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How Roma Mayors Penetrate the Municipal Power Structures: Resisting the Non-Roma Dominance in Slovak Local Governments

TOMÁŠ HRUSTIČ

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Tomáš Hrustič, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Klemensova 19, 813 64, Bratislava, Slovak Republic; e-mail: tomas.hrustic@savba.sk

This paper discusses the outcomes of power asymmetries in Slovak municipalities with Roma population and presents examples how local Roma leaders resist the non-Roma dominance by active participation in local elections. Presenting data from field research and long-term repeated observations, the paper shows successful strategies of elected Roma mayors who disrupt the usual perception of the Roma as objects of decision-making process and passive recipients of various policies. In these paternalistic beliefs Roma have never been seen as actors who can control resources, who could hold the political power and who could decide how to use the resources. Although the Roma have penetrated the power structures of many municipalities, they are not able to wipe out invisible ethnic boundaries, or, at least, to soften and disrupt them. However, as the text illustrates, it seems that the political power asymmetries in a significant number of municipalities are being balanced, nevertheless, the symbolic dominance and symbolic power of non-Roma still persists.

Key words: Roma, local elections, political and symbolic power, asymmetries, social mobility, ethnic boundaries

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POSITIONALITY, METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

All data and examples presented in this paper come from my continuous observations and research of political engagement of the Roma in Slovakia from various positions. Therefore, it is necessary to declare my positionality as a researcher and to clarify the character of the collected data. Firstly, I was able to conduct repeated visits and field trips to municipalities with elected Roma representatives as a researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Social

Anthropology at Slovak Academy of Sciences since 2009 until now. Secondly, my additional affiliation with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) allowed me close cooperation with hundreds of elected Roma councillors and mayors all around Slovakia from 2006 to 2018. Within this NDI programme I have coordinated a project on Roma political participation in Slovakia with the aim of empowering Roma activists and leaders to participate at all levels of politics and to be engaged in civil society. The priorities within this programme were consultations and networking providing Romani leaders with skills to influence policies, run for elected office, and govern effectively.

Particularly, in this paper I use data and materials from my field research diaries, election campaign observations and interviews with local Roma and non-Roma representatives and inhabitants of the visited municipalities.[1] However, I cannot separate these from my experience ingrained in my agency of a person who mobilised Roma local politicians and who is recognised in this way by many actors in Romani political movements in Slovakia. In the past few years I have had hundreds of discussions and interactions with Romani mayors, local councillors and other political and civic activists.

I have also analysed election result statistics and local elections in 2010, 2014 and 2018 and surveyed written resources in mainstream media reporting on local election results and participation of Roma candidates and elected Roma representatives.

The perspective of Roma in a Slovak rural set-up and local politics places them clearly in the position in the power hierarchies of their social field (Bourdieu, 1991). To elaborate more on Martin Kovats' statement (Kovats, 2013: 123) related to the national and state policies, I will show how this logic is valid and even more easily operationalised at the local government level: state policies usually aim at managing/containing Roma exclusion, rather than overcoming it, which enables separating 'Roma issues' from the mainstream policies and the majority society and allows "authorities to play on long-standing prejudices towards Roma (including those prevalent amongst officials) that Roma are a particularly problematic and difficult group to deal with" (ibid: 123). There are many examples in Slovak local government level of how local policies preserve Roma exclusion, reiterating the inability of Roma to 'adjust to the majority' or 'integrate' and in the end, confirm the dominance of non-Roma. In other words, the Roma are objects of cultural constructions created under white hegemony (Berger, Luckmann, 1999; Šotola, Rodríguez Polo, Škobla, 2018). Thus, I will further elaborate on previous works of researchers focusing on structural conditions and social practices at the local level and their impact on spatial exclusion on so-called Roma settlements (Škobla, Filčák, 2016) or persisting invisible (and often visible) ethnic boundaries of Roma who were already able to achieve some sort of vertical social mobility (Šotola, Rodríguez Polo, 2016). However, in my perspective I will focus on struggles for local political power and will illustrate examples of Romani resistance as agency against local non-Roma political actors who are pointing to Roma ethnicity as a disqualifying factor in good local governance.

Reflecting on Brubaker's concepts of groups and categories, we cannot focus on "ethnic groups" as presumed "real entities to which interests and agency can be ascribed" (Brubaker,

1 Research trips and finalising of the paper were supported by the project VEGA nr. 2/0066/19: "Patterns of social mobility of the Roma in the light of empirical research. Critical reflection of existing practices and collection of new data." Additionally, some data in this paper come from the field trip in August 2020 within the project PERCOM / REC-AG 809869 – "Persuasive Communication Models for Local Leaders to Enhance Non-Discrimination and Roma Integration," funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014–2020).

2002: 2). In terms of groups, people ask what the groups want, demand and aspire to; how they think about themselves and others and how they act in relation to other groups. People understand them in an essentialising language and attribute to them identity, action, interests and will. In the case of categories, Brubaker suggests that we ask more about processes and relationships. We are interested in how people and organisations act in relation to ethnic and national categories, how such categories are used in distributing and organising processes and relationships, and how categories are institutionalised and with what consequences (2002: 183). In one of my previous texts I have emphasised that the Romani political movement was always generally unable to attract a sufficient number of voters and supporters (Hrustič, 2015) and I supported by mirroring Barany's arguments that the failure of the ethnic (and political) mobilisation of Roma has several causes, such as the lack of previous experience with politics or inadequate skills of their political organizations (Barany, 1998: 309). I have pointed out that many Roma leaders who dominated in the era of development of Romani politics, perceived the Roma as homogeneous group voting in unison for a Roma party or a Roma candidate and did not perceive the Roma as a category, which has only the potential to fill and shape its groupness (Brubaker, 2002) with content that is ascribed to ethnic categories (Brubaker, 2002: 173). However, in the following paper I will show some examples on local level politics where Roma candidates were able to mobilise their voters and get elected and moreover, were able to adjust their strategies for the complex arena where struggles for local power take place and to learn how to be successful in this domain, usually dominated by non-Roma local elites.

POWER ASYMMETRY AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

Mayors and municipal councils control important local domains with power to address most of the problems of segregated Roma communities. The decentralised set up of the governance system delegates several key competencies to municipalities and quite a few of these competencies address the main issues relevant and crucial for Romani communities. Local town halls are responsible, for example, for infrastructure development including access to water and construction of sewage systems, construction of houses, waste management, and municipal road construction. Moreover, municipalities have competencies of primary and pre-school education and they also have a great potential to provide job opportunities. Municipalities are responsible for managing various social welfare support programmes and thus local administration keeps power over a limited income for many Roma persons dependent on social welfare system. Moreover, municipalities are the subjects entitled to benefit from various financial support schemes including EU structural funds and other international and national grants.

As a result, citizens of Slovakia often witness quite severe struggles for the control over local resources and harsh contests over the right to make decisions. In Slovakian rural areas, this access to contest for local power (informally) belonged and, in many cases, still belongs only to some privileged local groups with some sort of social and economic capital. In the past, in most municipalities local Roma even did not try to enter these contests for local power. They were used to the unfortunate fact that they had never been part of the political system and they had no access to control the power and make decisions either regarding their own communities or about municipalities as a whole. This approach puts the Roma into the position of objects of local policies without any power to participate in any decision-making processes related to their own communities. In the past three decades the majority of local political stakeholders were rarely willing to invest resources to excluded and segregated Roma communities. And if they did, there were many examples of how local authorities adopted measures paternalistically, targeting the Roma without any consultation with recipients of those measures.[2]

At the end of nineties of the previous century after the transformation of the socialist system, the first attempts of Roma to enter local (and national) politics occurred[3] and in some municipalities Roma were able to penetrate into municipal offices and were successful in gaining elected positions.[4] During the last 15 years Slovak society has been getting used to the fact that Roma are becoming part of the struggle for political power and the majority of the population stills perceives Roma politicians, especially at the local level, as a threat (Hrustič, 2015). Local political contests, which used to be reserved specifically for some privileged 'white' local groups are now more open. As a result, in many municipalities, the political battlefields are divided along ethnic lines. And logically, on both sides, new challenges and new circumstances lead to new strategies how to win these battles and how to succeed and how to repeat the success and hold the local power for a longer time.

The Slovak majority have always perceived the Roma as only objects of the decision-making process and policies. My field observations confirm claims of other scholars in this field (Lajčáková, 2010; Dráľ, 2009), that the Roma have never been seen as actors who can control resources, who could hold the political power and who could decide how to use the resources. Acknowledging Barth's theory, ethnicity, as an aspect of the relationship between any two actors influences their actions. Actors negotiate ethnicity, manipulate it and conceal it. From this point of view, both counterparts are a determining factor – they provide an opportunity to define oneself in this social space against one's counterpart (Barth, 1998). Moreover, in the context of the Slovak countryside and in the case of the Roma, this definition is amplified by a significant power asymmetry (non-Roma decide on resources) and symbolic power (the stigmatisation of Roma ethnicity). As J. Šotola and M. Rodríguez Polo (2016: 22) point out, it is the power asymmetry that is a significant barrier to the potential vertical social mobility of Roma in the Slovak countryside.

The system of unequal power distribution along ethnic lines is so deeply ingrained in the Slovak society that, in the past, it was only rarely questioned by both sides. The usual schema of a Slovak municipality is that non-Roma control the municipal government, the budget and distribution of resources. In many cases they are not willing to invest in a Roma settlement, which results in many substandard and underdeveloped localities.

2 For example, the system of constructing municipal low-standard social houses in the years 2001 – 2006 perfectly illustrates this reality. In none of the 68 municipalities which participated in the Housing Development Programme of the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development were representatives of the Roma communities involved in the planning processes (Hojsík, 2008).

3 Of course, initiatives of Roma to self-organise and engage in civic and political life are well documented in the first two decades in post-war Czechoslovakia (Sadílková, Slačka, Závodská, 2018) resulting in establishing the Union of Gypsies-Roma in 1969. As the authors conclude, these first Romani-driven political and civic efforts illustrate that Roma never resigned to accept the position of passive "objects/victims of state care and policy" (Ibid.: 79), however, they have never been able to achieve a satisfactory level of political participation (the Communist regime never accepted Roma as an independent ethnic group). In the last two decades of socialism, especially during the "normalisation" period, the paternalistic approach of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia excluded all attempts of Roma leaders to participate (for more details see Pavelčíková, 2004, 2015).

4 Details of political emancipation of the Roma in all government levels in the nineties are well documented in Hrustič, 2015.

However, Roma were able to gain local power at some municipalities increasingly in local elections in 2002, 2006, 2010 and then more significantly in 2014 (Hrustič, 2015: 133–139) and recently in 2018. The increase of Roma local elected officials is a disturbing fact for the non-Roma which is documented in my research by many anecdotal stories of elected Roma and informants from municipalities where Roma succeeded in elections:

> A Gypsy won elections in our village, this is a disaster, and everything will be ruined here. (Paraphrased statement of a non-Roma voter, reported by elected Roma mayor in 2014, field diary)

> How can a dirty Gypsy be a mayor? He barely can read!
> (Paraphrased statement of a non-Roma voter, reported to the author by a Roma research partner in 2018, field diary)

Or, on the other hand, non-Roma used to celebrate the fact when their Roma contesters do not succeed, which I illustrate by a random scene from an election night in a village in Eastern Slovakia. After the polling stations had been closed, the electoral committee was counting the votes and the results were very close and the process took longer than usual. Finally, the committee announced that the Roma candidate lost the post of deputy by only 2 votes. After the result was announced, yet informally, a loud applause and shouts of celebrations echoed from another room where the newly elected mayor (non-Roma) and his people were waiting for the results, shouting: "This is what we wanted, the Gypsy not to be there [in the municipal council]".

There are many instances of these negative reactions but to unveil more graphic details I will illustrate this schema in two examples in selected municipalities in Eastern Slovakia.[5]

I AM STILL ONLY A 'DIRTY GYPSY' FOR THEM!

The first example is from a municipality in North-Eastern Slovakia. Approximately 50 percent of its 3200 inhabitants are Roma and the village is residentially separated into non-Roma and Roma part. A Romani mayoral candidate won the post for the first time in history in this municipality in 2014 and has been re-elected in 2018. However, he still feels that the vast majority of non-Roma cannot accept the fact that a Roma is the mayor of the village:

> Even though I am a mayor and I have bachelor's degree and still continue my education, all non-Roma think about me as a 'dirty Gypsy'
> (personal communication with the mayor, January 2019)

During our discussion, a year after his re-election he was openly depressed by this fact, despite the progress in the infrastructure and material and living conditions in the village improved by successful renovation and construction projects in both, non-Roma and Roma parts of the village. I witnessed his first successful elections in 2014 and the reactions of non-Roma were almost apocalyptic. "A Gypsy is the mayor, our village will be ruined"; "we

5 Due to the sensitivity of the content I will not refer to names of these villages and I have blurred their geographical locations.

are finished here, we will have to move to live somewhere else"; "our village will turn into a gypsy-town" – these are few examples of statements I could hear from non-Roma.[6] However, no disaster happened. On the contrary, in four years of his first mandate, the municipality successfully applied for European funds, renovated the central part of the village, and the infrastructure successfully progressed. The mayor was re-elected in 2018 despite the fact that only one non-Roma candidate had been nominated to increase the possible success of non-Roma to regain the power. Moreover, the mayor was supported by a small proportion of non-Roma voters and has been re-elected.

When asked how people in the village perceive him, he sadly told me that even though he is a mayor and holds bachelor degree and continues his education externally, all non-Roma think about him as a 'dirty Gypsy'. Daily he feels that the non-Roma keep their deeply rooted distance.

The mayor learned after six years in the mayoral chair that the biggest challenge for his municipality is antigypsyism and racism at the level of interpersonal relationships and he has absolutely no power to deal with it – as a mayor. For example, during municipal festivals and celebrations, they must always organise two events, one for the Roma and the other for the non-Roma, because the 'white'[7] would simply not come to a joint event.

Despite the fact that the Roma in the village make up an approximately half of the population, the school is attended exclusively by Roma. Non-Roma children attend schools in a nearby district town and surrounding villages. As an example, he mentions a recent story when he had the opportunity to raise funds to expand a kindergarten in the municipality, but one of the preconditions was that at least 20 percent of children attending the renovated kindergarten would be the Romani kids. The kindergarten principal and parents (entire school board) have radically refused this possibility, preferring rather not to have an extension in kindergarten if their children would attend the kindergarten with some Romani kids, even though it means that they have to drive their children to kindergartens in neighbouring villages.

Among the local elites, there is strong pressure to divide the social life of the village on the basis of ethnic boundaries. The mayor is desperate and doesn't know how he could change it. The biggest challenge for the municipality is predominant antigypsyism and racism at both levels of interpersonal relationships and institutional level (schools, local restaurants, church). The mayor is aware that he has absolutely no power to deal with it from the perspective of his elected office but also from his personal perspective, given his stigmatised ethnicity. Social life in the village is divided by ethnic boundaries with only a few opportunities for Roma and non-Roma to meet and share time and space. Details like separate municipal festivals for both groups reflect the distance and unwillingness to bridge those two distinct worlds. Moreover, there are no positive visions of this trend to be changed in near or far future: because the local school is attended only by Roma students and all non-Roma students attend schools in surrounding towns. The young generation of Roma and non-Roma have no real chances to meet and to know each other. It was not so when their fathers and mothers were school students, as the trend of white flight intensified some

6 A similar pattern is described by Šotola and Rodríguez Polo (2016: 219) in a municipality in Eastern Slovakia (nicknamed Korbany) where the Roma took the political power in 2002 and non-Roma were predicting "horror scenarios" for the municipality as such. The Roma have held power in that village since then until now and the municipality has developed significantly. The example of Korbany, indeed an exception in the Slovak local politics, is fascinating because it shows the reverse political power where non-Roma can experience the situation which the Roma face in most of the municipalities in Slovakia (Ibid: 223).

7 I use this term as an emic term of the local Roma (including the mayor) referring to non-Roma.

ten or fifteen years ago. Thus, the middle-aged and older generation of Roma and non-Roma have gone to school together, they know each other by personal names and have some social contacts. And still, they keep strong ethnic distance and this gap will grow in the future because local non-Roma elites make efficient pressure to keep the social life of the village ethnically divided.

> Someone may not know how the Roma feel about such a thing when they say he is a Roma, a Gypsy, and they want to put him out of that chair [elected office] ... I have to say: it's bad, it's bad, very bad. Sometimes the person is so outraged that he just says, "I'm not going on". But I have such a nature that on the contrary, I am just going, I have such a nature that I will show them [not give up].
> (personal communication with the mayor, January 2019)

After closer analysis of the local non-Roma population, it is evident that there are several strong families which can be seen as local elites forming various local alliances competing over local power. This was one of the factors of the non-Roma losing 2014 elections.[8] In 2018 elections the non-Roma local elite families were able to unify in their strategy and supported only one non-Roma candidate. The mayor, however, defended his position, and, in his campaign was even able to identify specific non-Roma families with weaker ties and affiliations with local non-Roma strongest families and thanks to thorough door to door visits he was able to get significant number of their votes. This fact may seem as undermining my argument about strict social and ethnic division in the village as there is a significant number of non-Roma willing to vote for a Roma mayor. However, secret electoral ballots allow these non-Roma voters to vote without being recognised and their votes to a Roma mayor were a discreet sign of satisfaction with his good job and achievements, or on the other hand, a discreet sign of dissatisfaction with those non-Roma elites aiming to get the power in the village. Nevertheless, none of these non-Roma voters would have been willing to declare this support openly and publicly in front of their non-Roma neighbours and community members.

DARING ROMA CROSSING UNWRITTEN BORDERS

My second example is from a municipality in Eastern Slovakia where Roma compose more than 90 percent of the overall population. However, until 2018 there was no Roma elected as a mayor and the majority of the local councillors were always non-Roma, too. In 2018 local elections, a Romani mayor was elected for the first time in the history of the village.

The motivation of the mayor to run for the office was an effort to solve the problem with municipal land estates that was sold 20 years ago under questionable circumstances and which has since limited any progress in the Roma part of the village. When the Roma wanted to build their houses legally, they were not able to acquire a plot in the municipality and the municipal authorities did not allow them to construct houses, or even buy old houses in the so-called non-Roma part of the village. As a result, there were no prospects for the Roma community to grow in any aspect. However, two major issues were dominant: the municipality

8 However, a more important reason, in my opinion is the fact that the Roma mayor made really successful door to door campaign and was able to persuade a significant part of the Romani voters – as I will explain later in this paper.

did not address housing and introduced various barriers for individual construction for the Roma,[9] and there was the absence of a kindergarten, which created barriers for Romani kids to acquire basic skills before entering elementary education. However, as the mayor emphasised, apart from these major infrastructural differences the situation in the municipality was calm – the Roma lived their lives and non-Roma their lives, there were clear unwritten demarcation lines defining social and physical positions of both groups.[10]

After the elections in 2018 everything changed. There were more non-Roma candidates and the result was that the Roma candidate was elected. During the campaign, the non-Roma were sure that the Roma candidate could not succeed and they underestimated these chances. However, the status quo had been changed and unwritten rules were obsolete.

> This attitude [antigypsyism] has always been here, only it was more or less hidden. Everything only comes to light now, when I actually took up this position [became a mayor], so I think it has something to do with this. And before that, they probably did what they wanted here [in the municipal office].
> (personal communication with the mayor, August 2020).

The mayor's previous experience from cohabitation with non-Roma, from his previous position as a field social worker was that there were fine (no open conflict) personal relationships with local non-Roma. They accepted each other and sometimes talked together. After his election as a mayor, that situation changed dramatically.

> I have come to the conclusion, after elected to the municipal office, that I do not know these people. And that was probably the worst thing that could have happened to me. I wanted to give it [elected office] up.
> (personal communication with the mayor, August 2020)

Shortly after being elected to the office, the mayor received a series of anonymous letters with threats and intimidations. Most of the non-Roma now have open negative feelings against the Roma mayor who analyses this change of attitudes and hesitates whether it is personal or an overall reflection of attitudes towards the Roma in general.

> I don't think they know the Roma very well and now they are afraid that I just started in the office as a Roma and they do not know what will actually happen. Maybe they're expecting attacks from me (...) And really, if I wanted to, I could – I found thousands of things here [questionable transactions, papers not in order] and did nothing yet.
> (personal communication with the mayor, August 2020)

9 Housing segregation is just a visible marker of more subtle divisions between both groups. As Jan Ort (2016) points out on a specific case study from Eastern Slovakia, the reluctance to let the Roma live among non-Roma is a basic obstacle for the Roma to overcome the set boundary at the level of local relations. Even in the eventual individual willingness of some non-Roma to sell the land, there is a stronger solidarity among the non-Roma population, which keeps them maintaining the established unwritten order (Ort, 2016: 44).

10 Spatial segregation is one of the most dominant barriers to vertical social mobility of the Roma. As illustrated by Šotola and Rodríguez Polo (2016: 50), there are examples of villages, where Roma were able to buy land plots or houses in the central part of the village in the past, which was a baseline for their potential social mobility. However, physical crossing of the border (by owning a house in non-Roma part of the village) does not automatically mean overcoming the symbolic boundaries and asymmetric power distribution (Šotola, Rodríguez Polo, 2016: 239).

The mayor approached the office with a cooperative manner and plans. The mayor has a right to appoint his deputy from all elected local councillors. He made the decision to appoint a non-Roma who had the highest number of votes from all elected local councillors with the belief that this could help the municipality overcome the Roma – non-Roma antagonism and the deputy could use his long experience with management of the municipality to benefit both communities. However, after some time the mayor had to dismiss the deputy, because he refused to cooperate and even, was ashamed to attend meetings alongside the Roma mayor with other regional stakeholders.

The mayor expressed his doubtfulness as to whether the position is worth bearing these attacks and atmosphere. However, so far, he decided to go on and focus on the work and service to people in the village, though in much more difficult conditions.

NEW ELECTORAL STRATEGIES AS A REFUTING FACTOR TO POLITICAL DEMOGRAPHY?

The statistical estimates of the number of elected Roma mayors (and local councillors as well) show that in more and more municipalities the local political power seems to be distributed more equally among the ethnic lines. Non-Roma are losing power in a significant number of municipalities and in order to reverse the process they must employ new strategies. At first, there are several examples (also documented by the two cases in this paper) when non-Roma realised they cannot politically underestimate Romani communities and their representatives in their municipalities. In order to gain the local power again, they need to mobilise their non-Roma electorate, which, indeed is not a difficult task, because, as many examples show, non-Roma inhabitants perceive the Romani political successes as a very disturbing fact. In several municipalities I have visited after elections, non-Roma inhabitants often used informal slogans which could be paraphrased as "we need to take our village back". Again, we see paternalistic language ('our village') reflecting the unwritten hegemony of the 'white' population. In this logic, they have the right to rule in the village (it is 'their village') and Roma are at the margins, being a barrier to economic progress (often described as 'a Roma problem', or 'a Roma question'). To support this argument, they refer to Roma as uneducated, illiterate and unable to govern the local office.[11] This tool proved to be quite effective as it mirrors the power asymmetries and non-Roma dominance. Thus, the mobilisation of non-Roma voters is a first and important step for non-Roma to succeed again.

However, there is another key strategy to increase the chances of a non-Roma being elected by decreasing the number of non-Roma candidates. We can see that in many municipalities of this kind only one non-Roma candidate ran for the mayoral office and only a minimum number of candidates for local councillors. Moreover, there are many places where I had anecdotal notes of various electoral frauds and electoral corruption, either financial or material vote-buying, or using various threats and intimidation. For example, the municipality office controls the "activation work programme" on which many unemployed

11 I have already pointed out that the alleged illiteracy of Romani mayors is rather a myth which I have deconstructed in one of my previous papers (Hrustič, 2013: 62). Accusing elected Roma officials of illiteracy becomes a popular weapon in the struggle for political power, often used by unsuccessful non-Roma candidates and dissatisfied non-Roma citizens, sometimes reiterated in academic papers (Scheffel, Mušinka, 2019: 21).

Roma are dependent to get additional social welfare benefits.[12] Besides the programme's strong dehumanisation effects on Roma (van Baar, 2012: 1296), many mayors misuse this dependence by blackmailing voters to vote for the right candidate otherwise they would be not allowed to join this programme and would lose the small additional social income. Or, they bribe local loan-sharks, either financially, or promising them provisions to use future advantages[13] in exchange for securing Roma votes during election day.

On the contrary, in order for the Roma candidates to be successful in elections and eventually to get re-elected, they must increase their efforts in campaigning and I documented many cases when they were using similar strategies as non-Roma candidates in nominating only a minimum number of candidates in order not to split votes. However, many Roma candidates emphasised to me that they must focus more energy also to voter education because their experience from previous elections show that there are many invalid ballots. They believe that voter education combined with targeted mobilisation of voters can mitigate the potentiality of vote-buying in some of the Roma communities.

The fact that both mayors I used as examples in this paper had worked as field social workers when they decided to run in elections seems to be very significant to me. They were involved in helping the Romani community from this position and from their professional perspective they were able to understand key processes and opportunities of how to address some of the most important issues of Roma communities. However, after some time in this position they realised their limits – they were not able to break the glass ceiling, they were not in a position to influence the municipal authorities to deal with these problems. This motivated them to run themselves. In their campaigns, they built on their leverage and trust they gained as field social workers in the Roma community and could develop their election programmes according to the real needs of the local Roma.

Another important factor which helped the mayor of the first village to win election in 2014 is the fact, that he already had previous experience with election campaigns, specifically the campaign of a Roma candidate to the regional parliament in 2013. He was a member of the election campaign team of a regional Roma leader and was responsible mainly for door to door campaigning in Romani communities in the district. Additionally, members of this election campaign team received a series of training on conducting election campaigns by the National Democratic Institute within its Roma Political Participation Programme. The campaign, however, was not successful and the Roma candidate was not elected to the regional parliament. Nevertheless, all the team members gained important lessons learned. In this way, he had been able to use these skills in his own mayoral campaign a year later and after his successful campaign he acknowledged to me,[14] that this experience helped him to win local elections. He paid a lot of attention to designing a solid campaign strategy with an emphasis on a development programme for the community and on delivery of his messages in an effective way to his voters. As he admitted, in the previous regional campaign, he underestimated the direct communication with voters. He was aware

12 This so-called activation work programme, when people have to work extra hours for the community in order to obtain additional social income (Škobla, Csomor, Filadelfiová, 2018), was initiated with the original intention for clients to re-enter the official labour market. This intention failed as only a limited number of workers managed to get normally paid wage-labour due to "the extreme scarcity of productive work opportunities and racialized subjection in Slovakia" (Grill, 2018: 116).

13 Quite often, as a reward, family members of local loan-sharks get job position controlled by municipalities, for instance as coordinators of "activation work programme", assistants to field social workers, or community centre assistants.

14 In personal interview after he had been elected to the office, December 2014.

during his mayoral campaign, that his team must put strong emphasis on door to door campaigning, but also on Get Out The Vote (GOTV) mobilisation of voters, which proved to be effective in the end, and brought success to him.

> If a candidate plans to run, he must work with communities not only during the election campaign but all the time before. A candidate must work in the community, must be visible and has to try to help and find solutions addressing the problems. If voters recognise the candidate as the one who is trying to help them throughout the year, they will more likely vote for him.
> (personal communication with the mayor, December 2014)

Romani candidates in their election campaigns, however, are aware, that in many cases it is necessary to get votes also from non-Roma voters. This strategy is inevitable mostly for incumbent Roma mayors who defend their position and they have the advantage of promoting their successful achievements. However, as I illustrated in the example from the first municipality, there is only a limited number of non-Roma voters who can be targeted by this strategy. Anyway, presenting good results of a mayor's previous work in the office during four years' mandate and understanding social and political networks of the voters in the village are other key factors for successful re-election.

The increase of elected Roma representatives on local level is often explained by the factor of demography, not only by non-Roma political representatives but also by some academics. For example, David Scheffel and Alexander Mušinka, in their recent paper, and in a highly questionable and slightly derogatory manner, refer to political demography as a key cause of Roma candidates being elected: "We are referring to the remarkable gains made by Slovak Roma in the arena of municipal politics – gains that would have been unimaginable without the continued robustness of Romani fecundity" (Scheffel, Mušinka 2019: 21). Indeed, the positive demography is influential, however, as the figures in Table 1 indicate,[15] it is not the most significant factor, as can be seen in those municipalities with dominant Romani population where the local non-Roma are holding the political power. From 50 municipalities in Slovakia with the population of Roma higher than 70 percent, only in 22 of them had a Romani mayor been elected in 2014 and in 23 of them in 2018. On the contrary, 19 Romani mayors have been elected in municipalities within the zone of 45 to 69 percent of Roma population, which should be "unimaginable" according to the referred authors.

However, what is even more important than the growing number of elected Roma mayors (either crediting the political demography, or effective campaigns and quality of candidates) is the significant number of those Roma mayors who were able to defend their positions. Out of 34 Roma mayors elected in 2014, 29 of them were re-elected in 2018.

15 Information on the size of Roma population and number of municipalities with Roma population (columns 1 and 2 in the table) is based on sociographic mapping of infrastructure in Roma communities in Slovakia in 2013 (Mušinka, Škobla, Hurrle, Matlovičová, Kling, 2014). This so called "Atlas of Roma communities" was updated in 2019, however, as I refer to local election in 2014, I use the earlier source to categorise municipalities with Roma population. Regarding the number of elected Roma mayors (columns 3 to 5 in the table), as there are no statistics in Slovakia that would map the ethnicity of political candidates and elected representatives, these estimates of the National Democratic Institute were based on detailed data collection in the field in cooperation with local Roma and non-Roma NGOs and local governments and researchers.

Table 1 – Romani mayors in municipalities according to the percentage of the Roma population

Roma population	Number of municipalities with Roma population	Elected Roma mayors 2014		Elected Roma mayors 2018		Re-elected Roma mayors in 2018
1 – 10%	326	**2**	0,61%	**2**	0,61%	2
10 – 45%	573	**0**	0	**0**	0	0
45 – 50%	36	**1**	0,29%	**3**	0,89%	1
50 – 60%	49	**4**	8,1%	**5**	10.1%	2
60 – 70%	36	**5**	13,88	**11**	30,5%	3
70 – 80%	31	**11**	35%	**11**	35%	11
80 – 90%	10	**5**	50%	**5**	50%	4
90 – 100%	9	**6**	66,6%	**7**	77,7%	6
Total	1 070	**34**	3,2%	**44**	3,74%	**29**

CONCLUSIONS

The last two local elections showed that the interest of the Roma in municipal elections is very high and, in many localities, it even exceeds the interest of the majority. There are several reasons for this fact; however, it seems that the most important one is, that the Roma feel that they can have a real impact on the municipal level of politics and distribution of power. Inspired by success stories of Roma candidates in other municipalities all around Slovakia, more and more Roma voters believe that their votes are meaningful and they can play an equal role in local decision-making processes.

Roma candidates were able to mobilise their voters and get elected and moreover, were able to adjust to the complex arena where struggles for local power take place and learned how to be successful in this domain, usually dominated by non-Roma local elites. Moreover, some of them (as I illustrated in the first example in this paper) seem to be able to mobilise Romani voters by conceptualising Roma identity in contrast with non-Roma political actors (by thorough door to door campaign, discussions with local Roma stakeholders and explaining their positionality in the domain of local power asymmetries). As a result, they have been able to instrumentalise their perception of Roma identity and managed to organise election campaigns according to these principles, contrary to many previous unsuccessful attempts, when Roma leaders just expected they would be elected automatically on the basis of their ethnicity. As the example of the re-elected Roma mayor in this paper, he was able to learn this lesson learned from his previous experience in a regional election campaign, where he expected that Romani voters would vote for the Romani candidate automatically.

Although more and more Roma were able to unsettle the 'white' hegemony of municipal political representation, nevertheless, they are still trying hard to mitigate the power asymmetry in interethnic relations. Romani mayors still encounter racialized and essentialised categorising as a 'dirty Gypsy'. Crossing the borders drawn by ethnicity or breaking the unwritten rules defined by the dominant 'white' population is an unpleasant act also for the Romani actors but certainly unwanted phenomenon for the non-Roma. I have already pointed out to similar situations described by Šotola and Rodríguez Polo of instances when even the Roma who achieved some sort of vertical social mobility were not able to overcome unspoken but clearly performed non-Roma superiority, or, situations where the potential social mobility of Roma was intensely defended by local non-Roma by not selling houses in the central part of village to Roma (Ort, 2016).

To relate to the broader context, the examples I use in this paper are almost identical with the situation described by Cecilia Kovai (2012), though, she is not referring to political mobility of Roma in a Hungarian village, but instances of social mobility and social change which brought a radical shift to the local 'white' order. Moving away from the 'usual Gypsy' position at the periphery, emancipating from subordination and inferiority is not only reshaping the local relations by "intrusion into the space of the majority" (Kovai, 2012: 293) but also exposing non-Roma to a potential self-perceived threat from the Roma. The reader can see in both discussed villages in this paper signs of intensified stigmatisation of the Roma defined by Kovai as 'naming the Gypsy' and increased non-Roma resentment (almost disgust) against "the Gypsy menace", referring to Michael Stewart's title of the edited volume (2012), which deals with political and societal consequences of the Roma breaking the 'white' order and hegemony.

In this context, even though the Roma have penetrated the power structures of many municipalities, they are not able to wipe out the invisible ethnic boundaries, or, at least, to soften and disrupt them. It seems that the political power asymmetries in a significant number of municipalities are getting to some sort of balance, however, the symbolic dominance and symbolic power of non-Roma still persists. The mayor's words are self-evident in this perspective:

> These relationships haven't changed; because it's in man's nature. The majority population is not going openly against you, but we, as Roma, can feel it. Because the Roma are still inferior ... that they are still the ones [non-Roma] who [think they will] decide about everything. And it was we who showed them that not only they [non-Roma] know how to decide on certain things, but also, we, the Roma. Because even the former council – I had only three of them [Roma councillors] and they learned how to defend themselves, did not shout and calmly talked about things that we were able to achieve in practice thanks to those Roma [our voters].
> (personal communication with the mayor, January 2019)

This statement serves as an illustrative example of Romani resistance against local non-Roma political hegemony, with taking on agency, adopting functional strategies to counter balance the power asymmetry. The Roma realise that municipal elections are often the only way to demonstrate their agency and their desire for change.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TOMÁŠ HRUSTIČ – is a senior researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (IESA SAS) in Bratislava focusing on Romani Studies. He has participated in several international and national research projects and is author of more than 20 studies in peer-reviewed journals and books. Hrustič has experience in the NGO sector through his affiliation with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in facilitating workshops and training on various political participation of Roma focused on elected Roma representatives and Roma youth leaders. He was also elected (for the period 2014–2018) as an expert in respect of the Slovak Republic to the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities at the Council of Europe.