



## The Slovak Government Plenipotentiary for Romani Communities: From Form to Substance?

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### Introduction

Promoting genuine Romani participation in programme design, implementation and assessment is integral to the success of the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*. Specialised state institutions designed to address the situation of Roma can play an essential role in this, but can also easily yield mere token representation, if even that. In order to outline potential pitfalls on that count and identify what would be needed to ensure genuine, consistent participation, this paper examines the evolution of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary in Slovakia, from its creation in 1995 through the present.

The first ten years of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary are arguably less memorable for the accomplishments they have yielded than for their lack of consistent direction. Rather than apply and make subsequent adjustments to a programme for improving the situation of the country's Romani population, until mid-2000 authorities in post-Communist Slovakia repeatedly drafted what they presented as new policy priorities and called for new pilot projects to reflect those priorities. The discontinuity characteristic of Slovak policy towards Roma has been particularly evident in the operation of specialised government institutions to address Roma's problems. Notwithstanding significant progress under the third Government Plenipotentiary, the future effectiveness of the Office will depend in large part on sufficient budget allocations and on independence from electoral politics.

### 1995: The Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care

In the wake of Slovakia's first officially recognised racially motivated murder (the victim of which was a Rom), the "Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care" was established in 1995 as an organ of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. The Office was created in response to pressure by human rights organisations and the country's Romani population.<sup>1</sup> However, whereas Romani activists had demanded the creation of a government office for Roma headed by a Rom, the first Office of the Government Plenipotentiary was in theory ethnically neutral and the person chosen to fill it, Branislav Baláž, was an ethnic Slovak and a member of the ruling Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). In the report accompanying the government resolution that created the Office, "citizens who need special care" were defined as the unemployed, the socially and culturally "backward," ex-convicts, alcoholics, drug addicts, former inhabitants of orphanages and children's group homes and persons awaiting housing.<sup>2</sup> The ethnically neutral language of the initial resolution notwithstanding, a government resolution issued the following year "On the Proposal of Activities and Measures for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care" is more explicit in designating its objects as Roma, while also containing language (e.g., "un-adapted citizens") where the reference to Roma is implicit yet clear from common use of similar terminology in previous official discourse on Roma.<sup>3</sup>

From its establishment until its abolition in 1998, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care arguably generated little beyond various sets of priorities that were never implemented.<sup>4</sup> In preparation for the parliamentary elections of November 1998, HZDS made use of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary and its incumbent to broker an arrangement with Romani political parties by which the two Romani candidates included on the HZDS ballot were assigned positions that made their

election unlikely. While Ján Kompuš of the Romani Civic Initiative was assigned 61st place on HZDS's ballot, József Ravasz of the Party of Protection of Roma's Rights was placed at position 88. Given the total number of seats in the Slovak parliament, in the absence of preference voting HZDS would have needed to match its showing in the previous elections for Kompuš to be elected and would have had to fare better than ever before for Ravasz to win a seat.<sup>5</sup> In this manner, not only did the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care not involve Roma actively in the design of appropriate policy, but it also served effectively to undermine Romani political participation at both elite and popular levels.

### **1998: The Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Belonging to the Romani Minority**

Shortly after taking power in November 1998, the pro-Western government of Mikuláš Dzurinda fired Branislav Baláž from his post as the Government Plenipotentiary.<sup>6</sup> A government resolution issued early the following year, however, established a similar office with an ethnically specific name, the "Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Belonging to the Romani Minority", which was to reside under the newly established Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development.<sup>7</sup> Appointed to fill the position was Vincent Danihel, a Romani lawyer who had been elected in 1990 to the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly on the ticket of the Communist Party.

Disappointing initial expectations on the part of Roma and non-Roma alike, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Belonging to the Romani Minority seems not to have accomplished much more under Danihel than did the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care. While policy documents issued during Danihel's tenure in office reflect a consistency in priorities lacking under the previous governments, this seems to be the full extent of the results of Danihel's two years on the job.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the authority of the Office was not enhanced by Danihel's May 2001 dismissal on suspicion of embezzlement.<sup>9</sup> Nor was it reinforced by the frequent conflicts between Danihel and Pál Csáky, the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development, which culminated in Danihel alleging that Csáky had misused funds from the World Bank.<sup>10</sup> Considering that the Office in general and Danihel, in particular, were also widely criticised for lacking contact with the Romani population, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Solving the Problems of Citizens Belonging to the Romani Minority under Danihel may be characterised aptly as an instance of isolated, elite-level minority participation.

### **2001: The Government Plenipotentiary for Romani Communities**

Appointed in June 2001, the new "Government Plenipotentiary for Romani Communities" (as the post was renamed in September 2001), Klára Orgovánová, has been considerably more successful than her predecessors.<sup>11</sup> An expert on Romani issues of some international renown and Romani herself, Orgovánová has been consistent in her work to bring about implementation of the Elaborated Strategy of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of the Romani National Minority, which had been adopted in 2000.<sup>12</sup> Initial steps in this direction included the formation of an advisory board to the Government Plenipotentiary to aid in preparing appropriate projects, the opening of a branch of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary in Eastern Slovakia (where most of the country's Romani population lives) and the establishment of the "Inter-ministerial Commission for the Affairs of Romani Communities" as an advisory body to the Cabinet. Also encouraging given her predecessors' lack of contact with the Romani population have been Orgovánová's introduction of an internship programme in the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for young Romani activists, her trips to Romani settlements and her meetings with local authorities.

Notwithstanding her competence and dedication, Orgovánová's tenure as Government Plenipotentiary has not been without difficulties. Moreover, some of the measures taken

shortly after Orgovánová's appointment have not produced the intended results. The advisory board apparently lost momentum after aiding the Office in setting priorities and the Inter-ministerial Commission enjoyed neither independent authority nor particularly favourable relations with the Cabinet that it was created to advise.

In April 2002, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary took the step – unprecedented in Slovakia – of publishing a critical appraisal of the implementation of the government Strategy.<sup>13</sup> Unlike previous documents, which had either provided vague evaluation of existing policy or presented ostensibly new priorities for future policy, the document entitled *Priorities of the Government of the Slovak Republic with regard to Roma Communities for 2002* contains detailed analysis of action taken to date and proposes measures necessary to realise the goals set out in the Strategy.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary calls the state to task in noting that fulfilment of declared government priorities requires sufficient resource allocations.

Following the September 2002 parliamentary elections, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary was transferred from the authority of the Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development to that of the Prime Minister. The new Cabinet also redefined the Office's areas of responsibility in relationship to other state- and regional-level government bodies, creating further discontinuity in policy development. Later in 2002, strife within the Cabinet over the institutional framework within which the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary should operate led the World Bank to withdraw its funding for the Office, and this funding was not replaced by state budget resources.<sup>15</sup>

Slovak policy documents on Roma published since the parliamentary elections of 2002 hint at persistent tensions between the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Romani Communities and the Cabinet. A case in point are the *Fundamental Theses of the Concept of the Government of the Slovak Republic's Policy in the Integration of Romani Communities*, which combine the constructive-critical approach characteristic of Orgovánová's work with an introductory text reminiscent of policy documents issued under the HZDS-led governments.<sup>16</sup> The substantive sections of the document – apparently drafted by the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary without the participation of the Cabinet – contain frank analyses of policies implemented to date and provide lists of concrete measures to be undertaken in the medium and long terms. The introductory section in which the Cabinet presumably had a hand, however, is marked by clichés that suggest a lack of familiarity with the issues addressed in the remainder of the document, for example where it notes that “the essence of the problems of the Roma has a socio-economic character” or that “Roma in a uniting Europe face similar challenges to other ethnic groups”. Similar incongruities appear in the *Evaluation of the Fundamental Theses of the Concept of the Government of the Slovak Republic's Policy in the Integration of Romani Communities*, as well as in the *Priorities of the Government of the Slovak Republic in the Integration of Romani Communities for the Year 2004*.<sup>17</sup>

## **Lessons for the Decade of Roma Inclusion**

In its first ten years of existence, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary in Slovakia evolved from a purely political appointment into an organ capable of offering expert advice. Key to this evolution was not only increasing concern on the part of the Slovak government about its image abroad, but also the selection of qualified and engaged personnel to run the Office. Despite the considerable improvement in the functioning of the Office that came with the appointment of Klára Orgovánová, however, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Romani Communities remains hampered in its work by struggles over political competencies and insufficient budget allocations.

The combination of improvements and continuing difficulties in the functioning of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary in Slovakia suggest a set of more general lessons on how to ensure genuine Romani participation not only in Slovakia, but also in the other countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

First, specialised institutions similar in kind to the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary should be established as early as possible to address the overall situation of a country's

Romani population, rather than as a belated response to mounting social tensions and public outcry.

Second, the Romani population should constitute the explicit target group of such institutions. The choice of target group should be argued and specified on the basis of hard data illustrating the situation of the Roma in the country in question.

Moreover, Roma with proven interest in and considerable knowledge of the country's Romani population should be included as designers and executors of policy at all levels of these institutions.

Furthermore, the institutions should have sufficient authority to bring about timely implementation of the policy prescriptions they generate, with policy modified as necessary on the basis of regular monitoring and detailed reporting on implementation.

Finally, institutions such as the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary must be insulated operationally as well as financially from the vicissitudes of electoral politics.

While these five lessons admittedly amount to a tall order for Slovakia and its neighbours, meeting the goals of the Decade requires nothing less.

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<sup>1</sup> Michal Vašečka, "Rómovia a parlamentné voľby 1998", in M. Bútora, G. Mesežnikov and Z. Bútorová (Eds), *Kto? Prečo? Ako? Slovenské voľby '98*, Ch. 21, Bratislava, Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 1999, p. 292; Government of the Slovak Republic, Statute of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care, Government Resolution 668, Bratislava, 1995 (in Slovak).

<sup>2</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Statute of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care, Government Resolution 668, Bratislava, 1995 (in Slovak).

<sup>3</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the Proposal of Activities and Measures for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care for the Year 1996, Government Resolution 310, Bratislava, 1996 (in Slovak).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Government of the Slovak Republic, Conceptual Intentions of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of Roma in the Current Social-Economic Conditions, Government Resolution 796, Bratislava, 1997 (in Slovak); Government of the Slovak Republic, Report on the Fulfillment of the Functions and Measures for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care in the Year 1996 and Proposal of Measures for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care in the Year 1997, Government Resolution 335, Bratislava, 1997 (in Slovak).

<sup>5</sup> Whereas Kompuš's death in a car accident in September 1998 prevented his election to parliament, Ravasz's election may have been precluded by many Roma's lack of knowledge about preference voting. See Michal Vašečka, "Rómovia a parlamentné voľby 1998", in M. Bútora, G. Mesežnikov and Z. Bútorová (Eds), *Kto? Prečo? Ako? Slovenské voľby '98*, Ch. 21, Bratislava, Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 1999, p. 292.

<sup>6</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the Proposal for the Removal of PaedDr. Branislav Baláž from the Post of Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of Citizens Who Need Special Care, Government Resolution 861, Bratislava, 1998 (in Slovak).

<sup>7</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Statute of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of Citizens Belonging to the Romani Minority, Government Resolution 127, Bratislava, 1999 (in Slovak).

<sup>8</sup> See Government of the Slovak Republic, Strategy of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of the Romani National Minority and the Set of Measures for its Implementation – Stage I, Government Resolution 821, Bratislava, 1999 (in Slovak); Government of the Slovak Republic, Elaborated Strategy of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of the Romani National Minority – Stage II, Government Resolution 294, Bratislava, 2000 (in Slovak).

<sup>9</sup> "Vláda odvolala Danihela", in *Sam adaj-Sme tu*, May 2001.

<sup>10</sup> "Vláda odvolala Danihela", in *Sam adaj-Sme tu*, May 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Statute of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Romani Communities, Government Resolution 886, Bratislava, 2001 (in Slovak).

<sup>12</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Elaborated Strategy of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Solving the Problems of the Romani National Minority – Stage II, Government Resolution 294, Bratislava, 2000 (in Slovak).

<sup>13</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Priorities of the Government of the Slovak Republic with regard to Roma Communities for 2002, Government Resolution 357, Bratislava, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Priorities of the Government of the Slovak Republic with regard to Roma Communities for 2002, Government Resolution 357, Bratislava, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, *Third Report on Slovakia*, Strasbourg, 27 January 2004, CRI (2004) 4, p. 12; Michal Vašečka, "Roma", in M. Kollár, G. Mesežnikov and T. Nicholson (Eds), *Slovakia 2002: A Global Report on the State of Society*, Ch. 6, Bratislava, Institute for

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Public Affairs, 2003, p. 175.

<sup>16</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, *Fundamental Theses of the Concept of the Government of the Slovak Republic's Policy in the Integration of Romani Communities*, Bratislava, 2003 (in Slovak).

<sup>17</sup> Government of the Slovak Republic, Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the Evaluation of the Fundamental Theses of the Concept of the Government of the Slovak Republic's Policy in the Integration of Romani Communities for the Year 2003 and Priorities of the Government of the Slovak Republic in the Integration of Romani Communities for the Year 2004, Government Resolution 397, Bratislava, 2004 (in Slovak); Government of the Slovak Republic, *Evaluation of the Fundamental Theses of the Concept of the Government of the Slovak Republic's Policy in the Integration of Romani Communities for the Year 2003*, Bratislava, 2004 (in Slovak).