

Roma in Europe From Social Exclusion to Active Participation

# Roma in Europe

From Social  
Exclusion  
to Active  
Participation

## Osman Balic

### The difficult process of building a strong political Roma party in Serbia and Montenegro

#### 1. The Roma in Serbia

##### Population

According to 2002 official census data the number of Serbian citizens belonging to the Roma group is 108,193. It can however be safely assumed that this figure is higher by a factor of 3.5. This would bring the number of Roma in Serbia close to 380,000, or 1.45 % of the total Serbian population. - According to the 1991 census Serbia the Roma are the fourth largest minority following the Albanians, the Hungarians and the Muslims.

If at the 2002 census all Roma people had openly declared themselves as Roma, the result would have been unequivocal: The Roma would stand out as Serbia's second largest ethnic minority following the Albanians. Considering furthermore that the territory of Kosovo is currently not under Serbian responsibility, the Roma are in fact likely to be ***the largest single ethnic minority in Serbia.***

##### Roma political parties

Past efforts to set up a single strong Roma party have been unsuccessful. The first few Roma parties emerged at the time when a multi-party system was introduced in former Yugoslavia. It took Serbian Roma 15 years to understand that we needed help in our efforts to become relevant political players.

There were many reasons for this lack of success: an underdeveloped political culture, the lack of strong political parties and leaders, the Roma people's indifferent, enduring lethargy, their indolence, their low education level and their everyday problems. It is for precisely these reasons that the appearance of one or two *strong political Roma parties* would be helpful. Roma parties would be the best suited to deal with the political culture of the Roma, and to create a political organisation. They would have the credibility to

show their fellow Roma that politics is the arena where the fate of individuals and entire families is determined, and that this includes issues such as poverty, the formation of ghettos, the minority status, ethnic rights and the organisation of the state as such.

## 2. Relationships among Roma

***The Roma lack a sense of solidarity. Traditional closeness and support within the extended family, among neighbours, among people living on the same block, within a sub-ethnic group and among the entire ethnic group has been lost. It seems as though the ethnological myth about the strong ties among all Roma has disappeared. Instead of caring for their neighbour, people have developed a sense of utilitarian individualism and fatal egotism. "I care most about myself, only me and my next of kin are important". The relationship between generations has deteriorated, too.***

## 3. The Roma political culture

***Roma political culture is a disaster. To be more precise: It is non-existent. It would be right to say that it is a political non-culture.***

The following issues have an influence on the development of a *political culture* and the formation of a *strong political factor*.

Although I believe that the discrimination against the Roma is the greatest in the cultural field – albeit colourfully gift-wrapped -, it would be wrong to understate the importance of their role as a legal and political subsystem in society. Subsystems are a crucial determinant of the situation of large groups – ethnic in this case – in any existing community. If, into the bargain, the group in question is an ethnic minority without any protection from a country of residence within reach, which is unfortunately the case for the Roma, the political becomes so important that many social analysts would give it absolute priority.

The Roma play no part in politics at all, they have no influence and they are conveniently available for any kind of manipulation by the powers-that-be. According to Sonja Licht, one reason for this is the

"lack of homogeneous collectivity, of autonomous self-organisation and of a collective sense of national identity ..."

### **The Roma elite**

The building of an *intellectual* and especially a *political elite* among the Roma is yet to happen. Until recently they did not even have any representatives to speak of in the governmental institutions. Even where they had delegates in a number of local councils, as indeed they did in the last term of office, some members in the Serbian parliament and one minister without portfolio in the government of the Republic of Serbia, they had every reason to be dissatisfied with their representatives and their level of political influence – and they were. The majority of Roma even disbelieved their own representatives in government. Neither had they voted them into office, nor had these, as we found out, worked very hard to stand up for their authentic interests.

It is the Roma's wish and legitimate right to elect their own representatives, at least in those regions where they form a majority.

There is no doubt that the Roma would change their attitude and become politically mature if their emerging political elite developed a stronger sense of responsibility and decided to take the interests of their compatriots in hand.

### **Politics and fear**

In a strong civil society people would be surprised at the suggestion that there is a connection between the categories of fear and politics. However, if you have lived in the kind of totalitarian system that Serbia used to be, the thought of such a connection is justified. The fallen regime had intentionally created a sense of illicitness, warning people of the terrible consequences if they voted "wrong", or in favour of the democratic opposition.

The Roma people were in a particularly precarious situation. Stigmatised everywhere and at all times and let down by their own elite as well as being politically neglected by the ethnic majority population, they were always on their guard, and probably even

more afraid than everyone else. Is this *political angst* the main reason why the Roma do not express their true political will?

Fear is a sad reality in the Roma community and makes it difficult to move forward into an intercultural society. How else would one interpret the result of several studies according to which every third person is in one way or another afraid to speak their political mind? ("We're better off staying at home minding our own business", "Everyone knows everyone else and is afraid of them", "If I vote according to my real preferences Government will make life difficult for me.") Fortunately, over one half of the Roma have shaken off this fear. Those who are still living in fear are certainly not to blame. They should be patiently told that getting involved in politics and taking free political decisions is not a punishable offence; and that, on the contrary, it is the only way to build a society in which nobody need be afraid. Also, it should be made clear to the Roma that the majority of their compatriots, kinsmen and neighbours have left their anxiety behind, have become politically mature and are now "mercilessly" putting forward their political demands.

### **Political trust**

Some recent studies suggest that most Roma tend towards a conservative and authoritarian attitude and will not criticize the state, the government and their own representatives who collaborate with those in power. One explanation for this behaviour may be the experience of the many centuries during which the Roma had to find survival strategies in states run by other ethnic majorities. They consider themselves as being in a transnational position and feel a constant need to adjust themselves for the sake of their own survival. But *is this really their situation, and need things stay this way for the Roma?*

Meanwhile, many things have changed for our Roma. They, too, have founded political parties, or have joined other political parties, they have their own political leaders, their intellectual elite is growing, they are setting up alternative societies and non-governmental organisations... Who do the Roma trust the most? Or do they trust nobody when it comes to politics?

Roma no longer believe anybody blindly at all, and this is good for them. They do have a slightly greater tendency to trust state authorities. Their remaining trust is distributed between various other organisations: Some traditional organisations have forfeited

this trust (one of them being the umbrella organisation of Serbian, or Yugoslav, Roma Societies) and the newly emerged organisations have not earned their trust yet (such as alternative Roma societies and NGOs).

Potentially there are three types of political/societal players that could in the long run benefit from the improved situation provided they have patience and a good program to offer: the alternative Roma societies and non-governmental organisations, the Roma's own political parties, and the democratic opposition. The first type of organisation currently has the best chances, the second one has only little influence, and the third category is lagging far behind and should give this some serious thought.

### **The political parties of the mainstream population**

The problem is that the more relevant political parties on the one hand would love to have a strong influence on the Roma population but on the other hand are not willing enough to listen to their specific problems and needs. They realise that the Roma share in the electorate is not to be underestimated. After all they add up to several hundred thousand voters, and in some areas, villages, towns, constituencies, they actually form a majority.

Although the Roma are not aware of these implications, they sense their power as voters and know that they are being neglected by the political parties. They probably wonder why they even the democratic opposition is ignoring them in their party manifestos. The Roma have punished these parties by either not voting at all, or by casting a surprise vote for one of the candidates of the governing parties.<sup>1</sup> The Roma are developing more and more of a critical mind, and are deeply convinced that modern political parties in their "lust for power" are neglecting the interests of the common people. They also know that *the mainstream political parties* could make much of a political difference if they honestly tried. What the Roma ought to do is, through their own political elite, put more pressure on the political parties of the majority population, assert their claims more radically, and participate in political life with greater responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> The Serb Radical Party has enormous influence on the Roma, which is an incredible paradox.

## The Roma's non-governmental organisations

In Europe many governmental authorities and foundations have long ago understood the Roma problem. They do everything in their power to help this desperate people. There are hundreds of programs for the Roma and thousands of projects are being funded that cover a great bandwidth from child welfare to education and science programs, carried out by innumerable volunteers and enthusiasts, professionals and Roma-friendly experts, people of humanist virtue who offer their time to the Third Sector of non-profit humanitarian NGOs. Unlike our government, these organisations have understood that the future belongs to the Third Sector.

The number of so-called *Roma non-governmental organisations* has become confusingly large. The influence of these organisations which often confirm the Serbian saying "Wherever there is a Roma there is an NGO" is ever growing. The Roma have an undeniable right to found organisations. However, what would be even more useful is if these *one-man NGOs* could set up a network and become more integrated. Together they could put real pressure on political decisions.

The Roma approach to politics in its current form has never been studied in detail, nor have the political parties taken much notice of it. The Roma deserve greater interest and political attention. The majority of Roma *live in the cities. Their number is much greater than that of the Roma in rural areas.* As opposed to a scattered rural community, *urban concentration makes the Roma a significant part of the electorate.* Hence, if the right kind of political action is taken this could achieve two things. On the one hand, it would encourage *a more intense study of the complexities of the Roma polity*, while on the other hand a democratic process would *enable the Roma to express their political will freely.*

People are in politics for a variety of reasons. Some do it exclusively for their own interests, while others do it out of care for the needs of a specific social or ethnic group, while yet others are concerned about the higher national or state interest.... They all have their motivation, like the Roma do; only, by definition, it appears that the Roma are expected to present some specific additional justification to participate in politics.

As opposed to their compatriots in other parts of Europe, our Roma are not in the fortunate position that the limelight is on them. The government always has more important business to tend to, and if it does offer help it does so very selectively, treating the Roma more like an exotic folkloric dance group. To the political parties who benefit from Roma illiteracy and lack of organisation they merely serve as disposable objects – an extension of their electoral base. This is why the Roma should only rely on themselves and "*use their own potential*", become united and organised politically, and use their enlarged power base and assign a more sophisticated job to their own elite. They must also reach out to the NGOs operating in their vicinity, collaborate with them, join their programs and offer their own inexhaustible potential. They must find "friends" among the academic community especially those from the humanities and get them interested in their issues. It is only in this triple approach that the Roma visibility could increase and to ensure that the government can no longer refuse to acknowledge them.

In my integration model and on *its legal and political map* there will be no success without a distinct political culture and a strong political role. ***Power is not something you get for free; you earn it by fighting for it.*** *It is now the Roma's turn to take action. Their lack of a political culture and a wider reaching political influence has been their own fault. This is now where their great opportunity lies, or, as some believe, their greatest opportunity ever. "Politics is the only field in which the Roma can make a big difference for themselves."*

#### 4. The political Roma parties and their view of the problems

The following major parties of the Roma currently exist:

| Nr. | Name of party                              | Chairman              |
|-----|--|-----------------------|
|     | Party of Roma Unity                        | Žika Mitrović         |
|     | Roma Social Democratic Party               | Dragan Jovanović      |
|     | New Democratic Party of the Roma of Serbia | Dragan Ristić         |
|     | Social Democratic Party                    | Muharem Muja Alijević |
|     | Democratic Roma Party                      | Nenad Vasić           |
|     | Democratic Party of the Roma               | Sevdedin Haliti       |
|     | Roma Social Democratic Party of Serbia     | Srđan Šain            |

Roma party leaders were interviewed after the last local elections in Serbia which took place in September 2004. These interviews resulted in the following critical conclusions:

- All leaders shared the view that there was a lack of experts capable of participating in the political race.
- The existing political parties have not clearly defined their political ideas, their political goals, their election platforms and their campaign action plans. The reasons given included the lack of knowledge as to how such plans need to be drawn up, as well as a lack of funds.
- Another problem identified was the parties' inactivity in the period between elections. Parties are only active in the run-up to elections.
- All interviewees also mentioned the problem of party finance. Examples were mentioned of party members or other individuals making private gifts during election campaigns. This had clear implications for the outcome of an election.
- Roma candidates clearly ascribe the low turnout among the Roma community to the lack of trust in the Roma parties and in the Roma's traditionally apolitical attitude.
- Cases were mentioned in which registry staff had behaved in a discriminatory manner towards representatives of

Roma election committees and other party bodies as they came in to register.

- The relationship between Roma and mainstream parties is such that no one wishes to enter into a coalition with the Roma thinking that a pact with the Roma could be politically damaging.
- The media take an unfavourable stance vis-à-vis the Roma parties, which, often as a result of a lack of funds, have had no chance to make themselves known.
- The need was mentioned for more communication between political Roma parties in order to discuss the options of joining forces and forming coalitions.

The problems identified above are not new. They only illustrate the fact that the problems have not been solved, have not become any smaller or fewer, and that the number of Roma who would like to participate in the election process is on the increase. Another important fact is the lack of communication between parties, and of joint appearances in public, which would be much welcomed by all as a way of improving Roma participation in the election process.

After all these years a path has become visible which we should use to structure our political interests by building coalitions between Roma parties. The idea of creating more social justice and a strong political party is still far away from being implemented, our efforts are still unspecific and unsystematic. What is also lacking is a long-term perspective of Roma participation in power as well as the definition of our long-term goals for the time after the elections.

## **5. Recommendation:**

### **To political parties:**

- Education programs for the political parties should become available as soon as possible to teach party leaders to develop policies, organise campaigns and handling political management functions. In this manner Roma parties could build more trust among the Roma population. This would lead to a more participation of young people and intellectuals.

- Communication between political Roma parties should be encouraged. The basis of this communication should be the voter majority and the political platforms.
- Mechanisms must be created for the communication between Roma parties and candidates on the shortlists of mainstream parties.

### **For Roma NGOs and Roma media**

- Roma NGOs should assume the role of educators in the Roma community, explaining to people the importance of elections and encourage them to go to the polls.
- Roma NGO activists should become involved in the supervision and management of elections.