

# The Hungarian Roma Population During the Last Half-Century

ERNŐ KÁLLAI

## I. A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW FROM 1945 TO THE PRESENT

Before the 1944 German occupation, the majority of the some 200,000 Roma led a settled life and the various decrees about public order or epidemics aimed at their regulation only affected those who remained vagrants. Even though traditional Gypsy crafts began to gradually fade away during the era of the Dual Monarchy, the fast economic growth and liberalism of the age allowed the Roma to successfully find new livelihoods. Between the two world wars, however, the disappearance of traditional crafts accelerated and the Roma could keep up less and less with the technical and social changes accentuated by periods of crisis. The situation was further aggravated by strong Roma immigration from the surrounding countries, leaving significantly less job opportunities for an increased number of Roma. Thus the increase in the social and cultural gap between Roma and the rest of the society accelerated. *“On the eve of liberation the situation of the Roma population in Hungary had reached its historic worst.”*<sup>1</sup>

Conditions deteriorated further in the wake of actions against the Roma following Nazi occupation. The liberalism of the previous decades was gradually replaced by anti-Roma sentiment in public administration and among the gendarmerie. The ideas of “reconditioning”, “civilization” and the establishment of some sort of forced labour camps were considered in the interest of the “management” of the Gypsy question. Soon afterwards forced labour brigades began to be established and after 19 March 1944, the “Gypsy question” led to genocide. The original objective of the Nazis and the Hungarian Arrow Cross had been the deportation of the vagrant Roma but, since they could hardly find any such, execution of the plan actually involved the

---

<sup>1</sup> István Kemény, *Report on the 1971 Research on the Situation of the Hungarian Roma*. (HSA Institute of Sociology), 50p.

deportation of the entire Roma population of townships to extermination camps. To date, history has not been able to provide a definite answer as to the exact number of victims of this genocide. According to the research held to be the most reliable,<sup>2</sup> the number of victims was 5000, but the much disputed estimate of the Committee of the Victims of Nazi Persecution speaks of over 30,000.

### *From 1945 to one-party rule*

For the Roma, the end of the war primarily meant survival and escape from the threat of extermination. The period of democracy between 1945 and 1948 did much to change the relationship of the Roma to the society as a whole. The pre-1944 authoritarian regime denied equal rights to the Roma, while democracy proclaimed the principle of emancipation. Even though the newly formed police force – which replaced the gendarmerie in rural areas – soon became an instrument of political struggle, racial or ethnic discrimination was strictly forbidden and, due to its composition, socially it tended to take sides with the poor. Economically, however, the reallocation of land and the carving up of large estates had an adverse effect on the Roma as it involved a loss of job opportunities. The Roma were excluded from the redistribution of land, even though previously they had, for the most part, sustained themselves from agricultural labour. The reason for their exclusion was that there was not enough land to meet all demands, and by leaving out the Roma, more was left to distribute among the non-Roma population. The process of democratisation affected education as well. Before the Second World War the proportion of Roma children not entering the schooling system was 50%. This began to decrease quickly after 1945 and by 1957 the proportion of school-age Roma children who did not enter the schooling system was only 10%.

Politically, however, for a long period after the end of the war there was no progress as regards the situation of the Roma: even the relevant question hadn't been formulated. The first and for a long time the only theoretical discussion of the situation of the Roma was published in the theoretical journal of the Communist Party in 1946.<sup>3</sup> According to some authors,<sup>4</sup> András Kálmán's study was no more than the expression of his personal opinion, nevertheless after a long time he was the first to apply a comprehensive approach to the problem. "*Economic rehabilitation has to be supplemented by giving the Roma ethnic rights.*"<sup>5</sup> According to his formulation, the "Gypsy problem" is

<sup>2</sup> László Karsai, *The Roma Question in Hungary 1919–1945* (Cserépfalvi, undated.)

<sup>3</sup> András Kálmán, "The Problem of the Hungarian Roma". In: *Társadalmi Szemle 1946/8–9*.

<sup>4</sup> Erna Sággy, "Roma Politics in Hungary 1945–1961". In: *Regio 1999/1*.

<sup>5</sup> András Kálmán, "The Problem of the Hungarian Roma". In: *Társadalmi Szemle 1946/8–9*.

not tantamount to the problem of the Roma race or those whose mother tongue is the Roma language, since the majority of the Roma population consist of assimilated, urban-dwelling workers, craftsmen and merchants. The main problem concerns those rural or “vagrant” Roma who do not have regular jobs and income. According to his opinion the question is an ethnic one, since the Roma actually constitute an ethnic group, albeit one that has not been granted the rights it would deserve as such. He correctly recognised the fact that at the time the economic situation of the Roma had reached a historic low, and that discrimination and segregation will only be further aggravated by cultural and educational backwardness. It is also beyond doubt that the Roma were excluded from the redistribution of land even though after 1945, in the conditions of a democracy which proclaimed the equality of all before the law, this held the promise of the future for many. For a long time no movement, no Roma intelligentsia developed which could have effectively influenced the solution of the problems of the lives of the Roma.

Though we are aware that the analysis described above was actually not the official party position, its influence is nevertheless apparent in the principles of the Cultural Federation of Hungarian Roma, a short-lived organisation launched in 1957. Initiated by Mária László, the organisation’s first General Secretary, herself of Roma origin, the Roma Federation was established on 26 October 1957 in the same way as the other ethnic federations, under the auspices of the Ethnic Division of the Ministry of Culture. The objectives of the organisation included the creation and preservation of original Roma literature, music and other arts, and preservation of the ancient language for scientific research. The organisation’s statutes however also mentioned the creation of jobs and the development of schooling, health care and general living conditions. The Federation also played a significant role in supporting the Roma blacksmith small co-operatives formed in the forties. All these objectives pointed in the direction of establishing the status of an ethnic minority – something that the political authorities strongly opposed. Furthermore, the activities of the organisation became increasingly engaged in the management of individual complaints, which indicates that there was significant demand among the Roma for some sort of interest group. The authorities did not tolerate such activities for long, and launched a campaign against Mária László, based on her alleged Nazi past to replace her with Sándor Ferkovics in the post of general secretary. Ferkovics, as a former army officer, was trusted to carry out party instructions to the letter. During the period between 1959 and 1961 preceding its dissolution, the Federation was a mere shadow of the original, dynamic initiative. In the background, from 1960 onward Sándor Végh, head of the Department of Ethnic Minorities was already instructed by the party to work on the elaboration of a Marxist approach to the Roma question. This was to become the famous, or rather infamous, Party Ruling.

*From 1961 to the time of political transformation*

The 1961 ruling of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party defined the Roma question as a social rather than an ethnic issue. *"The basis of our policy toward the Roma population is to be the principle that, despite certain ethnic characteristics, it is not an ethnic group. In the solution of their problems we must take into account their particular social situation and ensure their full citizens' rights and responsibilities, as well as provide the necessary political, economic and cultural conditions for exercising these. (...) Many perceive it as an ethnic question and propose the development of the 'Roma language', the establishment of Roma speaking schools, colleges, farming co-operatives, etc. Such views are not only incorrect but dangerous as well, as they tend to conserve the segregation of the Roma and decelerate their integration into society."*<sup>6</sup> This obviously amounted to attempt at assimilation in the guise of a social crisis management exercise. Nevertheless, the ruling contains a useful summary according to which there were 2100 Roma settlements in the country offering barely human conditions.

In 1971, twenty-six years after the end of the Second World War, a nationwide study of the Roma was conducted under the leadership of István Kemény, which provided the most reliable source of data for many years to come.<sup>7</sup> According to the study, at the time the size of the Roma population was 320,000. 23% of these lived in the eastern regions (Szabolcs-Szatmár, Békés and Hajdú-Bihar counties), 20% in the northern region (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Nógrád and Heves counties), 21% in the Trans-Danubian region, 19% in the Budapest region (Pest, Fejér and Komárom counties) and 16% on the Great Plain (Csongrád, Bács-Kiskun and Szolnok counties). According to settlement types: 7.7% lived in the capital, Budapest, 14% in rural towns, and 78% in townships and villages.

At the time Hungarian was the mother tongue of 71% of the Roma, Romany of 21% and Romanian of less than 8%. Two-thirds of Roma dwellings were located in Roma slums. Over two-thirds of the Roma lived in adobe, earth or mud huts. 44% of residences had no electricity. Water mains was installed in 8%. 16% had wells on their own plots, 37% had wells within a 100-meter area. 3% of the residences had internal, 4% had external toilets; 61% had outhouses while 32% even had no outhouses.

<sup>6</sup> "On the Various Tasks Related to the Improvement of the Situation of the Roma". Ruling of the Politburo of the HSWP CC, 20 June 1961. In: *Documents of the Roma question in Hungary 1422 – 1985* (hereafter: *Documents*) 240.p.

<sup>7</sup> István Kemény, *Report on the 1971 Research on the Situation of the Hungarian Roma*. (HSA Institute of Sociology, 1976)

39% of the 14+ Roma population was illiterate; 26% of Roma youth between the ages of 20 and 24 had completed elementary school, the rest were either dropouts or (10%) had never gone to school. The nationwide study also recorded that, as a consequence of the industrialisation process of the 1950s and 1960s, by 1971 85% of working-age men were employed; 11% of Roma heads of families were skilled workers, 10% semi-skilled, 44% unskilled workers, 13% were physical workers in agriculture, 3% day labourers and 6% were self-employed or family-employed, or supported themselves from odd jobs. Employment of working-age Roma women was 30% in 1971, but rose to 50% by the beginning of the 1980s.

The programme to eliminate Roma slums was launched in 1965. As a part of this campaign, Roma citizens who had a regular income were given access to subsidised loans to build so called “CS” (lower comfort) houses or purchase old peasant cottages. “CS” houses were usually built as part of projects, adjacent to each other, while old peasant cottages were generally available in small settlements on the brink of extinction, which led to new forms of segregation in dwelling. Nevertheless, the dwelling and housing conditions of the Roma improved significantly.

According to a party document from 1984,<sup>8</sup> the strong Roma population of 360,000 was completely settled with a permanent geographical structure. The majority lived in or around the capital and in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Szabolcs-Szatmár counties, mostly in villages. However, most of them found job opportunities in industrial cities and towns and therefore had to commute to work or live in workers’ hostels. The rate of employment had increased further: by 1984, 53% of Roma women had permanent jobs. Half of the active wage-earners, however, were unskilled workers; the ratio of skilled workers was minimal compared to that within the majority population. The process of the elimination of the slums accelerated, but the building of the new “CS” houses led to the creation of separate settlement parts that were inhabited exclusively by Roma people.

According to the document, some 60% of Roma children went to kindergarten, one half of them completed elementary school, and an increasing number learned trades or went to high school.<sup>9</sup> The first generation of Roma intelligentsia had begun to evolve, most of whom achieved success in artistic fields or adult education. The segregated, special or remedial education of children had become increasingly accepted, yet the relationship between these special forms of education and the low educational level of the Roma

---

<sup>8</sup> The data were taken from the report discussed at the 2 October 1984 session of the Agitation and Propaganda Committee of the HSWP CC. In.: *Documents* 275.p.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

as compared to the majority society was not recognised. Open and covert prejudices had not disappeared; the “soft dictatorship” merely kept them submerged. Society blamed the Roma themselves for their bad living conditions and slow development and the mass media further reinforced the stereotypes of the Gypsy as skiver or criminal.

All in all, we can say that by the end of the eighties the situation of the Roma population had changed compared to previous decades. The opportunity to rise in social rank opened up before many, and those who could make use of it were no longer looked upon as “real Gypsies”. The foundations for these results, however, were very shaky. The bad quality of education and the low skill level of the workforce acted as time bombs after the unforeseen events of political transformation came about, and the debris buried a significant part of the Roma population along with the results and illusions of previous decades.

#### *Following the political transformation (1990 – )*

The spectacular social escalation that rested upon extremely uncertain foundations collapsed like a castle of cards moments after the political transformation. Following the privatisation of state-owned companies, redundancy first reached those Roma workers who had been employed to perform the lowest skill tasks, usually as unskilled workers (this involved more than one half of active earners!). While in 1971, as we have seen, the employment level among the working-age population was 85% (hardly lower than the 87% among the non-Roma population), by the end of 1993 this fell to 29% (as opposed to the 64% employment rate among the non-Roma population).<sup>10</sup> People with lower education, who had been employed only for menial tasks during the past period, now had no hope whatsoever of making it among the conditions of the new labour market dictated by business rationality. This undermined the livelihood of Roma families, and those who became unable to make repayments on previous housing loans lost their homes one by one.

During the years following the shock of the political transformation, the Roma population has undergone a further process of differentiation. We have witnessed the evolution of a (still very narrow) stratum who have been able to successfully meet the challenges of the last few years. Most of them try to make a living as entrepreneurs, some with substantial success. Of course this applies only in a lesser degree to those who have been forced to become entrepreneurs – they can only provide a daily livelihood for their

---

<sup>10</sup> István Kemény, “On the Hungarian Gypsy (Roma) Population”. In: *Magyar Tudomány* 1997/6.

families, but are still much better off than the majority of the Roma population. Others have made careers as intellectuals, becoming public figures.

A significant number of Roma families, however, suddenly fell back to the level prevalent several decades ago, and due to their lack of skill they have no chance of holding jobs. Poverty-induced crime has once again become frequent among the Roma in desperate situations, for many of whom this is the only hope of physical survival. Furthermore, since the political transformation has shaken their financial situation, too, the majority population turned on the Roma with new hatred. Beside segregation in education, employment, policing and housing, which had become commonplace by the mid-1990s, the idea of forced resettlement appeared, coupled with attacks and atrocities committed against Roma by organised groups. Openly racist political forces organising marches to honour Nazi “heroes” often appeared alongside nationally recognised political organisations, enjoying their covert or open support. After the infamous case of the segregated matriculation ceremony in Tiszavasvári, the plaintiffs struggling for the protection of their human rights appeared in the right-wing media simply as the “scabby horde”. Misinterpretation of the freedom of speech and democracy brought to the surface the hatred that had been latent for decades.

Political awakening and the beginnings of Roma self-organisation also gained momentum in the wake of the political transformation. Following the long period of organisations directed from above – such as the National Roma Council established in 1985 or the Hungarian Roma Cultural Federation revived in 1986 – the new legislation based on the ideal of constitutionality and proclaiming the freedom of association, speech and the press allowed the formation of independent organisations. Three specifically Roma parties had been formed for the 1990 elections – of which the most successful was the Social Democratic Party of the Hungarian Roma – but none of them managed to secure an independent mandate. However, during the first cycle of the freely elected parliament three openly Roma MP’s (Antónia Hága, Aladár Horváth and Tamás Péli) were able to participate in the legislation as representatives of large, national parties. In the next two parliamentary cycles however only one of them managed to keep his seat. Aside from a number of superficial exceptions, the parliamentary parties did not attach real significance to the question of the Roma and had no intention of including Roma representatives in their campaigns.

The activities of Roma NGOs took off in a much more dynamic manner. By the end of 1991, 96 such organisations had already been registered. However their operation is becoming increasingly uncertain, financing is uncertain and the awarding of programme funds is often a question of loyalty to



the government in power. The state has set up public foundations granting such organisations support for individual programmes. The public foundation “For National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary” was established in 1995 primarily to support the preservation of minority identities and cultures. The “Public Foundation for the Hungarian Roma” was launched in 1996 to support the livelihood of the Roma population, distributing some 80–90% of its support budget to promote agricultural production.

Act LXXVII 1993, On National and Ethnic Minorities, is of historic significance as regards the political activity and indeed the fate of the entire Roma population. For the first time it acknowledged that this people forms an ethnic minority and beyond individual rights grants the Roma the right of collective self-organisation. It was this act which made it possible for these organisations (now tending to call themselves “Roma” instead of using the word “Gypsy”, which has become increasingly pejorative) to establish representative bodies on both the local and the national level. In 1994 (and following the supplementary elections of 1995) 477 local Roma self-governments were formed. In the capital the district minority self-governments elected the Gypsy Minority Municipal Self-Government and set up the Gypsy Minority National Self-Government with 53 members, which latter received a one-time funding of Ft60 million. These self-governing bodies were elected for the second time in 1998, when the number of such local self-governments increased significantly, elections being held successfully in 764 locations. On the other hand, the municipal self-government could not be elected. In the second elections for the (now called) National Gypsy Self-Government the coalition lead by Lungo Drom won for the second time, and Flórián Farkas was re-elected as president. However, at the start of the second cycle, problems which could only be resolved by modifying the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities became more apparent. The law does not guarantee the financial basis for the operation of minority local self-governments, thereby making them dependent on municipalities. This is especially so in the case of the Roma as they have no motherland that could provide them with financial and moral support, as is customary in the case of the other national minorities in the country. The past few years have also made it clear that, due to the alarmingly low educational level of the Roma population, the elected local representatives and even the national politicians are, for the most part, unable to perform their tasks and formulate long-term plans. Successive governments have tried to produce spectacular action plans and set up various bodies to help the Roma population and reassure the majority society that they are “managing” the issue. These attempts, however, have not been overly successful to date.



More hopeful are those experiments which launch new initiatives in the field of education to enable the Roma to overcome cultural backwardness. Among these we find various bridging and skill-training programmes as well as the now internationally respected Gandhi High School in Pécs or the Romaversitas Invisible College, whose purpose is the training of experts with above-average skills. Albeit slowly, a new group of highly trained young Roma intelligentsia is evolving, whom it will be more difficult to exclude from decision-making in issues concerning the Roma. Another promising sign is that scientific research has started concerning the situation of Roma children in elementary schools and kindergartens. The results of this will perhaps make it possible to change the practice of segregated education, which has clearly proved to be a dead end.

To summarise the situation following the political transformation, we can conclude that there was a tragic decline which not only halted the social ascent of the previous decades but also destroyed many of the results achieved. The significance of this is now recognised at the level of politics. If we do not dispute the fact that masses of the Roma population are living at the very lowest level and are the most despised group in society – and it would not, in my opinion, be worthwhile to do so – then it is imperative to implement urgent, yet well thought through and scientifically based measures if we are to maintain the peaceful nature of the centuries old Hungarian-Roma coexistence. This is especially important now that the case of the Zámoly Roma has alerted the countries of the European Union to the situation – the increasingly hopeless and unbearable conditions of the majority of the Roma might well incite other groups to undertake such desperate acts.

## II. GOVERNMENTAL AND POLITICAL EFFORTS DURING THE LAST DECADE

After the political transformation the first democratically elected parliament and government immediately had to face the problems related to minorities, which had been suppressed for decades, and the challenge of immediate action. We can distinguish two major phases of the course of events during the last ten years: the issue from 1990 to 1995 was the reconsideration and review of the entire legislative and institutional background, while the first government programmes aiming to improve the situation of the Roma population commenced in 1995. Government action could not be further delayed as the political transformation had shaken the economic basis of the entire Hungarian population, and intolerance and the lack of solidarity grew among the masses of desperate people who had become unemployed. The Roma population became the primary target of the emerging and strengthening extreme right and fascist organisations. Organized harassment and abuse became everyday occurrences and, fearing unleashed emotions, political decision-makers also recognised that the situation could not be resolved without special state support helping the social integration of the Roma population.

### *Legislation and new institutions*

Right in 1990 a new institution with national authority was established: the Bureau of National and Ethnic Minorities (NEKH). Its primary task is advising the government on ethnic policy and providing the theoretical support for minority politics. In addition its tasks include the continuous monitoring and analysis of the situation of minorities and liaising with minority representatives. From the mid-1990s the Bureau has taken a decisive role in the formulation of Roma-related short and medium-term programmes and is now preparing a long-term strategic programme. A significant and widely acknowledged step forward was that, as of 1998, a separate vice-president of the Bureau is responsible for the coordination of Roma affairs. On the other hand, the reorganisation exercise of 1998, which placed the Bureau under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs instead of the Prime Minister's Office, received much criticism. It was primarily representatives of the Roma who felt that the Bureau had thus lost some of its weight, also noting that it is not very fortunate that the institution dealing with Roma affairs is ranked together with the judiciary and the prison system. Overall, however, there is general agreement that NEKH's activities are necessary, though

many believe it would be useful to elevate the status of the Bureau within the state hierarchy, thereby signifying the importance of its activities.

After the political transformation, the most important element of legislation concerning minorities which defined further progress and provided the basis for institutional framework was Act LXXVII 1993, On the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities, passed with a majority of 96%. This was an important step, since for the first time it established the legal recognition of the Hungarian Roma as a minority. Singularly in Europe, the Act enshrines minority rights to which both individuals and communities are entitled. The significance of this is that it grants minorities the opportunity to establish organisations, create minority self-governments or even achieve independent territorial organisation (autonomy). The Act solves the question of the criteria for belonging to a minority on the basis of the principle of self-definition. This principle provides a sound basis for the proclamation of identity, though it has also led to several problems during the past few years. Suffice it to recall only the notorious “cuckoo” case, when someone became a member of a minority self-government even though he had nothing to do with that minority. To avoid such frauds, minority organisations have been urging for years that the date of the elections of minority self-governments be different from that of the “ordinary” local self-government elections, or that membership in a minority organisation be a precondition for candidacy. It is also important to note that the Act provided for programmes in the public service media, recognised minority languages, the possibilities of establishing cultural institutions, the bases of the right to tuition and education, the right of minority representation in Parliament and the institution of an ombudsman for minority rights.

However, we also have to mention the shortcomings of the Act. First and foremost is the lack of sanctions. There is not much point in formulating what constitutes forbidden conduct and stipulating parliamentary representation if breaches against, or omission of these provisions do not entail any legal consequences, and if such are not provided for by other laws either. Another problem is that the Act does not ensure the financial conditions of the successful operation of minority self-governments. Multi-channel financing (supplementary financing from local councils, tenders) to complement the state’s normative support is rather uncertain, making it difficult to make long-term plans. This leads to the dependency of such bodies on local councils. It is also important to note that the Roma have no independent country of origin, which could extend moral and financial support. The scarcity of finances jeopardises successful operation, especially if minority self-governments intend to conscientiously fulfil their tasks and exercise their rights

provided for by law. On the basis of the ongoing debate of the amendment of the Act, we can expect positive changes. Minorities will probably achieve parliamentary representation on the basis of an acceptable compromise, but there has been no final agreement yet as to exactly how this will be carried out. We have no information, however, about any efforts to regulate financing and implement a system of sanctions.

Other important laws have also been passed which directly affect the situation of Roma in Hungary. Such, for example, was the 1996 amendment of Act LXXIX 1993, On Public Education, which defined the opportunities for national and local minority self-governments to establish and operate public educational institutions. Ministry of Education order no. 32/1997 provides for the principles of the kindergarten and school education of national and ethnic minorities. Its primary objectives include the definition of the principles of a system of education that fits the children's age characteristics and individual levels of development, promotes the learning of minority languages and cultures, as well as the preservation and development of cultural traditions. The order details the possible forms of education and the criteria systems related thereto. However, due to the complexity of the system, local councils and schools are often unaware of the possibility of the application of these forms; the various forms of education are often mixed up and even more often educators ignore parental wishes and consent.

Extremely important from the point of view of the Roma population was Act LIX 1993, On the Ombudsman for the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities. The task of the minority ombudsman – as laid down in the constitution as well – is to investigate abuses of constitutional rights and initiate general or individual measures for the remedy of such. The events of recent years and the reports of the ombudsman indicate that the creation of this institution was indeed necessary; its activities are indispensable for the functioning of a constitutional state. The ombudsman, however, has very limited potential of rectifying the abuses that come to light. The right of proposal and initiation of measures often does not fulfil its purpose, and the case of Roma appealing to the public is not always effective. It would definitely be necessary to broaden the ombudsman's sphere of authority.

The declared purpose of government order no. 1121/1995 (XII.7) on the Establishment of the Public Foundation for the Hungarian Roma was to promote equal opportunities.

*Medium-term action plans*

Government order 1120/1995 (XII.7) was the first significant government initiative which expressly sought a remedy for the increasingly impossible situation of the Roma. As a first step in this direction a Co-ordination Council for Roma Affairs was set up to harmonise the work of the ministries and the various national institutions, to promote finding a solution to the problems of the Roma and to support their social integration. Its declared objectives include the elaboration of a medium and a long-term programme to promote equal opportunities. Another, closely related government order was no. 1125/1995 (XII.12), a document which deals with the most urgent tasks concerning the situation of Roma in Hungary. Recognising the urgent necessity for government participation, this order prescribes the creation of action plans in various areas for the ministries.

The first medium-term action plan, Government order no. 1093/1997 (VII.29), was based on these government orders issued in 1995 and tried to comprehensively assess and define the tasks necessary for the social integration of the Roma. Its first part contains the measures to be taken during 1997 and 1998. In the field of *culture and education* the programme declares the necessity for the development of tuition fee and child protection support, the elimination of segregation in education, the further development of regional programmes for talented children (e.g. Gandhi High School and College) and the broadening of their networks, plus the establishment of boarding schools for talented pupils. In the field of *employment* the programme's objectives include the elimination of Roma slums, the creation of new employment schemes and the development of existing ones, the integration of Roma students into the vocational training system and the implementation of farming programmes. *Regional tasks* include the implementation of comprehensive crisis management programmes in areas with a high concentration of disadvantaged groups, i.e. where Roma form a significant part of the population. With respect to *anti-discrimination measures*, the programmes attach importance to the assessment of the necessity of further legislation and the inclusion of information about the Roma into police training. In the field of *communication*, finally, the programme speaks of the necessity for the elaboration of a PR strategy related to the development of the conditions of the Roma. The second part of the action plan lays down the guidelines for later measures, including support for the higher education of Roma students, the role of minority self-governments in the struggle against unemployment, the development of a screening and health-care network to improve the health conditions of the Roma population, support for legal aid

bureaus for conflict management and the necessity of a realistic image of the Roma in public service media.

The new government elected in 1998 found it necessary to revise the medium-term action plan. Basically the contents of government order no. 1047/1999 (V.5) reflect the objectives laid down in 1997; however, *priority is given to the tasks related to education and culture*. In the field of *education* therefore, presently the basic objective is the development of elementary education (beside the promotion of regular kindergarten attendance and the decrease of truancy), while in medium-level and higher education it is decreasing the dropout rate (via boarding schools and scholarships). In the field of *culture*, basic objectives include the development of cultural institutions to support group cohesion, the training of experts and the creation of technical materials. The basic objectives in the field of *employment* are support for people who are long-term unemployed or unable to start their careers, the organisation of public works schemes and the elaboration of a social land-ownership programme. In the case of *anti-discrimination* aims, greater attention has to be paid to the actual implementation of laws, while the task of *communications strategy* is to explain to the majority society why programmes for the Roma population are necessary at all.

To help the successful implementation of the medium-term action plan, the new government also found it necessary to change the governing body. Government order no. 1048/1999 (V.5) dissolved the Co-Ordination Council for Roma Affairs, replacing it with the *Inter-Departmental Committee for Roma Affairs*. A sign of progress is that the new forum may form sub-committees and invite representatives of Roma NGOs with consultation rights to its minimum four annual sessions. The ombudsman for minority affairs and the presidents of the Public Foundation for the Hungarian Roma, the Gandhi Public Foundation and the National Roma Parliament are permanent invitees.

### *The long-term strategy programme*<sup>11</sup>

Experiences of recent years made it obvious to political decision-makers that even though the level of the present system of minority protection in Hungary is acceptable, it is insufficient to resolve the problems of the Roma population and there is need for additional state measures. Changes, however, can only be implemented on the basis of a far-sighted, consistent long-term strat-

---

<sup>11</sup> As we have no access to documents, we were acquainted with the programme under preparation from a lecture held by Dr. Gabriella Varjú, vice-president of NEKH responsible for Roma affairs (since resigned from her post) held in Budapest at the public hearing of the Roma Expert Committee of the Council of Europe on 31 October 2000.

egy. If we examine the results of the medium-term and long-term programmes, it is evident that even though the efforts made have been positive, the conditions of the Roma population have not improved but have, in fact, deteriorated. The causes for this are the age-old poor living circumstances of the Roma and the scarcity of the country's economic resources. Representatives of Roma organisations and independent experts, however, attach at least as much importance to the defects and inconsistencies of the state's Roma policies, as well as the fact that several – not specifically Roma-related – legislative acts in various fields (child protection, social policy, family tax reductions) put the Roma at a greater handicap than they were years ago. The question of the utilisation of funds for the solution of the problems of the Roma is much disputed as well. According to statistics, in the year 2000 the budget reserved some Ft4.85 billion for the realisation of the objectives of the medium-term programme and a further Ft2.2 billion for other minority-related tasks, totalling to Ft7 billion. The problem, however, is that these funds are distributed among the budgets of the various ministries and there are no established procedures to supervise the actual spending – in particular, representatives of Roma organisations have no possibility of exercising such supervision. Such lack of transparency hinders the successful implementation of the programme, even though it would be a basic pre-condition for a long-term strategy.

After assessing the deficiencies and errors of the implementation of previous programmes, the long-term strategy declares as its objective the social and economic integration of the Roma population in Hungary, while maintaining their identity. Other objectives include the creation of jobs and the promotion of equal opportunities for the Roma to participate in society and politics. The programme intends to provide guidelines for changing the impossible situation of the Roma via a set of *principles*. Such principles include social solidarity and responsibility, partnership (Roma participation), subsidiarity and decentralisation (the local resolution of local problems), as well as the necessity of preserving and protecting the values of Roma culture. Further principles are the development of the legal framework against negative discrimination, transparency and publicity, and the necessity of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to the question. To ensure the financial basis for the implementation sustainability of the programme, the strategy recommends *a greater concentration of financial resources*. An important objective of the plan is *the creation and consistent implementation of a system of supervision and monitoring*. To effectively improve the conditions of the Roma, two *sectoral priorities* have been defined: improvement of the conditions of education and employment to promote the self-sustaining



ability of families. An interesting element is the definition of trans-sectoral, so called *horizontal priorities*, such as the elimination of social and political segregation and the promotion of Roma participation.

According to plans, the long-term strategic programme will be put to broad public debate where all parties concerned will have their say, thereby helping to eliminate potential errors. The opinion according to which yet again this programme is no more than a set of generalities and principles and contains few references appertaining to concrete methods to resolve the extremely serious situation has already been formulated by representatives of Roma organisations. Final acceptance of the programme will probably be preceded by heated debates. Everyone agrees, however, that, beside the participation of the Roma and non-Roma population, the greatest responsibility has to be assumed by the state, and that improvement of the living conditions of the Hungarian Roma population is only possible with strong support from the European Union.