PRESERVING ‘CULTURAL AUTONOMY’
OR CONFRONTING SOCIAL CRISIS? THE ACTIVITIES
ANDAIMS OF ROMA LOCALMINORITY
SELF-GOVERNMENTS 2000-2001*

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Abstract: In 1993, Hungary passed landmark legislation that allowed the establishment of minority self-governments for all recognized minority groups within Hungary. Written to protect minority culture and provide a forum for minority interests, this legislation has arguably had the most profound implications for the Roma/Gypsy minority in Hungary. The Roma, comprising approximately 5 per cent of the total population, form not only the largest minority group, but also have historically remained the most politically and socio-economically marginalized. Can this new institution enhance the possibility that the Roma may freely preserve their cultural heritage and traditions while becoming full members of Hungarian society, with equal dignity and social opportunity? We use data from a nation-wide survey of Roma leaders, as well as interviews and ethnographic information from local case studies to determine the activities of Roma local minority self-governments, and how these activities affect Roma communities and local inter-ethnic relations. We find that while the system was created to protect and preserve minority cultural autonomy, Roma self-governments are instead predominantly acting as local social lobbies, motivated by their community’s pressing social needs, currently unmet by the local and state authorities. This leads to the conflation of the ethnic and social dimensions of local problems, strengthening social exclusion and reinforcing the perception that Roma impoverishment is a ‘natural’ condition.

Keywords: Roma, ethnic relations, social inequality, social exclusion, political participation

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INTRODUCTION

In Hungary the first minority self-governments were formed in 1994 after the Parliament approved Act LXXVI on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities in 1993. This new legislation created a unique opportunity for national and ethnic minority groups in Hungary to voice minority interests through the formation of local and national-level minority self-governments. With a mandate to protect the “cultural autonomy” of Hungary’s minority populations, minority self-governments are now an established part of the political-institutional landscape. By 1995, after the elections for the first round of minority governments, 817 local minority self-governments were formed. In 1998, during the next round of elections, 1,363 local minority self-governments were formed, comprising an overall increase of more than 50 per cent, and representing all thirteen recognized minority groups1 in Hungary. The most recent elections held in October 2002, resulted in the formation of 1,811 local minority self-governments.

In this paper, we focus exclusively on the Roma/Gypsy2 minority, Hungary’s largest minority group, as well as its most disadvantaged one. This disadvantage has deep historical roots, and the Roma have experienced widespread discrimination, persecution and social exclusion since their first appearance in Europe centuries ago. Within the Central and East European region, Roma social and economic status has only worsened with the deepening hardships as a consequence of post-socialist economic and social restructuring (see e.g. Havas–Kemény 1995; Havas–Kemény–Liskó 2001; Kertesi 1994, 1995; Ladány–Szelényi 1998). Disproportionately under-skilled and undereducated, the Roma have been first fired and last hired in the new economy. The living conditions and health status for the Roma are so far below those of the majority that a recent United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report found that literacy, infant mortality and basic nutrition rates of most of the four to five million Roma in Europe are closer to levels in sub-Saharan Africa than those for other Europeans (UNDP 2002).3 Because of this, the ‘Roma question’ is a pressing issue for Hungary, especially in the context of integration processes with the West that necessitate the demonstration of progressive and proactive minority policies.

For the Roma, a minority historically excluded from formal political processes, the minority self-governance system opens an unprecedented institutional doorway to political representation and participation. Roma communities have taken advantage of this opportunity: out of the 817 minority self-governments formed by the end of 1995, nearly 60 per cent (477) were Roma governments. In the next set of elections in 1998, the number of Roma minority self-governments increased to 771. As of October 2002, the number of Roma minority self-governments increased to 771. As of October 2002,

1 These groups are: Armenian, Bulgarian, Croatian, German, Greek, Roma/Gypsy, Polish, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serb, Slovak, Slovenian, and Ukrainian.
2 We use the terms ‘Roma’ and ‘Gypsy’ interchangeably throughout this paper, although our preference is for ‘Roma,’ reflecting the increasing use of the term by both Roma and non-Roma organizations within the region. In Hungary, ‘Gypsy’ (cigány), is more frequently used as a self-identifying term than ‘Roma,’ although both are frequently used. The Hungarian government uses the term cigány.
3 However, socio-economic conditions for Roma populations vary widely from country to country (Mitev 2001), and overall for the Roma living conditions in Hungary are far better than in other countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia.

there were 1,004 Roma self-governments, with Roma self-governments forming in nearly one of every three municipalities.

What is the effect of the local minority self-government system on the social status of Hungary’s Roma? Do local minority self-governments have an integrative effect for the Roma, or rather do they simply strengthen segregation and social exclusion? Do these institutional developments help build a broader multicultural awareness within Hungarian society by officially recognizing the value of ethnic difference and cultural autonomy, or do they further marginalize minority groups by creating new local-level inter-ethnic divisions? While these questions have been actively debated, there have been relatively few empirical studies\(^4\) on the Roma minority self-governments, their effects on local level decision-making processes and inter-ethnic relations.

In this paper we use a combination of survey and interview data to examine the activities of Roma minority self-governments, the perceptions of their leaders and the impact of minority self-governments on Roma communities and local minority-majority relations. The survey, a combination of nearly 70 close and open-ended items, was mailed in November 2000 to 738 settlements containing active Roma minority self-governments. We received a 76 per cent response rate, representing a broad range of Roma minority self-governments from municipalities across Hungary.\(^5\) Subsequent contacts were made through the initial survey mailing, and interviews were then completed in twenty municipalities across Hungary, chosen to represent a wide variety of communities in terms of overall population size, rurality, size of the Roma minority, ethnic diversity within the municipality, relative capacity of the Roma self-government and the overall economic status of the settlement. We then completed interviews with representatives of minority governments. In some selected places we completed in-depth case studies as well, interviewing not only minority leaders but also key Roma community members and other community members occupying prominent local political and social positions. In particular we are interested in how Roma local representatives make use of what is essentially a cultural institution under circumstances in which their constituencies experience profound social problems.

\(^4\) This however, is beginning to change. Empirical studies include work by the Minority Research Group and the Center for Regional Studies of the Academy, concerning self-governments of all minority groups (Csefkó–Pálné 1999), an analysis of election results from 46 minority self-governments in five cities and two Budapest districts (Rátkai 2000), and a national-level study of Roma local minority self-government capacity and local social structure (Schaft–Brown 2000). Several case studies have been completed through the Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy (Vági 2000; Tóth 2000; Burka–Vida–Wizner 2002). A 1996 report by Human Rights Watch is an early but exemplary critique of the Minorities Act and the self-government system. To one extent or another each of these studies has indicated contradictions within the law, and shortcomings in the implementation of the minority self-government system, casting serious doubt on how effective these measures have been in enhancing Roma political participation and cultural autonomy.

\(^5\) We statistically evaluated the geographic and socio-demographic characteristics of places containing survey respondents and non-respondents. We were unable to detect any evidence of response bias.
THE SOCIAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT FOR ROMA MINORITY SELF-GOVERNANCE

The minority self-government system was established with the goal of preserving minority cultural autonomy. As such, although it is a ‘government’ in name, this institution has markedly limited capacity to address social disadvantage and exclusion. As in the case of the Roma, what are the possible outcomes when a legal-institutional innovation targeted towards a specific minority group is not equipped to address that group’s most pressing social needs?

First, the minority group might simply ignore the new institutional innovation, failing to see any ‘opportunity’ contained within it. A popular initial expectation, in fact, was that the Roma, being undereducated and inexperienced in civic life, might form only very few self-governments or perhaps none at all (Orsós 2000). However, in light of the number of Roma self-governments formed in the nearly ten-year span since the passage of the Minorities Act, this clearly has not been the case.

A second possibility is that the Roma might use the minority self-governments in complete consistency with the spirit of the Minorities Act, as a means of cultural expression, rather than a means of achieving broader social and political agency. We argue, however, that this was not the principal outcome either. Rather, our evidence suggests that in the absence of any other institutional possibilities, local Roma self-government representatives have attempted to adapt the existing institution to the needs and expectations of the minority community. We argue that under the given circumstances it is hardly to be expected that the activity of the Roma minority self-governments would concentrate on cultural activities. Instead, although Roma self-governments frequently assume ‘cultural’ functions, Roma leaders most often focus on the social problems of their communities and use the institution, originally invented for other purposes, as a tool for handling these problems. However, because of the contradictions between the cultural framework of the Minorities Act and the social status of the Roma, this ‘institutional adaptation’ has been uneven and in many cases has only undermined Roma social and political status.

The Roma Minority Self-Government: A Cultural Institution or a Social Lobby?

The Minority Act recognizes both individual and collective minority rights, acknowledging that “the totality of these rights is neither an endowment by the majority nation nor a privilege of minorities; the source of these rights does not derive merely from the numerical proportion of national and ethnic minorities, but on the basis of the respect for the individual freedom and for social peace their right to be different” (Hungarian National Assembly 1993: 1). In spite of this appealing and uncontroversial formulation, the Minority Act has already been target of frequent criticism.
This is partly because the Act did not emerge directly as a result of a minority-based social movement. Rather, it was a result of national-level political strategies motivated by, on the one hand, the desire to demonstrate progressive minority policies as part of an effort to gain accession to the European Union, and on the other hand, the desire to set a legislative precedent for neighboring countries that would ultimately benefit Hungarian minorities living outside Hungary’s borders (see e.g. Kovats 1999a; 1999b).

As a consequence, many have argued that the Minorities Act isn’t appropriate to the needs of minorities in Hungary, and in particular the Roma. First, by enumerating individual rights and institutionalizing the right for individuals to determine their own ethnic identity, the Act recognizes the possibility of dual or multi-ethnic affiliation. In practice, however, the Roma do not really have the possibility of free self-identification. Based on a variety of socio-cultural and ethnic ‘markers,’ including not just physical characteristics, but also stereotypically ‘Gypsy’ names, particular areas of residence or ways of living, in both formal-institutional and informal contexts, non-Roma Hungarians routinely classify persons as Gypsy and adjust their behavior accordingly. This occurs even if the classified persons are not willing to identify themselves as Roma in a given situation. As Bauman (1997) argues, in the eyes of the majority who identify themselves as having the only legitimate claim to the dominant culture, the minority will always remain an “other,” and those who leave their original community behind do not enter into the majority, but into a community of the “assimilants” who remain marginalized.

Second, minority self-governments have no true municipal administrative responsibilities. The conditions of a substantive self-governance are also missing, including financial autonomy. While the Act prioritizes the protection of cultural autonomy and contains a wide range of regulations related to minority education and preservation of minority language and culture, it does not create concrete institutionalized practices that would secure real political power for minorities. In total, the rights of minority self-governments hardly secure these institutions more possibilities than, for example, those of any other semi-formal association (e.g., they may ask for information, and may make proposals). Nevertheless, compared to associations, minority self-governments do have more say in the local decision-making when questions of the local basic education, local media, the promotion of traditions and cultures, and the collective usage of the language are concerned. In addition, the approval of the minority self-government is needed when appointing the heads of minority institutions. In practice, however, the degree of influence a minority self-government has on local decision-making is largely in the control of the municipal government.

Similarly, the election procedures raise serious legitimacy problems. Because ethnic identity is self-ascriptive, every Hungarian citizen has the right to vote for minority candidates. Currently there is no practical way to prevent non-minorities

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6 In fact, while the Minority Act was passed with the consensus of the parliamentary parties, the Minority Roundtable, which represented the interests of minorities during the preparation process, protested against it because its provisions did not go far enough to protect minority rights (see Egyed–Tokaji 1994).
from voting for minority candidates. This, in practice, means that minority representatives can be elected by the majority. For example, in the 1994 elections, although the Serb minority, including non-voting age children, numbered about 5,000, there were 16,000 votes tallied for Serb minority self-government representatives (Riba 1999). More recently in one of Hungary’s larger industrial cities where we conducted interviews, 4 of the 5 self-government representatives elected in the 1998 elections were Romungro, although two-thirds of the Roma community is Olah.\footnote{Despite the tremendous ethnic, cultural and linguistic variation across different groups, the Roma are often erroneously treated as an ethnically homogeneous population, constituting “one people with a number of fixed characteristics” (Willems 1998: 19). In Hungary, there are three main ethnic subgroups. The Romungro make up about 70 per cent of Hungarian Roma population, and speak Hungarian as their mother tongue. The Olah comprise about 20 per cent and speak various Romani dialects. The Beas make up about 10 per cent of the Roma population and speak a Romanian dialect (Kenrick 1998; Stewart 1997).} The (Romungro) president admitted that this almost certainly resulted from the fact that the four Romungro representatives used to work in the same factories with large numbers of ethnic Hungarians, were well known in the Hungarian community, and received ethnic Hungarian votes.

Not only may non-minorities vote for minority self-government candidates, but in fact there is nothing to prevent non-minorities from placing themselves as minority candidates. The case of Jászladány is a recent example. After several years of conflict and hostile relations between the municipal government and the minority self-government, the wife of the (ethnic Hungarian) mayor established herself as a Roma self-government candidate, won the election in November 2002 (through ethnic Hungarian votes) and effectively eliminated the minority self-government as an institutional force challenging the authority of the municipal government.

To recap, minority self-governments are legally and institutionally mandated to fulfill a cultural role under circumstances in which Roma communities are distressed by especially grim socio-economic conditions. According to the Act the institution of the minority self-government has a primarily cultural mandate. Its activity is to be focused on the preservation of traditions, and around the practice of language and culture because “…the establishment of minority self-governments, their activities and thereby the accomplishment of cultural autonomy, as one of the most important preconditions for the enforcement of specific minority rights” (Hungarian National Assembly 1993: 2). However, except perhaps for small groups of Roma intellectuals, most Roma are hardly interested in a Roma museum, theatre, monuments or whether their children are taught Romani or Beas language. Securing stable employment with a livable salary, attaining a better future for their children, and improving often miserable housing situations are far more important issues.

At the time of our survey, the majority of Roma minority self-governments were also situated in the most disadvantaged regions of the country, especially in the northeast and the southern counties, consistent with the geographic distribution of the Roma population. Over three-quarters operated in villages, rather than towns or cities. Half (49 per cent) of the Roma minority self-governments were situated in settlements with populations of less than 2,000, and slightly more than one-fourth (26 per cent)
operated in very small villages with less than 1,000 inhabitants. These patterns have remained consistent since the latest round of elections in 2002. The distribution according to geography and type of settlement only underscores the problems these communities face.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY OF ROMA MINORITY SELF-GOVERNMENTS

With this section of the paper we turn to a discussion of the results of the Roma minority self-government survey and the follow-up community-level investigation. According to the Minority Act the function of the minority self-governments, besides articulating minority interests, is to maintain cultural autonomy. However the Act also states that “within the sphere of its authority, the minority local government…may establish and maintain institutions, especially in such fields as local public education, local printed or electronic media, cultivating traditions (and) culture and general education. Within the limits of the available resources, it is (also) authorized to establish and run enterprises and other economic organizations; to announce competitions and to raise foundations” (Hungarian National Assembly 1993: 12-13).

Our survey enumerated six types of programs: educational or job training, cultural, local media programs, economic enterprises or business, agricultural support and social welfare programs. We then asked the respondents to mark which programs the minority self-government had been involved in.

The most frequent programs the Roma minority self-governments reported were cultural, social and educational. Nearly seventy-five per cent organized cultural programs, nearly two-thirds took part in the organization of social programs and slightly more than half organized educational programs. These rates are the same for those self-governments, which had no other financial resource except for the annual state support (which in 2001 was 628 thousand HUF, uniformly, or approximately $2,000). This is in spite of the fact that state support is only meant to cover operational costs, and not program-financing.

However, it is important to more thoroughly examine what, in fact, these programs really mean. While local leaders have used the institution to strengthen cultural awareness and Roma ethnic identity, based on the answers to the open-ended questions and our field work experiences it would seem that a significant part of the programs identified as ‘educational’ or ‘cultural’ have only a marginal or partial focus on the preservation of traditions or the practice of language and culture. Instead, they directly and indirectly address social problems.
Cultural Programming

Programs identified by respondents as cultural in content typically include organizational support such as forming and supporting folk ensembles events, or events like a local or county-level Roma Festival, Gypsy Ball, the performance of Roma music or dance ensembles, various contests, such as Roma poem and prose telling contest, sports events (almost exclusively soccer), Christmas parties, and sponsored trips, or ‘pilgrimages’ to various religious sites in Hungary. Some of these events serve purely to strengthen the local Roma as a community, creating social solidarity and affirming Roma identity. A second type of programming is ‘multicultural’ in nature and is intended to promote the recognition of Roma culture while at the same time improve the local minority-majority relationship. Events like local Roma Festivals are in part intended to demonstrate Gypsy culture and traditions such as singing, dancing, or even cooking to non-Roma.

However, a third group of the cultural programs contain events which, besides strengthening minority community solidarity, are actually thinly veiled forms of welfare support. Examples include Christmas parties when children, families with many children, or the elderly (i.e., those who are traditionally in need of community support) get presents often containing basic food provisions (such as rice, flour and sugar). Clearly, these presents, particularly when given to the elderly and the big families, are not merely gifts, which would make someone happier, but they also have the function of providing needed assistance.

In settlements where there are multiple Roma groups, programming is often targeted only towards one Roma group – the one affiliated most directly with the self-government.
Educational Programming

The Act ensures minority self-governments the right to take part in operating local basic educational programs and to establish minority schools and pre-schools which they may run either independently or with the municipal government. But this possibility is not that attractive for most Roma who are undereducated, and as a consequence have already been driven out from the labor market. They have a greater need for their children to complete the secondary school and obtain marketable knowledge and skill sets without any negative discrimination so that there may at least be hope for the next generation to achieve upward mobility and a better life.9

This is illustrated by the educational or job-training programs described by Roma self-government leaders. Our interviews indicate that the vast majority of educational programs are not culturally based ‘minority educational’ programs. Instead, they are ‘chance-equalizing,’ or rather ‘disadvantage-reducing’ programs. The Roma minority self-governments, within their possibilities, make serious efforts to motivate children to attend school and to go on to secondary schools. The Roma leaders we were in contact with were overwhelmingly against creating separate Gypsy classes, regardless of whether these would refer to the need for special development or to the cultural autonomy of the Roma children. Minority self-governments have the right to establish scholarships and a great number of them do so. When listing their most important achievements they often report about the number of Roma children attending secondary school.

Though financial support provided to children at the beginning of a new school year (e.g., buying books) should not be regarded as educational program, it is often listed as such. The self-governments give this support either to all Roma schoolchildren, or only to poor Roma pupils. In fact, often they provide this support to pupils in need regardless of their ethnic affiliation. Either the school or the minority self-government decides who is in need. All forms of this support can cause conflicts, and can emerge as conflict between the minority and the majority, or as a conflict within the minority community, or a conflict between the various poor groups. The function of ‘start-up’ support for students at the beginning of the school year is in order to provide assistance to those families truly in need. However, if anything, this role belongs more properly to the municipal government.

As a part of their efforts to eliminate the educational inequality of the Roma children, minority self-governments assume the task of building contacts with the local school. In some cases the school turns a deaf ear to their request, in other cases the ‘cooperation’ between the school and the self-government results in the local schools expecting the minority self-government to help regulate children (or even families) considered problematic. In other words, the school attempts to solve its own failures through the minority self-government, which then transmits the majority’s expectations, instead of being an equal partner in negotiating questions concerning its constituents.

While there are educational programs that do, indeed, relate to minority culture, such as Roma language courses or courses on Roma history and folklore, educational

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programs organized by minority self-governments are dominated by programs aimed at reducing social disadvantages. Besides poverty, our respondents mentioned unemployment as the most serious problem their communities face. One attempt to ease the unemployment problem is the launching of job training and entrepreneurship programs, often initiated by Roma minority self-governments in cooperation with other institutions.

**Social Programming**

Sixty-three per cent of Roma self-governments reported that they had been involved in organizing *social programs*. However, this kind of activity is not even mentioned in the Minority Act, since handling local social problems cannot be the task of a minority government, instead it is the responsibility of the municipal government. Yet the majority of minority self-government presidents adopt the expectations of their community and make alleviation of social problems as their primary objective. They see the fostering of Roma culture as important, but still a secondary goal.

*Table 1* shows that 92 per cent of survey respondents believe that a very important goal of the minority self-government is to improve the social and economic situation of the Roma. At the same time only 77 per cent agreed with the statement that preserving Roma culture and identity is a very important goal, though only this latter statement more completely corresponds to the spirit of the Act.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important aim is to improve the social and economic situation of the Roma</th>
<th>Most important aim is to preserve Roma culture and identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of self-gov’ts</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all typical</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very typical</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat typical</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totally typical</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>538</td>
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</table>

Social programs cover a wide range of activities, some of which are supposed to be the tasks of the municipal government, but are informally transferred to the minority self-government. Others include the distribution of food and second-hand clothing. In one example the minority self-government paid for medicine for poor families with many children because appeals submitted to the municipal government for the same aid took too long to process. A peculiar indication of minority self-governments’ role as social lobbies is the fact that they often help local poor residents who are not Roma.
Seventy-seven per cent of self-governments claim to organize programs that support both Roma and non-Roma, and only 8 per cent claim that this does not happen in their village/town.

One respondent lists the main activities of minority self-governments as follows: "Support of those who are socially in need, buying school equipment for the first-year pupils, food subsidy in pre-school. For commuting students support for buying the pass. Providing free land and seeds for an easier living. The scope of these supports is shrinking because of the tight budget (e.g., Christmas candy)."

Minority self-governments are eager to participate in local decision-making concerning the distribution of financial aid, as well as in the municipal government’s decisions about who to employ in local public works projects. In other words, they operate as social lobbies. In one town we visited, applicants for aid were prioritized if they had a recommendation from the Roma self-government. Roma minority self-government representatives who happen to be members also in the municipal government are almost always in the municipal government’s social committee. In small villages, where there are no committees, they are generally active participants in the municipal government’s decisions about social benefits. The minority self-governments are usually enthusiastic about requests from the municipal government to help with decisions about aid. We have met, however, Roma leaders who think this is problematic and reject such requests on the grounds that these tasks belong to the municipal government. Clearly this creates a situation where minority governments run the distinct risk of building patron-client relationships with their constituencies, and abusing what little power they have by trading personal ‘favors’ for political power.

The following quotation from a survey illustrates how the promotion of Roma culture is subsumed by the goal of easing social problems within the community. "The S. minority self-government is fully committed to improving the living conditions of the Roma, but minority self-governments all over the country are in need when it comes to finance. Support from the state is hardly enough for day-to-day operation. ... Many Roma regret forming the minority self-government; the representatives are also disadvantaged because most of them are unemployed. It would be better for them if being a representative were a job. What is needed is help from the state for minority self-governments to run businesses and help the Gypsies in this manner. Plus we would like to participate in local public administration, housing, etc. Culture is also important for the Gypsies, but many representatives say Roma music and dancing will not provide Gypsies with a living; they will end up like the cricket in the tale: dance during the summer and freeze in the winter."

In conclusion, we have found clear indications that the institutional framework of the minority self-government tends to be comprised by social support functions, in line with the needs and expectations of marginalized and disadvantaged Roma communities.
THE FUNCTIONAL TYPES OF ROMA MINORITY SELF-GOVERNMENTS

Are there any minority self-governments that in spite of the disadvantaged social status of the Roma can exclusively assume cultural activities, and become an institution preserving Roma cultural autonomy? In order to answer the question we first distinguished three types of the minority self-governments on the bases of the orientation of their activity.

(1) *Culture-oriented* self-governments take part in organizing cultural, local media, educational and training programs. (2) *Social and enterprise-oriented* self-governments focus exclusively on social programs, enterprises and agricultural programs. (3) Finally, *dual-oriented* self-governments launch programs both related to minority culture and social welfare and business.

Table 2. Classification of Roma Self-Governments with Respect to Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roma Self-Government Activity Orientation:</th>
<th>Number of Self-Gov’ts</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primarily Cultural</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primarily Social and Economic</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Cultural and Socio-Economic</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that more than three-fourths of Roma minority self-governments oriented their activities towards social support and economic development, primarily in the direction demanded by the Roma community (though typically not to the satisfaction of the community). Moreover, one out of ten self-governments focused exclusively on social support and economic development activities.

According to the Table, 23 per cent of all minority self-governments conform to the spirit of the Act by being culture-oriented. As we have seen previously however, even programs classified as ‘cultural’ frequently contain significant social or welfare-related components. Besides, being culture-oriented does not mean that these self-governments identify their role as cultural and intend to focus on preservation of minority culture. The surveys show that even out of these culture-oriented self-governments, 90 per cent agree with the statement that the main goal of the self-government is to improve the social and economic conditions of Roma, and 72 per cent attempt to launch programs that support both Roma and non-Roma poor. In other words, these self-governments may superficially differ from the majority in their activities, but not in their objectives.

**The Dangers of Social Lobbying**

By responding to the pressing demand of their communities and assuming a social/welfare role, Roma minority self-governments inadvertently contribute to conflating ethnic issues and social problems. They furthermore contribute to creating
conflicts between the different poor groups (i.e., between the ‘Gypsies’ and the ‘poor Hungarians’). Their attempt to include non-Roma poor in their activities indicates that they observe this latter problem, but it further worsens the first one. *As a consequence, instead of working toward the recognition of otherness and representing interests related to minority culture, the Roma minority self-governments contribute to a public perception that identifies ‘Roma’ with ‘poor’ and hence further marginalizes Roma communities.*

According to Szalai, for the Roma it is essential “*to recognize and distinguish the ‘social’ and ‘minority’ particularity of the community, which is the primary condition of the minority self-definition and of being recognized by others*” (2000: 548). We believe that local Roma leaders are not in a position to make this distinction either regarding their constituencies or the institution of the self-government.

Often, Roma minority self-government’s programs contribute to processes of segregation or self-segregation, to the satisfaction of the local majority community. This is the case, for example, when the minority self-government ‘wins a battle’ for a new health center or children’s playgroup (replacing the pre-school) right next to the Gypsy settlement. While minority leaders who fight for these ‘advantages’ feel they act toward the benefit of their community, they effectively serve the majority community who can now visit their doctor without having to interact with local Gypsies, or send their children to a pre-school filled with ‘misbehaving children from the colony.’ Similar examples of self-segregating processes abound; common to them is the phenomenon that the minority self-government inadvertently becomes the representative of majority interests and a contributing force to social exclusion. Paradoxically these programs strengthening segregation originate from intentions towards integration: the programs are to increase the social mobility and in a wider sense the life chances of the Roma (in the above examples the aims are to improve the Roma’s state of health and to increase the Roma children’s chances for a higher educational attainment.) The newly established health center or the play-group are parallel institutions that lead to segregation. However, the establishment of them is not at all motivated by any isolation efforts based on ethnic consciousness.

Lobbying for aid necessarily creates a hierarchical relationship between the municipal government that provides the aid and the minority self-government that lobbies for it. In this situation it is doubtful whether the minority self-government can be efficient in representing minority interests against the mayor’s office or the municipal government. Moreover, because of their own situation Roma leaders may also personally be made dependent on the mayor’s office for both personal and political favors. In one case, for example, the president of the minority self-government was appointed leader of the group of Roma doing communal public works projects.

Finally, we must point out that the minority self-government’s ambition to participate in solving the local social and welfare problems is an attempt that is bound to result in failure because the institution has neither the necessary authority, nor the resources. *Seeing this failure, Roma communities are dissatisfied and frustrated.* Even if they personally receive benefits from one program or another, as a whole they think of the minority self-government as something that cannot bring remedy to their problems (Molnár 2002). They feel the self-government brings no good to the Roma, except maybe for those who are closest to the resources.

WORKING AGAINST DISCRIMINATION – BUT WITHOUT TOOLS

We argue that the institution of Roma minority self-governments could potentially play an important role in diminishing minority disadvantages, reinforcing the self-esteem of the Roma and promoting equal chances in the social, political and cultural sphere. These, however, are issues to be addressed by the minority and majority together.

In all the interviews we made, Roma leaders mentioned examples of discrimination in their own towns and villages. In fact, often they named fighting discrimination as one of their objectives, as the following survey responses to open-ended questions indicate.

„The most important thing is to prevent teachers from regarding our children as a pain in the neck because they have brown skin. We don’t want Gypsy classes... We don’t want the school to move our children into classes for mentally handicapped to draw additional funding from the state.”

„As for my role, I don’t want to write more about it than what it is worth. In 1999 there were three attacks by skinheads in the village and the mayor pretended that nothing happened, even though six of the Roma were seriously injured. Families had to hide in the corn-fields for the night and the mayor knew about it, but he did nothing.”

At the same time, as it shows clearly in the above quote, self-governments have little hope to successfully articulate minority interests when it comes to discrimination. Although Article 9 of the Minorities Act says “a person belonging to a minority has the right to equal chances in the political and cultural spheres, which the state is bound to promote through adequate measures” (Hungarian National Assembly 1993: 6), in reality there is no effective legal restriction against ethnic discrimination. Though the discrimination against the Roma is widespread, the Act does not create any effective social or legal mechanism to prevent it. This is why Szalai argues that the Act does not account for presumably the most important need of the Roma from the broader perspective of basic and full citizenship: the defense of their human dignity and self-respect (2000: 565). While minority self-governments often recognize the need to take action against discrimination, they are rarely able to make an impact in these matters. The institution of minority self-governance as it currently stands is simply not appropriate for solving these problems, especially in the absence of a comprehensive anti-discrimination Act.

Struggles against racism and discrimination of this type by self-governments are doomed to fail because these institutions are dependent upon the municipality for political power, material and financial support. At the same time, municipal government representatives have no obligation, other than perhaps an ethical one, to take action against explicit or implicit discrimination in their settlements. In certain cases, in fact, they have an interest in tolerating discrimination, if this is what the majority of voters expect. This phenomenon is similar to what we have described in relation to routines of (self)-segregation. If the minority self-government attempts to take actions against discriminative local practices (e.g., related to aid distribution) or against efforts at segregation (e.g. Gypsy classes at school), the municipal government would often appear as its opposition rather than as a partner. Conflicts like that rarely end in favor of the Roma.
CONCLUSIONS

Based on surveys filled by presidents of Roma minority self-governments and on a series of interviews, we conclude that in contrast to the spirit of the Minority Act, Roma self-governments see as their main objective the improvement of social conditions in their community rather than the preservation of minority culture and strengthening of minority identity. The ambitions of local Roma leaders are influenced primarily by the marginalization of their community, while the protection of Roma identity remains secondary. As a consequence, Roma minority self-governments often play the role of a social lobby, to the point of trying to protect the interests of the non-Roma as well as Roma poor. This practice contributes to the public perception that confuses ethnicity issues with social problems and promotes (self-) segregation.

The choice for Roma minority self-governments between functioning primarily as a ‘cultural institution’ or ‘social lobby’ is greatly impacted by the legal and social circumstances out of which this institution was created and continues to operate. The institution of minority self-governments cannot and should not be used as a substitute for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to addressing discrimination and social inequality. As long as the political process fails to address the problems of the most disadvantaged groups of society, and as long as these people (both Roma and non-Roma) are at the mercy of the municipal governments’ arbitrary aid system, Roma minority self-governments will have little alternative, but to direct their activities toward easing the social problems in their communities.

REFERENCES


