Empowering Roma through participation: After the EU elections, what’s next for Roma?

Conference report

28 June 2019, Brussels
The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) is a European anti-discrimination organisation that promotes political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing information to the EU institutions, civil society and governments. Through its wide network, it aims to combat racist discrimination against Roma through awareness raising, lobbying and policy development.


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Introduction

On 28 June 2019, the European Roma Information Office, in collaboration with the European Economic Social Committee organised a conference titled “Empowering Roma through participation: After the EU elections, what’s next for Roma?” which took place in Brussels at the EESC. Present at the conference were representatives of the European Parliament, European Commission, European Economic and Social Committee, government officials, international organisations, ERIO network members, and Roma and non-Roma civil society.

Held shortly after the European elections, the conference aimed at assessing the electoral results on Roma. With the rise of nationalist and far-right parties and the uncertainty of how the new European institutions will be composed, there is a need to anticipate the possible consequences on Roma inclusion and on the fight against anti-Gypsyism. The conference was also an opportunity to reflect on practical experiences of Roma regarding the election process and the possible obstacles they may have faced. Finally, the question of Roma representation was raised, both politically and more generally. Indeed, proper Roma representation appears to be the most effective way to ensure that Roma issues and Roma inclusion remain a priority for the next EU mandate. Accordingly, the main objectives of the conference were to explore the impact the EU election results on Roma equality, share experiences of Roma during the election periods and discuss the issue of Roma representation within the political field.
Welcoming and opening remarks

IVAN IVANOV, EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE

ERIO’s Executive Director, Ivan Ivanov, started by reminding the goal of the event that is to see to what extent Roma were involved in the last elections. Hence, panellists will discuss barriers and challenges that Roma may have faced both as voters and as candidates. As he underlined, having such a conference on that day is particularly important as we are in an environment where Roma are still largely under-represented and where we witness a rise of extreme, radical, parties trying to put Roma in the margins.

ÁKOS TOPOLÁNSZKY, EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

Ákos Topolánszky started by bringing up a very recent event involving 48 Roma families cut out from fresh water supply in Hungary. From this event, he reasserted the importance of talking about fundamental rights and about democracy. Furthermore, the event is even more timely as the current strategy for Roma inclusion is about to expire. In this context, we need to keep European values on the table as we think about the decisions to come.
Keynote speakers

SZABOLCS SCHMIDT, DG JUSTICE, CONSUMERS AND GENDER EQUALITY, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Szabolcs Schmidt started by noting that we can all be very satisfied with the electoral outcomes as we witnessed the highest voter turnout ever which shows a strong interest from the population. Moreover, the European Parliament is going to welcome a new Roma MEP from Slovakia, in addition to two remaining Roma MEPs: Lívia Járóka in the EPP group and Romeo Franz in the Greens-EFA group. This, he said, demonstrates a good cross-party coverage of the Roma issue. This cross-party coverage is important because it is needed when we are talking about Roma inclusion. We need a consensus on the fact that the work is not yet finished. Now of course, as Szabolcs Schmidt underlined, is a crucial moment to talk about Roma inclusion as we are in the time of the design of the new policies for Roma. It is now that civil society has to be active and to make their voice heard in the European Parliament.

Szabolcs Schmidt then went on to remind the audience of the work that the European Commission has been doing in evaluating the current Framework for Roma inclusion. As he underlined, the Framework contains pros and cons. One of the main examples is in the field of education. If participation of Roma in school has improved, segregation has also increased, demonstrating here a positive and a negative effect next to each other. In terms of effectiveness, it is good to note that now we have structures in place, such as Roma contact points, that may not be perfect but at least the mechanisms are there. When it comes to cohesion, Szabolcs Schmidt said that there is such cohesion at European level between all kinds of different policies regarding Roma, including the Racial Equality Directive, the European Semester, the Structural and
Investments Funds, etc. Of course, he admitted that there is room for improvement but overall, coherence is good.

According to Szabolcs Schmidt, the evaluation of the Framework leads to a number of lessons. Mainly, there needs to be a better combination of mainstreaming and targeting measures, the issue of discrimination has to be addressed as the main underlying problem and we also need to make sure that Roma are directly included whilst taking into consideration the diversity of the Roma community.

Overall, Szabolcs Schmidt believes that there is a clear added value of the EU Framework as it puts Roma inclusion high on the political agenda not only in the EU but also in member states. Without the Framework, the Roma question would not have received such attention. Thus, he reasserted that even though the situation is sometimes frustrating, we have to keep in mind that it is far more than what we would have had without the Framework. Finally, even though the new Commission is not yet in place, he said that the current one will do their utmost to prepare technically all the information so that member states can discuss and we can have a seamless continuation.

SARITA FRIMAN, FINNISH EU PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

As the representant for the Finnish Presidency of the European Council, Sarita Friman presented the main priorities of the Presidency, that is to say, among others, a strong focus on the common European values and on the rule of law. She said that now is the time to bring these European values to the table and we have to keep them in mind for every decision that is taken. In addition to the common values and the rule of law, other priorities include building a socially inclusive Europe by putting forward the concept of “economic well-being”. Such concept means that the economy should be in line with the Agenda 2030 and the sustainable development goals. This can only be achieved through measures that benefit people and this is the general level principle of the approach Finland has decided to take.

Issues that are covered in the social dimension of the economy of well-being includes a very mainstream approach to Roma inclusion. Finland is of course a strong supporter of the Framework, but the main challenge is to find a way to mainstream policies for Roma. The Finnish Presidency will put a strong emphasis on anti-discrimination, on that note a political debate on the question is to be held in October 2019. In addition, Sarita Friman underlined the importance of having an active civil society especially towards member states, towards the commissioners and towards the European Parliament.

When it comes to political participation more precisely, she reasserted that political rights are fundamental rights and as such are part of the EU common values.

Sarita Friman ended by saying that two of the main questions today are to know how to mainstream Roma inclusion policies and
also how well Roma activists can align themselves.

You can view her presentation here.

ERIO VIDEO “WE ARE THE CHANGE”

To emphasize the importance of Roma political participation, a short video realized by ERIO and entitled “We are the change” was showcased. Through the voice of young Roma, this video sends a message about the power of Roma youth to bring change and claim their rights. One way to overcome discrimination against Roma and ensure an equal society is by having Roma, in particular young Roma, involved in politics. The video is available here.

Panel 1: What does the result of the EU elections mean for Roma equality?

ÁKOS TOPOLÁNSZKY, EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

Ákos Topolánszky said that it is too early to know what the results of the last EU elections mean for Roma equality since we do not know how the European institutions will be refurnished and who the main actors will be. What we do know is how important it is to keep to the values of the existing strategies when thinking about Roma inclusion. We do know how important it is to develop the Framework and to do it in a way that is much more targeted. He also admitted that we need a breakthrough in terms of Roma policies and that the focus put on fundamental rights and the rule of law should reach the most marginalized communities.

Participation of course is extremely important, Roma have to be represented and also to actively participate in the creation of strategies that concern them. Today we need inclusive policies, Ákos Topolánszky pleaded, we need policies that provide to the most needing. To this end, we need to be honest and such honesty should not be biased by political interest.

Ákos Topolánszky concluded by saying that the pro-Roma sentiment should be the basic point, it should be structural. He also acknowledged to be very grateful for the Finnish Presidency as it appears that they understand the real meaning of the issues which brings hope for a real change.

JAMES CARVER, FORMER MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

As his last official speech as Member of the European Parliament, James Carver
said that no matter his position he will remain active in favour of Roma rights. He also stressed that the impact of the EU elections on Roma is in our hands, it is important that we engage across the political spectrum for Roma. Political consensus on that theme is paramount as it involves issues faced by all communities. Indeed, we cannot be talking about education or health care issues without necessarily talk about the Roma community. That is a great way to link Roma issues with other communities and subjects.

His main advice for civil society is to engage with politicians who know and care about these issues. He underlined that there are very good Roma politicians and very good non-Roma politicians, and we need to concentrate our energy on that, no matter the political interests. In order to bring out change, there is a necessity to engage across the political spectrum. In addition, he reminded that, just as any other communities, there is a diversity of political opinions also within the Roma which makes this trans-party work even more important.

Mischa Thompson, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission)

Mischa Thompson underlined that there have been a few Roma voices raising in the US where, for example, a resolution was introduced by the Congress to celebrate the Romani heritage. In addition, one Commissioner from the US Helsinki Commission attended the last Roma Week and in 2017 they received former Roma MEP Soraya Post. Over the past decades, the Helsinki Commission has led effort in Washington speaking out against violence against Roma. Today, the Commission works with young Roma as part of a transatlantic program. Mischa Thompson then invited some of these youngsters present at the conference to make a short intervention.

Mimoza Gavrani, a Roma woman from Kosovo\(^1\) underlined the huge issue of discrimination where she comes from. She said that even though anti-discrimination legislation exists, there is a lack in implementation. As a native American, Cante Heart said that minorities are fighting everywhere to have their voices heard. She encouraged young Roma to

\(^1\) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
Rumyan Russinov made some observations regarding Roma political participation. The first one was that we can witness a large decrease of the Roma population living in central and eastern European countries. There is no way to tell precisely how many Roma left Bulgaria but, in some areas, it appears that over 60% of Roma left. This fact is important to take into consideration because when we are designing and implementing policies, we need to know how many people may need them. Secondly, we can also observe increased illiteracy among Roma. Once again, there is no precise data but according to estimates, illiteracy would be at around 20%. In terms of education, illiteracy is not the only issue, segregation is also a huge problem.

Generally speaking, Rumyan Russinov denounced the general deterioration of the social and public environment in Bulgaria where we see that anti-Roma propaganda has become mainstream. He said that 10 years ago, anti-Roma comments would trigger reactions and criticism from mainstream political parties and media. Now it is not the case anymore. Another tendency is that mainstream parties, in many countries, are not pro-Roma anymore and they tend not to want Roma candidates on their list because they are afraid of losing votes. Hence, they also start using anti-Roma speech as the Roma are the perfect scapegoat.

Rumyan Russinov concluded that in general, people, not only Roma, are largely disappointed with politics and they do not think their vote matters. This is particularly noticeable in Bulgaria where voter turnout at the last European elections was very low.
The question was raised to know what concrete steps could be taken to practically empower Roma, especially Roma women. Steps to empower Roma have to be taken at every level of society and they have to rely heavily on grassroot initiatives and civil society. In addition to that, it was recalled that the OSCE works largely on the issue through the organisation of workshops and targeted training.

Panel 2: How Roma experience election processes

NADEZHDA MOUZYKINA, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Nadezhda Mouzykina made it clear that democracy can only truly work when all segments of society are free to participate and make their voices heard without suffering bias. The big challenge right now is that despite the large numbers of Roma in the EU, participation is very low. Having 3 Roma MEPs is good but it is not enough. The same can be said from national parliaments. The only place where we actually see some improvements is at local level.

Among the identified 7 key barriers to political participation, 6 are directly linked to the electoral process she said. The first barrier and the biggest one is the lack of political will to encourage Roma to participate, this is due mostly to prejudices and high level of anti-Gypsyism.
Then comes the electoral mechanisms and political systems. She underlined the issues linked to parallel institutions, created by governments to represent minorities but without any actual political power. She then went on to address the issue of low turnout, usually related to a general mistrust in any political institutions or, more practically, problems with registration. There is also the issue of voter intimidation, votes buying and problems related to access to polling station. Finally, one big barrier to Roma political participation stands in the lack of education. Of course, adding to that are the socio-economic challenges, if you do not have food on the table you do not care about politics, she said.

In terms of Roma as candidates, Nadezhda Mouzykina took the example of the progress and recent election of Roma MEP Peter Pollak. She stressed that his election is an example of how mainstream parties can help Roma in being elected. She admitted that generally mainstream parties have more chance to be elected than Roma specific parties. Hence, Roma candidates should not only focus on Roma issues during the campaign, they should focus on these issues once elected and also find a way to connect Roma inclusion with matters that benefit the whole society.

You can view her presentation here.

**ORHAN GALJUS, EUROPEAN ROMANI UNION**

Orhan Galjus raised the question of Roma rights in a more historical perspective, asking why the Roma, after centuries spent in Europe, still have not succeeded in being included. He said that Roma should find other ways to succeed. One way lies in finding independent funding in order for the fight for Roma rights to be freer and not expect so much from the European institutions. In addition, Roma should find a way to unite, their leaders should find a way to work together in order to speak with one voice. If we do not do that, he said, we cannot have an efficient collaboration with the European institutions. The question that we must ask ourselves now, he asserted, is how to organize ourselves in order to have influence.

Orhan Galjus ended underlining how important such conferences are because they allow Roma to get closer and talk. For that reason, they should happen far more often.

You can view his presentation here.
After hearing some positive comments on the recent election of 4 Roma candidates at the last national elections in Spain, Pedro Aguilera recalled that Spain is not wonderland for Roma people. There, as elsewhere in the EU, Roma still struggle and suffer many obstacles. When it comes to political participation, he raised the issue of low turnout. For him, the main reason is that Roma do not want to give power to people that won’t represent them. He said that there is a real issue when it comes to Roma leadership today because we have been mixing the roles of NGOs and politicians for too long.

More generally, when asked what the leadership in the Roma community is, Pedro Aguilera refuses to accept that it would be only one person. The Roma are heterogeneous, they do not share the same political opinions, and it is not a bad thing since this heterogeneity creates more opportunities.

To end, Pedro Aguilera stressed that, from social fight to political fight, Roma are in charge. He also said to be quite positive in the sense that the new generation, being native digital, will have a strong role to play in the new strategy for Roma rights.

You can view his presentation here and here.

MÉLINA CHAPUT, EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE

Mélina Chaput gave an overview of Roma participation, both as candidates and as voters, during the last EU elections. The information presented was gathered thanks to ERIO’s network members and partners.

Overall, we know of over 30 Roma candidates at the last EU elections but Roma participation as candidates is not equal throughout the EU and only a few countries had Roma candidates.

It appears that, often, Roma candidates run for small parties that do not send any MEP. When Roma candidates are running with stronger political parties, they are usually not at eligible places. Finally, she made an important point saying that Roma run as candidates in a lot of different parties hence demonstrating the diversity of political opinions within the Roma community.

Regarding Roma political participation as voters, feedbacks from ERIO’s network members and partners shed light on a number of barriers. Some are structural and linked to the nature of the EU electoral process. Moreover, corruption and intimidation are also a big issue. Finally, lack of trust and literacy are also two very important obstacles to Roma participation.

Considering all of this, she recalls that there is still a need to work on empowering Roma to vote and to stand as
candidates. Tailored measures should also be adopted in order to empower Roma women more specifically, and encourage them to participate politically. Finally, actions should also be taken to facilitate Roma participation, this implies tackling discrimination and prejudices.

You can view her presentation here.

Panel 3: Representation and political participation

ILIA PETROV, IRU

Ilia Petrov started by reasserting the importance of voting in order for Roma to be able to influence decision-making but also the importance, for the institutions, to have insights and knowledge of Roma political participation. Of course, by voting, Roma create an opportunity for the institutions to understand what the Roma community wants and what struggles they face. Only by knowing, the institutions can work to better the situation of the Roma. That being said, when it comes to voting Ilia Petrov said that what Europeans want should be the same that what Roma want, once again reasserting that there should be a consensus on Roma inclusion.

As a long-time activist, Ilia Petrov also underlined the issue of Roma leaders and Roma representatives. All of them should try to find a way to work together in order to show the way for the whole community, to show them how to build their political conscience and how to vote for their interests.

More than political participation, he noted that there is a problem when it comes to Roma participation in civic and public life. We should see more Roma working in the Commission, in the European Parliament and in all the different bodies and institutions. In order to do that, there is a need for proper training, a need to allow Roma to have the skills necessary to participate. On that note, he underlined the importance of having Roma politicians
and Roma role models in order to pave the way for the rest of the community.

Ilia Petrov also stressed the importance of working with Roma on a local level since according to him, many documents issued by the Commission or the European Parliament do not match the reality of the ground.

ALEXANDER FILIPOV, IRU-LATVIA

Alexander Filipov stressed the degradation of the situation of the Roma in the past years, stressing that he got more opportunities, especially in terms of education, when he was young than what young Roma have now. He then stressed the need to encourage the high number of Roma who left their country, mainly in central and eastern Europe, to come back to their country and be part of the change there.

For Alexander Filipov a successful Roma inclusion will only take place if we have Roma representatives at all levels. Moreover, according to him, European institutions should work more closely with Roma, otherwise policies and measures adopted will not fit the Roma community and thus will not be efficient. He deplored that today we have made tremendous technological progress and yet, we still have not figured out how to create a better life for people.

FARKAS MIHAI, IRU

Farkas Mihai emphasized on the fact that, having worked with various institutions in the last 8 years, he could see that the European Commission has an interest in Roma rights and he is thankful for that.

According to Farkas Mihai, Roma representatives are not united enough. This lack of unity is reflected of course in the Roma community. Considering that the Roma community is widely spread out in the EU, it is hard to create unity and a real representation, but it is also highly needed. In addition, the Roma should work with non-Roma and the other way around. In terms of Roma inclusion, cooperation is key.
Discussion

During the discussion, the question of protecting Roma was raised, especially regarding the treatment of the Roma population in some European countries. The panelists agreed that Roma must be protected. They said that we should all understand these challenges and find a solution together. In many countries no one speaks for Roma and no one tries to protect them. It was put forward that the European institutions should care more and take actions against the perpetrators of racist acts, especially when such perpetrators are part of a government.

Secondly, involvement of Roma youth and Roma women in politics was brought up. The panelists answered that evidently there is a need to teach the youth and women how to be involved in politics. It was said that many young Roma have a political interest, are highly educated and could actively participate in politics. Unfortunately, they are also afraid to try.

Closing remarks and conclusion

IVAN IVANOV, EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE

Ivan Ivanov started by noting that we can see a lot of frustration among leaders of Roma organisations because the question of Roma representation is sensitive. Often, the institutions decide who should represent Roma, they choose which organisation to work with when in reality they should leave it to the community to decide.
Ivan Ivanov said he believed that the objectives of the conference were achieved. Indeed, with this conference ERIO wanted to provide a platform for different stakeholders to share their input on Roma political participation. In the end, he said, it does not matter for which party Roma vote; the important is that they do vote because their voice is important. It is paramount that Roma understand how valuable their vote is in order not to agree to sale it. Roma should think about giving their vote for their future, the future of their family and their country.

Political participation is the last tool that can be used in order to achieve success. Ivan Ivanov reasserted that Roma inclusion should not depend on others’ political will. Finally, he reminded the audience that ERIO’s role is not to give political opinion but encourage participation. He added “*We will continue doing this until there is change, no matter how small the change is. We will work with everyone who wants to join this battle.*”

Talking about Roma political participation, it is clear that Roma face a number of barriers that need to be addressed at all levels of society. Some obstacles are linked to the electoral process itself, hence measures should be adopted mostly at national level. Some barriers are linked to fear, being from intimidation, threats or actual violence. There again governments have a lot to do in order to actually protect the Roma community. Finally, the issue of lack of trust in politics is extremely widespread and to some extent understandable within the Roma community. This is probably the area where most of the work should be done in order to show to Roma that they do belong in the society, that they do have things to say and that their voice matters.

The question of Roma representation is also one that was largely debated. It is indeed difficult to envision how to properly represent such a diverse community. On the other hand, it is important to try and answer this question as it was argued that it would be easier to make Roma interests heard if it came from a unified voice.
Finally, it has to be noted that Roma participation is now particularly relevant as we are in a time of renewal in the European institutions and also in a time where the next Framework for Roma inclusion is being discussed. Hence, now is the moment for Roma and civil society to be active and to try and influence decision-making in a way that would benefit Roma inclusion.