



## **ODIHR – European Commission joint project “Roma use your ballot wisely!”**

### **Expert Paper\***

### **Mapping the Electoral Participation of Roma in South Eastern Europe**

#### **1. Executive Summary**

Under a grant agreement with the European Commission, the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI) in 2003 launched a three-year program focusing on electoral participation of Roma and related groups in South Eastern Europe, “Roma Use Your Ballot Wisely!” (RUBW).

Roma are underrepresented in elected office and less active than other groups due to a number of factors, including lack of information and low awareness regarding political and electoral processes; non-inclusion in civic and voter registers and frequent lack of required identity documents; reluctance by mainstream parties to include Roma candidates and to target the Roma constituency; social isolation and cultural fragmentation among Roma communities; and vulnerability of Roma voters with regards to electoral malpractices.

RUBW tries to increase the participation of Roma in public life by promoting dialogue among Roma communities and between Roma and the mainstream society and the authorities and to empower Roma to become protagonists in the decisions involving and affecting themselves.

To this end, the CPRSI has undertaken numerous activities within the RUBW project, including mass training of Roma voters; model elections; training of potential candidates, facilitating electoral coalitions; and training and secondment of election observers to OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions (EOMs) and domestic observation efforts.

The OSCE/ODIHR has observed elections in the target region since the mid-1990s. Since 2000, it has included a national minorities component in its missions, frequently with a specific target on Roma issues. Since 2001, Roma observers have participated in OSCE/ODIHR EOMs.

OSCE/ODIHR EOMs have identified a number of weaknesses in the area of minority participation in elections, not all of which are limited to minorities. These weaknesses include: absence of formal mechanisms to ensure inclusion of national minorities in elections; a small number of minority candidates, especially Roma; little attention to minorities in election campaigns; low voter turnout among voters belonging to national minorities, in particular Roma;

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problems with registration of voters from national minorities; and numerous reports regarding election irregularities in areas populated by national minorities.

Civic and voter registration continues to be a problem for Roma voters in many countries in the target region, partly due to failure of Roma to register their residence with the authorities. The problem is compounded by the fact that Roma often lack identity documents needed to register or to vote. In some cases, Roma communities have been relocated but not reregistered, forcing them to vote in polling stations far away from their actual place of residence. In the former Yugoslavia, Roma voters are also affected by the effects of the country's disintegration, such as difficulties to obtain documents or to prove citizenship or ownership of property.

Voter turnout among Roma communities is generally below average. This is partly due to lack of civic education and partly due to the lacking efforts of political parties to reach out to this electorate. Generally, political apathy appears to be quite high among Roma electors. Problems with identity documents and location of polling stations mentioned above further contribute to low turnout among Roma voters.

The chances of candidates from Roma parties to be elected are limited in most countries in the target region because there are no special mechanisms to increase the representation of minorities, such as lower thresholds or reserved seats. Roma parties are generally not well-organized and do as a rule not have coherent platforms, which limits their appeal. Furthermore, these parties often lack financial and human resources to run effective campaigns. Women and youth continue to be underrepresented among Roma party activists and candidates.

Roma are also among the ethnic groups most affected by pressure and electoral malpractices, including vote buying and outright election-day fraud. Combine with the fact that Roma are not well-represented in the election administration of most countries, this contributes to the feeling that their vote does not carry enough weight.

Based on these findings, this report offers a number of recommendations to the authorities of the target countries, Roma activists and NGOs and to OSCE participating States, aimed at increasing participation of Roma citizens in elections and in political life in general.

## **2. Introduction and Background**

The "Roma Use your Ballot Wisely!" project (RUBW) focuses on electoral participation of Roma and other groups commonly referred to as "Gypsies (such as Sinti, Egyptians, Ashkalie, Rudari) in South Eastern Europe. It was launched in the Summer of 2003, following a grant agreement between the OSCE/ODIHR's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI) and the European Commission (EC) which was signed in April 2003. The project was initially scheduled for a two-year term but was consequently extended to 30 June 2006. Under the grant agreement, the EC agreed to fund 80 per cent of the project's cost.

RUBW builds upon a previous project of the EC, the OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe (CoE), "Roma and Stability Pact in South Eastern Europe 2001–2003".

## 2.1. Background of "Roma Use Your Ballot Wisely!" Project

It is a widely acknowledged fact that Roma are underrepresented in public life and that they are politically less active than other groups. This concerns both their participation as voters and as candidates and elected officials. Several factors contribute to this situation, including:

- Lack of information among Roma regarding their civic rights, including the right to vote; low awareness regarding electoral processes and procedures; frequently insufficient understanding regarding the importance of participating in elections; lack of required documents such as IDs needed for voting, and/or non-inclusion in voter registers;
- Reluctance on the side of mainstream parties to include Roma candidates on their lists, especially in eligible positions, and to specifically target the Roma population in their election platforms and campaigns;
- Social isolation and cultural fragmentation among Roma communities, which affects the dynamics of Roma political parties and lessens their ability to cooperate;
- Cultural practices of unequal treatment of men and women among Roma; and
- Vulnerability of Roma voters with regard to election-related practices of corruption and other irregularities (vote buying, pressure on voters, group and proxy voting).

RUBW aims at increasing the participation of Roma in public life at all levels and stages of the decision-making process, in particular when dealing with issues concerning Roma themselves. To achieve this objective, RUBW tries to promote dialogue between Roma people and communities and policy makers in local, regional and national authorities.

By using electoral mechanisms in the countries of South Eastern Europe, the project tries to contribute to combating intolerance and discrimination based on ethnicity, culture, gender, lifestyle or religion, as well as social exclusion and marginalization of Roma people and communities, both within and between the communities.

To achieve this aim, the project has the two-fold objective of (a) facilitating mutual understanding and dialogues between the authorities and Roma, and (b) empowering Roma to become protagonists in the decisions involving and affecting themselves and to contribute to the democratic development and reconciliation of the societies they live in.

RUBW targets numerous groups within the countries of South Eastern Europe, including:

- Communities, NGOs and political parties of Roma and other groups commonly referred to as "Gypsies" (such as Sinti, Egyptians, Ashkalie, Rudari) as part of electoral communities;
- The network of contact points at national and regional level established during the

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previous EC-ODIHR-CoE project, including committees of IDPs and refugees;

- Women and youth, both as voters and as candidates;
- Selected mainstream political parties, their leaders, MPs and staff in charge of electoral platforms and campaigning;
- Elected authorities at the national and local level in selected countries, provinces or municipalities; and
- Bodies in charge of administering and monitoring elections.

## **2.2. Objectives of Research Report**

This research report analyzes electoral behavior among Roma communities in South Eastern Europe, based mainly on reports of OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions (EOMs), Election Assessment Missions (EAMs) and Needs Assessment Missions (NAMs). In addition, the report draws on reports provided by Roma observers who served on OSCE/ODIHR missions as core team members, long-term observers (LTOs) and short-term observers (STOs), as well as reports provided to the CPRSI within the RUBW project.

The aim of the present report is to establish the main factors contributing to low electoral participation among Roma in South Eastern Europe and to offer recommendations which could serve to address the problems analyzed by the RUBW project.

## **3. Electoral Participation within the "Roma Use Your Ballot Wisely!" Project**

The RUBW project is divided into three distinct yet interconnected parts or clusters, dealing with electoral participation of Roma (Cluster I), advocacy and lobbying elected bodies for implementation of specific measures of Rome policies (Cluster II), and Roma to Roma exchange of experience and information at the regional level (Cluster III).

Within the framework of Cluster I of the RUBW project, a number of activities aimed at increasing the electoral participation of Roma were undertaken. They included (a) mass training and voter education of Roma voters; (b) model elections; (c) training of potential Roma candidates; (d) facilitating electoral coalitions; and (e) election observation by Roma observers, including training of short-term observers and secondment of Roma observers to OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions.

## **4. Political and Electoral Behavior of Roma in South Eastern Europe**

The following section examines some key mechanisms which can serve to increase electoral participation and which have been used by the RUBW project over the past three years. Analyzing these mechanisms, the report tries to establish whether and to what degree that have contributed to increasing electoral participation and whether and how they can be modified in order to increase

their efficiency.

#### **4.1. Mass Training of Roma Voters**

In order to increase the electoral participation of Roma, this activity focused on producing voter education material, including in the Romani language, which was to be distributed among target communities in the framework of organized information campaigns and trainings. Local contact points and task forces contracted within the project were to contribute to the implementation of these activities.

In 2003, the RUBW project initiated an information and voter education campaign for the local elections in Albania. It appears that this campaign was only partly successful for a number of reasons, mainly the fact that the use of written material was found to be rather inefficient among Roma communities, which tend to rely more on oral communication, and that the target groups appeared to be more interested in observing the elections rather than being directly involved in the electoral process.

However, the mass training also yielded positive results: 16 persons from among the Roma and Egyptian communities were trained in promoting electoral participation and providing voter information; A voter education TV spot was produced and disseminated alongside posters, CDs and tapes; four Roma representatives were elected to communal councils in two communes covered by the project; and cooperation between Roma and Egyptian organizations was increased.

While it appears that awareness-raising programs targeting Roma voters are a key element in increasing their electoral participation, two additional criteria would have to be met concurrently for this approach to produce the desired results:

- such programs need to be conducted in cooperation with a partner organization which has the resources necessary to implement such a program on a (relatively) large scale; and
- the programs would need to be complemented by other programs, in particular ones aiming at increasing the number of Roma candidates.

When implemented properly and adapted to specific circumstances in a country, mass training can help to raise awareness of electoral issues as well as voter turnout. Furthermore, it can help to reduce the number of invalid ballots, and therefore wasted votes, by familiarizing voters with election procedures and techniques.

#### **4.2. Model Elections**

Model elections are a pilot activity aiming to arise interest in electoral participation among Roma and to give practical training on the electoral process by means of hands-on education. Target groups for this specific activity include political activists, representatives of the authorities, NGOs and voters.

While model elections seem to be a promising and quite innovative approach to increase understanding of and interest in electoral issues, there are some possible problems connected with them which could outweigh the benefits in most cases.

The main risk is that model elections are seen as a partisan activity, especially if they are conducted close to an actual election, when they would by definition be most effective. As a matter of fact, model elections planned for Romania in 2004 were seen by many stakeholders as a partisan activity and as part of regular electioneering, rather than as non-partisan civic training. Therefore, the planned model elections were dropped in favor of other, less contentious activities.

Model elections may have the unwanted effect of raising passions among Roma communities where they are held, and in particular among the more active segments in these communities who are involved in politics and elections. Instead of providing hands-on education, model elections could inadvertently contribute to conflict and increased tension.

If the aim of model elections is to create interest in politics and elections, it may be advisable to use them as a tool among the younger population below voting age, not too close to an actual election, and possibly as part of other civic and political education efforts. While it might take a longer time for model elections to have an impact if they are implemented in this manner, the long-term effects may be significantly more beneficial than if model elections are carried out in a less targeted manner and in a situation which would also make them more open to misinterpretation and maybe even abuse.

#### **4.3. Training of Potential Candidates**

Training of potential candidates for elected office from among Roma communities is a means to encourage and increase the electoral participation of Roma and to improve the political skills of the members of Roma political parties standing as candidates.

Within the RUBW project, corresponding activities took place in Bulgaria in 2003, and in the commune of Šuto Orizari (FYROM), one of the largest Roma settlements in Europe, in 2004. The project in FYROM specifically targeted potential women candidates, while the activities in Bulgaria focused on training women and young political activists.

Candidate training is an obvious means of increasing candidates' chances to run a successful campaign and eventually be elected. Such training is likely to be particularly beneficial for Romani candidates, given the generally lower level of political education and training among Roma communities, as well as the widespread lack of support by and resources of well-organized political parties.

The assumption that candidate training is particularly useful for Roma candidates is underscored by the fact that from among 75 potential Roma candidates trained in Bulgaria in campaigning skills and methods for leading negotiations on establishing coalitions, eight were actually elected in the 2003 local elections.



In the 2003 local elections in Bulgaria, Roma candidates fared considerably better than in the previous local elections of 1999. Roma parties and coalitions registered candidates in 149 out of 163 municipalities. The number of municipal councilors increased from 50 to over 125 nationwide, who were elected in more than 40 different municipalities. While most Roma councilors were elected in smaller towns, Roma were also elected to the municipal councils of seven district centers (Dobrich, Vratsa, Vidin, Shumen, Kyustendil, Blagoevgrad and Stara Zagora). Furthermore, a relative high number of incumbent councilors was reelected. The biggest success for a Roma candidate was the election of Nikolai Kirilov as chairman of a municipal council in Lom, the first Roma to hold such office. Overall, the success of Roma candidates in the 2003 local elections in Bulgaria point to the beginning of the establishment of a visible Roma political class in the country.

In FYROM, the training *per se* appears to have brought about less visible short-term effects than in Bulgaria. While participants responded to the trainings, they expressed a preference for election observation, rather than participation in the elections as candidates. This was mainly due to the perception of politics as a "dirty game" under traditional Roma customs. However, participants launched an active voter education campaign for Roma women in several municipalities (Šuto Orizari, Kočani, Štip, Prilep and Bitola) ahead of the 2004 local elections.

#### **4.4. Facilitating Electoral Coalitions**

Given the threshold requirements in place in many countries in South Eastern Europe, electoral coalitions are an obvious means of increasing the chances of representation of Roma on elected bodies, especially at the national level. Where no special provisions for national minorities exist, such as lower thresholds or reserved seats, electoral coalitions are in practice the only realistic way of increasing the chances of Roma being elected, apart from the inclusion of individual Roma candidates on the lists of mainstream parties.

Electoral coalitions can be divided into three distinct groups:

- Coalitions among two or more Roma parties;
- Coalitions between Roma parties and mainstream parties; and
- Coalitions between Roma parties and parties representing other national minorities.

Which of these coalitions is the most appropriate depends largely on the situation in each country. Determining factors include (a) the numerical strength of Roma and other national minorities as well as their geographic distribution in the country in question; (b) the electoral system, including constituency magnitude, methods used for seat allocation, possible regional thresholds, etc.; (c) political factors which may facilitate or hamper the formation of coalitions between Roma parties and parties representing other ethnic groups; and (d) the political strategy of the political groups involved, both within the Roma community and outside.

Given the numerical strength of the Roma population and the fragmentation of the Roma political

scene in quite a few countries in the target region, coalition building appears to be one of the key approaches to increase the representation of Roma people in politics. An increase in the number of Roma holding elected office might in turn lead to a higher interest among the Roma population to participate in elections since they can see the effects of having elected representatives from their own community.

The RUBW project undertook three activities aimed at facilitating electoral coalitions: in Moldova in June 2003 (round table), in Bulgaria in April–May 2004 (training), and in Serbia in September 2004 (round table).

The training conducted in Bulgaria in 2004 brought together Roma political activists and representatives of mainstream parties. As such, it provided a unique and valuable opportunity for political leader of Romani as well as mainstream parties to discuss the challenges of Roma political participation, to determine common areas of interest and focus, and to discuss future priorities.

In general, facilitating the establishment of electoral coalitions, regardless of what type of coalitions, can help to maximize the impact of the Roma vote, in particular in situations where Roma parties running on their own have little or no chance of winning representation on elected bodies.

#### **4.5. Election Observation**

Observation of elections by Roma is another means of raising interest in elections in general and awareness with regards to electoral issues. This holds true both to increasing interest of electoral issues within Roma communities and to raising awareness of problems facing the Roma communities outside the communities themselves.

In this context, both domestic and international election observation have their place. Domestic observation, either by Roma NGOs or by Roma operating within the framework of a larger domestic non-partisan group, is better suited in raising awareness among Roma communities, as well as among the majority population in the country concerned. International observation with the participation of Roma experts focusing on national-minority issues can carry significant weight both with the people and the government of the host country, as well as with the international community, which may choose to push for certain measures based on the international observers' findings.

Obviously, some key criteria must be met for an observation effort to be credible, regardless of whether it is domestic or international observation. These criteria include:

- **Impartiality:** A non-partisan, unbiased approach is probably the key factor determining an observation's credibility.
- **Professionalism:** Professional behavior and performance by all members of an observation effort is another key factor determining an observation's output and credibility. As a means



to achieve the desired professionalism, proper training and scrupulous selection of observers are needed. In addition, observers need proper guidance with regards to their work and to the methodology applied.

- Non-interference: For any observation to be credible, it is of paramount importance that each observer adheres to the rule of non-interference. Any kind of interference would turn an observer into an active participant and would thus affect the impartiality of the observation as a whole. Therefore, a code of conduct must be adopted, and it must be insured that each observer adheres to it.

#### 4.5.1. Domestic Election Observation

Domestic non-partisan observation continues to play an important role in most countries of South Eastern Europe. In most of these countries, domestic observer groups have been monitoring elections for a decade or more and have built for themselves a credible reputation. Among the best-known of these groups are *CeSID* in Serbia, *Asociația Pro Democrația* (APD) in Romania, and *GONG* in Croatia, all of which have been observing elections for about a decade or more. Given the experience and credibility of many domestic non-partisan observer groups, their assessment of an election carries a certain weight and is frequently taken into account by the public and political actors.

While domestic observer NGOs generally observe elections throughout the whole territory of a country using their standard methodology, some "mainstream" NGOs in the region include observation of settlements with a significant Roma population as part of their standard observation efforts. They also train and deploy Roma observers, often to these areas. In addition, Roma NGOs in some countries conduct election observation independently (although sometimes coordinating their activities with other observers). Both approaches to domestic observation have their merits and should be encouraged and further developed.

Roma NGOs or NGO networks have been accredited as election observers in several countries in the region, including Bulgaria (parliamentary elections 2005) and FYROM (local elections 2005). Roma observers have also been deployed as part of the observation efforts of mainstream NGOs, for example in Romania in 2004.

Thus, the Roma NGO "Equal Chance" was accredited as a domestic observer organization for the 2005 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. During the 2005 municipal elections in Šuto Orizari (FYROM), the "Roma Lobby Group" was accredited to conduct domestic observation.

For the 2004 local elections in Romania, APD conducted a project within the RUBW project. This project consisted of three elements: (a) a TV spot encouraging Roma voters to go and vote in the elections; (b) qualitative monitoring of the discourse relating to national minorities in six national dailies; and (c) training and deployment of Roma observers. As part of this activity, 34 Roma observers were selected using databases provided by Roma NGOs and trained locally. The 34 observers followed election-day procedures in eight counties. According to APD, these observers were treated no different than other APD observers. Regrettably, APD noted that some observers



did not take their role seriously enough, with some of them not turning up or being unreachable on election day. Despite certain problems encountered during the observation of the 2004 local elections, APD's effort should be seen as a commendable start, and similar activities should be undertaken in future elections.

Most problems observed during the 2004 Romanian local elections by Roma observers related to organizational aspects of the vote and could generally be resolved by bringing them to the attention of the polling board chairpersons. However, Roma observers also noted some cases where candidates offered inducements to voters.

#### **4.5.2. International Election Observation**

Since the mid-1990s, the OSCE/ODIHR has been the lead international organization observing elections in South Eastern Europe. Other organizations, such as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CLRAE) have joined the ODIHR on many missions for the immediate election period. In cases where elections are or were administered by the OSCE (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo), the Council of Europe usually takes the lead in election observation. In addition, OSCE field missions occasionally conduct election observation, especially in case of isolated electoral events such as by-elections or local elections limited to a few municipalities. In some of these cases, the resident OSCE missions have been supported by experts seconded by the OSCE/ODIHR.

The OSCE/ODIHR has observed numerous elections in the countries of South Eastern Europe since the mid-1990s. The OSCE/ODIHR has dedicated significant attention to issues of minority participation in elections, both in terms of analytical approach and of the practical work of election observation missions. For example, the OSCE/ODIHR in January 2001 published its "Guidelines to Assist National Minority Participation in the Electoral Process", which describe a variety of electoral mechanisms that can be used to achieve a meaningful political representation for national minorities.

The standard OSCE/ODIHR election observation methodology includes analysis of the participation of national minorities in elections. For the first time, these issues were examined in depth during the EOM for the 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections in Romania. Since then, the OSCE/ODIHR conducted several EOMs which – among other issues – focused on minority participation in elections, and in particular participation of Roma communities. In cooperation with the CPRSI and the RUBW program, a number of experts participated in EOMs to assess Roma participation in the electoral process. In order to assist EOMs, the OSCE/ODIHR has developed a number of checklists on national minority participation in the electoral processes.

Like other elements of an Election Observation Mission, ethnic minority participation monitoring is based on collecting information and assessing the extent to which the law and practice meet OSCE commitments and other universal standards in this field.

The EOMs collect information regarding national-minority issues, including any barriers to their

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equal treatment, assessing:

- minority participation as voters, candidates and elected representatives;
- the participation of minorities in leadership roles within state institutions, electoral commissions and political parties; and
- analysis of the legislative framework and its impact on minorities.

The analysis of the information collected, along with some basic data and concrete recommendations, are included in each EOM's Final Report. However, often core team experts collect much more information that could be used in the final reports published after election observation missions, which are limited in length to some 20 pages.

#### **4.5.3. Romani Short-Term Observers Throughout South Eastern Europe**

Romani observers have been participating in OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions since 2001(?). They have been deployed mainly as short-term observers (STOs), but also as long-term observers (LTOs) and as members of the core team dealing with national-minority issues.

The CPRSI has seconded Roma experts to EOMs in Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (?) and Croatia. Roma observers have also participated in missions outside the target area of the RUBW project, e.g. in Russia and Belarus.

The OSCE/ODIHR has undertaken training of Roma who will be sent to OSCE/ODIHR EOMs as STOs. For example, a regional training for STOs was conducted in Montenegro in December 2003, in cooperation with the Youth Center — Serbia and Montenegro.

Roma observers are generally deployed according to the standard observation methodology developed by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Department, usually in teams with non-Roma mission members. However, they do pay particular attention to issues related to national minorities in general and to Roma in particular, and Roma STOs are usually deployed to areas with a significant Roma population.

The findings of Roma mission members are an integral part of an EOM's output; statements of preliminary findings and conclusions as well as final reports usually include sections devoted to national minorities, often with a special focus on Roma issues. In addition, Roma observers provide more exhaustive reports on their findings to the CPRSI.

In their reports to the CPRSI, Romani STOs have frequently recommended that OSCE/ODIHR EOMs need to include an expert on national minorities, with a special focus on Roma issues. Fortunately, the inclusion of a national minorities analyst is now a reality on most EOMs, although the focus is not always – and almost never exclusively – on Roma issues. Nonetheless, it would be desirable if the OSCE/ODIHR's Election Department, in cooperation with the CPRSI,

enlarged the pool of minority experts who would be available to serve on EOMs in order to provide the necessary analysis.

## 5. Main Findings of OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Missions

OSCE/ODIHR EOMs deployed since 2000 have indicated a number of weaknesses in the area of minority participation in the election processes. However, it has to be underlined that generally, these weaknesses are not limited to minorities. Similar challenges are also applicable to other sections of a society such as women and youth. Sometimes, however, such groups are also disadvantaged within the minority communities.

In general, the findings of the OSCE/ODIHR EOMs in the area of minority participation could be grouped in several points.

1. Relatively common *absence of formal mechanisms to ensure inclusion* of national minorities in the elections, such as reserved seats, etc. Only a few observed countries have adopted election systems that give some form of preferential treatment to minorities (e.g. Montenegro) or have a limited number of reserved seats for minorities (e.g. Romania). In most observed countries, minority communities have to participate in the elections thorough mainstream parties. Even if they are able to form minority parties, their chances for election are limited by thresholds or methods of allocation of seats that are proven disadvantageous toward minority candidates (e.g. Moldova, Serbia).
2. *Small number of minority candidates*. In general, the number of minority candidates does not reflect their share of population. In the Moldova 2005 parliamentary elections, only two Roma candidates were included on the list of mainstream parties, both in positions that made them unlikely to be elected. However, it is also reported that the level of organization of minority parties is still weak, especially with regards to Roma parties (e.g. Roma parties in Serbia). On the other hand, positive developments can also be observed, such as a general and steady increase in Roma candidates standing for elections in the countries of democratic transition.
3. *Little attention to minority issues* in the campaign. Although the situation is improving with the development of political parties and their campaign tactics, mainstream political parties do little to attract support of minority voters. It can even be argued that frequently, parties shy away from targeting Roma voters' concerns, possibly because of fears that they will lose more votes from majority-population voters than they stand to win among the Roma electorate. This lack of attention is directly interlinked with:
4. Overall, *low turnout of voters* reported in areas inhabited by national minorities. When minorities demonstrate lower interest in the elections or have a record of below-average participation, they do not attract the attention of mainstream parties, which are not interested to include minority candidates on their lists and address minority issues in the campaign. This creates a vicious circle – lack of minority candidates and campaign issues leads to low participation of minority voters. And low participation of minority voters



leads to limited campaigning in the minority areas and small number of minority candidates on mainstream party lists.

5. *Registration of minorities as voters.* This is particularly applicable to Roma communities which are – as reported by many OSCE EOMs – affected by fundamental problems related to civic and voter registration, difficult access to identification documents, etc. Roma are often not registered as residents in the communities where they live (e.g. Slovakia and Serbia). This is often not a result of discrimination – some Roma may fail to reregister when they change their addresses, and there have been reports that in some communities, Roma are reluctant to register births within their families.
6. Relatively good reports regarding *availability of election material*, including ballots and voter information, in minority languages. This seems to be a standard and common practice of election administration in many of the observed countries. However, the administration in some countries continues to provide not only ballots but also voter information material in the official language(s) only.
7. Numerous reports regarding *election irregularities* in the areas populated by minority groups, usually at a higher rate than in other areas. This includes allegations of vote buying among Roma communities (e.g. in FYROM, Bulgaria). In addition, minority voters are often particularly vulnerable to threats of losing employment or social benefits and therefore forced to vote for particular parties/candidates. At the same time, certain vulnerabilities of women and youth are also observed in some minority communities.

## **6. Main Issues Reported by OSCE/ODIHR EOMs, by Romani STOs, and in Background Material Provided by CPRSI**

### **6.1. Voter Registration**

In many countries, civic and voter registration remains an issue which poses problems to the electoral participation of Roma. In the target region, voter registers are generally compiled on the basis of extracts from the civic registers, which are usually maintained by the municipal authorities. Persons who are not on the civic registers at their place of residence will therefore also be missing from the voter register and will thus not be able to vote.

The issues related to voter registration are numerous and may vary from country to country. In general, however, the main issue is non-inclusion in the civic register due to failure to report residence or lack of required documents, such as identity documents and birth certificates, or registration of property titles.

Observers on several EOMs have reported that Roma are often not included in the civic and voter registers due to their own failure to register with the authorities, especially if they have moved their residence. One reason for this failure to register appears to be a general mistrust of state authorities, while another reason is the perception that it is pointless to register since the authorities do not provide services for the Roma communities anyway. There are also reports (e.g.



from Albania) that Roma sometimes fail to register births within their families, which results in people missing from registers altogether.

Even where Roma are willing to register with the authorities, this is sometimes made difficult or impossible by lack of identity documents. Many Roma do not have the necessary identity documents due to lack of other documents required to obtain an ID or due to the lack of funds needed to pay for identity cards. Frequently, Roma only possess ID documents which have expired and can therefore no longer be used for voting purposes. There are also reports that Roma remain unregistered due to the unwillingness of the authorities to register them as residents, although these would appear to be localized issues rather than the result of discrimination originating from the national level.

Another key problem with the regards to registration of Roma is the fact that many Roma live in illegal settlements or have built houses without proper building permits, or that they have bought properties without registering them in their own names. Therefore, they are not able to register with the authorities in their place of residence. In some cases, Roma communities have been moved out of the towns they used to live in by the local authorities (e.g. Piatra Neamț, Romania). In such cases, new settlements have often been established outside these towns but the relocated Roma population remains registered in their previous places of residence. This poses problems with regards to electoral participation because these Roma nominally remain on the voter registers under their previous addresses, but as a matter of fact their new housings are often several kilometers away and are not served by polling stations in the vicinity.

In Albania, the OSCE/ODIHR EOM for the 2005 parliamentary elections noted that little progress has been made with regards to registration of Roma and Egyptians as voters and that further efforts are needed to remedy this situation.

In the former Yugoslavia, Roma are faced with additional problems resulting from the breakup of the country and the wars that followed it. More specifically, Roma in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia more frequently have problems with identity documents and property titles since the relevant documents may have been destroyed or would have to be obtained from what is now a different state. With regards to property, the former owners may have moved to a different country or may have died, and the current owners may find it impossible to prove their entitlement to a property. Such problems have been reported from Kosovo, for example.

Another problem in the former Yugoslavia is that Roma frequently are not registered as citizens of the country they live in, even if they have been resident there for a long time. This is basically due to the fact that they may have been registered in a different republic when the country fell apart and that they are not able to prove that they have been resident in the country in question long enough to qualify for citizenship. IDPs and refugees face different problems in that they could vote for elections in their home country but often find it very difficult to get their names on the voter registers. This applies, for example, to Roma from Kosovo who were displaced to Serbia, Montenegro or FYROM. In Serbia, the official number of registered Roma IDPs, mainly from Kosovo, is around 22,500. However, an additional 30,000 unregistered IDPs are believed to be living in Serbia, without the right to vote.



Generally, there appears to be limited knowledge among Roma voters on how to check whether they are on the voter list and how to be included if they are missing from it. This appears to be a widespread problem which has been reported from numerous countries and territories in the region, including Kosovo. In many countries, voter education tries to address this issue, often in minority-language broadcasts including in Romanes. However, it appears that further efforts are needed to address this issue, for example by providing hands-on assistance with civic and voter registration at the community level.

## 6.2. Voter Turnout

Voter turnout among national minorities is often below average. This appears to be particularly the case with Roma communities, which often show a rather high degree of apathy with regards to political issues and elections. Participants of a 2004 meeting of leaders of Roma political parties in Serbia noted that low voter participation among Roma is due to their general lack of interest in politics, but also because many of them do not trust Roma political leaders.

In general, Roma communities appear to be more interested in local elections than in national ones, as stated by participants of the 2004 meeting of Roma party leaders in Serbia. This focus on local elections is understandable since many decisions affecting a community's everyday life are taken at the local level. Perhaps more importantly, though, is the fact that Roma political activists have a much better chance of being elected in local elections in places where Roma form a sizeable part of the electorate. In national elections, by contrast, their chances to be elected are often next to zero.

To some extent, lower participation of Roma voters can be explained by lack of identity documents needed for voting; for example, this was cited by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM as one reason for low turnout among Roma voters in the 2003/2004 local elections in Albania, an election during which no reports of direct discrimination against recognized minority groups or obstacles harming their participation were reported (however, lack of motivation to vote among Roma voters appears to have also been an issue). In Romania, there are estimated that as many as 20 per cent of Roma citizens do not have identity documents and are therefore unable to vote.

However, there are also examples of high turnout among Roma voters. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM for the 2004 municipal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported that turnout among Roma voters was "relatively positive" and cited the example of Tuzla, where over 50 per cent of Roma voters had voted by 16:00 hrs., higher than the overall turnout in the town. In the 2003 local election in Moldova, Ciprian Necula, National Minorities Expert of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM, noted that turnout among Roma voters was high, often above the national average.

In specific cases, turnout among Roma voters can be influenced by choices of other ethnic groups. For example, Roma voters living in Serb-inhabited areas of Kosovo did not vote in the 2004 Assembly elections in order to avoid conflicts with their Serb neighbors who decided to boycott the vote.

The location of polling stations can also have an impact on voter turnout. In several countries, EOMs have been told, or mission members have observed directly, that Roma are occasionally served by polling stations which are located at a great distance from their place of residence. This has a direct effect on voter turnout, and the decision to establish a polling station at a distance is often not justified. Sometimes, however, such problems arise as a result of relocation of Roma who remain registered in their previous place of residence.

In the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections in Romania, for example, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission found that the Roma community of Piatra Neamț had been moved to a new settlement on the outskirts of the town but had remained registered at their previous residences. Consequently, they had to vote at polling stations 5–7 kilometers from their homes. However, these Roma citizens had not applied to register at their new places of residence, as required by Romanian law.

In the 2004 Assembly elections in Kosovo, some Roma and Ashkalie leaders complained that polling stations were too far away from people's houses. For example, the approximately 1,500 voters from Dubrava village (Ferizaj municipality) had to vote at a polling station located some 5 kilometers from the village. When this was brought to the attention of the Central Election Commission, it was too late to establish new polling stations.

In general, polling stations should be located close to the living quarters of the voters registered there. Should this prove impossible, for example because of wholesale relocation of communities without the required re-registration, steps could be taken to facilitate the transport of the voters affected. Transportation could be provided by local administrative bodies or civil-society organizations. Transportation by parties or candidates would be less desirable. In each case, however, steps would have to be taken to ensure that voters are treated equally (e.g. no preferential treatment or discrimination because of known political affiliation) and are not influenced on the way to the polling station.

### **6.3. Roma Parties and Candidates**

Roma political parties exist in all countries in South Eastern Europe, but their impact on politics remains limited for a number of reasons.

Given the number of Roma living in the region and the threshold requirements in place in most of the countries, fragmentation of the Roma party landscape poses a problem for representation in elected bodies. This is especially true for national parliaments, while in municipal councils the situation may be different in places with a higher concentration of Roma. At the national level, Roma parties can realistically hope to gain representation only if there are reserved seats for national minorities or if the electoral legislation and political situation permit the formation of coalitions, either among Roma parties or with mainstream parties.

Reserved seats for minorities exist in Romania and Kosovo. In Romania, each recognized national minority is entitled to one seat in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of parliament) if it meets a low threshold requirement. In Kosovo, one seat is reserved for each recognized minority,

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including Roma.

In Serbia, Roma party leaders noted that Roma parties frequently lack human and financial resources. Funding often comes only from party leaders' personal funds. Young people are underrepresented in Roma parties. Many members of the Roma elite are active in mainstream parties rather than in Roma parties. Frequently, there is a lack of programs and platforms. Not surprisingly given this context, no Roma political organization has succeeded in having candidates elected at the national level.

In some elections, the number of Roma standing for office is considerably lower than population figures would suggest. For example, the OSCE/ODIHR EOM for the 2004 municipal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina was told by the Council of Roma that only four of the more than 26,000 candidates seeking office were Roma.

In Moldova, where there are no ethnic parties *per se*, Roma are the one national minority which is strongly underrepresented. In the 2003 local elections, for example, very few Roma ran for mayor or municipal councilor. Even in communes with over 80 per cent Roma population, there were few or no Roma candidates on the ballot. For the 2005 parliamentary elections, Roma were again underrepresented; only two Roma candidates were included in the lists of mainstream parties, both in ineligible positions.

In Romania, Roma have been represented in the parliament since 1992 as a result of the reserved-seat system. In 2000, a second Roma MP was elected on the ballot of the Social Democratic Party. In the 2004 parliamentary elections, two Roma parties ran. However, both appeared to lack political experience and understanding of the election process. Neither of them had a written election platform, and interlocutors told the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission that Roma in general prefer to vote for mainstream parties rather than for Roma political parties.

Regrettably, women and youth remain underrepresented in Roma parties and amongst their candidates. Reports indicate that this is to a large extent due to traditional, paternalistic attitudes by party and community leaders. In order to increase the electoral participation of Roma in general, concrete steps should be undertaken to increase the share of women and youth among party activists, candidates and elected officials.

#### **6.4. Campaign Issues**

In general, Roma appear to be a rather neglected part of the electorate. In most countries in the target region, mainstream parties make limited efforts at best to reach out to Roma voters. The same holds true for most parties representing national minorities other than Roma. Issues concerning the Roma community rarely find their way into parties' election manifestos and campaign platforms in literature.

The main reason for this apparent neglect of the Roma electorate seems to be lack of interest on the part of the mainstream parties, to some extent as a result of low turnout among Roma voters. However, there appear to be instances when parties deliberately avoid targeting Roma voters out

of concerns that this could cost them votes from other parts of the population.

Although Roma parties specifically target the vote of the Roma community, they often use ineffective campaign tactics, and their campaign is often characterized by a dearth of programmatic issues, which limits their appeal among large parts of their electorate.

## 6.5. Irregularities

Reports that Roma communities are particularly affected by electoral irregularities are a frequent phenomenon. Such reports include all kinds of irregularities, ranging from pressure on voters to cast their ballots for a certain party or candidate, to vote buying and other inducements, to serious irregularities on election day such as ballot box stuffing or impersonation of voters. Their difficult socio-economic situation, including dependence on social benefits, make Roma particularly vulnerable, as does the lack of interest shown by the majority population. This section lists a few characteristic examples from elections observed by the OSCE/ODIHR in order to illustrate this point.

FYROM has an unfortunate history of election-day irregularities, especially in areas with a strong Albanian or Roma population. In the 2004 presidential elections, the OSCE/ODIHR EOM noted that prior to both rounds of voting, there were “persistent allegations of vote buying and pressure on Roma voters” in the towns of Štip and Strumica. During the first round election, members of the Roma community in Šuto Orizari, in the north in Skopje, complained to domestic observers that their votes had been cast for them. Evidence of ballot stuffing at this large polling center was directly witnessed by OSCE/ODIHR observers. During the second round of voting there was some improvement in the conduct of the election in this area – perhaps related in part to the focus by international and domestic observers there during the first round – but similar problems reportedly occurred in other voting centers in Roma areas.

During the 2005 local elections in FYROM, the OSCE/ODIHR EOM concluded in its final report that the “marginalized conditions of the majority of the Roma population resulted in this community being especially targeted by vote-buying schemes, by both incumbents and opposition” and that Roma voters were particularly vulnerable to threats of losing employment and social benefits. In Šuto Orizari, there were particularly widespread reports of pre-election irregularities, including bribery and forceful dispossession of IDs, as well as intimidation and physical maltreatment of voters. The vote was invalidated in several polling stations in Šuto Orizari during both rounds of the mayoral election, and the election had to be repeated altogether since the winning candidate’s mandate was withdrawn because he was serving a prison sentence.

In the 2005 elections in Albania, OSCE/ODIHR observers received credible allegations that attempts were made to influence their electoral choices in certain communes, these allegations referred to pressure, vote buying and bribery. Similarly, for the 2004 Assembly elections in Kosovo, the Roma and Ashkalia Documentation Center reported that some political parties delivered food and clothes to Roma communities before the elections.

During the 2005 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, OSCE/ODIHR observers directly observed

organized attempts to influence the vote of the Roma communities, including cases of vote buying.

In Romania in 2004, there were similar reports of attempts to influence and manipulate the Roma vote. Such reports included alleged threats by mayors that their eligibility for social benefits depended on their voting behavior. There were also reports that the Roma vote would be bought through promises and gifts; however, only few of these reports could be substantiated.

#### **4.5. Roma in the Election Administration**

In general, reports by observers indicate that the number of Roma serving on election commissions is low and does usually not reflect the proportion of the Roma population in a settlement. This trend is apparent throughout the region, and most reports by OSCE/ODIHR missions note that while some Roma served on election commissions, especially at polling-station level, their share was disproportionately low.

However, it is difficult to assess whether the low level of representation of Roma on electoral bodies is the result of active discrimination by the authorities and/or the majority population, or whether it is the reflection of lacking interest in serving on election commissions. In countries where parties nominate polling board members, low political activity of Roma could result in lack of representation on election commissions.

Whatever the underlying reasons for this lack of representation, steps should be taken by all sides involved (authorities, political parties, Roma communities) to address the situation and encourage a higher degree of participation of Roma on election commissions. Doing so would instill a degree of ownership of the process among the Roma population and could reduce the perception that Roma have no say in the electoral process.

At the same time, though, newly recruited members of election commissions would have to receive proper and thorough training so that they can fulfill their task properly and efficiently, and mechanisms would have to be established to guarantee that elections are administered in a professional and impartial manner. Equally important, where tensions may reasonably be expected, steps would have to be taken to ensure that members of election commissions are protected from undue pressure.

### **8. Conclusions and Recommendations**

It has become obvious from OSCE/ODIHR EOM reports, as well as from reports written by Romani observers serving on such missions, that the challenges which must be overcome in order to increase electoral participation among Roma communities in South Eastern Europe are numerous and often formidable. In order to increase the participation of Roma, be it as voters or as candidates, concerted efforts by all actors involved are needed. Roma communities, Roma and mainstream political parties, civil society, the governments and the international community all have a role to play in this respect. There needs to be a clear understanding not only of the challenges at hand, but also that there is no “quick fix” and that time and considerable resources

will be needed to properly address the problems identified.

The main challenges to increased participation of Roma communities in electoral processes can be summed up as follows:

- Incomplete civic and voter registration among Roma, as well as frequent lack of identity documents deprive many Roma of their right to vote;
- A widespread lack of understanding of political and electoral processes limits interest in politics and hampers political participation of Roma communities;
- Roma are generally underrepresented in elected office and in the state administration, and therefore have very limited possibilities to work for the benefit of their communities in public office;
- Roma political party structures are generally underdeveloped, parties often lack a clear programmatic profile, and frequently there are divisions among Roma political activists which split the Romani vote;
- Mainstream political parties lack interest in addressing Roma issues and fail to campaign actively among the Roma electorate;
- Roma candidates often lack proper training which would enable them to deal effectively with political issues and to campaign effectively;
- Roma voters are affected by pressure and electoral irregularities to a disproportionate degree.

In order to address these challenges, as well as problems outlined elsewhere in this and in other reports, the following recommendations are offered and should be taken into consideration.

### **8.1. Recommendations to the relevant authorities**

1. Where this is not already the case, the authorities should give consideration to instituting mechanisms which would provide for special representation of national minorities, including Roma. This could be achieved by reserved seats on elected bodies or by special thresholds, or preferential voting, among others.
2. Steps should be taken, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that as many Roma citizens as possible are included in the civic and voter registers.
3. Roma citizens should be issued with identity documents if they do not possess them already. For economically disadvantaged communities, consideration should be given to issuing identity documents at affordable rates.





4. State authorities and election administrators should increase their efforts at voter education targeted at Roma communities. Such voter education should be conducted in Romanes, in addition to the official language(s) of the country, and should also employ non-conventional approaches in order to reach communities where literacy might be a problem.
5. Civic education should start at a young age in school. Ideally, it should be part of the standard curriculum so that Roma youth are familiarized with political and electoral issues from an early age.
6. Efforts to provide for a higher degree of representation of Roma in public office need to be increased considerably, including at the national level. Having Roma civil servants would contribute significantly to general involvement of Roma communities and would give them a sense of ownership and involvement. Roma representation on election commissions, especially at the polling station level, also needs to be increased in order to instill a sense of ownership in the election process.
7. The authorities need to ensure that Roma voters are not subjected to undue pressure and that irregularities are prevented from occurring during voting and counting. All violations should be punished promptly and in line with existing legal provisions.

## **8.2. Recommendations to Roma activists and Roma NGOs**

8. Roma activists and NGOs should focus on civic and voter education of Roma communities, in cooperation with the authorities or independently. Such education should include youth who have not yet reached voting age, rather than only voters. The focus should not only be on voting techniques but on political and electoral issues in general, so that general interest in these matters is raised.
9. Roma civic society and activists should assist Roma voters in getting their names included on voter lists so that they can exercise their right to vote.
10. Political parties should structure themselves around issues rather than personalities. In this respect, civil society has the important role to push parties to organize themselves along programmatic lines. Parties should target and fine-tune their programmatic orientation and their message to the electorate.
11. Roma political parties should encourage and promote the involvement of women and youth.
12. Roma candidates seeking elected office should be trained in campaign techniques and political issues so that they can campaign more effectively and can convey their message to their electorate.
13. Where deemed appropriate, electoral coalitions should be facilitated in order to increase the chances of Roma candidates being elected.



### **Recommendations to OSCE participating States**

14. OSCE participating States should provide assistance to the authorities of the target countries with respect to civic and voter registration, as well as with the issuance of identity documents where needed.
15. OSCE participating States should provide assistance, material or otherwise, to voter education efforts conducted by civil society or by the authorities of the target countries.
16. OSCE participating States should use their influence to ensure that target countries do not tolerate, or engage in, electoral malpractices.
17. OSCE participating States should encourage target states to modify their electoral system in a way that would facilitate and promote the election of Roma and other national-minority candidates.