

OSCE-ODIHR

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Written Statement by the European Roma Rights Centre

The under-representation of Roma in political life, both as voters and candidates, has been the result of the same unchanging root causes relating to antigypsyism for many years. Notwithstanding the barriers to political participation related to marginalisation of Romani communities such as illiteracy, lack of education, administrative barriers, lack of documentation; there are additionally direct and indirect pressures from political actors which hinder Romani participation in OSCE participating states.

- In **Hungary** there is lack of transparency and little oversight from central government or the National Elections Office in the administration of the public works programme, of which many Roma are employed in, in relation to electoral corruption.
- A [study](#) by Yale University found that Hungarian politicians use public work to influence elections. According to the study, public service leads to two types of clientelism: the promise of public service can be used to buy votes and the threat of being fired can intimidate Roma into political support. According to [Romani public workers](#) in the north-east of Hungary mayors promise job opportunities only to those who vote for the ruling party and deny them if they do not.
- Additionally, Hungary's decision to lower the school leaving age from 18 to 16 has left many Romani young people without qualifications to access the labour market, so are left only with a public work programme that promises neither integration nor a future, and allows them and their community to be manipulated by local political forces.
- Whilst Hungary does facilitate Romani representation at many levels through specific mechanisms such as the Minority Self Government and the Roma Coordination Council. This has not translated into actual decision making power through meaningful political participation. Romani women in particular have, according to the [Roma Education Fund](#), had no noticeable increase in political representation in the past 10 years.
- **The ERRC recommends that Hungary:**
 - Increase oversight from the National Election Office and the National Selection Committee on the administration of public works programmes in relation to vote buying and voter coercion of Roma. **The ERRC recommends that the OSCE** investigates the allegations of clientelism involving Romani voters and the public works programme.
 - Investigate how local level voter manipulation of vulnerable Romani communities impacts on the voter registration process for the national minority lists.
 - Reverse the policy which lowered the school leaving age from 18 to 16, not only reducing opportunities for young people, but making Roma more reliant on public works and at the mercy of vote buying and voter coercion. The early leaving age also makes the path to political candidacy more difficult for Roma in particular.
 - Provide stipends to keep disadvantaged children in school until the age of 18 and to meet EU targets on education, employment and training to ensure young Roma can access the labour market and fully participate in public life as active citizens.

- In **Bulgaria** the climate of violence perpetrated by race mobs which are often incited by the state - severely hinders Roma political participation. Aside from the direct intimidation and the effect this has on alienating Roma from politics - forced evictions, pogroms, and relocation of Roma result in problems with Roma registering to vote in their place of residence.
- The issue of vote-buying and controlled voting, which disproportionately affects Roma, additionally enforces further intolerance from society when Roma are seen as the source of the problem rather than the victims. Despite the 2014 six month residency law which sought to restrict controlled voting, the practice has gone on unabated for many years and was raised as an issue surrounding the March 2017 parliamentary elections.
- The ERRC has observed that the anti-Roma climate in Bulgaria has notably worsened since these elections. Hate speech from major politicians alienates Romani voters as well endangering their well-being. It cannot be overstated how damaging to meaningful political participation it is when elements of the political class declare open season on Roma as political scapegoats and are not properly held to account for their actions.
- The appointment of Valeri Simeonov to lead the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues illustrates this, as well as the Council's lack of legitimacy. The man who had mused about creating modern concentration camps and refers to Roma as "feral, human-like creatures" was acquitted of hate speech in January this year by the supreme court. In addition, according to the [Civil Monitoring Report of the National Roma Integration Strategies](#), the structure of the Council has resulted in the body virtually not functioning at all, with almost no dialogue taking place between it and Roma NGOs since 2013. Its secretariat, which is also the National Contact Point, only includes four people none of which are Roma.
- **The ERRC recommends that Bulgaria:**
 - Implement specific measures to allow Romani political candidates to campaign in Romanes, and campaign on a political platform which targets the needs of Romani voters in particular. Both of which are currently legally prohibited.
 - Re-evaluate the six month residency period required for registration to vote. In theory this is meant to reduce controlled voting, but in practice disproportionately affects large numbers of Roma who are mobile or displaced. Many cannot prove six months' settlement in any specific place and often are unable to vote at their place of formal registration.
 - Ensure that those who incite racial hatred against ethnic minorities in their capacity as elected politicians are fully held to account in a court of law, and if necessary removed from their position of influence.