

Araştırma-İnceleme

**ACTIVE OR TOKEN PARTICIPATION?: HOPES AND
HINDERANCES BEFORE ROMA FACE POLITICAL
AMBITIONS**

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Abstract: Until recently, Roma people in Turkey and their political demands have been largely neglected. This group of people did not have any political representation through which to raise their voices or any kind of political will to change the discriminative clauses in Turkish legislations. However, since the accession negotiation process to the EU started, there has been a limited but important awakening in the consideration of Roma people in Turkey. In this regard, the most important step was the election of the first ever Roma MP in the history of the Turkish Republic. However, it is still possible to see limited political participation by the Roma in Turkey. Based on interview data in a qualitative framework, this paper will question the background of the limited political participation of Roma people. The interviews are conducted in one of the Turkish cities which is populated by a significant number of Roma: Edirne. This paper will address the hindrances to their active political participation, the sources of these hindrances and how Roma people have perceived recent developments. Drawing on the literature on political participation by minority groups, this study argues that although there has been visible political engagement by Roma groups, two important barriers affect their active participation. The joint effects of discriminative attitudes and internal dividedness weaken the Roma people's power to influence politics. All in all, participation by Roma people remains limited and is symbolic rather than being influential and active.

Keywords: Roma Groups, Political Participation, Edirne.

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AKTİF YA DA SEMBOLİK KATILIM?: ROMANLARIN SİYASAL İSTEKLERİNE YÖNELİK UMUTLAR VE ENGELLER

Öz: Çok yakın bir zamana kadar, Türkiye’de yaşayan Romanların istekleri büyük ölçüde görmezden gelinmekteydi. Türkiye’de Roman gruplar seslerini yükseltebilecekleri bir partiye ya da mevzuatta yer alan ayrımcı ifadeleri kaldırarak siyasi iradeye sahip değillerdi. Ancak, AB müzakere sürecinin başlaması ile beraber bu alanda önemli bir uyanış yaşandı. Konuyla ilgili en büyük gelişme ise Türkiye Cumhuriyeti tarihinde ilk defa bir Roman milletvekilinin meclise seçilmesi oldu. Ancak, hala Türkiye’de kısıtlı bir Roman siyasi katılımı söz konusudur. Niteliksel analizi yapılan mülakat verilerine dayanan bu çalışma, Romanların kısıtlı siyasi katılımının arka planını incelemektedir. Mülakatlar Roman nüfusunun yoğun olduğu Edirne ilinde gerçekleşmiştir. Çalışma, siyasi katılım önündeki engelleri, bu engellerin kaynaklarını ve alandaki güncel gelişmelerin Romanlarca nasıl algılandığını incelemektedir. Azınlık grupların siyasi katılımları alan yazınına dayanan bu çalışmada, Romanların siyasi katılımlarında gözle görünür artış yaşanmasına rağmen, iki büyük engelin katılımı etkilediği iddia edilmektedir. Romanların hem maruz kaldıkları ayrımcılık ve hem de grup içi bölünmüşlük Roman gruplarının siyaseti etkileme güçlerini azaltmaktadır. Sonuç olarak Roman siyasi katılımı etkili ve aktif olmaktan çok kısıtlı ve sembolik kalmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Siyasi Katılım, Roman, Edirne.

Introduction

In many countries, Gypsies constitute the most disadvantaged groups in both social and economic terms. (Revenga, 2002; Ringold et al., 2005). While poverty is one of the common features of Roma groups, this is often accompanied by social and political discrimination, which might be the factors in keeping them from being able to fully participate, and result in them being marginalised in many ways as a group and as individuals. Although recent efforts target social and economic aspects of Roma lives (see for example European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012; OSCE, 2014), the political sphere is still quite problematic as well as untouched. According to McGarry (2010, p. 2), since ‘Roma have never ‘risen up’ or used violence, they have been neglected in academic and political discourse’. However, it is important not to forget that political participation and representation of all citizens is a crucial part of democratic life, and ‘ethnic minority political participation play[s] a central role in the process of identity construction’ (Bird et al., 2011, p. 9).

When we look at politics, it seems that altering the situation is somewhat challenging as the legal structure of the countries might foster discrimination and avoid the active political participation of Roma communities. Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, still defines peoples except constituent peoples, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, as ‘others’ which includes national minorities. The BiH constitution regards ‘others’ as not constituent people, and therefore they

do not have the right to be elected as representatives to the House of Peoples of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly, nor are they allowed to be one of the three-member BiH Presidency.³ Another example comes from the Czech Republic where the electoral threshold hinders the Roma political parties in gaining parliamentary participation (Barany, 2001, p. 8). A similar situation is seen in Turkey, which imposes a 10 percent electoral threshold; this is an important obstacle preventing the representation of minority groups.

Considering the disadvantageous position of Roma communities, some research focuses on political participation of Roma groups in different countries, especially in the Balkans. However, the existing literature investigating Roma communities in Turkey is still quite weak, and thus much research is needed in this field of study. Recent developments, the start of accession negotiation process with the EU, discussions over Democratic opening since 2009 and election of the first ever Roma representative, Özcan Purçu, to the National Assembly in 2015, have raised the question once again. Why have Roma groups waited until 2015 to be represented in the Assembly? What are the obstacles to the Roma groups' political participation?

Taking this research question into account, we conducted a case study, which analysed the data collected from face-to-face interviews with Roma people from the city of Edirne in Turkey. Both sociological and firm political science perspectives have been taken and the reasons behind the relatively weak political participation and representation of Roma groups in Edirne were questioned. Following on from the path that Adrian McGarry opens with in his research of 'Who Speaks for [the] Roma population', we repeat and extend the question for Edirne case. 'Who speaks for the Roma population and what are the barriers preventing the Roma from speaking for themselves'?

This article argues the Roma community in Edirne still has limited political power. In addition to their chronic problem of facing widespread discriminatory attitudes, there are also internal divisions within the Roman community, which undermine their ability to influence politics.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The first part introduces the theoretical background of the study. As several definitions of political participation have been proposed in the literature, this part indicates the borders of the study. In the second part, the methodology of the study will be clarified and the reader will find details of the data collection process. Before moving onto the analysis part, the background of the Roma in Turkey, specifically in Edirne, will be mentioned. In the fourth part, findings relating to the limited political participation of Roma community in Edirne will be presented. Based

³ Article 5 of the Constitution of Bosnia Herzegovina: The Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina shall consist of three Members: one Bosniac and one Croat, each directly elected from the territory of the Federation, and one Serb directly elected from the territory of the Republika Srpska.

(http://www.ccbh.ba/public/down/USTAV_BOSNE_I_HERCEGOVINE_engl.pdf)

on these findings, the conclusion part will discuss possible ways of increasing political participation by this community.

1. Theoretical Framework of Political Participation

Political participation is one of the essential components of democratic lives. In fact, it shows the performance of democracy (Imbrasaitė, 2010; Kaase & Marsh, 1979). Verba maintains that ‘citizen participation is, ..., at the heart of political equality’ (Verba, 2001, p. 2). Both wide and narrow definitions of political participation have been indicated in the literature. For a long time political participation was taken in a very narrow sense and thought as being almost equal to electoral participation (Brady, 1999). However, this type of participation is somewhat insufficient to tackle comprehensively because electorates have much more of a ‘controller’ role rather than participatory (Imbrasaitė, 2010; Parry et al., 1992). Hence, several specific forms of political participation have been denoted in the studies (Deth, 2001). Among these definitions, Verba et al. (1978) made a great contribution to the literature by suggesting a wider definition which has been relied on in several studies.

by political participation we refer to those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take...we are interested in participation, that involves attempts (successful or otherwise) to influence the government (Verba et al., 1978, p. 1).

According to their study, not only voting, but also campaign activity, communal activity and particularized contacts are part of political participation. Although this definition is important and relied on in many studies, it is also found to be too narrow to explain political participation as being restricted with the activities that only target incumbent political authorities (Teorell et al., 2007, p. 336)

The study of political participation continues to broaden its scope and includes activities both political and non-political activities that aim to influence politics. In that sense, several different activities, such as involvement in political parties, attempts to influence society, signing petition, using the internet (Teorell et al., 2007), working for a political candidate or cause, writing letters to officials, taking part in community activity and protesting (Verba, 2001) are also suggested as ways of political participation. Consequently, studying political participation has turned into the studying of everything, as Van Deth (2001) rightly emphasises.

This paper does not seek to study everything but on the other hand, a narrow definition is not suitable for a research project in Turkey because voting is compulsory. In this study, we wish to understand the Roma group’s endeavours to take part in an active political life in order to influence politics and political outcomes. Therefore in this study political participation is taken as the way the UN takes:

political participation derives from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government (UN, 2005)

Just like Parry (1992) indicates, a definition of solely being interested in politics or talking about it is not sufficient from the perspective of this study. In other words, we regard participation as being ‘a form of action’ (Parry et al., 1992, p. 16).

While the topic of political participation has attracted considerable attention in political science, particular studies were also devoted to investigating minorities and immigrants’ political participation in countries (Bird et al., 2011; Leal, 2002; Martiniello, 2005; Mollenkopf et al., 2001; Uhlner et al., 1989). In addition to these studies, there are increasing efforts to examine the political activities of Gypsy groups (Barany, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Kovats, 2000; McGarry, 2010). Much of the literature that focuses on political aspects of Roma lives examines Central and Eastern Europe. Although each country has its own democracy experience, political system and dynamics, the findings of these studies might provide pointers for such an analysis of Turkey.

Barany (2001) examines the political participation of Roma groups. In his study, he indicates the role of non-Roma and Roma advocacy organizations for political organization. He demonstrates both the pros and cons of having active advocacy organisations regarding Roma political mobilization. In this sense, this research explains how these organizations also create new divisions within domestic Roma movements. McGarry’s work (2010) is another guiding piece for this research. In his notable study he examines the question ‘how do Roma organize themselves in public life’ (2010, p. 3). By indicating Roma communities’ peculiarities, McGarry shows the demands of Roma community and their organizing structure of representation to achieve their demands. He indicates that the importance of political participation in ensuring the transmission of socio-economic interests to the policy makers.

Both of these studies indicate the importance of political participation for the Roma community as well as Roma NGOs when political participation is investigated. In light of these studies, we examine voluntary activities of Roma communities in Edirne in influencing political life; therefore, NGO representation will be a crucial part of the study.

When it comes to Turkey, the literature on the Roma community in Turkey has been weak with a few seminal exceptions. Kolukırık and Toktaş’s study (2007) is one of those who examine the political participation of the Roma population in Turkey. This research is a product of a two-year fieldwork that was conducted in İzmir. Although this study provides important insights about the organisation of Roma communities in İzmir as well as the attitudes of these communities towards EU membership of Turkey, it does not examine active political participation and obstacles that the Roma face. Following on from the literature examining Roma political participation, another interesting study

details the politicization of Gypsy communities during the integration period. Just like, Barany's study, Akgül (2010) emphasise the importance of organizational experiences of Gypsies, and thus she analyses how Gypsy organisations have appeared and been evaluated in Turkey.

While these studies have made significant contributions to the study of Roma communities in Turkey, there is a need to extend their scope today because of the considerable political participation of Roma groups that has started to appear in political discourses (see e.g.gazetevatan, 2011; Milliyet, 2015a). However, in the larger scheme of things, there is only one Roma MP in the Assembly. At this point, it is necessary to investigate the reasons behind the limited political participation and representation of Roma groups in Edirne.

Combining political participation literature and studies regarding Roma communities, we shall investigate the political participation of the Roma community in Edirne by investigating the obstacles before them if they were to be politically active?

2. Methodology and Case Selection

The data presented in this paper were gathered through the author's face-to face interviews with 10 Roma politically active persons. These interviewees were selected to represent different economic and social background but the common feature of them was they all aim to influence decisions taken by politicians or bureaucrats. In other words, this is purposive sampling, also called judgment sampling, which is defined as ' the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses' (Tongco, 2007, p. 147); activists, candidate to nomination of parliamentary elections candidate for parliamentary election, representatives of NGOs order to achieve the purpose of investigating political participation, which indicates a certain degree of knowledge. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Roma neighbourhoods or NGOs' own houses.

As 'semi structured interview[ing] allows more opportunity for probing and gives the respondent considerable freedom to expand on a given question'(Huitt & Peabody, 1969, p. 29), this type of interview was conducted during the data collection process. However, it is important to emphasize that interviewees in this study seemed not to like formal structures. Rather, they preferred free-flowing conversations. Therefore, a balance between a semi-structured interview and a casual conversation was adopted in order to obtain workable data. We aim to describe individual experiences.

The city of Edirne was selected as a case to examine in this study because this city is one of the oldest cities in Turkey with a high number of Roma population⁴. What is more, there are very active Roma NGOs, which want to take part in political decision-making processes. However, when we take a look

⁴ Although it is not possible to have an exact number of Roma population in Edirne, Governor of Edirne in 2015 stated that there are almost 65.000 Roma people living at the centre and in the provinces. (Milliyet, 2015b)

at the current picture, the highest position taken by a Roma person is being a part of local government. At this point, it is important to scrutinise Edirne case. What are the main obstacles faced by the Roma community in Edirne when they would like to be politically active?

3. Background of Roma in Turkey

Although they are not readily visible to the authorities, Roma people in today's territory of Turkey have a long history. When we look at the history of this group, it is commonly thought that they migrated to different parts of the world from India (Arayici, 2008; Marushiakova & Popov, 2001; Ringold et al., 2005). While India is thought to be the mother land for the Gypsy communities, the Balkans also have particular importance in their history as this place is called the 'second home of the Gypsies' (Marushiakova & Popov, 2001, p. 7). It is thought that Gypsies left India in the 5th century and spread the all over the world in the 9th and 10th centuries. After leaving India, they came to Iran and then continued to migrate to different countries. While some groups migrated to Afghanistan, some took the way to Anatolia (Arayici, 2008, p. 528). Records say that the first group of Gypsy communities – the so-called Atsinganoi – came to İstanbul during the reign of the Emperor Constantine the IX Monomachus in 1054 CE. This group of Gypsies had no permanent job but it was thought that they were clairvoyant and they had magic skills (Marsh, 2008, p. 5; Marushiakova & Popov, 2001, p. 13)

The Ottoman Empire period was important for the history of Gypsies. The Empire had an administration system in which status and obligations of citizens towards the state were determined by religion (Marushiakova & Popov, 2001). In this administrative system, religious groups could enjoy a certain degree of communal autonomy in the fields of religious affairs, education, family law and some legal cases, the basis of the 'millet system' (Kursar, 2013, p. 97). However, the position of Gypsies in the Empire is quite unique, as they did not fully belong to one religious community. Ginio states that Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire were 'pushed into a twilight zone between the two [Muslim community and non-Muslim community] , and subsequently form[ed] a group of their own' (2004, p. 119). Tax system records in the Ottoman Empire are an important source to show this 'twilight zone position' of Gypsies in the Empire. All Gypsies in the Empire paid a poll-tax (*cizye*), which was normally paid by non-Muslim communities (Marushiakova & Popov, 2001, p. 27). Muslim Roma could not enjoy full rights and privileges which other groups under this category could (Kolukirik & Toktaş, 2007, p. 762). According to Kenrick, the situation of Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire was slightly lower than Muslims as 'they paid higher taxes and they were exempt from military service' (2007, p. 281)

When we come to the 15th century, Roma groups around Rumeli and İstanbul were organised as Çingene (Gypsy) *Sanjak*. Kırkkilise (kırıkkale) was the centre of this Sanjak, and the Empire also assigned a *sanjacak beyi* (*manager of the sanjak*) for this administration. Although the exact date for the formation of

Çingene Sanjack is not known, Çingene Sanjak was used for the first time in Kanunname'de (903 / 1497) (Dingeç, 2009, p. 35). This sanjack was organised in Rumeli since the Ottoman Empire aimed to rely on Musellem Gypsies while conquering the Balkans (Şanlıer, 2013, p. 15). What is interesting here is the leader of *Çingene Sanjack* was not appointed among the Gypsy group themselves. This is a significant point as showing that ruling the gypsy communities and collecting taxes from them was a task of non-Gypsies (Dingeç, 2009, p. 36). In addition to this, the Ottoman Empire issued some regulations to rule Gypsy communities. Among them, Kanunnamei Kibtiyan-i vilayet-i Rumeli was issued by Sultan Suleiman I Magnificent in 1530. In accordance with this legislation, Gypsies had the right to enjoy their own legal status (Lowry, 1981, p. 51)⁵. 1874 was an important year for the history of Gypsies living in the Empire as after this year Muslim Gypsies become equal to other Muslims in the Ottoman Empire (Kenrick, 2007; Paspati, 1888). They were perceived to be 'a part of the mosaic of Ottoman society' (Topuz, 2011). All in all, it can be said that the situation of Gypsy groups in the Ottoman Empire was relatively relaxed, and they had a better situation compared to those living in Europe (Oprisan, 2006; Tağ, 2015).

When we come to the Republic of Turkey, migration flows from the Balkans to the new state influenced the Roma composition in the country. Muslim Roma migrated to Turkey from Greece while Christian Roma emigrated to Greece as a result of population exchanges between two countries (Matras, 2014, p. 584). This acceptance of Gypsy communities into the new state was important because the immigrations of Gypsies would be discouraged later by legislation. The 1934 Law on Settlement (Law on Settlement No.2510, 21.06.1934) shows this reluctance⁶.

When we come to specifically Gypsies in Edirne, it is possible to see the historical importance of this city for Roma communities living in Turkey. The concentration of the Roma population in Thrace started in the Sultan Bayezıt era, when he sent Gypsy communities from Anatolia to both Thrace and Serbia (Kenrick, 2007, p. 281). Later on, Edirne became part of Gypsy Sanjack.

This city has always been an ethnically diverse city. According to Yıldırım (2011, p. 91) there were 144 neighbourhoods in Edirne in 1650, 10 neighbourhoods were known as Gypsy, Greek, Jew and Armenian districts (as cited in Tağ, 2015, p. 32). The immigration of Gypsies to Thrace started in the Ottoman Empire but a substantial number of Gypsies migrated to this region after World War I. Although, many Gypsies spread to Anatolia in the following years, Edirne still remained as a country with a high concentration of Gypsy/Roma (Topuz, 2011, p. 98).

⁵ Rumeli Etrakinün Koyun Adeti Fatih Sultan Mehmet era, Kıptiler Nizannamesi

⁶ see Article 4 , those who are not attached to Turkish culture; anarchists, spies, itinerant Gypsies and persons deported shall not be accepted as immigrants into Turkey.

Today, there are 24 neighbourhoods in the centre of Edirne (TÜİK, 2016). The Roma population lives in almost all of them. Among these 24 neighbourhoods, the Roma are concentrated in 11 (Edirne Foundations Federations, 2016). Most of these districts are right in the heart of the city centre. As this numbers indicate as well, most Roma groups in Edirne are settled. Edirne Gypsies follow their tradition, celebrate their festivals and preserve their identities (Topuz, 2011, p. 98). What is more, they have several NGOs to promote their social, economic and political interests.

4. Analysis of Findings:

After clarifying the research question and theoretical disposition of this study, the next parts will address the analysis of interview data. Based on this data, it is possible to group obstacles facing political participation by Roma groups in Edirne into two groups: firstly, discrimination, which they face when they wish to be politically active; and secondly, divisions within the community itself weaken their power in their dealings with the authorities. In the following parts, these two key themes will be scrutinized analytically to uncover the matters of limited political participation and what problems arise.

5. External Problem: Discrimination

Facing discriminatory attitudes is part of the daily lives of Roma in many countries. When it comes to Edirne, in which Roma have lived for several years, they are not exempt from it. All the interviews underlined their own experience of discrimination.

‘I think that Roma groups’ problems arise from the non-Roma community. We are talking about people who do not want to live in the same apartment block as a Roma’. (interview 2)

‘Two important events deeply affected my life when I was just a teenager. First, I wanted to go to military school. I passed the written exam but I was not allowed to enter. Second, I wanted to marry a girl. She refused me. Both had the same reason. I was a Roma’. (interview 4)

First of all you cannot prove that you actually exist. You are Roma, they let you rise until a certain point and then they say Stop! You cannot go further ...It does not matter if you are a university graduate or if you are wealthy or if you have a job. You sit on the same table with a non-Roma – *gadjo* – eat together and have chat, and after you leave the table they would say, ‘Who is this Gyngen, just ignore him’. These attitudes create big problems especially in primary relations.’ (interview 10)

Just as in their social life, Roma people face discriminatory manners when they wish get actively involved in politics. They bitterly state that they are neglected and underrated when they want to take part at the level of decision-making.

I think discrimination persists in political life as well. I did not see any Roma at a decision making level in parties such as the AK Parti, CHP or MHP in any city.⁷ (interview 2)

To achieve a senior position in political life is not just difficult, it is impossible...I myself experienced discrimination when I wanted to get actively involved in politics as a Roma person. I was a candidate nominee. There is always prejudice in mind. The saying 'It is harder to crack prejudice than an atom' is correct. No matter how much you are conscious about your community, know the subject comprehensively, have problem solving abilities regarding the issues, have a responsibility to the community you live in and are full of enthusiasm to serve this community, they [non-Roma in the political arena] do not care. They only care about how much you can attract support from your own community and contribute to their political goals. (Interview 1)

While 'discrimination' facing Roma groups' political participation has been underlined in the interviews, it is important to emphasise that there is an observable distrust among some interviewees towards those who have the opportunity to influence politics. In other words, these interviewees stated two-sided discrimination. On the one side, they indicate how difficult it is to rise within the political realm if you are a Roma. On the other, they are against to so called 'token efforts' in order to show as if Roma groups are represented.

In Turkey there is only one Roma representative. The meaning of this is like there is a group that will go soon extinct. You say to one person among the group that 'you can live if I give permission to you. But for this, you should behave, obey my rules and do what I want'.....I myself completely object to this. It is just a token effort. It does not represent the grassroot members. (interview 1)

There are active members in the political parties but in reality Roma are faced with hidden barriers. For instance, they do not ask your opinion when they set up the party administration. I became a member of the administration board because they were 'Roma aware' during that time. It was necessary to fulfil the criteria during this process; in other words showing that they give positions to someone from the Roma community. Otherwise, I would not have taken that role. (interview 2)

When we look at the background of discrimination towards Roma communities in Turkey, it is possible to see that legislation also paved the way for this. In this regard, the 1934 Settlement Law is constantly mentioned during the interviews and interviewees severely criticise this law. What is more, in Roma workshops which NGOs have organized, it has been noted that Article 4 of this law [1934 Settlement Law] is famous for being an indicator of suspicion, hate and hostility towards Roma (Roma Workshop Report, 2010, p. 11).

Although this law is particularly cited when the topic is discrimination, there were other discriminatory pieces of legislations.⁸ Topuz says that these discriminatory expressions in the legislation make Gypsies think that they are

⁷ AK Parti: The Justice and Development Party, CHP: The Republican People's Party, MHP: the Nationalist Action Party

⁸ for detail about discriminatory clauses in the legislations see Topuz, 2011.

not equal citizens compared to other parts of the society (Topuz, 2011, p. 102). Although the discriminatory clauses in the 1934 Settlement Law were removed thanks to the new Settlement Law in 2006, one interviewee (interview 8) stated that it would not change anything unless people were prepared to change their own minds.

All in all, it is possible to see that discrimination towards Roma groups, which was underpinned by legislation for several years, still persist in their daily as well political lives. When they want to influence the political agenda and take an active part in political life, they first have to combat prejudice and discriminatory attitudes. However, this is only part of the story. All the interviewees that we met also underlined internal problems, sourced from within Roma groups as being important drawbacks to their political participation and representation.

6. Internal Problem: Dividedness

When we examine Roma groups' political participation, it is clearly noticed that NGOs have a significant importance. In fact, these organisations are an important way of transmitting political demands to the decision makers. In that sense it is possible to argue Roma NGOs are not merely civil society organisation to promote human rights of Roma communities in Edirne. Respondents underlined that being a leader of an effective NGO is the first step to political participation and representation.

It is impossible for a Roma person to be involved in politics if he/she is not carrying out activities in one of the associations..... On the other hand, representatives of the political parties, they only take the ideas of the head of these associations into consideration. (interview 10)

Although some interviewees bitterly criticise the politicization of NGOs, this argument of interviewees is supported when we look at the background of Özcan Purçu, the first Roma MP in the history of the Turkish republic. He was founder of one of the Roma NGOs, İzmir Roman Kültürü Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneđi, in Turkey. What is more, during his period of nomination Roma representatives from several Roma NGOs supported him. In fact, when the CHP decided to nominate one Roma person as a candidate as a Member of Parliament, Purçu was the name the Roma groups agreed on.

We were the RomFo (Roman Rights Platform).It is the platform on which all heads of Roma NGOs in Turkey come together. There were NGO directors from almost 20-25 cities. And we decided that Özcan Purçu can represent us. Do not think that all these directors indicating Purçu's name as a candidate were from CHP. There were also those who are close to the AKP and the MHP. (interview 5)

In other words, being a part of a Roma NGO is perceived as a way to be close to the political cadre as well as a springboard toward the political world. However, the activities of NGOs also received severe criticism in terms of forgetting the real problems of the Roma communities when dealing with politics. On this

point, critics maintain that Roma NGOs in Edirne do not pursue the actual interests of the Roma community.

Today Roma NGOs continue their existence just for doing politics. Therefore they do not produce political ideas; they just support what the existing outcomes are. (interview 3)

There are NGOs which pursue politics. I never do this. NGO representative should not go beyond the NGO constitution. (interview 7)

While the NGOs take an important role in both the social and political lives of Roma groups in Edirne, certain divisions within the Roma groups are also noticeable. On this point, all interviewees bitterly underlined the ‘divisiveness of Roma communities’ and it results in not having a group leader. This divisiveness only contributes to the aims of non-Roma groups who do not want to see Roma people in political life.

The meaning of the divisiveness among the NGOs is multidimensional. Beside the number of NGOs which focus on similar topics, such as education and economic development, how they approach these issues reflect clear divisions among Romas. Big and important divisions start from how they should define themselves. Definition of the group is an important issue because it determines the relation to the state.

Roma communities describe their own identity by their own studies and projects. On the one hand, these studies keep saying that ‘We are Turkish’ and repeat the sentence, ‘How happy is the one who says I am a Turk!’ On the other hand, they ask for special units for Roma culture and language, separate classes for Roma children and respect for the Roma identity. These two practices contradict each other. (interview 1)

Every Roma has a flag and Atatürk picture in their home. We never define ourselves as a ‘minority’. First and foremost, we are Turks. (interview 6)

We are Gypsies. I feel sad when Gypsies define themselves Turkish before Gypsy. (interview 9)

Starting from the definition, identification of the primary problems of Romas is also different. Lack of education, poor and unhealthy settlements, and economic disadvantages were mentioned as primary problems of the community. While previous studies have emphasised the Gypsy/Roma diaspora’s fragmented characteristics, the Edirne example shows that this fragmentation might be valid. In other words, the Gypsy population cannot be defined in just religious, cultural and historical linguistic terms (Revenga et.al. 2002, Ringold et.al.2005, McGarry 2008), they also have different perceptions and problem articulation.

Conclusion

Contrary to many countries that have a high Roma population (e.g. Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary), there is not a Roma-based political party in Turkey. In fact, it is unrealistic to expect a single party formation for Roma as it is not possible to take a seat in the parliament with a 10 percent election threshold. In this regard, the only hope for the Roma population is for a Roma to be a candidate

for another existing party. However, the history of the Turkish Republic has witnessed only one MP with a Roma heritage. In this regard, the election of the first ever Roma representative to the GTNA was a moment of genuine historical significance, not only for the Roma groups, but also for Turkey as a whole.

While the election of the first ever Roma representative was an important step for Turkey, it is quite surprising that the city of Edirne with a high population of Roma could not achieve this in its history. Focusing on the case of Edirne, we try to shed light on the political participation of Roma people in that city; specifically we try to understand the hidden barriers to political ambitions. Recalling the political participation of the UN, and focusing on actions such as assembling, registering as a candidate, campaigning and holding office at different levels of government, data were collected from those who have pursued the foregoing activities in Edirne. Relying on interview data with these Roma people, both the discrimination they face and in-group divisions were explored as factors diminishing the political power of Roma communities and their ability to transmit interests to the decision-making levels. In this regard, the major findings are compatible with the literature in the sense that the NGOs are helpful tools to influence policy-making; however, they also have a role in creating divisions within the domestic Roma movement (see Barany, 2001). All in all, the study explores the only possible and acceptable way of active political participation by Roma groups in Edirne, being a leader of a non-governmental organisation. There are still existing hindrances to the Romas' political ambitions.

This article provides a new understanding with respect to political participation by Roma groups. However, the findings are limited by the number of interviews, by the selection of cases and by specific policy issues. Consequently, further studies are needed to increase the number of cases and reveal the different ways of participation.

List of Interviews:

1. Representative from the Association for Research Development & Solidarity on Roma Culture (Edirne Roman Kùltürünü Tanıtma, Arařtırma, Geliřtirme ve Yardımlařma Derneđi, Edrom)
2. Representative from the Balkan Roman Association (Balkan Roman Derneđi, BAROM)
3. Representative from Edirne Roma Educational Volunteers Associaton (Edirne Roman Eđitim Gönüllüleri Derneđi)
4. Representative from Edirne Roma Educational Volunteers Associaton. (Edirne Roman Eđitim Gönüllüleri Derneđi)
5. Representative from AZ 81 Sport Club (AZ 81 Spor Klübü)
6. Representative from Trakya Roman Engelliler Yardımlařma ve Dayanıřma Derneđi (Trakya Disabled Roma Solidarity and Cooperation Association)

7. Representative from the Edirne Federation of Associations (Edirne Dernekler Federasyonu)
8. Representative from the Trakya Romanları Eđitim Geliřtirme ve Kltr Arařtırma Derneđi (Trakya Roma Education Development and Culture Research Association)
9. A parliamentary candidate without any NGO affiliation
10. Representative from the Roma Youth Association (Roman Genlik Derneđi)

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