

Roma in Europe From Social Exclusion to Active Participation

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Roma and EU Accession: Elected and Appointed Romani Representatives in an Enlarged Europe

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Introduction¹

¹ On December 9 and 10, 2003, the European Commission and the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) organized a two-day program on the role of Romani leaders in the European Union's candidate countries. The discussions brought together officials of the European Commission and members of the European Parliament with elected and appointed Romani representatives from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (which became members of the EU on May 1, 2004), and Bulgaria and Romania, which await accession. The meeting in Brussels marked the second occasion on which the Project on Ethnic Relations together with the European Commission, organized an opportunity for Romani representatives to be heard at the European Union's headquarters. At the first meeting, which PER organized in Brussels in July 1999, government representatives and Romani leaders came before the European Commission to discuss and debate the development and implementation of government strategies toward Romani communities in countries aiming to join the European Union. The emphasis at that meeting was on the need for partnerships between governments and the Roma in developing their strategies. The present meeting came at a historic moment for the Romani communities in Europe—on the eve of the first round of EU enlargement, expanding the EU from 15 to 25 member states. The fact that, for the first time, the Romani language was officially used at the European Commission and in the European Parliament, was a significant symbol of change.

The purpose of the event was to encourage direct dialogue between Romani elected and appointed officials from candidate countries and the European Commission and European Parliament. For the European officials it was an important opportunity to get a first-hand assessment of policies from Roma in policy-making positions and to gauge their influence. For the Romani representatives it was an opportunity to get a picture of the EU's present policies and future approaches to Romani issues. The first day's roundtable at the Commission featured presentations and statements of Romani delegations. Commission representatives provided the Roma with information on current and future EU policies and instruments that can be of use for Romani minorities. Romani participants also questioned Commission officials on a number of specific issues. After the roundtable Romani delegations met with Commission officials in their offices for individual talks. At the second day's session, held at the European Parliament, the members of the parliament posed a number of questions to the Romani representatives and a lively debate followed.

Although the May 2004 enlargement brought into the European Union several countries with large Romani minorities, the fears that had been expressed in the media of some EU countries did not materialize: there were no waves of “the wretchedly poor Roma minorities of new member states like Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic” invading better-off Union states.² Nevertheless, Romani issues will challenge governments and Romani leaders in the new EU countries. The experience of the old member states in solving Romani issues has not been exemplary.³ Indeed, the new concern over the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has stimulated a reexamination of policies in several EU states including Spain, Greece, Germany, and Sweden.

Will enlargement mean changes for the Roma? Will it improve their living conditions and provide them with equal chances in education and employment? Will it diminish exclusion and discrimination?

That no quick progress is to be expected is clear to governments and Romani leaders alike. However, enlargement does bring hope that the problems of the Roma can be tackled in new ways and with previously unavailable funds. The social unrest in the Romani “mahala” (neighborhood) of Plovdiv, Bulgaria in 2002 and the riots in eastern Slovakia in February 2004 are warnings of the consequences of indecision and inaction.⁴

Romani communities are beginning to mobilize, to build civic and political organizations. Romani leaders demand a voice in the public and political life of their countries. They seek positions in elected bodies and in public administration. They urge a coordinated policy toward the Roma at the EU. These developments challenge the EU and its member states alike.

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² “Those Roamin’ Roma,” *The Economist*, February 7, 2004.

³ *Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection*, Open Society Institute, EU Monitoring Program, Budapest (2002). See chapters on “The Situation of Roma in Germany” and in “The Situation of Roma in Spain.” The full report is available at <http://www.eumap.org/reports/2002>.

⁴ Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe warned against this danger in 1997. See *The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Paper*, PER Report, Princeton, 1997, p. 35.

During the period before accession, EU policy aimed to pressure governments of candidate countries to devise policies and programs for their Romani minorities. The EU also provided some financial help to implement these programs, and encouraged the development of Romani civil society. Accession brings many changes in EU policy. Some instruments, for example, PHARE financing, are no longer available after accession. And the European Commission's influence over countries that have already acceded is diminished. To be sure, new means and different forms of financial support will become available, but the Roma will need to learn to use them as new EU citizens.

With the emergence of Romani political organizations, a small but growing group of Romani politicians—members of national legislatures and governmental bodies—are seeking a larger role in formulating and carrying out policies toward Romani minorities in their countries and in the EU.

The elected and appointed Romani representatives came to Brussels to learn at first hand the future of EU policy toward their communities. They asked the EU to continue to support them and to maintain the pressure on their governments for change. They sought to consolidate the partnerships between EU institutions in Brussels and Romani organizations, especially political organizations. They suggested increasing the financial and political resources for the Roma and recommended that monitoring mechanisms now focus more on outcomes than on spending. Most important, they brought to Brussels a perspective that views each country's national politics as key in the struggle to promote and protect the interests of Romani minorities. They emphasized that, especially in countries with large Romani communities, national solutions have to be found, and that Romani minorities must join the political mainstream.

I. Background

EU Support for Romani Communities

During the pre-accession process, the EU and its institutions in Brussels exerted pressure on governments to introduce policies for improving the dire situation of the Roma and achieving their better integration into society. Accessing states undertook efforts in this direction following the requirements and recommendations of the Copenhagen Political Criteria (1993), the Agenda 2000 (1997), the

Commission's regular reports on progress made toward accession (issued since 1998 and subsequently updated each year), and the COCEN Guideline Principles to improve the living conditions of the Roma, adopted at the Tampere European Union Council meeting in 1999.

In the 1998 EC Accession Partnership documents for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania, further integration of Romani minorities was made a medium-term political priority, while Slovakia was encouraged to foster and strengthen the policies and institutions protecting minority rights. The updated 2001 Accession Partnership documents made implementation of the national action plans or framework programs for Roma a political priority in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

In the 2001 Enlargement Strategy Paper, which reviewed progress made in accessing countries, the Commission concluded:

In all countries with sizeable Romani communities national action plans are now in place to tackle discrimination, which remains widespread, and to improve living conditions that continue to be extremely difficult. In most cases, implementation of these action plans is underway and, in some countries, national budgetary resources have been reinforced. PHARE funding continues to be made available to support these actions. Further efforts are required to ensure that the various programs are implemented in a sustained manner, in close co-operation with Romani representatives, and that appropriate budgetary support is made available in all countries.⁵

In the Commission's 2003 Comprehensive Country Monitoring Reports for accessing countries (the last reports before some of these countries joined the EU), it is noted that while the countries essentially meet the commitments and requirements arising from the accession negotiations, the Commission still underlines that considerable efforts should aim at improving the situation of the Romani minority in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. More specifically, the report on Slovakia stresses that: "The gap between good policy formulation and its implementation on the spot has not significantly diminished. Considerable efforts need to be

⁵ Available at: <http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report2001/index.htm>.

continued and reinforced to remedy this situation.”⁶ The report for the Czech Republic underlines that “the multi-faceted discrimination and social exclusion faced by the Roma continue to give cause for concern” in the areas of hiring practices, education (Romani children are channeled into special schools) and housing.⁷ For Hungary, the report concludes that, “the majority of persons belonging to the Romani community are still exposed to social inequalities, social exclusion and widespread discrimination in education, employment and access to public services. Segregation in schools has remained a serious problem.”⁸

In the 2003 Regular Reports for candidate countries, the Commission notes that in Bulgaria a wide range of initiatives has been undertaken by the government, including an action plan for implementation of the Framework Program, “but the situation of the Roma minority has barely improved.”⁹ In the case of Romania, the report observes that though progress has been made in a number of areas, “the implementation of the Roma Strategy has continued although a lack of resources has meant that the results have been somewhat limited.”¹⁰

The Romani issue in new EU member and candidate countries therefore remains of concern, a fact which is corroborated by other international organizations in Europe.¹¹

In the pre-accession period, the EU’s PHARE Program provided candidate countries with financial support. It was operational since

⁶ *Comprehensive Monitoring Report on Slovakia’s Preparations for Membership*, pg. 34, available at: http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/pdf/cmr_sk_final.pdf.

⁷ *Comprehensive Monitoring Report on Czech Republic’s Preparations for Membership*, pg. 34-35, available at: http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/pdf/cmr_cz_final.pdf.

⁸ *Comprehensive Monitoring Report on Hungary’s Preparations for Membership*, pg. 36, available at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/pdf/cmr_hu_final.pdf.

⁹ *2003 Regular Report on Bulgaria’s Progress Towards Accession*, pp. 25-26, available at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/pdf/rr_bg_final.pdf.

¹⁰ *2003 Regular Report on Romania’s Progress Towards Accession*, pp. 30-32, available at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/pdf/rr_ro_final.pdf.

¹¹ See the latest Country Reports published by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) or the Country Reports and Advisory Committee Opinions published through the Framework Convention for Protection of National Minorities.

1989 with a total allocation of 4.2 billion euros for 1990-1994, which increased to almost 6.7 billion for 1995-1999. Each candidate country was a recipient of a “national allocation” under the PHARE Program, and authorities were encouraged to earmark support to Romani communities channeled through the Civil Society Development Foundations set up in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. Since 1998, following the priorities defined in the Accession Partnerships, the PHARE national programs have devoted part of their budgets to financing projects for Romani communities. The total amount of support for Romani programs in 1999 reached 11.7 million euros; this amount increased in subsequent years to 13.65 million euros in 2000 and 31.35 million in 2001. Apart from PHARE’s national programs, Romani communities benefited from other EU financing programs like the Lien Programme, the Access Programme, the DG External Relations’ European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, the DG Employment and Social Affairs, and other initiatives.¹²

The Roma in Mainstream Politics: Exercising Political Rights

In a variety of recommendations made by a number of international organizations addressing Romani issues (including the most recent OSCE Action Plan),¹³ a recurrent item is a call for the inclusion of the Roma in decision-making processes, i.e., their participation in the public and political life of their respective countries. Including the Roma into governance and decision-making structures is of vital importance for the integration of the Roma and for their feeling as part of society. Participation and partnership are therefore the key words for the integration of the Roma.

The Project on Ethnic Relations has promoted these key ideas since 1991, when it began its involvement in Romani issues in Central and Eastern Europe. It has encouraged governments and Romani leaders to forge constructive partnerships, and it has facilitated the inclusion of the Roma in legislative and governing bodies. PER was the first organization to work on electoral

¹² More in: *European Union support for Roma communities in Central and Eastern Europe*, DG Enlargement Unit, Brussels, May 2002, updated in 2003. Available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/pdf/brochure_roma_oct2003_en.pdf.

¹³ The *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area* was adopted in OSCE Permanent Council Decision No. 566 on November 27, 2003. Chapter six, “Enhancing participation in public and political life,” addresses this topic. The full text is available at: www.osce.org/documents/odhr/2003/11/1562_en.pdf.

strategies for the Roma as well as the first to encourage alliances between mainstream parties and Romani political groups.

In the 1997 PER policy paper, *The Roma in the Twenty-First Century*, Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe concluded that ethnic mobilization among the Roma was a strong trend. The Roma may seek to turn the Romani community into an effective pressure and interest group, as other national/ethnic minority groups have done in the contemporary world. Mirga and Gheorghe suggested that the future of the Romani community depends on its successful development into such a group, conscious of its rights, interests and power. They also asserted that the Roma have to use the democratic means available to them, such as free elections. They recognized a great need to attain legitimate representation that can bridge the gap between self-appointed Romani leaders and the inactive masses.¹⁴

To date, however, it is still quite difficult to attain stronger representation and substantially increase the level of Romani participation in public and political life. Opinions vary on the question of why the Roma remain underrepresented in elected bodies and in politics in general. Most analysts and activists tend to view the state of mainstream parties, governments or even society in general as responsible for the failure of the Roma to reach a satisfactory level of political participation and representation. Societal exclusion, racism, and discrimination or “window-dressing” policies that place only a token number of Roma in public bodies are cited as reasons for this failure.¹⁵

Rather than political organizations, rapidly developing Romani civil society groups are often taken to represent the community's interests. A variety of advocacy networks has been substituted for genuine political representation that is accountable to its constituency.¹⁶

¹⁴ The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Paper, PER Report, Princeton, 1997.

¹⁵ See, for example, papers in: Roma Rights Quarterly No. 4 (2003): Political Rights, ERRC, Budapest, April, 2003, available at http://lists.errc.org/rr_nr4_2003/index.shtml; and NDI's Roma Political Participation in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, available at: www.accessdemocracy.org/library/1636_cee_romareport_033103.pdf.

¹⁶ See the work of Peter Vermeersch on this topic. A number of polls on the level of the Roma's trust in their organizations may also help explain the issue. A 2003 UNDP poll found that 86% of the Roma believe their interests are not well represented at the national level, and 75% think they lack adequate representation at the local level. 91% of the Roma cannot name an NGO they can trust and 86% cannot name a Romani party they can trust. There are variations in this data from country to country, but

Some have asserted that grass-roots initiatives and burgeoning Romani nongovernmental organizations have countered the development of Romani political organizations and, therefore, curtailed the political participation of the Roma. The effort to build up strong and effective political organizations has been weakened by the fact that most of the educated elite have moved to the civil sector, which offers greater financial rewards and has been heavily supported by foreign donors.¹⁷

Within the Romani community, confusion continues about leadership and legitimacy. While the need for more elected representatives is becoming recognized, making them responsible to the Romani constituency, which is predominantly uneducated and subject to manipulation, remains a serious issue.

A token number of Roma in public administration and a few elected Romani representatives (no doubt an insufficient number) reflect the current ability of the Romani community to exercise its political rights. It is promising that the need for change in this regard has also been recognized by the Romani civil sector, as some of its prominent leaders have acknowledged the need for broader inclusion of the Roma into mainstream parties and politics.¹⁸

Party politics is about numbers, and what the Roma can get as their share of power and positions depends on how strong they are in a political sense, that is, in terms of predictable and stable voting patterns. To date, the Roma's voting preferences are not limited exclusively to Romani parties and are unpredictable. Yet what the Roma have gained, especially in recent general and local elections,

overall, Romani parties still do better than Romani NGOs. Romania represents the most interesting case: the disparity in Romani trust toward the Romani parties and NGOs in Romania reaches the highest rate: 26% trust Romani political parties compared with less than 5% trusting Romani NGOs.

¹⁷ E. Sobotka, "The Limits of the State: Political Participation and Representation of Roma in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia," *JEMIE (Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe)*, Winter 2001/2002. Also available at www.ecmi.de.

¹⁸ Rumyan Russinov recently acknowledged this by stating: "...The mechanisms of the Romani movement itself are exhausted and we no longer can carry out policy change on the level of civil society...We need broader inclusion, not at the policy level but at the political level." in E. Sobotka, "Roma in Politics in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland," *Roma Rights Quarterly No. 4 (2003): Political Rights*, ERRC, Budapest, April 2003, p. 31.

can be regarded as an achievement (in Hungary, Romania, or in Bulgaria).¹⁹

II. The Brussels Meeting

EU Support for the Roma: Evaluation and Expectations

There was general agreement among Romani participants that the EU's political pressure and financial support for governments and Romani minorities were essential in realizing national programs and action plans for the Roma in candidate countries. This approach worked to keep Romani issues on the agenda of governments and forced them to seek and adopt necessary policies in partnership with Romani representatives. For most Romani speakers, however, a precondition for an effective Roma policy is the will on the part of the government to act, and a country's own budgetary commitments to ensure implementation of adopted programs and action plans. Both were viewed as problematic. As one Romani speaker put it, there are always people of good intentions in the government, but the real commitment of the government itself has often been lacking.

Romani participants were concerned with the pace and outcomes of governmental policies. They held the view that despite the growing amount of financial support from the EU to their respective governments, the progress achieved in their countries remains unsatisfactory. They were especially concerned with the pace of implementation of programs. In some countries like Slovakia and Bulgaria efforts have been greatly delayed or insufficient to meet people's expectations for improvement.

Some participants viewed critically the fact that governments tend to rely heavily on foreign donors, especially the EU, in carrying out programs for the Roma. Similarly, they were concerned with the way their governments have used EU funds supposedly earmarked to support Romani minorities. Accounts of spending have not

¹⁹ L. Plaks, "Roma Political Participation: A Story of Success or Failure?" Statement prepared for the conference, *Roma in an Enlarged European Union*, Brussels, April 22-23, 2004. The Romani representatives gathered in Brussels at the PER and EC organized meeting were committed to continuing efforts to increase the number of Romani politicians in their countries in the future.

provided Romani representatives a clear picture of whether these funds were properly used or reached their targets, both in terms of the communities they were intended to serve and the objectives of the projects or programs. They saw a need for more transparency and information sharing on the part of the government, as well as monitoring not only of spending but also of outcomes.

Some criticism was also expressed toward the Civil Society Development Foundations and the EU's country delegations for insufficient transparency in their procedures for selecting projects and granting funds. The Romani representatives suggested that the EC should come up with more specific guidelines in this regard, paying attention to the fact that Roma projects should be carried out with active Roma involvement, and that in many instances Romani organizations are at a disadvantage when they have to compete with non-Romani organizations staffed with highly educated professionals.

They requested a continuation of the EU's policy of support for Roma and pressure on governments. As one Romani participant stated, there is a need to redouble the efforts of all actors involved in order to bring real change to the Romani community in the coming years. They expected a consolidation of partnerships with Romani organizations, especially political ones. They suggested strengthening monitoring mechanisms that focus on outcomes. Most importantly, however, they advocated in favor of strengthening the role of elected and appointed representatives in their countries. According to them, while the EU's policy of support and pressure on governments and efforts to develop civil society in Romani communities were much needed and welcomed, these were not enough: Romani minorities need to enter into mainstream politics and formulate Romani issues as essentially political issues. Only in this way will the Roma be less dependent on the will of others and will become stakeholders in their countries' politics.

Romani Representation in Elected Bodies

There was a marked difference in the approaches and assessments among Romani representatives who have attained a certain role in mainstream politics and those who have not. This difference was evident in the contrast between the Romani delegations from Hungary and Romania on the one hand, and those from Bulgaria and other countries on the other. In the former group, the Romani representatives were part of the political establishment and were

bound to their political partners, or they were part of ruling coalitions. In the latter, the Roma represented a group of employees in the public or state administration with no relation to mainstream parties or support from stronger Romani political organizations. As a result, the first group was more likely to present rather positive accounts of their own accomplishments in policy design and implementation. They were also more future-oriented in terms of what they hoped to achieve, by what means, and what they expected from Brussels after accession. More criticism was voiced by the second group, especially the delegations representing Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In these cases the Roma had not reached a similar role in mainstream politics, and there were few achievements to report.

The Romani MPs viewed Romani issues as essentially political. As the Romani MP from Romania emphasized, the Roma cannot simply be passive observers, but must take part in devising solutions to their problems and bear some responsibility for them. However, in order to play this more active role, the Roma have to assume a genuine partnership within mainstream politics.

Romani organizations have chosen various ways to gain representation in parliament, depending on what was feasible and the traditions of a given country. In Romania, where minority NGOs were eligible to participate in parliamentary and local elections, the Roma Party (now called the Social Democratic Roma Party) emerged as the main Romani political organization representing Romani interests. It has participated in all rounds of elections since the beginning of the 1990s, and has consistently won the Roma reserved seat in parliament. In other countries, where NGOs were not allowed to participate in elections, the Roma have turned to different strategies: either forming their own ethnic parties as in Slovakia and to some extent in Bulgaria, or seeking political agreements with mainstream parties, as in Hungary.

These efforts recently started bringing positive results in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, but not in Slovakia or the Czech Republic. Demographic factors (i.e., the size of the Romani community in some countries—a potential pool of votes to be gained by mainstream parties), have often played a decisive role, though not in the case of Slovakia, despite the fact that the Romani community there as a proportion of the total population is the largest in the region.

Romani organizations have utilized a strategy of seeking strong political allies, mainly among the strongest party. In exchange for Romani votes, cooperation is formalized by signing pre-election political agreements or protocols. Such agreements have been concluded in Romania between the Roma Party and Party of Social Democracy (PSD).

In Hungary, Romani organizations, depending on their declared affiliation or political orientation, entered into agreements with two major parties: the socialists or the right-of-center Fidesz. Similarly, in Bulgaria, Romani organizations have associated themselves with mainstream parties.

As a result, during the last round of elections, the Roma gained the following seats in parliaments: in Hungary three seats from the Fidesz list and one from the socialists; in Romania one reserved seat won by the Roma Party, and a second as a result of the former president of the Roma Party's joining the PSD; in Bulgaria two seats, one from the National Movement of Simeon II (the ruling party), and the other from the left-of-center Coalition for Bulgaria (now in the opposition). Romani MPs in Bulgaria also reported gains during the last local elections.²⁰

Looking ahead, all Romani MPs declared that they will be seeking possibilities to enlarge the Roma's representation in their countries' parliaments. They viewed as unsatisfactory the solution of having a single minority reserved seat for the Roma, as in Romania, since this may reduce the representation of what is sometimes the largest minority in the country. They argued for a change in electoral law which would release Romani minority organization lists from the obligation to pass the five percent threshold normally applied for political parties. This would correct the sometimes paradoxical situation in which a single Romani MP, entitled to a reserved seat, is elected with the highest number of votes in the entire parliament (as in Romania). This change would also help the Roma in countries such as Slovakia gain the representation that they now lack. In Hungary, there is an ongoing debate on amending the electoral law to bring it into agreement with the constitutional provision that requires parliamentary representation for minorities.

²⁰ In Bulgaria, for example, a total of 164 municipal councilors representing the Romani minority was elected in the 2003 local election compared with 101 in 1997. In Romania, in the 2004 local elections the Roma more than redoubled their gains, with 372 councilors compared with 151 in 2000 and 139 in 1996. In Slovakia's local elections in 1998, the Roma had 6 mayors and 86 councilors; in 2002, 158 Romani councilors and 10 mayors were elected.

Since the political scene in Hungary is evenly divided between the left and the right, Romani votes can be decisive in which way the power will go in the next elections, and the Hungarian Roma hope to play an increasingly significant role in the country's politics.

Institutionalization of Roma Policy

Institutionalization of Roma policy has long been viewed as necessary to effectively address and solve Romani issues. In Hungary, a set of institutions with Romani participation was established as a result of the 1993 Minority Act. Later on, the institutional base was enlarged after the adoption of governmental strategies, which were complex and numerous in Hungary and Romania (i.e. inter-ministerial commissions, expert bodies, advisers, foundations, etc.), and less so in the other countries represented at the meeting. Requests for setting up specific government institutions to deal with the Roma were also part of pre-electoral agreements with mainstream parties in the case of Romania and Hungary. Eventually, in these countries, offices for Romani affairs at the government level headed by Romani officials were established.

The Romani MPs present in Brussels, especially those from Romania and Hungary, reported that they play a central role in the design and implementation of their countries' Roma policy. The Romanian Romani MP present noted that the Roma Party launched its negotiations with the PSD in 1997, and concluded an agreement in 1999. The Protocol of Understanding that they signed outlined the Romani objectives and priorities to be supported and implemented by the PSD after elections. Among those were: setting up an institutional mechanism for implementation of Roma policy; ensuring inclusion of the Roma into the public administration at various levels; and drawing up a national program to tackle Romani issues and promote and support legislation that would help the Roma overcome their present position of disadvantage in society.

Two Romani MPs currently serving in the Romanian parliament are actively engaged in promoting laws that will help improve the situation of the entire Romani minority. (A document providing information on the legislative initiatives of Romani MPs in the Romanian Parliament was offered to the Commission and the European Parliament). A renewed protocol was signed in 2002, which provided the Romani minority with a new institution: a National Office for the Roma, which is headed by a Rom, as well as

Romani county offices at the level of prefectures. Lastly, a third protocol was signed in 2003, which envisioned further strengthening the institutional framework for policy implementation, i.e., setting up a national agency for the implementation of Romani policy.

In the case of Hungary, as noted by the Romani MP and state secretary heading the Romani office in the government, the 2002 change of the government was critical in the effort to improve the situation of the Romani minority. A medium-term action plan is in operation and detailed steps have been outlined up to 2006. The institutionalization of Romani policy is advancing, which he described as a milestone in integration policy; a state Romani secretariat has been established; a number of Romani representatives have been appointed to the state administration in ministries and more are working at the level of local authorities. Education, housing and employment have been prioritized and assigned separate budget lines. He also stressed that the recent law on hate speech and equal opportunities, which Romani MPs lobbied for, will soon be voted on in the parliament, and that this law is of paramount importance to the Romani minority.

In Hungary, two different sets of structures representing Romani interests are in place: the Romani MPs and appointed representatives in the government and the existing system of the Romani minority self-government. At the local and municipal levels, approximately one thousand Romani representatives are active in minority self-governments, and around 800 are active in self-governments proper. At the top of these is the Romani national self-government. Its head, who was present at the Brussels roundtable, agreed that while major progress has been reached in a number of areas, some persistent problems have still not been solved in the fields of education, housing and employment. But there have been promising efforts: for example, a system of scholarships for Romani students (operating with three million euros for this year); a "slum-eradication program," which is projected to eliminate 460 slums; and, through the National Development Program, it is foreseen that significant funds will be spent on Roma projects. Romani self-governments and the state secretariat will work hand-in-hand determining how to spend those funds.

The Bulgarian Romani MP emphasized that the Romani minority is under-represented in elected bodies and in public administration, and argued that without better representation very little can be improved or achieved. Besides the two MPs currently serving in Bulgaria's Parliament, there is only one other Romani employee in

the government administration, though there are promises that more Roma will be employed at various ministries in the forthcoming year. He argued that the Roma in Bulgaria need to achieve stronger representation and establish relations of political partnership with the government and its institutions. While he was ready to acknowledge that Romani political activism is still low, he also asserted that the Roma have to be given a chance, since the Romani minority has an educated elite available to participate in public life. He argued for viewing the Roma as a constructive party and not as an obstacle to Bulgaria's EU integration. In his parliamentary work he is focused on social issues, including increasing social benefits, combating unemployment among the Roma, and especially increasing work opportunities in regions where the Roma are concentrated in large numbers.

As achievements, he mentioned the adoption of an action plan to implement the government's Roma strategy and the passage of anti-discrimination legislation. In reference to the former, however, he pointed out that the budget for implementing the action plan is insufficient. He also requested more transparency from the government in how these resources will be spent.²¹ On the topic of the anti-discrimination legislation, he said that he considered this legislation important for the Roma but he claimed that the Roma remain largely uninformed about it. In general, he saw the need to move from discussions and plans to action, in order to obtain real results on the ground. Better communication between the Roma and the government would be conducive to this, he said. The other Bulgarian Romani delegate in attendance added that efforts have been undertaken to work out local action plans as an effective way of implementing the national action plan.

The Perspective of Romani Government Officials

In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Romani communities currently do not have parliamentary representation. The weak institutions that have been established to deal with Romani issues coupled with the few Romani employees in the public administration do not correspond to the scale of the problem this minority faces in both countries. The Roma are also politically not well organized and do

²¹ A similar view was presented by the Balkan Human Rights Project in its press release on October 16, 2003 titled "Bulgaria: The government worked out its Action Plan for the Roma minority but it raises a number of questions."

not represent an effective pressure group to be taken seriously by the mainstream parties.

The office of the Plenipotentiary for Romani Issues is the only institution for the Roma established at the government level in Slovakia. It has been tasked with elaboration of a governmental strategy, coordination of its implementation, and cooperation with Romani organizations. The Plenipotentiary for Romani Issues asserted that some of these tasks have been completed. For example, a long-term strategy worked out by the office was adopted by the government in April 2003. The office also provides assistance to Romani organizations and especially to Romani mayors. Efforts are also underway to strengthen the office by setting up five branch offices in Slovakia.

In the view of the Plenipotentiary, successful government-policy implementation depends on political will and proper funding, both of which are problematic at the moment. It was also pointed out that despite the existence of many Romani political parties (18), they are neither effective in mounting pressure on the government nor supportive of the office of the Plenipotentiary. The Plenipotentiary, who comes from the NGO sector and has no political affiliation with any of the mainstream parties, cannot count on the support of the Romani parties. However, the external support and pressure from EU institutions have been helpful to its work.

A critical view was also advanced by another Slovak Romani participant, an employee of the Ministry of Education. Little progress can be noticed in the area of education of Romani children, he asserted. In 2001, the Slovak Ministry of Education adopted a program to support education of Romani children as part of its long-term national program. The government amended some existing laws and adopted several decrees and resolutions, which made possible the introduction of a “zero-level,” or pre-school grade, in elementary schools, as well as a teacher’s assistant position. Both initiatives were aimed at “the creation of a supportive curricular environment for children and youth from disadvantaged social and cultural backgrounds,”—mainly Romani children.²² The Ministry of Education also introduced the teaching of Romani language and literature in the curricula for the first to ninth grades of elementary school. This has been in effect since September 2003. Several projects related to schooling Romani children have been carried out

²² Jan Hero, “Training and Education of Roma Children and Students in Slovakia,” a written statement prepared for the Brussels meeting.

or are underway with PHARE funding or the support of other foreign donors.

Problems persist, however, including the de facto segregation of Romani communities and schools in areas with a highly concentrated Romani population; low-quality infrastructure, with insufficient space and capacity in kindergartens and elementary schools; the unresolved issue of channeling Romani children into special schools for the mentally handicapped; the attitudes of Romani parents to special schooling; lack of interest among teachers to work in segregated Romani schools; and the tendency to remove non-Romani children from kindergartens and elementary schools if there is a growing number of Romani students there. In the view of the representative from the Slovak Ministry of Education, there is in general a gap between policy and implementation, between commitment and practice. To resolve the problems of the Romani minority in this area he saw a need for the government to follow the principle of positive discrimination, social inclusion and multicultural education.

The participants from the Czech Republic identified the issues of regional and self-government policies toward the Roma, employment, and housing as topics of major importance. Following the decentralization reform and the establishment of fourteen regions, the implementation of the government's Roma strategy is carried out by regional authorities. In each of the regions a Roma coordinator has been appointed as a kind of liaison officer between the authorities and Romani organizations. The Coordinator of Roma Affairs for Central Bohemia (the largest region) cooperates with twenty Romani NGOs and three Romani community centers. In his region there were only two Romani city council members.

Regional authorities follow the government Roma strategy's principle of supporting citizens in need or in danger of social exclusion. This is a project-oriented policy: authorities offer grants to NGO projects. The government plans to allocate 40 million Czech crowns (approximately \$1,522,000) for 2004 to implement the Roma strategy, but the Roma Coordinator for Central Bohemia doubted whether these funds will help realize the strategy's objectives. In his view there is no real follow-up in implementation of the government strategy due to a lack of political will on the part of regional and local authorities. This grants-oriented policy does not bring positive results, he argued, and the situation is, in fact, getting worse.

In the Czech Republic there is a critical situation in the area of housing. Privatization and the sale of apartments has led to a situation in which private parties attempt to get rid of Romani residents or tenants who are often unable to pay their rent and other services. As a result, Romani tenants are evicted and are forced into slums or migrate abroad.

The other Czech Romani participant, an employee of the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights, specified that based on her experience (she has been working in the Ombudsman's office since 2001), those especially in danger of eviction are Roma occupying city council housing. According to her, the recent administrative reform on decentralization provided municipal authorities with unlimited authority over housing policy, with little opportunity to have their decisions revised or sanctioned. As a result, in some municipalities authorities act in harsh and uncompromising ways, relocating Romani tenants or evicting them from city council flats or houses.

Both participants confirmed that the level of the Roma's political participation in the Czech Republic is insufficient, and that there are few institutions established to encourage it (such as the Inter-Ministerial Commission on Romani Affairs and the position of regional Roma Coordinator)—all other advocacy for the Roma is left to NGOs.

Romani Ownership and Responsibility: Civic and Political Organizations

Acting as politicians who are responsible not only to their Romani constituency but also to their mainstream political partners has emerged as something new and certainly a sign of the growing political maturity of Romani elected representatives, a Romani participant observed. Romani MPs have been especially prone to espouse the idea that they, as democratically elected representatives, bear a different kind of responsibility than the leaders of Romani NGOs and Romani activists.

This difference in roles and capacity in handling Romani issues by the political and civil sectors was strongly expressed by the participants. In the view of most of the Romani participants, while there are a great number of Romani NGOs involved in programs and projects targeting the needs of Romani communities, solving their problems requires more than that—it requires a national-level

policy. To have such a policy the Roma need to join elected and decision-making bodies. Those in parliament and in government use political means to change the situation on the ground through legislation and governmental measures which they lobby for. Their efforts aim at finding systemic solutions that would affect entire communities. The same cannot be achieved by NGO projects. However, with this approach comes a different kind of responsibility: to deliver results and in case of failure to face the burden of criticism and pay a political price. The effectiveness of their efforts depends on their skillfulness and relative strength in pursuing Romani interests vis-à-vis lawmakers and government ministries. For this reason it is very important, as the Romani MPs stressed, to have political allies or partners that will support them.

Governments increasingly tend to seek or even demand more responsibility and involvement of the Roma themselves in improving the situation of their communities. At the Vienna OSCE meeting,²³ as reported by the OSCE/ODIHR Adviser on Romani and Sinti Issues, notions of ownership and responsibility were central in the debates. The governments' approach at that meeting was that the Roma themselves bear some responsibility for the current situation and they have to do more to change it. This emphasis on the Roma's own responsibility came close to the notion that they themselves are responsible for the situation they are currently in, an idea that was contested by the majority of Romani representatives present. In the OSCE Action Plan adopted in Maastricht in 2003, stress was therefore put on the Roma's ownership in the process, that is to say, the Roma shall bear more responsibility once they have a definite role and ownership in the process of designing and implementing policies intended to improve the situation of their communities. This duty is increasingly associated with elected and appointed Romani representatives. The OSCE Action Plan puts the issue of the Roma's political participation high on its agenda, both as voters and as candidates, and intends to strengthen it in the future.

This speaker also noted that such a role for elected and appointed representatives is challenged by other Romani actors, mainly from the civil sector. Activists from Romani NGOs question the legitimacy of those in elected bodies and public administration, and as a rule, they also question whether those people represent the genuine interests of the Romani community. This controversy is due partly to

²³ The special meeting on Roma and Sinti was held on April 10-11, 2003, at the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting in Vienna.

the different agendas pursued by each sector and partly to the way NGOs perceive the state and its policies. The Romani civil sector positions itself as the defender of human rights, whereas the elected and appointed representatives, as part of the state structure, deal with social and economic issues. Romani NGOs are accustomed to seeing the state and its policies as hostile to Roma, and therefore those Roma who become part of it are subject to criticism as representing the other, non-Romani side. As one Romani MP concluded, however, it is far more important for Romani leaders to make their communities understand what elected and appointed Romani representatives do in office and whether their efforts bring any concrete results than to engage in this kind of competition.

Roma in the Post-Accession Context: What Framework, What Policy?

In outlining the European Union's policies, the Director of the DG Enlargement's Directorate of Co-ordination of Negotiation and Pre-accession for Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, pointed to the uniqueness of this event both for the Romani representatives and for officials in Brussels. The Roma need to learn what the European Union's policies are and what they can realistically expect from Brussels. At the same time, the institutions of the European Union need Romani feedback in order to understand what is working and what needs to be improved as regards programs and policies to assist Romani communities. He emphasized that Romani representatives need to learn to work with Brussels institutions: they may be bureaucratic and complex, but the Roma should not be frustrated by this. They must be persistent and actively network, and this kind of event contributes to that aim.

In the pre-accession period, the EC used regular reports to pressure governments of candidate countries to implement policies to improve the situation of Romani communities. With enlargement completed, however, the EC will lose this means of direct pressure and leverage over governments, and this could have negative consequences for the Roma. In addition, the PHARE program for acceding countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia will come to an end by May 2004. This program will be operational only for Bulgaria and Romania, until they complete accession. From 2004 onward, Roma of the new EU member states must turn to the Union's instruments and various types of financing to ensure that existing policies or projects will be continued. Therefore, the Roma

need to learn and better understand the instruments and types of financing available inside the Union.

He underlined that one of the visible results of EC policy and the pressure it exerted in the past was that governments have developed policies and action plans toward their Romani communities and have begun their implementation. The European Commission is aware that the overall situation of the Roma in candidate countries is far from perfect. It therefore must make sure that governments will fully implement those action plans, especially at the regional and local levels. Efforts to ensure this will be continued but in a more informal way.

With accession completed, the new member states will “join the club,” and will be in a position to shape the policies and rules of the EU. The time remaining in this meeting should be used to reflect on what can be improved in future EU policies to better address and integrate Romani communities inside the Union, the EC representative said. Romani representatives should engage in direct dialogue with their respective governments to try to lobby them, since it is through their government representatives in the Union Council that they may impact future policy toward the Roma. Even the frustration that the Roma may encounter while working with current instruments could be useful and indicative for the Commission of how to improve these instruments. Finally, he stressed the need to work together, since, after all, “most of you here will soon be EU citizens.”

Another representative of the Commission explained that to the extent possible, it will continue to pressure governments over Romani issues, but this can be done only within the limits of existing legislation. “No Roma programs without the Roma” is a well taken principle, but the Commission itself cannot enforce it over sovereign governments. Similarly, while the Commission is supportive of governmental policies and action plans for the Roma, it cannot give directives as to how such programs should be carried out. The EC deals with governments, and EU directives address the needs and rights of its citizens. From the Union perspective, the Roma are seen first and foremost as citizens, and not necessarily as minorities. However, the EC sees and pays attention to the problems of Romani communities. Dialogue with a variety of organizations and representatives is largely the way the EC does business—it has regular contacts with all sorts of non governmental organizations. This speaker therefore welcomed the fact that such

contacts and dialogue have been extended to the Romani elected and appointed representatives of the new member states.

The speakers also underlined that the EU does not have all the answers to the Roma's problems, but it can offer many opportunities to address these problems, especially to new member states.

EU Instruments and Framework Policies

Representatives of the EC made a presentation of the Union's instruments and policies, outlining those that could be beneficial to Romani communities. Three fields were mentioned: EU legislation, funding opportunities, and a framework for policy coordination to reach common goals. As one EC representative pointed out, in the fields of employment and social policy alone, which are as important to Romani communities as to other citizens of the Union, there are some seventy-five pieces of legislations ranging from health and work safety issues to equal opportunities for men and women. He especially underlined Directive 43/2000, the so-called Race Equality Directive, which had already been mentioned during the meeting. Some states have been late in integrating this Directive into national law, but the Roma nevertheless need to know that they can bring their governments to the European Court of Justice if authorities infringe on the provisions of this legislation.

The most important funding opportunities are provided by the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund. All new member states will benefit from these funds. The Structural Funds operate in medium-term programming periods of seven years; the current period is for 2000-2006. The ten new member states that joined the EU on May 1, 2004 will fall under the current Structural Funds programming period, and will benefit from it between 2004 and 2006, at which time a new period will start (for 2007-2013). Twenty-two billion euros have been earmarked for all structural instruments in the ten new EU member states. The Treaty of Accession states that the acceding countries may benefit from eligibility of expenditure under Structural Funds as of January 1, 2004 provided that all the conditions laid down in the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund regulations are fulfilled. These conditions concern full compliance with the implementation rules of these funds, as well as with community policies and legislation.

Allocations from the Structural Funds depend on a country's GDP and population size. According to the Structural Funds regulations, structural actions are concentrated on three priority objectives: Objective One focuses on the economic development and structural adjustment of regions that are lagging behind. Regions eligible are those which have less than 75% of the average EU GDP. Objective Two aims to support the economic and social conversion of areas facing structural difficulties (industrial, rural, urban and fisheries). Objective Three aims at developing labor markets and human resources, and it is intended to support the adaptation and modernization of national policies and systems of education, training and employment. The European Regional Development Fund finances programs for Objectives One and Two. The Regional Policy Directorate-General is in charge of this fund. The European Social Fund finances Objective Three programs, and the DG Employment and Social Affairs is in charge of this fund. These two funds are of importance to the Roma, while the other two funds, which are related to agriculture and fisheries, are of less interest to them.

How does this work? Governments come up with national development plans—strategies for the use of structural funds for the 2004-2006 period. The plan includes: an analysis of the situation relative to the objective concerned; an analysis of priority needs; strategies and priorities envisaged for action; and a financing plan. This document should be widely discussed in the country and then presented to the Commission for negotiation. The Commission generally intervenes at the level of strategies and priorities. Setting up measures and criteria for projects falls under the authority of the governments. In most cases, the development plans of acceding countries are built as Community Support Frameworks (CSF) with single-funded operational programs (SOP) as a means of implementing them. All the negotiations over Community Support Frameworks and operational programs for Structural Funds were concluded and signed with new member states in December 2003.

Once adopted by the Commission, the development plans are implemented by managing authorities appointed by the member states. Implementation of the measures and projects is supervised by the Monitoring Committees. All projects that receive EU financial assistance must also be co-financed, and selection of projects is carried out by the national or regional authorities competent for each program, not by the Commission.

Employment and Social Policy Framework

As mentioned above, the DG Employment and Social Affairs is in charge of the European Social Fund, which is the main instrument for boosting the employability of disadvantaged groups and helping them get access to labor markets. This Directorate General provides financing for Objective Three programs, as outlined in the framework of the European Employment Strategy and Employment Guidelines (adopted at the 1997 Luxemburg Summit),²⁴ and in the social policy objectives of the Lisbon Council of 2000, which are to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.²⁵ This instrument was therefore of special interest to the Roma, considering that they are a population which is gravely affected by poverty and unemployment. The representative of the DG Employment and Social Affairs stated that the European Social Fund has been used by current member states such as Spain, Greece and France for projects involving the Roma. During negotiations, the Commission encouraged new member states to use it for Roma-specific projects. Another fund was also mentioned—the Equal Community Initiative. This fund supports innovative projects for helping disadvantaged groups get better access to the labor market. Dozens of such projects focusing specifically on the Roma have been supported in current member states.

Romani participants were informed that in the DG Employment and Social Affairs there are four separate programs dealing with social inclusion, gender equality, anti-discrimination and employment incentives. In all of these areas the Commission maintains particular focus on the Roma. In a recent call for project proposals issued by the unit on anti-discrimination the Roma were mentioned specifically.

²⁴ With the EU Treaty, signed in Amsterdam in 1997, employment was put firmly on the Union's political agenda. The commitment to coordinate employment policies and promote the creation of more and better jobs was translated into the European Employment Strategy at the Luxemburg Summit in 1997. The Employment Strategy was designated as the main tool to give direction and ensure coordination of the employment policy priorities to which member states subscribed at the Union level.

²⁵ The European Councils in Lisbon and Feira (2000) set up a new objective: the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The political guidelines and objectives laid down by the European Council contained, among others things, a requirement to promote better understanding of social exclusion, mainstreaming the promotion of inclusion in member states' employment, education and training, health and housing policies, and developing priorities in favor of specific target groups (for example minority groups, children, the elderly and the disabled).

During the negotiations with new member states the Commission devoted substantial attention to Romani issues and encouraged governments to use the Structural Funds also for their Romani communities. However, it was also mentioned that the Roma themselves need to get in touch with national authorities or governments and make sure that their communities will benefit from this support.

While the Commission has much less ability to pressure full member states than candidate or candidate countries, it still holds some tools that can be of use. One such tool that was mentioned is the so-called "open method" of coordination in the areas of framework policies for employment and social inclusion.²⁶ This means that at the Union level member states agree on common objectives and commit themselves to carrying them out. Governments then have to report back to the Commission on how they have tried to achieve these objectives, and during peer review the Commission and governments assess how well countries did in meeting their goals. In both employment and social inclusion such common objectives were adopted and they cover areas of interest to Romani minorities.

Current member states issue reports on social inclusion, and based on these reports the Commission adopts a Joint Report on Social Inclusion. The new member states are joining this scheme, and in December 2003 they signed a Joint Inclusion Memorandum (JIM).

²⁶ The "open method" of coordination introduced by the Employment Strategy includes the following steps: a) employment guidelines: following a proposal from the Commission, the European Council agrees every year on a series of guidelines that establish common priorities for member states' employment policies; b) National Action Plans are prepared by each member state describing how these guidelines will be put into practice; c) the Commission and the Council jointly examine each National Action Plan and produce a Joint Employment Report, and the Commission then prepares a new proposal to revise the guidelines for the next year; d) upon receiving a proposal from the Commission, the Council may decide to issue country-specific recommendations. In this way the open method of co-ordination delivers a rolling program of yearly planning, monitoring, examination and readjustment. Following the European Council in Lisbon (2000) the open method of coordination was extended also to the social policy field with a slight change related to two-year periods of planning, reporting and readjusting priorities. Candidate countries participated in both framework policies in accordance with the provisions of the Accession Partnership. Joint Assessment Papers (JAP) on employment were concluded for the first time with candidate countries in 2001 as preparatory documents for developing a national and regional strategy for potential assistance by the European structural funds after accession. Similarly, in the field of social policy the acceding countries prepared and signed with the Commission a Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion (JIM) in December 2003.

All JIM's have prioritized social inclusion measures with special emphasis on groups at particular risk of long-term unemployment, like young people, the elderly, or women, and vulnerable groups such as the Roma and other ethnic minorities. Those priorities and measures are also included in the programming documents of the Community Support Frameworks.

During the preparation and negotiation of these documents the Commission and especially the DG Employment and Social Affairs encouraged governments to include and pay particular attention to Romani issues. These documents can be a political tool the Roma can use to keep governments accountable, by questioning whether the common objectives they agreed to have been met. Currently, the Commission is reviewing the existing arrangements, policies and programs to see how they can work even more effectively to address Romani issues in an enlarged Union. A study on the Roma that is being conducted in cooperation with the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) among others, and a conference in Brussels scheduled for April 2004, have the same purpose: to address the specific needs of Romani minorities with Union instruments.²⁷

Romani Minorities as Beneficiaries of Structural Funds: Possibilities and Risks

The remarks of the Romani participants revealed that only some of them were well informed about these instruments, frameworks and documents, and about how the Structural Funds operate. Romani minorities that have strong political representation in their country have certainly been more successful in securing Romani interests and lobbying for inclusion of their objectives in programming documents. It also became clear that in many instances the Roma have been left out of the consultation process or, having little power or political influence, they have had trouble getting the government's attention to ensure their problems are adequately addressed in negotiated documents.

²⁷ The conference "Roma in an enlarged European Union" that took place in Brussels from April 22-24, 2004. The Report on *The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union. Fundamental Rights and Anti-discrimination* was published under the Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs, Unit D3, European Communities, 2004. The Report however, does not elaborate on political participation and representation of Roma.

According to one of the Romani representatives from Hungary, Romani issues are addressed in all five Operational Programs of that country's Community Support Framework. The Commission's particular focus on the Roma during pre-accession negotiations contributed to this outcome: after the first round of negotiations, the Commission indicated that there were too few measures in support of the Roma, and requested that the government take additional steps to address their situation.

Similarly, the Romani representative from Slovakia reported that the Commission's intervention (which included, among other things, insistence on including the Plenipotentiary for Romani Issues in the delegation at the last stage of negotiations in Brussels), was helpful in placing the Roma's needs in the Community Support Framework chapters on basic infrastructure and human resources.

A Commission representative noted that in Slovakia the Structural Funds contribution for Romani minority measures will be higher than usual at 80%, which means that only 20% will be required as co-financing (for other programs the level of financing and co-financing are 75% and 25%, respectively). In the case of the Czech Republic, the Roma were addressed in two Operational Programs which determine what percentage of resources should be devoted to Roma projects. In this way, the Commission tried to ensure that structural funds will be used for the benefit of Romani communities as well.

However, establishing more specific targets, such as, for example, targeting Romani minorities in regions where they are concentrated or addressing the housing needs of the Roma (a request raised by a Romani representative), would be politically difficult for the Commission. These issues fall under the discretionary authority of member states. In addition, the Commission lacks reliable comparative statistics on minorities, especially the Roma. The Commission formulates general targets; in the field of employment, for example, member states must reduce the unemployment gap between disadvantaged groups and the mainstream population. Suggesting something more specific and quantitative would require the collection of data on ethnic groups, which is a sensitive issue both for governments and among Romani communities.

The Romani participants argued that when it comes to social policy and identifying targets, data for all kinds of social groups are needed; they were therefore in favor of collecting data that reflect the social standing of disadvantaged populations in general. They

were, however, against putting the Roma on some kind of special ethnic record or register.

The Commission representatives explained that the EC's ability to influence concrete measures or projects is very limited, since both managing structural funds and selecting projects are the responsibility of each member state. They also emphasized that in some countries governments may delegate some of the decision-making powers over the use of structural funding to regional and local authorities following the EU decentralization policy. On the other hand, however, access to structural funds has become easier: proposed projects do not need to be negotiated each time with the Commission as was the case for PHARE financing. It is important for the Roma to come up with a perhaps smaller number of higher quality projects. They also noted that Romani organizations can be members of the Monitoring Committee that will oversee the use of structural funds. This Committee will have the authority to change measures or shift resources to another measure if needed.

However, Romani participants were concerned about the capacity of Romani communities and organizations to come up with such projects, especially given that the requirement for co-financing may limit Romani initiatives. They were also concerned about whether the local authorities will have adequate interest in coming up with projects addressing the Romani population or supporting the Roma's own projects. In the view of some participants, the Roma are not well informed about these new funding opportunities and how to access them, or how well their needs are addressed in programming documents.

One of the Romani participants from Romania concluded that the meeting revealed to him a basic message: both in the accession process and afterwards, governments play a central role. To him this means that it is absolutely necessary for Romani minorities to have political representation, whether in parliament or the government or even in institutions in Brussels. Unless Romani representatives actively participate in these institutions, they cannot help secure Romani interests.

The issue of participation in decision making or consultation in various institutions was repeatedly brought up by the Romani representatives. Independently of each other, several Romani participants came up with the idea that elected and appointed Romani representatives should be given an opportunity to consult on Romani issues with EU institutions on a regular basis. They

suggested setting up a body at the European Commission that would work to bring together Romani representatives and representatives of these institutions, and would be a structure for cooperation, coordination, dialogue, guidance and monitoring of EU policies on Romani minorities across the EU. It was also emphasized that some level of coordination must take place between the implementation of EU-funded programs and existing governmental strategies or action plans for Romani communities in member states. The same request was repeated by Romani representatives at the session in the European Parliament. Several MEPs supported the idea of having regular meetings of this kind in Brussels.

In response to this request, a representative of the European Commission pointed out that there is a certain way of doing things at the Union level; the EU Council, where representatives of member states sit, take decisions following their governments' instructions. Romani representatives may therefore need first to lobby their governments and get their support for their proposals. He also stressed that such suggestions must be well worked out before they are presented.²⁸

The Approach of the Romani Representatives: Romani Issues Are Issues of Politics²⁹

The EP's Foreign Affairs Committee has been active on Romani issues, and has kept them on its agenda since the beginning of negotiations with candidate countries. For the Romani communities of the new acceding countries, the Civil Liberties Committee of the EP will become an important body dealing with Romani issues since in the future it will be an internal issue of the EU. Romani organizations will therefore have to address themselves to and

²⁸ In a press release entitled, "Commission calls for clearer focus on addressing Roma discrimination in an enlarged EU," after the conference "Roma in an enlarged European Union" that took place in Brussels from April 22-24, 2004, the Director General of the DG Employment and Social Affairs Ms. Odile Quintin, stated: "We need to ensure that EU policies make a real difference to Roma communities across the enlarged Union. All stakeholders need to work together in a coordinated way. We can no longer afford to take a piecemeal approach to this issue." In an example of the kind of approach needed, Ms. Quintin proposed a review of the internal coordination within the Commission to ensure that there is a "joined up" approach to policy issues relating to the Roma across all the Commission's Directorates-General. More at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/news/2004/apr/roma2_en.html.

²⁹ The second day of the PER and EC organized event brought Romani representatives together with members of the European Parliament.

cooperate closely with this committee. The Foreign Affairs Committee will continue its involvement in Romani affairs but only for candidate countries (i.e., Bulgaria and Romania). It will also pay attention to the Romani communities in the former Yugoslav states.

In views of MEP's it was encouraging to see Roma who have attained political positions and are politically active in defending their communities' interests. They stressed that political participation is of fundamental importance to the Roma since it will be more difficult to solve Romani issues if the Roma are not able to organize themselves politically; solutions must be found on the ground, at the national and local levels.

The Romani participants elaborated on their approach and perspectives on Romani issues in national and European politics. According to the speakers, Romani issues need to be seen as essentially political, and solving them therefore requires a political solution. This means that the Roma need to enter mainstream politics and become active actors bearing political responsibility to their Romani constituencies and mainstream political allies. As elected and appointed officials working in parliaments and governments, they have assumed the role of Romani politicians. They are still few in number, but with each round of elections in the region they are gaining in terms of the number of elected MPs or councilors in regional or local councils. This development needs to be supported and strengthened in the future.

The Romani representatives also spoke in favor of institutionalization of domestic Romani politics—having specific institutional structures at the central and local levels of governing bodies in order to keep Romani issues on the political agenda and make sure they are dealt with on a regular and continual basis. They advocated for Romani participation in these structures, which would ensure that the Roma have a say in the decision-making process. In general, the Romani representatives acknowledged a need to strengthen Romani political organizations or parties as a way to politically mobilize Romani communities, through which they hope to be able to ensure implementation of measures making possible better integration of the Roma.

The MEPs debated this vision, discussing whether or not it is the best approach. In the view of several MEPs, the Roma's choice of forming separate Romani parties or ethnic-based political organizations may not be the most appropriate, and may in fact be counter-productive in the effort to integrate the Roma into

mainstream public and political life. Instead, they argued that a better strategy is for Romani representatives to join mainstream political parties. Positive examples of successful efforts by minorities to do this were cited from the United Kingdom.

In reply to this criticism, the Romani MPs argued that this option is currently not possible in Central and Southeastern Europe. Mainstream parties are neither interested nor ready to have Romani politicians join them, or to integrate Romani issues within their parties' platforms. Nevertheless, the willingness of mainstream parties to enter into pre-election agreements with Romani organizations or parties in itself needs to be highlighted as a breakthrough. Mainstream parties are interested in receiving a predictable share of the ethnic minority vote (which minority organizations promise to deliver) and this could be a source of power for minority politicians.

Romani communities are still not a very predictable voting block, and Romani politicians are not yet as successful in mobilizing their potential constituencies as are other minority leaders, but they are learning mainstream and ethnic politics. At the same time, as the Romani MP from Bulgaria acknowledged, the Romani minority there can't rely on other strong minorities (such as, for example, the Turks) to represent and secure their interests. The Turkish minority is represented in Parliament by some twenty MPs, it heads several ministries in the government, and many Turks serve in the state and local administration. For that reason, Bulgaria is often presented as a kind of ideal model of ethnic politics. It may be a model that works for the Turks, but not for the Romani minority, said the speaker. This participant claimed that the Roma need to defend and ensure their rights and interests on their own, through political participation as an ethnic minority.

Romani participants pointed out that analyzing the participation of the Roma in politics in the region since 1989 provides several interesting findings. First, the Romani candidates who run in general elections from the lists of their own organizations or parties, in most cases, fail; those who associate themselves with mainstream parties and often run from these party's lists, more often, win. Second, the Romani constituency, which is in some countries significant in numbers, is becoming more and more of interest to mainstream parties seeking votes. The willingness of some mainstream parties to enter into pre-election agreements with Romani organizations or parties is a visible sign of this, and the Roma benefit from it to secure seats in elected bodies and positions

in public administration. Third, the same strategy applied in local elections also seems to work: Romani minorities increase their gains with each round, securing more seats in local and municipal councils.

Funding for Roma Projects

Several Romani participants brought up the issue of EU funding for Roma projects. They were concerned that, often, earmarked or available funds do not reach the target communities, but go to better informed and better organized organizations and do not necessarily benefit Romani communities. As one Romani participant put it, an “ethnic business” is flourishing. It was also pointed out that there is growing criticism among Romani organizations and leadership over the current flow of funds intended to improve the situation and integrate Romani communities: funding is increasing but it has not been followed by improvement in the Roma’s situation, which calls into question the effectiveness of the EU’s spending. The Romani representatives requested more transparency on the flow of funds, and especially the spending of governments, monitoring not only spending but also outcomes and results.

Responding to these requests and criticisms, a representative of the Commission disagreed with the assertion that projects that have been funded have produced no results; these results may not be sufficient, but they have definitely produced some positive changes on the ground, he said. It was also pointed out that it is a question of quality projects; currently, there is a lack of good Roma projects. This speaker reminded the Romani representatives that they should not rely only on EU support and funding opportunities—these are only supplementary resources. The primary obligation to address and solve the problems of Romani minorities rests with each member state.

Nevertheless, as one MEP acknowledged, this issue is a serious one and the European Parliament should address it. He recognized a need to improve the management of EU funding and make sure that funds are getting through to their legitimate recipients, and are not stuck somewhere in government offices. He pledged the intention of the Parliament to ensure that EU assistance for Romani communities gets through and becomes a source for realizing Romani projects. In this context, the OSCE Adviser on Roma and Sinti issues pointed out that the EP has a budgetary committee

which approves the Commission's budget, and this is an asset that can be used to impact EU funding policy.

Prospects for Cooperation with the European Parliament

Responding to the Roma's quest for closer cooperation, the chair of the meeting and representative of the EP's Foreign Affairs Committee outlined prospects for cooperative efforts. First, it was suggested that this kind of meeting with Romani elected and appointed representatives should be held regularly in the future—perhaps once a year. The agenda of such meetings should be extended to cover Romani issues not only of new member states or acceding countries, but also of the “old” member states of the European Union. Romani representatives from these countries should participate as well. MEPs who participated in the meeting were committed to do whatever possible to promote and debate the issues of the Roma within the European Parliament. Several committees were named as especially useful to this purpose, the Committees on Foreign Affairs, Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Regional Development (which deals with structural funds) and Budgets.

Participants were also reminded that negotiations are beginning on the new 2007-2013 programming period for EU Structural Funds, and MEPs can inquire as to whether something special or extra can be done for the Roma. Officially, the issue of the Roma is not within the scope of European Union policies; it is an issue for national governments and there are currently no proposals in the new EU constitution to change that. However, one can argue that the Romani minority represent a special minority not comparable with others. This may offer grounds for initiatives in favor of the Roma. In this regard, it was suggested that when MEPs formulate conditions for the 2007-2013 structural funding period they may consider how to include Romani communities or make sure that support will reach them, especially the regions where the Roma live in the difficult circumstances so well known to all.

MEPs endorsed also the idea of the Romani representatives to establish a body that would bring together Romani representatives and representatives of Brussels institutions and would be a structure for cooperation, coordination, and dialogue, guiding and monitoring EU policies on Romani minorities across the EU. Its up to the Roma to realize this idea however. Such a body could be a

counterpart to the European Parliament or even to national parliaments.³⁰

³⁰ Following the June 2004 elections to the European Parliament, a new possibility has appeared for the realization of a number of suggestions and recommendations generated during the discussions in Brussels. Livia Jaroka, a young Romani woman from Hungary, was elected from the Fidesz party list. She became the second Romani MEP after Juan de Dios Ramirez-Heredia from Spain, who served from 1994-1999. Later on another Romani representative from Hungary, Mrs. Viktoria Mohacsi, from the socialist party has become the MEP.