



“Labour, equality and bread”

Case Study in Slovakia

“How can mobilisation of Roma from the grassroots be stimulated so Roma can address and fight their own rights and interests” ?

This is the central question behind the research Spolu international conducted in the summer of 2004 in Slovakia. The object of study were the protests against a new social benefit system in February 2004. Roma organisations succeeded to close ranks and prepare a common, constructive message in response to the Slovakian government.

“ ...so many Roma showed their opinion for the first time. We could see a new historical experience. Roma showed bigger courage and self confidence as a majority...” - Quote from research interview.

1. TIME FRAME AND RESEARCH METHODS

In August 2004, Marga Verheije, independent researcher, visited Slovakia to make a series of interviews with local and national Roma leaders and people who, because of their position (local administration, working for local Roma community centre), were very well informed about the protests in their community. She also made use of written reports from RPA, SITA and ERRC and ERIO-Net. Marga concluded her research in November 2004.

Central goal of the interviews and literature study was:

Reviewing the protests in Eastern Slovakia in order to acquire insight into the process of mobilisation and empowerment. What happened when and where? What was the role of Roma leaders? What was the result of the protests? What can be learned from this situation?

During the interviews Spolu encountered different, sometimes conflicting, opinions. Also, it was not always possible to get access to the right figures, dates, and the exact sequence of events. Bearing that in mind, the researcher and Spolu still believe that this case study may play a valuable role in the discussion on how Roma in Slovakia can make their voices heard better and more effectively to improve the situation of the Roma community.

2. WHAT HAPPENED?

Introduction of new social benefit system

At the beginning of 2004, the Slovakian government introduced a new social benefit system, which reduced social benefit payments to disadvantaged social groups. The argumentation of the government behind this decision were that the social benefit system has to cease to provide a replacement for earned income. It should be work that secures income for citizens. Apart from basic social benefits, citizens in material need may receive some kinds of social aid, and they are entitled to an 'activation contribution' if they work a minimum of ten hours per month performing community services or voluntary jobs.

The government underpinned its decision by the argumentation that theoretically, people should work and not be dependent on income support from the state. However, in reality there was no work available and the work offered by the state to activate unemployed people was only temporary, provided very little income and did not lead to more structural work. And even so, the availability of this kind of work did not nearly meet the demands. The Slovakian government had shifted all responsibility for the implementation of the activation programmes to the local governments, but failed to allot them with sufficient means (money, people) for this task. Local governments felt as though the national government merely handed over the problem to them.

The welfare cuts hit the poor part of the Slovakian population severely. Reports mentioned that some family's lost 50% of their income. Among them a high percentage of Roma. This part of the population already lives in extreme poverty, often with no, or very poor access to basic public services.

Timeline of the reaction

Beginning of February 2004

Victims of the welfare cuts had the feeling they had nothing more to lose. The first signs of the social unrest showed up, starting with small protest actions in some Eastern Slovakian towns and warnings of Roma leaders. Protesters showed that they didn't agree with the new social laws and asked for jobs. " *We want to work, but there is no work available*".

February 12

Ladislav Fizik, one of the leaders of the Roma Parliament, an association of Roma parties and associations, announced the preparations of the Roma Parliament for a nation wide protest on February 25. Fizik warned the Slovak government; if they failed to reassess social laws and their impact on the Roma community, pensioners and the poorest groups, people would begin protesting and rioting the moment they get their first social benefit according to the new scheme.

February 18

A group of eighty Roma and some non-Roma raided a Billa Supermarket in Levoca, arguing they were forced to steal food due to their poor social situation. Strengthened police patrols prevented further raids.

February 21

The Roma parliament organised a big gathering of Roma leaders in Zvolen. Between 150 and 200 people came together. Several of them had never attended a meeting of the Roma

parliament before. “*All participants came there with a big hope in their hearts to create concrete steps in solving the bad social situation of Roma which culminated in stealing and protests.*” (Quote taken from one of the interviews).

A so-called crisis- or strike board was elected to co-ordinate the protests and the general strike. This board wrote an appeal, in which were asked to openly show their dissatisfaction with the new laws on February 25 . The protesters were advised not to ask for more money but for work. “ *Labour, equality and bread*” and “ *work, work, work*” were chosen as the leading slogans for the demonstrations. The protest should be peaceful and legal.

February 23

A group of Romani started to loot a local grocery store in Trebisov. Later that day a bigger group (several hundreds) organised to leave the Roma settlement, but were prevented by the police to do so.

February 24

Several hundred masked police officers raided the settlement of Trebisov and begin a police action. That evening, the Slovak government ordered the largest mobilisation of its police and armed forces since 1989, in order to address the problem of unrest and a threatened state-wide strike. That week the Slovak media was dominated by headlines such as “This is war”.

Ladislav Fizik called off the general strike. Roma leaders felt that they could not take the responsibility for the effects of the protests. The Roma leaders feared that the reaction of the mobilised military and police force would be out of proportion, but were also afraid that they would not be able to limit the Roma protesters to peaceful protest. The protest meeting in Levoca was changed into a press conference.

In several towns and districts people rallied to the local administration. They showed their criticism on the social reforms and tried to come with constructive proposals such as:

- private firms should be supported to employ Roma
- part of the work offered by the local council should lead to extra skills for the people involved, training of working habits etc.
- support to Roma pupils who want to follow higher education.

February 25

The government announced several measures to mitigate the effects of the new social benefit system. Although in the eyes of the Roma leaders these extra measures were far from sufficient, they called off the nation wide protests. In Eastern Slovakia the situation slowly calmed down.

March 4

With a special memorandum, the Roma Parliament, addressed the Slovak government to take measures in the sphere of: anti-discrimination of Roma, extra money for the activation work, extra work and education programmes for young Roma. The Roma Parliament also requested the creation of an expert committee for the national council to address Roma problems. Also other nation wide Roma NGO's and parties made an appeal to the government.

3. RESULTS FOR ROMA COOPERATION AND STRENGTHENING THE ROMA VOICE

Common message

Many people who attended the meeting in Zvolen on February 21 were surprised by the general willingness to put co-operation before rivalry for once. It was clear that there was a common goal: to respond in a constructive way to the government measures, to show the strength of the Roma people, and to make sure the protest where kept into control. A major decision was taken to concentrate on the request for work and to make clear in the communication that Slovakian Roma are Slovakian citizens. This meant that Roma are part of the society and the Slovakian government needed to take its responsibility for them.

Professional reaction of Local Roma leaders

Local Roma leaders should be praised for the way they responded to the protests. They were not prepared and had no strategy, but convinced the highly aggravated Roma people they had to protest in a constructive way. They needed to respond to the superior forces of the police, and, in some cases, had to tackle provocations of non-Roma.

Transcending sense of responsibility

Local Roma leaders showed they felt responsible for the Roma people in their communities but also for the community as a whole.

Legitimate community position

Local Roma leaders demonstrated the local administration and the media their worth with valuable information and an understanding of the situation in the Roma communities. Local leaders based the legitimacy of their position on their ability to solve concrete problems for their people - they helped selecting people for the activation work, they helped writing letters to local and national administration, and they organised the protest meetings. In many villages and towns the relation between local Roma leaders and local administration improved.

Limited outcomes

An immediate effect of the protests was the work provided by the activation schemes. However, the problem remained that this was only temporary work, and did not lead to structural work. The other measures (extra money for school children) also had only slight effects on the welfare cuts. The common opinion of the people interviewed for this research was that the general situation of Roma in Slovakia was still getting worse. They expected new protests and riots with the coming of winter.

4. EVALUATION: POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

Most people interviewed for this research evaluated the events in February as follows:

Positive:

- For the first time Roma people in Slovakia scale raised their voice throughout the nation. They seized the “ moment.”
- The slogans (demands for work) were very well chosen: they represented the opinion of many Roma and reminded the authorities of their responsibilities.
- Local leaders consolidated their position and new local leaders could be identified.
- In many communities the relation between local administration and local Roma leaders improved.
- The harsh welfare cut-backs were slightly alleviated.
- The international press covered the demonstrations and the worsening situation of Slovakian Roma.

Negative:

- National leaders were not able to bundle their forces for a longer time. Rivalry and blaming of each other had a bad effect on the communication with the government and media.
- Roma organisations did not succeed to get non-Roma organisations to support their actions. Their efforts would have been stronger if their appeals and memoranda would have received support from non-Roma organisations.
- Riots and looting reconfirmed the pre-existing negative image of Roma.
- The effects of the protests on the living conditions of Roma is negligible. Roma leaders agreed too quick with the governments bids.
- Many Roma people were disappointed by the results. Will it be possible to mobilise them again?

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The size and dimensions of the demonstrations and protests in February 2004 came as a surprise for the Slovakian Roma movement. The event has taught us how to be prepared if new social unrest appear, how leadership and co-operation developed and about processes of mobilisation.

It was a useful lesson for the Slovakian Roma movement, but its importance reaches far beyond that. Recent events have shown us that Roma throughout Europe face similar circumstances. Situations that call for a nation-wide response. The following recommendations therefore are directed at all European Roma organisations and networks.

About new social unrest in the future

In the summer of 2004, new social unrest was expected in the near future, as the situation of Roma was not improving. Roma leaders in Slovakia should not wait for that moment but prepare themselves, the local Roma, the media and all allies they may mobilise.

- i. Good strategies are needed to get more results. It may be helpful to prepare an action plan on how to communicate with the people in the communities, the leaders on local, regional and national level, possible allies, the authorities and the press (see annex A).
- ii. Due to the fact the Roma from the grassroots were mobilised, suddenly the Roma had negotiating power. This power could be used more effectively, if requests were formulated more clearly and more realistic to demand from governmental bodies (For instance what are the ideas to overcome the big unemployment, how to create extra jobs? Or, is it possible to develop a new scheme for the distribution of welfare money, a scheme that is fair in the eyes of Roma and that prevents misuse and overcomes the creation of the culture of dependence).

About leadership and cooperation

Local Roma leaders may play an important role in the creation of a new social movement among Roma, with common activities and campaigns. This is not an easy process. Step by step leaders will be identified, stimulated to collaborate and to find ways to raise the voice of the local Roma people in a constructive manner.

- i. Young promising and unknown Roma are identified in the local communities who might be trained to act as new leaders.
- ii. These, and existing local leaders, gained a lot of experience. It will be very valuable to share this experience and to analyse if they are motivated to play a key role in the improvement of the position of Roma in the future.
- iii. Expectations towards the local Roma leaders can be made clear: Which skills should they have to be a good leader?
- iv. How can the Roma middle class be involved, as leader, as allies?
- v. How to work together with allies, like political parties, journalists, lawyers, human right NGOs.

About mobilisation processes

From the case it becomes clear that active involvement of the local Roma is a crucial in the process of their mobilisation and we learn that:

- i. If a topic is close to the concern of the Roma (if it an issue), they can be organised and mobilised much easier. 'Internal motivation' guarantees that they want to invest time and energy to show their concern by formulating their opinion during meetings and by attending protests.

- ii. It is much easier for leaders to play a key role in their community or region if they act in the direct interest of the people. It may be helpful for them to assist them in identifying the issues that are a immediate concern of the people that the leader represents.
- iii. Collaboration between (local) leaders is more likely if it is based on common issues derived and translated from their grassroots. The rivalry can be forgotten if common issues and goals are identified.

Annex A

- Develop a script. What will be the aim of the demonstration? How will you announce the demonstrations? What will be the leading motto? Make a telephone list of all the people, institutions who should be informed. Make time to have a clear briefing before the demonstrations, to inform the participants about the route, the aim, appointments how to behave etc.
- Use the press and prepare a strategy to communicate with them, how to take care that the press is well informed about the position of the Roma. How to provide objective and factual information. Identify journalists with whom you want to work.
- Identify spoke-persons. Take care that these persons are good to recognise.
- Identify people who will take care that the demonstrations stay peaceful. Take care that they are good to recognise.
- Discuss how to react on provocations from the police and non-Roma.
- Take care that you make a good record of the events? Keep a log-book, make pictures and video of the events? Take care that you count the participants?