

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide by promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

We started our work on Roma in 2003 by conducting assessment missions, funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI), to Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia to determine how Roma could more effectively use the political process to address longstanding issues of social and economic exclusion.

Over the past five years, using the findings and recommendations, NDI, funded primarily by the National Endowment for Democracy and OSI, has conducted programs throughout the region to increase Romani capacities to engage in political and civic life. The program has been guided by the principle that **skilled** Romani activists can more effectively participate in political parties, government and civil society; compete for elected office; and influence policy. The initiative has focused on Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia.

This year, NDI conducted an assessment on the barriers to political participation of Roma in Romania, and the report that was presented in Bucharest, in Washington DC, Brussels, and now here, in Geneva.

There was no specific motivation why the assessment was conducted in Romania other than by numbers, Romania having the largest population of Roma. Official number is around 500,000, but many estimates are numbering the Roma between 1 and 2,5 million.

NDI examined the legal frameworks supporting minority rights and equal access; governing structures that provide services to and represent Roma communities; political parties as the bodies that aggregate citizen priorities and compete for office; civil society in their role as both government watchdogs and partners; and the trends in public opinion toward and among Roma.

In conducting the 2009 assessment, NDI brought to bear its experience of marrying political research to development goals, as well as its relationships with key political actors in Romania, in the Roma community, and in the international community. The assessment drew upon quantitative and qualitative tools, including desk research, public opinion polls, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and an assessment mission in Romania, featuring topical experts. In assessing the barriers to Roma political participation, NDI examined five subject areas: 1) the legal frameworks that protect and guarantee minority participation; 2) access to government and legislative structures; 3) the role of political parties in aggregating and promoting Roma interests; 4) civil society as a vehicle for advocacy and legislative activism; and, 5) public opinion among Roma and non-Roma, as well as social structures within the Roma community

#### Main findings:

Romania has made definite progress in integrating Roma into the country's political life in the past 20 years, but there are still significant barriers that require attention before Roma can be considered full and active participants in the country's political system. For Roma, the largest ethnic minority in Romania, social attitudes toward and among Roma present the greatest barriers to civic engagement, party outreach and policy debate. "These attitudinal and motivational barriers will require a long-term commitment to address and resolve".

Romania's system of legal protection for human rights is well established and does not appear to be the primary barrier to political participation or socio-economic advancement among Roma. However, questions surrounding compliance, implementation, and enforcement do hinder the quality and quantity of Roma participation. For example, provisions within Romania's constitution

entitle the officially recognized (19 by number) ethnic minorities to have at least one representative in the parliament; however, subsidiary laws regarding party registration, elections, and funding for national minority organizations have a combined negative impact on the ability of Roma to gain representation more proportionate to their population size. These laws also inhibit open political competition for Roma votes, lessening accountability of the party that holds the single Roma seat, in this case the *Partida Romilor Pro Europa* (Roma Party), which has monopolized the Romani legislative mandate for well over a decade.

The 2008 reform of the laws surrounding Romania's parliamentary elections, which changed from a party-list proportional representation system to a proportional system in single member constituencies, has not yielded significant benefits for Roma wishing to run for office. Nor, however, has it presented a major barrier to their quest for elected representation. It may, over time, result in closer connections between Roma communities and their elected representatives – regardless of ethnicity – who must now look to the votes of a single district for their re-election.

Other barriers are structural, relating to elections, parliamentary representation, and the effectiveness of various government agencies, such as the National Agency for Roma or the National Council for Combating Discrimination. “These can be addressed in large part through budgeting or legislative reform, political will and law enforcement.

Based on its findings, NDI developed recommendations that highlight the importance of including Roma issues on political agendas at all levels and the need to devote improved financial and human resources to the problem. Specific recommendations include:

- Romania's mainstream political parties need to address more publicly and meaningfully the dire situation facing Roma and develop effective outreach strategies with designated liaisons to the Roma communities and Romani NGOs. There should be issue based platforms and activities addressing Roma, and real outreach in between elections, not just in every four year, trying to convince the Roma AND poor population through different incentives to give the vote to their candidates.

- Funding to civil society by the Romanian government as well as the international community should be increased for projects that boost political participation, enhance civic activism and education, and promote issue-based advocacy.

- The Government and Parliament of Romania should strengthen the mandate, neutrality and resources of the National Agency for Roma to improve coordination among the various ministries and other governing bodies dealing with Roma issues.

- The National Council for Combating Discrimination should be promoted more broadly as a public service agency for Roma and all groups that suffer discrimination.

- The Roma Party, as we have 19 officially recognized minorities, and the Roma Party is the one having a seat in the Chamber of Deputies due to the

legislation on elections that offers one reserved seat to each officially recognized minority should seek to win back the Romani voters it has lost by reassessing its platform and strategy, and reinvigorating the party with a new generation of supporters, candidates and leaders who will demonstrate their commitment to public service.

- Civil society should play a larger role in breaking down the barriers preventing Roma political integration by drawing on a variety of approaches that include training and cultivation of young Roma leaders, civic education projects targeted at both **Roma and non-Roma**, community organizing projects that bridge ethnic lines, and constructive engagement with Parliament and government to promote a broadly-supported, clearly defined legislative agenda.

- Finally, the European Union and the international community should continue holding Romania accountable for its legal obligations with regard to human rights and anti-discrimination, promoting cultural diversity in its member states, and funding programs targeted at increasing Roma political inclusion.