

3. Some Experience about the Operation of Local Roma Self-governments in Hungary

„... I pull the cart and they push it, if necessary ...”

In the year 2001, a large survey project was organised by the Minority Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (“MTA”) to collect information about the social circumstances of Hungary’s Roma population. This project made it possible to launch a research program – in addition to the third national representative Roma survey – that examines the operation of local Roma minority self-governments. This short article presents only a fraction of the complete analysis, published in 2005.⁷³ Some details have been taken from the analysis regarding the establishment of local Roma minority self-governments and a brief description is offered about the conditions of the operation of these bodies and their management of funds. Finally – as we did not know at the time of the survey that the legislation would be amended by today, with special respect to the election process – we briefly describe the changes that minority organisations then wanted.

Hypotheses

As we had been dealing with this issue for a long time and were familiar with the professional literature, the positions of Roma minority leaders and the increase in the number of Roma minority self-governments in each term, we were convinced, unlike many others, that the solution was not just to simply say that this form of minority representation is unnecessary. There must be functions which only minority self-governments can perform – at least more easily than a civil organisation. It is no coincidence that one of the critics of the minority system – who even repeatedly urged the elimination of the whole system – seized the opportunity and undertook leadership of the national self-government.

We thought it was not a coincidence that local Roma self-governments think it important to „ethnicise” the social issue, i.e. they work in areas where they are not necessarily competent. There must be a reason – if it is true that they are so deeply involved in searching for solutions to social issues – that they cover such areas and the reason must

⁷³ Kállai Ernő: Helyi cigány kisebbségi önkormányzatok Magyarországon. Gondolat-MTA KI. Budapest, 2005.

have something to do with not only the situation of the Roma population but also the special forms of enforcing their social interests.

We also assumed that minority self-governments have at least as strong a political socialising role as civil organisations. This is true also because the leaders of a municipality, who have a public law status, have to take elected representatives more seriously than, for example, the representative of a foundation – and this is an important aspect in the case of the Roma. It is also clear that several, now country-wide known, Roma politicians started their career at the local level – though they have been unable to have the same results in national bodies as locally.

Before the survey we had thought that the “ethno-business” would be a simplified explanation to the survival of minority self-governments as, according to our knowledge, these minority organisations do not have a budget which would fully explain why their members want to be elected. Not to mention the fact that, in many cases, people with no Roma roots also found Roma minority self-governments, which cannot be because of the high social prestige of the Roma – so there must be some other motivating factor.

In order to justify or refute these assumptions, we wanted to shed light on the circumstances of the operation of local Roma minority self-governments. We tried to collect basic information about the municipalities themselves to see what opportunities a minority self-government may have. The survey, therefore, gave a brief overview of the sociological features of municipalities, the numbers/proportions of the Roma and non-Roma communities, their relationship, their use of languages and inter-ethnic relations. We examined the conditions of the operation of local Roma minority self-governments like infrastructure coverage, financial resources and their management and the personal traits of their representatives. We made a detailed analysis of the actual activities of Roma minority self-governments in the light of the requirements set out in the Minorities Act. In the case of self-governments which do not carry out the activities defined in the Act, we investigated what these bodies actually do. We tried to map the external relations of these self-governments and the efficiency of their operation through the eyes of an outsider. Finally, we examined whether minority representatives consider any changes to the current system necessary.

Establishment of Minority Self-governments

1. Continuity, terminated organisations

One of the priority aims of our survey was to examine the Roma self-governments of municipalities where these bodies started its operation already in the first term (i.e. in 1994 or, where second elections were organised, in 1995). We asked the current president of the Roma self-government when the first self-government had been established. In two out of the 100 municipalities covered by the survey, the year mentioned in response to this question (1989 and 1991) was definitely wrong: in these years the Minorities Act had not yet been passed. It is likely that some civil organisation was founded in those years, which later served as the base of the self-government elected years later. Another three presidents said their organisation had been founded in 1998: official records proved that we were right in thinking that they remembered wrongly.

An interesting issue is whether these self-governments operated on a continuous basis or finished working before the end of their term. The latter happened in 12 cases. There was one municipality where work had been stopped before the end of both terms (i.e. starting in 1994 and 1998) and there were another 7 where representatives did not work until the end of the 1994-1998 term. In the remaining 4 cases, the Roma self-government was terminated at the beginning of this period. From these items of information the survey could only conclude that, naturally, more self-governments had been terminated in the first term – presumably because the system was new then. As we have written down in other case studies⁷⁴ and as is described in other analyses, most people – including the leaders of minority and municipal self-governments – described the first term, i.e. the period between 1994-1998, as the “time of learning”. In the light of this statement, the number of cases described above does not seem too high. We found no typical patterns for the termination of Roma self-governments within any county or region, indicating that things happened depending on the actual local circumstances. The only typical feature as regards terminations is that each of the 10 municipalities where the Roma self-government terminated was a small town. However, we consider it as a mere coincidence within the sample.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Kállai Ernő: 'Az abonyi cigány kisebbségi önkormányzat működése' In: *Regio*, 1998/4.

⁷⁵ The sample of 100 contains 8 county capitals, 24 towns, 57 villages above 1000 persons, and 11 villages under 1000 persons.

2. Changes in the number of candidates and their motivations

In the third term of elections, when the survey was carried out, we already had experience about the continuous increase of the number of Roma self-governments. We wanted to find out if the number of candidates had changed in the municipalities covered by our survey and whether the same people ran in the elections – which could then shed light on the number of people involved or interested in politics in the given municipality.

The results of the three elections show the following. In the first term, the lowest number of candidates in one municipality was 3, the highest 29. The most important thing, however, is that in 58 municipalities the number of candidates was between 5 and 10, i.e. in the majority of cases the number of candidates was not too high but still enough for democratic elections. In 1998, the highest number of candidates in one municipality was 30. In the majority (in 70 municipalities), the number of candidates was between 5 and 15 (in most cases between 10 and 15). In the year 2002, the largest number was 50 in one single municipality. Competition was strong in general: in 76 municipalities the number of candidates was between 5 and 17.

Differences by regions and municipality types are interesting. County averages are similar: in 1994/1995 the average number of representatives in municipalities in the different counties ranged between 7 and 13. Figures were similar in 1998 and even in the year 2002 the highest number was only 18. Interestingly, averages have always been the highest in Szolnok County and the highest candidate numbers have always been in Borsod County (25, 30 and 50 candidates in one municipality in the three terms). It is also interesting that in the third term major decreases were seen in Csongrád, Fejér and Bács-Kiskun counties. In spite of this fact (and of some similar decreases during the second term, which can merely be mistakes in estimation) we have seen a continuous increase in the number of candidates.

To no surprise, real differences are experienced by municipality types. Far more candidates ran in county seats than in small municipalities in 1994/95: figures were twice as high as in villages with a population below 1,000. This, however, did not become a trend as in the next two terms numbers were roughly the same. What we saw in 1994/1995 was only that in large towns people “woke up” earlier: they knew about the new opportunities after the passing of the Minorities Act earlier than in small towns and villages. However, this information difference ceased to exist as years passed.

These results clearly show that the number of candidates dynamically grew as years passed, even though, according to the public, neither minority self-governments nor their representatives have a high social prestige. Still, such a position has its attraction to the Roma who want to be involved in politics. We assume that there may be several reasons. On the one hand, such a position entails a certain prestige at the local level, especially in small towns and villages. One of the conclusions of our survey was that people are likely to be motivated not by the remuneration (which is not too high) but the opportunity for representatives to establish informal relations – which, in the long run, may even be turned into some financial advantage. The so-called „beneficial treatment”⁷⁶ can be equally attractive: members of minority communities may become representatives in the municipal self-government, which offers not only the personal relations but also money as the remuneration of municipal self-governments is orders of magnitude higher. We also assume that the motivation of several people is to use local positions as a first step to “high politics”: this, plus the personal relations and finances accumulated over the years, are required for anyone to become a representative in the National Self-government or fill any other, national or county-level, position.

We also investigated if those who are representatives now, during the third term, had been in similar functions before and, if so, when and for how long.

The analysis clearly shows that in 22 municipalities 1 person, in 34 municipalities 2 people and in 18 municipalities 3 people had been representatives already in the first term and, according to the findings of the survey, there were only 8 municipalities where nobody had been a member of the minority self-government between 1994-1998. As regards the second term, we can see that the number of municipalities where representatives were already in their second term increased. Looking at the overall picture we found that there are many municipalities where one-three representatives are permanent and there are six where all the five minority representatives have been the same since the first minority self-government elections. Looking at it from the opposite angle we can say that there are only 14 municipalities altogether where none of the present Roma self-government representatives has been permanently in his/her current position since 1994/1995 but only 4 where all the current members have their first term at the moment.

⁷⁶ See the Minorities Act

This aspect is relatively strongly connected to counties. In Szabolcs, Heves, Csongrád and Borsod counties local Roma self-government representatives are relatively permanent. In contrast, a lot of changes have taken place in Nógrád County. It is no coincidence that in Szolnok County, where – as was mentioned earlier – there have been a lot of candidates, many changes also took place.

From this we can conclude that though the number of minority self-government candidates steadily grows the actual representatives are usually the same: local Roma self-governments do not change much in their composition. We think this may be related to the motivations behind running in the elections: the results of personal relations are realised only in the long run. Interview-based surveys in thirty municipalities show that, as time passes, minority representatives recognise the advantages resulting from personal relations, which they would not be happy to give up. However, the majority of the leaders of municipal Roma self-governments put this as follows: *„one gathers enough experience to understand that it makes no sense to stop: others would have to start everything from scratch”*. A similar attitude was seen on behalf of the leaders of municipal self-governments: they also “get used to” the people they have to work with and think these people can be “handled”: they would not like to start cooperation with someone unknown. As one of the mayors said: *„The minority self-government is in good hands and I told him this because the other day he said he would not run in the elections next time. I told him if you do not run I will not cooperate with any other Roma, just you. Not because I don't like the other guy but because this is something one has to learn. He already knows the ins and outs of these official things, the paperwork, the bureaucracy, he now knows how things work”*.

We consider that some permanency in a minority self-government is an advantage. It would not be ideal, though, if relations became „petrified” as that would indicate that this young – hopefully better educated – generation is either apathetic to politics or is pushed out of power in the long run.

Candidates' motivations for running in the elections were very different: a wide range of motivations was identified during our interview-based survey. Some belong to the „obedient type”, who run in the elections like acting under instruction: *„A paper was put on the notice board by the notary that the minority self-government could be established and we were told about it, so this is how we did it”*. An „enhanced” version of this

scenario is when the leaders of the given municipality dictate who the members of the minority self-government should be. From their point of view this eases cooperation as the minority organisation is founded by people they know well. We have seen several examples to this, as well: *„Everybody was nominated by the mayor and there was also an independent candidate, who became a member of this Roma self-government. So four were nominated by the mayor. Before the 1994 elections, the mayor had founded a “for 'B' Elections Association” and 86% of the people joined it: they did not know what it was but they joined it. And, of course, nobody votes against something he or she is a member of.” An even more extreme example is when a non-Roma candidate is supported: „Did you know the former leaders of the Roma self-government? – The mayor was the former leader. Because she led the first one. Then she became mayor, she handed it over to an elderly man and then came I. – Did none of the Roma want to be in this position? Or was nobody apt? – The self-government has two Roma members but neither really wanted to be president. – You said there were two candidates. Why did they have no chance? How could you win? – This is interesting. Perhaps it was not them (the Roma) who voted for me because not only the Roma had the vote. But I don't think they would really be apt. This depends not only on education: one may have only 6 elementary classes or none at all yet he or she could do a lot. You also need willpower and ambition, who knows what. – Were you supported by some organisation? – Yes, the Lungo Drom. It operates in Szolnok.”*

However, our interviewees' opinions about the purpose of being a representative were very clear and similar. Their first aim is to help the Roma improve their situation. *„The first thing was that there were a lot of problems with the Roma here, they just couldn't find their way after the termination of the agricultural coop, where a lot of them had worked and supported their families from the money they made there. When the coop was closed these people were on the verge of homelessness so someone had to do something. Since my enterprise closed also at this time I saw that some solution should be sought for these people, I thought somebody should undertake this and I dared do it”*.

So in the majority of the cases, the main aim was to help the Roma make a living rather than any of the aims defined in the Minorities Act – perhaps because those aims were not yet known at the time.

Basic Conditions of Operation

1. Location, assets

We think that one of the prerequisites of the successful operation of a minority self-government is the appropriate location and equipment of the office and the assets available to implement goals. This aspect has to be examined because, according to the Minorities Act: „*The mayor’s office, established by the municipal self-government, has to support the work of local minority self-governments, in the manner defined in the Rules of Organisation and Operation*”⁷⁷. However, this item of legislation does not specify what qualifies as “appropriate” in the given circumstances. According to our experience, this provision does not guarantee a good quality location. To start with, the municipal self-government considers that the office made available to the minority self-government is only a “temporary” one as it would get back to the hands of the municipal self-government if the Roma organisation is terminated. On the other hand, especially in small towns and villages, even the municipal self-government has few rooms that can be used as offices. As a result, often only the “letter of the law” is observed: they try to find a solution that causes them the least possible pain. If the local Roma self-governments think circumstances are bad the question arises: why does the municipal self-government not give more? Is this all they can make available or do they think the successful operation of the minority self-government is not that important? Our survey of 30 municipalities, which also included interviews, found answers to these questions. We found a local Roma self-government that operated in an ex agricultural cooperative site in a rural area, as well as another one that held meetings in the local culture house – though the latter clearly thought the whole building belonged to them. A surprising experience was when a room was given to the minority self-government in a district of a county seat populated mainly by Roma – because it was there that they could directly communicate with their community – but we found this building boarded up and people living in the area confirmed that the office had not been used for years. The leader of the local Roma self-government said the following about it: „*The office of the Roma self-government is next to Slum x. The office is quite large, 60 m², or 80? And it is completely bare. A few dilapidated wardrobes with the doors missing, that’s what we got. And nothing else. And there*

⁷⁷ 28. §

is a telephone. When we held a meeting there people came in, sometimes sober, sometimes drunk, and literally threatened us, how do we dare not give them a home, clothes and school things for their children? They said we were only there to grab all the money. So it was out of the question for anyone to go there and receive people alone”.

In small towns and villages whatever facility is available must suffice: „- Where is the office of the self-government? – Here, next to us, it’s a kind of wedding room and that’s where the municipal self-government meet and that’s where we, the minority, also meet, there is no separate room. This is really bad: we can’t use it on Saturdays and Sundays, when we want to meet, then we have to come and ask for the key – and they give it to us, but it’s like when you go to the dentist.”

The mayor of a town proudly told us about a surprising solution they had found: „- Does the local Roma self-government not have a room? – We could not provide one, so we agreed that they would rent something and the president of the minority self-government has a big house, so they have a room there.”

We must note that only one tenant and one owner was found in the sample; in the other municipalities offices were made available as a favour. However, many complained about the disadvantages of this situation as in the past years – including the first term – several municipal self-governments transferred the minority body to a different office as they wanted to use the original one for a different purpose. During the interviews we heard heated statements hinting at the influence of political parties when we asked about the reasons for the „eviction”. Minority self-governments in Heves County were similarly dissatisfied, as was written down by our researcher working in that county.⁷⁸ Here, according to experience, *„the mayor’s office allocated offices to minority self-governments after their establishment but they considered the problems with the offices over these eight years as a personal offence: in the majority of cases, these offices were dilapidated. One of them has even been declared dangerous to life (according to the mayor’s office, the minority self-government has ruined it so no new office was given to them instead), another office is wet, its walls are mildewed so the furniture was taken back to a small office in the basement of the local culture house. In one town, the office was moved to a smaller room as the municipal self-government’s company wanted to use the original one, which had been renewed and equipped*

⁷⁸ Kállai Gabriella: 'Tereptapasztalatok Heves megyében.' In: Kállai Ernő (szerk.): A magyarországi cigány népesség helyzete a 21. század elején. Kutatási győrsjelentések. Budapest: MTA Etnikai-nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2003. 93-103. o.

by the Roma self-government (according to the mayor, the reason was that the Roma self-government had spent relatively little time there and as they do not have many visitors a smaller property would suffice for their operation). In another case, the office was in a building where one of the city's local library units operates – but this place is very far from the city centre (buses ran every thirty minutes or once an hour even during peak hours) and it was not even close to the district where many Roma lived. As to the quality of the office, only one minority self-government was satisfied: they had a large office in the town centre, sharing the same building with the mayor's office. The municipal self-government even put some dilapidated items of furniture in the office and the Roma self-government got a computer and a printer. The majority of municipal self-governments gave some furniture/equipment to the Roma self-government and also pay utility costs, which usually do not include telephone expenses: such expenses are always a subject of a separate agreement with the municipal self-government. Only half of the six minority self-governments had a phone line, a computer and a printer. Only two had a photocopier and only one had access to the Internet (some expected an Internet connection to be installed in the spring). The offices I visited were tidy, clean and their walls had recently been painted.”

The equipment and furniture available in the offices are wanting. At the time of our survey, which was carried out during the second term, the office furniture we found had in most cases been provided by the municipal self-governments. “Furniture” usually meant a desk and a few chairs.⁷⁹ A more important aspect is the availability of technical equipment required for modern management in the offices. Such equipment was almost nowhere provided by the municipal self-government so local Roma self-governments would have had to obtain the same from their own resources. In the light of other circumstances, which will be described later in this document, it comes as no surprise that the situation was disappointing as regards the availability of such equipment. Only six of the local Roma self-governments covered by the survey had a photocopier (purchased from grants). In Szabolcs County, none of the local Roma self-governments had a photocopier of their own, not even in the county seat. Even more astonishing was the fact that 15 local Roma self-governments had no computer at all – even though it seemed that even if they had had one they would have not been able to make any use of it as they had no employee. It follows almost direct-

⁷⁹ V.ö.: Kállai Ernő: 'Az abonyi cigány kisebbségi önkormányzat' I.m..

ly from this fact that there was no Internet access in 22 local Roma self-government offices. In the light of these it is surprising that 27.6% of the interviewees thought their circumstances were sufficient for the high quality management of their activities and over 48% considered that their circumstances were „acceptable”. These opinions show that the majority were satisfied with their circumstances – though everyone had ideas for improvement. Local Roma self-governments in Budapest were the least satisfied and those in Borsod County were the happiest with what they had – though the latter area had the most local Roma self-governments without a phone line, a computer and access to the Internet.

Our large-sample survey provided more details. In the present term, 41 of the 100 local Roma self-governments interviewed had offices in the same building as the Mayor’s Office and 58 used „some other facility”. As we mentioned earlier, we know from the interviews that “other facility” may mean – especially in the case of large towns – an office building or some other property owned by the municipal self-government. In most cases, these “facilities” have a permanent function other than use as an office building. Examples include the municipal library, culture house or agricultural cooperative building. Naturally, representatives are the most dissatisfied in these cases. No significant change has taken place over the years: figures were roughly the same already in 1994/95 (40 and 58, respectively). 40% of the interviewees could not answer our question regarding the former and current legal status of their offices. Most of those who could answer this question said they had been given an office as a favour: the municipal self-government had made an office available to them, for the purposes defined in the Self-governments Act and the Minorities Act, but only as long as the office is used by the local Roma self-government. Very few (13 in 1994/95 and 10 at present) minority self-governments rented their offices. We know from the interviews that in the majority of cases the municipal self-governments rent these offices as they cannot make one of their own available to minority self-governments. Even fewer (5 in 1994/95 and 7 at present) of local Roma self-governments actually own the offices they use. Another fact about the legal aspect is that decisions about most of these offices are in the hands of the municipal self-government. As regards regional differences, offices are made available to local Roma self-governments in the building of the Mayor’s Office in small towns and villages as such municipalities have no other option. Not surprisingly, the larger a town is the more possibilities exist for the placement of the local Roma self-government.

We think that this aspect, i.e. that of the placement of the local Roma self-government office, is very important. Both alternatives – in the same building as the Mayor’s Office or elsewhere – have their advantages and disadvantages. In the building of the Mayor’s Office everything is available: the Roma self-government can use any office equipment of the Mayor’s Office they do not have themselves. If they need support they can consult with someone from the Mayor’s staff – it is often enough to walk upstairs to discuss things with an expert. So this solution has its advantages. However, this scenario also entails threats as we have seen in several places that minority organisations start to lose their independence: the officers of the Mayor’s staff start to take things in their hands. Several interviewees stated that the leaders of the municipal self-government convene the meetings of the Roma self-government, keep the minutes and do all the administration. We consider this a major threat as minority representatives must be politically educated: they can only represent their voters independently and efficiently if they also learn the basics of administration. This would diminish their external influence, which is rooted in their lack of expertise.

We consider the physical space available to minority representatives equally important: do they have only one single office with a few chairs or do they have a meeting room, a reception area and, perhaps, even a spacious room where public events can be organised?

According to the findings of the survey, the floor area available to local Roma self-governments varies on a wide scale in the municipalities visited: the smallest area was 6, the largest 300 square metres. The majority, however, use an area between 20 and 100 square metres. County averages also differed significantly. The national average floor area available to local Roma self-governments was around 52 square metres but averages were far above this in Baranya, Csongrád, Hajdú-Bihar and Komárom counties. The smallest offices were found in Pest and Nógrád counties, way below the average.

Naturally, floor areas are also strongly connected with the size of the given municipality: offices are over twice as big in county seats than in villages with a population below 1,000. Here we must note that in most small towns and villages, minority self-government offices are in the building of the Mayor’s Office, unlike in county seats, where the size of the offices of local Roma self-governments is presumably also larger.

Going into the details we also looked at the number of offices. In half of the municipalities the available floor area comprised only one single office. 17 local Roma self-gov-

ernments had two offices, 7 had three and 9 had four. Looking at county averages we can see that in the counties with a large floor area mentioned above the number of offices was low – consequently, such large offices are likely to be also used for other purposes. Perhaps only pride made some Roma representatives whose office was, for example, in the local culture house, say that the whole facility was used exclusively by the minority self-government. This assumption is confirmed by the information available about the functions and areas of the rooms used by them. We asked the interviewees about the size of the room where only office activities are carried out. In response to this question, 26 of the interviewed self-governments stated they had no room used exclusively as an office.

Those self-governments that have an 'office' in the traditional sense use a room of 8-100 square metres. However, the majority (i.e. fifty) of the 65 local Roma self-governments that have an office use a room of 12-30 square metres exclusively for office administration purposes. There are 18 local Roma self-governments that also have a separate presidential office – with a size between 12-20 square metres. 26 said they had a separate meeting room (area between 10-50 square metres), 25 stated they had a reception room (with roughly the same size; they perhaps meant the same room) and 8 also had a separate room for public events (with a floor area of 20-150 square metres). All this shows that about one third of the local Roma self-governments covered by the survey had not only the area required for the high-quality management of their activities but also separate rooms for the different functions like a presidential office and/or a meeting room. There are a few minority self-governments which said they also had a room for public events – though we had doubts as to the permanent availability and exclusive use of such rooms. Finding the truth would require a deeper investigation. Summarising our experience regarding one element required for successful operation (i.e. the quality of the offices used) we think that this fundamental prerequisite is wanting.

Technical Assets

As a next step, we asked minority self-governments what technical assets were available for the successful performance of their work. We should not draw far-reaching conclusions from the quality of their offices: that may be wanting, yet if the required equipment is available (even if crowded or not properly separated in different rooms) the same could mitigate the problems related to the number/area of offices.

We asked the interviewees whether they had the equipment considered indispensable today. At the very beginning we saw that over 60% of the sample had no computers, 27 had one PC, 5 had two PCs and two had 10/13. Those that did have a computer had usually got it in a grant and many either got it from the municipal self-government or purchased it themselves. Naturally, only those minority self-governments had a printer (usually purchased from their own budget or from grants) that already had a computer. Thus it is no coincidence that very few had Internet access. Naturally, self-governments without a computer could not use the World Wide Web. However, even of the local Roma self-governments that did have the necessary technical preconditions only 21 had an Internet connection (purchased from their own budget, from grants or with the help of the municipal self-government). We think this aspect is highly important not only because modern and fast communication requires the Internet but also as information can be collected about available grants, necessary as an additional source of financing, through the World Wide Web. In recent years, one of the priority aims of the Government has been to support access to grants via Internet portals (examples include Romaweb or the homepages of ministries). We also heard many times the following at conferences and other forums, when minority representatives complained about getting information too late about grants: „mind you, all the forms and information are on the web.” However, the above described circumstances put limitations to the successful representation of minorities. This issue also has other important aspects, with which we will deal later in this document.

The next question in our interviews was if the given local Roma self-government had appropriate office furniture. In 31 places, the answer was that the minority self-government had no furniture which only they used. These must be where the minority self-government is permitted to occasionally use an office of a facility used for a different purpose (local culture house, agricultural cooperative, etc.) to hold a meeting or receive visitors. It is thus no surprise that 80% of minority self-governments do not have, for example, a photocopier. We thought even if they had no Internet access they should have a phone line of their own. However, not even this is true in all cases: 54 local Roma self-governments do not have a telephone connection. Those that do are mainly the ones that use an office in the building of the Mayor's Office, where there had been a phone line already. The phone issue is starting to become part of the “gypsies stink and steal” stereotype as many notaries and mayors said: “their phone calls cost a fortune”.

We also wanted to know if local Roma self-governments were allowed to use equipment available in the Mayor's Office which they did not have. Answers show that this is the way to solve such problems (88 positive answers). As we noted earlier, in our opinion, this circumstance prevents minority self-governments from becoming truly independent bodies.

We tried to find out if there were any regional differences in the average number of office equipment. According to the findings of the analysis, this aspect strongly depends on both the region and the municipality type. In the eastern, poorer part of the country, especially in the „North” Region, the situation is far worse than west of the Danube. Differences by municipality type are even more conspicuous. Clearly, offices operating in county seats are the best equipped, in contrast with small towns, where actual equipment penetration also depends on the financial status of the given municipality.

Location, assets – evaluation

After the infrastructure-related questions we asked the presidents of local Roma self-governments to evaluate their organisation's infrastructure (i.e. location and assets; one of the cornerstones of successful operation). According to 21% of the interviewees, their infrastructure was suitable for the proper operation of their organisation. In contrast, 26% stated that not even the basic conditions of operation exist. The rest said their infrastructure was „acceptable”. These data clearly show the actual situation. In connection with the 26 “dissatisfied” places let us remember the 26 local Roma self-governments (mentioned above) who think they do not have an office appropriate to manage their activities. In the case of the 21 “satisfied” self-governments we must not forget those bodies, described above, which have a presidential office, a computer with a printer and even Internet access. We also asked how much the assets received from the municipal self-government impacted the success of their work, i.e. how dependent they are on the positive attitude of the municipality. According to 17% of the interviewees, they could not operate at all without the municipal self-government's support and 24% said what they received from the municipality had a decisive impact. In summary, over 40% of the local Roma self-governments could not perform their tasks without the municipal self-government's support.

Summarising the information collected about the available infrastructure (i.e. location and assets; one of the cornerstones of successful operation) we can say that there

exist two basic types of local Roma self-governments. One – representing less than one third of the local Roma self-governments – has not only a sufficient floor area (60-80 square metres) but also use different rooms for different functions: they have an office, a meeting room and, in some instances, even a presidential office and/or a room for public events. These self-governments have a computer and most also have Internet access. Though they strongly depend on the positive attitude of the municipal self-government in the establishment of these circumstances, they usually use a separate building as they are usually located in a county seat or a large town, where possibilities are better. The other type – over two thirds of local Roma self-governments – usually have one single office, typically 30-50 square metres, most in the same building as the Mayor's Office. The vast majority do not have a computer and, consequently, no Internet access and many do not even have a phone line of their own. The operation of these local Roma self-governments, usually located in villages and small towns, depend on whether the Mayor's Office lets them use the infrastructure they need. This significantly hinders their independence and, due to the lack of the appropriate infrastructure, they cannot access grants, which would offer revenues and, thus, a wider range of program opportunities.

2. Financial conditions and management

A separate area of investigation of our survey was the financing of local minority self-governments – a fundamental condition of their operation. In recent years, local Roma self-governments have been divided by the issue of “multi-channel financing”, considered democratic and appropriate by many but evaluated as a failure by others. This financing method can be briefly described as follows: from the annual national budget the state provides each local minority self-government (not only Roma self-governments) a fixed state contribution, paid out on a quarterly basis (HUF 628,000 in 2001, 655,000 in 2002, 680,000 in 2003 and 714,000 in 2004). This can be supplemented by the local municipal self-government from its own budget (depending on its plans and the available amounts). On the other hand, minority self-governments can increase their budget using grants and other sources of financing. Naturally, everything other than the fixed state contribution is uncertain. The amounts received from the municipal self-government depend on many factors: primarily, whether the local self-government can afford providing any support. It is a well-known fact that in Hungary, especially in small towns,

resources are wanting. Therefore, even with the best of intentions there is no guarantee that minority self-governments can be supported – especially in municipalities with 6-8 minority self-governments. Another important fact is that personal relations play a decisive role. If there is a conflict between the mayor or the municipal self-government representatives and the local Roma self-government members there is little chance to obtain any support. And, according to the findings of the survey, this “softens” attempts to enforce and protect interests. The situation is very similar with large national grants.

Revenues

In our survey covering 30 municipalities, we tried to collect information about the financial management of local Roma self-governments. Their total annual revenues ranged between HUF 600,000 – 11 million. However, the evaluation of data proved to be difficult. Therefore, in our survey covering 100 municipalities, we applied a new method and, after putting things in categories, came to interesting conclusions.

In the course of this second survey, the interviewed minority self-governments were not asked to tell us the amount of their annual state support as we had very bad experience about this. Later, however, we were not surprised when the majority of municipal self-governments were also unable to specify the exact amount of their state support. So for the year 2002 we asked minority self-governments to tell us the amount received from the municipal self-government and other revenues (which they were later asked to detail) and the total amount of their annual revenues. This latter amount also contained state support.

For double checking purposes we also summarised the data provided by them, added the amount provided by the state and compared the result with the annual revenue they specified. Major differences were found in only a few cases, which indicates to us that minority self-governments know the amount provided by the state and include it in their total annual revenues but they do not exactly know what it is. The reason is that they receive this state subsidy through the municipal self-government and it is difficult for them to separate it from other amounts that also arrive through the same channel.

We then looked at average revenues and the whole revenue structure. The analysis made it clear that most minority self-governments within a given county have similar revenue levels. This revenue amount is somewhat above HUF 1 712 000 on average. Naturally, there are extreme examples. For instance, local Roma self-governments in Bé-

kés County, which was also covered by the survey, had almost four times the national average (i.e. HUF six and a half million) in 2002 and minority self-governments in Csongrád, Somogy (nearly 4 million) and Zala (over 3 million) counties also had a large budget. In contrast, Borsod, Szabolcs and Pest counties, which are important bases of the Roma population, have to make ends meet from very tight budgets.

Differences by municipality type are also conspicuous. Local Roma self-governments in county seats have nearly five times as much money to spend than in municipalities with a population below 1,000. As the size of the municipality increases, so grows the amount of revenues.

One of the reasons for these major differences is the structure of revenues. There is the state support, whose amount is the same for each minority self-government, independently of the size of the municipality or of the local ethnic community. There are major differences in the additional revenues coming from municipal self-governments. Small municipalities, which lack resources themselves, cannot make much money available to minority self-governments. While county seats can easily give the local Roma self-governments HUF 2-3 million on average, the amount of such local support is less than HUF 10 thousand in small towns and villages. As we saw earlier, this additional support is far higher in certain counties. However, we think that differences by municipality type are the most important. The relationship between the mayor and the local Roma self-government also plays a decisive role – especially in small municipalities where the role of personal relations is stronger.

Furthermore, significant differences exist in “other revenues”: they can make things succeed or fail. What does this category include? Most of it is support provided by ministries (our sample included 18 self-governments that had received moneys from a ministry), usually for some cultural event. In most (15) cases, the amount received from a ministry was between HUF 50 thousand – 400 thousand but in one instance HUF 2.5 million had been paid to one single local Roma self-government by one ministry. The second largest source of income is the “Magyarországi Cigányokért Közalapítvány” (“MACIKA”; “Public Fund for the Hungarian Roma”), which supported 14 Roma self-governments. The Fund provided amounts between HUF 60,000 – over 3 million for social support programs. Both according to the survey results and the presidents of local Roma self-governments, county self-governments play a negligible role in financing: even municipality self-gov-

ernments provided more, usually for cultural purposes. In some instances, the National Roma Minority Self-Government donated sowing seeds and other assets used in social support programs to 5 local minority self-governments. Their value was small, between HUF 30 – 600 thousand. One local Roma self-government received support from abroad on one single occasion. This is extremely rare in the case of the Roma: it is a well-known fact that they do not have a mother country, which deprives them of a significant source of income. If they do receive such support it is from grants provided by funds located abroad or, in most cases, amounts from some Hungarian foundation that receives support from a foreign country. In rare instances private individuals also donate, usually money for summer camps or gifts for children. Besides, some local Roma self-governments also carry out business activities and the revenues from the operation of their business (usually a small enterprise launched to create new jobs, dressmaker shops, palette factories) are used by them. These revenues may be in the order of magnitude of millions of HUF

However, nearly half of the local Roma self-governments have no additional source of revenue in addition to the fixed support provided by the state. There may be several reasons for this but, according to the survey findings, the primary one seems to be the lack of personal relations. Those successful in raising funds do have these personal relations and are clever in managing their affairs. A very important aspect is whether any of the minority self-government members is a well-known Roma politician in the country. It seems no coincidence that the local Roma self-governments with the largest budgets include those of the towns of Szolnok, Nagykanizsa and Bátorfőnyék, municipalities where there is a well-known Roma politician.

Naturally, we asked the interviewees what revenues they expect⁸⁰ in 2003 and whether they think the situation would be better. We asked the same question of the municipal self-governments and compared the answers. Minority self-governments seemed optimistic: they expected their revenues to increase by an average of HUF 100,000. Looking at municipality types, the minority self-governments of county seats and small towns seemed to have positive expectations.

Additional revenues from municipal self-governments – this data is not only an expectation as the budgets of municipalities were already known at the time of the sur-

⁸⁰ The data is estimated as the interviews were made in 2003.

vey – also increased by an average of HUF 30,000, though municipal self-governments in county seats also mentioned far higher amounts than the minority self-governments in their municipalities.

Based on the above information we can say that there is a small increase in budgets every year – especially if we compare amounts with those in the first term – but major differences exist between the different local Roma self-governments both as regards the total amount of revenues and their structure. It is primarily in small towns and villages that local Roma self-governments get funding only from the state, in the form of the fixed state support.

Expenses

After revenues, we examined expenses. We were especially curious to know what expenses those local Roma self-governments have which have a large budget to spend. In the case of those that had only the fixed state support there was no question: the amount they have is only enough for survival. We must also note that we did not ask the leaders of local Roma self-governments to specify exact amounts as we had experienced earlier that such requests met with strong objection or interviewees were uncertain. Thus, in most cases we asked them to tell us the division of their total budget by expense types, in percentage. Everyone was happy to answer the question so raised and we made reverse calculations from their revenue data in our analysis. Naturally, we could not calculate exact amounts, only orders of magnitude.

The general expense structure of local Roma self-governments contains seven major expense types. The largest amount is usually operating expenses. This is no coincidence as these expenses are unavoidable for the operation of these organisations: without this item, there would not even be an office. As to the actual expenses in this category, the main items are the costs related to the maintenance and operation of the office(s) of the local Roma self-government. These include rentals, telephony costs, other utility costs, paper for the printer, etc. In 44 municipalities, 10-30% of the budget is spent on such costs but in another 11 almost all the money available had to be spent on these items. Another important data is that 26 local Roma self-governments had almost no operating expenses. There may be two reasons for this: either the municipal self-government charges nothing for the operation of the minority office, which is usually located in the

same building as the Mayor's Office, or the self-government consider other costs far more important. Examples were seen to both.

The second expense type contains the costs of asset purchases and development. Thinking about the level of computer penetration, such expenses are important – yet local Roma self-governments spend 7% of their budget for such purposes on average. This corresponds to a small amount, usually the price of an average quality PC. Interestingly, half of the local Roma self-governments incur no such costs. This may be due to the lack of resources or a different set of priorities. When the president of a local Roma self-government was asked in the interview when they would buy a PC to modernise office management his answer was as follows: *„We don't need one, no one could use it. The other week we sent a young, unemployed woman to a computer course but after finishing it she got a job and did not come back. This is why it would make no sense to spend on it: none of us knows how to use it.”* So future-oriented investments are either financially impossible or self-governments have not yet realised their importance.

Many in the country are interested in the amounts of remunerations paid. These also include the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses, which is often considered a “hidden income” of self-government representatives.⁸¹ Many people think this is what the self-government system is about, laying one's hands on state moneys, which is the real „ethno-business”. In the average expense structure, these two items make up one third of the total budget. Comparing these with the amount that representatives get as honorarium and cost reimbursement – we find out that the average amount is commensurate with the average amount indicated above.

It is interesting that, as these figures show, the costs of operation – if the term is understood to include remunerations and the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses – make up half of the budget of an average local Roma self-government. And only then come costs on the implementation of the goals specified by law.

There are three more expense types. One is education costs, which, in theory, means the costs of the operation of minority schools financing other types of nationality education programs (language courses, courses on the traditions of the given ethnic group, training of teachers to teach these, etc.). In reality, however, this expense type is usually used as a hid-

⁸¹ This cost type also includes wage-type expenses paid to employees, though they are very few. This will be discussed later.

den social benefit given to Roma students to cover the expenses of school books, workbooks and school equipment or, as a better alternative, in the form of scholarships. Local Roma self-governments admittedly spend more, 12% on social support. According to the findings of the survey, this category includes emergency benefits granted to cover the costs of medication, household fuel, job creation projects and Santa Claus gift packages, which is generally considered very important. However, these support types should not be provided by the local Roma self-government but by the municipality self-government, based on the beneficiaries' social status. Items of legislation on minorities do not allow or grant sources for such expenses. The fact that local Roma self-governments do spend on such needs shows that municipal self-governments are either unable or unwilling to perform such obligations. In many instances, they just pass the buck saying „go to the Roma self-government, this is their business!“. Local Roma self-governments try to comply with the expectations of the Roma population – though neither law nor their budget really allows them to do so.⁸²

Finally, we must deal with expenses on cultural purposes, which, according to law, is the most important task of minority self-governments. As we saw in the relating legislation, the preservation and strengthening of cultural identity should be the focus area of the operation of local Roma self-governments (and the self-governments of other ethnic groups). However, they spend only 12% of their budget on such purposes. According to our experience, supported events are 1 May fairs (organised jointly with the municipal self-government), Roma balls and Roma-Police football matches, which are organised to mitigate conflicts between the two groups. Almost no Roma self-governments created or supported a theatre or any significant cultural group. However, this is not surprising in the light of the fact that not even the National Roma Minority Self-Government, which has a far larger budget, is involved in any such project, either. So the strange situation arises that projects aiming at the preservation of the cultural identity of the Roma are supported not by the local Roma self-governments, which were originally established for this very purpose, but by civil organisations.

Naturally, it is interesting to look at the expense structure by counties and municipality types: when discussing revenues we identified counties where local Roma self-governments had large budgets. We must examine if these “richer” self-governments use their budget similarly or if differences exist also on the expense side.

⁸² This subject could be discussed in more detail in a chapter on activities and the wrong directions of the operation of local Roma self-governments but this document does not cover such aspects.

Looking first at the county averages of operating expenses we can see that, with a few outstanding exceptions (though these mean counties with a low number of local Roma self-governments), no major differences exist. What is conspicuous is that in Szabolcs and Pest counties, which have large Roma populations, very small amounts are spent on such purposes. The above-mentioned Szabolcs and Pest counties spend the most on social welfare purposes, besides Bács and Komárom counties. The fact that almost no money is spent on such purposes in Békés, Csongrád, Szolnok and Somogy counties indicates in some cases that the leaders of local Roma self-governments know legislation very well. The reader may remember that these counties have the local Roma self-governments with the highest budgets. In Békés County, the local Roma self-governments covered by our survey had almost four times as much money as the national average (i.e. nearly HUF 6.5 million) but local Roma self-governments also had much money to spend in Csongrád and Somogy counties (nearly HUF 4 million) and in Zala County (over HUF 3 million). So on what did they spend a significant part of the money available to them? The following local Roma self-governments visited by us stated that they had spent the following percentages on remunerations and the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses in the year 2002: 60% in Békés County, 65% in Somogy County and over 40% in Szolnok County. Making reverse calculations from the budget amounts specified by them, we came to the conclusion that these percentages correspond to nearly HUF 4 million in Békés County and over HUF 2.5 million in Somogy County. There was no surprise in the case of Békés County as 75% of the representatives in the local Roma self-governments covered by the survey were unemployed. As regards Szolnok County, we must note that they had spent the highest percentage of their budgets on programs organised to preserve the cultural identity of the Roma, i.e. the primary goal defined in the Minorities Act. We should also mention the example of Borsod County: self-governments here spent the majority of their budget on remunerations and the reimbursement of representatives' expenses but these self-governments had the lowest budgets (HUF 987,000 on average) and nearly 70% of the representatives here were also unemployed. It thus seems that in several cases this was the reason for the bad proportions on the expense side. In other cases we do not know the reasons for the surprising allocation of budget amounts.

We then looked at the relationship between the expense structure and the size of the municipality. One can see that the operating expenses (again including development

costs, remunerations and the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses) of local Roma self-governments in county seats make up almost the whole budget. The low amounts spent on social, educational and cultural purposes indicate that these self-governments have to make serious efforts to keep their own organisation running and the few programs they can organise do not actively change the life of the Roma population living in the county seat. It thus seems that there is hardly any communication between representatives and those they represent – which is partly explained by the size of these towns. However, the reader may remember that the local Roma self-governments of these towns have the largest budgets.

As the size of the municipality decreases so decreases the amount of operating expenses – though remunerations and reimbursements are at a constant level – and so increases the amount spent on social, educational and cultural purposes. To us these data – as well as our experience gained in the course of the survey – show that in small towns and villages there is a far closer relationship between the Roma population and their representatives. This is true even if these self-governments spend significant amounts on projects which should not be the responsibility of the local Roma self-government. But at least there is a relationship. Based on this information we cannot agree with those who say⁸³ that local minority self-governments should be terminated and only the national ones should be kept: in small towns and villages we at least know what these organisations actually do.

Finally, we try to describe the operation and management of the “average” minority self-government (not a specific one). Based on data from 2002 we can say that the average local Roma self-government has an annual budget of HUF 1 712 000. A large part of this amount (HUF 655 000) is the fixed state support and another HUF 560 000 is received from the municipal self-government. The “average” self-government collects an additional HUF 650 000 from grants (mainly from a ministry or “MACIKA”). The total budget is allocated to the tasks the self-government has to perform. It spends over HUF 500,000 on development and operation and an additional HUF 600,000 on remunerations and the reimbursement of costs. The remaining half a million HUF is spent, roughly equally, on social support, educational projects (usually meaning some “hidden” social support) and cultural events. The conclusion from these items of information is that, on the one hand, over two thirds of its

⁸³ Please refer to the analyses made by Árpád Rátkai

budget is used to keep itself running and the remaining one third is spent on purposes (e.g. social support) which is not their competence or task.

Plans for the Future

Since the birth of the Minorities Act, different efforts have been made to amend the law: everyone feels that the existing regulation does not properly address the problems of the Roma. Several amendments to the Act have been drafted but – as no political consensus exists – changes could not be implemented. It thus seems topical to look at the ideas of local players about what changes are necessary.

The answers given by our interviewees made it clear that the majority of local Roma self-governments support reforms. They think legislation should be amended – though financing is an even hotter issue. They say they want wider competences to be able to efficiently implement the vision that already drives their operation. Thus they want to be more deeply and more efficiently involved in the resolution of social issues and in finding jobs for their voters. They want to have the right not only to participate in discussions on these issues but to also be entitled to decide. However, they think the budgets they currently have are ridiculously low to implement these goals. Municipal self-governments only agree with the idea that the current financing scheme must be changed – but they consider that problems should be resolved through better state support. As regards their legal status, about half of the municipal leaders are satisfied with the current situation: those who urge changes want stronger control over minority self-governments to make it clear to them what their actual tasks are. As one mayor put it: *„There will be elections again in the autumn. I have only one desire: to have somebody who can negotiate. He does not have to know the legislation, I will tell him how to do things lawfully. I only wish he understands what I say...”*

Minority organisations have long wanted to have a county level in their self-government hierarchy. They consider it is due to the lack of this level that there is little communication with the National Self-government and they clearly want to have regular communication and interaction – even if in a hierarchical relationship. Municipal self-governments are less enthusiastic about this, as well.

There has been a lot of debate in recent years about the weak powers of minority self-governments – basically rooted in the electoral system. The so-called “odd-man-out

situation” has become widespread (and not only in the case of Roma self-governments), which caused a lot of indignation in outsiders. The gist of the phenomenon is that a minority self-government is established by people who do not belong to the given minority. As regards voting for minority self-governments by all voters, some even say this is unconstitutional as there are „szimpátiaszavazatok” – which results in nothing else in practice than the fact that the self-government of a given minority is elected by people other than the members of that minority group. It happened that, after a bitter ethnic conflict in a municipality, the majority of the local voters helped a group of non-Roma to power. These issues clearly indicate that election rules should be urgently reformed.

To our great surprise, nearly half of the local Roma self-governments and municipal leaders were satisfied with the electoral system. The likely reasons may include the fact that, in many cases, Roma politicians find non-Roma electors easier to convince, i.e. to influence, than the members of their own community. They are afraid that they would have a worse chance if they had to rely on the votes of people whose expectations they cannot satisfy – even if only because of their lack of title to do so. The majority of reformers are of the position that only those should be eligible to become minority representatives who are certified by the given minority to belong to them. In other words, this means the introduction of the electoral register, the most important reform currently planned.

The same is true for who should be given the vote in minority elections. The vast majority of local Roma self-governments want the votes of the non-Roma population. We think this is where it becomes clear that they are afraid of their own community: it is easier to convince those who do not care who the Roma representatives will be.

The issue of the delegation of Roma MPs to Parliament stirred similar emotions. Though the Minorities Act contains a provision on this, it refers the method of implementation to another item of legislation.⁸⁴ This item of legislation has never been passed, even though the Constitutional Court has repeatedly declared that the failure to pass such an act is unconstitutional. Whether such a solution would fit into the current parliamentary structure is another issue – if not, another way of implementation should be found. Naturally – or, perhaps, not so naturally – there are Roma MPs in different parliamentary parties, but this does not satisfy the requirement set out in the said Act. As the results of

⁸⁴ „Section (1) of Article 20: Minorities shall have the right to be represented in Parliament, in a manner to be defined in another item of legislation.”

our survey show, not only all local Roma self-governments agree that the Roma should be represented in Parliament but municipal self-governments share the same idea. We also asked how interviewees thought such MPs should be elected. 16 said such a person should be delegated by the National Roma Minority Self-Government (“OCÖ”) and nearly one third considered they should be elected by civil organisations. Naturally, the proposal that local Roma self-governments should elect the MP of the Roma community was supported by the vast majority.

(Ernő Kállai)