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# Ethnic mobilization and the state: the Roma in Eastern Europe

Zoltan Barany

## Abstract

The political mobilization of marginalized ethnic groups is a process indispensable for the realization of their political objectives. This article identifies the key criteria and conditions that promote and impede successful ethnic mobilization and analyses the determinants of state policy towards newly mobilizing ethnic minorities. The theoretical arguments receive empirical support from the findings of a comparative study of the Romani (Gypsy) minority in seven East European states.

**Keywords:** Political mobilization; ethnic mobilization; ethnopolitics; state minority policies; Roma (Gypsies); Eastern Europe.

The collapse of state socialism in Europe created the necessary conditions for the political mobilization of a variety of marginal groups. Groups whose identity and/or presence was not officially recognized (for example, homosexuals), which just began to emerge as a result of the postcommunist transition processes (for example, the unemployed and the homeless), and a number of ethnic minorities which had suffered political exclusion (for example, the Roma [or Gypsies]) in the past could now seize the opportunity to participate in the political process through establishing political parties to articulate and represent their interests.

The political mobilization of ethnic groups and the reactions of the East European states to them have taken a variety of forms. The questions worth asking, then, are what concerns have governed the mobilization processes of various ethnic communities in the individual states of the region, how successful have they been in gaining representation in political institutions, and what can we learn from the reaction of these states to ethnic mobilization? More specifically, what have been the key elements of the mobilization experiences of the Roma, the region's largest ethnic minority with a population of approximately five million people? Examining the ethnic mobilization of the Roma in the regional context of Eastern Europe is helpful for comparative purposes because Romani communities, however dissimilar and diverse, exist in every state

of the region. At the same time, one ought to remember that there are a plethora of sociopolitical, historical and cultural differences between the Roma and other ethnic minorities, thus generalizations could seldom be made based on the Romani experience.

This article draws on the findings of several years of field research in seven East European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia) encompassing dozens of interviews with Roma and *gadje* (non-Roma in the Romani language) politicians, activists and ordinary people. Given the diversity as well as the spatial, cultural and socio-economic marginality of the Romani populations, the nature of this research counsels against making definitive statements concerning a number of principal issues (for example, the exact size of their communities), and therefore some of the conclusions reached may be deemed somewhat speculative.

This article is concerned with neither societal attitudes towards the Roma nor the deterioration of their socio-economic conditions in post-communist Eastern Europe. Rather, following a brief general discussion of ethnic mobilization, it analyses the Romani experience of political mobilization and the East European states' responses to it. I argue that the experiences of the Roma underscore the weight of five variables of successful political mobilization: (1) strong ethnic identity; (2) past mobilization activities and accumulated political resources; (3) 'conventional' factors of group effectiveness (that is, leadership, platforms, organizations); (4) state actions and (5) the size of the ethnic minority.

I contend that Romani political mobilization has so far been largely ineffective owing to first, the weaknesses in Romani identity, secondly, the lack of past experiences and thirdly, the shortcomings of their political organizations. Moreover, I suggest that the political and socio-economic conditions of the Roma have been largely determined by factors exogenous to their mobilization activities: the minority policies of the state; and the size of the Romani minority in the given country. More specifically, I argue that although the political clout of Romani communities remains small in all East European systems, the Roma has gained the most political influence in Hungary and Macedonia.

### **Ethnic mobilization**

In order to appreciate fully the inherent difficulties of Romani political mobilization, it seems expedient to consider briefly ethnic mobilization in general. Political mobilization denotes the deliberate activity of a group of individuals for the realization of political objectives. Mobilization is attitudinal in so far as there is a firm commitment to action and requires 'means of translating this commitment into action or observed behavior' (Nettl 1967, pp. 32–33). These goals generally encompass enhanced interest representation; the cessation of political, social,

economic and other types of discrimination; and the improvement of the given collective's conditions and relative standing in society. Mobilization needs to produce and maximize political resources that will amplify the group's influence: these typically include attracting votes, activating sympathetic third parties, forming coalitions and lobbying, and may entail less 'conventional' political goods like disruptions, protests, and violence which may be used as bargaining chips (Lipsky 1968, pp. 1144–1158). Mobilization may be measured by the active membership of the organizations created, the amount of resources accumulated, the number of programmes established and the protests organized.

In the case of ethnic mobilization the most pertinent characteristic of the group is its ethnic identity, defined here as 'those who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others' (Shibutani and Kwan 1965, p. 47). In fact, the acceptance and endorsement of ethnic identity by the group may be considered as a prerequisite of successful ethnic mobilization. It is a mistake to assume that a distinctive ethnic group possesses, by definition, a strong and well-developed identity. In order to flourish, ethnic identity must be consciously preserved, sustained and strengthened through a number of possible methods. These may include the celebration of a historical personality or event, the commemoration of shared past tragedies, or the holding of ethnic festivals. The chief objective of these endeavours is to endow the individual's ethnic (as opposed to other [for example, geographic, occupational, gender]) identity with meaning, substance and depth.

A variety of causes may bring about ethnic mobilization. The ethnic community in question may suffer real or perceived discrimination at the hands of another ethnic group or groups, and/or it may be excluded from or denied political, social, or economic goods. Ethnic mobilization may occur even in the absence of such exclusion or marginalization in cases where the mobilizing community intends to improve its circumstances *vis-à-vis* other ethnic groups in society. Ethnic mobilization may be triggered or stimulated by the complete or partial removal of obstacles in the way of ethnic activism, the emergence of charismatic leader(s), and/or instances of particular distress or injustice suffered by the given ethnic group. The nature of ethnic mobilization may depend on the identity of those blocking it (whether it is the state, a particular political actor, another ethnic group), the circumstances of the injury suffered by the ethnic group (violent or non-violent), as well as prevailing political, social and cultural rules, norms and values affecting political activity. In sum, ethnic mobilization is fuelled by people's grievances about their relative deprivation and their determination to pursue their political interests (Gurr 1993, p. 123).

The process of mobilization presumes the presence and active participation of a leader or leaders enjoying some measure of authority in the

ethnic community, as well as of individuals capable and willing to equip the group with some organizational form. The importance of the leader(s) is difficult to overestimate for those in a leadership position may determine the success or failure of the organization or movement. Individuals dominating the mobilization process might be 'natural' leaders whose academic qualifications (for example, superior education), economic position (that is, financial success), social standing (for example, coming from a respected family), and political background (for example, relevant prior activities) may predestine them for leadership. Alternatively, a leader may emerge by way of a deliberate selection mechanism which might adopt criteria such as the capacity to interact successfully both with the given ethnic group and other (particularly the dominant) ethnic group(s), politicians, or business leaders. Competition and rifts within the ethnic élite generally impede, whereas cooperation fosters the ethnic group's chances for mobilization (Brass 1991, pp. 25–30). One of the key tasks of the leader is to forge links with a population hitherto uninvolved in politics (Breuilly 1993, p. 19). The individual leader's success in getting the population to participate and enrol depends to a large extent on the level of support which that leader receives and the number of rivals who challenge his or her leadership.

A weighty decision to be made by the collective relates to the profile of its activities. An ethnic group might elect to concern itself primarily with cultural issues (for example, familiarizing its members and 'outside' society with its traditions); economic issues (for example, reducing rates of unemployment); political issues (for example, placing representatives in the legislature), or still other issues. Mobilization also requires the identification of shared objective(s) which the collective desires to achieve. Such aims might be general (for example, the improvement of the group's economic conditions) and/or specific (for example, the halting of discriminatory practices against members of the group in a given school district). Consensus about certain goals can be expected to increase an ethnic group's ability to take joint action (Enloe 1973, p. 183).

Normally, the more general the goal to be realized, the more difficult it is to gauge the effectiveness of a movement's activities. Identifying sensible, realistic goals is crucial for the success of ethnic mobilization *and* for the accomplishment of these aims. What is a reasonable objective is primarily determined by situational factors and thus must be examined on a case-by-case basis. Still, setting unrealistic goals or exploiting the appeal of an archaic, mythical past could conceivably be essential to mobilization and might even be more effective than the identification of a more practical goal (Cohn 1970; Edelman 1985).

The institutional form through which mobilization itself is expressed is one of the most significant aspects of ethnic mobilization. Once it is decided to create an organization, a number of issues need to be deliberated. Would an exclusive, 'élite'-type organization serve the group's

objectives better, or do circumstances require a mass party or movement? What would be the main profile of the organization: political, economic, social, or cultural? A principal condition of any ethnic group's political effectiveness is the raising of the 'communal consciousness of its individual members' (Enloe 1973, p. 160). No active organization can exist without financial support and determining where the required funds will come from (state or foundation patronage, private donations, membership fees) is a critical factor in the process. A related concern is the identification of individuals whom the group wants to attract to the organization (for example, wealthy businessmen, intellectuals, women), and the method of their eventual recruitment.

Another decisive organizational question of the ethnic group's political representation is the number of its institutions. It would appear logical that a single organization which acts as the sole representative of the ethnic group would increase cohesion in the community. Some ethnic communities are so divided along occupational, tribal, economic and social lines, however, that it would be a mistake to expect one organization to articulate their interests. Conversely, a relatively homogeneous ethnic population might create a large number of organizations owing to rivalries within its leadership or dissimilar political views among its members. In a scenario where many organizations exist the chances of fragmentation, competition and tension between their participants are likely to arise. Under what conditions is a single organization able to assert itself, and what circumstances foster organizational divisiveness? The answers to these questions may be affected by numerous related variables such as leadership competition, generational disputes, inter-familial and clan tensions, ideological cleavages and class differences.

The next section examines the post-1989 mobilization experiences of the East European Roma based on these criteria.

### **Romani political mobilization**

A strong and widely shared sense of ethnic identity is one of the essential components of successful ethnic mobilization. The ethnic definition of the Roma is difficult, however, because of the amazing diversity among Romani communities with clear-cut distinctions in occupation, language/dialect, lifestyle, geographic location, socio-economic status and religion. Some of the East European Roma are economically, although not culturally, integrated; others exist on the fringes of society in every respect. Different Romani groups may well hold each other in such contempt that they actually prefer to associate with *gadje* rather than with Roma belonging to other groups. Although the majority of East European Roma have been settled for generations, the length of time that they have been settled (since before 1945, or during the communist era) signifies yet another important dividing line. Nor are the

**Table 1.** *Approximate size of Romani communities and their proportion of the population in selected East European states<sup>7</sup>*

	Total population	Roma population	Proportion of Roma in total (%)
Bulgaria	8,950,000	750,000	8.3798
Czech Republic	10,302,215	275,000	2.6693
Hungary	10,335,000	575,000	5.5636
Macedonia	2,034,000	240,000	11.7994
Poland	38,377,000	45,000	0.1172
Romania	23,198,330	2,150,000	9.2680
Slovakia	5,274,335	500,000	9.4804

**Sources:** White, Batt, and Lewis 1993; Liegeois 1994, p. 34

Roma homogeneous in their use of language: in Romania, for instance, an estimated 60 per cent speak Romani in the family (most also speak Hungarian or Romanian); in Hungary, only 20 per cent of the Roma can speak a Romani dialect (Barany 1992, p. 41).

The differences between the multitude of these geographically, occupationally and linguistically unique Romani communities are such that it is not clear what *the* Romani identity is, since many Roma do not consider themselves members of a cohesive ethnic group but identify instead with the subgroup to which they belong. In northeastern Bulgaria alone, there are nineteen distinctive Romani tribes with particular customs, traditional trades and other substantive splits between them (Helsinki Watch 1991, p. 4). In sum, the ethnic identity of the entire East European Romani population is multi-dimensionally diverse and difficult to define. Although members of individual tribes (such as the Kalderash, Lovara, Beash) usually share a strong sense of belonging, the ethnic identity of the region's Romani population as a whole is weak. What unites all East European Roma are their ethnic, linguistic and cultural origins rooted in northwestern India, and similar historical experiences of political and socio-economic marginality in Eastern Europe for the past six centuries. For reasons of space, I shall employ this highly generalized concept of the Romani people.

## The past

Historically, the Roma have remained largely isolated from the mainstream political processes of Eastern Europe owing to their sociopolitical and economic marginality and to many Roma's reluctance to participate in the white man's politics. Two major reasons explain why contemporary Romani communities do not benefit from past political experiences. First, Romani self-organization prior to 1989 only took

place in a few areas of Eastern Europe, and nowhere did it succeed in influencing state minority policy. Second, until recently Romani culture and history were for the most part unwritten, consequently the events of the past could not be exploited to benefit current ethnic mobilization processes.

In terms of cultural history, the most important Romani organizational activities have been traditional community structures, such as the councils of elders and the *kris*, the Romani community court (Weyrauch and Bell 1993, pp. 323–99). The activities pertaining to the selection of the ‘Gypsy King’ in Poland after the seventeenth century demonstrated a certain desire and aptitude for Romani self-organization in the early modern state (Ficowski 1985, pp. 15–22; Crowe 1995, pp. 152–53). In the interwar period a small number of Romani associations and loose-knitted organizations were brought to life, particularly in Romania (Rommel 1993, pp. 45–61). Organizations such as the General Union of the Roma (Romania) and Future (Bulgaria) were loose associations whose existence was cut short because of infighting, the beginning of the war and subsequent anti-Romani pogroms (Romania), or because of restrictive laws (such as the 1934 law for the defence of the state in Bulgaria) (Helsinki Watch 1991, p. 7).

In the communist period a handful of unofficial associations existed mainly among the Kalderash Roma, especially in Romania and to a lesser extent in Bulgaria. These were informal groups embracing those men and their families who engaged in different types of activities branded illegal under Communism: goat and horse trade, currency exchange, cross-border trade, etc. In general, the Roma were not organized; the exceptions are the few organizations created for the Roma by East European states in order to mollify the few Romani activists and control their lives. The task of these bodies was not to safeguard or represent the Roma’s interests – after all, the communist state maintained ‘Minority Councils’ and other bureaucracies for that purpose – but to shape Romani cultural and social activities into a manageable and controllable institutional form (Barany 1996, pp. 87–88). Usually they were subordinated to the ‘popular fronts’, non-party communist umbrella organizations like the Fatherland Front (*Otechestven Front*) in Bulgaria, and the Patriotic People’s Front (*Hazafias Nepfront*) in Hungary, and were unceremoniously abolished when they became inconvenient to the state.

In Bulgaria, for instance, the Gypsy Cultural and Educational Society was dissolved in 1953 along with 194 local Romani organizations, and the few Roma who insisted on continuing the organization’s activities were imprisoned in 1958 (Simonov 1990, p. 13).<sup>1</sup> In 1968 the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry approved the creation of a Slovak Gypsy Union followed by a Czech counterpart a year later. Both were used and controlled by the regime and were disbanded without explanation in 1973



(Ulc 1988, pp. 312–13). In the 1980s several Romani organizations, including the Democratic Federation of Hungarian Gypsies, the Gypsy Cultural Association and the Gypsy Council were established in Hungary. In fact, the Council, whose programme was designed by the Ministry of Culture, was little more than a superficial body that was supposed to show the West that minority rights were observed in Hungary. The exception to this rule of state-controlled organizations was *Phralipe* ('Brotherhood' in Romani), an independent Hungarian Romani association originating in the twilight of the communist era.

In sum, there is little history of genuine Romani mobilization with practical relevance to the post-1989 period, and the few examples that there are have remained unknown to and/or unappreciated by Romani communities. Therefore, Romani political mobilization – unlike that of other East European ethnic minorities (such as Germans in Poland or Hungarians in Serbia) – has not been able to profit from the political resources accumulated in the past.

### Group effectiveness

After 1989 the region's marginal populations had the opportunity to participate actively in politics. The Roma formed political organizations and sociocultural associations everywhere in Eastern Europe, most of which have been plagued by a number of problems similar throughout the region. As a result, Romani minorities, notwithstanding their considerable size in several East European states, have remained politically ineffective.

### Leadership

Most Roma are traditionally suspicious of authority and hierarchies imposed upon them or operated by the outside world. Some Romani leaders have taken advantage of this traditional distrust to create or reinforce factionalism between Romani groups. The majority of the new Romani élite come from the intelligentsia, individuals who were identified by the communist regimes as potential role models for their communities. Practically all of them are male, which is not surprising given the traditional Romani tribal and family structures. Some are genuine activists but, as in mainstream political life, many enter politics for personal or material gain. The script of Romani parties has changed little across the region since 1989 (Barany 1994, p. 333). Typically, a party forms with several leaders at the helm all of whom attract or appeal to a specific constituency. Since none of them see any reason to play second fiddle, a leadership rift occurs resulting in the creation of a number of breakaway parties that do their best to undermine each other.

In some countries such as Hungary, and to a lesser extent, the Czech Republic and Romania, there are many Romani organizations, and even

more political leaders who rarely enjoy much authority in their communities. Consequently, there are legitimate questions concerning their claim that they provide genuine representation for their communities.<sup>2</sup> In Bulgaria, where there are perhaps half a dozen local Romani leaders who can command the loyalty of Roma residing in but scarcely beyond specific geographical regions, there appears to be much less fragmentation and divisiveness between Romani leaders. The most unified support is enjoyed by Faik Abdi, the only nationally recognized Romani leader in the Republic of Macedonia, who has been a member of parliament since 1990 (*Institute* 1993).

One possible avenue towards the resolution of the Romani communities' serious leadership problems might be to actively involve traditional Romani leaders (*bare, phure, voivode*) in the political process. In some areas, especially where nomadism was abandoned only relatively recently (that is, in the communist era), they are respected by and can exert a great deal of influence on their people. Most traditional leaders have been reluctant to interact with white politicians, primarily for cultural reasons. They prefer to communicate with the *gadje* through intermediaries, educated Roma who have proved to be successful in both cultures.

### *Political programmes and objectives*

The political programmes of Romani parties are often determined by the aspirations of individuals; thus, there is little cohesion at the political level, and it is often unclear which of the many leaders represents which goal. Still, the general aims of these organizations are similar across the region and much like those of other marginalized ethnic minorities. They include full recognition and the rights befitting a distinctive nationality, civil rights enforced by effective legal instruments, schools with Romani as the second language of instruction, affirmative action in public offices (such as local administration and the police), broadcast-time in the state-owned media proportionate to the size of the Romani population and its fair portrayal therein, state-supported social and economic programmes to alleviate disadvantageous conditions. More specific objectives are particularly important at the local level, where individual Romani leaders and/or activists may campaign for political, economic, or cultural goods from which they expect to derive personal benefit.

The programmes and demands of Romani groups have often been unreasonable and the inevitable failures have served to increase the political apathy of Roma and erode support for their parties. For instance, Romani parties across the region routinely promise their supporters that they will place a specific number of their politicians in the local, regional and national legislatures and nearly always they fall far short of their pledges. The most immoderate demand has been put

forward by the party for the Total Emancipation of the Macedonian Roma whose leaders have called on the United Nations to establish a Romani state to be called 'Romanistan' (Poulton 1995, pp. 193–94). More reasonable objectives have been crowned with some success such as, for example, the Hungarian Roma's peaceful anti-racist demonstrations, the translation of school books into the Romani language in Romania, the securing of state financial support for Romani-language schools in Poland (Mirga 1993, pp. 69–76; Zadori 1993, pp. 9–12; Council 1994, p. 29).

What makes goals 'reasonable' and, then, to a large extent, whether or not they are achieved depend on the specific local conditions: the power and authority of the ethnic party, but even more importantly the priorities, possibilities and especially the attitudes and policies of the pertinent local, regional, or state authorities. For instance, increasing Romani-language radio and/or television broadcast time for Macedonian and Romanian Romani parties was a realistic goal; but for their Bulgarian counterparts it was not, despite the fact that the objective conditions existed in all three states. In Macedonia, the government and the president have expressed their willingness to extend concrete support to the Roma (Reuter 1993, pp. 90–93). Romania has received a great deal of international criticism for its human rights record but its political élites have been willing to make some concessions (Barany 1995c, pp. 26–31). In Bulgaria, however, there has been no precedent for minority broadcasts, there are no Romani political parties (given the constitutional prohibition of parties based along ethnic lines), and no significant political force could be expected to support the issue.

### *Political parties*

Since 1989 the vast majority of the Roma have remained politically passive not believing in their power to influence political outcomes. Yet the greatest obstacle, and the one that does most damage to the authentic representation of Romani interests is the internal dissension within their communities and the subsequent proliferation of their organizations. The disunity of the Romani community in countries like Hungary and Romania is primarily explained by the large number of unique subgroups (distinguishable by dialect, traditional occupation, or settlement patterns) present in it. Considering the persistent differences between these groups for centuries, incorporating them into an all-encompassing political organization appears to be well-nigh impossible.

After 1989 many Romani political activists saw the political party – rather than cultural or socio-economic organizations – as the primary organizational vehicle for ethnic mobilization given the new political institutional framework of the postcommunist state system. They calculated that prompt and substantial improvement in the Roma's con-

ditions could only be expected from the state through more sympathetic policies and changes in budgetary allocations. In order to attract the state's attention, then, the Roma needed to organize political parties that could voice the community's demands.

Soon after the fall of Communism many Romani parties were created amidst a great fanfare only to fade into oblivion a few months later. Consequently, tracking them is difficult. In some countries, such as Hungary and Romania, the organizations of marginal populations receive state support. Owing to the large number of Romani groups, however, the financial aid each receives is small.<sup>3</sup> Today there are numerous competing Romani parties in several East European states frittering away the Romani vote at election time. Thus, notwithstanding the end of their institutionalized political exclusion, the Roma are not represented in proportion to their numbers. The Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and nearly one-tenth of the population in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia; none the less, they remain profoundly divided and, consequently, politically ineffective.

For example, there are 240 Romani organizations registered in Hungary, yet none has any representative in parliament.<sup>4</sup> Currently, only one Rom sits in the legislature who represents the Federation of Free Democrats (not a Romani party). In the 1990 Czechoslovak elections the Romani Civic Initiative, which ran under the umbrella of the victorious Civic Forum movement, won five seats in the federal and Czech national parliaments. In subsequent elections, however, the Roma have been unable to place any of their candidates in the legislature. Even though the Romani community in Romania has established more than fifty organizations, Madalin Voicu of the Romani Democratic Union is the sole Romani representative in the Bucharest legislature. There are no Roma in the Bulgarian and Slovak legislatures.

The most diverse Romani communities of the region have organized the largest number of Romani political parties (Hungary and Romania), and the cohesion and unity of these communities appear to be the lowest. In fact, in both these countries some Romani leaders created umbrella organizations in order to unify the community's voice at least during the electoral campaigns. These organizations have not been successful because their leaders could not hammer together even provisional electoral coalitions and they failed to gain the support of many Romani parties. The number of Romani parties continues to grow although, according to some Romani activists, many that claim 'national' status are in fact 'phantom' parties which consist of single families, which have no more than a handful of members, and which are founded purely for financial gain (*Budapest Week* 1993).<sup>5</sup> In countries with more homogeneous and much smaller Romani communities the Roma have organized only a few political parties, which, in turn, seem to be more cohesive and unified. In Macedonia, for instance, there are two Romani parties which

have managed to maintain amicable relations. In Poland, just a few Romani parties exist, and their membership roughly corresponds to regional boundaries rather than to different political tactics; there appears to be little competition between them.

In sum, the types of Romani political parties, élites and programmes have not proved conducive to the effective representation of Romani interests.

### **State responses to Romani mobilization**

Romani political activism has been chiefly directed towards gaining concessions from the state; it is important therefore to consider the dynamics between the two. The key point here is that the state plays a quintessential role in determining the success of ethnic mobilization. More specifically, state policies towards the Roma have been more important in determining their conditions than the particular circumstances of Romani mobilization given its deficiencies. Thus, the question of whether the Roma established few organizations or many may not be of much consequence, if state policies are hostile to them.

Generally speaking, the realization of effective collaboration between multiple political parties is more difficult than the establishment of constant and flexible communication flows within one. Negotiating agreements between political objectives and the strategies by which they are to be achieved is much more feasible within one organization than among many. An ethnic collective that can unify its politically active members in a single organization would seem to have a better chance of political success than an ethnic group represented by many disparate institutions.

To be effective, an ethnic political party must attract the state's attention, since in most cases remedies for the ethnic community's grievances either come from the state or are originated and directed by the state (Brass 1985, pp. 1–56). In order to enter into a dialogue with ethnic leaders and their organizations the state must be convinced that they are the legitimate representatives of the ethnic community. In other words, the state needs to ascertain that the ethnic group's leaders and parties enjoy some measure of authority within the ethnic group, that is, they can claim its support and possess the ability to speak for the membership of their parties (Gurr 1993, p. 68). It is reasonable to assume that the state would be more willing to consider a dialogue with an ethnic group if the latter had one or more organizations representing it, rather than many associations whose political strengths were difficult to gauge.

The political record of Romani communities in states where they have a small number of parties is mixed. In Macedonia, the Romani community has been relatively successful in gaining concessions from the state largely due to the benevolence and attention of state authorities

(Barany 1995b, pp. 515–31). In Poland, there are only a few Romani organizations but they are not powerful and do not have the kind of political presence enjoyed by their Macedonian counterparts. However, the Polish state has been much more attentive to the relatively small Romani community's problems than have its neighbours.<sup>6</sup> For instance, following one of the few attacks on the Roma in Poland, the authorities publicized the case nation-wide as an act of racial intolerance and severely punished the perpetrators (Burtosz 1994, pp. 21–22).

In Slovakia, however, the relatively small number of active Romani parties seems to have made no difference in the community's desperate political and socio-economic situation. Relative cohesiveness among the Slovak Roma has not yielded benefits for the collective, mainly because a number of successive Slovak governments have neglected the Roma and their problems (Orgovanova 1994, pp. 7–8, 26–28). Although in Bulgaria there are fewer Romani organizations both proportionately and in absolute numbers than in Slovakia, they appear to be similarly ineffective in representing their communities' interests. The reason is not the lack of Romani political parties but the unwillingness of Bulgarian authorities – with the exception of the president's office and a handful of local administrations – to devote the necessary attention to the Roma's generally abominable conditions (Folkeryd and Svanberg 1995, p. 49; Tomova 1995).

Conversely, in spite of the large number of Romani parties in Hungary and Romania, their communities have benefited from increasing state interest and some concrete programmes devised to alleviate the socio-economic marginalization of the Roma (Nemzeti es Etnikai 1994; Zamfir, Pop, and Zamfir 1994). In Romania, the constitution guarantees the representation of ethnic minority interests in the legislature through a representative selected by the community. In 1993 a Council for National Minorities was established by the government which coordinates the minority programmes of various state authorities and provides a special forum for the articulation of minority grievances. In both countries Romani parties receive government funding. Hungary has gone farthest in Eastern Europe by enacting an extremely liberal Minority Law in 1993, introducing a system of local self-administration for minorities a year later, and appointing a Parliamentary Commissioner (Ombudsman) for National and Ethnic Minority Rights in 1995 (*Bulletin* 1993; Parliamentary 1995). Thus, while it might appear that the likelihood of the Roma's political success (that is, constructive state policy) is enhanced by a smaller number of Romani parties, that factor alone certainly does not guarantee it.

In Hungary's case, it is useful to recall that there are at least three million Hungarians in neighbouring countries but, apart from the Roma, comparatively small ethnic minorities in Hungary. For decades the Hungarian state has pursued progressive minority policies internally,

while calling on its neighbours to treat their own minorities similarly. Since 1989, the Roma, who were previously largely ignored, have received a great deal more attention. In contrast, both Romanian and Slovak authorities have feared the perceived irredentist threat represented by the relatively large and well-organized Hungarian minorities. But in these cases state policy was not moderated by external minorities, since there are no substantial Romanian or Slovak populations abroad who might be potential 'hostages'.

In states with fewer Romani parties the support that individual organizations enjoy is generally higher. Thus, in the Macedonian and Polish Romani communities their parties are quite influential, especially when contrasted with the power that the average Hungarian and Romanian parties might sway. At the same time, in the case of the East European Romani communities, it appears that from the state's perspective the number of minority organizations is of little consequence. The Slovak government has paid little attention to their Romani community (few active parties), in contrast with Hungarian authorities which have devoted considerable resources and study to the problem (many parties). The Czech Republic, on the other hand, has demonstrated little apparent concern about the Roma (many parties) in contrast with Macedonia (few parties).

I have attempted to show above that, to a large extent, the state determines whether ethnic political mobilization will be successful (that is, that positive changes occur in the conditions of the minority group) or fruitless. State attitudes towards the Roma (and other ethnic groups) are governed by many different considerations. The most important of these seems to be the size of the given minority, and the real or perceived political threat it may represent. Other weighty issues are the amount of resources the state can devote to ethnic affairs, the conditions of other minorities, considerations of foreign actors (for example, the 'mother' state of the minority, international organizations), ideology, history and cultural traditions.

It is no coincidence that the Roma appear to enjoy the best position

**Table 2.** *Number of Romani organizations and state attention to the Romani minority*

		State attention	
		high	low
organizations	many	Hungary Romania	Czech Republic
	few	Macedonia Poland	Bulgaria Slovakia

(relative to the rest of the population) in Poland and Macedonia. In the former, their proportion in the population is very small (0.11 per cent). Although in Macedonia the absolute and relative size of the Romani community is far larger than in Poland, it represents no political threat to the dominant ethnic group, especially in contrast to the much larger Albanian minority (around 25–30 per cent of the population). In Hungary and the Czech Republic, however, the Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority (5.56 per cent and 2.66 per cent respectively) and their serious socio-economic problems have presented the governments of these states with major dilemmas (which politicians in Budapest have decided to tackle unlike their colleagues in Prague). It is easy to see why the approaches towards the Roma in Poland and Macedonia on the one hand, and in Hungary and the Czech Republic on the other, may be quite different.

Clearly, however, there are some profound, systemic or case-specific causes that explain the variety in state-minority relations in postcommunist Eastern Europe. The 'conventional' wisdom about the comparative progress of democratic consolidation of the region's states appears to be a poor predictor of state-minority relations (Gati 1996). Otherwise, how could one explain the unenlightened treatment of the Roma in the Czech Republic as contrasted with the relatively tolerant and constructive approach of Macedonian authorities? The answer lies not only in such political institutional factors as electoral systems, codified minority rights and constitutional arrangements but also, and perhaps more importantly, in facets of political culture and social history. Although space does not permit a case-by-case analysis here, the satisfactory answer to the specific question above would, no doubt, include reference to the fact that Macedonians have peacefully coexisted with the Roma for centuries, whereas Roma were settled by the communist regime into inhospitable Bohemia in order to replace the labour force of the deported ethnic Germans following World War II.

A discussion of the postcommunist East European states' policies towards ethnic minorities in general, and towards the Roma in particular, must distinguish between different political institutions (Barany 1995a, pp. 1–8). The most pertinent of these are the president, the national government, the governmental agency or agencies responsible for minority (and, especially, Romani) affairs and the local governments. The perspectives of these institutions clearly differ, often according to how far they are from having actual contact with the Roma.

The presidents of the new East European states are generally sympathetic to the plight of the Roma. Presidents Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic, Arpad Goncz of Hungary, and Kiro Gligorov of Macedonia are especially well-informed about the Romani minorities in their countries and time and again have expressed their support for policies targeting solutions to the Roma's problems. While other presidents may not be so enlightened in their views of ethnic minorities, they are seldom



in a position to make any significant difference in the ordinary Rom's life. One reason why some presidents can 'afford' to be so liberal and compassionate in their public statements is that their power – particularly in 'pure parliamentary systems' like the Czech Republic and Hungary – to affect political outcomes is quite limited.

The national governments are generally less sympathetic towards minorities and specifically towards the Roma than presidents are. Ordinarily, they are in more regular contact with the local authorities and are more intimately familiar with the problems that local officials face. The overall attitudes in governmental or state agencies concerned with minorities depend to a large extent on their ministers or directors (and the person[s] who appointed them). Usually these are the primary institutional loci of individuals with training and expertise in minority (and Romani) affairs and, therefore, this is where most of those with realistic views of the Roma's problems and sound ideas concerning potential solutions for them can be found.

The attitudes of local authorities towards the Roma are the most problematic. The local officials are generally the least educated and harbour the most prejudices. Frequently, it is they who maintain direct contacts with the Roma in their capacities as local bureaucrats, aid administrators, policemen and social workers. They often contend that the empathy and enlightened views of *national* officials are naive and idealistic, for they are rarely matched by actual experience with the Roma. Although many local officials are genuinely concerned with improving the conditions of the Romani community in their district, original and praiseworthy intentions often get overlooked in the course of daily routine, usually characterized by poor working conditions, inadequate resources and low material rewards.

Put differently, the worth of the presidents' compassionate words and that of progressive governmental policies and central directives is largely dependent upon implementation at the local level. For example, while the minister of interior might order county police captains to follow anti-discrimination regulations in law enforcement, it is up to the policeman on the street to arrest those attacking the Roma and to close down restaurants displaying 'No Gypsies Allowed' notices. More often than not, however, the policeman shares the anti-Romani biases of the general population. In sum, the overwhelmingly negative societal attitudes toward the Roma are strongly reflected in the implementation of policies, enlightened though they might be.

## Conclusion

The current socio-economic environment does not favour the Roma but they have finally got the chance of legally organizing themselves and rectifying some of the wrongs of the past and so setting themselves on a

more promising course. Up to now, the Roma have clearly proved themselves unable to capitalize on their political opportunities. At the same time, failures in the initial period of political participation were not unexpected, and growing experience should result in better organizations and more institutional cohesion. No doubt, there are some ways whereby the political weakness of the Roma might be reversed. For instance, there is a substantial pool of politically apathetic Roma who could be encouraged to participate in politics. A large number of Romani intellectuals have either turned their backs on their ethnic heritage or have become frustrated after having seen the self-destructive machinations of rival Romani parties. There might be ways to enrol or re-enrol them as active supporters. Another possibility might be in obtaining the assistance of domestic or international organizations to support the education and guidance of Romani politicians.

That the two politically most successful Romani communities are in Hungary and Macedonia is scarcely a coincidence. One reason for this is that, despite its flaws, Romani mobilization has been more effective in Hungary and Macedonia than in the other states of Eastern Europe. The main reason, however, is the two states' relatively progressive policies towards the Roma and the support that their Romani communities enjoy in their mobilization efforts. It should also be noted that – notwithstanding the very problematic treatment which Romani populations have received in several East European states – given the tremendous shortcomings of Romani mobilization, whatever successes the Roma have had in improving their conditions in the post-1989 period have been largely due to exogenous factors (that is to say, domestic authorities, international organizations and non-governmental agencies).

Although the Romani communities themselves can do a great deal to improve their conditions through political mobilization, their opportunities for success are limited. Harmonious ethnic relations ultimately hinge on the state's willingness to accommodate ethnic diversity and to extend concrete assistance to marginalized ethnic minorities. Without a sympathetic *and* actively helpful state the effectiveness of mobilization is likely to be limited. In the absence of a supportive state, ethnic mobilization may make a difference in elevating the community's ethnic consciousness but rarely will it mean much in terms of policy outcomes and tangible progress in lifting the ethnic group out of its political and economic marginality.

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## Notes

1. See also author's interview with Krassimir Kanev, Helsinki Watch Group (Sofia, March 1995).
2. Author's interviews with Janos Wolfart, State Secretary for Minorities, Hungary (Budapest, June 1994); and with Klaus Fabrizious, member of the Council for National Minorities, Romania (Bucharest, March 1995).
3. In 1992, for instance, over 100 organizations divided Ft. 90 million (about \$1 million at the time), *Koztarsasag*, 3 July 1992.
4. Author's interview with Andras Biro, chairman of the board of the European Roma Rights Center (Budapest, July 1996).
5. Author's interviews with Andras Biro (Budapest, July 1996), Peter Huncik (Bratislava, August 1996), and Catalin Zamfir (June 1996).
6. Author's interviews with Andrzej Mirga and Jacek Wasilewski (Cracow, June 1994 and July 1996).
7. I arrived at these numbers of the Roma by taking the mean of the 'minimum' and 'maximum' numbers of Liegeois (1994, p. 34). Although I disagree with some of the figures given in this book – in my view the numbers for Macedonia and Romania are *grossly* exaggerated; they are much closer to 75,000 and 1 million respectively – I elected to use them here for the sake of consistency. General population numbers were taken from White, Batt and Lewis (1996).

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