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CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

Roma Participation: From Manipulation to Citizen Control

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In the last two decades, with the increasing interest and governmental involvement in problems faced by Roma, with support from international organisations, Roma participation has become an empty slogan. In almost every speech of politicians, government officials or representatives of international organisations, Roma participation comes up as the core value of and a necessary ingredient for successful Roma policies. Analysing the situation on the ground leads researchers to a different conclusion. In fact, Roma are rarely consulted, their involvement is marginal, and their voice is not heard during the policy-making process. Should one be surprised about the limited success in improving the situation of Roma all over Europe in spite of political commitments and resources allocated for Roma inclusion? The participation of Roma is a good indicator to predict the success or failure of policies targeting Roma, as well as of the commitment of the politicians to promote equal rights and social justice for all.

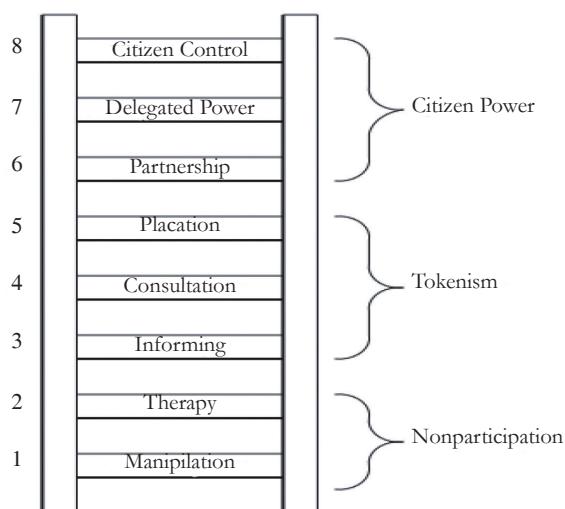
Roma participation is not only a Kantian moral imperative to treat people as subjects and not as objects, but also a very practical tool to ensure the sustainability of the policies targeting Roma. For example, in education, if the government intends to decrease the dropout rate among Roma, then it makes sense to involve Romani parents in the process, and in deliberations with local authorities and with the educational structures, to include the parents in the decision-making at the school level, and to give them ownership over such measures. Only by involving Romani parents can the dropout rate be reduced, as parents, in general, are primarily responsible for sending their children to school. Failure to involve Romani parents will result in a failure to reduce the dropout rate.

Let us be more concrete about Roma participation. Nowadays, on the European and national level especially, there are

few meetings concerning the situation of Roma where there are no Romani activists/professionals. Is that what is usually meant by “Roma participation”? One has to make it clear that Roma participation is not only a matter of having Roma among the participants. It is a larger problem, encompassing issues such as who participates, how they participate, the degree or intensity of the participation, and the type of participation. While participation is a loose concept in social sciences, one that is often misused and abused in the development field,² Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation is a helpful tool in bringing some clarity to the matter of Roma participation.

In a 1969 article on power structures in society,³ Arnstein presented a ladder of participation of citizens in decision-making, containing eight rungs corresponding to three levels of involvement: non-participation, tokenism and citizen power. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Ladder of citizen participation.
Source: Arnstein, 1969.



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2 Sarah C. White, “Depoliticising Development: the Uses and Abuses of Participation”, *Development in Practice* 6 (1996) 1: 6–15.

3 Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”, *JAIP* 35 (July 1969) 4: 216–224.

Manipulation is merely a public relation exercise by the power-holders, who place citizens on advisory boards or committees with the aim of “educating” them and getting their support. Therapy is a form of participation where citizens are perceived as mentally ill due to their powerlessness and subjected to clinical group therapy, the focus being their illness, without affecting the causes that have led to their “illness”. These two forms are defined as non-participation.

Informing is the next rung on the participation ladder, consisting of informing citizens of their rights, duties and options without offering an adequate channel to provide feedback and to influence the measures affecting them. Consultation gives an opportunity to citizens to express their opinions without any guarantee that they will be taken into account. Placation occurs when a few selected citizens are placed on various boards and committees, usually forming a minority in these structures, without being accountable to the community. The level of citizen placation varies depending on their capacity to define priorities and the level of community organisation. These three forms are defined by Arnstein as tokenism.

The next three rungs are citizen power: redistribution of power among citizens and power-holders through negotiations and institutional arrangements. In partnership, responsibilities for planning and decision-making are shared through joint structures, with clear rules that could not be unilaterally changed. Delegation of power is achieved when citizens acquire dominant decision-making authority over an issue or measure (veto power). Citizen control occurs when they have full managerial control over a policy or institution – such as a school, community centre or neighbourhood services – and are able to negotiate the conditions for changing the institution or policy.

By applying this model to the context in which Roma participate, one might have a good sense of how powerless Roma as a group are. In most cases Roma are involved through non-participatory methods or, at best, through consultation and placation. No genuine form of participation of Roma, as described by Arnstein, can be observed in Europe, in initiatives that affect a large number of Roma.

How do Roma participate in public life? Living in representative democracies, the question is: who speaks on their behalf? Who represents them, and how are their representatives selected? Roma are citizens of their countries and they can participate in public life, including politics in this

capacity. However, there are many obstacles that limit or exclude Roma from participating in public life. The most serious exclusion is the lack of identification documents, which makes many Roma invisible for the state.

As a group, there are several arrangements through which Roma participate in public life. One might distinguish three types of such arrangements: first, Roma representation as a national minority, second, Roma representation as a group of citizens pursuing their interests through political organisations, and third, representation through NGOs.

The first level is that of Roma as national minority. Here there are different institutional arrangements in each country. These arrangements go from affirmative action to minority self-government and from representation in consultative bodies to a high degree of autonomy, including territorial autonomy. There are only a few countries that do not recognise the existence of national minorities and do not provide for any type of representation. Catherine Messina Pajic gives a good overview of such arrangements in six countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the ways(s) in which Roma are represented through these arrangements.

A second level is representation of Roma in the elected state administrative structures, such as local or regional councils, municipalities and parliaments. Here it is a combination of the minority rights approach – in Romania minority NGOs can register in elections and propose candidates – and a political rights approach of Roma as citizens, through their own political parties or by joining mainstream parties. The articles in the current issue present some cases of Roma participation using these strategies and arrangements.

The third level is representation of Roma through NGOs. All over Europe, especially in the last two decades, Roma have set up non-governmental organisations to defend their rights and to pursue their public interests. Thus the most important role played by these NGOs has been that of ensuring channels for articulating, aggregating, and representing the interests of Roma. This is one of the basic functions of political parties, but they do not have a monopoly over it. In fact, this function of civil society is very important when the interests of some significant groups are not represented by political parties, due to the electoral system or other causes.

One might notice a confusion regarding representation of Roma through appointment. Some Roma individuals

are appointed in different structures of the state administration. Often they are considered as representatives of Roma and they are invited to speak on behalf of Roma, when in fact they are simple bureaucrats. However, an in-depth debate on the co-optation and participation/representation in the case of Roma would be something to consider for further research.

In the last four decades, especially after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, Roma set up political parties or non-governmental organisations, or joined mainstream organisations, political parties or churches. However, there is a large consensus among academics and practitioners that Roma are underrepresented, that their voice is not heard and that participation of Roma in policy-making, using Arnstein's ladder, corresponds to forms of non-participation or tokenism at best.⁴ One aspect that stands out when analysing Roma participation is the predominance of indirect political forms of participation through non-governmental organisations in defining and aggregating their general interest.

Roma political parties have been unsuccessful in attracting the Roma voters and playing a role in the political arena, no matter in which country in Europe. Disenchantment with their electoral performances, as well as with the internal democracy, allegations of corruption and authoritarian leadership, kept many Roma away from joining or voting for Roma parties. Mainstream political parties failed to incorporate Roma interests within their programmes. They were not interested in tackling the Roma *problematique*, as they were afraid of diminishing their electoral support.⁵ The institutional arrangements for national minority representation and the electoral requirements for getting into parliament and institutions of local democracy proved to be serious challenges for Roma. Another cause of the preponderance of participation through NGOs was the lack of direct support from donors for Roma political participation.

Pursuing their interests through non-governmental organisations was sometimes a deliberate strategy⁶ but it was due to some other factors as well. Unlike other national minorities from the region, which were supported by the kin-state, Roma did not receive support to develop organisational infrastructures and qualified cadres to be able to compete efficiently with other political groups. Donors were mostly interested in an associational approach, based on projects that responded to some critical issues within the community. Moreover, the national minority representation mechanisms were and are not designed to tackle problems as complex as those that Roma are facing.⁷ Even the minority self-government system in Hungary, which claims that it provides for self-administration of such problems, proves to be lacking the power to tackle problems faced by Roma efficiently, as minority self-governments are rather parallel structures to the local administration institutions – the place where real power is.⁸

Mainstream organisations' work on Roma had an impact on Roma communities. They were often perceived by donors as more reliable, due to their qualified staff as well as their administrative capacity to implement projects and programmes. Many such organisations co-opted Roma in their staff, and they had influence in shaping the policy discourse on Roma. But the involvement of Roma in the setting of their strategies and priorities was marginal at best. Nevertheless, there are often objections among Roma to the work of these organisations, questioning their commitment to improve the situation, as they were often seen as the "gypsy industry", exploiting the opportunities and funding allocated for Roma projects for their own benefit.

An interesting case is that of different religious denominations and their influence on Roma communities. The mainstream churches, with the exception of the Christian neo-Protestant ones, have paid little attention to Roma and

4 Zoltan Bárány, *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peter Vermeersch, *The Romani Movement: Minority Politics and Ethnic Mobilization in Contemporary Central Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Aidan McGarry, *Who Speaks for Roma?: Political Representation of a Transnational Minority Community* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2010).

5 For a debate on the electoral strategies to be pursued by Roma and the benefits of setting up their parties versus joining mainstream parties, see Andras Biro, Nicolae Gheorghe, Martin Kovats *et al.*, *From Victimhood to Citizenship: The Path of Roma Integration* (Budapest: Kossuth Publishing, 2013), 129-196.

6 For example in Romania, in early 1990 some influential Romani activists opted for such a strategy. See "Identitatea Romani intre victimizare si emancipare" Nicolae Gheorghe in dialog cu Iulius Rostas [Romani identity between victimisation and emancipation: Nicolae Gheorghe in dialogue with Iulius Rostas], in Istvan Horvath and Lucian Nastasa, eds., *Rom sau Tigan? Dilemele unui etnonim in spatiul romanesc* (Editura ISPMN, Cluj Napoca, 2012).

7 See Iskra Uzunova, "Roma Integration in Europe: Why Minority Rights Are Failing", *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* 27 (2010) 1.

8 See National Democratic Institute Assessment report, *The Hungarian Minority Self-Government System as a Means of Increasing Romani Political Participation*, 2006, available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/25974>.

their vulnerability. As these religious groups were themselves in minority and often marginal, their capacity to put issues faced by Roma on the public agenda was very limited. However, they favoured a bottom-up approach, focusing on social change at the community level.

Thus policy-makers are left with limited choices to ensure that Roma have a say in the policies targeting them: Roma NGOs. NGOs are the institutions developed by Roma that might claim that they represent the voice of the Roma, that they “represent” the Roma. Is this a good enough reason for policy-makers to take into account these voices and to invite them to the negotiation when designing and deciding policies towards Roma? But what exactly is a Roma NGO? How should one define them, and by what criteria? Who should be at the negotiation table, when the number of NGOs claiming to represent the Roma is high, numbering hundreds in some countries? In other words, who should participate?

While there are high expectations for Roma to organise themselves and to participate in the democratic process and policy-making, authorities too often ignore the historical past and lack of such traditions among Roma communities. With a few exceptions, mostly during the inter-war period, Roma had no models of organising and expressing their interest in society in a similar manner to that of other groups. As a vulnerable group that has faced severe exclusion throughout their history, the Roma have developed specific survival strategies and institutions adapted to the context in which they lived, based on non-participation and non-engagement with state institutions and majority societies. Thus, expecting Roma to be able to develop representative institutions similar to those of other groups in society is not only unrealistic but also indicative of a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Roma situation.

There is no recipe for ensuring Roma participation. Often officials ask for a partner to negotiate and work together in improving the situation of Roma. As there is no such partner entrusted by Roma themselves, the issue of who participates is a critical dilemma for policy-makers and for the policy-making process. The legitimacy and degree of representation of Roma by the NGOs will always come up, as there is no Roma membership-based mass organisation governed by democratic rules. In addition, working with Roma

is not an easy task, due to internal stratification and diversity. One might be challenged and asked to be more flexible with some rules, there is a need for consultations with numerous groups, which requires time, and there might be conflicts among Roma leaders and different interests asserted by Roma groups. As a result, policy-makers might feel uncomfortable in making decisions on issues that they feel are not going to satisfy all Roma. However, they have to act when issues are burning or there is a constant pressure on them from international organisations or other governments.

As some authors indicate, there is a constant practice among governments, international organisations and also donors to invite to their table only those Roma representatives that did not challenge them. The examples provided by Jud Nirenberg⁹ are eloquent of the results achieved so far regarding national strategies/programmes for Roma, the Decade of Roma Inclusion, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies or other international initiatives. While at the local and national level one might identify some positive practices in having Roma as partners in different initiatives, at the EU level Roma participation is at an incipient stage. The Roma Platform, the main consultative forum of the EU on Roma policies, has failed to engage Roma in a meaningful way, Romani activists often being invited only to listen to the discussions.

Policy-makers, especially at the international level, consider some criteria in working with “their Roma Partners” such as the English proficiency of Romani activists, their knowledge of administrative and bureaucratic procedures, or their ability to use modern communication infrastructure, and did not take into account the fact that all too often these Romani activists have no constituency. The involvement of Romani activists is most often individual in character, rather than institutional. Those Romani activists who did not meet the criteria for participating in the discussion, despite having support in their communities, are not at the negotiation table. One should also mention the fact that some Roma leaders are corrupt or corruptible and governments preferred to work with them because they could control their “working” partner.

There are other dimensions to consider when analysing Roma participation. Some of these dimensions are analysed

9 Jud Nirenberg, “Romani Political Mobilization from the First International Romani Union Congress to the European Roma, Sinti and Travellers Forum”, in Nando Sigona and Nidhi Trehan, eds., *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Neoliberal Order* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

by the authors of the articles in the current issue of *Roma Rights*. Some remain to be researched and analysed in the future. For example, it will be extremely interesting to obtain data on how Roma perceive themselves within the political structures in European societies, how they see their role and engagement with these institutions, what their political beliefs are and how they define their collective interests, etc. However, there is a need for a long-term programme

to transform Roma organisations into representative and knowledgeable partners for the governments and international organisations. This might be a challenging goal, as it seems that no government, donor or international organisation is directly interested in such a long-term project. At least, none has this as a priority in their plans of actions for Roma. Let us hope that they will do so, because at the end of the day, those that lose are Roma and non-Roma alike.