they would rather vote for a Romanian than for a Roma candidate:

“[I wouldn’t vote for a Roma candidate because] Roma are more corrupt than Romanians.” [integrated Roma, man, Bucharest]

“[I wouldn’t vote for a Roma candidate because] you can get along better with a Romanian than with a Roma.” [integrated Roma, woman, Bucharest]

For non-Roma respondents, a candidate’s ethnic background is very important. As compared to Roma respondents, Romanian respondents tend to be more willing to vote for a Romanian candidate than for a candidate with a different ethnic background. Also, for Romanian respondents, it is more acceptable to vote for a Hungarian candidate than for a Roma candidate (if Roma and Hungarian were the two choices). This is so because,

“... we are Romanians and I don’t think we will ever elect a colored one, a Roma, as president. I mean, a candidate may be Hungarian, Hungarians are educated people and they know what they want.” [non-Roma, man, Bucharest]

4. PERSONAL LIFE AND IDENTITY

When asked if the life of a Roma is different from the life of a Romanian, the general opinion of our focus group participants is that there are significant differences between the two. Most Roma respondents deemed their life worse than the life of Romanians because Roma are being discriminated against in many (if not most) domains from the job market to access to education to access to public health services and other (state) institutions. The main reason for being discriminated against is, according to some respondents, “*simply being a Roma*”.

“Moderator: So you said that Roma’s lives are pretty similar but the life of a Roma is much different than the one of a Romanian. In what sense?”

V: They call you ‘Gipsy’ everywhere you go. When you get on a bus, they avoid you and take precautions, they say ‘A gipsy got on the bus!’ But Romanians steal too...

B: Romanians think that they are better than us. They show us no respect. When we get on the bus, they say ‘The gypsies got on the bus, the crows!’... that’s how they call us. ‘Be aware [guard your pockets] the crows got on the bus!’ [...]

Moderator: What about the hospital? What do they say?

B: They say: A patient came in. Look how dark-skinned he is.” [F.G. Roma men – Soldanu]

“C: It’s really hard in Romania! The lack of jobs... what can I tell you?! Regarding us, the colored ones, we are marginalized. To get a job, I visited 10 different companies. It’s racism. They looked at my skin’s color... I am telling you the truth.

Moderator: And how long did it take you to get rejected from these 10 companies?

C: About a week. What would my children eat?” [F.G. Roma man – Bucharest]

Some of our focus group participants explain the impossibility to get a job by invoking factors such as ethnicity, lack of formal education, and cultural barriers. Both Roma and Romanians think that the lives of Roma and Romanians are quite different. In general, Romanians consider that Roma are much poorer than Romanians and have a much more difficult life. Moreover, it seems that Roma from urban and rural areas have been drastically affected by the current financial crisis. Roma participants to our group discussions said that they cannot find jobs anymore and those that are employed claim that employers are either paying them less money or are threatening to fire them *first*.

Other specific problems of Roma deal with the incapacity to support their families due to the large number of children in Roma families. Some of our focus group participants (both Roma and Romanians) believe that the lack of access to jobs could be the reason that might help explain the petty crimes (mainly thefts and robberies) allegedly committed exclusively by Roma.

When talking about interactions between Romanians and Roma, the general impression was that the relationships between the two groups are getting worse. In rural areas, many Roma have illegally built houses on public land and this fact is a source of tensions between non-Roma and Roma residents. Some Roma women who attended our group discussions tended to be more optimistic, claiming that Romanians and Roma have learned (in schools) to be more tolerant. According to some respondents, this more optimistic view might be inaccurate given the fact that most Roma women in rural areas are confined to their households and do not interact frequently with non-Roma.

In rural areas, examples of successful collaboration between Roma and Romanians refer almost exclusively to work-based, short-term relationships. Not owning land and not having regular jobs, many Roma work for Romanians and get paid on a daily basis. The situation is different in urban areas, where more Roma declared that they have long-term relationships with Romanians (i.e., they have Romanian friends, colleagues, and neighbors). Yet, among Romanians, there is a widespread perception according to which one should be careful when dealing or having relationships with Roma, as the latter tend to be “*sneaky and always looking for ways to fool or rip you off.*”

In terms of preferences for ethnic minorities' parties versus mainstream political parties, many Roma respondents did not make much difference between them, claiming that both are corrupted and don't really care about people's “*real problems.*” Yet, as compared to Roma from urban areas, more Roma from rural areas think that their interests could be better represented by ethnic minorities' parties because such parties understand better Roma's local problems. Most Roma from urban areas consider that minorities' political parties do not have enough force to make themselves heard and influence national politics. This is probably why many Roma urbanites prefer mainstream political parties. Yet, according to our Roma respondents from urban areas, mainstream political parties should have more Roma representatives among their ranks.

Both integrated and non-integrated Roma believe that their communities are torn apart and that they should be more united. They are aware that many Roma sell their votes for immediate benefits such as money or gifts. They believe that “Roma should be smarter, stick together, and vote for their representatives in the parliament, as Hungarians do.” Roma generally appreciate the Hungarian community and look up to it, considering it to be united and well organized. Thus, Roma respondents (particularly in Colțâu) take the Hungarian community as an example of how the Roma community should be.

When they feel that their rights are violated, Roma respondents say that they would go to the local public institutions such as the police, the mayor, local counselors they know or to their local community leader (“*Bulibasa*”).

In our focus group discussions, both Romanians and Roma classified Roma into three large categories, as follows: 1) the so-called “integrated Roma,” which are considered to be “cleaner, better educated, and accepted by the non-Roma”; 2) the “struggling Roma” category, which includes Roma who work hard and try to pay their taxes without committing illegal acts; and 3) “the embarrassing Roma” category, which includes uneducated, unemployed Roma, “who steal and do not want to work” and are seen as an embarrassment to the entire Roma community.

Another interesting fact signaled by our Roma respondents deals with extremely negative image that Roma from Romania have in some European countries, especially in Italy and Spain. Many Roma respondents believe that the foreign media has distorted the image of Roma in these countries and, as a result, Roma are now blamed for every crime committed in Italy and Spain, even if the perpetrators are non-Roma. Our Roma respondents also denounced the Romanian state authorities for not doing anything to protect its Roma citizens who reside abroad. The Romanian state's inaction is, for many Roma respondents, another sign that the Romanian state does not really care about them.

5. POLITICAL PROCESS: POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Citizens' interaction with governmental institutions. Irrespective of ethnicity, gender, education or age, in the vast majority of cases, our focus-group discussions indicated the interaction with governmental institutions is characterized by lack of trust. These feelings are the result of previous experiences that our participants had when they accessed various institutions; such experiences were marked by bureaucratic rigidity, delays, postponements, and by the lack of respect on the part of public servants. Also, our participants seem to feel that if one doesn't have "relations" (or "connections") and doesn't know the right people, no problem can be solved.

"Look at me, for example, I have registered a request at the city hall 4 years ago for these ANL houses for young people [OUR NOTE: ANL – National Agency for Housing runs social housing projects] but if you don't have anyone or if you don't know somebody there... they keep telling me to renew my application... I don't trust anyone..." [F.G. Non-Roma, Bucharest]

Roma respondents (and non-integrated Roma, in particular) have numerous problems in accessing public institutions and approaching public authorities because many Roma lack information about public or other institutions that might help defend their interests.

"Most of us don't know where to go if we are discriminated against by employers. You have to deal with these things on your own. What can you do? If you go to a local counselor they are not able to help you. They send you to another office. We don't have a lawyer at the county level. I know many cases and I can tell you a lot more about them." [F.G. Roma men, Coltau]

Awareness of and interaction with local level elected representatives. The familiarity with local elected representatives varies by rural and urban areas, ethnic background, and interest in politics. In rural areas (smaller communities), respondents tend to know their elected leaders, be they local counselors or MPs in their respective districts. In rural areas, Roma (and non-Roma) respondents tend to interact more often with local elected leaders. In urban areas, however, both Roma and non-Roma respondents are less familiar with local public officials. Respondents who claim that they are interested and very interested in politics also have a better knowledge of local or national political leaders.

The ideal political representative's image. When talking about the qualities that elected representatives should have, we can make a distinction between the elements signaled by the vast majority of our focus group participants and those pointed out by the non-integrated Roma and ethnic Hungarians. To a very large extent, respondents' expectations towards local representatives refer to social skills, openness, and interest in the community's problems. In this sense, most respondents claim that local elected officials *"should fulfill the promises made during the electoral campaigns, should know how to talk to ordinary people and be close to them, establish branch offices in smaller and more distant localities, involve people in the implementation of community projects, get informed about peoples' and community problems, and ignore political reasons when distributing funds."*

Regarding specific problems, ethnic Hungarians would like to be invited more often to the council meetings, at least to those meetings in which important decisions related to the community are made. They would also like to see a greater involvement from the authorities' side in solving Roma's problems and thus assuring a better standard of living.

Roma respondents, especially non-integrated Roma, would like the local authorities to be more involved in solving their problems; Roma respondents also expect from local authorities to inform and consult them in matters of importance for their community as a whole. Roma respondents have the feeling that their problems are not known by local authorities, who should help them to integrate better in the community. This is also why many Roma respondents repeatedly stressed the need for the presence in their communities of a Roma representative from a public organization. Such a Roma representative would be responsible in mediating communication between Roma and public authorities.

Willingness to run for public office. Our respondents' willingness to run for public office does not seem to be affected by factors such as a person's ethnic background. The main reasons why respondents are unwilling to run for public office deal with their self-perceived poor qualifications, lack of experience, lack of political support (particularly in the case of Roma respondents), and the immorality that allegedly prevails in politics.

The political leaders most liked by our respondents include the current President Traian Băsescu, the former President Ion Iliescu, current and former Prime Minister(s) and members of the current Cabinet (e.g., Emil Boc, Victor Ciorbea, Elena Udrea, Theodor Stolojan), current and former MPs (e.g., Mădălin Voicu, Crin Antonescu, Mircea Geoană, Victor Ponta, Mona Muscă, George Becali, Laszlo Tokes) as well as local administration leaders (e.g., Liviu Negoită, Cristian Popescu-Piedone, Tiberiu Iacob-Ridzi, Klaus Johannis). Roma respondents repeatedly mentioned Gigi Becali – a maverick businessman and controversial Romanian politician – who is also known for his charity works, popular appeal, and religiosity.

Roma County Bureau's (BJR's) Notoriety and Accessibility. Only in Colțău and Petroșani, at least one respondent mentioned that s/he has heard of BJR. In Colțău, most Roma respondents who knew of BJR also approached it. They did this for the following reasons: 1) to report discriminatory practices against Roma children; 2) to enroll one's children in school; 3) to denounce the poor quality of education for Roma; 4) to invite in Colțău a BJR representative to solve problems related to the local schools; 5) to solve a problem related to ID cards and other official documents. Respondents who did not know about BJR complained about the fact that they lack information about the existence of such an institution, its location, and capabilities.

Perceptions regarding the role of ordinary citizens for improving the political system. Irrespective of ethnic background, age, gender or education, most respondents feel powerless *vis a vis* Romania's political system and elected officials. As mentioned previously, there seems to be a sharp divide or a chasm between Romania's political class and ordinary citizens, with the latter deeply distrusting the former. As a result, most respondents are highly skeptical in regard to ordinary citizens' power to influence and improve the country's political system. According to our respondents, possible solutions to influence and improve the current political system (i.e., political class) have a rather radical character and include boycotting elections, strikes, and large scale demonstrations against the government, the presidency, and the parliament. Some Roma respondents also referred to the need for stronger Roma organizations, which are currently extremely fragmented.

The notoriety and perceptions of NGOs. In the focus-groups conducted with Roma respondents, NGOs that address Roma's problems have a somewhat good notoriety. Among the NGOs mentioned by Roma respondents are "Romani Criss" and "Tumende" (in Petroșani); Roma's political party "Partida Romilor" was also mentioned. The overall impression of such organizations is also good. Our Roma respondents mentioned several successful programs and actions initiated by NGOs such as cultural and educational programs, courses on public policies, courses on traditional crafts, programs for children (field trips) etc. An unsuccessful program mentioned by our respondents dealt with combating domestic violence in Petrosani; this program aimed to create a shelter for victims (women and children) of domestic violence but apparently was a failure.

Yet, many Roma respondents said that such NGOs should be more involved in their communities and should visit Roma communities/neighborhoods more often. Other Roma respondents claimed that many Roma-related NGOs do not have enough power because they lack funds and because many Roma are less inclined to be involved in voluntary activities and associations. A few respondents also said that some Roma-related NGOs are inefficient because their leaders are not interested in Roma's problems and siphon off funds/resources to use them in their private businesses/interests.

Only a few of our focus-group participants declared they volunteered in NGOs programs. Yet, the overall majority of our respondents claimed that, if asked, they would gladly volunteer in various programs and civic initiatives such as children's programs, educational and cultural programs, and animal protection programs.