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Ethnic mobilisation and the political conditionality of European Union accession: the case of the Roma in Slovakia

Peter Vermeersch

***Abstract** In recent years the European Union (EU) has applied its 'political' criteria for accession as an instrument to positively influence policies on minority issues in the candidate member states of central Europe. This essay explores the impact of the EU enlargement process on the political experiences of the Roma communities in Slovakia. Based on fieldwork observations, it is argued that although the EU's minority protection criterion has stimulated certain domestic legal and institutional changes in Slovakia, this external pressure has not been perceived by Roma activists as a clear point of support for their political mobilisation. This may relate to a number of circumstances. First, the EU minority criterion is perceived as limited because the EU has imposed requirements on candidate states which it does not demand from its current member states. Second, Roma activists suspect that Slovakia's concern for developing minority policies is related more to enhancing the country's standing in the international community than with remedying domestic social marginalisation. Third, the absence of elite allies in power and the lack of resources within Roma communities have hindered Roma citizens in their political mobilisation. And fourth, Roma activists are confronted with widespread negative stereotypes in which they are held responsible for harming Slovakia's relationship with the EU.*

KEYWORDS: EUROPEAN UNION; ETHNIC MINORITIES; SLOVAKIA; ROMA; POLITICAL MOBILISATION

Introduction

Making policy on minority issues in post-communist central Europe today is far from exclusively a matter of domestic politics; it is significantly influenced by the norms and standards emerging in the international political arena of contemporary Europe. In particular the European Union (EU) has attempted to alter central European policies related to minorities by explicitly linking normative pressure with membership conditionality. Since the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 the EU has increasingly emphasised the importance of the protection of ethnic and national minorities as a norm and as a political precondition for the accession of central European candidate member states. The usage of political conditionality is based on the assumption that introducing comprehensive conditions for EU membership will incite prospective members to align their policies with the standards set by the EU. In this way the EU hopes to guarantee the political stability of future Union territory. In literature on conditionality there is considerable debate over the effectiveness of the EU's membership

conditionality in general (Checkel 2000: 6–7; Grabbe 1999: 8–9), as well as over the implications of setting specific requirements on minority protection (Amato and Batt 1998; Liebich 1998). A question which is not directly addressed by the literature, however, is whether and to what extent EU conditionality on minority treatment is perceived as beneficial by the minorities themselves. In other words, one wonders what impact it has had on attempts of marginalised ethnic minorities in central Europe to politically mobilise on an ethnic basis.

This article seeks to explore the above question in the case of central Europe's most widespread and, arguably, most troubled minority – the Roma.¹ More than other minorities on the continent, the Roma have been seen as having 'a particular significance within the process of European integration' (Kovats 2000: 16). Not only do they have a minority status in a large number of European states, but they also form a diverse variety of communities which are increasingly conceptualised as a transnational ethnic group by representative associations which are, in certain cases, indeed active across state borders. The EU currently takes a firm position pertaining to the treatment of the Roma in central Europe and has, in light of its own accession criteria, on several occasions criticised central European governments' poor record on Roma protection. This criticism has conveyed the message that membership of the Union is to a certain extent dependent on a state's ability to protect Roma. Obviously, this broad political conditionality has put a strain on the central European governments which aspire to become members as soon as possible. One would therefore expect that Roma movement organisations are supportive of this conditionality and have used it to buttress their claims and protests. However, as this article will detail, among Roma activists in central Europe a much more ambivalent perception of the EU's conditionality can be detected.

Slovakia, a country which during the years of its democratisation has experienced intense scrutiny from European institutions over minority issues, provides an apt illustration of this predicament. During the last decade, Slovakia's shortcomings in protecting its sizeable Roma minority have become painfully clear. After 1989 the Roma were disproportionately affected by problems that flowed from economic restructuring such as large-scale unemployment and a steep fall in living standards. During communism Roma had been employed in industries such as steel and mining, although mostly in underprivileged positions. Impoverishment of many Roma after the collapse of these industries was accompanied by an increasing spate of racist attacks against them, lack of protection by the police, experiences of unequal treatment in education and the justice system, and unequal access to public services (European Roma Rights Centre 1997; Guy 1998: 56–66). Both a legacy of poverty and problematic social policies of the past as well as recent failures in providing adequate measures to eradicate discrimination and marginalisation have created a social and spatial distance between non-Roma and Roma, the results of which are visible both in urban areas and in the countryside. Against this backdrop Roma activists have called upon the Slovak government to take new policy initiatives to tackle discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage, and have attempted to enhance the political participation of Roma constituencies.

Based on interviews with 19 individuals working within active ethnic Roma organisations (including self-help organisations and ethnic political parties) carried out during fieldwork in 2000, this article seeks to analyse the Roma perspective on conditionality. To contextualise this, the paper also describes the

shifts in the Slovak political environment in which collective Roma political assertiveness has developed and focuses on the strategic political situation within which Roma decide whether to become politically active. I will argue that international governmental pressure in this case has not visibly led to a critical expansion in political opportunities for the group to organise a strong ethnic movement. In other words, domestic Roma actors who want to mobilise protest are confronted with a number of obstacles which prevent them from benefiting from the EU's political conditionality.

The article considers three perspectives. First, it considers problems that can be considered as intrinsic to the development of the EU's conditionality policy towards central Europe in the field of Roma protection. Second, it examines Slovakia's political response to international scrutiny. Finally, the discussion shifts to the response of Roma activists to the changing domestic and international political context.

Minority rights and the protection of Roma in the pre-accession context

Before embarking on discussing the three perspectives outlined above, I start with a brief description of the evolution of the EU's concern for minority protection in general and specifically for the plight of the Roma in central Europe. During the last decade minority rights were emphasised in a number of widely adopted instruments of international law, such as the 1990 Charter of Paris of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the 1995 Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The countries of central Europe are currently members of the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Thus, minority protection there has been exposed to widespread international attention. In the course of the 1990s the EU has also demonstrated a growing concern for the protection of national minorities in central Europe. For example, the European Commission's 'Agenda 2000' refers to both the Framework Convention and the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1201 (1993) on minorities. The impact of the EU in this field is no doubt far-reaching. It has the capacity and the financial resources to influence minority policies of other states and to empower minority citizens to challenge the initiatives (or lack of them) of their governments. The existing international documents relating to minority protection hold governments accountable for their internal activities *vis-à-vis* minorities. One would expect that, as a consequence of their strong desire to join the EU, the candidate countries would be more likely to acknowledge this accountability and adjust their policies. Especially relevant in this respect are the conclusions of the 1993 European Council of Copenhagen, which mention minority protection as a prerequisite for future membership.

By including the requirement of minority protection, the EU has aspired to serve as an anchor of stability for its unstable neighbours to the East. However, until recently the topic of minority protection has been somewhat neglected in the EU's internal affairs. For example, the EU has long been silent on how to deal with discrimination against minorities in EU countries, a phenomenon which nevertheless has become an important challenge because of the increasing success of a political rhetoric of cultural exclusion directed against non-EU 'immigrants' who are often made into scapegoats for socio-economic problems

(Stolcke 1999). Despite pressure kept up by the European Parliament since the mid-1980s to adopt protective European legislation in the field of anti-discrimination and anti-racism, it took more than a decade before an important step in this direction was taken with the ratification of the Treaty of Amsterdam (European Parliament 1997).² Moreover, the provenance of the EU's concern over minorities seems to lie not with conflicts on EU territory that have led to serious political violence, as seen in Corsica or Northern Ireland, but fundamentally with ethnic conflict in the Balkans and central Europe. Arguably, the EU's specific stance towards post-communist central and eastern Europe stems from the popular assumption that the 'ethnic' East is historically more inclined to ethnic conflict than the 'civic' West. As various scholars have pointed out, this argument is problematic because it invokes a simplistic stereotype of the 'backward' East (Kürti 1997). Lack of reciprocal commitments from the EU with regard to minority protection has also led, as a number of authors argue, to a problem of inconsistent enlargement policy (Alston and Weiler 2000: 13; Amato and Batt 1998). Consequently, the EU's condition on minority protection is open to variable interpretation and creates uncertainty over which commitments central European states still have to make in order to safeguard their accession procedures. This is particularly true, as I will show, of commitments related to the protection of Roma.

When did the EU become interested in the issue of Roma protection in central Europe? Although there was tangible concern over the possibility of inter-state minority conflicts arising in central Europe in the first half of the 1990s, the situation of the Roma as a minority in need of protection was not yet an issue within the enlargement context at that time. This may, to some extent, relate to the fact that the Roma experienced difficulties in framing themselves as a 'national minority'. In other words, they could not easily replace a stigmatised identity with the political identity of a clearly defined ethnic group on a certain territory with clear and well-publicised claims. Diverse levels of assimilation among Roma, lack of communication between the different Roma groups and territorial dispersion inhibited the efforts of Roma activists to promote an understanding of the Roma as an ethnic group, let alone a national minority.³ Moreover, in contrast to other national minorities in the region, the Roma could not rely on an external state dominated by their ethnic kin. This fact significantly lowered the risk of any Roma-involved ethnic conflict developing into a war between two or more states. Plausibly, this was seen as an argument for not devoting much international political effort to the increasing problem of inadequate Roma protection.

However, in the latter half of the 1990s, the European Commission started paying some attention to this topic. This seems to have been partly induced by the growing media coverage of the appalling treatment of a great number of Roma, and partly the result of work by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Project on Ethnic Relations and the European Roma Rights Centre. It has been argued, most notably by Risse and Sikkink (1999: 18), that transnational non-governmental actors in the human rights sector have played an influential role in the increase of human rights monitoring by international institutions, which in their capacity have the power to pressure norm-violating states. Ostensibly, this has been true for the Roma. EU attention was additionally stimulated by a small group of independent Roma activists who had been able to voice their

concerns in other international fora such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the United Nations (UN). Ian Hancock, a Roma scholar of linguistics and well-known for his publications on the history of Roma persecution, did this in the capacity of the United Nations representative of the International Roma Union (IRU). This organisation has since the beginning of the 1970s attempted to create a cohesive political Roma identity. Since its organising of the fifth World Roma Congress in July 2000 in Prague the IRU has attempted to garner new credibility as the main representative body of the Roma as a 'transborder nation'. Attention for the Roma on a European level was also stimulated by the work of Roma activists such as Rudko Kawczynski (linked with the internationally active Roma National Congress) and Nicolae Gheorghe. Gheorghe had been able to pressure the OSCE to include a commitment to Roma issues in its 1992 Helsinki Concluding Document and in 1999 he became the OSCE Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues within the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR).

Gheorghe was also one of the key participants in a European Commission-supported round table in 1996 on the situation of the Roma in Europe, which brought together a selection of representatives of Roma interest organisations. This resulted in a document entitled *'The Roma – A Truly European People'* (Roma Round Table 1996), which was a plea to the European Commission to raise awareness about the problems of the Roma in the candidate member states. The document emphasised the responsibilities of European institutions in this field, arising from the conception of the Roma as a transnational 'European people'. Although in essence it represented nothing more than a guiding declaration, the document had a certain legitimacy: the round table had been hosted by the European Parliament, and representatives of the OSCE and the Council of Europe had participated in drafting the declaration. As a result, since 1996 the European Commission has referred more systematically to the plight of the Roma in the light of the Copenhagen political criteria (Project on Ethnic Relations 1999). This led to a significant criticism of the central European governments in the European Commission's 'Agenda 2000', which pointed out that the treatment of minorities was in general satisfactory, 'except for the situation of the Roma minority in a number of applicants, which gives cause for concern' (European Commission 1997). In this way the European Commission made clear that the situation of the Roma was to play a certain role in deciding whether a candidate member would be ready to join the EU. At the Luxembourg European Council in December 1997 Slovakia was for a number of reasons temporarily excluded from the first group of countries to start detailed accession negotiations. Although reference was made in the Agenda 2000 to Slovakia's official treatment of Hungarian and Roma minorities, the protection of Roma did not emerge from the report as the number one reason for putting the country on the waiting list. Slovakia was judged to have failed to meet the political conditions on the basis of the Commission's description of Slovakia's shortcomings in the functioning of democracy in general and specifically on the country's lack of stable institutions needed to secure democracy. Nevertheless in the year following the Council's decision, when a significant number of Slovak Roma began seeking asylum in EU member states, protection of Roma suddenly became a prominent topic of the relationship between Slovakia and the EU. Even after the instalment of a new government in Bratislava at the end of 1998, various EU officials considered it to be the most important political problem

area.⁴ In the Commission's 1999 Accession Partnership on Slovakia the improvement of the situation of the Roma was identified as the single short-term priority under the political criteria (European Commission 2000: 4).

Popular impressions of the size of this Roma migration to the West often appear to be exaggerated, but the phenomenon nevertheless posed a new challenge to many Western European governments, which had to address an intense rise in anti-Roma sentiment (Matras 2000: 41). As a result, the Roma suddenly received increased, but ambivalent attention from Western governments and international institutions. In the context of EU enlargement, Roma migration was debated in connection with the issue of border crossing and, not surprisingly, elicited mixed reactions from European institutions and member states. While the European Council in Tampere in October 1999 stressed its objective to promote a 'full and inclusive application of the Geneva Convention', individual member states attempted to reduce what they considered to be 'pull factors' without paying much attention to the 'push factors'. Roma migration was primarily understood as a threat. For example, at a conference co-organised by the European Commission in 1999 a representative of the Commission stated that it is 'important to allay fears of large-scale migrations that exist in the EU countries by taking concrete steps to improve the situation of the Roma, so that there would be no impetus for such migrations' (Project on Ethnic Relations 1999: 1).

Intrinsic problems of EU pressure on Slovakia

So far the discussion has served to illustrate the development of the EU's concern for the situation of the Roma in central Europe. The question is now: how have Roma activists in the Slovak Republic responded to the EU's usage of conditionality?

In general, accounts of Roma mobilisation display a striking ambivalence with regard to the EU's pressure on Slovakia. On the one hand, Roma activists have suggested that the international political context of EU enlargement has deeply impacted upon their position. On the other hand, in almost all cases they emphasised the difficulty of translating pressure exerted by the EU into a tool for Roma mobilisation.

In my interviews with Roma activists the importance of 'European influence' on developments in the domestic arena was almost always mentioned spontaneously. Moreover, emphasis was placed on the growing attention from the European Commission and individual EU countries as a support for Roma claims for better political representation, redistribution policies and a better practice of minority protection. Roma considered such a support necessary because their attempts at mobilising politically have been faced with a number of internal and external obstacles. For example, unlike the Hungarian minority representatives, Slovak Roma elites have grappled with the reluctance of many to identify themselves as Roma in the public sphere and engage in protest. The results of the 1991 census – the first following the Roma's official acknowledgement as a national minority in 1991 – illustrate this problem quite well. The official census figure for the Roma population was 80,627, or 1.52 per cent. But Roma organisations themselves have claimed that Roma account for around 7 or 8 per cent (up to 500,000) of the Slovak citizens (Druker 1997: 22–3; Kenrick 1998: 187; Liégeois 1994: 34), and even the Slovak government has now admitted that

the actual proportion of people who identify themselves as Roma in daily life must be much higher (Government of the Slovak Republic 1999a).⁵ Apparently fearing all kinds of consequences, many Roma are reluctant to participate in official data gathering. In similar vein, many refrain from entering a public protest movement or an ethnic political party. To a great extent the problems of public identification and mobilisation seem to be related to the public 'image' of Roma identity. Opinion research has suggested that the Roma, more than the Hungarians, are faced with powerful negative stereotypical thinking about them in society. From a host of opinion surveys, most notably those carried out by the think-tank Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), the Institute of Public Opinion Research of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (ÚVVM) and the FOCUS polling agency, it emerges that intolerance against Roma is higher than against all other groups (Henderson 1999: 159). Unsurprisingly, politicians in power are not often interested in listening to voices of Roma activists. In theory, external pressure deriving from the EU's conditionality could provide Roma activists with a powerful argument to draw the attention of politicians and persuade Roma citizens to participate in public protest and political activism. In reality, it seems, it has failed to do so.

When looking for possible answers to the question of why this is the case, a first perspective is one which examines the quality and the content of the EU pressure itself and how it has been perceived by Roma activists. One of the problems that some Roma have identified is the fact that signals about Roma protection coming from the EU, and primarily from the European Commission, do not contain a clear idea of what must be done to remedy the situation. As one Roma activist in Košice formulated it:

The EU's criticism is not really helpful because it's not clear what we should ask from the government when we refer to it. I even don't know to what extent this is a strong criterion ... Because there is little communication about this from the European institutions.

The descriptions of the situation in the Commission's yearly 'regular reports', have been brief and general and do not indicate to what extent the situation must be made better in order to result in a positive evaluation. Neither is there a concrete requirement on the introduction of national legislation prohibiting discrimination in crucial areas such as employment, education or housing. Consequently, there has been a broad margin of interpretation of how to fulfil the minority criterion. Being itself only grudgingly involved in developing an internal human rights policy, the EU, it seems, has sent implicit messages to the candidate countries not to take this aspect of the Copenhagen criteria too seriously. Slovakia has easily responded to criticism, for example by referring to the international documents which it has signed. Slovakia has ratified the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), a text which is widely considered to be the most far-reaching legal instrument for the protection of persons belonging to national minorities. In contrast, at the beginning of 2001 only nine EU countries had ratified it and two (France and Belgium) had neither signed nor ratified it yet.

For the EU this points to the essential question of whether it should aspire to a common core of shared standards in the field of human rights, and if so, whether this would not harm the principle of subsidiarity which permits member states to decide on such matters for themselves. Alston and Weiler (2000: 26) have argued that a minimum core of shared standards is a necessity

to enhance the EU's credibility as a human rights proponent, and that the EU at least could play a role in encouraging member states to adhere to such instruments as the FCNM.

For the Slovak Roma there is also another important problem: because of their vague and general character Commission assessments leave space for – or at least do not refute – stigmatising views about the Roma. The Commission's reports all mention the problem of discrimination in several ways, but they are silent about the persistence of a certain rhetoric about Roma in Slovak society and politics that precede acts of discrimination. In this discourse the whole range of problems with which Roma are confronted are lumped together and explained by using a reified idea of 'Roma mentality' or 'Roma culture'. This view *de facto* excludes an analysis of complex causes in a political context and easily leads to scapegoating the Roma. For example, the discussion on the miserable housing conditions of Roma communities is often informed by the idea that Roma supposedly never had respect for housing (European Roma Rights Centre 1997: 60–2). As will be focused on later in this article, a similar mechanism is often at work when Roma migration is discussed. Popular beliefs about nomadism as an allegedly historical and innate cultural trait of the Roma produce the suggestion that the phenomenon of current Roma migration is inexplicable in terms of political context, but only in terms of them seeking economic advantages 'as they have always done'. Consider, for example, this statement made by Slovakia's Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development, Pál Csáky, in November 2000:

... we are not happy with the abuse of [the] right [to asylum] by certain members of our population groundlessly seeking asylum in order to obtain economic advantages ... The problem of Romany migration, a *phenomenon lasting for several centuries*, cannot be unilaterally resolved; its successful resolution is only possible by consistent international co-ordination.

Likewise, one can easily find authors who state that the unfavourable position of the Roma in education is somewhat deserved because of the alleged fact that 'Roma are not a literary culture, and nor are they proponents of the schooling that goes with it' (Braham and Braham 2000: 101).

By not carrying out research into the contextual causes of migration and segregated education,⁶ these statements support a popular rhetoric that assumes a natural hostility between 'Roma culture' and 'European culture'. Their line of thinking matches an argument often alluded to by Slovak politicians that the problems Roma are faced with are related to cultural difference and thus to the mere *presence* of the Roma themselves, and are not so much the responsibility or the problem of the 'Slovak community'. For example, in his speech Csáky called the 'Roma problem' a 'complicated problem [which] presents a quest for a comprehensive model of coexistence of two substantially different cultures, rather than a classic minority issue.' In other statements by Slovak politicians the problems facing the Roma are phrased as the problems *caused* by the Roma.

The successful resonance of the latter argument in Slovak debates about EU membership creates a severe dilemma for Roma activists. They have become somewhat reluctant to stress the EU criterion, because they fear that society will hold them responsible for blocking EU accession. Thus, instead of inadequate minority protection being seen as an obstacle for EU membership, the Roma themselves would be perceived as the obstacle. International pressure on central Europe exerted by individual EU states responding to the Roma refugee wave

has contributed to this dilemma. In other words, the question which has thrust itself upon Roma representatives is the following: is it possible to protest a situation when the situation is framed as being your own responsibility?

This is an essential point, which can be approached theoretically from the angle of social movement studies. It has been argued by an increasing number of students of social movements that importance should be attached to three aspects of collective action: political opportunities, mobilising structures, and shared and socially constructed ideas and sentiments. The last aspect means that for a social movement to occur it is important that people have a certain common perception of a social problem and the hope they can redress that problem by acting collectively (McAdam *et al.* 1996: 5). 'Framing processes' have been defined as conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action (McAdam *et al.* 1996: 6). To date, the dominant understandings of the Roma are that they form a problem in and of themselves. Arguably, it is precisely this which hampers Roma mobilisation. Roma activists, who mostly do not have adequate financial resources, find it extremely difficult to promote alternative understandings of their identity, their culture and their situation.

The 'Roma problem' and Roma-related policy in Slovakia

Theories of political opportunity structure assert that political protest activity is not an uncalculated by-product of social circumstances. Ethnic collective action, like other forms of movement activity, is encouraged or discouraged by the formal or informal political and institutional environment. In order to study the Slovak Roma mobilisation in the context of the EU enlargement, it is therefore important to examine how the domestic political context in Slovakia has developed during recent years and has responded to both claims coming from the Roma and pressure from outside. In other words, did developments in political and institutional contexts lead to an expansion of political opportunities for the Roma?

Since the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Slovak government has issued three conceptual plans relating to the position of the Roma. The first was the 1996 'Activities and Measures in Order to Solve the Problems of Citizens in Need of Special Care' (Vláda Slovenskej Republiky 1996). This document described a number of problem areas (education, employment, housing and health) and measures that had to be followed for their solution. However, it failed to mention any measures for fighting ethnic discrimination. Moreover, the text treated the phrase 'citizens in need of special care' and the name 'Roma' as synonymous concepts. In this way an explicit link was made between Roma ethnic or cultural identity and social inferiority by attributing the roots of the 'Roma problem' to their 'socially retarding environments' (paragraph E) or their 'negative social behaviour' (paragraph F). This language was heavily scrutinised from an international human rights perspective, especially in NGO reports (e.g. European Roma Rights Centre 1997).

The resolution stimulated a contemptuous view of the Roma, but was for the rest little effective. The position of Government Commissioner for Citizens in Need of Special Care was created, but there were few signs of implementation (Vašečka 1999). Branislav Baláž, who filled this position, tabled a new document in November 1997 which led to the adoption of a new government resolution

(Vláda Slovenskej Republiky 1997). Albeit more detailed in its analysis and including more information on how to finance plans, the new resolution and the accompanying policy paper did not reframe the first plan's views of the Roma themselves as the chief cause of the problems described. Moreover, problems such as the dramatic lack of Roma participation in Roma-related policy design and policy implementation were simply ignored.

These two government initiatives did not bring an important shift in the political and institutional context of Roma mobilisation. Roma representatives remained rather confused about which institutions to align themselves with, which claims to stress and what criticisms to cite in their protest activities. The 1994–98 government, consisting of the populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) and the radical leftist Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS), had a strong nationalist imprint and was under a great deal of influence from its premier Vladimír Mečiar (HZDS). Mečiar's authoritarian style, his attempts to concentrate political power and aggressively promote Slovak nationhood were all heavily criticised both domestically and internationally, most clearly by NGOs and European institutions (Bútorá *et al.* 1999). However, realising the potential size of the Roma electorate, the HZDS – and in particular its leader – more than once declared themselves to be willing to 'fight for the Roma'. This, in combination with the HZDS's influential rhetoric on a need for a strong social policy, attracted the attention of many Roma. In the run-up to the 1994 elections, for example, Mečiar publicly stated that financial loans would be made available to Roma politicians on the condition that they would form a united party; Mečiar even offered financial and material support for the Roma's electoral campaigns. These propositions aroused mixed reactions. Although some Roma were very pleased to see support coming from a mainstream political force, a number of them perceived Mečiar's initiatives and statements merely as cynical political tactics. As Mečiar had made statements before which were evidently anti-Roma, for some Roma it was obvious that his supposedly Roma-friendly discourse was driven not by a concern for the minority itself but by the will to obstruct the political advances of the Hungarian minority.⁷ Moreover, by promoting Roma party formation, the HZDS could prevent other non-ethnically based parties from drawing in Roma votes. In this sense HZDS support for an ethnic political Roma movement could be seen as a way to defuse a developing political landscape and to secure the party's own dominant position. Under these circumstances, a gap was growing between those Roma activists who wanted to support Mečiar for tactical reasons and those activists who supported the international shaming campaign almost exclusively directed against Mečiar.

The domestic political context changed radically after the 1998 parliamentary elections when former opposition parties established a new government – a 'grand coalition' dominated by the newly created Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) of Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, and which also included the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK). The reactions of the international community also changed dramatically, with governments in the West now openly supportive of reconsidering Slovakia for EU membership. The EU's criticism concerning minority treatment in Slovakia became much less articulate while the Slovak government regarded the Copenhagen political criteria as fulfilled. For those Roma activists who had referred to EU monitoring to stimulate policy change, it became clearly more difficult to criticise the initiatives of the new government.

One Roma activist from a Roma youth association stated that soon after the instalment of the Dzurinda government there was 'a dead point' for him because the government was now doing 'just enough to get approval from the EU'. Another activist connected to a Roma political party said that before 1998 he had frequently contacted the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities to ask them to criticise the government, but he added that 'at that time Mečiar was in power and that made things easier. Everyone was against the government.'

Among Roma activists there were, however, also high hopes that this new government would take policy initiatives which would result in better Roma protection and representation. The new government introduced a number of initiatives. The most important ones were the creation of the position of a Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development, a position filled by the Hungarian Pál Csáky (SMK); the establishment of an Advisory Body for the Slovak Government on National Minorities and Ethnic Groups, which includes representatives from the minorities; and the appointment of a Government Commissioner for the Solution of the Problems of the Roma Minority (while abolishing the Government Commissioner for Citizens in Need of Special Care). Selected for the position of the new Government Commissioner was former Slovak Helsinki Committee chairman and former MP Vincent Danihel, himself a Roma – this latter aspect being vigorously emphasised by the government. Danihel's office, responsible for bringing Roma concerns to the governmental level, completed a policy paper in June 1999 entitled 'Strategy of the Government for the Solution of the Problems of the Roma', which was later adopted by the government (Vláda Slovenskej Republiky 1999).

This resolution was underpinned by the idea that Roma organisations should be encouraged to participate in the implementation of plans that address Roma issues. Most instrumental in this process was the Government Commissioner. His office was now to draft concrete projects, propose measures and report to the Government, and became, to a large extent, responsible for the distribution of available funds. Roma activists were stimulated to found socio-political organisations and submit project proposals. However, two important problems remained. First, although the resolution called upon Roma organisations to actively participate in policy formation and implementation, no clear structure was elaborated to achieve this. Government Commissioner Danihel, who was given the task to facilitate Roma participation, was not an elected representative. Moreover, very soon after his appointment he lost credibility among many Roma activists. His image as a political opportunist primarily stemmed from his support for the official government stance that Roma migration to the West was only economically driven, and not – as Roma activists and international human rights organisations emphasised – the result of mounting discrimination. This led to a great deal of distrust, with many Roma believing that both Danihel's position and the whole strategy which he represented was merely declaratory – meant to enhance Slovakia's standing in the international community and not to empower the Roma minority with a substantive voice in policy-making.⁸ An increasing number of Roma activists seemed to be convinced that policy change was designed specifically and narrowly to respond to external pressures.

Second, one could also question the creation of a specific 'ethnic' institution to guarantee a certain Roma influence in the decision-making process. The government argued that through a process of consultation there was now sufficient

participation of Roma in the drafting and implementation processes of Roma-related policies. But this institutional mechanism did not at all facilitate Roma political involvement in the central positions of mainstream politics. Even in the official explanatory text accompanying the resolution there were no clear ideas of how to stimulate the presence of Roma in central political institutions or in mainstream political parties.⁹ Moreover, the government's policy did not pay attention to the cultural implications of the decision-making process. The institutionalisation of a cleavage between Roma and non-Roma politics possibly leads to a very limited and static interpretation of Roma interests. This is problematic because it ignores the diversity and flexibility of Roma interests and produces an essentialist understanding of Roma identity. Moreover, government documents allude to a very negative essentialist notion of Roma identity. This is, for example, illustrated by the explanatory report itself when it defines the 'Roma problem' *inter alia* as the 'problems caused by the specific way of life of a part of the Roma national minority' (Government of the Slovak Republic 1999b: 1).

The development of Roma political assertiveness in Slovakia

How have the Roma themselves in their given domestic political context attempted to produce a minority voice in the Slovak political process? After the 'Velvet Revolution' a number of Slovak Roma activists successfully mobilised support from within the main political movements. In 1990 a group of Roma established a political party under the name Roma Civic Initiative (ROI) and was able to side with the anti-communist movement organisation Public Against Violence (VPN) in the run-up to the first election. Slovak Roma ran for parliament in a coalition with VPN and were elected to the Federal Assembly (Geza Adam) and to the Slovak Parliament (Anna Koptová). The Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) also included Roma on its list for the 1990 elections which brought Karol Seman and Vincent Danihel into the Federal Assembly.

Although the Roma explored different forms of political activism in this period, it soon appeared that only under the umbrella of a main political party were they able to achieve positions they could actually win. But instead of increasing their engagement in non-ethnically based parties, the small Roma political elite was forced to form a separate Roma representation in the political spectrum. As Evans and Whitefield (1998) have shown on the basis of a 1994 survey, voters' choice of party in Slovakia was predominantly determined by the issue of ethnic rights (related primarily to the Hungarian minority), more so than in the Czech Republic. Ethnic division became an important political cleavage, and subsequently the mainstream political parties in Slovakia, both Slovak and Hungarian ones, were not inclined to take in Roma representatives, nor did they show much interest in promoting Roma interests. It is likely that they feared a pro-Roma stance would inhibit their success with their non-Roma constituency. Further, the emergence of ethnically based Roma political activity was characterised by an uncertain notion of Roma political identity. This led to an abundance of new parties with comparable agendas but different political identification. For example, ROI supported the idea of the Roma as a national minority and advocated the use of the word 'Roma' (*Rómovia*) instead of the negatively connoted 'Gypsies' (*Cigáni*). But other parties did not want to make clear statements on this issue, fearing to lose the support of certain parts of their

constituencies. In one extreme case a Roma ethnic party, the Party for the Integration of Roma (SIR), unambiguously stated in its political programme that it wanted to assist in the abolition of Roma identity and the assimilation of the Roma into Slovak society (Mann 1992: 264).

ROI stood separately in the 1992 elections, but only managed to get 0.6 per cent of the vote, which was far below the 5 per cent threshold for gaining parliamentary representation. After the break-up of Czechoslovakia, Roma political forces splintered into a large number of small parties and quasi-parties, none of which could co-operate or integrate with a non-Roma party and hence became even more marginal. ROI tried to repair good relations with the parties in power, in particular with the HZDS. But even with the support of the latter, it did not manage to attract more than 0.67 per cent of the vote in the 1994 parliamentary elections. During the following years a number of new Roma parties would again emerge. Among those were offshoots of ROI, consisting of groups of former members who had disagreed with the way the party was making itself dependent on the Mečiar government instead of leading a clear opposition line, or were dissatisfied with the undemocratic way in which they believed the party was run.

In 1996 a new Roma political party was established, called the Roma Intelligentsia for Co-existence (RIS), in direct response to the number of instances of anti-Roma violence peaking in 1995–96. The party appealed to minority rights discourse and aimed to bring a positive image of the Roma (as 'intelligentsia') to the fore. More than ROI, RIS emphasised in its statements the responsibility of the government for the increase in anti-Roma violence and the deterioration of the situation of the Roma in general. RIS critically reviewed the government's Roma policies, specifically the 1997 document prepared by Branislav Baláž, and RIS more than once demanded Baláž's resignation. Because of its critical stance towards the Mečiar government, the party was also indirectly opposed to ROI, which was prone to defend government policy.

Before the elections of 1998 RIS concluded a co-operation agreement with the SDK, which placed the party even more at odds with ROI which in turn made an agreement with the HZDS. Both co-operation agreements proved problematic in the end. Jan Kompuš (ROI) and József Ravasz of the Party for the Protection of the Rights of the Roma (SOPR) – a party close to ROI but which targets Hungarian-speaking Roma – had been accepted on the HZDS candidate list. ROI was particularly contented by the fact that the HZDS financially supported the election campaigns of the two Roma candidates and believed that this was the only way to get Roma representatives into the parliament – regardless of the HZDS reputation concerning minorities. However, Kompuš died weeks before the elections and Ravasz did not get elected. RIS, in contrast, could not make the vague collaboration agreement it had with SDK more concrete after the elections. Partly as a result of the fact that RIS affiliates were not selected for functions in the government administration, conflicts among different branches of the party arose, which eventually led to a schism and a new party name (Slovak Roma Initiative).

To be sure, the failure of both ROI and RIS in the 1998 national elections does not take away the fact that there were some slight indications of a growing Roma electorate in some municipalities. As a result of 1998 local elections six mayors and 86 council members were elected from Roma political parties (Government of the Slovak Republic 1999a). However, the course of the 1998

parliamentary elections and their aftermath clearly illustrates the difficult relationship between the Roma activists and the mainstream political elite in the domestic arena. As a consequence of their extreme lack of financial resources, the Roma saw themselves very dependent on the mainstream political elite. The Roma have been actively looking for such support, but at the same time there has been an obvious lack of trust in these major political forces. Eager for Roma votes, certain main parties may have admitted Roma activists to their electoral lists or have concluded pre-election agreements, but no non-Roma political party has gone so far as to visibly support the ideas of Roma political activists. Moreover, mainstream political parties still find anti-Roma sentiment easy to capitalise on. Consequently, a divide between Roma activism and mainstream political forces, to which the state has significantly contributed through its failure to provide effective participation initiatives, has further stigmatised Roma identity.

Framings of the 'Roma exodus'

Since 1997 the Roma migration from Slovakia has increasingly fuelled an intense political discussion on immigration policies and effective minority protection both in Slovakia and in the EU. The negative effects of the dominant stereotypical understanding of the 'Roma problem' are illustrated quite well with respect to the controversies in political debates on this phenomenon. In general, discussions were mainly concerned with the cause of this apparently sudden migration. Roma activists, supported in this by human rights organisations, emphasised that growing numbers of Roma asylum-seekers were fundamentally the result of a general discriminatory climate in Slovakia, which had over the years deeply affected the economic position of many Roma. The Slovak Roma tried to translate international scrutiny into a complaint against their government. The idea of building a protest movement this way seemed a logical strategy, since Slovakia's treatment of the Roma more than ever evoked comment and reporting in domestic and international mass media. Research conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) and the Slovak Helsinki Committee shows that news on Roma asylum-seekers has directly influenced Slovak media to report about various aspects of the position of Roma communities in the country. However, some Slovak daily newspapers frequently offered their readers prejudiced headlines, such as 'asylum adventure', 'the tricks of the Roma during the organised actions' or 'conspiracy of the Roma' (International Organisation for Migration 2000: 139).

The Roma's framing of the migration wave was also confronted with a firm counterframing by agencies in power. The Slovak government asserted that the migration was not the result of a political problem in Slovakia, but on the contrary should be seen as a purely 'economic' migration, involving people abusing asylum procedures and welfare systems in EU member states. For example, in July 1999 Human Rights Minister Csáky appealed to the media to stop using the word 'exodus' – as the refugee wave had been frequently labelled in the press – on the grounds that this implied a violent act of forced eviction. Instead, Csáky described the phenomenon as 'ethnobusiness' (SITA News Agency, 8 July 1999). In this way migration was portrayed as the logical continuation of what was regarded as 'typical' Roma behaviour – abuse of a state's welfare resources. Tellingly, MP Róbert Fico – one of the country's most

trusted politicians – in January 2000 tried to find popular support for his newly established political party *Smer* (Direction), by proposing to stop social benefit payments to returned asylum-seekers for a period of 12 months after their return (Czech News Agency, 9 February 2000). Consider also in this respect the statement by Slovakia's President Rudolf Schuster at a meeting of the Presidents of the Visegrád countries in December 1999, which said that the Roma have a 'low concern of developing normal habits' and are hence living 'from one benefit to the next' (Office of the President of Slovakia 1999: 7). In general, it was suggested by different politicians that the Roma migration was to be regarded in a broader picture – a picture in which Slovakia's responsibility is downplayed and a greater responsibility is put on the Roma. One can also read a similar suggestion from frequent statements of the Slovak government that, referring to the argument made by many Roma activists themselves that the Roma are a 'European nation', the international and European level should carry responsibility for 'solving the Roma problem'. During the summer of 1999 even more criticism directed against the Roma was elicited by public speculations about the involvement of opposition party HZDS in the financial organisation of Roma migration to Sweden, at that point president of the EU, for purposes of discrediting the current government.

Roma protest was further hampered by the fact that only a very limited number of Roma were indeed granted asylum. Moreover, in many cases EU governments used ad hoc measures to stem the number of Slovak asylum-seekers. For example, in October 1999 Belgium carried out a very controversial collective repatriation clearly aimed at specifically discouraging this group from seeking asylum (Cahn and Vermeersch 2000). Later, Belgium – like the UK, Finland, Ireland, Denmark and Norway – introduced visa requirements for Slovak citizens. This latter measure obviously gave rise to additional pressure on the diplomatic relations between Slovakia and the EU countries. Particularly symbolic for many Slovaks was the consequence that they had to possess a visa for travelling to the European institutions in Brussels, this in spite of Slovakia's recent admission to the first group of candidate states to hold detailed negotiations on EU membership. Not surprisingly, the blame for spoiling Slovakia's relations with Europe was again put on the Roma.

The widespread conception of an essential 'Roma culture' understood as characterised by a number of very negative traits produces a difficult position for those activists who want to contest government policy from a 'Roma' perspective. The Western reaction to the refugee wave seems to have stimulated this negative conception. Hence, it is likely that as long as international attention is not aimed at changing this image, the pressures exerted on Slovakia will not lead to significantly better opportunities for Roma activists and politicians, but, on the contrary, to more negative pressure on the Roma.

Conclusion

As an empirical exploration indicates, Roma political activists in Slovakia have to contend with a number of difficulties when they want to utilise the minority protection requirements of the EU to buttress their political mobilisation. The first reason is that the Union has been hesitant in embracing a clear minority rights policy for itself and therefore has not developed a consistent vision on minority rights in its enlargement policy. Hence, Roma political activists fear

that this criterion will not be taken seriously by their government. The influence of EU enlargement on minority politics in central Europe is seen by EU officials as an opportunity for creating better conditions for Roma. It seems, however, that this opportunity will be limited as long as accession criteria on this topic do not go hand-in-hand with stimulating better anti-discrimination policies within EU member states. Further, the presence of membership conditionality seems to have had little positive effect on the solution of internal problems of Roma mobilisation such as divided leadership, lack of resources, the reluctance of many Roma to stand up publicly in the name of the ethnic group and the absence of support for Roma institutions established by the state. The policy changes introduced by Slovakia in 1999 were regarded by the EU as a form of compliance with international standards, but they have failed to create a relationship of trust between Roma actors and agencies in power. As a result of the political elite's reluctance to include Roma as realistic political allies or to initiate serious negotiations with Roma political organisations, Roma politics in Slovakia is still more or less doomed to develop in the margins of mainstream politics. However, the most important obstacle hindering Roma political development is the way the 'Roma problem' is framed and reproduced in society. Greater sensitivity for this aspect in the EU's assessments could probably be important for attempts at constructing a less prejudiced view on the Roma. To date, the overall presence of a stigmatising discourse makes it very difficult for Roma activists to protest their situation. The emphasis on the 'Roma problem', a construction in which very different problems are lumped together and associated with 'Roma culture' and 'Roma mentality', has made politicians in power hesitant to support any Roma claims for fear of losing votes from the ethnic majorities. Public opinion seems to perceive problems that are directly related to the marginal position of the Roma in society – for example, the increasing number of Roma asylum-seekers in EU member states – as problems *caused* by the Roma themselves, while alternative understandings of the problems facing the Roma so far do not resonate either in the domestic or in the international political arena.

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Notes

- 1 Although the name 'Roma' has widely replaced such negatively connoted designations as 'Gypsy', 'Tsigane' or 'Zigeuner', its usage remains, to some extent, contested. This article conceptualises the name 'Roma' as an ethnic label in politics. Therefore, the 'Roma' will be seen as those who publicly consider themselves 'Roma' or are considered as such by a wide population. The relatively successful introduction of the name 'Roma' can be seen as one of the important achievements of Roma movement action since the 1970s.
- 2 In the Treaty of Amsterdam, the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of 'racial or ethnic

origin' was added as Article 13. This may be regarded as an attempt to turn the minority protection requirement into an enforceable condition within the Union. Also the Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin and the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 determining the general framework for equal treatment at work demonstrate the fact that the EU has taken steps in this direction.

- 3 Hence the continuing debates on the meaning of Roma identity among both activists and scholars. The Roma have only weak symbols of national or ethnic unity and have often been regarded as a social group (Kapralski 1997). Nevertheless, Roma activists have been involved in promoting an overarching Roma ethnic identity in their search for a stronger collective position in society and politics. Authors like Hancock (1997) and Fraser (1995) have stressed the unifying force of Roma language and the connection between Roma identity and the Roma's alleged Indian origin. Others, however, have suggested that it is more realistic to study Roma identity as a construction mainly influenced by the way itinerant and marginal groups have been treated by dominant populations, popular science and authorities (Lucassen *et al.* 1998). Communist approaches to Roma generally discarded the existence of a separate Roma ethnic identity and introduced policies aimed at assimilation. At the same time, however, these policies produced new perceptions of the Roma as a 'socially disadvantaged stratum' or a 'socio-culturally maladjusted group'.
- 4 European Commissioner Günter Verheugen emphasised this during his visit to Slovakia in February 2001. He called 'respect of minorities, and in particular of the Roma population' one of the three important issues that need further monitoring under the Copenhagen political criteria. The other two were the independence of the judiciary and the fight against crime and corruption (Verheugen 2001).
- 5 Some authors believe that low official numbers are related to the fact that Slovak Roma in general possess a 'low level of ethnic awareness' (Plichtová 1993: 17). A more plausible argument is made by Guy (1998: 59) who states that many Roma may have been reluctant to label themselves as Roma in official statistics for fear of bureaucratic repression in the future. Demographic data on Roma are a sensitive issue in Slovakia. Roma activists have eagerly hoped for a higher number of Roma registrations in the 2001 census. Speculations about high Roma numbers are also used in arguments that are less Roma-friendly. For example in June 2000 MP Róbert Fico (formerly deputy of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) and now leader of a new popular political party called Smer) said during a press conference that in 2010 there will be 1,200,000 Roma in Slovakia and added that the Roma thus pose a threat to the Slovak social benefit system.
- 6 A high percentage of Roma children in Slovakia are placed into so-called remedial special schools for mentally 'handicapped' children, usually on grounds of their poor command of the Slovak language or their alleged lack of 'social skills' (International Organisation for Migration 2000: 63–4). Although this practice is not based on a deliberate policy of ethnic segregation, it *de facto* creates a barrier between Roma and non-Roma from childhood and significantly diminishes opportunities for Roma children. One of the government's initiatives to alter this practice, the so-called preparatory 'zero classes' for Roma within regular schools, is also problematic because it equally puts Roma children apart from non-Roma.
- 7 For example, on 12 July 1994 Mečiar said in an interview with the Austrian daily *Die Presse* that his party opposed a recently adopted law allowing the use of bilingual road signs because 'it is concerned about the welfare of ethnic minorities'. According to Mečiar, the law was restrictive because it did not pay attention to the language of the Roma (RFE/RL Newline, 13 July 1994). This seemingly pro-Roma statement was at the same time also a clear anti-Hungarian one, and even an anti-minority statement. It used the case of the Roma to block pro-minority legislation of which many Roma, mainly those who are Hungarian-speaking, were supportive.
- 8 In its press conference on 9 May 2001 the government announced the removal of Vincent Danihel from his cabinet position. The most important reasons given were his lack of support among the Roma and his inability to correspond with international organisations.
- 9 When the issue of lack of presence of Roma in politics is mentioned in the explanatory text, the Roma themselves are reproached: 'So far [the Roma] have not achieved such a level of social structures that would make them to support, in higher numbers, a certain Romany political party defending their interests. The fragmentation of Romany political parties has prevented them from entering the political scene as a relevant entity. The solution for safeguarding the interests of associations of the Romany national minority is the establishment of non-governmental, Romany and non-Romany civil associations and generally beneficial societies. The Romany minority

themselves must also realize their co-responsibility for their destiny' (Government of the Slovak Republic 1999b: 1).

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