

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
Forum on Minority Issues
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Intervention for item 5 of the provisional agenda
National practices and real experiences: existing mechanisms for the political participation of
minorities.

Dear member's states representatives, experts and delegates,

I am addressing you on behalf of Bulgarian NGO serving the most marginalized minority in Europe – The Roma. Facing discriminatory attitudes, trapped in poverty, unaware of their rights, Bulgarian Roma minority falls prey to votes shopping and cheap promises during the election process.

While shortcomings can be found towards effective political participation for the Roma minority at the Governmental level, empowerment of the minority community members to equally participate in the decision making process at the local level, successfully attains at regaining trust in democratic processes and institutions among the Roma minority, assuring adequate and efficient public policies towards their problems and foster Roma efficient involvement in local politics.

Implementing project supported by the OHCHR we succeed to establish an advisory and a consultative body (Municipality Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues) to the Municipal Council of Polski Trambesh to offer a forum for consultation on developing, monitoring and evaluating local programs and strategies targeting Roma. Thus to serve as providing an avenue for the local Roma not only to present their existing needs and problems to the Municipal Council but

also to influence and monitor local long-term policies and strategies towards Roma. This led to change of the Municipal policy towards Roma minority in acknowledging that actions by the Municipality authorities, including budget allocations, are needed to ensure Roma integration; 700 000 leva (about 350 000 euro) were allocated for activities towards Roma minority.

Based on the lessons learned during our work with different levels of Governmental and Municipal administration, we would like to share the following thematic recommendations to the Forum:

- States should implement positive actions to assure that minority representatives enjoy cultural, economical, and social rights to the same extend as the majority of the population, to ensure equal ability, capacity and resource for minority communities to exercise their right to political participation.
- Concept of minority rights should be promoted widely among the all political actors in a given State to assure that minority rights activism and movements are correctly perceived not as secessionism motivated but as based on international recognized human rights standards aimed to ensure peaceful and fruitful cooperation between minorities and majority of the population, thus leading to a more stable and just State for all of the citizens;
- Free and accessible education should be provided for minority members in minority rights as well as in the basic “civic knowledge”, needed to effectively exercise their right to political participation;

Footnote 1:

The right to effective participation is meaningless unless the minority community has both ability and resource to exercise it. These include necessary level of “civic knowledge,” equality in economic, social, and cultural rights, non-discrimination, and electoral encouragement.

Many Intergovernmental agencies and international nongovernmental organisations reports proves that vast majority of Roma are unemployed and depending on social welfare monthly allowances and relief funds provided by the State to cope with their subsistence. Trapped in poverty, Bulgarian Roma minority members are disproportionally dependant on the Social care system to maintain the minimal living standard but their access to social services are restricted by both discriminatory attitude and prejudices among the governmental officials and legislative requirements constituting barriers towards receiving social services. Roma social rights are violated on daily bases due both – social workers reluctance to pay necessary attention to their struggles and legislative criteria to access social system set for as a barrier that Roma cannot overcome themselves.

Thus, instead of being service providers, officials are perceived by the Roma as barrier to services and this attitude Roma transfer to the State institutions in general. Our experience in acting as a mediator between Roma community members and government and municipal administration shows that authorities aim at ensuring that Roma are made aware of their obligations and do not intend to inform them of their rights and opportunities, which prevents Roma to enjoy fully their right to effective political participation .

Bulgarian state appears to equal minority rights and ethnic political parties with secessionist movements, thus resulting in total ban of ethnic political parties /art.11 (4) of Bulgarian Constitution/, in no recognition of the concept of minority rights and lack of political support towards affirmative measures to assure effective political participation to minorities.

The presence of a constitutional ban on ethnic parties, however, has not meant that no ethnic parties have been present in Bulgarian politics. De facto Turkish-dominated Movement of Rights and Freedoms (DPS), represents the interests of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria and its support is concentrated heavily in the region populated by this minority. The DPS itself and numerous commentators and analysts continuously pointed out the Bulgarian “ethnic model” as represented by the incorporation of the DPS in mainstream democratic politics, the moderation of the DPS policy positions over time, and its law-abiding behaviour (see sources cited by Maria Spirova, University of Milwaukee, paper prepared for presentation at the 2004 Annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, April 15-17, 2004, Columbia University, New York). The “ethnic model” has been seen as the major factor for the preservation of ethnic peace in the country, the respect of the civil and political rights of the Turkish minority, and for their relatively good economic well-being. However, the Bulgarian “ethnic model” has excluded any other minority, a fact that has been painfully obvious in the situation of the Roma.

On the other hand, heterogeneous and diverse Roma communities cannot be unified by one national Roma oriented political party to overcome the 4 % threshold of overall votes needed to take seats in the Parliament. Thus since the first democratically conducted elections only 3 MPs were ethnic Roma. /Bulgarian parliament constitutes 240 MPs/

The full project report can be downloaded at <http://www.romatogether.org/Download.php>

Documented cases representing violations of Roma social rights are available at the <http://www.romatogether.org/Database8.php>