

The participation of Minorities in the Democratic Institutions with a special focus on Roma
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“The political parties should overcome their prejudices and invite Romani men and women on their candidate lists and also to implement actions in their party programs focusing on integration of Roma especially at the local and regional level. In the same time it is important to understand that Roma are first of all the equal citizens in country of their residence and so they have a right to be politically active”. This statement was made in May 2005 at the launch of Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 – 2015 by Romani non-governmental organizations in the Czech Republic, and it is still very actual.

As the Czech Republic is approaching the regional and Senate elections this month the question about Romani participation remains. Roma are underrepresented in political systems. Since 1991 there was only one Roma in the Chamber of Deputy in the Czech Republic. With the exception of Hungary where the Constitutions states that groups recognized under the Act on Minorities are to be represented in the Government, the other Central European countries such as Slovakia and Poland are lacking Romani political representation in their current parliaments and local councils.

To prove that there are Roma who would like to be politically involved, civil organization Athinganoi together with Romani women group Manushe (Slovo 21) was organizing Political Leadership Program for Romani Women. There have been 9 Romani women trained in the main disciplines related to the Czech local and national political system as well as to core Romani issues. As a part of the project the negotiation about involving participants in politics was done with the local parties.

As a success of the program, it is considered that there are three participants who are running in upcoming regional election. However their position on the candidate lists doesn't ensure their election. Moreover the political parties in which they were registered are new. The well known and established parties did not want Romanies on their candidate lists at all, since there are afraid to loose voters. Some political parties in the parliamentary election earlier this

year were using issues of high unemployment of Roma, and their bad living conditions¹, as a pre-election topic. The aim was to attract Romani voters, presenting them those values and merits that would benefit their situation, such as social security, no discrimination, and better access to education. But other political parties were discriminatory and were supporting anti-Gypsyism². More of such campaigns are attracting the majority of population who dislike Romanies³.

As a negative outcome of the project we might consider that one participant from the Political training was applying for the internship at the local office of Social Democrat MP as a part of the project, and she was not accepted. The assistant of a Member of Parliament sent her out, saying that she would not learn anything there since they are not doing politics in the office. The assistant sent her to the regional office of the Social Democrats or to the Communist party.

To conclude non-governmental organizations could not supplement the work of the government and political parties. Similarly as we consider very low representation of majority women in politics we need to increase the minority representation especially of Roma who are the citizens of their countries and for considerable part European citizens. We call upon the governments to support citizenship education – such as voters’ education, politicians trainings directed both to Roma and non-Roma to ensure higher democratic representation and mutual understanding of all people in OSCE countries.

¹ According to the Czech press, the number of Romani ghettos has been rising in the Czech Republic. A total of 76 percent of Romanies are allegedly unemployed. Only 19 percent of Romani women have a job. Some 23 percent of Romanies allegedly live in the ghetto in the Czech Republic (STEM poll).

² The common arguments of politicians were that Romanies are not working, and they are using government taxes for their own means. These political stands are in principle reflecting public opinion. Consequently, they are present prior to election and also following after them.

³ especially those who would not like to have a Romani neighbor. Only 11 percent of respondents from the poll say they would tolerate a Romany neighbor without problems, while for one-third it would be unacceptable (STEM Poll, 2006).