Ethnic Minorities and Political Mainstreaming

Summary Report from *Participatory Analysis Sessions* with Roma Leaders and Activists in Slovakia

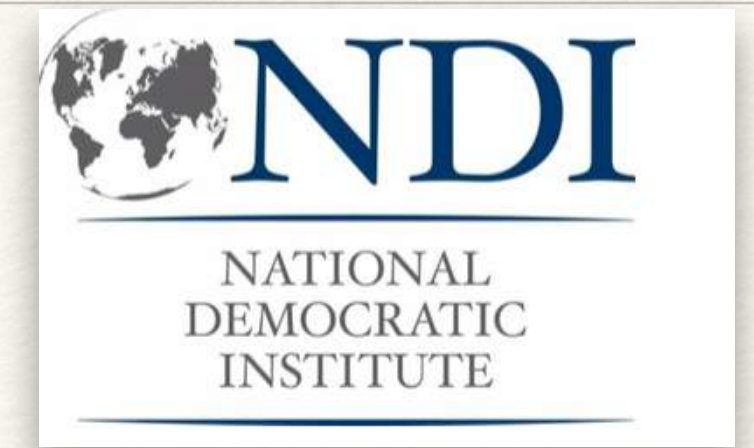March 2015

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Participatory Evaluation Initiative

Participatory Evaluation Initiative

❖ **Objective:** To deepen the understanding of the Institute's underlying *theory of democratic change* for Roma political empowerment in Central and Eastern Europe.

❖ **Strategy:** To engage Roma leaders and activists as *analytical partners* in the design, implementation and utilization of a retrospective evaluation of NDI's 10 year program in Slovakia.

This report summarizes findings from a series of *Participatory Analysis Sessions* held with Roma leaders and activists across Slovakia in March 2015. The sessions launched a 12-month, participatory evaluation initiative funded by the National Endowment for Democracy
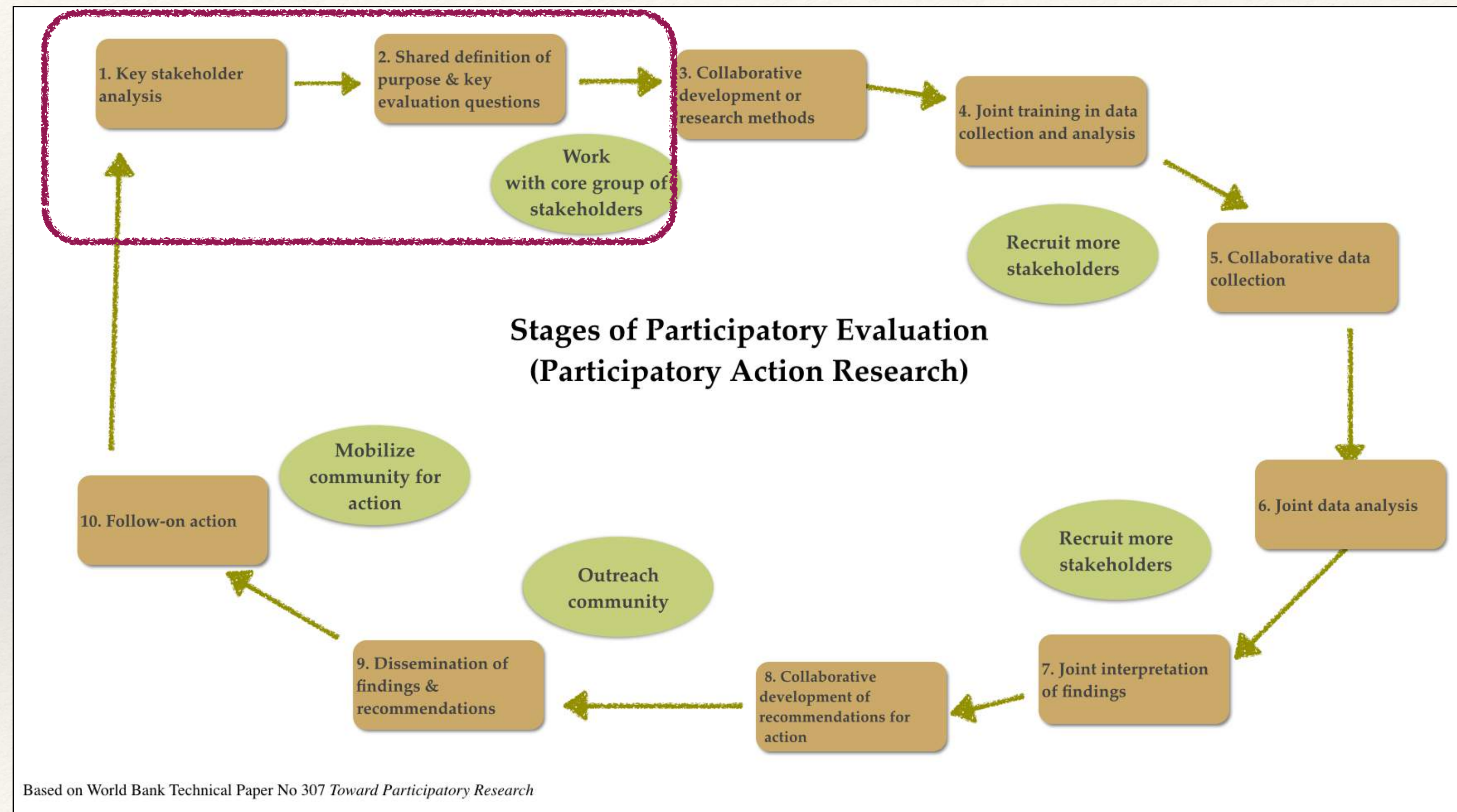
Summary Report

1. **Purpose & Methodology**

2. Helping & Hindering Factors

3. NDI's Intervention

4. Roma Participatory Evaluation Questions

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Participatory Evaluation Initiative

Participatory Analysis Sessions (PAS)

The sessions marked the first step in a participatory evaluation initiative in which NDI and its partners developed a shared purpose and set of questions for the 12-month evaluation.

Stages of Participatory Evaluation (Participatory Action Research)

- 1. Key stakeholder analysis
- 2. Shared definition of purpose & key evaluation questions
- Work with core group of stakeholders
- 3. Collaborative development or research methods
- 4. Joint training in data collection and analysis
- Recruit more stakeholders
- 5. Collaborative data collection
- 6. Joint data analysis
- Recruit more stakeholders
- 7. Joint interpretation of findings
- Outreach community
- 8. Collaborative development of recommendations for action
- 9. Dissemination of findings & recommendations
- Mobilize community for action
- 10. Follow-on action

Based on World Bank Technical Paper No 307 *Toward Participatory Research*

Methodology

Participatory Method

Participatory methods share four characteristics:

❖ User-friendly instruments

❖ Participant-generated data

❖ Joint analysis of local issues

❖ Co-construction of knowledge

Under this approach, NDI engaged participants in the generation and analysis of data through small group deliberation, prioritization and interpretation of results.

❖ **Line of Inquiry**

1. What were the most important helping and hindering factors for mainstreaming Roma into civic and political life over the last 10 years?

2. In which factors did NDI's program most intervene?

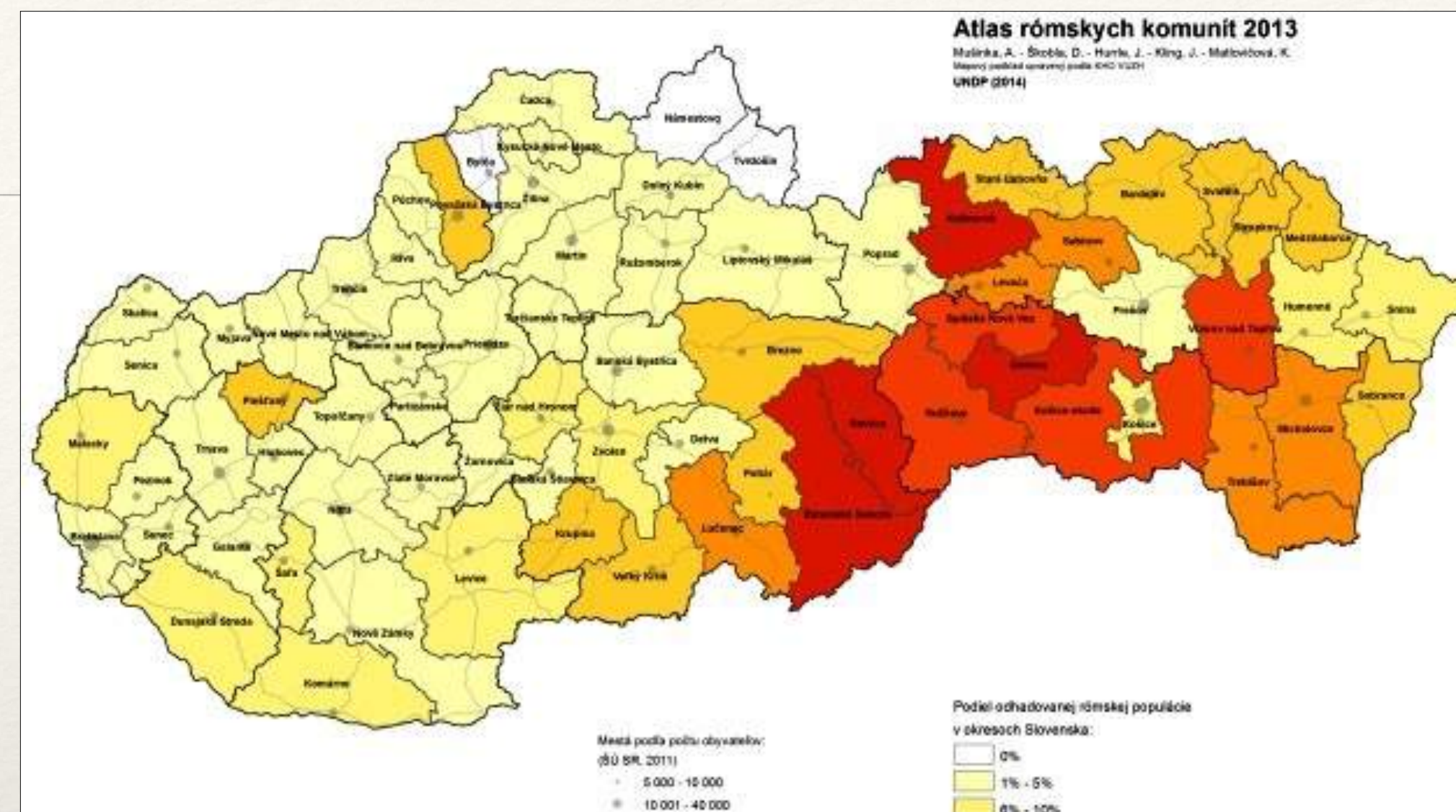3. What questions should the evaluation attempt to answer?

Participatory Analysis Sessions

Period of Field Work: February 28 - March 8, 2015

Purposive Sample: Participants were selected, non-randomly, from four regions in Slovakia, three of which have significant Roma populations.

Participant Profiles: Participants represented Roma activists, politicians and elected officials, many of whom had worked with NDI over the last 10 years.

Roma Population Density

Participatory Analysis Sessions
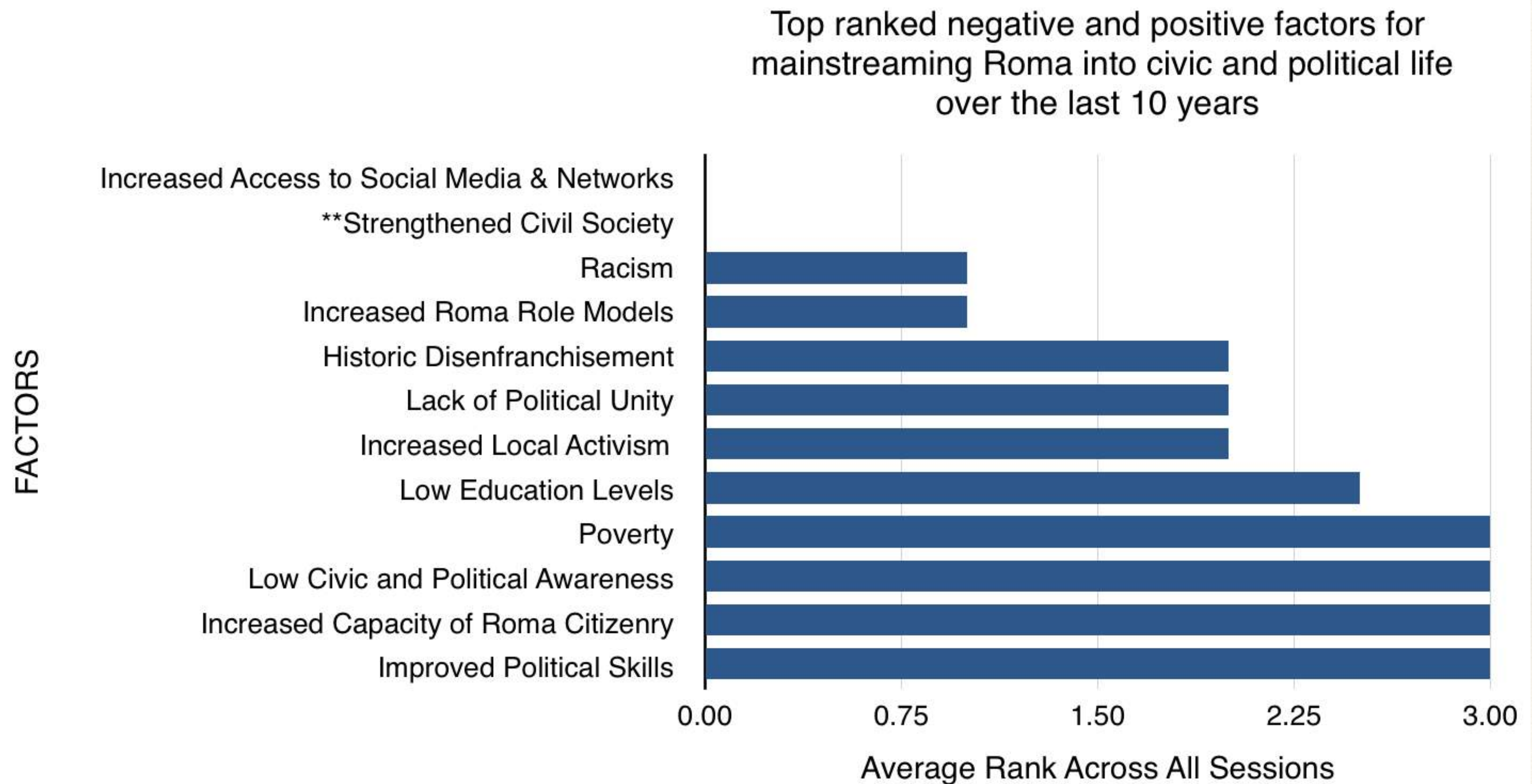
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What were the most important factors that hindered Roma participation in civic and political life over the past 10 years?

Hindering & Helping Factors

Top ranked negative and positive factors for mainstreaming Roma into civic and political life over the last 10 years

Historic Disenfranchisement

Participants prioritized the legacy of historic disenfranchisement as a major barrier to mainstreaming the political and civic participation of Roma over the last ten years. Despite the fact that Roma have lived in what is now present-day Slovakia since the 14th century, Roma identity has been the subject of State suspicion for centuries.

In the 20th century, under fascism, Roma lost their rights to land, citizenship, and then their lives in the holocaust. Under communism, Roma were subject to systematic assimilation programs that displaced people from their communities, culture and language, while Roma women were sterilized to reduce the overall Roma population.

In the transition to a market-led economy, Roma have suffered geographic, economic and social marginalization. Participants prioritized the historic legacy of disenfranchisement because it continues to alienate Roma from their ethnic and political identity, making it difficult to mobilize Roma constituents to fully realize their political rights in Slovakia today.

Sign banning entry of itinerant Roma and travelers, 1920s

Post-communism, the Roma lost many of the public services previously provided by the State. The majority of the Roma have been pushed literally and figurative to the outskirts of society, living in informal settlements without the support of public roads, public utilities or public transportation.

Participants prioritized the negative impacts of poverty as undermining their ability to mobilize other Roma. The burden of eking out a living occupies the majority of peoples' time and energies, with little left for political or civic activities. During elections, poverty makes Roma communities vulnerable to predatory politicians who easily entice desperate people to sell their votes for cheap gifts of alcohol, food and money.

There are no mainstream politicians who have the courage to solve the Roma issue. In the past, many politicians would come to the Roma segregated settlements and see how absolutely horrible the situation was and they promised to help. But they soon found out that they couldn't gain political points by advocating for the Roma. **~Roma Activist, Bratislava**

Endemic & Structural Racism

Participants noted the persistence of racism against Roma from all quarters of Slovak society. Negative stereotypes of Roma are not only reinforced by the Slovak media, but are replicated throughout Europe, "internationalizing racism" against the Roma and confirming mainstream prejudices. Participants noted that during elections, mainstream politicians find they can easily tap into long-held anti-Roma sentiments for populist wins in the local, regional and national elections.

With accession to the EU, mainstream politicians have come under more scrutiny from the international community and have learned to use more politically correct language when publicly referencing Roma. In place of overtly racist bombast, a new political rhetoric of "self-help" has emerged. Although the largest recipients of state benefits are non-Roma, politicians and policy makers consistently highlight Roma as needing to address "their own problems" and cease being a burden on the state. Within an increasingly anti-Roma environment, the State has introduced a new policy of mandatory work, deploying "community activators" to mobilize Roma labor for municipal projects.
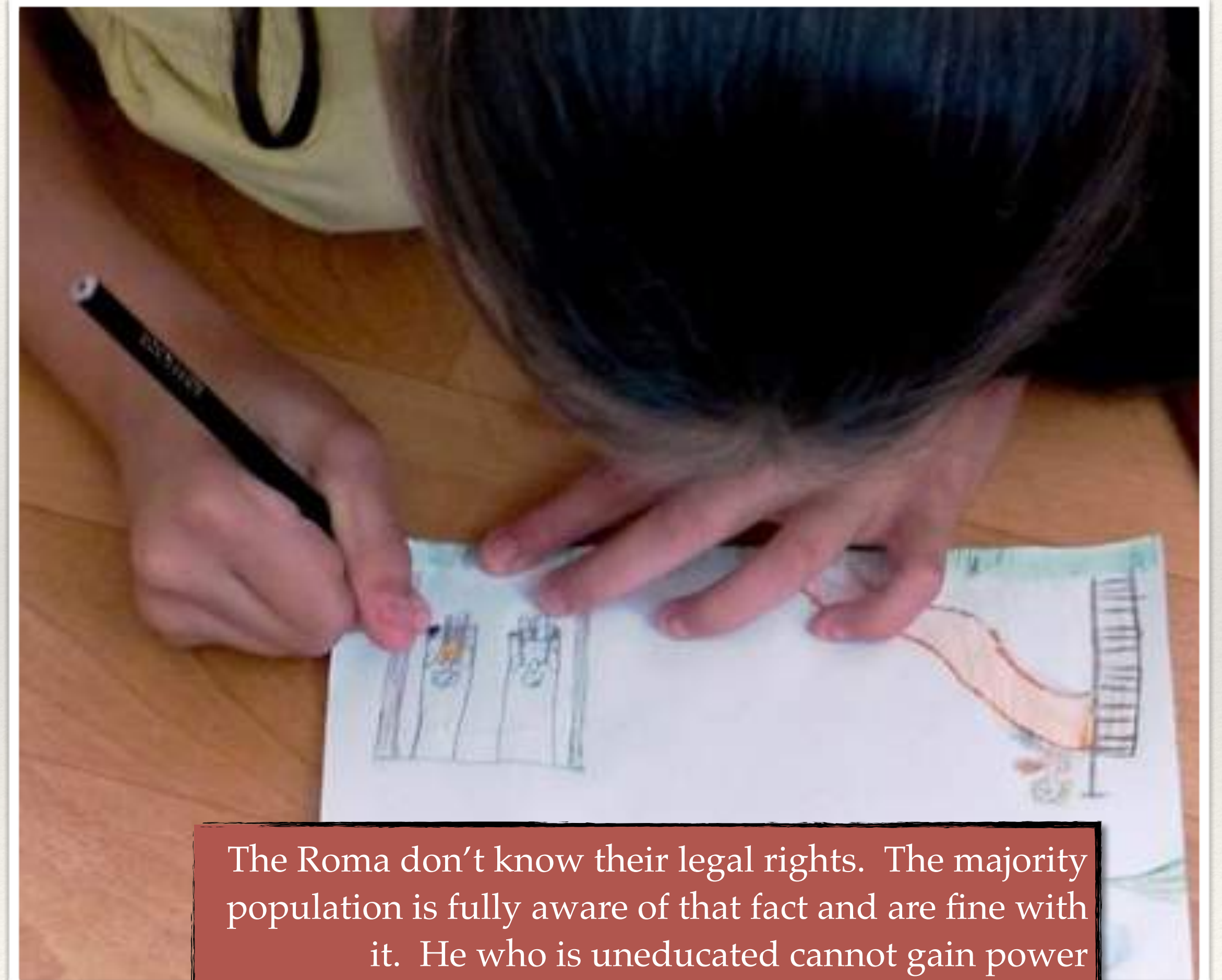
After joining the EU, Slovakia harmonized its legislation, signing international human rights treaties. However, the human rights reality on the ground is different. Roma and non-Roma NGOs also are not monitoring [human rights] effectively. In the past, if a Roma citizen were killed the NGOs would go to the autopsy to find our the cause of death. Today, there is no reaction, even when Roma children are abused by the police. The cases of racism are less visible, but the atmosphere toward Roma is still negative. ~ **Roma Activist, Bratislava**

Participants noted low levels of education among Roma populations as a major barrier to mainstreaming Roma into political and civic life. Driven by exclusionary practices within the education system, Roma children are frequently segregated from mainstream children within schools, or are deemed mentally disabled and sent to special schools where they receive low quality education.

Lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills not only exclude Roma from economic advancement, but exacerbate barriers to social services and thwart their political participation at the local level. Educational and language barriers dissuade Roma from participating in municipal meetings where they might hold local officials accountable for the use of EU funds earmarked for the improvement of Roma settlements.

The Roma don't know their legal rights. The majority population is fully aware of that fact and are fine with it. He who is uneducated cannot gain power
~ Roma Activist, Banska Bystrica

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Participants prioritized a lack of political literacy as a serious hindering factor that makes the Roma electorate vulnerable within the mainstream political system. During elections Roma constituents may be easily manipulated by mainstream parties who place Roma on their party lists as tokens, but offer no real policy solutions. Participants also noted that many Roma candidates also lack training, basing their campaigns on emotional appeals in place of political strategy.

After elections, poor understanding of their rights increases the power of local officials — both Roma and non-Roma —who can bend Roma constituents to their political will and/or exclude them from local decision-making processes.

Roma voters are often manipulated and threatened by mayors before elections. They tell them "if you don't vote [the way I say], you won't receive your benefits [from the state]." The Roma are hostages of the system and easily manipulated at election time. If the Roma want to engage in civic activism, it is dependent upon the willingness or unwillingness of the local mayor. Many give up their local activism because of threats, bullying and the misuse of power. **~ Roma Activist, Kosice**

Participants believed divisions within the Roma community were driven by both internal and external forces. Geographic isolation of Roma communities, from mainstream society, as well as from other Roma settlements, hinders unifying Roma citizens under a common political purpose. Generational divisions between established and aspiring Roma leaders and activists, undermine the potential energy and sustainability of a broader social movement. Roma women who aspire to political activism and leadership may be frowned upon by their local communities.

Lastly, participants noted the fractious antecedents of Roma national politics immediately after the Velvet Revolution in which over 20 separate Roma political parties vied for leadership. While that number has fallen to three Roma parties, they are unable to unite the Roma electorate under a common banner.

It is easier to create unity at the local level, around concrete projects. It is difficult to translate that [unity and process] to the national level ~ **Roma Activist, Bratislava**

What were the most important factors that helped Roma participate in civic and political life over the past 10 years?

Participatory Evaluation Initiative

Capacity of Roma Citizenry to Engage

Participants noted the increasing capacity of Roma to move into all areas of Slovak society over the past 10 years. They noted a number of contributing factors, including: the establishment of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities; affirmative action programs that support Roma in completing middle school, high school and/or vocational training; and an increase in university scholarships earmarked for Roma students. This has led to higher educational attainment, which has helped to improve employment and living conditions for the Roma.

Along with support for education, participants noted the standardization of the Roma language as an important factor in their civic and political participation. At the State level, participants noted the EU accession process as a key lever for opening up space for Roma at every level of society.   As a consequence, Roma have seen more legislation that helps to remove barriers to their participation. Of note was the Anti-Discrimination Law that prohibits the exclusion of minorities from access to public goods, such as education, healthcare and social services. Participants also noted the newly proposed Construction Act that would legalize the land around Roma settlements; and the amendment to the Vote Buying Act that punishes equally both vote buyers and sellers under the law. Lastly, participants noted that between 2001 and 2011 more citizens identified themselves as Roma on the National Census.

Although there is still a lot of anti-Roma sentiment, there are members of the majority who want to give the Roma opportunities and who want to work and live together. ~ **Roma Activist, Kosice**

Roma Role Models

Participants identified the creation of positive Roma role models as an important factor in increasing Roma civic and political engagement over the past ten years. They believed that positive media coverage of Roma professionals and activists has helped to counter the negative stereotypes the majority population have of the Roma. However, most importantly they have served to bolster the confidence of other Roma to engage in areas of Slovak society where they have historically been excluded.

Participants emphasized that the increased number of capable Roma candidates running for office — whether they won or not — provided positive role models for Roma in the political arena. Positive images have helped to motivate a new generation of Roma leaders and activists who are now building alliances with like-minded Roma and non-Roma.

Roma Political Skills

Participants believed that the improvement in political skills was a key factor in expanding political space for Roma leaders. They credited political training that helped them run higher quality political campaigns that included: developing clear pro-Roma policy platforms and messages, outreaching voters through door-to-door campaigns, and mobilizing volunteers at the local level. Participants emphasized the importance of outreaching both Roma and non-Roma constituencies — something they had not considered as feasible before the campaign training.

Participants noted that as a consequence of their higher quality campaigns, mainstream parties and politicians also began placing more emphasis on Roma issues during their campaigns. Most importantly, some mainstream political parties have begun to see capable Roma candidates as politically valuable assets who can bring to their parties expertise and credibility on Roma issues — beyond the tokenism of the past.

Participants saw as important, the emergence of more individual activists at the local and regional levels. Although most of the activists are from small and diverse civic organizations within the Roma settlements, their work and local leadership have helped to mobilize grassroots pressure, which has great potential for strengthening municipal accountability.

As these local Roma actors began to mobilize Roma citizens around diverse issues, they also began reaching out to each other to cooperate and engage the local municipalities. Community members watching the local grassroots activities also gained a sense of agency and hope that they, as citizens, could make a difference in their communities.

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Participants prioritized social media and networking as important factors in helping to bring Roma more fully into civic and political life. On the one hand, better access to the internet and social media facilitated the dissemination of more civic and political information to Roma. Their use of social media also prompted mainstream media to pay more attention to Roma candidates during the election, as well as provide more accurate information about them.

On the other hand, participants noted that social media — along with cross regional training — had allowed the Roma participants to exchange news, information and new ideas with like-minded Roma across Slovakia, as well as across Central and Eastern Europe. Participants believed the opportunity to interact and network with other Roma created a greater sense of hope and change, especially among the younger generation.
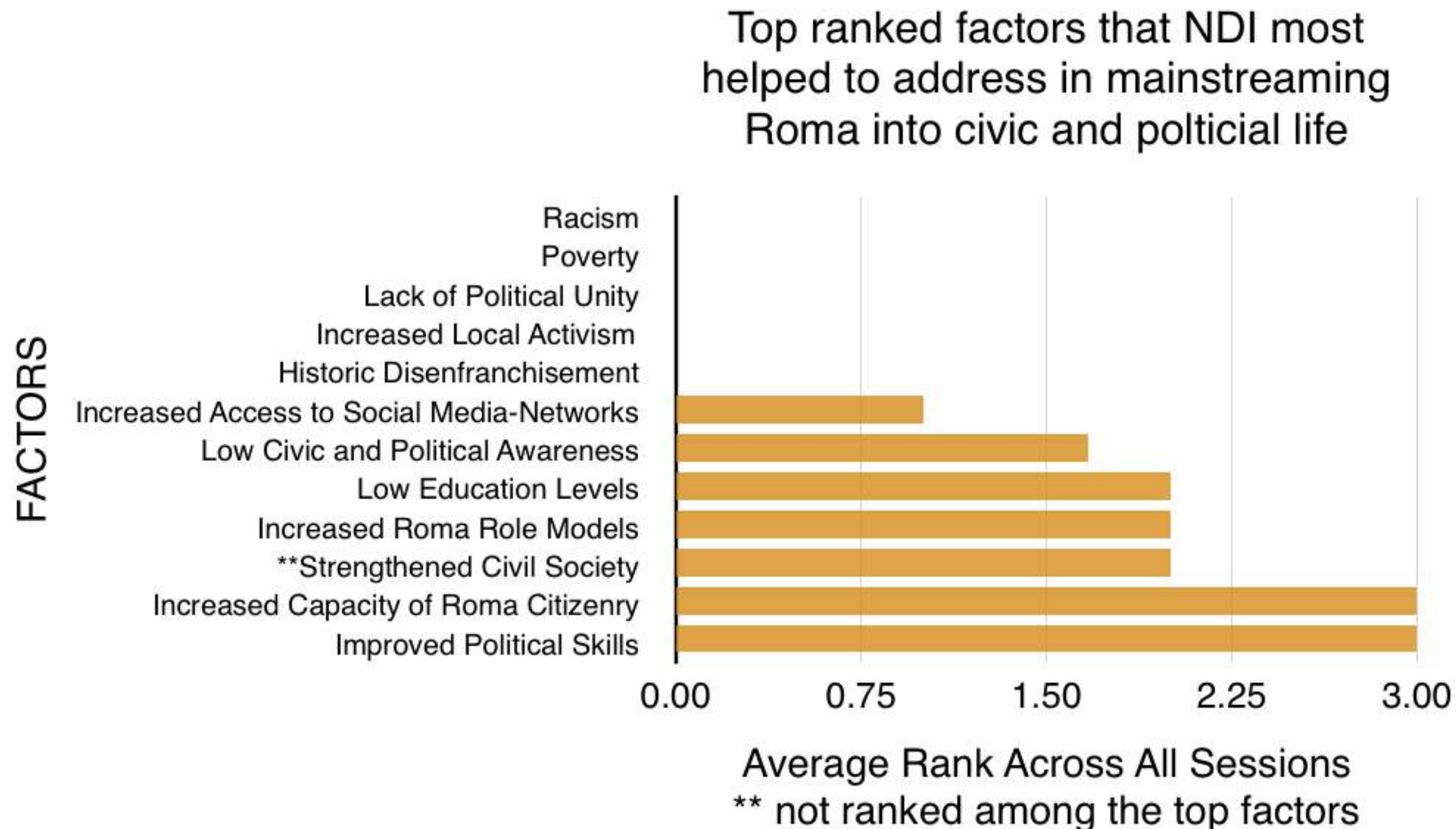
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Which factors did NDI most help to leverage or mitigate over the past 10 years?

Factors in Which NDI Most Intervened

Improved Political Skills

Participants ranked highly, NDIs contribution to improving the quality of Roma candidates' political skills during and after the elections. Participants believed that NDI's training helped to prepare Roma candidates and political parties to design and implement higher quality election campaigns that addressed the concerns of all population groups. Once in office, NDI training helped to support Roma elected officials in the execution of their duties.

To a great extent, we have NDI to thank for the election of Roma mayors and councilors.
~ Roma Activists (Kosice)

Increased Capacity of Roma Citizenry

While multiple factors have contributed to the overall capacity of Roma to participate in more areas of Slovak society, participants noted NDI's support to the Roma in helping them to more fully enter the political arena.

Politics is about power. In this way NDI has indirectly given us power to resolve the issues facing this country.

~ **Roma Activists (Kosice)**

Participants noted that NDI came to Slovakia at a time when democratic processes and institutions were weak, and civil society was still emerging. The larger society, including the Roma, did not fully understand the meaning of civic and political participation. Participants felt that NDI's early work contributed to strengthening the nascent "Third Sector" in Slovakia by providing opportunities for young leaders to receive training and experience that later would be brought to bear in civic activism.

** "Strengthening Civil Society" was recorded but not ranked among the most important helping and hindering factors to address. However, it was identified as one of the factors to which NDI most strongly contributed.

Participants discussed the increase in positive Roma role models during a number of the analysis sessions. They noted that Roma role models serve as drivers and motivators for change, encouraging other Roma to engage more fully in Slovak society. Participants felt NDI's work had contributed to the increase of positive Roma role models in the political arena, most notably at the national level, with the election of Peter Pollak to parliament. However, participants noted as equally important, the local Roma mayors, councilors and community activists that continue to motivate and energize the Roma to engage in civic and political life.

Increased Civic & Political Awareness

Participants credited NDI's programming with raising the political and civic awareness of Roma at the local, regional and national levels. They felt NDI's activities were essential for motivating and activating Roma as civic and political actors. Along with raising awareness, participants felt that NDI's support also contributed to strengthening the ability of Roma to apply pressure to their representatives at the grassroots level.

It had a snowball effect. Even those Roma who had not participated in NDI's workshops started to be more motivated and inspired

~ Roma Activists (Bratislava)

Increased Access to Social Media & Social Networks

Participants identified networking as a follow-on effect of NDI's political training. NDI facilitated information exchanges, first through the workshops themselves and then through social media platforms. The NDI program helped training participants to keep in touch after the workshops and to continue exchanging experiences in applying their new skills. As more Roma emerge as mayors and municipal councilors, participants noted the need to continue strengthening these kinds of peer-to-peer learning networks.

In the initial stages of NDI's programming, Roma did not need networks. They first needed information and skills for local activism. Later, when Roma started to become more politically active, networking became more necessary.

~ Roma Activists (Presov)

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What questions should the participatory evaluation attempt to answer?

Participatory Evaluation Initiative

NDI Training Programs?

Many of the Roma leaders were not only participants in NDI's past workshops, but had become trainers themselves. Therefore, they were interested in answering questions on the effectiveness of the targeting, recruitment and training processes they were replicating, as well as the downstream effects of the training itself. Almost all the groups noted that they were not interested in the *quantity* of Roma participants, but the *qualitative* outcomes and impacts of the NDI-sponsored training. Participants wanted to use the answers to these questions to better target the recruitment and training of new Roma activists to ensure they were investing in people who would continue to engage in the political process.

Political Mainstreaming?

Like NDI, Roma activists and leaders also wondered if the mainstreaming approach to political and civic participation was effective. Given the challenges outlined above, participants debated the efficacy of integrating into a deeply flawed and discriminatory political system. Some participants wanted to know if closer cooperation with Roma political parties would have been more effective in gaining votes. They also wanted to know if the program had increased the number of Roma citizens engaging in politics and the elections, particularly Roma women voters. They were interested in understanding the program's contribution to diminishing the barriers between Roma and non-Roma, and raising the profile of positive Roma role models.

Political Parties & Candidates?

In discussing political competition, participants wanted the evaluation to answer tactical questions as well as strategic questions about their engagement in mainstream political parties. Specifically, they were interested in evaluating the effect of their candidacies on raising Roma issues in Slovakia's larger political and policy discourse. Not only were they interested in an inventory of Roma candidates on political party lists, but if and how their presence within political parties focussed attention and commitment to addressing Roma issues.

Public Opinion & Voter Mobilization?

Roma leaders and activists were interested in understanding the hearts and minds of both Roma and non-Roma constituencies during the elections. Of particular concern to participants was the influence of ethnicity and racism on voting behavior. Roma leaders wanted the evaluation to provide insight into when and why non-Roma voters would vote for Roma candidates, as well as why Roma voters might prefer mainstream, non-Roma candidates.

Roma activists and politicians were interested in understanding the factors of success in mainstream political competition at the local, regional and national levels. They wanted to know the success rate of Roma candidates in non-Roma communities, as well as the success rates for Roma versus non-Roma candidates in general. The participants also were interested in understanding the downstream effects of successful Roma candidates and if multiple Roma candidates split the vote to the benefit of non-Roma candidates. In addition, participants wanted to identify the kinds of qualifications for Roma candidates that would garner the support of Roma voters, as well as the kinds of support Roma constituents were willing to provide Roma candidates during their campaigns

Elections & Vote-Buying?

Participants also recognized that Roma communities were extremely vulnerable to the vote-buying tactics of predatory political parties and local officials. They wanted the evaluation to answer questions on the degree of vote buying in Roma communities, the strategies used in vote buying and the motivation of Roma voters to sell their votes. They also wanted to know if NDI's programs had contributed to diminishing vote-buying over the past 10-years, and which anti-vote buying strategies and messages were most effective.

Much discussion centered around the qualities and qualifications of Roma elected officials at the municipal level. On one hand, participants wanted the evaluation to identify the capacity gaps of Roma elected officials that hindered the effective execution of their administrative duties. They also wanted to know if Roma mayors would be willing to undergo additional training to address those gaps. On the other hand, participants wanted the evaluation to provide insight into how effectively Roma mayors and local councilors understood and represented the needs of their constituencies, both Roma and non-Roma. Participants were particularly interested in understanding the dynamics between local mayors and councilors and the frequency with which Roma councilors were coopted by non-Roma mayors.

Civic Engagement Post-Elections?

Discussion also centered around the lack of accountability at the municipal level, in part due to the indifference of non-Roma mayors and council members to Roma needs, and in part due to a lack of engagement of Roma community members post-elections. Therefore, participants wanted the evaluation to identify if and how Roma citizens were receiving information from their local councils on issues of concern to them, and if they were attending local council sessions. They also wanted the evaluation to identify if Roma community members were continuing to monitor the needs of the local community and the municipality's response to those needs. Lastly, participants wanted the evaluation to provide insight into the motivations and incentives for engagement among Roma citizens after the elections.

Given the herculean efforts of Roma leaders and activists, participants wanted to know if NDI's program had helped Roma leaders to affect the legislative process at the national and local levels.

A number of participants discussed the secondary effect of NDI's training program in bringing together Roma activists and leaders who had not worked together previously. Therefore, participants wanted to know if new networks had been created among Roma candidates, if those networks had helped Roma elected officials in their jobs and if the networks were sustainable. They also wanted the evaluation to assess the benefits and viability of a Roma elected councilor and/or mayoral association. Participants were also concerned with creating generational change and therefore wanted to evaluate the extent to which older Roma activists were passing on their experiences and expertise to younger Roma activists.
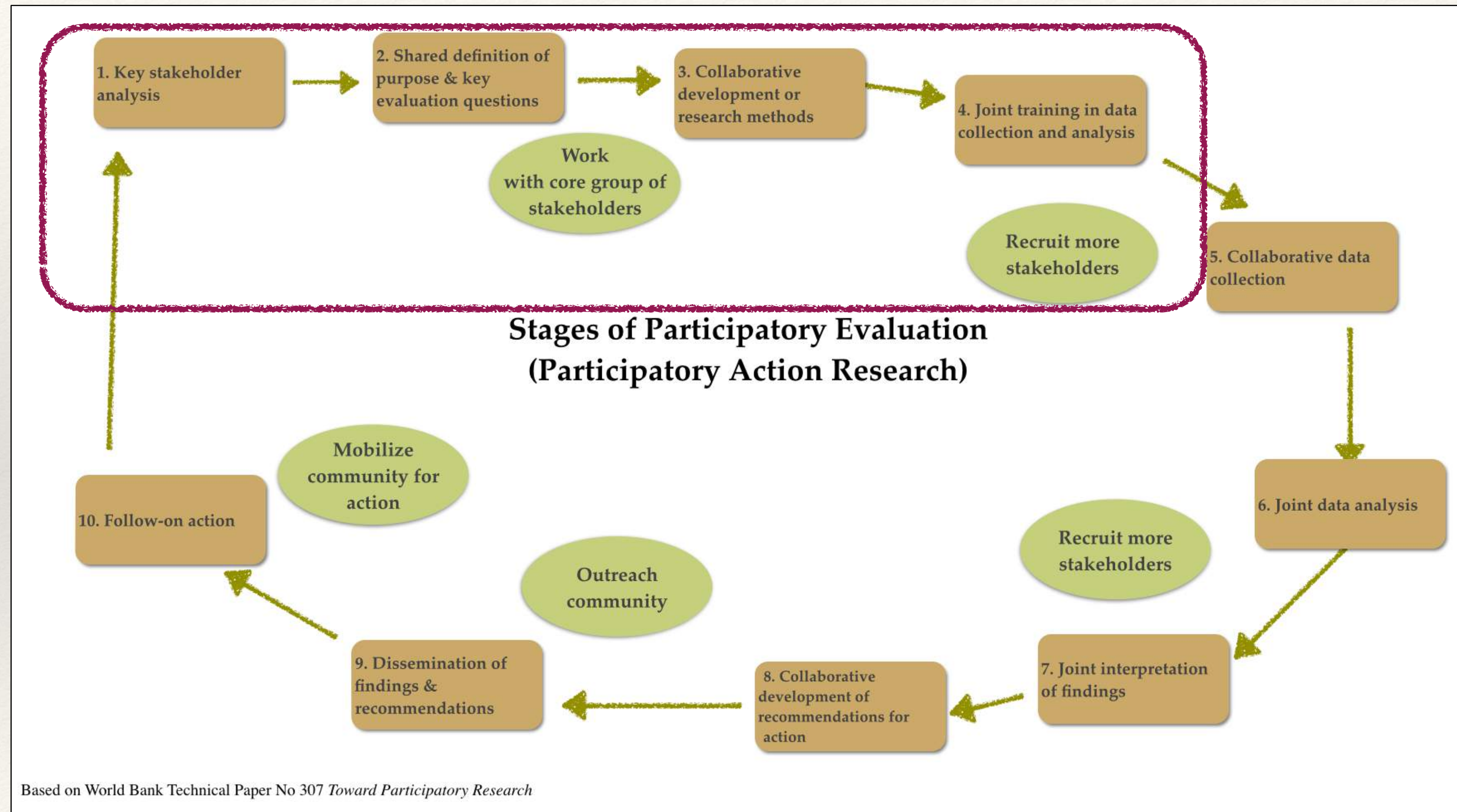
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Analytical Partnership

Next Steps:

❖ Form a Roma Advisory Committee

❖ Design Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) projects in selected Roma communities

❖ Train Roma Research Assistants

Stages of Participatory Evaluation (Participatory Action Research)

Based on World Bank Technical Paper No 307 *Toward Participatory Research*

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Participatory Evaluation Initiative