

## PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

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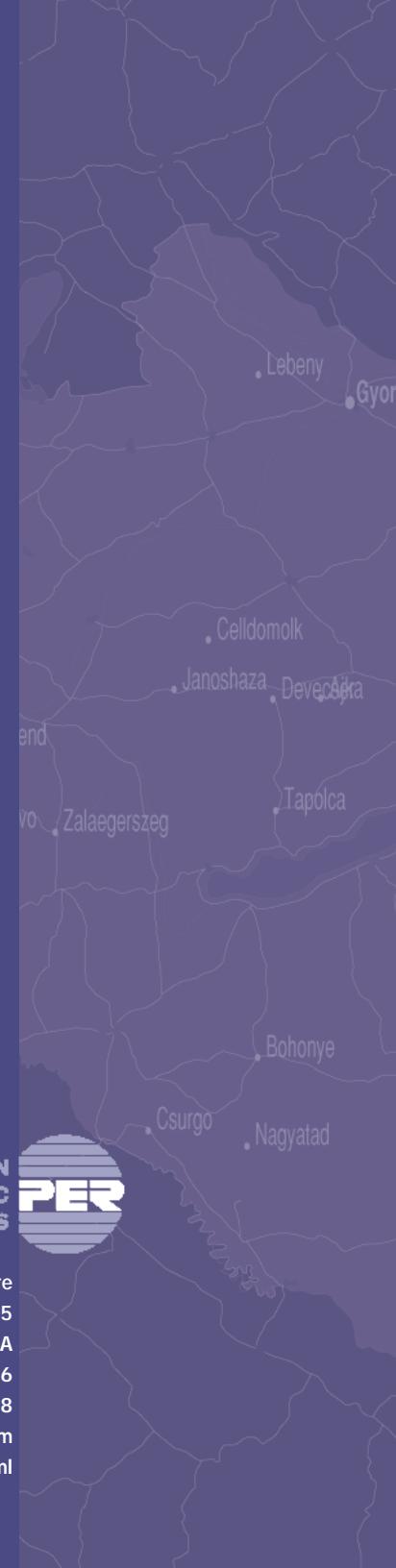
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HUNGARY

## SELF-GOVERNMENT IN HUNGARY: THE GYPSY/ROMANI EXPERIENCE AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

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## PREFACE

Hungary's system of self-governments for the country's national and ethnic minorities has been viewed by many as a bold and innovative experiment. Particularly with respect to the plight of the Roma/Gypsy—where there is little debate that their integration into the social, political, and economic fabric of the country is far less advanced than is the case for other minorities in Hungary—the system intended to offer hope through minority empowerment. From May 9 to May 11, 1997, a workshop entitled "The Romani/Gypsy Self-Government System in Hungary: Experience and Prospects for the Future" was held in Budapest, Hungary. Co-sponsored by the Project on Ethnic Relations, the Council of Europe, the Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary, and the Hungarian National Gypsy Self-Government (NGSG), the workshop sought to assess the system of self-government in Hungary.

Using this opportunity to pause and evaluate Hungary's system of minority self-governments was significant on two levels. First, it reinforced the shared desire to improve minority rights and to establish and refine mechanisms to protect individual self-expression, cultural identity, and minority rights. Second, it underscored the fact that the efforts to develop and enhance these mechanisms are not necessarily inherently antagonistic to the larger goals of the societies in which the minorities live. Discussions that are candid and open, as well as inclusive, are likely to provide movement toward these goals. At the same time, these discussions offer the possibility of extending their benefits beyond the particulars of the Roma toward the universal issues that are represented by their case.

The workshop addressed several key issues, such as: What are the principles and the legal framework that constitute the basis for the self-government system in Hungary? What are its accomplishments and its shortcomings? How widely is it accepted? To what extent do national and local Romani self-governments, the Hungarian national government, local authorities, and Romani nongovernmental organizations collaborate, and how effective is their collaboration? The workshop also explored ways to improve the training of officials in local self-government and of those in the central government who deal with Romani issues.

To consider these questions, the meeting brought together an assemblage of individuals uniquely positioned to offer insights from their own experience—Roma and non-Romani international officials, experts, and

practitioners. Afterward, a series of discussions and interviews was organized with local authorities and leaders of self-government in the field. This allowed workshop participants to witness first-hand the realities of the NGSG system.

This report presents a summary of the discussions held during the four days of meetings. The report was prepared by Peter Priadka of the PER Bratislava office, and edited by Warren

Haffar of PER's Princeton staff and Robert A. Feldmesser, PER's Senior Editor. The participants have not reviewed the text, for which PER assumes full responsibility.

**Livia B. Plaks**  
*Executive Director*  
Princeton  
New Jersey  
November 1997



From left to right:  
Florian Farkas, Eva Orsos-Hegyesine,  
Andrzej Mirga, John Murray.

## INTRODUCTION

The position of minorities in Hungarian society is defined by Article 68 of the country's constitution and by the amendment adopted in 1990. Minorities are guaranteed the rights to participate in public life, to establish local and national minority self-governments, to use their own language, to receive school instruction in the mother language, and to use their own family and birth names.

The Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities Act, passed by the parliament on July 7, 1993, guarantees to the thirteen minorities living in Hungary the right to personal autonomy and the right to establish local and national minority self-governments. This act explicitly includes the Roma/Gypsies among the thirteen recognized national and ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup> Although the rights of national and ethnic minorities are the same, the Roma/Gypsies are regarded as an ethnic minority because they meet the following criteria:

- They have been living on the territory of Hungary for at least one century.
- They constitute a numerical minority within the population of the country.
- They hold Hungarian citizenship.
- They differ from the rest of the population in terms of their language, culture, and traditions.

The act permits any minority group that is not listed in the act to apply for recognition as a minority.<sup>2</sup> In cases where a significant number of inhabitants belong to a minority, the establishment of settlement-level minority self-governments offers minorities the opportunity to exercise rights that are equivalent to those that come with territorial autonomy. Because local and national minority self-governments are elected bodies, their establishment has solved the problem of the lack of legitimacy that had characterized the old nationality associations. They are partners of

<sup>1</sup> See *Report of the Government of the Republic of Hungary to the National Assembly on the situation of the national and ethnic minorities living in the Republic of Hungary*. Hungarian Government Report No. J/3670 (Budapest: Office of the Prime Minister, 1997). The other twelve recognized minorities are Armenians; Bulgarians; Croats; Germans; Greeks; Poles; Romanians; Ruthenians; Serbs; Slovaks; Slovenes; and Ukrainians.

<sup>2</sup> Current government guidelines for minority recognition call for at least "one thousand citizens who profess to belong to the particular minority group and are eligible to vote" sign a petition to be submitted to the National Assembly for consideration. *Ibid.*, 3.

municipalities at the local level and of the legislature and executive at the national level. Minority legislation and the system of minority self-governments have brought the minority issue back in from the periphery of public life.

Accommodation for each minority self-government is granted by the government, typically in the form of office space for headquarters. Such accommodation must be provided by the municipalities, though they are reimbursed for doing so by the national government. Minority self-governments also receive an operating budget, in the form either of a transfer of assets, the amount of which is guaranteed by law, or of subsidies from the national budget. According to a recent Hungarian government report, however, minority self-governments at the national level and even more so those at the local level are not adequately prepared professionally for their role in the decision-making process which is granted to them by the legislation.<sup>3</sup>

#### A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

*Gypsy* is an English term used to denote ethnic groups formed by the dispersal of commercial, nomadic, and other groups from within India, beginning in the tenth century, and their mixing with European and other groups during their diaspora. The terms *Gypsy* and the several European variants of *Tsigan* are considered by many to be pejorative and are often replaced by the more neutral term *Rom*. However, because *Gypsy* is widely used in Hungary, the two terms are used together in this report. Thus, *Roma/Gypsies* refers to the group as a whole, and *Romani/Gypsy* is the corresponding adjective.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## OPENING REMARKS

The coordinator of activities for the Roma/Gypsies of the Council of Europe welcomed the participants and stressed that the system of self-government for minorities in Hungary has attracted great interest because it goes well beyond the minority policies of other countries. It is a bold, innovative experiment, he continued, that is not easy to implement, because it involves some fairly complicated administrative problems. He added that other Europeans are keenly following Hungary's efforts to see how the system is working and how it might be applied in their own countries.

PER's Executive Director stressed that the aim of the workshop was to examine the pros and cons of this remarkable experiment. Both the national and local self-governments bear a great responsibility, she continued; adequate funding and cooperation between Romani self-governments and Romani leaders are among the most important factors in determining its ultimate success. Finally, she expressed PER's pleasure at being one of the sponsors of the workshop.

The President of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities of the Government of Hungary welcomed the participants and stressed their joint responsibility to the people of Romani/Gypsy origin, who face many problems and disadvantages in comparison with other people. She also expressed sincere gratitude to PER and the Council of Europe for providing the opportunity to convene the workshop in Budapest.

The President of the Hungarian National Gypsy Self Government (NGSG) also welcomed the participants, especially the representatives of Romani/Gypsy self-governments from various regions of Hungary. He stressed that the workshop provided an opportunity to further develop international relations by working together to address the needs of national and ethnic minorities that are shared by all countries in the region.

The State Secretary at the Prime Minister's Office spoke about the legal framework of the minority self-government system. He said that Hungary had so far implemented only about one-quarter of the necessary framework for the system. Minority self-governments have been created, and the present legislation provides a solid ground for them to be effective. The legal framework for Hungary's thirteen minorities, he stated, was created by the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities Act,

which was based on the principle of personal autonomy. He acknowledged that the Hungarian system is not without its problems. For example, anybody who is registered to vote may do so in elections for local minority self-governments, regardless of his or her ethnic identity. This means that some local minority self-governments can be elected by a majority of voters who are not, in fact, members of the minority community in the region. He pointed to some striking examples of this, such as the case of a Serb being elected to the Croat minority self-government.

The State Secretary emphasized that although the legal framework has been created, a viable system to provide financial support for it has not. Minority self-governments need both legal and financial guarantees. Financial backing is of particular importance for the Romani/Gypsy minority and their self-governments, because they face the worst social crises and the worst unemployment rates of all the minorities. The Roma/Gypsies have suffered greatly during the changes in recent years. Because of their low level of education, they have been the principal victims of economic restructuring. Since 1993, the government, together with the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities and civic organizations, has provided assistance in order to train members of the community for public-service employment. The Secretary stressed the need for an elite within this population that would halt linguistic assimilation and preserve a distinct identity. Quality housing and employment programs are also an absolute necessity. In concluding, he said that the system of self-government must be based on a civil society and not be an administrative body only.

A member of the Hungarian parliament spoke about the first elections of minority self-governments in Hungary, which took place in conjunction with municipal elections in the winter of 1994. He emphasized that non-members of an ethnic group can and do participate in the ethnic minority self-government elections. The original intention, he continued, was to establish a Ministry of the Self-Governments as an umbrella organization for all minority self-governments at both the national and local levels, although this has not yet been done. He observed that the legal status of minority self-governments is not yet clear, although their basic task is to organize the activities of minorities and respond to the needs of the community.

He stressed that the Roma/Gypsies constitute the largest minority in Hungary (approximately 560,000, of the country's total population of

ten million) and that they face the worst social, employment, and educational problems. Because minority self-governments have taken over some of the tasks of local government, close cooperation between municipalities and minority self-governments is essential, especially in the matter of the distribution of social benefits. This kind of cooperation is not common. While the problems of the different minorities in Hungary are not identical, the law does not draw any distinctions among them, and this often compounds problems. However, he said, the legal framework is becoming institutionalized; the system has been developing naturally, and it will continue to develop if the state provides the necessary financing. The state has allocated 258 million forints from the state budget for minority self-governments.<sup>4</sup> Some minority self-governments, he said, want to have full-time staffs and ethnic-minority politicians.

Nevertheless, he went on, the main objective of the minority self-government system is the preservation of the distinct identities of the minorities, and the traditions and cultures of minorities are based on language as a carrier of identity. Many minorities in Hungary—such as the Germans, the Croats, and the Slovaks—have already lost their language, and it is now too late to preserve their linguistic traditions. The general preservation of their identity he emphasized, is a goal of very high priority, and a satisfactory solution to achieve it must be devised.

Another representative of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities spoke about the financing of minority self-governments. Municipalities, highly autonomous structures whose activities are not subordinated to other levels of government, are responsible for such basic matters as the communal infrastructure and the provision of safe drinking water. He stressed that minority self-governments have taken over a mix of responsibilities from both the local municipalities and the central government. Given their mandates, they should be guaranteed an appropriate level of funding, whether from governmental subsidies, municipal subsidies, domestic or foreign foundations, or a foreign country, if the minority has a mother country abroad.

The problem with financing, he explained, stems in part from the nature of the electoral system. The government of Hungary has no idea of the exact numbers of minorities, because all eligible voters can

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<sup>4</sup> As of December 1997, the exchange rate for the Hungarian forint was approximately two hundred per one U.S. dollar.

vote for minority self-governments. Minority self-governments are partly funded by subsidies from the central state budget twice a year. Municipalities are also obligated to support minority self-governments, but the amount of money that should be granted is a matter of some dispute.

The government of Hungary is providing assistance to municipalities that do not have adequate means of financing minority self-governments. According to the representative, the state budget of 1996 for the first time included a separate section for minority self-governments, and there are public foundations for funding various minority projects. Minority self-governments, he emphasized, should be fully integrated into the public funding systems. However, there is mistrust about issues of financial management, partly due to the fact that nobody knows exactly how national minority self-governments are using public funds. Compounding the problem, he said, the NGSG sometimes refuses to submit to financial audits, claiming, as it did in 1995, that such audits undermined its autonomy.

Discussion of funding issues continued, as another participant spoke about the activities of the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary. He explained that this foundation is supported by taxpayers and its funds are earmarked for programs that foster the integration of the Romani/Gypsy population into Hungarian society. Representatives of the ministries, of self-governments, and of various counties are all included on the foundation's board. In June 1996, a total of seventy million forints was allocated to improve housing and living conditions, through loans and various other programs of support; forty million was granted to Romani entrepreneurs in the form of interest-free start-up loans; twenty million was provided as scholarships and grants for students (assistance to children who are starting their schooling is the most popular program); and ten million was made available for media and legal advocacy. The participant emphasized that the government should cooperate more closely with the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary.

One of the representatives of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities spoke about the activity of the Public Foundation for National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary. This foundation was established in January 1995, she said, with funding of four hundred million forints, partly provided by the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities. Its goals, she continued, are to provide financial support to minorities for education; religious activities in the native language; publication of liter-

ature, newspapers, and magazines (in 1996, the foundation supported three journals for the Romani/Gypsy minority); and the production of documentary films and other cultural programs. Financial assistance is also being provided for professional training, for the building and strengthening of relations with mother countries, and for research on folklore and folk music. The foundation, she noted, has received over eight thousand applications. She stressed that 37 percent of the budgeted funds went to Romani/Gypsy applicants. In addition, the foundation provided scholarships and fellowships for 670 Roma/Gypsies in secondary schools and for about 100 studying at the university level.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LAW ON MINORITIES

The participant from the Gypsy Research Center in Paris presented a report, originally prepared for the Council of Europe in 1996, suggesting that much remains to be done to meet the goals of the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities Act, particularly regarding the Romani/Gypsy communities. He emphasized that it would be to Hungary's credit if, having adopted this act, it did everything in its power to ensure its implementation. Otherwise, there is a risk that the act would become a mere facade behind which the conditions of minorities, especially those in difficult situations, like the Roma/Gypsies, would degenerate further still.

There are serious gaps in the knowledge of those in charge of applying the act, he continued, and better training programs must be developed. The provisions in section 17 of the act guarantee to minorities the right to establish self-governments at both the national and local levels. The first elections leading to the establishment of minority local self-governments took place in December 1994, at the same time as the general local elections. Nationwide, minority candidates in the self-government elections polled some 1,800,000 votes, a significant number of which were cast by members of the majority population who chose to support minority candidates. The NGSG was established in April 1995, as were national self-governments for other minorities. Its members have been elected mainly by the representatives of local self-governments. At that time, there were 416 local self-governments with a total 2,153 electors, 1,695 of whom voted to select 53 representatives from among 260 candidates. The coalition formed by the Lungo Drom Gypsy Association received the overwhelming majority of the votes, winning all 53 seats on the NGSG.

The representative of the research center concluded by saying that the Council of Europe should help disseminate information about the NGSG system throughout Europe, because the plight of Romani/Gypsy communities, although critical in Hungary, is difficult throughout the entire region. Compounding the problem is the fact that the Roma/Gypsies have no mother country to turn to, making it all the more important that international institutions use their authority to push for much-needed improvements. Development programs of the Council of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe, he added, should help to build and develop contacts among representatives at the local level from among the Council of Europe's member states, and exchanges of representatives should be increased to help overcome the isolation of the Roma/Gypsies. Furthermore, these exchanges should offer training programs for local authorities and representatives of municipalities. He stressed that self-governments in Hungary, as well as municipalities in Hungarian towns and villages, should and could participate in this program.

Another participant from Western Europe spoke about the Norwegian experience with Sami self-government, the topic of a case study sponsored by the Council of Europe—*Democracy, Human Rights, Minorities: Educational and Cultural Aspects*. She pointed out that there are many similarities between the Roma/Gypsies in Hungary and the Sami in Norway: Both represent the largest ethnic minority in their respective countries, and both have been targets of assimilation and discrimination. Moreover, their social situation is significantly worse than that of the majority population of their countries. The system of Sami self-government in Norway has existed since 1989, when a Sami Assembly was first established. The creation of a minority self-government system, she said, is an ongoing process in both countries. She emphasized the great responsibility borne by Norway and Hungary as pioneers of a new model that will benefit both the minority and the majority populations. The study referred to considers both the positive aspects and the challenges of Sami self-government, and the Hungarian experiment in minority self-government may well benefit from the Norwegian experience. Some of the conclusions of the study are:

- Minority self-government has a positive effect on the experience of ethnic identity of the minority as well as of the majority.
- Minority self-government may, however, provoke and mobilize other minorities, or it may lead the majority to feel that its own position is threatened.

- When the political situation offers possibilities for participation and influence through minority self-government, it should not be difficult to recruit outstanding politicians from the minority group.
- Clear and coherent policies from the central authority are necessary to avoid the creation of interethnic conflicts within a minority self-government at the local level.
- Conditions of the ethnic and national minorities are affected by internationalization and by the nation-state's role in international organizations.
- Minority self-government in general presupposes qualified representatives; adequate training programs are therefore necessary.

## ORGANIZATION AND ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL GYPSY SELF-GOVERNMENT

The President of the NGSG discussed the important political challenges the system presents for both the national government and the Roma/Gypsies. He emphasized that every Hungarian county is represented in these structures; the NGSG has set up twenty-two offices in twenty counties. The NGSG, he said, should serve as a coordinating body and provide authority for local branches. The legal framework would therefore have to be changed, because minority self-governments now have no functions other than cultural ones.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A representative from the NGSG described its organizational structure. The system has fifty-three members, seven of whom are members of a presidium, consisting of the president, the vice-presidents, and the officials responsible for social policy, culture, and education. The NGSG has its own office, with an office manager, an auditor, and experts in various fields, currently including sociology, psychology, and education. The NGSG makes proposals and recommendations to the government and the parliament regarding legislation on Romani/Gypsy affairs. It has a special committee on housing affairs and seeks to assist in alleviating the conditions of the unemployed. However, he explained, since the regional associations do not have the necessary legal status, more effective coordination between the NGSG and local self-governments is lack-

ing. The NGSG, he added, is also responsible for building contacts and improving relations between the Romani/Gypsy population and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the police.

He pointed to the particular problems of the settlements, where almost all residents are uneducated and, as a result, unemployed. Many no longer receive state subsidies and are unable to obtain bank loans for starting up small businesses. He said that more than 80 percent of the Roma/Gypsies end their schooling at age sixteen. He remarked that Hungarian society still harbors a great deal of prejudice against Roma/Gypsies; NGOs and civic organizations need to work more actively to overcome that prejudice.

Another participant mentioned that the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities Act has left many issues unresolved. For example, the legal position of minority self-governments is unclear. The Act has no provisions for implementation, and as a result, local representatives have to struggle for acceptance in their communities. Because of this, municipalities are not able to make effective decisions on Romani/Gypsy issues, either. He expressed the belief that new constitutional provisions were needed; the present constitution does not have rules against ethnic discrimination. Regarding funding, he suggested that the local self-governments receive direct subsidies in the same way that municipalities do.

Another participant argued that the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary does not have sufficient funding. Further, he pointed out, there are 237 Romani/Gypsy organizations in Hungary, but they are allowed to represent only their own members. However, self-governments can represent the approximately 60 percent of the Romani/Gypsy population in Hungary that are unemployed.

The NGSG representative stressed that self-governments have been unable to fulfill their mandate themselves and lack the necessary power to pressure the government to do it. Thus, the self-governments require greater autonomy to address the social problems that exist within the Romani/Gypsy communities.

Another participant declared that the social situation of large Romani/Gypsy families is especially bad. Citing his experience as a social worker, he said that the Roma/Gypsies in Hungary have been the biggest losers under the new regime and that the political rights and freedoms

they have gained do not make up for the discrimination and economic hardships they have had to endure. The present legislation, he said, is essentially useless. An NGSG representative agreed that it is not sufficient to limit the discussion to the legal and administrative aspects of the NGSG. He pointed out that the NGSG has received only 96 million forints, a very small sum in view of its mandate.

## ACHIEVEMENTS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF THE MINORITY SELF-GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

The representative of the Hungarian Parliamentary Commission for National and Ethnic Minority Rights spoke about potential modifications of the minority self-government system, from the perspective of an ombudsman for minority rights. He stressed that there needs to be some possibility for the national and ethnic communities in Hungary to become an integral part of society, without having to assimilate. Such integration has two aspects: integration into the minority community and into society. It is necessary, he continued, to create a system that would enable minorities to protect their identities. Integration into society does not require melting into the larger society. Hungary's experience with minority self-government could be a model for other countries, but it should not be copied uncritically. It is necessary to create self-sufficient minority communities with their own elites, which could represent their interests in a clearly defined way, in accordance with democratic principles and in partnership with other segments of society.

In any case, he went on to say, the system of minority self-government has helped to resolve the problem of legitimacy within minority groups in a democratic way; their legitimacy can no longer be questioned, since they have been democratically elected. They can represent their communities and build them up from the grass roots. The existence of such representatives, he said, is justified only if they have the authority and capacity to deal with community problems without recourse to extralegal or coercive methods. He stressed that Hungary is not and cannot become an ethnically homogeneous country; it is impossible to remove minorities, as many Hungarians seem to wish, because 10 percent of the Hungarian population belongs to one minority or another. He had recently submitted an interim report to the parliament on the minority self-government system, in which he said that the system requires significant corrections and amendments.

He went on to say that self-government is a kind of autonomy, and every type of autonomy includes three elements: structural, functional, and financial. If one of these elements is missing, it is impossible to speak about autonomy in any meaningful sense. But only one of these elements has really been implemented in Hungary: the structural. Minority self-governments are legal entities, organized by themselves and not by external forces, and they are legally entitled to make some decisions. However, the other two elements of autonomy do not exist in Hungary. There is no central coordination of the allocation of money for the more than 800 minority self-governments. It is not even clear what kind of activities should be financed or how their budgets should be managed. A genuinely autonomous system cannot exist without an autonomous system of financing.

Regarding the elections of minority self-governments, he said that the problem of voter registration can be dealt with in one of two ways: by registration by families who determine for themselves whether they belong to a minority, or by voluntary individual declaration of minority affiliation, which would mean, in effect, no registration. The second way is the current system in Hungary; everybody who is eligible to vote is free to vote for minority self-governments as well. The representative also touched upon the issue of minority members in parliament. The Hungarian constitution guarantees each of Hungary's thirteen minorities one parliamentary seat, but this rule has encountered problems. According to a recent agreement among parliamentary parties, every minority should get a mandate. However, it is still not clear how minority representatives are to be elected.

A participant from Bulgaria made the point that the Hungarian system of minority self-governments has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, it helps to stem assimilation, and it revives cultural identity. Language is one of the keystones of culture, he said, and the fact that 80 percent of the Romani/Gypsy people in Hungary do not speak the Romani language suggests that the Roma/Gypsies in Hungary have gradually assimilated into the majority culture and that their identity is in the process of disintegration. The establishment of self-governments should help to stem this process by putting the problems of the Romani/Gypsy people on the public agenda. It will also give more Romani/Gypsy people the confidence to identify as Roma/Gypsies.

A second positive aspect, he said, is the fact that the system has the poten-

tial to address many of the problems of the community and to do so with the participation of the Romani/Gypsy people themselves. The system could put an end to the tradition of either ignoring minority problems or dealing with them from the outside and making decisions without the participation of minorities themselves. The system of self-government gives minority members the opportunity to take an active part in addressing the problems of their community, instead of having programs imposed on them from above, without consulting them. In this way, the Hungarian system gives minorities some confidence that their problems are not being ignored and, by involving them in problem-solving, it develops leadership skills and provides experience. Communities need strong leadership to represent them and to be advocates of their interests and rights.

Among the negative aspects of the system, said the participant from Bulgaria, is that elections were not the appropriate procedure for establishing the first NGSG, because many of those elected had had no experience with Romani/Gypsy issues. The first step should have been the appointment of members to do preparatory work, consisting of public-opinion research to study attitudes toward the idea and how people viewed its effectiveness. Other negative aspects of the system, he said, were the lack of cooperation with the national government and NGOs, even though they are working on the same problems and toward the same goals, and the failure of the NGSG to identify its priorities or a long-term strategy for achieving them. Consequently, efforts are often misguided and limited to short-term crisis management.

According to the Hungarian constitution, said this participant, "minorities are an indispensable part of the Hungarian people." But if the NGSG does not engage in greater cooperation with other institutions, the result will be the segregation, not the integration, of the Romani/Gypsy community. It would be helpful to learn from the experience of other countries that are trying to integrate their ethnic groups. For example, in the United States, a basic principle is the institutionalization of ethnic diversity. This provides an opportunity for the representation of different interests and for joint problem-solving through consensus and conflict prevention. An issue that remains unresolved is the question of the legitimacy of the NGSG within the Romani/Gypsy community itself, as well as among the general public. In addition, the internal organization of the NGSG needs to be assessed.

A participant from the Czech Republic stressed that the main problem of the Romani/Gypsy community in his town in the Czech Republic is that of co-existence with the majority population. He said that the Hungarian model, where minorities have a right to establish self-governments, could especially serve as an example to other post-Communist countries. In the Czech Republic, he continued, the Roma have practically no chance to be elected to the national parliament. The Hungarian system gives minorities the possibility of having their own representatives at the national level— people who can be legitimate negotiating partners in state institutions. He concluded by voicing his skepticism about the possibility of establishing minority self-governments in the Czech Republic.

## LOCAL MINORITY SELF-GOVERNMENTS IN PRACTICE

A representative of the Regional Association of Local Minority Self-Governments from Zala County, in which 7 to 8 percent of the population are Roma/Gypsies, spoke about their problems in that part of the country. The regional association consists of eight members, each of whom represents one local minority self-government. The most serious problems in the region are education and unemployment. The social welfare system was not dealing adequately with these problems. The problem of financing, he continued, could be solved by enlisting the help of NGOs. He recommended that the law on the rights of minorities be amended, and he concluded by calling on those at the national level of the NGSG to provide more support to those at the local level.

A representative of the regional association from Szabolcs-Szatmar-Bereg County stated that his county is one of the most disadvantaged in Hungary. The regional association consists of thirty-five members from thirty-five minority self-governments, including the German and Slovak self-governments. He pointed out that more than two hundred people have asked the association for assistance but, due to legislative shortcomings such as the fact that regional associations have no legal status, they have not been able to provide more than legal assistance. He closed by saying that one of the most important problems of the Roma/Gypsies is the lack of proper training; only 12 percent of the Romani/Gypsy population in the county have received proper training or education.

Representatives of local self-governments described their experiences.

One of them pointed out that 80 percent of the Romani/Gypsy population cannot speak the Romani language. Also, only twenty-five young Roma/Gypsies from his town have received any vocational training, and only one has attended college. However, he expressed appreciation for the support received from the Hungarian population in his region. He said his region's local self-government meets weekly to discuss the problems of the various settlements and ways of providing help. He is also a member of the municipal government, and in that capacity he expressed appreciation for the financial support of the NGSG and the Ministry of Welfare. One problem, he noted, is that the Roma/Gypsies are sometimes unable to pay back the loans they have received.

Another participant spoke of the need for greater cooperation between the NGSG and both the municipalities and the NGOs. His self-government has five committees for dealing with such problems as housing, living conditions, families, health care, and unemployment (the local unemployment rate among the Roma/Gypsies is about 95 percent) and their staffs try to provide appropriate assistance. He emphasized that every small success is the result of a long and difficult effort. A colleague of his added that life expectancy among the Roma/Gypsies is eight to ten years lower than among the Hungarian population. Their level of education is very low. Immunization programs for children are insufficient; his local self-government is trying to provide additional vaccinations.

A representative of a Budapest township mentioned that his self-government has received more than two million forints in financial support from the municipality and has even signed a financing agreement with it. His self-government also receives financial support from the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary and from the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities. The self-government provides financial assistance according to a plan that is drawn up at the beginning of each year. Aid is provided for education, for equipment for public schools, sports, and culture, and for the development of settlements and housing. He expressed gratification at the fact that the Romani/Gypsy community of his town had its own television and radio programs.

In addition, he said, the city of Budapest is extraordinarily important in the NGSG system, because 10 percent of its population of two million are Roma/Gypsies. They have established self-governments in twenty of the city's twenty-two townships. (Even before the minority self-government system was introduced, there was an independent Roma/Gypsy

Minority Club.) The municipal authorities have signed several contracts with the self-governments and have provided them with rent-free office space and a room for a theater. The municipal budget has a separate item for financing the self-governments. Nevertheless, she emphasized the need for a more empathic attitude toward the situation of the Roma/Gypsies.

A member of the Romani/Gypsy self-government from the same part of Budapest said that his self-government is in a very fortunate situation. The municipality in his district respects the right of veto over issues affecting the Romani/Gypsy community. This can be considered as tremendous progress.

## ROMANI/GYPSY SELF-GOVERNMENTS AND NGOs

A sharp division of opinion between the NGSG and Romani/Gypsy NGOs became evident at the workshop, over such issues as these:

- Self-governments, as elected bodies, are legal representatives of Roma/Gypsies, whereas NGOs have to fight for their legitimacy.
- The NGSG receives money directly from the state budget and other government bodies created to support the system, whereas NGOs have to struggle for their funding.
- The NGSG is dominated by members of the Lungo Drom organization. Activists representing numerous Romani/Gypsy NGOs are in opposition to it.
- The NGSG tends to monopolize all activities of Roma/Gypsies or at least to control them. The NGOs thus feel threatened.

A member of an NGO called Romani Parliament stressed the fact that some of his colleagues were not allowed to participate in this workshop. He considered this to be a telling example of the troubled relations between the NGSG and other organizations. In his view, the main problems facing the Romani/Gypsy community in Hungary are poverty and long-term unemployment; the Hungarian government and national parliament, he said, are fully responsible for this state of affairs. The only way to achieve social rights is to fight for them together with other groups of the population whose situation is similar to that of the Roma/Gypsies. Further, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that the right of minorities to be represented in the national parliament of

Hungary had not yet been fulfilled. The Roma/Gypsies, he stressed, are victims of the reform process, in part because they are excluded from the privatization program. He declared that the situation of the Roma/Gypsies in Hungary was much better fifteen years ago; at that time, Roma/Gypsies could achieve much more than they can now. Today, the only "right" the Roma/Gypsies have is the right to beg. To improve this situation, public life must be opened to the entire Romani/Gypsy population. Representatives of the Roma/Gypsies, he said, should be properly trained professionals. Therefore, it is necessary "to change the regime" of Romani/Gypsy representation in Hungary. Otherwise, the Roma/Gypsies will remain slaves forever.

A representative of the Foundation for the Protection of Roma Civic Rights said that there is still no real parliamentary representation of the Roma/Gypsies in Hungary and that policy decisions are more favorable for Hungarian minorities outside Hungary than they are for non-Hungarian minorities within Hungary. The Roma/Gypsies, he continued, are victims of social prejudice and as a result cannot participate in the building of a democratic society. The Office for National and Ethnic Minorities should approach the NGOs as friends and not as enemies.

A member of the Association for the Protection of Rights in Szolnok said many organizations were founded after the establishment of the new regime in 1989, particularly as civil rights and freedoms were expanded. However, only a small number of these organizations survived more than a few years because of legislative, financial, and organizational problems. The establishment of minority self-governments is therefore a much-needed step. Because political parties cannot always represent the interests of all citizens, the system of minority self-government is critical and represents significant progress. But, he stressed, minority rights can be enforced only through the joint efforts of minority self-governments and NGOs.

A representative of the Bureau for the Protection of National and Ethnic Minority Rights said that his organization deals with cases of discrimination against minorities. Virtually all of the bureau's clients are Roma/Gypsies. Among other things, the bureau provides legal representation in cases of discrimination against minority self-governments and their members. He cited one case in which a member was verbally attacked and requested legal assistance from the bureau; the result was a settlement that increased public awareness. The bureau also cooperates with minority self-governments in the areas of education and training

and supplies legal expertise to members of minority self-governments.

A member of the Association of Romani Women Taking Part in Public Life criticized the system of financing minority self-governments. The speaker, who is also a member of a local self-government in a district of Budapest, said that they have no money to establish cultural and community centers. It is impossible, she said, to do a professional job without adequate financing.

A participant from a Romanian NGO sharply criticized the elected Hungarian Romani/Gypsy representatives for lacking sufficient knowledge about their rights. They do not use the rights they already possess, he charged, especially the right of veto at the local level. He added that the system of minority self-government in Hungary is a very special experiment in Europe, and he asked those who criticized the current regime whether it would be better to return to Communism, where there was no freedom of discussion. He went on to say that the situation of the Roma/Gypsies in Romania is more difficult than it is in Hungary. NGOs in Romania do not have the right to run candidates in local (municipal) elections. In Austria, too, only one Romani/Gypsy organization—Sinti of Austria—is supported by the government. Others are not recognized as

“partners” of the government and therefore do not receive any financial support.

A representative of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities said that the Roma/Gypsies have acquired responsibility for themselves. She stressed that the government must search out partners on lower (regional and local) levels. If local self-governments are not connected with NGOs, they have no one to represent.

Local Roma self-government  
representatives  
in Batonyterenye.



## CLOSING REMARKS

A representative of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities asserted that the Roma/Gypsies are full citizens of Hungary and that they want their share of all the opportunities enjoyed by other Hungarian citizens. Minorities in Hungary, she continued, have been victims of the Holocaust and subsequent discrimination. The minority policy in Hungary could be really effective and could set an example for other countries. She said that Hungary is not out to paint a rosy picture of the situation of its minorities for foreign consumption. Rather, the country is willing to speak openly about the shortcomings and problems of its minority policies. In Hungary, she continued, people still know very little about minorities, especially about the Roma/Gypsies, who continue to be the objects of prejudice. She stressed that members of the self-governments should be aware of their rights and should use them, especially the right of veto. However, the greatest responsibility lies with the national government, which should respect the human dignity of every citizen. There is still much to be done, she said, by everyone.

PER's Executive Director said that the workshop had fulfilled its main task: to analyze the Hungarian system of minority self-government. She said that PER is acutely aware that this system is a unique experiment, still in its infancy, and that cooperation among all levels of government is required in order to achieve the goal of an improved quality of life for the Romani/Gypsy population in the country. She closed by acknowledging that no one can change the situation overnight, but the Hungarian system of minority self-government is a significant, necessary, and long overdue first step.

A representative of the Council of Europe expressed his gratitude to the participants for their honesty and frankness. While the Hungarian system of minority self-government is still in its early stages, he said, it is already possible to see its value, and other countries should draw lessons from it. He added that it is necessary to prevent ethnic conflicts from becoming destructive. We need to find mechanisms that would guarantee minorities a real share in political and social life, and the Hungarians have found one promising way. The Council of Europe considers the situation of the Roma/Gypsy a critical social and human rights issue for contemporary Europe and will continue its supportive activities.

## POSTSCRIPT

On the final day of the conference, participants traveled to Batonytereny, a village outside of Budapest, for a series of discussions and interviews with local authorities and members of the self-government. Participants witnessed at first hand the evidence of cooperation, as well as some concrete expressions of the difficulties that had been alluded to during the four days of the proceedings in Budapest. Discussions were held with, among others, the President of the Association of Roma Representatives in Nograd County and the Mayor of Batonytereny. They also heard a presentation concerning the daily workings of the local self-government.

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