



JEMIE

Journal on Ethnopolitics and
Minority Issues in Europe

The Political Significance of the first National Gypsy Minority Self-Government (Országos Cigány Kisebbségi Önkormányzat)

MARTIN KOVATS

*The Centre for Russian and East European Studies
University of Birmingham, UK*

Autumn 2001

The Political Significance of the first National Gypsy Minority Self-Government (Országos Cigány Kisebbségi Önkormányzat)

MARTIN KOVATS

The Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, UK

The paper examines the activities of the first National Gypsy Minority-Self-Government in Hungary (1995-8). It argues that, in respect of the Roma, Hungary's innovative system of minority representation is subject to conflicting tensions stemming both from the context of the disintegration of most Roma from the mainstream economy and society, as well as the competitiveness of nascent Roma political activity. The paper identifies a tendency towards unaccountable empire building and for the control of increasingly large sums of public money, resulting from structural problems of the system which need to be addressed if it is to be an effective and successful mechanism for minority representation.

I. Introduction

Hungary is a small country with a lot of history. Hungary is a small country with a large Roma minority. It is therefore not surprising that Roma in Hungary are making history. Despite the existence of Roma/Gypsy populations in almost every European state, Hungary is the first country to construct a nationwide network of legally recognized, publicly financed and popularly elected institutions for the representation of their interests (the minority self-government system). In April 1995 the first National Gypsy Minority Self-Government (NGMS-G) was elected with a four-year mandate. This development has put Hungary in the forefront of states seeking to mediate the changing circumstances of a large Roma/Gypsy population through a representative political mechanism specifically constructed for that purpose.

Since the mid-1980s the situation of the Roma in Hungary has been characterized by two main features. On the one hand, there has been an historically unprecedented entry into the public political arena of explicit Roma interest representation beginning with the National Gypsy Council (Országos Cigánytanács) in 1985, and including the explicit recognition of Roma as a rights-endowed ethnic community, as well as the creation of hundreds of self-organized groups and the establishment hundreds more minority self-governments. However, this period has exactly coincided with a disastrous decline in employment opportunities and living conditions for the majority of Roma people as well as an increase in prejudice and discrimination i.e. a decline

in the protection and entitlements accruing from citizenship. Clearly Roma interest representation has not been able to protect the interests of most Roma people. It is weak or, more accurately (because politics is fundamentally about power relations), relatively weak compared with those interests with which it must compete (either directly or indirectly) for social resources. Therefore, given the novelty and uniqueness of Hungary's initiative, as well as the importance of the minority self-government system, not only for the Roma population but also for wider society, this paper examines the activities of the first National Gypsy Minority Self-Government (NGMS-G) within the context of the development of the Roma as a political factor within Hungary.

II. The Causes of Emergent Roma Politics

In order to identify the significance of the first NGMS-G it is necessary to examine the process of Roma politicisation of which, since 1995, it has been the foremost national expression. For over half a millennium Gypsies have lived in Hungary without establishing formal political institutions. This raises the question of why Roma politics now? One important reason lies in the growth in both the absolute and relative size of the Hungarian Roma population over the last fifty years from 100,000 in 1943 to approximately half a million today.¹ An even more important factor than size is the relatively greater degree of social and economic integration of Roma resulting from the complex and ambiguous relationship between the minority, the state and the wider society going back to the Middle Ages.

It was the policies of the Kádár regime from 1961, which targeted the Roma for inclusion within the labour force of the centrally planned economy, that laid the basis for Roma politics. The effect of abolishing isolated settlements (cigánytelep), bringing Roma workers into the wage economy, facilitating school attendance etc. was to make Roma people (similarly to all other citizens), to an unprecedented level, dependent on extra local, extra-communal authorities (public utilities, employers, educational and health care institutions, the legal system, local and national government etc). In other words, the historical survival mechanism of limiting contact

¹ Pomogyi, L., Cigánykérdés és cigányügyi igazgatás a polgári Magyarországon, Budapest: Orsis Századvég, 1995; G Havas, G Kertesi & I Kemény, "The Statistics of Deprivation - the Roma in Hungary", *Hungarian Quarterly*, vol. 36, no.3, 1995

and avoiding conflict with outside authorities has become increasing obsolete. In order to secure those resources necessary in modern society (work, welfare entitlements, housing, education, health care, legal protection etc.) it has become necessary for Roma people to engage with those authorities from whom these goods and services can be obtained.

Such an analysis demonstrates that Roma politics is a dynamic phenomenon representing a fundamental historical change in the circumstances of the Roma population in Hungary and which is driven by the need of Roma people to achieve the same level of protection and opportunities enjoyed by other citizens. However, given the early phase of its development, Roma politics encounters very considerable obstacles to the effective representation of Roma people's interests. In addition to a lack of political experience (both amongst leaders as well as the Roma population in general) and of organisational traditions (for public political activity) and linguistic/cultural heterogeneity, Roma politics needs to cope with the wide geographic spread of a constituency undergoing its gravest economic crises of recent times amidst a climate of strengthening prejudice. Furthermore, very high rates of unemployment means there are few material resources the Roma population can devote to its own political activity thus making its organizations dependent on external sources of funding, largely from the state. This has the combined effect of obstructing mass participation in Roma politics and of dividing activists who must compete against each other for financial support. In the light of these structural problems, János Báthory, the last communist government's 'Gypsy expert' and architect of postcommunist Hungary's Roma policy, was clearly correct in his analysis that "the Gypsies constitute a relatively weak pressure group".²

III. The Evolution of Roma Interest Representation

Though the structural problems of the Roma population as a political interest group may account for the decline in the living standards of most Roma people during Hungary's long 'transition', it seems incompatible with the dramatic increase in the number of organizations and institutions set

² Phralipe VI, nos 7-9. 1995: 104-8

up to formally promote Roma interests. The solution to this apparent paradox lies in the recognition that, since the mid-1980s, formal Roma interest representation has itself been a *policy of government*.

The integration policy of the Kádár regime was unambiguous in its approach towards explicit Roma representation. The 1961 politburo decree launching the policy also abolished the short-lived Cultural Alliance of Hungarian Gypsies (Magyarországi Cigányok Kulturális Szövetsége) (set up in 1957). Nationality status was rejected by the state on the basis that such a move would be “harmful and wrong as it would conserve the isolation of the Gypsies and slow down their integration into society”.³ Nevertheless, Roma identity failed to disappear. In part this was because the state was faced with what can be termed the ‘assimilationist’s dilemma’: in trying to construct policies to reduce the ‘difference’ of a particular group it becomes necessary to pay ever greater attention to identifying the particular characteristics of the group, thus giving implicit recognition to its ‘difference’.

The ‘new consensus’

By 1979, the state’s approach towards Roma identity had become more ambivalent. In a decree the Politburo declared that “the country’s Gypsies cannot be considered a nationality, but an ethnic group which is gradually integrating with society, assimilating”.⁴ Nevertheless, it was economic reasons that lay behind the final impetus towards the construction of explicit Roma political representation. Though the 1979 decree demanded that “party organs and subsections...should help deserving Gypsies achieve appropriate position in public life” it was not until the economic crisis of the early 1980s that formal Roma representation was actively considered.

Economic austerity required the re-evaluation of policies and programmes that either directly or indirectly affected the integration process. In 1984, the People’s Patriotic Front (Hazafias Népfront) the umbrella organization of socialist civil society, outlined the new direction of policy concluding that “the catching-up [of the Gypsies] is restricted by our difficult economic situation

³ B. Mezey, *A magyarországi cigánykérdés dokumentumokban 1422-1985*, Budapest: Kossuth, 1986: 241

⁴ Ibid. 274

... as a consequence of which we should consider the Gypsies as ethnic group (népcsoport) which has an important role to play in the construction of a new consensus".⁵ In other words, the aim of policy was shifted away from equalizing the circumstances of Roma people with those of other citizens and towards the less ambitious (and cheaper) one of creating a formal relationship with (representatives of) an 'ethnic group'. The mechanism for the 'new consensus' was established in the following year in the form of the National Gypsy Council (NGC)(Országos Cigánytanács) and reflected the imbalance in power between the two 'sides' of the dialogue. The membership of the NGC was selected by the National Secretariat of the People's Patriotic Front under whose supervision it worked without a budget of its own. The brief life of the NGC coincided with the first wave of redundancies of Roma workers, one-third of whom had lost their jobs by 1990.

A New Minorities Policy

Though the initial motivation behind the construction of a formal dialogue between the state representatives of the Roma population were economic, by the late 1980s this process was added to by a wider re-evaluation of relationship between (cultural) national identity and citizenship (the relationship between citizens and the state). This process (reflecting profound changes in the domestic and international circumstances of the country) was conceived not only to strengthen the identity of Hungary's domestic national/ethnic minority populations, but also Magyar (ethnic) identity both at home as well as with regard to the wider Magyar diaspora.⁶ Amendments to the Constitution in 1990 brought Gypsy identity into the same category with other domestic nationalities, a status confirmed by the Law on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities in 1993 (Minorities Law) which established the minority self-government system. In effect, Roma policy became assimilated into a broader Minorities Policy, the essence of which is "to arrest the further loss of identity of the national and ethnic minorities of Hungary who are already far down the road of assimilation".⁷ The problem with this ambition is that (the strength of) national identity is fundamentally a subjective and abstract concept. Therefore, in order to give substance to this political approach, the primary aim of policy towards the Roma (as well as the other minority populations) has become the creation of institutions to represent these

⁵ M Blaha, G Havas & L Révész, 'Nyer_viszonyok', *Beszél*, vol. 4, no19 1995

⁶ R Gy_ri Szabó, *Kisebbségpolitika rendszerváltás Magyarországon*, Budapest: Osiris, 1998

identities and whose task is to facilitate the anti-assimilation process.

IV. The Circumstances of the Roma Population Following the Change of System

The great irony of the situation of Roma politics is that the policy of encouraging its formal, organizational manifestation, constructed to help reduce public expenditure and to emphasize the ‘difference’ of the Roma (as part of the ‘new consensus’ and the introduction of the anti-assimilation minorities policy), has come at a time when the effects of the change of system have created a greater than ever need for policies to be developed to support the living standards and equality of Roma people as citizens.

Official Roma unemployment is four to five times greater than that of non-Roma⁸ and it is estimated that almost three-quarters of Roma live on or below the poverty line compared with 15 per cent of the total Hungarian population.⁹ Roma suffer higher than average rates of child mortality and chronic illness and it is estimated that Roma life expectancy is approximately ten years less than the national average.¹⁰ Within the public education system, Roma disadvantage begins early on with relatively low nursery attendance and with Roma children being heavily over represented amongst those pupils classified as mentally deficient and/or requiring special education.¹¹ The chances of Roma going onto higher education are fifty times lower than for the national average and Roma make up only 0.22 per cent of students in higher education. Many Roma live in housing of poorer quality than the national average and high unemployment has seen many unable to pay mortgages and/or utility bills and thus becoming in danger of eviction or being compelled to relocate to cheaper, less desirable accommodation.¹²

⁷ Ibid. 10

⁸ A kisebbségi jogok parlamenti biztosának megállapításai a foglalkoztatás területén tapasztalható hátrányos megkülönböztetésr_l, javaslatok, kezdeményezések a diszkrimináció feltárása, megel_zése, megszüntetése érdekében: 2

⁹ Népszabadság, 13 May 1995

¹⁰ Beszámoló a Magyar Köztársaságban él_nemzeti és etnikai kisebbségek helyzetér_l, Budapest, January 1997: 17

¹¹ A Kisebbség ombudsman jelentése a kisebbségek oktatásának átfogó vizsgálatáról, Budapest 1998: 45

¹² J Ladányi & I Szelényi, “Class, Ethnicity and Urban Restructuring in Postcommunist Hungary” in Gy Enedi, *Social Change and Urban Restructuring in Central Europe*, Budapest: Akadémia, 1998: 67-86

Roma are also victims of the vicious circle of disadvantage stimulating discrimination and prejudice which, in turn, reinforces disadvantage. Surveys of public opinion demonstrate a high degree of antipathy towards the Roma on the part of non-Roma population and prejudice is admitted to be a significant factor within the culture of the police and state institutions.¹³ Their vulnerability was exacerbated in 1992 when the Constitutional Court struck down the communist law prohibiting ‘inciting hatred against ethnic or other communities’ on the grounds that it was incompatible with freedom of speech.¹⁴ In addition to being the main targets of racially motivated crime in Hungary, Roma suffer significant disadvantage within the criminal justice system and are heavily over-represented amongst the prison population.¹⁵

V. Roma Politics: a Challenge for the Self-Government System

It is clear that in recent years the factors contributing to the emergence of Roma politics (the need to represent the interests of Roma people in order for them to enjoy equality with other citizens) has intensified greatly. Therefore, in order for Hungary to avoid a political crisis (as well as the economic and social costs of maintaining a disadvantaged and impoverished Roma population) the minority self-government system needs to be able to address and reduce Roma disadvantage and establish equality of opportunity. However, the self-government system is primarily designed to enable minority populations to enjoy cultural autonomy. It also contains scope for minority interest representation and Roma politics presents an important test for the self-government system in regard to the extent to which these provisions can be exploited to address the needs of Roma people.

The pluralism of Roma politics represents another significant challenge for the self-government system. There is an ongoing debate within national Roma politics regarding appropriate relationship between the state and Roma organisations. In addition to this ideological division, the scale of the problems facing those whom activists seek to represent and the continual problems of attracting funding means that Roma politics is particularly competitive. It was

¹³ Hetivilággazdaság, 1 May 1998

¹⁴ Constitutional Court, Decision 30 1992, V.26

¹⁵ L Huszár, “Romák, börtönök, sztatisztikák” *Amaro Drom*, August 1997

therefore a serious error for the election of the first NGMS-G to be held in Szolnok, where one of the leading factions in Roma politics, Lungo Drom, has its headquarters, as this sent a signal to the electors that the government favoured one faction over the others. Furthermore, the electoral system employed did not allow for the proportional representation of the various electoral groups leading to all fifty-three places being won by the Lungo Drom coalition, thus creating the danger that the NGMS-G might be used as a tool for the promotion of one faction in Roma politics rather than acting as the representative body of the Roma population as a whole. The self-government system is particularly vulnerable to such a situation, as unlike parliamentary systems of representative democracy, it provides no role for an ‘opposition’ and seriously undermines the status of unsuccessful candidates as the ‘legitimate’ representation of the minority (at the national level) becomes the monopoly of the national minority self-government.

VI. The Structure and Initiatives of the NGMS-G

Regional Offices

The main problems confronting the newly elected NGMS-G stemmed from the novelty of the self-government system. While the Minorities Law identifies a number of areas of responsibility and rights for national minority self-governments, lack of precedent as well as of an Executive Decree (which could more closely define the role of the NGMS-G) meant that the organization had to explore for itself the extent of its powers. Throughout its four years (1995-8), the first NGMS-G consistently demanded that changes be made to the Minorities Law which its president, Farkas Florian, described as “not the most successful of legal constructions”. These demands focused on the need to clarify the relationship between self-governments (national and local) and their corresponding governmental authorities (the state and local government) and of the link between local and national self-governments (in effect the right to set up county level self-governments).¹⁶ It is a testament to the political weakness of the NGMS-G (as well as of the other national minority self-governments which made similar demands) that these anomalies within the Minorities Law have yet to be resolved. The NGMS-G was also a consistent advocate

¹⁶ Lungo Drom, May 1997: 16-17

of minority representation in Parliament (a requirement of the Constitution) which was debated and rejected by the National Assembly in February 1998.

In the absence of changes to the Minorities Law, the NGMS-G was forced to set up its own form of intermediate minority representation from out of its own resources. By 1997, twenty-three regional offices had been set up operating in eighteen counties. Each of these was headed by a NGMS-G member and each county was represented on the Coordination Council of the NGMS-G.¹⁷ The Office for National and Ethnic minorities also appreciated the importance of the regional offices and in December 1995 asked all county councils to consider the NGMS-G offices as their main negotiating partner. However, this initiative served to illustrate the problem of the unofficial status of the offices. Whilst many councils accepted this proposal, some complained about the additional costs that such a relationship would entail and others questioned the legitimacy and competence of the regional offices.¹⁸ The main role of the regional offices was to facilitate the link between the NGMS-G and the 477 local Roma self-governments. However, in this matter they did not prove an unqualified success as research in 1998 found that less than half of local Roma self-governments approved of the work of the NGMS-G and that 45 per cent claimed to have either a bad or no relationship at all with it.¹⁹ Unfortunately, no research has been carried out into the workings of the regional offices so it is difficult to evaluate the full scope and effectiveness of their activities.

The NGMS-G's Budget

Between 1995 and 1998 the NGMS-G received 457.5 million forints directly from the state budget as well as 60 million forints (in MOL, the state oil company, shares) prescribed by the Minorities Law and 61.215m ft for the purchase and refurbishment of a headquarters. The NGMS-G also won smaller sums from ministries and foundations for specific projects. Most of this income (approximately two-thirds) was spent on the running costs of the NGMS-G itself

¹⁷ Jelentes az Országos Cigány Kisebbségi Önkormányzat (OCKÖ) pénzügyi-gazdasági tevékenységének vizsgálati tapasztalatairól, Állami Számvev_szék - v1008-48/1997: 4

¹⁸ Összefoglaló a cigányság helyzetének javítására irányuló tevékéségek területi összehangolásáról szóló CKT 1.sz.ajanlássalkapcsolatos megyei önkormányzati véleményekr_l, Cigányügyi Koordinációs Tanács Titkársága, November 1996 and the full responses of the local authorities (unpublished)

¹⁹ A kisebbségi önkormányzatok működésének országos tapasztalatai (kutatási zárótanulmány-unpublished), MTA

(including the regional offices) and its office, which employed half a dozen people.²⁰ The rest of the money was spent on supporting organizations or specific projects.²¹ Due to its own limited resources and the absence of financial guarantees from government, the NGMS-G was not able to exploit the rights granted to it in the Minorities Law with regard to setting up institutions such as a theatre, library etc. as part of establishing cultural autonomy. However, in 1997-8 the NGMS-G was given 180 million forints by the Ministry of Culture for the establishment and running of a National Gypsy Cultural Centre.²²

Despite its limited financial resources the NGMS-G did manage to launch some high profile projects. The main one of these was the establishment of the Szolnok based Roma Chance Foundation (Roma Esély Alapítvány) and school supported jointly with the organization Lungo Drom. The aim of the school is to help disadvantaged children (both Roma and non-Roma) achieve a vocational education. The NGMS-G was successful in overcoming initial difficulties with the local authority over the site of the school and in 1997 the first students graduated.²³ However, the NGMS-G leadership was disappointed that their initiative did not receive the level of financial support and prestige enjoyed by the Gandhi Foundation and Grammar School. Consequently, the NGMS-G demanded that the Gandhi be brought under its control, however given its standing as a flagship educational initiative and the opposition of many Roma intellectuals to such a move, it is unlikely that the NGMS-G will be able to achieve its aim in the foreseeable future.

The other main initiative of the NGMS-G was its house building programme aimed at helping poor Roma families find the necessary 35 per cent contribution by which they can qualify for a government house building/buying grant. The NGMS-G successfully lobbied for its scheme to be included in the government's Medium Term Action Plan announced in 1997 with the aspiration that it might win a proportion of the 100 million forints set aside by government to support innovative house building initiatives. To manage the programme the NGMS-G set up the Social House-building Public Works Company (Szociális Építő Közhasznu Társaság) with which it also

²⁰ Állami Számvev_szék, op. cit.

²¹ Lungo Drom, December 1997: 4-5

²² 1072/1998. (VI.22) Korm. határozat: Amaro Drom, January 1998: 14-5; Magyar Hírlap, 7 February 1998

²³ Lungo Drom, May 1997: 4-5

hoped to run a job creation scheme within the public works programme. It was initially hoped that 500 homes would be built,²⁴ but problems in securing finance and in organizing projects saw this ambition scaled down to 250. By the end of 1998 only 100 houses had been completed.²⁵ The NGMS-G also set up its own research organization, the Gypsy Research Centre (Cigány Kutató Intézet) and launched its own newspaper, Cigány Hírlap, for which it received 9 million forints in 1996 from the Public Foundation for National and Ethnic Minorities (Nemzeti és Etnikai Kisebbségekért Közalapítvány).²⁶ However, failure to account for this money meant that no further support was forthcoming in the following year and the paper ceased publication.

VII. The NGMS-G and the Public Foundations

Though its own resources were limited, the NGMS-G enjoyed a degree of influence over significant sums of public money allocated for Roma programmes and initiatives through its representation on the board of trustees of the Public Foundation for Hungarian Gypsies (Magyarországi Cigányokért Közalapítvány) (PFHG) and the Public Foundation for National and Ethnic Minorities (Nemzeti és Etnikai Kisebbségekért Közalapítvány) (PFNEM). However, the NGMS-G was dissatisfied with these arrangements and sought to increase its influence over the allocation of these sources of public money. The PFHG was set up in 1995 to support subsistence programmes, the education of Roma pupils through grants and to help establish and develop Roma businesses.²⁷ In 1996 it had a budget of 150 m ft rising to 250 million in 1998. The NGMS-G delegated five of the foundation's twenty-two trustees but lobbied "to exercise full rights over its supervision and management".²⁸

Within the Board of Trustees of the PFNEM, which has the role of allocating public money to

²⁴ Amaro Drom, April 1996: 10

²⁵ Lungo Drom, October 1997: 12-13; Magyar Hírlap, 30 November 1998

²⁶ 100 Nap, Budapest: OCKO, 1995

²⁷ Magyarországi Cigányokért Közalapítvány 1996-98, Budapest: MCKA, 1998

²⁸ Az Országos Cigány Kisebbségi Önkormányzat cigánypolitika javaslata a Kormány részére, 14 August 1998 (Roma Sajtóközpont)

minority organizations and media, each minority has one delegate and other trustees represent a various ministries. In order to increase its influence over the resources, which would significantly strengthen the political position of its leadership vis-à-vis rival Roma organizations, the NGMS-G leadership lobbied to be given a greater role in the nomination of trustees and in the way money is allocated.²⁹ However, the main financial ambition of the first NGMS-G was for the various ministries to set aside funds for Roma projects (estimated at least one billion forints) and which the organization would exercise a decisive influence over.³⁰ The NGMS-G achieved partial success in this area in 1998 when it reached agreement with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development to manage a 100 million forint fund set aside to help Roma win regional development grants.

VIII. Empire Building

The desire of the first NGMS-G to gather ever greater sums of public money under its own control exposed a significant problem inherent in trying to manage a complex political issue (the circumstances of the Roma population) through a mechanism primarily designed for establishing the cultural autonomy of minority populations. Roma programmes inevitably require the specific allocation of large sums of public money and it is not surprising that ‘legitimate’ national representative body of the Roma wishes to play a role in how this money is allocated. However, the Minorities Law makes no provision for national minority self-governments to exercise such a role and, as shall be shown, national minority self-governments are not subject to the same level of accountability as other public organizations. Even more problematic is that given the competitiveness of Roma politics and the decisive role public funding plays as a means of attracting support and in defining relationships between organisations, increasing the amount of money directly controlled by the NGMS-G can lead to these public funds being allocated for political reasons rather than on basis of objective criteria.

Therefore, it was particularly worrying when, in 1998, the NGMS-G announced that “we must

²⁹ NGMS-G submission to MPs (Roma Sajtóközpont): OCKÖ cigánypolitika javaslata op. cit.

³⁰ Magyar Nemzet, 7 February 1998: OCKO cigánypolitika javaslata op. cit.

move towards autonomy in welfare provision".³¹ No evidence was presented to indicate that the NGMS-G could be capable of undertaking such responsibility, but any such move would have serious implications for the rights and status of Roma people as citizens. Furthermore, given the high rates of unemployment and poverty amongst the Roma population, giving the NGMS-G responsibilities in this area would give it enormous political influence over the lives of a large number of very vulnerable people.

The empire-building tendency of the first NGMS-G also manifested itself in attempts to reorganize the structure of government in order to increase its status and power. In its submission to MPs prior to the debate in Parliament on the situation of Roma in March 1996, the NGMS-G demanded that the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities (ONEM) be abolished and replaced with two secretariats, one for 'nationalities' and a separate one for Roma. The NGMS-G argued that the ONEM had fulfilled its function with the passage of the Minorities Law and was now an obstacle to direct contact between government and national minority self-governments. This position was widely criticized, not only by Roma activists and representatives of the other minorities, but also by MPs and academics who took the position expressed by Minister of State Éva Orsos (President of ONEM) that the separation of Roma issues into a special secretariat could only weaken the effectiveness of Roma interest representation within government.³² Undeterred, the NGMS-G leadership continued to argue for changes to the governmental structure, though by 1997 its demand had been amended to the creation of separate ministry for minority affairs with the NGMS-G having the right of veto over the nomination of the official responsible for Roma affairs.³³ The following year the NGMS-G president, Florian Farkas called for this post to be made at the level of Secretary of State.³⁴

The preoccupation of the first NGMS-G with trying to seize greater status for itself within the governmental structure was particularly surprising given the important changes that were made within the Office or National and Ethnic Minorities during this period and which were aimed precisely at increasing the role of the NGMS-G within the policy-making process. In December

³¹ Lungo Drom. February 1998: 12

³² Documents of the Roma Sajtóközpont

³³ Hetivilágazgazság, 25 September 1997: 55

³⁴ Magyar Hírlap, 21 February 1998

1995 the Coordination Council for Gypsy Affairs (Cigánügyi Koordinációs Tanács) was set up. This was an integral part of the Horn government's policy of coordinating measures to address Roma disadvantage, which Farkas Florian claimed to be a product of joint work between the NGMS-G and the Secretary of State for Minority Affairs, Csaba Tabajdi.³⁵ Headed by the president of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities, senior members of all the main ministries were represented as well as Farkas himself. In other words, the Council provided the president of the NGMS-G with direct access to a wide range of government representatives on a programme which the NGMS-G claimed for its own. The NGMS-G's position within government was further enhanced in April 1996 when the Roma Programme Committee (Roma Programbizottság) was created, headed by the Prime Minister, as an extra guarantee that the government policy (supported by NGMS-G) would be realized. In addition, in 1997 as president of NGMS-G, Farkas received voting rights on the Council of Public Works (Közmunkatanács).

The first NGMS-G's attempts to reorganize government structure in a way which would increase its influence over Roma affairs and the money allocated for Roma programmes had little to do with the perception of being excluded from the policy-making process. Instead, it was based on the desire for the NGMS-G leadership to enhance its political status in the eyes of the Roma population through extending its ability to offer patronage to potential supporters. However, the NGMS-G's empire building also reflected the most characteristic feature of policy towards the Roma over the last fifteen years, namely the preoccupation with political/administrative structure at the expense of the development of programmes able to tackle the serious problems facing much of the Roma population. In order to examine this theory more closely it is necessary to examine the Horn government's Medium-Term Action Plan for improving the situation of the Gypsy population, which was developed between 1995-97.

IX. The Medium-Term Action Plan

The four years of the first NGMS-G coincided with first attempt by a postcommunist government to develop a comprehensive package of policies designed to tackle the multiple

³⁵ Magyar Narancs, 7 March 1996: 14-16

disadvantages of the Roma population. The new governmental approach was outlined in a government decree in December 1995.³⁶ As previously noted, the NGMS-G claimed responsibility for developing the contents of the policy which explicitly required that the NGMS-G to be consulted by ministries in drafting their proposals. The 1995 decree covered a wide variety of areas including education, employment, housing, health and anti-discrimination. However, the decree represented only a preliminary stage in the policy process requiring ministries and national agencies to develop plans that could be worked into a comprehensive action plan, which was finally announced in July 1997.

The Medium-Term Action Plan represented a necessary re-focussing of government activity away from defining and regulating the abstraction of ethnicity towards policies designed to achieve practical improvements in the lives of Roma citizens. The plan not only covered the most important areas of government responsibility but, in its aspiration to coordinate a wide variety of policy initiatives, it created the opportunity for more effective and efficient use of public resources to tackle highly complex issues. However, an examination of the contents of the Action Plan also reveals its serious limitations and it contained nothing which would lead to a tangible improvement in a significant number of Roma people's lives before the next round of self-government elections in 1998.³⁷

The Action Plan's sixty proposals contained very few new initiatives and the majority of its programmatic commitments sought only the extension of existing programmes (such as the Social Land Fund, public work scheme, grants for Roma pupils, increasing the number of Roma education hostels etc.) In addition, despite being almost two years in the making, almost half the proposals in the Action Plan were limited to either reviewing or carrying out further research into the effects of existing policies. Whilst the generation of accurate information is unquestionably necessary if policy is to be successful, the emphasis on this within the Action Plan meant that the plan itself contained no specific targets against which the effectiveness of the various policy initiatives could be measured. Therefore, despite the stated aim of the plan being "to improve the living conditions of the Gypsy population" it failed to identify what this exactly

³⁶ 1025/1995. (XII.12) Korm. határozat a cigányság helyzetével kapcsolatos legsürgetőbb feladatokról

³⁷ Lungo Drom, December 1997: 4-5

meant, what extent of ‘improvement’ was expected and by when. Notably, the kind of timescale to which the plan was working was indicated by the government in its Report on the Situation of the Gypsy Community in Hungary which stated that “it would take the Gypsy community at least two decades to reach the level of integration which had developed by the 1980s, and the full-scale integration of the Gypsy community is conceivable only in a historical perspective”.³⁸

In effect, the Medium-Term Action Plan set an agenda for government action for a considerable number of years into the future. In itself this is a significant advance as noted by John Murray, Coordinator of Gypsy Affairs at the Council of Europe, who praised Hungary for outlining the government’s commitments to Roma in writing.³⁹ However, for the agenda to be realized a number of potential political hazards need to be overcome. In particular, future governments must agree to be bound by commitments made by their predecessors and to invest the time, effort and resources necessary to carry out the agenda. This problem was illustrated following the general election in May 1998 when the new government announced a review of the Action Plan, took the ONEM out of the Prime Minister’s Office and placed it within the Ministry of Justice, and abolished both the Coordination Council and the Roma Programme Committee. It was more than a year before the Orbán government presented its own version of these bodies and adopted a re-worded, but largely unchanged version of the Action Plan.⁴⁰ This process serves to illustrate the extent of the political challenge facing the NGMS-G and other representative organizations in the coming years in pursuing Roma interests as governments juggle with their own political priorities and exercise their right to restructure the machinery of state.

X. The first NGMS-G and Roma Politics

The Problem of Accountability

The self-government system is a novel political experiment which needs to evolve over time in accordance with experience gained about how it functions in practise. As previously noted with

³⁸ E Szilágyi & A Heizer, *Report on the Situation of the Gypsy Community in Hungary*, Budapest: Office for National and Ethnic Minorities, 1996: 20

³⁹ Lungo Drom, October 1997: 7

⁴⁰ 1130/1998. (X.6) Korm.határozat

regard to its tendency towards empire building, the activities of the first NGMS-G demonstrated the problems inherent in trying to manage the dynamic and complex political situation of the Roma through a mechanism primarily constructed for establishing cultural autonomy. The activities of the first NGMS-G also exposed the failure of the rules governing the self-government system to clearly identify to whom national minority self-governments are accountable. National self-governments are elected by an electoral college made up largely of local minority self-government representatives. Therefore, neither the Hungarian electorate nor members of the minority itself has any direct say in the composition of national self-governments and thus has no means to call its members to account. Aware of this problem, the position of the first NGMS-G, as expressed by its vice-president Miklós Pálffy, was that the NGMS-G represented the interests of local self-governments.⁴¹ However, the electoral college exists only for one day and there is no mechanism by which it can be reconvened, and even if it should be, it would exercise no authority. Neither are national self-governments accountable to the Hungarian Parliament nor, with the exception of the State Audit Office, which has the right to investigate their financial affairs, to any government body.

While the autonomy of national self-governments is not really a problem amongst the other minorities, where there is generally consensus about the function of national self-governments and their activities, this is not the case with the Roma. Yet, reforming the system to achieve greater accountability runs the risks of either offending the other minorities (by infringing upon their autonomy) or abandoning the principle that all minorities are treated equally by the Minorities Law. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the first NGMS-G demonstrated that unless mechanisms are put in place to ensure that it can be made to give account of the methods and substance of its decision making processes there is a danger of the self-government system losing its credibility. Furthermore, unless the NGMS-G can be made to function in a more open and democratic manner, it is unlikely that Roma interest representation can become sufficiently capable to ensure that government pursues policies that reflect the needs and circumstances of the Roma population, thus ensuring that the serious social, economic and political problems of the current situation persist for longer than necessary.

⁴¹ Amaro Drom, February 1997: 9

In the absence of formal mechanisms of accountability, the Hungarian public is largely dependent on whatever information the NGMS-G chooses to make public about how it makes its decisions. Farkas Florian has admitted that “we had to adopt a certain flexibility, yet democratic procedure for reaching decisions”.⁴² However, throughout its term in office the first NGMS-G was dogged by accusations from both within and outside of the organization that the “the rules for organising and running [the NGMS-G] gave only the most minimal rights to its members, in this way the activities of the leadership and of the central office were completely unsupervised”.⁴³ In 1997 an NGMS-G member, Gyorgy Rostas-Farkas, accused the NGMS-G leadership of taking decisions that were ‘unethical’ and ‘illegal’ and alleged that the NGMS-G had not prepared any minutes of its proceeding for two years.⁴⁴ Another member, József Krasznai, also expressed his frustration with the arbitrary management of the NGMS-G describing his experience as a member as “we meet every quarter, but no documents are ever prepared, throughout the years of the NGMS-G we have suffered from a complete absence of information”.⁴⁵ In February 1998, three of the leading figures in Roma politics outside of the NGMS-G published an open letter to the Prime Minister expressing their frustration and concern at the secretive way in which the NGMS-G was run and arguing that the failure of it to publish its internal documents was a breach of the Constitution.⁴⁶

Question marks over the level of democracy within the first NGMS-G are extremely damaging not only to the organisation itself, Roma politics in general, but also to the reputation of the self-government system as a whole. Further cause for concern was generated in 1998 when the NGMS-G president, Farkas Florian had to ask President Göncz for a pre-trial pardon in order to prevent a two year long police investigation into his role in financial irregularities, found at one of Lungo Drom’s foundations, from coming to court.⁴⁷ Later that year Farkas and Lungo Drom were also ordered to pay out over 13 million forints by a court for breach of contract over the purchase of a business without their having means to pay for it.⁴⁸ In 1997, the State Audit Office

⁴² Amaro Drom, April 1996: 8-11

⁴³ Amaro Drom, April 1996: 13

⁴⁴ Amaro Drom, February 1997: 12

⁴⁵ Amaro Drom (melleklet), May 1997: 14

⁴⁶ Amaro Drom, March 1998: 5

⁴⁷ Gy Kerényi, ‘Elsikálva’, Magyar Narancs, 19 March 1998: 16-17

⁴⁸ T Bandor, ‘Vadásztalalom vége?’ Amaro Drom, July 1998: 3

carried out a thorough investigation into the financial management of the first NGMS-G and found no serious problems, however, given Farkas' ambition to exercise ever greater control over increasingly large sums of public money (Farkas was re-elected president in 1998), it has become a matter of urgency that the NGMS-G makes its procedures more open to public scrutiny. It is therefore unfortunate that no independent research has been done in this area because the NGMS-G leadership has obstructed researchers from carrying out such work.

The relationship between the first NGMS-G and national Roma organizations

Even more damaging to the political credibility of the first NGMS-G was its failure to work towards healing the divisions within national Roma politics. In part this problem lay with the structure of the self-government system which, through its winner-takes-all electoral system for national self-governments and the status of these bodies as the sole 'legitimate' representative of a minority, is not well designed to cope with the competitive and pluralistic politics of the Roma. However, the system was not created to promote the interests of one factional interest above another, but to enhance the status and authority of the minority through formal representation. However, the extent to which a national self-government embraces other strands of political opinion within its minority population is left entirely to the organization itself.

The position of the first NGMS-G's leadership towards cooperation with other Roma activists was signalled shortly after its election in April 1995 by Farkas Florian who qualified his enthusiasm by arguing that "in the past there have been some who have sought to make things impossible, if that happens we will not bother with cooperation".⁴⁹ In April 1996, an open letter to the Prime Minister was signed by forty Roma and non-Roma, including seven NGMS-G members complaining that "the NGMS-G maintains no links with the majority of Roma organizations or local Roma self-governments".⁵⁰ In response to this letter a meeting was held in the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities designed to ease tensions between the NGMS-G leadership and Roma civil organizations at which the responsible ministers Éva Orsos and Tabajdi Csaba stressed the importance of good relations within Roma politics. Nevertheless, little progress was made and in February 1997 three leading figures in national Roma politics

⁴⁹ Népszabadság, 3 May 1995

⁵⁰ Amaro Drom, May 1997: 19

Béla Osztojkán, Aladár Horváth and Kozma Blanka refused to take up their mandates as NGMS-G members to which they were entitled following the forced resignation of sitting members.⁵¹

In effect Farkas Florian wished to use the self-government system to restructure Roma politics in a way which gave less influence to his long-standing critics at the national level. In reviewing the four years of the first NGMS-G he concluded “I consider the greatest achievement that the NGMS-G has survived and that we have created a political model, a structure, which is manageable, functioning and generalisable”.⁵² The long-term problem with this approach is that using the self-government system to exclude significant Roma activists compels those activists to question the legitimacy of the self-government system itself. This not only undermines the credibility of the self-government system as a model for minority representation but also entrenches division within Roma politics, thus limiting its political effectiveness.

XI. Conclusion

The election of the first ever NGMS-G in April 1995 was a moment of genuine historical significance, not only for the Roma minority, but also for Hungary as a whole. As a novel and unprecedented system for the political management of minority issues, the minority self-government system will evolve over time taking into account experience gained about how it operates in practice. The situation of Roma people represents the greatest challenge for the system. Roma politics itself is not a product of the self-government system but is a reflection of the historical development of Hungary as a country and of the Roma population within it. There is an inconsistency between the fundamental dynamic of Roma politics to achieve the equality of Roma people with regard to the rights and opportunities enjoyed by other citizens and the primary role of the self-government system to promote the ‘difference’ of minority identities through facilitating cultural autonomy. Furthermore, the construction of a formal mechanism for the representation of Roma interests has its origin in the re-evaluation of the relationship of the state towards Roma people within the context of reducing public expenditure. For the self-

⁵¹ Népszava, 8 May 1997

⁵² Lungo Drom, July-August 1998: 4-5

government system to succeed as a model of minority interest representation with respect to the Roma these tensions need to be addressed and the system made capable of facilitating a significant reduction in the disadvantages faced by Roma people and of establishing genuine equality of opportunity.

The ambiguous experience of the first NGMS-G illustrated the scale of the challenges ahead, though by identifying these provides the opportunity to resolve them. The role of the NGMS-G in constructing the Medium-Term Action Plan and its input into its implementation was a positive indication that the self-government system can be used to address Roma disadvantage. However, the plan itself was very limited in ambition, demonstrating that the self-government system has not sufficiently compensated for the structural political weakness of the Roma population as an interest community. This is a matter of concern as in the coming years Roma policy must overcome a number of significant political hurdles if even its limited provisions are to be realized.

The Action Plan has also illustrated the need to urgently resolve the precise role Roma interest representation, and of the NGMS-G in particular, with regard to political responsibility for and financial management of programmes specifically targeted at the Roma people. At present the self-government system is not well constructed for dealing with the scale and complexity of the political challenges posed by the situation of the Roma, which differs significantly from that of the other minorities. The tendency towards empire building of the first NGMS-G exposed the self-government system's vulnerability to a drift towards divisive ethnic nationalism. The NGMS-G's drive to take the management of Roma policy away from the machinery of the state and place it under its own largely unaccountable jurisdiction must distort and undermine the internal momentum towards the creation of equal opportunities on the basis of citizenship.

However, the activities of the first NGMS-G also demonstrated that it is not only the scale of the needs of the Roma population which poses problems for the self-government system, but also the competitive, pluralist character of national level Roma politics. To protect the credibility of the self-government system a method needs to be found to ensure that the NGMS-G does not become a tool by which one faction amongst Roma activists promotes its own sectional interests

at the expense of representing the Roma population as a whole. This means consideration needs to be given to how the NGMS-G is elected and to whom it is politically accountable, as well as to what role Roma civil organizations can play in the policy-making and implementation process. Though important in itself, the real historical significance of the first NGMS-G was its marking of the latest stage in the ongoing evolution of Roma identity into a political phenomenon. For the self-government system to succeed as an experiment in minority representation, its evolution needs to be guided by the lessons to be learned for this history.

Biographical Note

Dr Martin Kovats is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, UK. He has published a number of articles in Britain and Hungary on Roma political development and has recently completed a research project investigating the operations of Hungary's unique mechanism for minority representation, the minority self-government system. Dr Kovats' work focuses primarily on the implications for Roma politics and policy in central Europe of EU enlargement. He is currently working on a book on Roma politics.