

## **STUDYING THE NUMBER OF THE GYPSY MINORITY IN HUNGARY AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE NORTH GREAT PLAIN REGION**

**István Zoltán PÁSZTOR**

University of Debrecen, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development Planning,  
e-mail: susterfia83@citromail.hu

**János PÉNZES**

University of Debrecen, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development Planning,  
e-mail: penzes.janos@science.unideb.hu

**Abstract:** In the current study, the Hungarian system of the minorities' advocacy is in focus with special regard to the Gypsy minority local governments. The representation of the Roma population has become very wide-spread from the mid 1990's by the Gypsy minority local governments, however this temporal change fits to general trends of other minority local governments. Important territorial characteristics were discovered by the example of the North Great Plain Region where significant part of the Hungarian gypsies are concentrating.

**Key words:** minority, advocacy, Gypsy minority local governments, Hungary

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Statistic calculation of the Roma population in Hungary and in neighbouring states (Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine) includes numerous uncertainties.

There are significant differences in the number and ratio of the Roma population. Adding the numbers together 1,278,898 people declared themselves as Roma in total in the course of censuses. Regarding the Roma population in the region 41.8% lived in Romania, 29.6% in Slovakia and 14.8% in Hungary in 2001/2002.

Various sociological estimations and surveys differ significantly from the data of censuses. According to such estimations more than 4 million (4 134 600 people) Roma people live in gypsyeight countries. More than half of them (52.3%) lives in Romania, while Hungary is in second place with 15.9% and Slovakia is overtaken by Serbia as well according to the estimations.

The difference between the total values of the censuses and that of the estimations is around 3.2-fold.

Problems associated with Roma people occur with different weights in the given countries. It is clear, however, that handling the situation of the Roma population has become a priority in the countries with a significant ratio of Roma inhabitants (Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Hungary).

The European Union attempts to help the integration of Roma people via a united Roma strategy – involving the national Roma integration strategies of the member states into a joint framework. In our opinion a key role could be associated with the Gypsy minority local governments in Hungary.

Therefore besides studying the change in the number of the Roma population in Hungary the focus of the present paper was placed onto the system of the Roma minority local governments. Changes in the number and spatial characteristics of Gypsy minority local governments are presented in detail on the example of the North Great Plain Region.

### **CHANGES IN THE NUMBER AND RATIO OF ROMA PEOPLE IN HUNGARY**

Ratio of the Roma population in Hungary increased from 1.1% at the time of the Gypsy census in 1893 to 5.6% at the time of the sociological survey in 2003 (Figure 1). Based on the census covering the entire population the number of Roma people in Hungary increased sevenfold between 1941 and 2001. Although estimations are from different times the increase of the number of Roma people can be characterised as exponential the primary source of which is high natural increase (Hablicsek, 2007).

Rapid growth is also the result of international migration excess and the increasing ratio of identity undertaking (effects of the latter are visible primarily in censuses) apart from high reproduction rate.

The demographic prediction of László Hablicsek calculates with 2 million people of Roma ethnicity by 2050, giving the quarter of the rapidly decreasing total population of Hungary based on the available data and numerous (current and probable) demographic characteristics (Hablicsek, 2000).

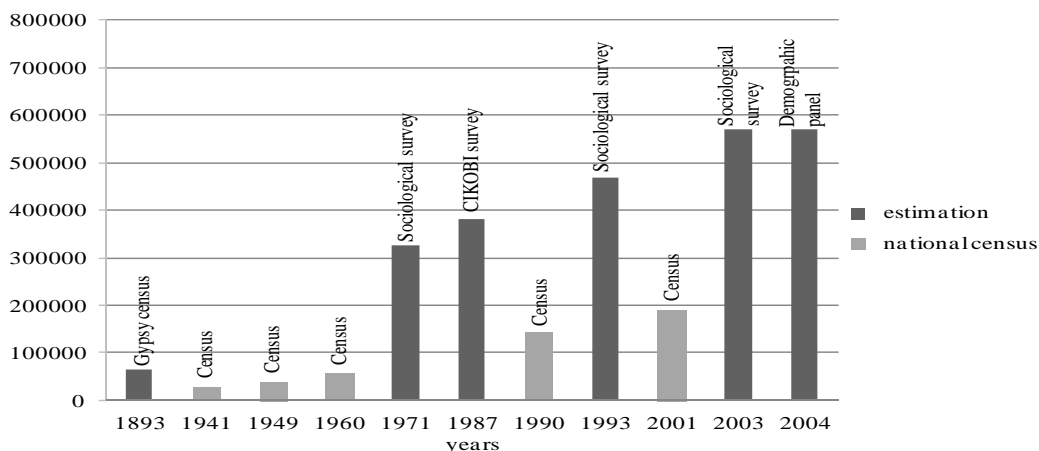
On the other hand, general demographic trends can be significantly different in particular Roma communities that make the problem even more complex. Productivity depends on education, employment and traditions that can be influenced by social relations as well. Certain Hungarian case-studies revealed that social segregation (isolation from other lifestyle models) may have stronger effects than residential segregation (Durst, 2007). Besides, demographic specifics are different in the case of different Gypsy ethnic groups as well (Janky, 2007) (figure 1).

Due to the characteristic natural productivity the age structure of the Roma population is markedly different from that of the Hungarian population. In 2003 almost 37% of Roma people were younger than 15 years old while the same age group covered only 16% of the entire population. Ratio of the age group above 60 years old was only 4% among the Gypsy population while the same group gave 21% of the entire population (Kemény, 2004). This difference cannot be explained by the high natural productivity of Roma people only but reflects the expected age significantly lower than in the case of the non Roma population.

Spatial distribution of Roma people in Hungary (similarly to the rest of the states in the region) is very uneven. Their ratio is higher in northeastern and southwestern Hungary.

Roma population is concentrated in the more underdeveloped regions. Primary places of settlement of Gypsy people are distant from the economic

centres and are areas characterised by small villages and hit by structural crisis (Kocsis–Kovács, 1991). This fact further increases the difficulties of their integration.



**Figure 1.** Estimated number of Roma population in Hungary between 1893 and 2004 (people)  
(Source: Edited by the authors, data from censuses and from other sources<sup>1</sup>)

### MINORITY (ETHNIC) LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN HUNGARY

In the modern international law the principle of minority local governments occurred in the 1990s (Majtényi, 2003). However, these documents (UN General Assembly decisions, Copenhagen Document of the OSCE) due to their character involved only recommendations in relation to minorities (Kállai, 2005). The UN framework convention on the Rights of National Minorities protects minority rights directly while the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages does the same indirectly (Kardos, 2007).

The Parliament General Assembly of the European Council accepted the famous Recommendation No. 1201 in its 44th meeting on 1st February 1993 and it appeared also in Hungarian legislation with the definition of national minority.

In Hungary the Act LXXVII of 1993 on the rights of national and ethnic minorities declared the right of forming local governments for national minorities.

Minority local governments can be formed by direct election by the voters. According to the act of 1993 the number of representatives in the minority local government board in a settlement is 5 people while it is 5 and 9 people at the county and capital levels respectively (Kemenczky–Farkas 1998).

Changes in the law took place first on 13th June 2005 when act CXIV on minority local government representative elections and on modifying certain acts related to national and ethnic minorities was accepted after a long debate. This was aimed primarily to define the authority of minority local governments and to enable them to establish their institutional network. This act ordered already on the three levels of minority local governments: settlement, capital and county (regional and national minority local governments).

Another significant change was brought by act LXII of 2010 on modifying the acts required by the reduction of the number of minority local government representatives. According to the modification the number of representatives is 4

<sup>1</sup> By the works of Cserti Csapó (2010), Hablicsek (2007), Kocsis-Kovács (1999)

people per settlement and 7 people in the county and capital minority local governments. National minority local governments are elected by the electors, who are the members of the settlement minority local governments in charge on the day of the election.

In order to hold minority elections at a settlement at least 30 people have to be registered in the election register in the given settlement.

The Hungarian Parliament accepted the act determining the next election on 19th December 2011. The new cardinal act replaced the act of 1993 on the rights of national and ethnic minorities modified in several times and the new act is in harmony with the new Constitution of Hungary. It defines as new definitions the ethnic cultural autonomy and the ethnic organisation related to the general ethnic elections missing from the law before (Mayer, 2011).

Changes occur in the title of the act as well as the term minorities are replaced by nationals (although in the case of Roma people nationality – due to the lack of an individual home country – is not correct. The application of the term ethnic would be correct).

In the next local government elections (2014) the number of voters in the ethnic register will determine the number of representatives. In case the number of voters in the ethnic register does not reach a hundred people the number of the representatives will be three. If the number of voters is above a hundred then four representatives can be elected.

The act determined the number of regional (county) ethnic local government representatives to be seven people while the number of national ethnic local government representatives is between 15 and 47 people based on the number of voters (Belügyi Közlöny, 2010).

Ethnic local governments will operate as independent legal entities in the future making their budget planning and management transparent. With the occurrence of legal remedy guarantees their legal and financial control is solved as well (Mayer, 2011).

### **NUMBER OF GYPSY MINORITY LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN HUNGARY BETWEEN 1994 AND 2010**

Number of minority and Gypsy minority local governments increased continually in Hungary in the studied period (Figure 2).

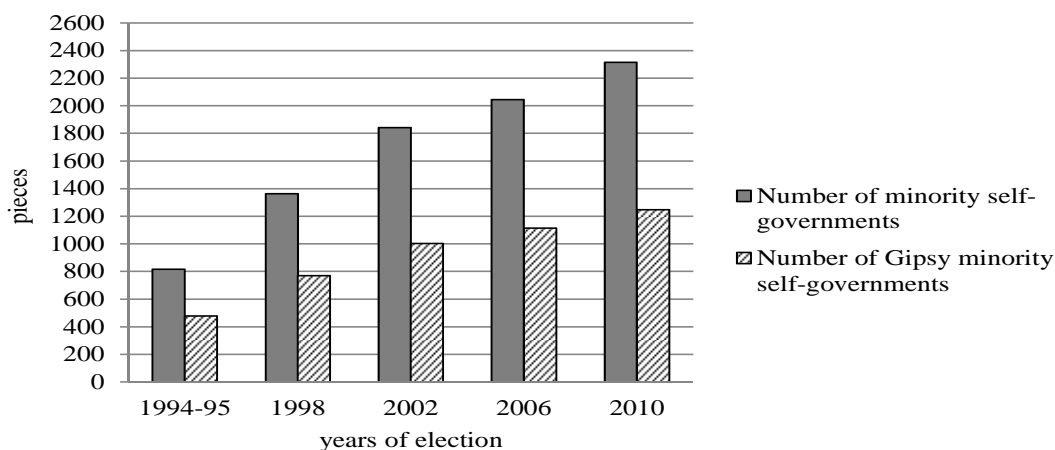
In 1994 and 1995<sup>2</sup> when the first local minority government elections were held 817 local minority governments of twelve minorities were formed in Hungary. 477 out of these were Gypsy local minority governments. Regarding the Gypsy local minority governments 415 local governments were formed in 1994 and 61 were formed as the result of the by-elections in 1995.

Interesting characteristic of the first elections was that the number of candidates was significantly higher in the county centres than in the smaller settlements, almost double compared to settlements with population less than 1000 people. This can be assessed as those living in greater towns obtained information on the possibilities offered by the minority act earlier (Kállai, 2005). Due to terminations, however, only 738 minority local governments were in operation in October 1998. One of the reasons for the closures of these local

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<sup>2</sup> If no minority local government was formed in the first election in 1994 it was possible to hold new election, so called by-election for the initiation of 5 voters declaring themselves to belong to the same minority and residing in the given settlement. The appointed date for this by-election was 19th November 1995 and it had to be initiated by 19th September 1995.

governments was the lack of appropriate public administration practice of the elected representatives (Doncsev, 2001).



**Figure 2.** Number of minority and Gypsy minority local governments in Hungary between 1994/95 and 2010 (pieces)

(Source: own construction based on data from [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu))

The following elections were held on 18th October 1998. The number of gypsy minority local governments formed at this time was 766. It was interesting that in settlements where Gypsies were the majority already they were passive politically therefore no minority local governments were formed in several cases.

Following the elections in 2002, 1841 minority local governments, 1004 Gypsy minority local governments among them were formed in Hungary (Molnár-Schafft, 2003). Associated with the 2002 elections a hot issue was that the most important factor in the results of the election was the place of the surname of the candidates in the alphabet. Another phenomena – the ethnic business – was revealed. As the list of voters was not supervised, anyone could have stated himself/herself belonging to a given minority group in the hope of making profit of it (Rátkai, 2003).

Minority local governments were formed in settlements and regions where nobody declared himself/herself of any minority identity and it is provable that these represented no minorities, their legality, however, could not have been questioned (Karácsony, 2005). These made it clear that the legal conditions of local government election have to be regulated (Eiler, 2005).

Despite low modifications the number of minority local governments was still increased. This resulted in the formation of 2045 minority local governments in 2006 out of which 1113 were related to Gypsy population.

1106 333 and 133 492 people were registered as Roma voters in 2006 and 2010 respectively. This means an increase in the number of those willing to participate in the minority local government elections by 20%. In 2010 1248 Gypsy local governments were formed in settlements.

Number of voters of Roma minority increased in Budapest and in every county as well. Greatest increase was in Fejér (36%), Csongrád (33%) and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (30%) counties. Number of Roma voters increased in the settlements where Roma local governments were formed already in 2006 and in

almost everywhere – except for 10 settlements (Magicz, 2010). Almost all of the 13 recognised nationalities increased the number of their minority local governments – except for the Slovenians and Polish – significantly in the studied period (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Total data of the local governments of recognised minorities in Hungary between 1994/1995 and 2010 (pieces)

(Data source: own construction based on [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu) and Kállai, 2011)

Minority	1994/1995	1998	2002	2006	2010
Bulgarian	4	14	30	38	41
Roma	477	771	1004	1113	1248
Greek	6	18	30	34	37
Croat	57	73	107	115	127
Polish	7	32	50	47	49
German	162	268	335	378	424
Armenian	16	25	30	31	39
Romanian	11	32	44	46	71
Ruthenian	1	9	31	52	75
Serb	19	34	43	40	48
Slovak	51	73	112	116	122
Slovenian	6	10	13	11	11
Ukrainian	0	4	12	19	23
Total	817	1363	1841	2040	2315

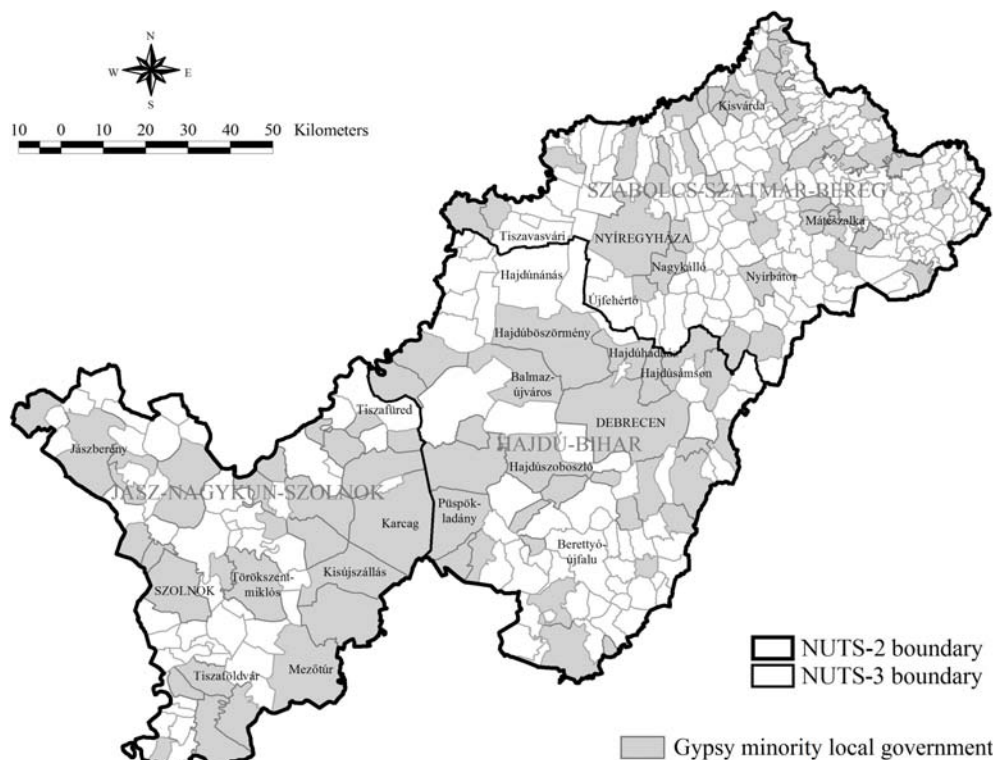
Minority communities themselves, however, feel this rate of increase in voter activity unjustified and in their opinion, a part of the formed local governments cannot be regarded as a real organization of minority self-administration.

Regarding the minority voter lists composed of at least 30 names prepared at the elections in 2010 215 of them can be questioned whether they are really composed of member of the given minority communities based on the data of the latest census.

### **GYPSY MINORITY LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE NORTH GREAT PLAIN REGION**

In Hungary the North Great Plain Region is one of the areas where the number of Roma inhabitants increases intensely. Based on our own research results (Pásztor–PéNZes–Bántó 2012) around 200 thousand Roma people live in the region giving 13.1% of the total population in 2010. Besides the number of inhabitants the fact that Gypsy minority local governments were formed in 109 and 232 settlements in 1994/95 and at the time of the last elections respectively also justifies the study of the issue in more detail (Figure 3).

Regarding the by-elections in 1995 as well the number of the newly formed Gypsy minority local governments was varying in different counties (29 in Hajdú-Bihar county while 30 in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok county and 50 in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county). Spatial distribution of the local governments was not in accordance with the spatial distribution of the Gypsies. In smaller settlements where the ratio of Gypsies was higher local governments occurred only after later elections. This is proved by the fact that there were hardly any Gypsy minority local governments in the eastern part of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county characterised by tiny villages.



**Figure 3.** Spatial distribution of the Gypsy minority local governments in the North Great Plain Region formed in 1994/95

(Source: Own construction based on the data of [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu))

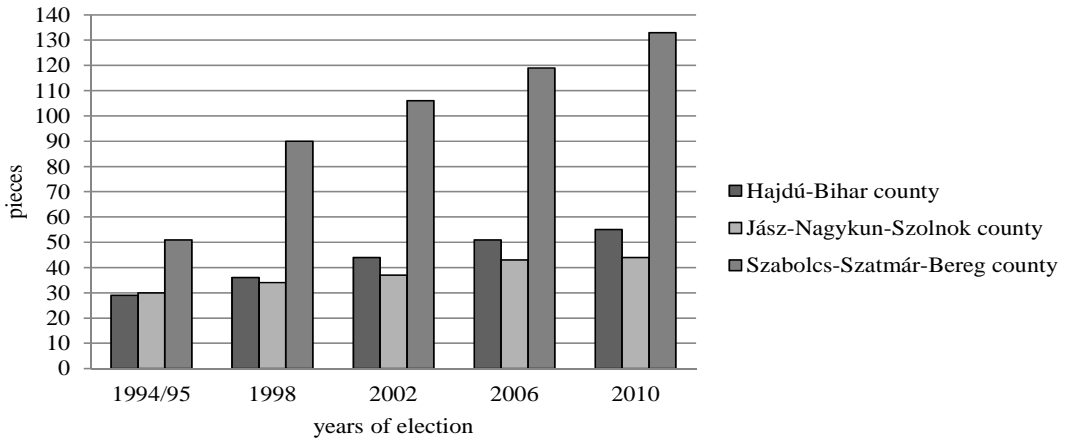
The first cycle proved to be very problematic for the Gypsy minority local governments formed in the region. The reason for this was the random appointment of the representatives for the particular posts thus they were unable to meet the requirements. Due to the low level of education of the representatives and to their significant cultural shortcomings these local governments were not regarded to be partners. This made it clear that the local governments have to be led by Roma people who have professional knowledge apart from goodwill (Kállai, 1998). Similarly to the national trend, the number of Gypsy minority local governments increased continuously in all three counties following the first elections (Figure 4).

In 2010 the fifth cycle of minority local government operation started. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2010 only those Hungarian citizens were able to take part in the minority elections who registered themselves in one of the minority voters list by 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

In 232 out of the 389 settlements of the North Great Plain Region Gypsy minority local governments were formed in 2010 (Figure 5). Their number was doubled compared to 1994/95. The most significant change was the formation of local governments in settlements along the border in the region where the highest ratio of Roma population live.

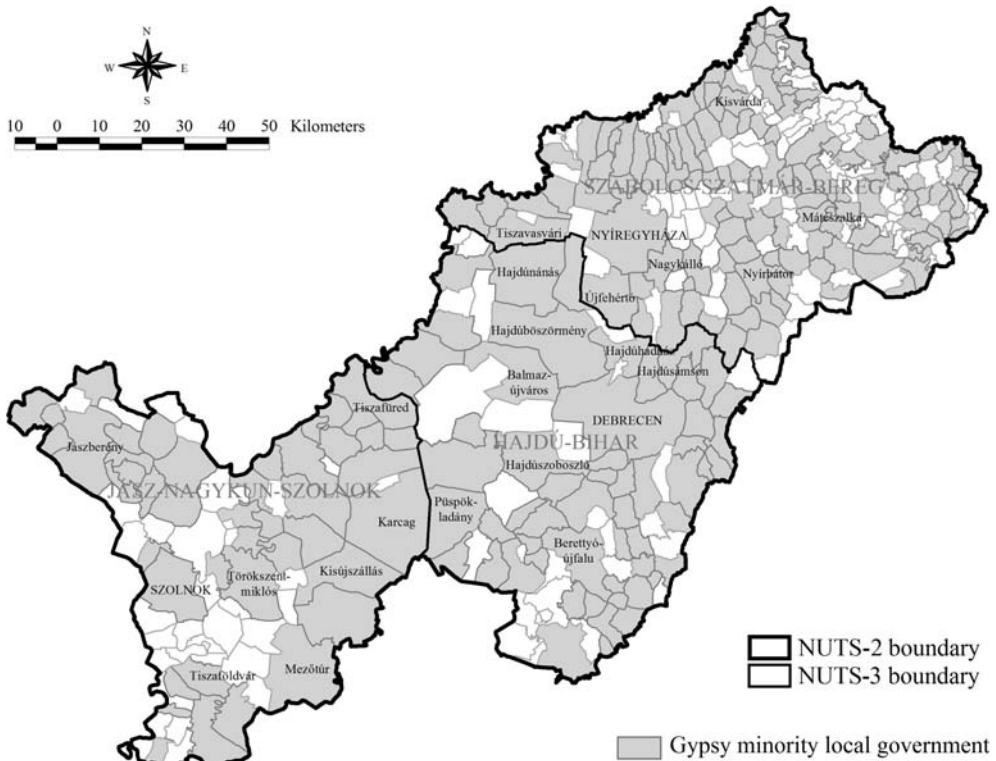
Based on the demographic predictions moderate increase of the number of Gypsy minority local governments can be expected. Increase is expected to appear primarily in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county where Gypsy minority local

governments could be formed in 25-30 settlements in the future. In the other two counties of the region Gypsy minority local governments have already been formed in accordance with the ethnic ratios.



**Figure 4.** Number of Gypsy minority local governments in the counties of the North Great Plain Region until 2010

(Source: Own construction based on the data of [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu))



**Figure 5.** Spatial distribution of Gypsy minority local governments in the North Great Plain Region in 2010

(Source: Own construction based on the data of [www.valasztas.hu](http://www.valasztas.hu))



As mid-term election is not possible in the case of minority local governments it happened several times that local governments were closed due to various types of conflicts and local Roma people remained without representation.

### SUMMARY

In our study the tendencies of the number of the Roma population in Hungary were given based on scientific literature and databases. The changes in minority legislation in Hungary and the number of Gypsy minority local governments associated with them were also discussed. Analysing the elections in 1994/95 and in 2010 the changes in the spatial distribution of Gypsy minority local governments in the North Great Plain Region were also studied.

The analysis declared that the number and ratio of Roma people increased significantly in recent decades. Demographic processes – higher natural increase characteristic for the Roma population and migration of the non Roma population away from certain settlements – suggest further increase in the ratio of the Roma population in certain settlements.

The first minority act accepted in 1993 has been modified at several times, however, the increasing trend in the number of Gypsy minority local government is constant. Based on the example of the North Great Plain Region it was proved that the increase of the number of Gypsy minority local governments was basically in accordance with the ethnic ratios and even the increasing tendency is expected to continue in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county.

Gypsy minority local governments – due to, among others, their spatial extent – may have key role in the social integration of the Roma population. In order to achieve success, however, wide social co-operation with the active participation of minority local governments is essential together with government measures more effective and integrated than before for improving the living conditions, education and employment of Roma people without which the integration of them and the successful handling of social problems are hard to imagine.

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