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“Welcoming the Roma to Political Participation in Europe”

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The Roma populations are grossly under-represented in local and national assemblies and government administrations all over Europe. This is a serious flaw in our democracies and perpetuates a situation of exclusion and marginalization of some ten million people on our continent.

When in Romania last week I discussed this with politicians there. I was informed that there is, in fact, one Roma representative in the Romanian parliament (chamber of deputies), he had been allocated one of the seats reserved for minorities. He can take part in the discussions on equal footing with other parliamentarians.

However, the Roma is a large minority in Romania. The official figure is about half a million; in reality they may be three, perhaps even four times as many. If they were represented in the parliament in proportion to their numbers, they should have something like 25 seats.

In other words, even in countries which are trying to include minorities through quota systems or reserved seats, the Roma are severely under-represented.

In Romania, my interlocutors admitted, the situation is even worse in the local assemblies. By and large, the Roma are not part of the political process. This is the tendency all over Europe.

There are of course several explanations.

One is the long history of discrimination and repression of Roma. Even after the *Porrajmos* and the Nazi killing of at least half a million Roma – probably 700.000 or even more - there was no genuine change of attitude among the majority population towards the Roma. It took years before the issue of compensation to surviving family members even came up to discussion.

Long after the Nazi period Roma families have been chased from place to place in a number of European countries – not being welcome anywhere. Governments have been slow in formulating apologies to the Roma community for these human rights violations.

It is not surprising that this history has created bitterness and a feeling of exclusion among the Roma. And you need only read some of the Court judgments in Strasbourg to realize that Roma

people are still facing hostile environments. Do they have good reasons to trust the majority population?

All efforts to encourage Roma participation in public life must recognize this basic point.

The majority, mainstream political parties have a responsibility for this state of affairs. By and large, they have shown very little interest in the Roma. Not only have the Roma representatives not been invited to their electoral lists, their views have seldom been sought. As the Roma populations have generally had a low voter turn-out they appear not to have been seen as an interesting factor in election campaigns.

Sadly, some political parties – primarily on the extreme right – have targeted the Roma in xenophobic statements in order to exploit reactionary tendencies among the electorate. This is one reason why some of the poisonous cliché lies about the Roma have spread so widely.

Even worse is the fact that some of the established political parties have not made clear that such xenophobia is unacceptable. One of my negative experiences in Romania was the discovery that some top level politicians had made clearly prejudicial statements about the Roma – without making a distinction between a few misbehaving individuals and the whole ethnic community. This does not encourage the next generation of Roma to feel attracted to enter politics.

There are other factors which have created barriers to Roma political participation. There is a lack of information among Roma about their civil rights and the whole electoral process. The Roma communities themselves are divided and still not well organized. The problem of lacking ID documents also affects participation in elections. This, of course, is also a problem for those who are not registered as citizens in the country where they live.

What should be done?

There is of course no simple and quick solution to a problem which is so deeply ingrained in attitudes among both Roma and the majority population. However, there are now experiences made from efforts in several countries which could be analyzed and learnt from. They could be compared with the OSCE standards such as the Lund recommendations from 1999 and the Warsaw guidelines from 2000.

One lesson is that proactive measures are absolutely needed. It is not sufficient to unblock some hindrances – there is a need to compensate for the long history of exclusion and marginalization through positive action.

Another lesson is to focus much on the local level. If it does not work in the municipalities Roma participation cannot be real on national level.

Efforts to encourage participation must be undertaken with Roma participation. Remember that there is a deep fatigue in many Roma communities of gadje “Roma experts” who pretend to know better than them what they need and want.

Some points:

1. Further steps must be taken to put an end to the anti-Roma discrimination. Comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation must be adopted and enforced. Further efforts to raise awareness among officials and the general public are necessary. There should be clear reactions against any tendency of xenophobic discourse and jargon.

2. More needs to be done in order to recruit Roma into civil service on both local and national level. It is particularly important that Roma are invited into the police profession and as staff in schools.
3. The attempts with reserved seats in political bodies should be developed. I noticed that the practice in Slovenia with one such seat in the local assemblies has created a channel in some municipalities between the Roma communities and the authorities.
4. The non-governmental organizations should be further encouraged to organize programs in civic education in Roma communities. Such programs should include human rights and practical aspects of the election system. It is important that they reach women. Written information for such education and about the elections should be available in Romani language.
5. More outreach efforts are needed to secure voter registration. Again, it is important to reach also women. The widespread problem of lacking personal identification documents must be resolved with high priority. This will have to include a solution of the problem for those who are stateless.
6. Public life is not only about elections. Participation is about a possibility to influence on a daily basis. More organized consultation is needed, for instance, in the municipalities, between the local authorities and the Roma population on housing and other concrete problems. Advisory bodies could be set up to give such consultations more continuity and promote the legitimacy of the Roma representatives. Authorities should be open to support Roma cultural centers – where this have been tried it has had positive effects also for inter-Roma communications.
7. Finally, it is important that the main stream political parties take their responsibility. How can they be encouraged to do this? I assume this is the subject for another conference – with their participation!