

# THE GOVERNMENT'S ROMA POLICY IN THE PAST FOUR YEARS

## **History**

The operation of the government led by Viktor Orbán between 1998 and 2002 gave ground to a great deal of dispute also from the aspect of the integration of the Roma. Many felt that this issue was completely pushed to the background, while others held that those four years brought significant results and progress. I do not think that I am very wrong if I wager that similar ambivalence characterises the workings of the Medgyessy and the first Gyurcsány governments.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of the Gandhi Secondary Grammar School, this national institution of the Hungarian Roma, was associated with the last years of the 1998-2002 government cycle. The Gandhi Secondary Grammar School was built from central budget funds under a frame agreement concluded with the Gandhi Public Foundation in December 2000, and it was also completed as schedule by April 2002.

As far as the Roma issue is concerned, two other key areas of the Orbán government were the scholarship programme targeted at young Roma and the support of the initiatives against discrimination. Both programmes were said to be supported with substantial amounts. If we briefly review the data of the NEKH (National and Ethnical Minority Office) we find the following:

In the 2001/2002 school year a total of 12,777 young Roma (7,027 students in senior grade primary school, 4,505 students in secondary school, 1,217 students in college and university and 28 students studying abroad) received study scholarships.

In the first semester of the 2002/2003 school year a total of HUF 499,190,000 was disbursed in scholarships for 18,911 people (9,996 in primary school, 7,103 in secondary school, 1,748 in higher education and 64 students studying abroad).

Already at that time many people thought these figures controversial. According to the 2001 census, there were 81,099 Gypsy students in primary education, 13,035 in secondary education and 188 in higher education. It is estimated that about 0.3% of the Roma population have ongoing or already obtained collage or university degree. It seemed that this scholarship system was not achieving the desired effect because the

support was either received by non-Roma students or the studies led to the loss of the Roma identity or there could be some other underlying causes for the contradictory figures. (We received certain answers to this question in the past years.)

It was also a 2001 development that the Ministry of Justice—with the involvement of the National Gypsy Minority Self Government and the National and Ethnical Minority Office—established the Anti-Discrimination Roma Customer Service Network with effect October 15, 2001. The Ministry of Justice allocated funds from its own budget for the operation of the Network and for the further training of the lawyers working in the Network. The rights protection office started operation in 24 locations with the involvement of 22 lawyers. The aim of the Network was to set up a legal aid service which focuses expressly on matters where the clients suffered legal injury because of their Roma origin. The mandate of the lawyers involved in the Network covered legal advice, filing lawsuits in discrimination cases, representation of their clients in court and these services were free of charge for the client.

In addition to the direct government involvement the Minority Office, in cooperation with the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary, also supported the activities of the civil rights protection offices and the conflict management and prevention organisations and institutions. In each of 2001 and 2002 it allocated HUF 20 million for the support of the civil organisations involved in such activities. On the basis of the applications in 2001, 21 offices, and in 2002, 29 offices received support, including HUF 1 million support for the inter-active legal aid service of Radio C. This radio station advised inquirers in legal matters in weekly live broadcasts with the involvement of lawyers hired by the station.

As part of a medium-term action package the Public Foundation for Hungarian Roma invited applications for a HUF 25 million budget to support the operation of the Gypsy Rights Protection Offices, which budget it annually increased from its reserves because of the large number of applications. In 2002 it supported 30 organisations on 74 applications in a total amount of HUF 37.4 million. These sources were further increased by the second sub-project of the Phare Roma Integration Programme, which consisted of two parts. The first sub-project focussed on the development of the Roma rights protection office network and the second on the support of anti-discrimination training planned in seven regions of the country. The applications were invited for the

development of the rights protection offices in July 2001, and grants were allocated to 11 already operating and 4 new offices. Under this programme HUF 53 million was allocated for office development projects. In 2002 the already operating offices received HUF 3 million, and the new offices HUF 5 million support to purchase office equipment.

Before the elections Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Flórián Farkas, president of the Lungo Drom and the National Gypsy Minority Self Government concluded a cooperation pact. They planned to set up the Roma Integration Office, whose operation the government was to evaluate every half year. But this plan fell through because of the government change.

### **Four years – two governments**

The period 2002-2006 has to be divided into two parts because of the change of government. But in the respect of Roma affairs this period did not see any sharp change: what we can witness is rather something analysts compare to a slowing car. 2002 saw high ambitions of ‘changing the world’, by 2003 the processes slowed down as a consequence of the permanent reshuffles, and from 2004 onwards the whole thing seemed to be moving in the same place. In our view this process was essentially influenced by two factors: firstly, by the disintegrating effect of the reshuffles that became almost permanent after a while, with each new leader coming up with new intentions and new ideas. The apparatus always had to wait long months to pick up momentum, to master the new directions which, after a short while, usually turned out not to be so new either. Secondly, and this is even more important than the first one as it had perhaps the most influence on the government’s role in Roma matters, was the gradual ‘philosophy’ change, the crystallisation of the principles of the Roma policy. The most characteristic feature of this was that Roma matters gradually ‘slipped over’ to the area of social policy.

### **The first two years – high ambitions**

The year 2002 brought undoubtedly significant changes in the Roma policy sphere and in ‘high politics’ alike. Not only the Roma issue appeared in the parliamentary election campaign in the spring of that year (in contrast to the previous elections), but also

politicians of Roma origin surfaced both on the left and the right side. And these politicians campaigned on such national lists, which eventually produced four certain finalists in the elections. Eventually, once again there were Roma members of parliament representing the major national parties. Flórián Farkas, József Varga, Mihály Lukács started work in the Fidesz faction, and László Teleki did in the MSZP faction. By way of another sign of the continuing rise of Roma political life, in the autumn of 2002, 998 settlements elected a Gypsy minority local government, 4 settlements elected a Roma person for their mayor and 545 Roma members were elected into the local governments, in contrast to 1998 when there were about 3,000 Roma representatives in 740 Gypsy minority local governments.

It could be expected after such preliminaries that the Roma policy would be revisited at government level, too. It could also play a role in this that in the person of Aladár Roma the prime minister appointed a Roma advisor to assist his work. So the new government that took office in the summer of 2002 set as a key objective to promote the social equality of the Roma. A special sub-chapter of the new government programme (although many people found it strange already at that time that the ‘Social Policy’ part) was dedicated to the measures that need to be taken in the interest of the Roma, after a brief evaluation:<sup>96</sup>

*„C. Tasks connected with the social and political integration of the Roma in Hungary*

*1. We consider the social sinking of our Roma compatriots the consequence of an extensive and dramatic social process, and not an ethnic problem. The rise and the fullest possible social integration of the Roma is our shared interest. So in order to prevent further social depression and ensure equal opportunities, we are launching an extensive anti-poverty programme.*

*2. The government hereby restores the rank of government coordination in Roma policy matters. It assigns appropriate budget instruments to the tasks of the programme developed with the involvement of the affected people and appoints such cooperation forms that ensure the broadest possible social unity.*

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<sup>96</sup> „To act now, and for everyone! Programme of the government of the national democratic coalition Hungary 2002-2006“ (*Parliamentary motion no. H19.05.25.2002*)

3. We will submit and approve an anti-discrimination law. We will punish with special sanctions any discriminating action which results in the social exclusion or in the precipitation of such exclusion, of the Roma. We will examine what effective tools can be used against hate speech.

4. We will restore needs, establish communication based on equality between the dominant society and the Roma. We lay emphasis on good quality mediator training, and promote the increase of the number of Roma professionals with scholarships and other methods.

6. We will prepare a long-term programme for the abolition of the Roma slum colonies, for creating living conditions worthy of human beings and for promoting mobility.

7. We support from budget sources the human rights organisations that take action against discrimination, and assist the formation and work of the Roma civil rights protection organisations. We intend to increase the role of the civil associations in the prevention and management of local conflicts, and in the development and implementation of programmes promoting integration.

8. The preservation of the ethnic-cultural identity of the Roma is to be implemented together with the process of social integration. We shall grant the same statutory guarantees to protection of the Gypsy language and culture which are enjoyed by the other minorities.

9. The basis of the comprehensive anti-poverty programme of the government is the development of education and training, and the assurance of the equal opportunities of the children. We intend to reduce the disadvantages rooted in poverty already at the stage of kindergarten education. We will create opportunities for the employment of Roma kindergarten teachers and assistants and for the establishment of relations based on trust between families and the kindergarten. We will take appropriate measures to ensure that more disadvantaged children receive kindergarten care for a longer time and under special programmes, if necessary.

10. The government pays special attention to the situation of the Roma in the schools, to their integration and the eradication of segregation. We will review the system of transfers and prevent that Roma children who are declared private pupils or students are excluded from regular school education.

11. *We consider the right of the Roma to strengthen their own culture and education a constitutional right. We encourage and support the operation of classes and schools that consider such education a priority, but this may not become a basis for segregation in education.*

12. *With the help of teachers and family counsellors we shall enhance the awareness of Roma families to the importance of education. We shall make a special point of promoting the vocational training of the children of poor families, and improving their participation rate in higher education. Together with the civil associations and those businesses that are willing to sponsor students, we will launch preparatory, scholarship and trainee programmes to support young talented Roma people.*

13. *In higher education and adult education we will launch differentiated Roma programmes. Our aim is to raise the level of education and improve the job opportunities of the Roma population. We will launch development projects that also take into consideration the regional differences. We will also use the existing education and public education infrastructure to achieve this aim.*

14. *We will invest special care in leading back to the world of labour the unemployed Roma. We will instruct the labour centres to employ special Roma employment advisors.*

15. *From among the traditional Roma occupations, we will support the ones which are efficient from economic and environmental aspects, too. We will assist the local governments' land lease and agricultural production promotion initiatives. We will make special point of offering employment opportunities for Roma people in the service sector, tourism and social services as well, not only in low-prestige occupations."*

It is important to emphasise also the part of the chapter on education:

*„4.8. One of the keys to the rise of the Roma population and to changing the prejudiced attitude towards the Roma is education. Therefore:*

- we will ensure the condition for every Roma child to attend kindergarten;*
- we intend to grant targeted support, professional assistance and teaching supplement to those schools and teachers, who efficiently implement the integrated education of Roma students, at the same time we will also support those schools which have been established on civil initiative and which accept Roma children;*

*– we will set up a scholarship fund so that the teacher’s training institutions will train more teachers with Roma identity or commitment, and to ensure that every level of teacher’s training is properly prepared also for the special tasks of the education and training of young Roma people.”*

As first step towards the implementation of the objectives also specified in the government programme, significant organisation changes were implemented in order to break with the old frameworks – appearances at least suggested that something new was in the pipeline. Roma affairs again came under the direct control of the Prime Minister’s Office, a state secretariat and an affiliated Roma Affairs Office were set up for the purpose. For the first time in Hungarian political life, a Roma political state secretary and an office director were appointed. Roma policy issues of strategic importance were transferred under their supervision and direction from the National and Ethnic Minority Office. Similarly, in conjunction with the declared programme of the government, there started the realisation of the concept under which Roma civil servants were to be appointed to the different ministries to manage Roma policy matters in the given area and represent Roma interests.

It seemed that the most important questions would be decided at the peak of public administration (and political control), in the Prime Minister’s Office. The newly formed State Secretariat for Roma Policy and the Roma Affairs Office set to work with tremendous momentum in the following strategic areas:

- With its resolution no. 1186/2002 (XI:5) the government regulated the new institutional order of the social integration of the Roma, and set out those principles which help enforce in practice the objectives laid down in the government programme.

- The organisation was involved in elaborating in what form and manner the Roma should appear in the National Development Plan connected with the upcoming EU accession and the operative programmes.

- The Roma Affairs Council, a consulting body consisting of prominent Roma and non-Roma persons, was established under the leadership of the prime minister. This body was designed to pronounce an opinion in strategic matters and set guidelines.

- The Roma Affairs Office set to completely remodel the government resolution 1047/1999 (V. 5.) in terms of approach and professional content. In the course of this work a new government programme started to take shape for the implementation of the

objectives specified in the Government Programme. This package, which was targeted at the Roma but which was not excluding any other social groups either, was meant as the first element of the government effort to create equal opportunities for all disadvantaged social groups.

After the first few months' work the following priorities began to take shape, which reflected a truly changed approach:

Equal rights – this area comprised, among other things, the elaboration of the anti-discrimination law, the revision of the minority legislation, moderation of the election system and process, the EU-compliant further training of civil servants and the creation of a legal framework for more effective action against crimes of racist motivation.

Improvement of the quality of life—this area comprises, among other things, the implementation of such complex pilot programmes which can serve as an example for the continuous re-integration of the backward regions, the strengthening of health and social services and their operation in a new approach, the clearance of slum colonies and the promotion of business ventures that provide a living for the people of a region.

Education—this area comprises, among other things, the measures aimed at eliminating the inequalities rooted in the entire education system from kindergarten to graduation, including the broadest possible access to kindergarten care, ensuring the background conditions of learning, multicultural education, re-integration of school drop-outs and eradication of segregation in schools.

Employment – this area comprises, among other things, the creation of opportunities for employment in trades that will be competitive also in long term and temporary employment to provide subsistence for people who drop out of the labour market.

Identity- this area comprises, among other things, the creation of a Roma art fund, the support of the community houses and the establishment of international cultural relations.

Social communication—this area comprises, among other things, the efforts aimed at raising the level of tolerance of the majority society, the support of public television and radio programmes dealing with Roma issues and awareness raising to the importance of IT literacy.

According to the plans, an independent multi-sector monitoring system, designed to control and evaluate the use of the funds and the technical implementation of the



projects alike, and to make proposals for the necessary changes, would also have constituted an integral part of this government programme. Departing from these basic principles, the tasks and objectives of the Roma Affairs Office also included the elaboration of a long-term strategic programme representing a new approach and promoting of the equal social opportunities of the Roma.

It should also be mentioned in this context that the work of the Anti-discrimination Inter-ministerial Committee set up in 2001 quickly gathered momentum and by the end of 2002 the Committee came up with the concept of a draft legislation on equal treatment and equal opportunities.

### **The first two years—checked momentum**

The ambitious plans aimed at improving the life of the Roma, which were also laid down in the government programme, and the work that started in the Roma Affairs Office in 2002 promised fundamental change of approach and significant changes in general. But this illusion had to be soon discarded. In vain were, after a long time, as many as four Gypsy members of parliament, in terms of public role they were clearly a disappointment. Many expected that at long last the elected Roma MPs will often and emphatically call the attention of the public to the difficult and often hopeless situation of the Roma. They could even have come to the idea that, putting aside different party interests, they should join forces to make effective politics in the interest of the Hungarian Roma. But this did not happen. In the first two years two of the four MPs failed even to deliver their ‘maiden speech’. Flórián Farkas and László Teleki burdened their fellow MPs with the problems of the Roma for less than 22 minutes altogether.

But László Teleki was given the opportunity to do something to improve the life of the Roma from a government position. His position of political under-secretary of state was always a little shaky in legal terms as he was given the mandate to shape and determine the Roma policy of the government with the involvement of the ministerial commissioners and Roma officers appointed in the different ministries. It turned out within a short time that this did not work in practice. Firstly, the process of appointments grew very slow, and even where the appointments did happen after all ministerial commissioners and Roma officers were put in a civil servant status and as such, under the direction of a given ministry, so the state secretary did not really have the authority to instruct

them or control their work. Despite their best intentions the appointed young Roma officers proved almost powerless in their position. On the one hand, they had little or no public administration experience, and on the other, as beginners they started at the bottom of the hierarchy, so in the absence of true administrative powers they could at best be onlookers rather than shapers of the Roma programmes of the ministries in question. There was one exception to that rule, Viktória Bernáth Mohácsi, who was appointed ministerial commissioner in the Ministry of Education by the will of the junior coalition party. She was the one who ‘condensed’ the political ideas of the SZDSZ in Roma matters and she was given both the opportunity and the support to implement an experiment for integrated education practice. Ms. Mohácsi (and later Gábor Daróczi who followed her in the post) had extreme luck because they had plenty of opportunities to realise their ideas, and also much underlying support which came from those liberal intellectuals who had long been planning these steps.

The intention that created the Roma Affairs Council also went awry. Originally, the organisation rallying prominent Roma and non-Roma personalities was intended as a consulting body, but the majority the participants wanted to have a say in shaping the Roma policy too. So the body was gradually reduced into a protocol organisation, in the last year the members resigned their office one after the other and the initiative slowly died away.

If we look back on the developments it can be seen that the principal engine of the work generated by the election promises was – or rather could have been - the Roma Affairs Office, and especially its leader Judit Berki. But the public administration position of the organisation, which should have been in charge of strategic planning also according to the original intentions, was rather shaky from the very start. It belonged to the Prime Minister’s Office led by Elemér Kiss, and its direct supervision was with Judit Berki in the position of under-secretary of state. László Teleki was also attached to this office. But the relations were unclear from the very start which led to rather strange situations sometimes.

A typical example was the question of revision of the package of medium-term measures. On a political decision which was also conveyed by the secretary of state, the officers and employees of the Office reviewed the question and came to the conclusion that a programme with an entirely new approach had to be developed. Strategic

planning produced a programme whose implementation would have brought qualitative changes in the life of the Roma. However, it became clear in the course of the inter-ministry coordination process that the programme was impossible to be implemented. Such comprehensive programmes can only be realised with a massive concentration of duties and funds. But the political will did not go that far. The ministries wanted to continue the old practice in which themselves decided what programmes, also available for the Roma, they want to implement and how much money they would spend on them from their own budget. Finally this decade-old, unsuccessful but simple practice, whose 'efficiency' is well characterised by research results, received continued political support. Although, the government resolution no. 1021/2004 (III.18) which was approved after much labour reflects the new priorities, we have little information about actual implementation. The execution of the programme remained with the ministries and control with the Inter-ministerial Committee for Gypsy Affairs, whose operation was later criticised both by the incoming minister and department director.) No one had the will to generate true changes in the life of the Roma with targeted and concentrated steps. Rather the view (the already mentioned 'philosophical question') began to strike roots that "there is no such thing as Roma issue". This political view, which became more and more accepted also at public administration level, condemned every institution and programme that targeted expressly the Roma because it conceived them as another form of segregation. Its place was taken by the so-called equal opportunities policy which has no dedicated Roma programme but which rather puts the Roma, the poor and the disabled in one and the same group of questions requiring solution. This political turn, or we can rather call it a philosophical development because several Roma politicians and even more researchers, especially social policy researchers who were also able to exercise influence on the government, endorsed this approach, spelt complete failure for the Roma Affairs Office. It was not able to implement its strategic programmes, the mills of public administration gradually began to grind up its organisation and its staff spent most of their time sorting out irrelevant matters. Their most important tasks were, for example, to comment the new Highway Code rules or the changes to the legislation on the protection of animals.

All in all, the government's Roma policy was determined by spectacular questions which, however, failed to affect masses of Roma. The matter of elimination of the Roma

slums cropped up time and again but never reached completion; committees were formed, only to dissolve not much later. Genuine success, like during the previous administration, could only be achieved in most of the cases with the allocation of the intervention and other – not very large – funds, and with the eternal “hit”, scholarships.

The situation which was already bad enough was further aggravated by the permanent changes and the resultant inability to take decisions. First, Péter Kiss replaced Elemér Kiss at the top of the Prime Minister’s Office, and in the middle of 2003 Katalin Lévai was appointed minister without portfolio in charge of equal opportunities. In each case the apparatus had to wait out what new concept the new manager was to put forward in the matter, whether the programmes developed that far could be implemented or must be revised. The biggest change was undoubtedly brought by the appointment of Katalin Lévai who helped to final victory the concept which denied the existence of the ‘Roma issue’. According to the political concept, programmes of this type only increase the segregation of the Roma because primarily social issues were at stake which, however, should be addressed in the framework of general social policy. Anything ‘left out’ will be ‘handled’ by the equal opportunities policy.

It was with this approach that the anti-discrimination law, which had been missed for years and which also the European Union urged, was developed and approved under the title ‘Act CXXV of 2003 on equal treatment and the promotion of equal opportunities’. In that law the legislator paid an old debt, as the types of discrimination were also determined in the Hungarian legal system. But besides these positive elements the method of putting in the same league the extensive discriminatory practice hitting the Roma with other, completely different problems like disability, sexual identity, etc. received plenty of criticism. Many found this approach offensive. Not to speak about the fact that initially no such institutions were set up which would disclose and sanction segregationist attitudes.

By the end of 2003 the fate of the Roma Affairs Office that had started operation with such high ambitions, was sealed. After the appointment of Katalin Lévai it remained a pending question for a long time whether the office dealing with the Roma would stay inside the Prime Minister’s Office or would be removed from there and a quasi ministry would be set up through the combination of the areas supervised by Katalin Lévai. This latter option was chosen. The Government Office for Equal

Opportunities was established and Roma affairs were relegated to the rank of one of its General Directorates, at department level. In this situation Teleki was gradually pushed into a legal vacuum. Judit Berki did not wish to assist in this situation and resigned her position. With her resignation Roma affairs, which took such a promising start after the change of government, became an empty shell.

### **The first Gyurcsány government**

“Zhanav ke jekh Ungriko them si: le romengo thaj gazhengo them”, Ferenc Gyurcsány included this Lovari sentence in the presentation of his government programme (provoking the heated protests of several MPs, ‘This is the Hungarian parliament’, someone shouted) and then he promised: his government will continue the equal opportunities programme of its predecessor to ensure the integration of the Roma in the community in the fields of education, work, health and culture. He did not cause any disappointment, the already running processes indeed continued, but reorganisations in the first place. After the new government entered into office, there emerged the Ministry for Equal Opportunities with Kinga Göncz in charge, and—for a change—one of its departments was made responsible for ‘Roma affairs’ (by way of an unexpected development this remained so until the end of the government cycle, although the new director of the department Andor Ürmös was only appointed a good half year later). From that time on we cannot really speak about ‘Roma affairs’, at least we could witness few genuine developments also conceivable for the public at large.

One of the focal questions became the abolition of Roma slum colonies. The preparation of this programme started back in 2002, but with the political change, complex implementation looked less and less feasible. ‘Pilot programme’ began to be the dominant term in this matter, which spelt no less than retreat given the large number (400-600) of the slums to be eliminated. Although, initially word went around about a foreign loan borrowing and a HUF 10 billion project, in the end only an experimental programme covering a few localities was launched, and even that rather as a symbolic gesture. (We dedicate a special study to the controversial colony clearance project in our report.)

The ‘success story’, the scholarship programme to which every government liked to refer as their single biggest achievement, suddenly collapsed too. Cases of major

fraud came to light and it also turned out that a large number of non-Roma students received grants under this support programme. The question of the scholarships always presented a fundamental problem because this form of support was given as a kind of implicit social subsidy, on ethnical basis (let us recall state secretary Csaba Hende who said that many Roma families would even beat their children to force them to go to school because they needed their scholarship to keep the family afloat). Under the effective laws anyone may 'claim' to be a Roma, no one will doubt their claim, and also many students only registered in an education institution to get the money and then disappeared. So the disbursement of this support was suspended, causing major disadvantage for those students who were indeed Roma and indeed wanted to study, and whose further education came at risk with the withdrawal of the support. What will be the fate of this form of support, whether it will stay or will be substituted with some other form, is still not to be known.

It was also in the context of the scholarships that the financing practice of the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary (MACIKA) came under scrutiny. They tried in vain for four years to enforce a different concept, they failed to draft such amendment of the articles of association (change of the board of trustees) which the court would also accept. Now, it is rumoured that financial support will be withdrawn from them, the matter of the scholarships has also been removed from their authority, and we do not know any further about the fate of MACIKA.

By way of an unexpected development, at the end of 2005 with a four-party consensus parliament approved the amendment of the minority legislation. This affects the election rules primarily (you could read in our 2004 report several analyses about the failures through decades to carry out the amendment). But not only the acceptance of the amendment was surprising but also the fact that the version not supported by professional circles of the new element of 'registration' was approved. So we will only receive information about the effects and experiences of 'state registration' implemented under the law after the upcoming new elections. In this context, the complications around the National Gypsy Minority Self Government should also be mentioned as these amounted to a decisive 'experience' of this government cycle.

## **Interim note: complications around the National Gypsy Minority Self**

### **Government**

January 2003 started with the election rally and scandal of the National Gypsy Minority Self Government (OCÖ). However, this was not a Gypsy scandal as many people wished to present it, but rather a situation that had been threatening with explosion for a long time, and whose causes were rooted in the legal regulations on the minorities and in the election system. The fact that it came to the surface was caused—for the first time in many years—by a genuine political race. For the first time during the election of the OCÖ members such political forces appeared on the scene which seemed capable of toppling the leaders who had been in power for two cycles. The incumbent ‘rulers’ were naturally less than happy about this development. Not a big problem so far, but it was topped by the impossible election rules. Under these rules the organisers rallied the people eligible to vote—over 4 thousand people in all!—to one place and tried to keep them together until the close of the elections, which meant almost a whole day. The majority of these people came from the country, left home very early in the morning, so they began to get tired as the day wore on. Political disputes and quarrels broke out which, after a while hit such low tones that they actually matched the standard of the 2002 parliamentary election rallies. And when it dawned on the incumbent coalition that they can no longer cling to power, they walked out on the election rally. The vote was naturally held and the National Election Committee (OVB) declared winner the members of the Democratic Roma Coalition. The Lungo Drom coalition led by Flórián Farkas appealed the decision. In principle, there was little chance that the appeal would be upheld because everything went in the same old system, which was regulated less by formal law than by custom, that was also used in the previous two cycles. Yet the Supreme Court upheld the appeal and ordered the election repeated. The principal argument in their explanation was that the 50% participation rate required by the law for quorum was not available in the final vote. However, the quoted regulation only requires such participation rate at the start of the election rally, and does not say anything about the final votes. The same interpretation was given at the time by the OVB and also by the Supreme Court itself. Since this interpretation was changed, and viewed from this angle the former two bodies were also elected in a manner which was against the law, it seemed necessary to call new

elections for 1 March. The lack of regulation, combined with the law interpretation, was a very powerful weapon in the hands of the political groups currently in a losing position, because by walking out on the rally they could annul the election. It was to be feared that under such situation the OCÖ could not be established. It is also characteristic of the uncertainties of regulation that the affected parties kept taking their complaints to different forums, asking for the appointment of a ministerial commissioner, government commissioner and the presence of international observers at the election. After such preliminaries the members of the Democratic Roma Coalition won the repeated elections with surprising smoothness and great majority, with only two of the 'incumbent' Lungo Drom members getting into the national body.

But the series of scandals caused by the uncertainties of legislation did not end with this incident; in fact they fuelled public interest for the remaining three quarters of the year and relegated to the background all other Roma questions. The conflict continued, now between the newly elected coalition members, already at the founding meeting of the OCÖ. Since several people aspired for the president's post, the candidates continuously questioned each other's steps. The regulations on the minorities do not even specify who and when can convene the founding meeting of the OCÖ. At the founding meeting, which was held at last despite such preliminary events and where even violence occurred in the presence of the press, a radical Roma politician Aladár Horváth was elected as president, while one of the groupings forming the coalition withdrew from the operation of the OCÖ. The election of Horváth not only surprised, but also filled with fears many people, because he was the one who called the minority self government system harmful, a form of 'institutionalised segregation', and as such something that should be eliminated. Whether in his new position he would indeed attempt to drive the processes in such direction, we never learned. After three months, during which his efforts concentrated primarily on the assessment and consolidation of the situation of the OCÖ, his unhappy vice-president and the candidates who walked out on the founding meeting, called a vote of confidence and toppled Aladár Horváth who had barely entered his office. His place was taken by Orbán Kolompár. Instead of genuine work, the tone of the subsequent months was set by procedures filed against one another, the pursuit of law interpretations, and then Kolompár's consolidation efforts.



Summing up the situation around OCÖ, we could even have witnessed a natural process. All that happened was that an old leadership was ousted, then Aladár Horváth, who enjoyed the support of the Roma and non-Roma intellectual community of the capital was toppled by Orbán Kolompár, a successful entrepreneur who enjoyed the support of the country Roma politicians and leaders. The problem is that all this took place amid a series of scandals which eroded to an extraordinary degree the prestige of Roma politics and consequently also of the Roma population.

We can only hope that the changed regulation will create other opportunities. But that much seems certain that Roma representation has been reduced in a significant area: and this is the abolishment of favoured mandates in the localities. Because the regulations, which were (by chance) working up to that time, were changed in such a way that the existing form became anti-constitutional and the Constitutional Court annulled the relevant regulations. And in vain did the Roma MPs (acting in unity at last) try to table an amendment motion at the end of the parliamentary cycle, the political conflicts proved to be more powerful than the will for agreement.

The single most significant initiative of the Gyurcsány government was, by all means, the programme against child poverty led by a prominent authority of the question (Zsuzsa Ferge). And although many people agreed that it is highly important and praiseworthy to support the poor groups of society, including naturally the Roma, it is not certain that the across-the-board support system will actually reduce the social differences between the Roma and non-Roma poor. Actual implementation is expected from the second half of 2006, although people many doubt that the programme will be able to start at all in view of the upcoming austerity measures. Even if it is implemented, many people believe that its results will be offset by the economic austerity measures which will affect everyone (VAT increase, gas price rise, tuition fees in higher education, etc.) and which will put a major burden on the society, and especially on the poor, including masses of Roma.

Summing up the events of the past four years, many people look back on them with disappointment. After 2002 even Roma people (including the emerging new intelligentsia) entertained great hopes that at long last after the change of regime the Roma cause would also take a favourable turn. These hopes were also fuelled by the new institutions and the newly appointed Roma leaders. As we can see, both caused

disappointment. The role of the political state secretary also remained unclear, he/she would probably have had the opportunity to push the new initiatives through the political decision makers, but this did not happen. The Roma Affairs Office fell to pieces, the officers in the different line ministries were struggling for authority (the only exemption was the ministerial commissioner in the field of education who managed to win the most independence, perhaps this is why he seems more successful than the others). It seems that the governing MSZP does not think very important the Roma cause, not even at symbolic level. They did not appoint any Roma candidates for the EU parliamentary elections on any important party lists, just as they did not do this for the 2006 parliamentary elections. Neither under-secretary of state Teleki, nor Katalin Kállai, who is said to have great influence in the MSZP, was given an opportunity. Although it seems rather probable that after the changes at the autumn local government elections Teleki will get a mandate for his loyalty to high politics. But, considering the experiences of the past years, this is not likely to generate any real changes.

Disappointment has become the ruling sentiment with Roma people and Roma politicians alike. As a fundamental sign of this there appeared, even though without much success for the time being, the demand for independent ethnic political activities. What everyone thought impossible so far seems to be approaching: notably, that the Roma will soon wake up and reject this humiliating, 'I eat-from-my-hand' method and will appear as an independent factor in the political life. Knowing the Hungarian society, this will fill many people with fear and with growing hatred.

*(Ernő Kállai )*