The Political Empowerment of Roma Youth in Bulgaria: Challenges and Perspectives

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Introduction

Bulgaria is the country with the highest percentage of Roma in Europe. Although not reflected in official statistics, numerous international organizations and studies estimate that Roma make up approximately 10 per cent of the total population of Bulgaria. Over the past twenty years, the country has witnessed a series of efforts to improve the living standards of Roma. Since the fall of communism, organizations such as the Open Society Institute in Sofia and the Human Rights Project, among others, have been established with the aim of improving the situation of Roma and of promoting democratic values more broadly. To this end, the focus of such work has been to combat the social exclusion and marginalization of Roma, including by improving literacy and school attendance rates, ensuring the provision of adequate housing and health care and preventing ethnic discrimination. Consequently, Roma issues have been made part of the government agenda. In 1999, strategic documents such as the “Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society” were adopted for the very first time. In 2005, Sofia hosted the launch of the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, signalling the country’s commitment to improve the situation of Roma.

Despite these efforts, a number of reports published by local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) suggest that these and other integration strategies remain ineffective. A particular problem with such strategies is that they are often developed without the full participation of Roma. This paper is premised on the view that the only way to assist Roma in dealing with the challenges they face is to provide for their political empowerment; Roma must be afforded a place at the decision-making table in order to shape their own future. The political participation of Roma in Bulgaria has been neglected for many years and continues to limit the capacity of Roma to realize their full potential.

This paper analyses the main barriers to the active political participation of Roma in Bulgaria from the standpoint of Roma youth. It applies the definition of “political participation” used by the Roma scholar and researcher, Dr. Iulius Rostas, who defines the term as “participation in electoral processes for local decision-making institutions.” In the main, the paper considers traditional forms of political participation, including running for election as a politician and voting as a citizen. From the outset, the paper studies the overall picture regarding the political participation of Roma in Bulgaria, and presents data on their political representation at the local and national levels. The paper includes data on Roma political participation collected following the local elections held in 2003, 2007 and 2011, as well as data on Roma representation in the Bulgarian Parliament. In addition, the paper ex-
explores two case studies presenting the experiences of young Roma who have been elected at the national and municipal levels. Focusing on Roma youth, the report also examines the number of young educated Roma in Bulgaria who could in future come to represent any political party. Finally, based on interviews with young Roma, the report concludes with recommendations for the Bulgarian government, for the country’s political parties and for international, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including the OSCE/ODIHR.

Roma political participation in Bulgaria

Ethnicity in Bulgaria and the 2011 National Census

In order to obtain a more accurate measure of the political participation of Roma in Bulgaria, it is necessary to establish the number of Roma as a percentage of the country’s population. Data collected by the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria (NSI) in the most recent national census from 2011 puts Bulgaria’s population at 7,364,570. Of these, the number of people who self-identify as Roma is 325,343, or 4.7 per cent of the total population of Bulgaria.

However, this data is highly disputed for a number of reasons. According to Article 21, paragraph 2, of the Bulgarian Act on Statistics, individuals cannot be required to provide the statistical office with any information on their race, ethnicity and religion. In accordance with this legal norm, in the censuses of 2001 and 2011, questions on ethnic origin, religion and mother tongue were answered on a voluntary basis. As such, the ethnicity of many individuals was not recorded. In 2001, 1.1 per cent of respondents did not answer questions on ethnicity. In total, 736,981 respondents, or 10 per cent of the total population, did not answer the question on ethnicity. It is perhaps unlikely that ethnic Bulgarians would not indicate their ethnicity on the census. It is more likely that those who do not self-identify do so because they belong to an ethnic minority. Thus, it would appear that the Council of Europe estimate of approximately 700,000 Roma is reasonable. Based on this figure, 24 members of parliament, 517 municipal councillors and 530 mayors or deputy mayors should, ideally, be Roma. This paper explores the extent to which the political participation of Roma falls short of this projection.

Roma political representation in Bulgaria in the 2011 local elections

The voluntary nature of questions pertaining to ethnicity also make it difficult to obtain comprehensive information on Roma political representation. However, during the 2003 and 2007 local elections, organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Centre for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe” collected data in order to analyse the Roma political representation. Research into the local elections of 2011 was conducted by the author of this paper.

By comparing data from these three election years, it is evident that the number of locally-elected councillors nominated by “Roma parties” (i.e., those parties who skipped the questions related to ethnicity) was 683,590, or 9.3 per cent of the total population. In addition, the number of those who responded but preferred not to indicate their ethnicity was 53,391. In total, 736,981 respondents, or 10 per cent of the total population, did not answer the question on ethnicity. It is perhaps unlikely that ethnic Bulgarians would not indicate their ethnicity on the census. It is more likely that those who do not self-identify do so because they belong to an ethnic minority. Thus, it would appear that the Council of Europe estimate of approximately 700,000 Roma is reasonable. Based on this figure, 24 members of parliament, 517 municipal councillors and 530 mayors or deputy mayors should, ideally, be Roma. This paper explores the extent to which the political participation of Roma falls short of this projection.


249 Bulgarian Law on Statistics, Article 21, para. 2: “Individuals cannot be required to provide statistical data on race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, health, privacy, party affiliation, committed legal offenses, philosophical and political beliefs.” The Bulgarian original is available at: <http://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2134668297>.

250 In the census, respondents were asked four questions relating to ethnicity (questions 10 to 13), namely: “10. Your ethnic group is: 1) Bulgarian; 2) Turkish; 3) Roma; 4) Other: (please state); 5) I don’t self-identify. 11. Your mother tongue is: 1) Bulgarian; 2) Turkish; 3) Roma; 4) Other: (please state); 5) I don’t self-identify. 12. Are you religious? 1) Yes; 2) No; 3) I don’t self-identify. 13. Your religion is: 1) Orthodox; 2) Catholic; 3) Protestant; 4) Muslim Sunni; 5) Muslim Shia; 6) Other: (please state); 7) I don’t have a religion; 8) I don’t self-identify. See: 2011 National Census form, National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/karta_Census2011.pdf>.


whose leaders openly self-identify as Roma) has seen a drastic decline in numbers, from 126,254 in 2003 to 96,255 in 2007 and 17 in 2011. These results are alarming, especially when compared to the total number of municipal councillors elected in 2011 (5,174).

The results of the Roma parties in the 2011 local elections are as follows:256
- **Euroroma**: elected a total of eight municipal councillors, receiving 3,659 votes;
- **Solidarnost**: elected a total of five municipal councillors, receiving 3,402 votes;
- **Drom**: elected a total of two municipal councillors, receiving 643 votes; and
- **European Security and Integration (ESI)**: elected two municipal councillors, receiving 1,726 votes.

The total number of votes received by these parties was 16,174. In comparison, the turnout for the local and presidential elections of 2011 was 51.8 per cent.257 Therefore, out of 6.52 million eligible voters in the local elections, approximately 3.38 million went to the polls on election day. Thus, only about 0.5 per cent of the total votes cast went to Roma parties.

Meanwhile, the 2011 local elections did not lead to an increase in the number of Roma included on the party lists of left, right and centre parties. Roma were elected as councillors from the lists of some non-Roma parties on the left and the right. However, it is still difficult to determine the number of Roma councillors elected from the lists of mainstream (non-Roma) parties, although the available data does indicate a decline in numbers since the 2007 local elections. The data on Roma councillors elected from mainstream parties is as follows:
- **Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)**: one Roma councillor elected in Polski Trumbesh;
- **Local Coalition Liberal Democratic Union**: two Roma councillors elected in Kaspichan;
- **Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)**: three Roma councillors elected in Sliven and one in Tervel;
- **Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)**: 15 Roma councillors elected in total (one in Dubnik, one in Zavet, two in Levski, two in Pavlikeni, two in Strazhitsa, two in Plovdiv, two in Ugarchin and three in Kneja);
- **Agrarian Union “Aleksandar Stamboliyski”**: one Roma councillor elected in Lom and one in Valchedram;
- **Order, Law and Justice (RZS)**: two Roma councillors elected in Pleven and one in Strazhitsa;
- **New Time (Novoto Vreme)**: one Roma councillor elected in Peshtera; and
- **Political Club “Trakia”**: one Roma councillor elected in Kuklen.

Therefore, the total number of Roma councillors elected from mainstream parties in the 2011 local elections was 29. Together with the 17 elected representatives from Roma parties, the total number of Roma municipal councillors elected in the 2011 local elections was 46. As such, only 0.88 per cent of the total number of 5,174 councillors elected were Roma. This percentage is considerably lower than the 4.7 per cent figure in the country provided by official government statistics, and much lower than other, more realistic measures of the size of the country’s Roma population. This demonstrates the under-representation of Roma in politics at the local level.

If the number of elected Roma councillors was proportional to the size of the Roma population, then according to official statistics there should be 243 Roma municipal councillors. Of course, this figure would more than double if the Council of Europe estimate of the size of the Roma population were applied. Therefore, according to official statistics, Roma are under-represented both in local government and in the national parliament by a factor of six. In order to understand the issue, it is necessary to examine the various barriers to Roma political representation.

### Barriers to the effective participation of Roma in elections

#### Higher votes cast but fewer mandates: the voting system matters

This section will examine the legal obstacles that prevent Roma parties from performing more successfully in elections. These obstacles in part explain the declining number of Roma representatives, as discussed below.

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255 Teodora Krumova, op. cit., note 250.
Despite the increase in the number of votes cast for Roma parties in the 2007 local elections compared to the 2005 parliamentary elections, there was a decline in the number of elected Roma representatives. Thus, the number of votes cast for Roma parties in the 2007 local elections was 76,236, while in the 2005 parliamentary elections this figure was 45,637. However, this increase in votes did not translate into an increase in the number of Roma representatives elected in local elections. This was due to the introduction of a new method of calculating the electoral threshold that was adopted three months before the 2007 local elections. The new threshold was made equal to the municipal electoral quota, which is calculated by dividing the total number of valid votes cast by the number of councillors. The resulting figure is the percentage threshold. This method of calculating the electoral threshold – known as the Hare-Niemeyer method – has the effect of pre-screening the political forces that will succeed in electing municipal councillors. Consequently, parties that fall below that figure are automatically disqualified and will not receive any seats in the local city council. This meant that, for the smallest municipalities (those with eleven councillors), the electoral threshold shot up to nine per cent, thereby dooming smaller parties to failure. Meanwhile, independent candidates found the nine per cent threshold even harder to meet. Although the electoral threshold was lower in larger communities, it still posed a barrier to smaller parties, including Roma parties.

In addition, Roma parties tend to struggle to form coalitions that would enable them to gain more votes and mandates. There are two primary reasons for this. The first is owing to the fact that more than one Roma candidate can be nominated for parliamentary or local elections in a given region or municipality. As a result, the large number of Roma candidates scatters the votes. The second reason is that leaders are often unable to reach a consensus on which candidate to support. Parliamentary elections provide Roma with a better opportunity to unite behind the candidates of a particular Roma party or Roma candidate from a mainstream party. Again, for this to work, however, there must be just one Roma party in the region. Meanwhile, Roma from mainstream parties must be in the first five to ten places on party lists. Only then can the system of preferential voting work in their favour. Thus far, however, Roma parties and candidates have struggled to overcome these hurdles.

From this, we might conclude that, in order to succeed in elections, a candidate for public office must represent a strong party that is well-funded, well-structured and expected to gain the majority of the votes. Otherwise, votes that do not contribute to the formation of a mandate will be allocated equally to other parties and candidates that are able to overcome the electoral threshold. In reality, Roma political structures are usually newly established and poorly funded. Therefore, the best way for Roma candidates to win a mandate is to become part of a well-funded, well-structured mainstream party.

The inclusion of ethnic Roma in mainstream parties presents its own risks, however. Roma candidates should be wary of the incentives for mainstream political parties to have them on board. Very often Roma are used for the purpose of ethnic tokenism, with some parties including Roma candidates in the last positions on party lists in order to feature them on campaign posters and other promotional materials in order to attract Roma voters. Moreover, mention of their “concern for minorities” is often used to boost a mainstream party’s credentials when co-operating with European Parliament parties and western donors. Such deceptive forms of Roma political representation are a serious issue as they can deter young Roma from becoming politically active.

The problem of vote buying

Vote buying has traditionally been a key topic during the local elections for both media and politicians. Unfortunately, the sale of thousands and even tens of thousands of votes during elections in Bulgaria is no novelty, but has been practiced by all major parties for many years as a way to boost their votes. During the 2011 local elections, candidates from across the political spectrum were engaged in vote buying. There were two unusual developments in vote buying in 2011, however. Firstly, vote buying did not only affect Roma votes, but also influenced the votes of thousands of ethnic Bulgarians, primarily young people who were alienated from the main political parties. According to Zhivko Georgiev, a leading Bulgarian sociologist, nearly half of the votes bought in

258 Teodora Krumova, op. cit., note 250.
the 2007 local elections belonged to young ethnic Bulgarians. Indeed, research has shown that young people, including Roma, are more likely to participate in vote-buying and selling than any other age group.

The other new development in the 2011 local elections was the public campaigns against this dishonest practice, with media and Roma NGOs condemning vote buying. For example, the Alumni Club of the Internship Program for Young Roma to the National Assembly (ACIPYNA) campaigned in Roma and non-Roma communities across the country with the motto “I will not sell my vote”. This campaign began as an initiative of the Amalipe Centre in 2007, and was then adopted by the ACIPYNA, NDI-Bulgaria and the Open Society Institute in Sofia.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from Bulgaria’s vote buying problem is that those who are most likely to sell their votes are those that are most neglected by political parties, namely Roma and youth. The problems of these groups are often not adequately addressed by politics and, as a result, the only advantage for them in voting is the money they can make on election day. In general, there appears to be an immense gap between young people and political parties in Bulgaria, resulting in high levels of apathy among young people towards politics.

Research conducted in 2013 into the quality of democracy in Bulgaria compared the three largest political parties in Bulgaria to analyse their support base. The parties included in the research were Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). The research revealed that approximately 20.8 per cent of 18 to 30-year-olds support one of these parties. In other words, only one in five young people in Bulgaria back a political party. Information on the ethnic identity of the young people surveyed was not included in the research. It should also be noted that the study defined “support for a party” not as active involvement in party activi-
ties, but as sharing the party’s values. Information on the numbers of young people actively participating in political parties in Bulgaria can be found at the parties’ central offices. The present paper would like to examine further whether there are young and educated Roma who can become the future political leaders of the Roma community.

The political participation of young and educated Roma in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the number of young Roma who hold university degrees increases every year. Although there is no data available on the number of Roma students graduating each year, if one looks at the numbers of students applying for scholarships at the Roma Education Fund (REF) and the Roma Memorial University Scholarship Program (RMUSP), a limited picture of the number of Roma graduates in the country emerges.

Every year, the number of applications to the RMUSP by Roma from Bulgaria is between 300 and 500, of which around 200 are successful. The number of scholarship beneficiaries from Bulgaria for the academic year 2012/2013 was 202. For the year 2013/2014, the number of Roma students applying for RMUSP was 352, of which 209 received funding. For the year 2014/2015, the REF received 507 applications and accepted 220 of them. Between 2001, when the RMUSP was founded, and 2012, the RMUSP provided more than 1,400 scholarships to Roma students from Bulgaria. Therefore, including an estimate for the 2014/15 academic year, the total number of scholarships awarded between 2001 and 2015 exceeds 2,000. In other words, bearing in mind that bachelor degrees last around four years, at least 500 Roma students have already graduated university.

261 “Ефектът “Катуница” върху президентските и местните избори в България през 2011 г. Проход от популизъм към апаратизъм” , София 2012.
263 Each academic year, the Roma Education Fund supports more than 200 Bulgarian Roma students and receives many more applications.
Moreover, data from the Student Society for Development of Intercultural Dialogue (SORMD) show that 2,163 Roma students completed university degrees before 2010.267

However, it appears that young educated Roma are not going into politics. Indeed, only five out of the 46 Roma municipal councillors elected in 2011 are below the age of 29. Two of the five hold a university degree. The remaining councillors are aged 35 and over, and none of them have completed higher education. The question remains as to why young and educated Roma do not want to engage in politics. This issue is further discussed below.

The participation of Roma women

The number of Roma women engaged in politics is another issue of concern. According to current data, there are no records of Roma women being elected to the posts of municipal councillor or mayor in the 2011 local elections. Following the 2007 elections, 87 of the Roma elected as municipal councillors were men and nine were women (nine per cent). This is despite the fact that 25 per cent of Roma candidates running for the mayor’s office were women. Meanwhile, no research has been conducted into the number of Roma women who ran or were elected in the 2007 local elections.

In general, women are under-represented in politics in Bulgaria. A 2013 report by the European Institute for Gender Equality put Bulgaria in the penultimate place in the EU.268 The same report found that women’s representation in parliament in Bulgaria is around 23 per cent, despite the EU goal of 40 per cent. Women's representation in public administration varies between 20 and 40 per cent, with women better represented at lower levels of public administration, including in local municipalities. According to a 2014 report, only 11 per cent of women who run for local elections in Bulgaria are successful.269

Therefore, in terms of their involvement in local politics, it seems that both Roma and non-Roma women are under-represented. However, Roma women are comparatively more disadvantaged, as there are no Roma women in the Bulgarian parliament, compared to 23 per cent non-Roma women, and no Roma women running in local elections, while non-Roma women make up 11 per cent of local government leaders. Thus, Roma women are especially disadvantaged in politics, and an elaborate set of measures must be implemented to achieve gender equality in all aspects of social and political life.

Case studies: success stories

In order to find out more about the work of and difficulties facing those young Roma who have been active in politics and succeeded in being elected, this section will look at two case studies. The first case study is of a young Roma woman who became a member of parliament, and the second is of a young Roma man from a rural area who succeeded in being elected as a municipal councillor.

A Roma woman in the Bulgarian Parliament

Since 1990, just one Roma woman has managed to become a member of parliament (MP) in Bulgaria. Milena Hristova became an MP in 2009 at the age of 29 and was the only Roma MP in the 41st National Assembly. She entered the parliament with the Euro-Roma party under the leadership of Tsvetelin Kanchev. The local Roma community was proud of her achievements, rewarding her with strong electoral support.270

267 "Статистика за студентите от ромски произход в България" (Statistics of students of Roma origin in Bulgaria), Student Study for the Development of Interethic Dialogue (SSID) website (undated), <http://www.ssidid.org>.

268 In the report, Bulgaria was shown to have a gender equality coefficient of 37, while with the EU average was 54. The gender equality coefficient consists of six core domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power, health and two satellite domains (intersecting inequalities and violence). The satellite domains are conceptually related to the Index but cannot be included in the core index because they measure an illustrative phenomenon. Specifically, the domain of violence measures gender-based violence against women, and the domain of intersecting inequalities considers specific population groups such as lone parents, carers or people with disabilities. The Index provides results at the domain and sub-domain level for the EU overall and for each Member State. It provides a measure of how far (or close) each Member State was from achieving gender equality. See: European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Gender Equality Index – Country Profiles (Italy: EIGE, 2013), <20150514 Roma Youth Activism conference papers_compiled.docx>.


Two years after the elections, however, Hristova decided to break connections with her party owing to “incompatible ideologies”. At the end of 2011, she joined the Coalition for Bulgaria. In 2011, as part of the Parliamentary Legislation Committee, she proposed an amendment to the penal code to provide for prison sentences of one to four years for the crime of inciting hatred, discrimination or violence. However, the Coalition for Bulgaria was opposed to the initiative and decided to refer the amendment to the Constitutional Court.

In spite of these successes, however, Milena Hristova struggled to forge a dialogue with Roma civil society organizations. In 2010, Hristova called on the Prime Minister Borisov to order that investigations be carried out on all Roma organizations that receive funding from the Roma Education Fund, a private entity based in Budapest. As a result, widespread financial and police checks were conducted at the offices of a number of organizations. Although none of the organizations were found to have committed violations, Roma civil society representatives were treated as suspects. In 2013, Hristova again ran in the parliamentary elections, from her home region of Plovdiv, this time as the member of a mainstream party. However, she was placed seventh in the party list and was not re-elected.

The success of Milena Hristova in the 2009 parliamentary elections can in part be explained by her high placement on the party list for the region in which she ran. As a result of constructive dialogue between the Euromoma party and the Coalition for Bulgaria, as well as the support she received from the Roma community in her district, Hristova managed to win a seat in the 2009-2013 parliamentary mandate.

The story of a young Roma running in the 2011 local elections

Atanas Stoyanov is a young Roma who belongs to the “Burgudzhii” (smiths or knife makers), a Roma community in northern Bulgaria where traditions are very well preserved, including those relating to early marriage, language and culture. Raised in a small village, Atanas was the first person in his community to obtain a university degree. In 2005, he became the first Burgudzhii Roma to be accepted to the University of Veliko Tarnovo to study a bachelor’s degree in public administration. In 2009, aged 19 and still in university, he ran for the first time in the local elections for the post of municipal councillor. Stoyanov was put in second place on the party list of the National Movement for Freedoms and Rights (NDPS) – a newly established and largely unknown party that lacked funding. In the elections he was only 30 votes short of being elected councillor. Although he lost the elections, he showed his gratitude for the support of those who voted for him by organizing a big celebration.

Four years later, during the 2011 local elections, Stoyanov was once again a candidate for the post of municipal councillor, this time for the Order, Law and Justice (RZS) party, a centre-right mainstream party with local and regional structures and financial resources. He was again placed second on the party list, and succeeded in winning his seat and becoming a municipal councillor for the Municipality of Strazhitsa. He was the first Roma to be elected to this position.

Similar to the first case study, the success of Atanas Stoyanov was in part due to his being placed second on the party list. In addition, Stoyanov also benefited from his training and education, having graduated from a school for young Roma politicians in 2006 and having worked as an intern in the national parliament in 2007. These experiences helped him to develop his political campaign in a professional manner. Following his election as municipal councillor, he was pressured by party colleagues to resign in favour of the next candidate on the party list before being sworn in as councillor. In response, Stoyanov mobilized the support of the local Roma community and managed to retain his position.

This example demonstrates how Roma candidates are sometimes used as tokens with which to attract Roma votes; however, it also highlights the importance of mobilizing community support behind a strong leader. Meanwhile, Stoyanov’s education and training meant that he was well equipped to manage an election campaign and had acquired important skills to that end, including public speaking and campaign management.

271 “БСП ДАВА НА СТА ТЕКСТ НА ДЕПУТАТА” (BSP gives the Court a text of MP from the Left), dariknews.bg, 26 April 2011, <http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=706430>.

272 Elena Kodinova, “Прокуратурата търси 18 месеца дали са откраднати пари на Сорос и не откри нищо” (Prosecutors seek 18 months to find out if Soros’ money was stolen and find nothing), segabg.com, 13 May 2012, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=600492>.

273 For the purposes of this research, the author was encouraged to share his own story.
Analysing the barriers to political office facing young Roma

Considering the fact that a growing number of Roma youth in Bulgaria have a university education, it is unclear why more of them do not stand for political office. To answer this question, the author interviewed three representatives of the Alumni Club of an internship programme for young Roma to the Bulgarian National Assembly.

Over the course of five internship programmes in the National Assembly organized for Roma youth between 2006 and 2011, a total of 50 young Roma had the opportunity to participate in and get acquainted with parliamentary work. As a result of the programmes, an Alumni Club was created that aimed to provide programme participants with ongoing opportunities to network and formulate common positions on processes and policies for Roma integration, as well as to discuss other topical and socially relevant issues. The largest campaign organized by the Alumni Club was titled "I will not sell my vote" and was implemented from 2007 to 2013 to deter vote buying during elections. The campaign succeeded in reaching thousands of voters, including both Roma and non-Roma. In addition, the Club organized numerous press conferences and round tables on Roma issues that were attended by state officials and diplomats. The Club even managed to bring Roma issues to the attention of the then US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, who met in person with the Club's members in 2012.

Unfortunately, the Club was forced to suspend its activities owing to a lack of funding. During the interviews, members of the Club were asked what obstacles young and educated Roma faced when attempting to engage in politics. A wide range of responses were given, and these are provided in the following paragraphs.

One of the challenges cited was the desire of young and educated Roma to practice in the professional field in which they gained a degree. Many young people, including Roma, are less interested in politics and are more interested in the fields that they have chosen to study or in which they have experience. Therefore, young Roma graduates are more likely to obtain work in the private sector or to start their own business than to embark on a political career.

The free movement of capital, services and labour that Bulgaria has benefited from following its EU accession in 2007 is another factor deterring young Roma from entering politics. Many young Bulgarians, including young Roma, prefer to find work as skilled or non-skilled workers in wealthier EU member states, where they can often earn twice as much as what they would earn if they stayed in Bulgaria.

Moreover, political office is not thought of as rewarding, as elected positions are perceived as too demanding and poorly paid. Although political representatives at both the local and national levels jointly agree on their own salaries, the money they earn is less than the average monthly salary and often insufficient as the sole source of income. At the same time, those in public office are prohibited by law from being part of any for-profit organizations. As a result, this leads them to break the law by transferring any business activities that could amount to a conflict of interest to a relative or friend, while continuing to engage in and profit from the activities themselves. Furthermore, a councillor cannot in theory be unemployed, as they cannot receive social benefits. Once they take public office, social benefits must be stopped, and in their place the councillor will receive a smaller amount. Therefore, if a municipal councillor loses her/his permanent job — a common occurrence owing to political reasons and pressure — they cannot then register as unemployed and cannot receive social benefits until they give up the elected post. The only way around this is to violate the law by accepting bribes and other illegal acts.

Another deterrent for young Roma is the negative public image of politics and politicians. Many young people, including young Roma, do not want to engage in a profession that is often considered to be

274 "Млади роми инициираха национална кампания "Не продавам гласа си" (Young Roma initiated campaign "I will not sell my vote"), agencia.bg, 10 May 2013.
275 "Конференция Перспективи пред младите роми в България" ще се проведе в София" (Conference on "The perspectives of young Roma" will be held in Sofia), etnosi.wordpress.com, March 2012.
276 "Хилари Клинтън: Интеграцията на ромите е незавършеното дело на България" (Hillary Clinton: Roma integration is the unfinished work of Bulgaria), osi.bg, 6 February 2012, <http://www.osi.bg/?cy=10&lang=1&program=1&action=2&news_id=519>.

dishonest and corrupt. In Bulgaria, politicians often have a bad reputation owing to corruption scandals that result in their arrest during or after the execution of their duties. In this regard, many view the work of politicians as risky.

Finally, some of those interviewed expressed the concern that, although they would like to be a member of a party or to run for elections, their chances of success would be low because they are too poor or because they do not have any relatives or friends in politics. In other words, running for public office is perceived as a “family” privilege that only well-connected or rich young people can enjoy.

Conclusions and recommendations

What can be done to foster Roma political empowerment?

This paper has revealed that the level of political representation among Roma in Bulgaria is very low, with Roma comprising just 0.88 per cent of municipal councillors in the country. Meanwhile, recent changes to the electoral threshold have overwhelmingly affected small Roma parties, leading to a further decline in Roma political representation. As of early 2015, Roma in Bulgaria are under-represented in politics by a factor of six to one, as calculated according to data from the National Statistical Institute. This ratio decreases further when we apply estimates of the size of the Roma community in Bulgaria provided by international organizations.

The level of interest in politics among youth (those aged between 18 and 30) in Bulgaria, including Roma, is five times less than that of other age groups, at only 0.2 per cent. Interviews conducted as part of this research found that Roma youth do not think that politics is important and are not motivated to become politically active. Those young Roma who are interested in politics do not have institutionalized opportunities in which to engage their interests, such as through internship programmes in parties, in the parliament or in other executive branches of government. In Bulgaria, no organization exists that is focused on training young Roma on how to be politically active, further discouraging young Roma from entering politics. Many young Roma believe that it is not education but personal or family connections that are essential to becoming a party member. Combined with high rates of youth emigration, these problems pose a serious barrier to the political participation of young people and, in particular, Roma youth.

The number of young and educated Roma with university degrees in Bulgaria is steadily growing. This paper has found that more than 2,000 Roma students have graduated in different disciplines in recent years, representing a potential resource for both Roma and non-Roma parties, although one that is currently not utilized by political parties.

Roma women are often particularly disadvantaged when it comes to running for and being elected to public office, and as a result are the least likely to engage in politics. While only 11 per cent of women who run for public office at the local level succeed, there is no information available on the number of Roma women elected to local government.

Many mainstream political parties use Roma as tokens, as was seen in the case of Atanas Stoyanov. They do not include Roma candidates in their party lists, or only include an insignificant number, as they do not consider this to be a priority. When elected through mainstream parties, Roma are often prevented from working in the interests of the Roma community, as Milena Hristova found out when she tried to introduce changes to hate crime legislation. Thus, Roma candidates succeed only when they are afforded a primary position in the party list of a mainstream party or coalition, and when they have the backing of the local community. Meanwhile, Roma candidates from Roma parties can only succeed if there is sufficient co-operation among local Roma leaders. In general, political parties led by ethnic Roma have weak local structures and lack funding, while the current legislation on electoral thresholds sets them up for failure. In order to run for the position of municipal councillor, candidates must have sufficient financial backing with which to organize an electoral campaign. This effectively excludes most young people, including Roma, from running. Meanwhile, it is practically impossible for unemployed people to become councilors owing to the current legislation framework.

278 Antoniy Todorov blog, op. cit., note 259.
The recommendations developed as a result of this research are aimed at three different groups in Bulgaria: Roma youth and their communities; the government, political parties and state institutions; and other stakeholders, including national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The main recommendation to young and educated Roma in Bulgaria is that they realize the importance of Roma political participation. Young and educated Roma should understand that the lack of political participation among Roma is a key obstacle to their socio-economic development. Over the years, decision makers have ignored the problems of the Roma population and have not treated them as Bulgarian citizens. As a result, the government does not respond to the basic needs of Roma communities, such as paved streets, refuse management, street lighting, schools and hospitals. Despite the fact that Roma make up a sizable portion of the population, the Roma culture and language are not taught in Bulgarian schools. If more young Roma entered politics, then they would be in a position to tackle such issues. Moreover, the non-participation of Roma in the political life of the country arguably leads to the development of nationalist parties, such as the Ataka party, that openly spread ethnic hatred from the parliamentary rostrum. There are no Roma politicians to oppose incidents of hate speech that threaten interethnic relations and could potentially lead to ethnic conflicts.

Political parties should realize that it is damaging to society as a whole when one or another part of society does not participate in decision-making processes. The exclusion of ethnic groups leads to a deepening social divide and to problems that ultimately affect both ethnic Bulgarians and Roma. On the other hand, an increase in Roma involvement in politics would improve their sense of belonging and citizenship, thereby helping to make them more invested in their communities and in Bulgarian society. Political parties should think of young and educated Roma not just as Roma, but also as professionals who are able to contribute their expertise in all areas of public life, including education, healthcare and economics. The government and political parties should seek to amend the current legislation to make the position of municipal councillor more accessible to all members of society and not only to those with stable incomes.

Moreover, government and political parties should provide young Roma with opportunities for equal participation in public service, with a view to appointing them in permanent positions in the public sector. To this end, internships should be set up that aim to increase the number of young Roma in different areas of government, including in political parties, in parliament, in government ministries and national agencies, in local municipalities and in the judiciary. Young Roma women should be a particular focus of such internship programmes, since they are the least represented in government and political parties. These initiatives should be included as part of the implementation of the “National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020)”. International, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including the OSCE/ODIHR, should be a leading force in ensuring that the state takes the appropriate steps towards increasing the participation of Roma youth in politics. They should provide assistance to the state in implementing the necessary measures and, at the same time, should help to create models and mechanisms for Roma integration. Needless to say, NGOs should not take on the primary role of the state, but should apply their knowledge and experience to developing pilot models that might help to shape national policies. Meanwhile, national and international organizations should focus on lobbying and advocacy to turn such proposals into national policies rather than on implementing one-off activities that are unsustainable. One initiative that would increase the participation of Roma youth in politics are internships offered to young Roma in the state apparatus, embassies and international organizations. These would ideally be implemented by national and international organizations, including the United Nations, the European Commission, the European Parliament and EU political parties, the European Council, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and NATO, among others. Since there are no organizations dealing with the political education of young Roma in Bulgaria, it is crucial that a special school is established to develop the political skills of young Roma, thereby improving their participation in upcoming local and parliamentary elections. Through such internships and training programmes, Roma youth will gain valuable skills that will not only increase their personal self-esteem but will make them a sought-after workforce for state institutions and political parties.
Training programmes on the importance of Roma inclusion should also be provided to representatives of political parties and the government in order to encourage mainstream political parties to ensure that their national and local structures are ethnically diverse.

Last but not least, those Roma who have already succeeded in being elected as municipal councillors should do more to share their experience and expertise with young Roma. For example, the establishment of associations of young politically active Roma would provide a suitable forum for the exchange of knowledge and experience, thereby helping to trigger the political inclusion of Roma at the local level.