

ROMA VOTERS DESERVE AN INFORMED CHOICE

For the **Working Session 14:**
Democratic institutions, including:
Democratic elections; Democracy at the national, regional and local levels;
Citizenship and political rights
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From my experience as a mainstream OSCE short term observer and as a Roma politician and participant in Bulgarian political life, I would like to share with you the following points, structured into *pre-dispositions* (what holds true for Roma in general), *problems and opportunities* (these are concrete facts that happen, in some cases reinforced and seen as opportunities by participants in the political life) and *recommendations* (necessary steps to be taken by parties, governments, society, civic actors, media).

Pre-dispositions

- In general, most of the general issues raised by mainstream parties (taxation, education, health care, foreign policy, and infrastructure) very often remain not understood by the vast majority of the Roma voters. I call that lack of knowledge of the ideas that reach to the Roma, or otherwise, a gap in the communication channel that reaches them.
- Roma have a very little knowledge about the people that are running as candidates in most of the elections (except for Presidential) – but this is very often true also for people with low level of education or people living in the countryside/province. In the big majority of the cases most of the Roma do not know who they the candidates are and what they are candidates for – especially in municipal, and national elections in political systems with proportional representations/ party lists.
- Many Roma make a living as seasonal workers – they are far away from their place of residence when elections take place.
- Many Roma often lack identity documents for various reasons – the cost of acquiring them perceived to be high, lack of desire and necessity to acquire them.
- Many Roma live in segregated neighborhoods (ghettoes) with lack of communications – transport and media, lack of electricity. They do not have an interest to follow the news.

Problems and opportunities

- lack of knowledge on the elections – Roma do not know what they are voting for
- lack of ideas that reach them and problems in communication channels
- lack of interest and understanding on the electoral process
- low level of literacy
- lack of identity papers
- vulnerability to rumors and gossips that spread in the Roma ghettoes

- vulnerability to take material incentives (clothing, food, money) to vote, often understood by the Roma as the only benefit they obtain in the elections
- louder voice of ethnic parties

Recommendations

- mainstream parties address issues in a way that is more understandable to Roma
- include Roma candidates in the party lists on eligible positions
- introduce preferential vote on the party lists
- governments should invest more money on non-written voter education materials such as radio and TV broadcasts, as many Roma are illiterate
- civic education, civil registration and voter registration campaigns should be widely conducted by relevant authorities at local level and within Roma communities
- NGOs involved within Roma community in explaining the electoral process should be neutral and not campaign for candidates
- more active approach by States is needed towards Roma communities regarding civil and voter registration
- more precision on the legislations that targets mobility of citizens and legitimacy of the voters who want to vote outside place of residence, so that the decision about who is legitimate to vote is not taken on a case by case basis and at the disposal of a local official of local electorate commission
- explanations of the type of elections, and of the electoral process along with information about voting procedure should be main elements of wide campaigns conducted in Roma communities by local authorities in partnership with Roma organizations