

expressed satisfaction with "the emphasis on equality and participation." See *Roma Rights in Focus*, Newsletter of the Human Rights Project, No 10, special edition, pp.15-16.

² For example, *Programme for the Solution of the Roma Problems in the Republic of Bulgaria*, adopted by the government of the Socialist Party with decision 163 of January 30, 1997, stated that: "The existing social problems and lack of integration of the Roma ethnic group in the years of transition to a market society are related overwhelmingly to the economic situation in the country. [The main goal of the Programme is to achieve stable socio-economic development of Roma."

The fact that Bulgarian authorities classified the Romani issue as a social one was also evident in the titles and mandates of the institutions which dealt with Romani issues. For example, the National Council for Social and Demographic Issues, established in June 1995, was set up to deal with ethnic communities, including Roma, women's organisations, disabled and pensioners. This body was replaced by the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCEDI), established in December 1997. The link between ethnic and demographic issues in the title of this institution, apart from its racist implications, is also indicative of the ideology which interprets minority issues through the paradigm of social issues.

³ The NCEDI is the only governmental structure in Bulgaria which addresses minority issues, including Romani issues. According to its goals, stated in Article 1 of its Rules and Regulations, it has to "facilitate consultation, cooperation and coordination between government bodies and non-governmental organizations with the aim to develop and implement a national policy with regard to ethnic and demographic issues and migration." According to Article 2(2) the National Council is empowered to "coordinate with the state bodies and with the non-governmental organizations concrete measures in execution of accepted international obligations from the Republic of Bulgaria in the sphere of the rights of Bulgarian citizens belonging to minority groups and their integration in society." See *Official Gazette* No. 118 of 10 December 1997.

⁴ See Opinion of the Legislative Council of the Ministry of Justice on the Framework Programme from 19 January 1999, available in the *Human Rights Project* archive.

⁵ In March 2001 the government appointed Ms Svetlana Vassileva, a Romani woman, to the position of Secretary of the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues. She is the first Romani person to be appointed to this body, four years after it had been established, and the first Romani person to hold a senior government position since 1989.

In Search of a New Deal for Roma

ERRC Interview with Nicolae Gheorghe

In September 2001, the editor of *Roma Rights* spoke with Mr Nicolae Gheorghe — founder of the Bucharest-based non-governmental organisation *Romani CRISS* and currently Advisor on Roma and Sinti issues at the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), based in Warsaw — about political participation, Romani politics and civil rights work in Europe.

Roma Rights:

Mr Gheorghe, you've been working for over ten years on Roma Rights. We want to talk with you about "political participation". What has changed since the beginning of the 1990s? Where are we now? Where do you see progress? Where do you see things that need to be worked on? Where should we go from here?

Nicolae Gheorghe:

Well, I think it started with chaos and we are starting to identify now some lines along which we can create order. The chaos at the beginning of the 1990s was productive — it was like a big bang: There was heat, light, energy — for good and bad — and a lot of us drew a lot of creative activist strength from the years immediately after 1989. There was an emergence — an enthusiasm, a flowering — in which Roma went forth into public life, to be acknowledged and to affirm themselves. It was refreshing. It was a time when a lot of people started to work for organisations and parties. Activity took different clear forms in different countries, depending on the political climate. Take Czechoslovakia for instance: ROI — the Romani Civic Initiative —

came as a sort of junior partner to the dissident group Charter 77, which took power. They were on a progressive track; President Havel shook Emil Ščuka's hand in Bratislava and the ROI came in with something like 11 Members of Parliament in the three parliaments — the Czechoslovak Federal Parliament and the Czech and Slovak lower houses. Today, there is no more ROI in the Czech and Slovak parliamentary houses, and between the two countries, there is only Monika Horáková. She is on the list of the Freedom Union party and has no links to that earlier generation of Romani politicians; she came like a meteor into Romani politics.

So if we are talking about Czechoslovakia and post-Czechoslovakia, we see a situation in which now there is a greatly diminished presence of Roma in parliament. The Romani party is almost defunct, there is a growing rejection of Roma in the wider society — as shown by the 1993 citizenship law and the flight of many Roma from the country, so there is a sense of a loss over ten years in Romani politics. International Romani Union President Emil Ščuka has said repeatedly that the causes of this loss are first of all the break-up of Czechoslovakia. He says that the number of Roma in the Czech Republic is now too low for Roma to compete as Roma in the political system. All in all, Romani party politics in the Czech Republic are dead.

Emil Ščuka has also said that one of the reasons for this is the flourishing of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This is the other development throughout the region: the dramatic growth of Romani non-governmental organisations. There are hundreds of NGOs throughout the region — in Bulgaria, in Romania, in Slovakia. This hasn't killed off the political parties, but we can see that, over ten years, Roma explored a variety of forms of political expression and political participation: through non-governmental and traditional channels through which to express ourselves and to try to channel the mobilisation in political life. And now, after ten years, I think we need to start to assess and try to strategise a little about which way to go. Some people in political parties look critically at the role of NGOs. They say, "look, our young and talented and educated people are going into work in NGOs — doing basically civil society work — humani-

tarian, civil rights, etc. They are no longer interested in Romani politics. Who remains in the political parties? The old ones: the traditional ones, the self-appointed presidents and 'vajdas' [editor's note: a "vajda" is a local community leader]." In many ways, they are people who have not succeeded in other areas, and in many ways they are doing rather badly in political life — at least, the political parties are doing rather badly.

So there is a crisis now in Romani politics: The bright ones are drawn into work in NGOs; they are better paid, they are self-appointed, they are less accountable to the people — they are less democratic. And this would be my criticism of the *Open Society Institute*, of the Council of Europe, of the PHARE programme of the European Union — those considered, through their funding preferences, to be responsible for this proliferation of NGOs. It may also be a symptom of a generation gap, but it is something I am concerned about: How can we re-launch Romani politics?

One way that is encouraging to me is via Romani electoral politics, where Roma have started to play a role in individual countries. I am encouraged by the growth of individual Roma participating in mainstream politics. This is the case of Monika Horáková in the Czech Republic and this is the case of Normunds Rudevičs in Latvia. Now there are two Roma in the Bulgarian parliament from various parties, in Romania there is one Romani representative of the mainstream Social Democratic party, and we still have the reserved seat — the one seat in the Romanian parliament reserved for a Romani representative. In Romania, the Romani Party (*Partida Romilor*), which has existed for ten years, decided before the last election that they would not try to get elected on the strength of the Romani constituency alone, and they made an alliance with the Social Democrats two years ago, when they were in opposition. On a local level, this strategy lost to some extent, but on a national level, this strategy paid off: There is now a second Romani MP. He is the head of the Parliamentary Commission for Human Rights, Minority Rights and Churches. They have an advisor to the president, they have a state secretary in the Ministry of Public Information, and they have about 40 people in local government. So actually they made a pretty good political deal.

We will see if this deal will pay off. In any case it is certainly better than before. In Bulgaria, the four or five Romani parties that competed in the election lost, while those Roma who stood on individual party tickets are now in parliament.

I think, we are moving now into a kind of maturation among Romani politicians. For example, Macedonia: In Macedonia, there has always been one strong Romani constituency because of the huge number of Roma in the Šuto Orizari municipality in Skopje. The MP from the district is Romani. The local council and the mayor are Romani. Competition is now between three Romani parties, plus the mainstream parties have Roma on the ground competing. This reflects the development of pragmatic political thinking. There is an electoral success of Roma — still very limited, but success nonetheless. There is even a new growth of successful Romani politicians in Western Europe. For example, there is a new Romani representative — Mr Rudolf Sarközi — on a Vienna district council. Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia will all have elections next year, so it will be interesting to watch what happens further.

If we think about how political ideologies are starting to be articulated in the Romani world, most of them are dominated by ethnic thinking: “We are Roma, we are an ethnic Romani party, we need to go forward as Roma.” There is not that much debate among us about political ideologies: Who is a social democrat, who is liberal, who is a Christian democrat, etc. This is a mistake, in my opinion: Roma are pushed all the time onto an ethnic ticket, rather than into a wider debate about political philosophies and where we stand. We are still at the beginning of fleshing out our ideologies.

Roma Rights:

Can we go back to the recent Bulgarian result? I found it rather depressing: I mean, activists painstakingly put together a Romani coalition of a number of Romani parties, and it won only 0.6 percent of the vote. Is there a way to imagine a Romani platform that is not purely ethno-nationalistic? Are there issues specific to Roma that would stand distinct from mainstream politics, address Romani concerns, attract Romani voters, and yet not be simply the lowest common denominator of ethnicity?

Nicolae Gheorghhe:

The loss in Bulgaria, I think, has a lot more to do with the fabulous success of Tsar Simeon, and the way in which he captivated Romani and non-Romani Bulgarians, and much less to do with anything particular about Romani politics. Roma are part of Bulgarian society. There is a high level of integration in Bulgarian society. For example, social democracy has rather deep roots in Bulgarian society. If you look closely at what goes on in the ground in Bulgaria, you can see that Romani voters in Bulgaria have tended to behave rather coherently as a Romani segment of Bulgarian proletarian voters, rather than endorse ethnic parties that would pull them out of their local context and push them toward ethnic-specific politics. I see more productive and useful work toward mainstreaming Roma in the political system — I would rather see Romani social democrats, Romani liberals, etc.

Another interesting recent development in Bulgaria is the fact that some of the new Romani political formations are much closer to the “tribes”; there is, for example, a party of Kalderash Roma. These people are reacting not only to their marginalisation in society, but also to their marginalisation in Romani parties. What we at the Contact Point have tried to do is to network commonalities and foster coalition between Romani parties, as well as to try to get smaller Romani parties allied — and with good positions — on the lists of the mainstream parties. But again, I am still hoping that young Roma will come from the NGOs and re-enter mainstream politics — and we have seen this in Bulgaria during the 2000 elections with the training programme by the *Open Society Institute* and some of the follow-up activities of that group. I was heartened to see a team of around ten young people whose clear aim is to be politicians — not NGO activists, but mainstream politicians, doing basic parliamentary and governmental politics.

Roma Rights:

More donor money has gone toward NGOs in recent years than towards other areas of Romani life. Some have said that this money may have been detrimental to the growth of Romani grassroots politics. Is that true? Or is there a better way of using these funds to focus Romani power?

Nicolae Gheorghe:

Well, as I said, I speak from the far side of a generation gap. My generation of Romani activists grew up in trade unions, in the Communist parties, and young people probably needed to break that model and get some distance from it. But we are now in a new phase. Governments are adopting policy documents on Roma. We are moving into a period when those policies will have to be implemented. This means the focus is moving much more to a local level and to specialised areas of expertise. We now need Romani officers and experts to fill the ministries and governmental offices — professional Romani administrators. Roma who have been working in NGOs are in a good position to fill these positions. Funding might now focus on encouraging these people to go into public administration. Of course, these people may have to accept lower pay. But it may now be important to break the cycle of “monitoring” and “community work” and send people into government. We need Romani experts — I am one. My NGO training was crucial for my preparation for my job as an international officer in the OSCE.

Of course, NGOs continue to have a key role. They are more policy-oriented now. They will be important for developing new ideas and new areas. Also, it is of course crucial that NGOs monitor the performance of Roma in the administration. Some of us now are in those jobs — not enough, there should be more — but NGOs must monitor Roma and non-Roma in power. We are, if you accept my metaphor from earlier, post-big-bang.

Roma Rights:

You travel a lot and meet with Romani activists in many countries. Do you see clearly emerging issues — specific cross-border issues — around which Roma can mobilise? Are there common issues around the region? Or is the Romani issue still about separate states, separate conditions, separate realities, and in need of redress at a local or national level?

Nicolae Gheorghe:

Most Roma are entrenched locally — local groups, local issues. From time-to-time in the course of the 1990s, we have found ways to

mobilise nationally. For example, in Romania during the serious mob violence episodes in the early 1990s, we managed to build national Romani unity. In spite of initial resistance by Roma to recognise that what goes on in the next village matters, Roma acted in solidarity with those Roma who were attacked around the country. We also managed to react as a cohesive group when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Romania tried to impose the name “tigan” on Roma in the mid-1990s. We reacted with a common voice and made it clearly known that the ministry had no right to name us. That was the last time I think. There have been some street demonstrations since then, but I think they have been mainly shows, and not really organised around issues.

In the late 1990s of course, Roma have organised in pressing through policy programmes. I am thinking mainly of Romania and Bulgaria. Romani activists in those countries shaped a platform and worked to get support from Roma around the country to endorse a Romani platform.

The only truly transnational issue thus far among us has been the refugee question — whether or not to show real solidarity with Roma who have fled their home countries. I am not sure there is genuine widespread solidarity with Romani refugees, but at meetings, you will generally hear statements of sympathy, and it is a basic fact that no Romani leader today can be without a position on refugees and causes of flight. And of course in some countries, the refugee issue has caused deep disagreement among Romani leaders as to what kind of politics to pursue.

Of course one issue that could unite us is Kosovo and the situation of Roma in the former Yugoslavia. I confess I was surprised by the low level of solidarity among Roma with the Roma from Kosovo. Early on there was a lot of emotion; we gathered some money among ourselves for the victims. But two years after the ethnic cleansing, there has been no major Romani-led action. I don't see mass action built around the Kosovo crisis. We are still concerned mainly about unemployment in our own countries, whether EU money is being properly spent, etc. I really was amazed; maybe I am wrong, but I have noticed that it is actually difficult to focus people's attention on the crisis of Roma in

the countries of the former Yugoslavia. So I think we are still very concerned with our own families, our own groups, our own localities, our own countries.

Roma Rights:

You are now Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues at the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. What will your office do over the next few years to increase Romani power?

Nicolae Gheorghie:

We have spent money and energy on organising a series of round-table events aimed at bringing together the major competing international Romani organisations and trying to assist them in reaching a coherent programme to present to their partners at an international level. We have had some success, but it is generally fleeting — sometimes up, sometimes down. It is still basically a zero-sum game between the major Romani organisations. One side wins everything or loses everything. I will continue to work in this area both out of inertia, and also because I think it is important.

In the coming years, I also intend to devote more time to fostering Romani electoral politics with the goal of increasing the number of elected Roma in the OSCE region countries. I would like to see more Roma with knowledge of how the game of politics is played. Elected Roma can have real legitimacy. I would like to devote energy to getting us out of the self-appointed leadership model.

I dream of transitional Romani elections — to implement mechanisms to elect our leadership democratically, to foster accountability and legitimacy. Today we choose undemocratically among the self-appointed. I want to see a more democratic Romani movement. One small step toward this end is happening presently: We have been holding meetings on the initiative of President Tarja Halonen of Finland to create a constituent assembly of Roma at a pan-European level. This body would have links to the Council of Europe and aim to influence decisions taken on Roma at the European level.

I will also continue the work of the OSCE, begun in the early

1990s, to find mechanisms for the international recognition of Roma as a people in diaspora. The issue of Roma is discussed often in the OSCE and is an OSCE priority. We may now begin to think about a Roma peace conference — to make peace between Roma and the wider societies, to make a political deal between Roma and others — a peace conference to settle the issue of Roma in the Balkans and to establish Roma as a legitimate and constituent member of the Balkan peoples. A deal about what? Possibly about the European Roma Rights Charter proposed now for several years by Rüdiko Kawczynski. Perhaps about the “Roma nation” idea promoted by Emil Ščuka. About how to implement human rights principles in reality and how the work of anti-discrimination activists can find its place in the machinery. There are a number of perspectives that can be harmonised, but I would like to sit down at one table with all of the players — governmental and non-governmental — and hash it out. We need to work out a draft of our deal — of our peace treaty.

Roma Rights:

Thank you very much.