

ROMA POLITICAL SCHOOLS

Promoting Roma Political Participation and Civic Engagement



IN BRIEF



Roma and Travellers

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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1. Background

The political participation of Roma communities and the presence of Roma in public services and as elected officials, particularly at local level, far from reflect the demographic weight of those same Roma communities. In addition, the generational shift that includes a growing number of Roma with solid educational qualifications, with an emerging consciousness and a renewed vision of community leadership and community organising, is not yet directly translated into Roma presence in the political sphere.

It is also understood that the characterisation of participation as political refers to any decision related to public life and taken at any level by any institution, including within self-governance structures.

The theme of Roma and Traveller political participation, presence, empowerment and influence in political and public life was the main focus of the 5th meeting of the Council of Europe's Dialogue with Roma and Traveller civil society held in June 2018. The starting point of the Dialogue was that "although the engagement of Roma and Travellers in political and public life has noticeably increased over the past decade, they still face considerable obstacles in securing political presence, sustaining representation and exercising influence. Repeated evidence has shown that Roma and Travellers, and particularly young persons and women, encounter a series of social barriers and prejudices which severely impede their capacity to effectively participate in public life. Hence, Roma and Travellers are largely absent from local and national political and public participation and decision-making processes. This invisibility ultimately undermines the potential for Roma and Traveller political participation. Political participation demands that participation needs to be effective for Roma and Travellers to reverse embedded marginalisation and discrimination. The individual right to participation is not enough. Targeted minority participation mechanisms have not yielded adequate results and Roma and Travellers continue to be marginalised".

The Council of Europe has been a privileged witness to some of these developments since 2013. Through its action in the ROMED2, ROMACT and ROMACTED joint programmes, the Council of Europe has been promoting dynamics of local community organising in the participating municipalities. This action has led to the emergence of a large number of Roma community leaders, many of them young, with strong potential and motivation to get further involved and bring about positive transformation for their communities. This group of people are proud of their Roma identity and have a new understanding of the importance of political participation and the need for a more efficient collective representation of their communities. They have developed the necessary will, confidence, and competences to be part of the public sphere.

Since the end of 2015, within the framework of the Thematic Action Plan on the inclusion of Roma and Travellers (2016-2019) and of the Strategic Action Plan for the Roma and Travellers Inclusion (2020-2025) the Council of Europe has developed training sessions (Roma Political Schools¹) for Roma citizens having the potential to stand for election at local level, in order to bring Roma closer to local decision-making bodies and promote their active participation in local administration. The first such systematised experience of these Roma Political Schools was held in Bosnia and Herzegovina prior to the municipal elections of 2 October 2016. Training was organised for a group of Roma participating in the community action groups of the ROMED2 programme with the support of the Council of Europe's Electoral Assistance Division. As a result of this training, 20 people of Roma ethnic origin stood as candidates in the elections, 12 of whom were elected as municipality councillors (10 of those elected had never previously been candidates in local elections).

Since 2017, the Council of Europe, in partnership with Roma-led and pro-Roma organisations, has been supporting Roma Political Schools held to date in **Albania, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine, with pilot initiatives also in Kosovo***.

These schools attach much importance to the political participation of Roma women and Roma youth which is reflected in both the selection of participants and the composition and expertise of the resource teams (mentors, trainers, public figures, party leaders, academics, etc.) which deliver the training. The implementation process is therefore also in line with the conclusions and priorities of the 6th International Roma Women's Conference on "Women and Political Representation: the case of Roma and Traveller Women" (November 2017)², the recommendations of the aforementioned meeting of the Council of Europe's 5th Dialogue with Roma and Traveller Civil Society (June 2018), and the Study on the active political participation of national minority youth in the Council of Europe member States adopted (in June 2021) by the CDADI – Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination Diversity and Inclusion³.

Two thematic reports of the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (CAHROM)⁴ address the participation of Roma and Travellers in decision-making and advisory bodies, as well as participation in political life and provide recommendations concerning Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Ireland, Norway, and Spain.

The Roma Political Schools complement strategically the Barvalipe Schools initiative of the Roma Initiatives Office (RIO)/Open Society Foundations. Barvalipe Schools have similar objectives but exist in countries where the Roma communities are demographically larger in accordance with the OSF's geographic priorities.

The Roma and Travellers Team also coordinates its action with the Schools of Political Studies of the Council of Europe in order to propose qualified applicants of Roma origin for future editions of these schools, as well as to benefit from adapting the training and pedagogical methods together with the experience and institutional framework generated by these schools in participating member States.

1 Roma Political Schools is the generic terminology used in the Roma and Travellers Team to encompass the different training processes initiated at the end of 2015 with similar aims, such as the Roma Political Academy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015-16), the Portuguese Roma Political Academy (2017-21), the "Other School of Politics" in Turkey (2017-20), and the Political Schools in Albania, Greece, Italy, Spain, Ukraine, and Kosovo*.

* All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo

2 See conclusions of the 6th International Roma Women's Conference at : <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/roma-women> and the recommendations at: <https://rm.coe.int/recommendations-from-the-6th-international-roma-women-conference/16807c0e28>

3 <https://rm.coe.int/prems-101821-gbr-2530-study-on-the-active-political-participation-of-n/1680a3bb30>

4 [https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/cahrom#{"18184355":6}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/cahrom#{)

2. Overall Objectives

The overall objective is to foster the political participation of Roma. The Roma Political Schools train Roma citizens with the aim of bringing Roma closer to local, national and European decision-making bodies, whilst promoting their active participation and interaction with public administration, as well as their presence in the public sphere. This includes Roma with the will to stand for local election and possible national and European elections as representatives of their communities.

3. Specific Objectives

1

Promote civic and community engagement, political participation and Roma presence in the public sphere

2

Foster enthusiasm and provide skills for an improved participation of Roma in relevant political processes, including elections

3

Increase the understanding of the importance of the fundamentals of democracy and the need for active citizenship

4

Increase the networking and political capacity of the Roma communities in order to reduce the inequality and representation gap of Roma

5

Help to generate and maintain a safe environment for the expression of the Roma collective identity and aspirations with the affirmation of the Roma as a political actor





4. Educational Focus

The Roma Political Schools strive to use innovative education concepts that focus on supporting actions, democratic participation and civic activism of Roma people who want to strengthen the role of their local communities and affirm the power of their ideas.

As in other educational processes in the Council of Europe, it is recognised that there is no one “right” or single way to educate for democratic leadership. The use of a variety of methods and the diversity of the educational approaches are important characteristics of these training sessions. The participants involved, although all of Roma origin, have a very diverse educational level and educational background; the groups being trained are also composed of participants of different ages from Roma communities that also vary in terms of size, demography, specific context of inclusion, community participation, etc. Within the same group, participants also often have differences in relation to the degree of development of their political leanings, party affiliations and positions in the political spectrum.

To date, the approach to the Roma political schools has therefore been based on providing content in a balanced combination of non-formal education methods, with academic presentations, thematic participative debates, storytelling and inspirational examples, group work, individual mentoring, skills sessions, etc. The training sessions have favoured approaches that are participant-centred, participatory and innovative, building from needs and concrete examples to ideas, then from ideas to development of strategy and impact.

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The content provided in the training sessions and modules has also varied according to the specific context of each Roma political school. In general terms, the main issues covered are:

- ▶ Roma history, history of Roma participation, Roma emancipation;
- ▶ Rights and participation of minority groups;
- ▶ Democracy, rule of law and human rights;
- ▶ Racism, discrimination, anti-Gypsyism;
- ▶ Leadership and public service;
- ▶ Community organising and civil society;
- ▶ Gender equality and Roma women participation;
- ▶ Political systems, political culture and electoral systems;
- ▶ Political parties;
- ▶ Public administration;
- ▶ Specific skills training (such as public speaking, fundraising, campaigning, etc.).

The Roma Political Schools also strive to create a roadmap and a mentoring scheme for all those participants willing to take political action and a step forward in transforming the conditions within their own Roma communities, to help create conditions for participation, and to enable exchanges between participants and relevant political actors in civil society organisations, political parties, the academic community, with inspirational elected officials and holders of public positions, as well as those from the economic, social and media sectors.

The promotion of these exchanges also encourages political networking, helping to open doors and encourage the interest of parties and other organisations in the participation of Roma on Roma issues, whilst contributing to the creation of a new vision and role of the local Roma community through joint forces.

To date, the teams of trainers, presenters and mentors of the Roma political schools have been very varied and have included people such as:

- ▶ Elected Roma and Roma holding public posts such as parliamentarians, local councillors, mayors, secretary of state;
- ▶ Members of national and local government;
- ▶ Parliamentarians, including European parliamentarians;
- ▶ Representatives/leaders of political parties;
- ▶ Leaders and activists from minority and other interest groups;
- ▶ Roma academicians and political scientists;
- ▶ Leaders and activist of civil society organisations;
- ▶ inspirational Roma role models and personalities.



Many of the 10-12 million Roma and Travellers in Europe suffer from extreme poverty and exclusion. The existence of widespread anti-Gypsyism reinforces and aggravates their economic and social deprivation.

This Strategic Action Plan on Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020-2025) translates the strategic objectives of the Council of Europe regarding the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law into a policy framework for the social and intercultural inclusion of Roma and Travellers in Europe. It provides a framework that is flexible and adaptable to country-specific conditions, serving as a roadmap and practical tool for the design, implementation and adjustment of programmes and actions.

The objectives of the Strategic Action Plan are to promote and protect the human rights of Roma and Travellers, to combat anti-Gypsyism and discrimination, and to foster inclusion in society.

The Strategic Action Plan is structured around three main lines of action:

- ▶ combating anti-Gypsyism and discrimination and supporting real and effective equality;
- ▶ supporting democratic participation and promoting public trust and accountability; and
- ▶ supporting access to inclusive quality education and training.

For additional information:

www.coe.int/roma

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.