

Commentary: How should Romani representatives be appointed?

Prague, 29.10.2012 21:42, (ROMEA/Romano hangos)

Ondřej Klípa

*During discussions on the website of the Romea news server (www.romea.cz), the debates between pro-Romani and Romani activists have often returned on various occasions to the topic of legitimacy - who can and should "speak on behalf of Romani people" or "represent Romani people" in the Czech Republic? The Editor-in-Chief of the **Romano hangos** periodical, Pavel Pečinka, has reached out to a circle of his regular contributors with questions that can all be summarized under the basic question of: Who can speak "for Romani people"? News server Romea.cz is gradually publishing the responses submitted to him by selected authors. Below is the translation of the response submitted by **Ondřej Klípa, who has been entrusted with representing the management of the Office of the Czech Government Inter-ministerial Commission for Roma Community Affairs.***

Here on our territory, anyone who declares himself or herself to be a representative of the Romani minority or the Romani nation can theoretically become a representative. No reliable method exists for refuting that person's conviction. Espousing a certain ethnic identity is not comparable to membership in an organization created by an obviously delineated group of people. While in a civic association - or in a state, where membership is *de facto* demonstrated by one's identity card - representatives can be elected through the usual democratic mechanisms, the same does not apply to national minorities.

Ethnic identity, as a social construction of reality (not as a biologically inborn fact) can be felt, or not - or even changed during the course of one's life - irrespective of the opinions of those around us. It is completely subjective. Thanks to this fact, general agreement will never be reached on who is a member of a certain minority (even among people who do not espouse this status) and who isn't (even among people who do actively espouse it). Therefore, it is unclear who should be empowered to select any eventual representatives of a given minority.

During previous elections into some of the municipal-level Minority Self-Governments in Hungary, "white" neo-Nazis declared themselves to be members of the Romani minority, ran as candidates, were elected, and then completely disrupted those institutions from within. Similarly, even in the Czech Republic, we have the example of the Committee for National Minorities established locally in the region of Těšínské Slezsko, where a person declaring Polish nationality was appointed to the leadership of the community and then proceeded to actively work against the interests of the local Polish minority.

Ethnic identity or nationality is, moreover, considered sensitive data according to Czech law (and laws elsewhere), which means it may only be published or recorded in anonymous statistics. No one, therefore, has any way of learning whether a specific person is a member of a minority or not unless that person publishes that information. This makes it even less possible to delineate the group of "voters" who should choose representatives for their minority.

However, by questioning the democratic mandate of the "representatives" of national minorities in general, I do not want to cast blanket doubt on the need for communication between public administrative institutions and representatives of Romani people. The problem is that the existing models for communication with Romani people at the level of municipalities and the state administration have been created by the Romani representatives themselves, and they have never had to meet any criteria in terms of origins. By these "models" I mean the Committees for National Minorities at municipal and regional levels, the various commissions and ad hoc working groups, the Czech Government Inter-ministerial Commission for Roma Community Affairs, and the Czech Government Council for National Minorities.

Let's admit that despite an absence of formal authority, some Romani leaders enjoy a rather promising informal authority. When we are aware of the system of loyalties most Romani people feel on the basis of their extended families, and the sub-groups that distinguish themselves through regions of origin, dialect, etc., then the greatest number of adherents can obviously be attributed to the Olah "kings". However, I am not aware that the king in Brno or Ostrava has ever been involved with the public administration consultation mechanisms.

The irreplaceable benefit of involving Romani representatives in addressing various problems stems from their experiences of "being Romani in the Czech Republic", i.e., being the victims of racial discrimination, or of prejudice at the very least. Of course, here the most valuable experience would be that of a person living in full social exclusion and experiencing these problems personally each and every day. However, such Romani people do not tend to become "appropriate" representatives.

The public administrative institutions are, therefore, completely logically forced to choose Romani representatives on the basis of their expertise. This is not surprising. During any sort of consultation, responsible administrators of public affairs want to hear perceptive and, if possible, rapid solutions to specific problems - socioeconomic ones, in our context - which often require professional erudition. Ordinarily, no one asks what a Romani representative went through as a Romani schoolchild, or how many Romani people share his opinion; rather, what is expected is expert assistance with an employment or housing issue.

These criteria of expert experience and professionalism, however, are not expressed during the "creation" of Romani representatives, or they are camouflaged in various ways, since expressing such criteria would suppress the original intention that what is primarily being sought is a representative of the national minority. Otherwise, it would be sufficient to turn to research facilities or universities and a professional team of advisers would be ready to go (and they would certainly not work free of charge).

This means Romani people with sufficient social capital in the majority society are the only ones who ever make it into the public administration's field of view - in other words, those who can be "understood" by a given bureaucrat or politician, those who "speak the same language", both figuratively and literally. I would say that the process I have described above has produced significant part of the current Romani representation. Of course, these people also may have offered valuable professional knowledge as well as a certain informal authority among other Romani people, or they eventually gradually earned that knowledge and authority.

To the degree that representatives of the public administration perceive a certain Romani representative as "real", then that representative is real. Such a representative will be considered next to those Romani leaders who rely solely on their informal, traditional authority, as well as next to those who shore up their authority in more modern ways (through the media, pop culture, etc). However, it will always be impossible for there to be clear-cut, standardized representatives in the context of a group espousing a shared ethnic identity.

*Originally published in **Romano hangos** number 17.*

Ondřej Klípa, translated by Gwendolyn Albert