

**Why Roma do not have their authentic representation in the
parliament? A case study of Roma in Montenegro**

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Submitted to

Central European University

Romani Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Roma Graduation

Preparation Program

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore why the Roma in Montenegro do not have their authentic representative in the Montenegrin parliament. In order to elaborate the understand the situation in Montenegro, I conducted interviews with different actor who are interested in the topic of political participation of Roma. Furthermore, I examined articles and reports related to the topic of political participation. The main findings of my paper show how the electoral system is discriminatory against the Roma community, and how the Roma political elite prevents new generations to challenge the status quo of authentic representation. The paper puts forward a set of policy options on how to overcome the obstacles to Roma political participation. The most effective option that my paper suggests is the establishment of a civic initiative composed of variety of Roma activists, intellectuals and community leaders.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor and friend, Simona Torotcoi for all her help and support during the whole year, especially while writing this thesis. Also, to all of my friends who were supporting me during the whole year at RGPP.

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Introduction

“In order to achieve the principle of equality between ethnocultural communities in the national-state context, it is necessary to recognize the special political rights of members of minority communities or minorities as collectives. This is especially true for communities that have been marginalized or discriminated against for a long time, as is the case with the Roma ethnocultural community” Vuković-Ćalasan (2017, p. X).

Authentic political participation of the Roma community has been of interest for different actors. Whether we examine this issue from academic perspective or Roma civil society organizations (CSO) or international organizations, all actors strive to understand what the most effective way of having the Roma voice heard in the political discourse would be. In the absence of strong political Roma leaders, CSO overtook the role of Roma politicians. Beside their efforts to advocate for the improvement of the socio-economic position of the Roma community CSO felt the responsibility to fight for the political rights, especially the right to be elected (Sobotka, 2003).

Since the early 90s, international organizations and institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU) or the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have been recommending post – soviet countries to work on creating space for national and ethnic minorities to exercise their social and political rights guaranteed by international law and framework.¹ Through different trainings in past three decades, especially those organized by OSCE, and NDI were aimed on strengthening the capacities of Roma members to have a vital role in representing their community on international, national and local level.

Roma and non-Roma scholars have as well focused on the issue of political participation of the Roma community. Aidan McGarry is probably one of the well-known scholars who has dedicated substantial efforts in trying to unpack the issue of Roma participation and representation. In his book “Who speaks for Roma? Political representation of a transnational minority community” (2010), McGarry evaluates representation structures in Hungary and Romania, and argues that “Roma fall through the cracks of conventional political theories and presents a multi-disciplinary approach that draws from the literature on minority rights, citizenship, international relations, and social movements” (abstract).

¹ See for example https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR-PUB-12-07_en.pdf

Rovid (2012) explores the different options Roma have for political participation at the national and international level across Europe. He analyzed three discourses that have emerged and developed in the last three decades: one focusing on human rights, a second one on Roma self-determination, and lastly on the social inclusion discourse.

Table one presents in a summative way the main options Roma have for political participation and representation by looking at both: electoral and non - electoral frames.

Table 1. Options for state-bounded political participation and representation

	electoral	non-electoral		
		private body	public body	traditional
autonomy	minority self-government	associations, foundations, activism	consultative and expert bodies, governmental agencies, Ombudsman	traditional leader (<i>vajda</i> , <i>bulibasha</i> , etc.)
special rights	communal reserved seats			
	exemption from rules (e.g. lower threshold for ethnic parties)			
	over-representation of minority territories			
	race-conscious districting			
	quotas of mainstream parties			
formal political equality	Romani political party			
	Romani MP of mainstream political party			

(Source: Rovid 2012, p.13)

The focus of scholars was mainly on central Europe countries and those that are members of EU. However, from a political and academic perspective ex-Yugoslavian countries were left on the margins. Some of the possible reasons why this countries are left out on the margins are due to the political transitions of ex-Yugoslavian countries towards the key values which EU promotes (democracy, rule of law etc.) whereas those countries from Central and Eastern Europe that joined EU are still struggling in ensuring genuine political participation and representation of Roma (McGarry, 2014).

All former Soviet satellite countries had to transition and try to comply with EU standards, but in the West Balkans this process was hampered even more by a bitter war that resulted in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Once Yugoslavia dissolved, many nations arose,

among them Montenegro. The political situation in Montenegro cannot be understood without realizing that Montenegro also had to form itself as a nation.

In ex-Yugoslavia countries, especially in Western Balkans, when it comes to the Roma community the focus was more on providing access to education, housing, health and employment (e.g., Roma Decade 2005-2015) and the question of political participation has been neglected by international and national actors.

Despite this fact, The Roma community in some of the countries such as Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo managed to have their formal representation in the national parliament and public administration. For example, Kosovo has reserved seats for minorities (out of 120 seats, 20 are envisaged for minorities). Ten seats for Serbs, three for Bosnians, two for Turks, one for Gorani and four for Roma, Egyptians and Ashkali. Despite this, in countries such as Montenegro and Bosnia and Hercegovina Roma are still lacking authentic representation in the parliament.

Due to the complexity of political system of Bosnia and Hercegovina (e.g. the issue with the Dayton agreement in 1995, the recognition of other minorities withing the constitution of BiH), in this paper I decided to focus only on the case of Montenegro.

As pointed afore, various academics are interested in the issue of political representation of the Roma community at the European level. However, when it comes to Montenegro, Danijela Vukovic-Calasan is the only academic who wrote about this issue. In her paper *Politics of Multiculturalism and Roma Political Participation in Montenegro* she stressed out how the Roma community is left out of political life of Montenegrin parliament despite the fact that the constitution of Montenegro put an emphasis on multiculturalism. According to her, the unsuccessful integration of Roma in the Montenegrin society is a result of institutional weaknesses and state practices, especially when it come to the political participation of Roma: “Full integration of all ethnic and national communities can be achieved only through recognition and respect of their collective identities in political dimension, prevention of the assimilation and all forms of discrimination of minority national communities” (abstract, 2017).

Despite the current legislation, the parliamentary elections from August 2020, showed once again that Roma cannot get any seat in the Montenegrin Parliament even though there is a high level of political mobilization among the Roma. Through this paper I aim to provide answers on why Roma do not have their authentic representatives in the parliament of

Montenegro. This paper aims to suggest and what could be most effective way in Montenegro's case in order to create space for meaningful political participation of the Roma community. Given the current situation and political context for the lack of political representation, my main argument is that the most effective political participation of The Roma community is through civic movement. The framework of analysis is based on the theory of elites which refers to a situation in which a community's affairs are best handled by a small subset of its members (*encyclopedia britannica*).

After introducing the methodology and the research design of this paper, I will explore some of the reasons why Roma do not have their authentic representatives in the national Parliament. Afterwards, I will propose what might be the potential solutions to overcome the lack of political representation. Finally, I will conclude with might be the optimal scenario given the current context.

Methodology

In order to explore what might be the answers to the research questions that I raised within this paper, in addition to secondary data analysis (academic articles, media articles, CSO publications etc.) I decided to conduct two semi-structured interviews. Interviews were used as a tool to understand how different actors perceive the lack of authentic representation of Roma in the Montenegrin parliament and what might be some of the effective ways to overcome these obstacles. Depending on their area of expertise, the interviewees were asked different questions. In general, they were asked to give their opinion in regards to what are the reasons why the Roma community lacks political representation, what are the main challenges to achieve effective participation and what can be done to change the status quo.

The interviewees have multiple identities such as: human rights activists, CSO representatives, politicians, academics, Roma activists who have been working on Roma issues for more than a decade. The interviews online (using zoom platform). Both interviewees gave consent to recording of the interview and to the usage of their names for the purpose of my paper. table 2. summarizes the demographics of interviewees and presents some of the details of the interviews.

Table 2. The demographic characteristics of interviewees

Name	Current position	Former position	Details of the interview
Elvis Berisa (Kosovo)	CEO Roma Youth Organization "Walk With Us - Phiren Amenca" and one of the founders of the UPRE (Ujedinjeni pokret Roma I Egipcana – United Movement of Roma and Egyptians)	Journalist at MCD.Monitor, CINCG (Centre for investigative journalism). Intern in the Ministry of Human and minorities rights in Montenegro. Intern in Ministry of Foreign Affairs.	Interview was conducted via zoom and lasted approximately 40 min.
Gazmen Salijevec (Kosovo)	President of Romani Inicijativa Deputy Minister for Communities and Returnees	Project officer at ECMI (European Center for Minority Issues)	Interview was conducted via zoom and lasted approximately 32 min

In addition to the above-mentioned interviews, I had two discussions with well-known academics Martin Rovid and Aidan McGarry both of them working on Roma participation and political representation on European level. Also, I had a discussion with Stephan Muller, who for two decades has been working on Roma related issues on European level.

1. Why are Roma not represented in Montenegrin parliament?

There are various reasons why Montenegro is still among the few ex-Yugoslavia countries where Roma do not have their authentic representatives in the Parliament. The first and main reason is electoral law which does not recognize Roma as ethnic community that should have the same treatment as the national minority. Secondly, even though the electoral law lowers the threshold for parliament representations for some minorities it does not envisages the same treatment for the The Roma community. The electoral law states that national minorities should reach 0.7 of valid votes to have one MP in the parliament of Montenegro, however, in 2011 in the case of the Croatian national minority the threshold was lowered at 0.35. Thirdly, political elitism and the voting behavior of Roma is an important factor for the lack of formal representation of Roma. Up to date Roma were pressured to give their vote to the biggest party in Montenegro (Democratic Party of Socialist) and the Roma Council influenced The Roma community to vote for that party therefore, limiting their free choice.

All these reasons will be further elaborated below. The analysis is based on findings of the interviews and existing publications and sources which tackle this issue.

1.1. The structure of the electoral system and Laws in Montenegro

According to OSCE parliamentary elections report Montenegro of 2020, Montenegro has unicameral system with 81 members of the parliament elected for a four-year term. The candidates are chosen from a closed list according to the proportional representation system. Seats in the parliament are obtained if the candidates lists obtain at least 3% of the valid votes. However, there are preferential rules with regards to national minorities that are less than 3% of the total population. If minorities do not meet the three percent limit, then a lower threshold is used: 0.7% for Albanians and 0.35% for Croatians².

Article 94, paragraph 1 of the Law on the Election of Members of Parliament, stipulates that the distribution of mandates is given based on electoral lists, which must receive at least 3% of the total number of valid votes in the constituency. Paragraph 2, point 1 of the same

² OSCE. (2020). ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission in Montenegro. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/2/473532.pdf>

article stipulates that in case that none of the electoral lists of a particular minority or national minority community meets the condition referred to in paragraph 1 and individually receive at least 0.7% of valid ballots, acquire the right to participate in the distribution of mandates as one common electoral list with the total number of valid votes.

In 1998, international organizations such as the CoE and the OSCE recommended to Montenegrin government to incorporate affirmative measures in order to enable national minorities to exercise their right to be elected. This affirmative measure was applicable only to Albanian national minority. This measure envisaged an amendment on Law on the Election of Members of Parliament. It was foreseen that an Albanian party which manages to obtain 0.7 percent of valid ballots shall have one member in the national assembly of Montenegro.

Parliamentary elections in Montenegro are regulated by the 1998 Law on Elections of Councilors and Members of Parliament and 2007 Constitution. According to Székely & Horváth (2014), the Montenegrin constitution does not recognize Roma as distinct constituent part of the nation. The preamble of the Constitution of Montenegro contains the phrase “persons belonging to nations and national minorities living in Montenegro: Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosnians, Albanians, Muslims, Croats and others.” As the quote shows, Roma are not recognize and are put on the margin of Montenegrin society. In addition, “Montenegro only mentions the Albanians and the Roma in its minority law and only the Albanians in its electoral law” (Székely & Horváth, 2014, p. 436). As a consequence, Roma can not enjoy the same electoral treatment as other minorities.

The Roma minority in Montenegro is the only minority that up to date can not exercise their political right to be elected which is otherwise guaranteed by the Montenegrin Constitution and international treaties that Montenegro is part of. Despite the current legislation, the parliamentary elections from August 2020, showed once again that Roma can not get any seat in the Montenegrin Parliament even though there is a high level of political mobilization among the Roma.³ The Roma vote on both, local and national elections. They are aware of the elections, however, due to the current legislation Roma political parties even

³ <http://www.cin-cg.me/i-predstojeci-izbori-bez-mogucnosti-za-politicku-participaciju-roma-strankama-dobri-samo-kao-glasovi/>

theoretically could not gain one seat in the Parliament even if the whole The Roma community would their vote to the Roma party.

1.2. Double standards: Croats vs Roma

The 2011 Law on Elections of Councilors and Members of Parliament, Paragraph 3 of introduces an additional exception which states that "if none of the electoral lists for the election of members of the Croatian people in Montenegro meets the requirements of paragraph 2 of this Article and point 1 of this paragraph, the most successful of them, with at least 0.35% of valid ballots, shall be entitled to one mandate".

The main issue with the above-mentioned law is that it does not even mention the Roma. According to latest census in 2011, there are 6,251 (1.01 percent) Roma in Montenegro, while the Croatian national minority is represented by 6,021 (0.97 percent).

According to Berisa, from civic movement UPRE, who has been advocating for political representation of The Roma community in Montenegro, he stated that it is unclear why in 2011 when the electoral law was amended and lowered the threshold from 0.7 to 0.35 for Croatian national minority, why the same principle was not an option for Roma. For Berisa, this is a clear case of political discrimination:

I don't know how the whole process went. I know that the law was amended in 2011 through high pressure of Croatian national minority and the international organizations (OSCE, EC), through their influence the law was amended. For me, it is a clear case of political discrimination and I think that international organizations have to be louder when it comes to political participation of Roma in Montenegro as they were in the case of Croats.

It is incomprehensible that the The Roma community must secure twice as many votes for one parliamentary seat than the Croatian community. This is not a concept of democratic society; it is a typical example of double standards. The threshold imposed for the Roma minority is impossible to be met even though the whole Montenegrin The Roma community will give their vote for their seats.

1.3. Political Elitism and the political behavior of the The Roma community

In Montenegro, all national and ethnic minorities have their national council since 2008. This council are funded by the government⁴. The general opinion of Roma activist and professionals regarding the power and influence of the president of the Roma council is that there is a monopoly on Roma related matter and it is often claim that any Roma related issue can not be discussed without the participation of Roma council. This organization lacks the necessary skills and capacities needed to significantly contribute to social inclusion of The Roma community in Montenegro. However, all important decisions that have impact in all areas of The Roma community life are shaped by the Roma council.

The current situation with regards to Roma political representation in Montenegro can be best explained through the theory of political elites. As cited in Rothman (2001) "political elites as 'the holders of strategic positions in powerful organizations including dissident ones, who are able to affect national political outcomes regularly' (1998, p. 15, Dogan 1989)" (p. 11656). According to *encyclopedia britannica* elite theory, in political science, refers to a situation in which a community's affairs are best handled by a small subset of its members⁵. Even though Montenegro is a democratic country, and the representatives are chose on a legitimate way it does not mean that they will represent the interest of the people.

1.3.1. Lack of strong formal political organization of The Roma community

In January 2020, a Roma political party (Demokratska partija Roma – Democratic party of Roma) was established by members of Roma council. The main issue with first Roma party, according to Berisa is that the people who founded this party have a negative image in the public discourse due to their collaboration with Democratic Party of Socialist (DPS).

DPS is a party which is supported by The Roma community not because The Roma community wants to give their vote to this party but because of the president of the Roma council puts pressure on them:

⁴ For further details see: Zakon o manjinskim pravima i slobodama, Službeni list Republike Crne Gore, broj 31/2006. Dostupno na: <http://www.sluzbenilist.me/PravniAktDetalji.aspx?tag=%7B9CA4613B-9871-47EF-A24A-DFEDA6E15F38%7D> (12. 09. 2016.)

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/elite-theory>

Till now we had a situation that the biggest party (DPS), through Roma council was buying Roma votes. This is a public secret. This is one of the reason why we started the movement to stop the misuse of our community, said Elvis Berisa.

The political elitism has negative consequences and elites can feel threaten when the community representatives raise their voice and form new structures that challenge their power:

The Roma party was formed after one month when we organized a press conference, when we have represented the goals of our movement UPRE. We had three goals, one of them was to advocate for amendment on electoral law. Members of Roma council perceived our movement as a threat, and from the very beginning they were sabotaging our work. We received a lot of information how members of our community were told that we are dangerous because we are working for the opposition side (political parties, mainly radical Serbs parties), explained Berisa.

Since elites are people who control resources through incumbency of certain top positions in organizations (Rohman, 2001), elites are afraid that their position of power will be overturned by the new generations of representatives who might get access to the people and resources they have now:

We become aware that what we plan to do as a movement is not going to be an easy task. They (Roma council) were afraid of our movement, because in our movement we have a variety of individuals. We have educated Roma, activists and community leaders almost all around the country. They were afraid because they are aware that we can be in future those that will be working with the parties that are in power, said Berisa.

2. How to overcome the obstacles to Roma political representation in Montenegrin parliament?

This section addresses some of the possible solutions for Roma in Montenegro regarding their lack of representation in the parliament. The first proposal looks at possible changes in the electoral law. The second one suggests how through civic movement political participation can be achieved. The third one argues that there is a need to reforming the existing Roma political party, or forming new ones.

2.1. Changes in the electoral system and laws

Keeping in mind the current electoral system and the flaws that it has when it comes to Roma (as discussed in section 1.1) there is a need to change the law and make it feasible for the Roma to have their representative as other minorities in Montenegro.

The reform of the electoral law in 2011 enabled the Croatian minority to achieve the threshold according to their demographic, however failed to introduce the same principle for the Roma ethnic community in Montenegro. Since 1998, the Law on the Election of Councilors and Deputies has been amended 17 times, the last time in October 2018, and the legislators have never recognized the necessity of introducing electoral right for the The Roma community.

Having in mind that Montenegro is in the negotiating process to join EU, and the new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020-2030⁶, EU Commission should be louder when it comes to Copenhagen criteria, and chapter 23⁷, and call upon the Montenegrin government to implement all recommendations that are aimed at creating an environment where all minorities, without any exemptions exercise their rights, including political rights. Moreover, the Montenegrin government can also use the example of neighbour countries, such as Kosovo, where through reserved seats is ensured for minorities to have their authentic representative in the national parliament.

⁶ [EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020-2030](#)

⁷ [Copenhagen criteria](#)

2.2. Bottom up – civic movement

Through the interviews that I conducted, all of my interviewees agreed that a bottom-up approach within the Roma movement could bring positive changes when it comes to effective way of addressing the needs of The Roma community through political participation.

My interviewee, Gazmen Salijevec, one of the most prominent human rights activists in Kosovo, for two decades he has been advocating for improvement of socio-economic position of Roma communities in Kosovo. He is the leader of Romani Inicijativa, a movement composed of different activist from Kosovo. Salijevec stated that from last national elections in Kosovo, The Roma community for the first time have two representatives in the parliament. The main factor why there are two Roma MP, according to Salijevec is due to the direct work with The Roma community in those cities where for years The Roma community has been neglected by “Old leaders”:

In Kosovo there are 120 MPs, 20 seats are reserved for minorities. 10 for Serbs and other 10 for all minorities. Roma, Egyptians and Ashkali have four seats. Two seats goes for the those parties with higher number of votes. This year, for the first time we have two Roma MPs and both of them are coming from civic initiatives, explains Salijevec.

The turning point for the positive outcome was the unity of Roma activist in Kosovo. The trust that representatives and leaders of civic movement establish with the The Roma community. This approach can be used by civic movement UPRE from Montenegro to gain support for their advocacy and political efforts.

Pointing out the lack of trust in existing political parties in Kosovo, Salijevec explain that civic mobilization was the way to represent adequately the interest of the community and to achieve a stronger parliamentary representation:

I was always saying that Roma serves to other parties as a voting machine and that we have to do something in that manner. Through civil society organizations we tried to establish a good cooperation with our parties but usually we were deceived by them. This is the reason why we establish our movement. From the very beginning we were honest with our people. We did not promise them anything, we said that we are going to do our best but we

need their support. We went from house to house, village to village and talk with our people. We have created a trust with our community. This is the reason why we now have two Roma MPs for the first time.

2.3. Formalizing the existing Roma “party” or forming new ones

In order to have political representation, political parties are crucial. The opinions of my interviewees are divided. Salijevic, the leader of Romani Inicijativa (Roma Initiative) thinks that the best option is to have a union of Roma CSO who the community trust. Based on the discussion with Elvis Berisha, a member of civic movement UPRE in Montenegro, the only Roma political party should strive to include different individuals who will later work in this party. The representative of Roma and Egyptian movement (UPRE) believes that representation should be through the existing (but improved) political party or through a new party:

We have tried through NGO to work in order to improve the position of our community. There are some changes, but the real change will come only through political party. We have a party now. I’m not satisfied with the people who are in that party because of their previous work, but there are few individuals who have capacities. If we manage to “eliminate” those that are corrupted and bring those with that have capacities and knowledge, we can try to work in future to tackle different issues that our community is facing, believes Berisa.

In my opinion, the question is not whether to reform the existing party or forming new ones if they are going to be run by another elite. Keeping in mind the influence of the Roma council in Montenegro in shaping all policies related to the Roma community and voting behavior of Roma, I think that the unity of Roma activist, professionals and community leaders through a civic movement can be the most effective option for future political representation of the Roma community in Montenegro.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued what might be the reasons why in Montenegro Roma do not have their authentic representatives and what can be done in order to overcome the obstacle for their participation in the political life of the Montenegrin society.

Firstly, I pointed out how the current electoral law is discriminatory towards the Roma community and what changes should be done to enable the Roma community to enjoy their right to be elected. The right to be elected is guaranteed by all international treaties and by the constitution of Montenegro.

Secondly, based on the findings of the interviews and secondary data analysis, I elaborated what steps different actors should undertake to create space for the Roma community from Montenegro to have their representatives in the parliament.

Finally, after I examined the current situation, I concluded with suggesting an option to effective Roma political representation in the Montenegrin parliament. The option of having a unity of Roma activist, professionals and community leaders through a civic movement I believe could be the most effective option for future political representation of the Roma community in Montenegro.

All in all, keeping in mind that Montenegro is in negotiating process of joining European union, and the new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020-2030 EU Commission should be louder when it comes to Copenhagen criteria, and chapter 23. EU commission should call upon the Montenegrin government to implement all recommendations that are aimed at creating an environment where all minorities, without any exemptions can exercise their rights, including political rights.

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