



ERIO'S CONFERENCE

“Strengthening Roma’s political participation”

10 June 2016, Brussels



Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Welcoming remarks and opening.....	4
Panel 1: Roma's political participation in Europe.....	6
Panel 2: Why Roma political participation and representation matters?	8
Panel 3: How to ensure Roma political participation and representation?.....	10
Closing remarks	11
Obstacles and solutions concerning Roma political participation and representation	12

For more information, please contact: Tel: +32 273 33 462

E-mail: office@erionet.eu

The **European Roma Information Office (ERIO)** is an international advocacy organisation which 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.

[Website](#) - [Facebook](#) - [Twitter](#) - [LinkedIn](#)

Introduction

ERIO, in cooperation with the European Economic Social Committee, organised a conference titled *“Strengthening Roma’s political participation”*, which was held at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels on 10 June 2016. The conference was attended by officials from the European Economic Social Committee, European Commission, European Parliament, and representatives of EU Permanent Representations, embassies, civil society, international organisations, Roma activists and journalists.

Roma have a history of exclusion and continue to be denied access to decision-making processes and institutions. To guarantee Roma’s rights, it is essential to ensure their genuine political participation so they are adequately represented in local, national and European decision-making structures.

It is important to promote Roma’s full participation in political structures at all levels to ensure the effective implementation of Roma related policies, including the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). As stressed in the Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the member states¹ and in ERIO’s Fact Sheet Roma political participation and representation², empowering Roma by promoting their political participation in society is critical to advance the process of Roma inclusion.

Roma need to be empowered to become democratic and participatory leaders in the process of Roma inclusion. Their political participation is closely linked to their inclusion enabling them to be involved in decision making processes concerning the design, implementation and evaluation of Roma related programmes and policies. It will further ensure the effective implementation of the NRIS at national and local levels.

The objective of the conference was to:

- advance Roma’s political participation at the local, national and European levels
- offer an opportunity for stakeholders and experts to engage in dialogue on how best to increase Roma’s participation and representation in politics
- identify the main obstacles for Roma political participation and possible solutions

¹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lisa/139979.pdf

² http://www.erionet.eu/doc-fact-sheet_political-participation_2016

Welcoming remarks and opening

Ivan Ivanov, ERIO Executive Director

Ivan Ivanov opened the conference and reminded participants about the on-going need to promote and ensure Roma political participation. *“Roma political participation is still low in the EU: with an estimated Roma population of 6 million, one would expect 2% of political representatives to be from the Roma community. However, this number has not yet been achieved in 2016”*, he noted. Mr Ivanov explained that some barriers and obstacles are still blocking Roma involvement in politics as voters and as representatives. He believes Roma should take the responsibility and not leave it to other parties or politicians. Moreover, he pointed out the need to make Roma political participation possible in public life and in politics and to give them access to decision-making processes and institutions.



He believes Roma should take the responsibility and not leave it to other parties or politicians. Moreover, he pointed out the need to make Roma political participation possible in public life and in politics and to give them access to decision-making processes and institutions.

Georges Dassis, EESC President

Georges Dassis provided an update on various aspects of the European Economic Social Committee (EESC) work on Roma. He then explained the key elements needed for reinforcing Roma political participation and representation. First, Roma should be involved at all stages of the decision-making in order to achieve effective policies that can improve their situation within the EU. Second, Roma should be strongly involved in the development of the national strategies from the preparation, implementation to the evaluation. In order to achieve these objectives, it is essential for the EESC to strengthen the capacity of NGOs working on Roma; to offer a formal structure for Roma to express their needs and to share their ideas in all policy areas; and to develop local coordination networks that could lead to local initiatives by promoting cooperation between representatives of local authorities, the government and civil society. To conclude, Mr Dassis explained that, for the EESC, the involvement of Roma is crucial at all stages of the policy-making process. Co-operation should be understood on a larger scale and simple consultation should be replaced by the research of consensus with the Roma community.

Dora Husz, European Commission, DG Justice, Team Leader

Dora Husz described her meaning of Roma political participation explaining that Roma should be involved from development to the implementation of policies including policy review at all levels (local, national and European). Their participation might be direct and through representatives such as NGOs. She then described the different initiatives of the European

Commission concerning Roma inclusion. She underlined that the Commission's work aims to improve implementation and monitoring stages of the National Roma Integration Strategies. The Commission also initiated other projects such as the campaign "For Roma with Roma" focusing on activities with the media to fight anti-Gypsyism and stereotypes of Roma. As mentioned by Ms Husz, some future initiatives are also in preparation, such as a joint initiative with the Council of Europe and the Slovak Presidency.

Discussion

During the discussion, the need for proportional representation of Roma was underlined. The discussion was mainly driven by questions on the way to get over the "blame culture", especially in the current context dominated by the refugee "crisis". Dora Husz expressed her regrets about the current blame culture that monopolizes discussions on Roma. According to her, a participatory method is the key: meetings on what NGOs and the Commission can do together might help to go further on Roma political participation, as both entities have Roma inclusion as a common goal that can only be achieved together.



Panel 1: Roma's political participation in Europe

Candy Sheridan, Norfolk County Council Planning Committee Chair



Candy Sheridan shared her story and the challenges she faced to get involved in politics as a Traveller woman. The main challenge she faced was getting education for the position of representative of her community in the local Council. She considers that Roma should be actively and directly involved in politics and use their right to vote to influence the political sphere by voting out politicians who support anti-Gypsyism. Ms Sheridan referred to the importance of Brexit for the Travellers and Roma in the UK, since the EU is the last protection for these communities. Showing the audience some pictures of the Travellers community she came from, Ms Sheridan explained the need to keep and raise awareness about the Roma heritage, the importance of getting to learn the community and to stop depicting Roma in a negative way. Finally, she concluded on the importance of getting to know the political system to start Roma's engagement process in politics.

Nadezhda Mouzykina, National Democratic Institute, Sr. Program Manager, Central & Eastern Europe

Nadezhda Mouzykina started her intervention with a quotation from Wynton Marsalis: *"We always hear about the rights of democracy, but the major responsibility of it is participation"*. According to Ms Mouzykina, Roma representation is still disproportionate at both European and national levels, although the situation at the local level is improving.



She identified several barriers that could explain Roma's low political participation. These include: the lack of political will; the political system and mechanisms that make difficult for Roma to compete; the manipulation by mainstream parties of Roma, putting on their list to secure votes; the general mistrust of Roma after years of segregation; the technical difficulties such as the lack of documents, the lack of infrastructures and of voter education and some issues such as voter intimidation or vote buying; and the disunity among Roma community. Despite some changes in local offices with more Roma being elected, the situation of Roma political participation and representation did not change much. Finally, she concluded by stressing the importance of not underestimating the power of one voice.

Anna Striethorst, Open Society Foundations, Senior Policy Officer



Anna Striethorst thanked ERIO for organising this conference on such an important topic since Roma activism is essential for their inclusion and changes are impossible without Roma being involved. According to her, civil society is needed, especially for investigating and monitoring local authorities in their actions towards Roma. NGOs help to find grounds for credible actions against authorities not

respecting the rights of Roma. However, according to Ms Striethorst, the role of the civil society is too limited, as well as its resources for contributing to the political process. The civil society participation should not replace representatives in politics. She pointed out some potential solutions for improving Roma political participation: offering education to the citizens, through for example campaigns inviting Roma to use their rights to vote, or give support to organizations that educate voters; preparing candidates for office and assisting them while in office; engaging a stable dialogue (at least 2 years before the elections) with Roma voters for differentiating simple mobilization from real participation.

Discussion

Some participants asked about possibilities for concrete help given by both NDI and OSF at the national level. Ms Mouzykina explained that, for example, NDI provides training for Roma who are running for election and also helps to overcome the challenge of voter registrations. Another aspect is government accountability and monitoring of the government policies (especially with respect to the National Roma Integration Strategies). Regarding the case of the UK, both organizations represented by Ms Mouzykina and Ms Striethorst reaffirmed that the Roma community will receive the same support as now whatever the results of the UK referendum.

Panel 2: Why Roma political participation and representation matters?

Benedek Jávör, Member of the European Parliament (Hungary)

In his [video](#) message, Benedek Jávör stated that some obstacles still have to be overcome such as poverty, institutionalized discrimination in education and employment. The main problem concerning Roma political participation and representation is the inherited anti-political sentiment. Unfortunately, Roma might think they have nothing to do in politics. It is crucial to change this way of thinking. Roma should communicate on their situation, join and collaborate together for having their own representatives. They might also join political parties who are open and willing to help in their actions.

Marta Garcia Fidalgo, European Commission, DG NEAR, Roma policy coordinator

Marta Garcia Fidalgo started her intervention on the key notion of democracy which, according to her, is about all citizens having the same rights. Democracy and participation are tools that give space to the most vulnerable. Participation, in that sense, is the key missing element concerning Roma. Barriers to Roma political participation still exist and identifying them is a useful step according to her. However, Ms Fidalgo expressed the need for Roma to get involved, to be present in institutions, such as in the European Parliament. Having Roma representatives could help fighting discrimination and overcome the lack of political will, she said. According to her, Roma need to be part of mainstream policies in order to solve problems, and for this they should be empowered and supported. Political participation can help Roma to speak in the name of their community, to improve the Roma situation. Finally, to achieve this goal, Ms Fidalgo reminded that Roma need to work together beyond their differences within their community.



Massimo Toschi, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Programme Manager



Massimo Toschi explained that there are no legal barriers for political participation of Roma, but the implementation of the existing laws is what creates discrimination. According to him, one should always address Roma political participation by looking at the root causes: low education, poverty, unemployment, all reinforced by anti-Gypsyism. Taking the example of Travellers, he explained how the system of registration has been created for settled people,

excluding them from the voting system and forcing Travellers to re-register when they move. He underlined the necessity to change the administrative system for allowing Roma to vote. Referring to the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948) and the UN's [International Covenant on Civil and Political Right](#)(1966), he highlighted the responsibility that governments have to help people to participate politically. What is needed, Mr Toschi noted, is the reinforcement of the legislation that already exists and has been rectified by member states. He also updated participants about the future FRA activities, such as the release of the EU-MIDIS survey which will be available by October 2016.

Discussion

The discussion began with a question about the possibilities of the European Commission to push countries to work more on Roma integration. Marta Garcia Fidalgo (DG NEAR) explained that Roma integration is part of the enlargement process. However, Dora Husz (DG JUST) explained that the European Commission can only assist



and guide member states but does not have the possibility to impose anything. FRA representative was asked if they plan to have a report on Roma political participation like they have done for people with disabilities. In order to do so, FRA needs to receive a formal request from the European Commission and MEPs to carry out research on that topic.

Panel 3: How to ensure Roma political participation and representation?

Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia, President Unión Romani and first Roma Member of the European Parliament (1986-1999)



Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia began by sharing his personal experience as the first Roma MEP. Although he got elected in Spain in 1986, he considers the voting system as the main obstacle for more Roma to get involved in politics. Taking the example of Spain, he criticized the geographical restriction of the electoral system which allows voters to vote only for candidates in their region. That is why he called for a

new EU law to allow a transnational voting approach allowing people to vote for deputies from any member state, not only their own. This would allow Roma to vote for Roma deputies. He believes Roma share the wish to defend human rights as well as the Roma culture and values. In order to achieve this goal, solidarity within the Roma community is essential. Roma should concentrate in their similarities rather than on their differences for speaking as one voice. Their collective identity should be their strength.

Livia Járóka, former Roma Member of the European Parliament (2004-2014)

Reflecting on her personal experience as Roma activist, Livia Járóka underlined the importance of the learning-process for better involvement of Roma in politics and that Roma political participation should be an everyday process, supported by Roma and non-Roma. She said that Roma should not focus only on what they perceive as Roma issues but be involved and speak as one voice on general issues, such as the current migrant crisis and radicalization. Moreover, she stressed the need to have Roma involved in policy-making processes, especially those from the settlements who could express clearly the needs of their community. Support from the Roma community to Roma politicians is also a key element. To the list of barriers described by Nadezhda Mouzykina, she added the disillusion of the Roma with political parties after years of discrimination. According to her, some key elements for improving Roma political participation and representation include: the need for de-ethnicization of politics; the necessity to have more Roma involvement at all stages - planning, monitoring, implementation and the importance of getting inside knowledge, looking at the situation in the settlements.



Madi Sharma, Member of the EESC permanent study group on Roma Inclusion



According to Madi Sharma, since Roma is one of the main issues nowadays in Europe, the main actor and speaker should be Roma. For her, one of the barriers Roma face is the lack of know-how in politics. Some values she considers as essential include: co-operation (Roma should work together with Roma and non-Roma); communication (Roma should communicate about good examples and practices they achieved, they should speak with one voice and stop the blame culture); collaboration (sustainable projects should be achieved); and Roma empowerment as well as their access to social and economic rights which will give them access to political rights.

Discussion

During the discussion, it was suggested that Roma politicians should be involved in mainstream general policies such as the environment to show that they defend everyone's rights and not only the rights of Roma. Moreover, it was also recommended for Roma communities to take a position on current issues and policies, speaking as one voice.

Closing remarks

Closing the conference, Ronald Lucardie reminded of the importance to have politicians who reflect the people they serve. Electing Roma politicians is an important component for the inclusion of these communities and to strengthen democracy. Electing Roma candidates can also mean a better representation of the interests of Roma constituents and a genuine interest to improve their lives. He also highlighted the importance to "never underestimate the power of one vote though or one voice". We need to stop the current blame culture that dominates discussions on Roma. Finally, he pointed out the important distinction between mobilization and political participation, the latter being still at the stage of learning, seeking for know-how tools. That is why, he concluded, Roma need to be empowered to become participatory leaders in the process of Roma inclusion.



Obstacles and solutions concerning Roma political participation and representation

During the conference, participants identified the main obstacles concerning Roma political participation and representation. They also provided key recommendations on how to increase and ensure political participation and representation of Roma.

Main obstacles relating to the electoral system concerning Roma participation

Some rules of the **voting system** were identified as **discriminatory** towards Roma in their access to political participation. For example, residential registration is required before an upcoming election. First, this requires the possession of ID documents, recognized by the government. However, many Roma do not have identity cards. Secondly, it forces Roma to register each time they move to another city in order to be able to vote.

➤ *Solutions relating to the electoral system barriers for Roma participation*

Legally, no barriers for Roma political participation exist. The implementation of the existing laws is what creates discrimination. However, what is needed is the reinforcement and **better implementation** of the existing legislation that has been rectified by member states. **The voting system should be more inclusive** in order to overcome technical barriers such as voter registration of Roma.

Main obstacles relating to the electoral system concerning Roma representation

Concerning Roma representation, it is still complicated for Roma candidates to find their place in the current electoral system. **True competition in elections does not exist yet**. Roma integration in mainstream parties is still insufficient. Politicians still perceive Roma representation as potentially **damageable for gaining votes**. They are still reluctant to defend Roma interests, to appoint Roma candidates, or to support Roma initiatives. Roma candidates who do integrate in mainstream parties are often placed so low as to be unelectable. It is often perceived as manipulation of Roma vote. Despite the lack of trust towards mainstream parties, Roma voters seem to prefer to vote for those parties rather than for Roma parties. Roma-based political parties did not manage to satisfy Roma voters and to receive enough support for their candidates to be elected. Roma voters do not necessarily support ethnic-based parties and their candidates.

Another concern of the electoral system is, for example, **the limitations of quotas system** with reserved seats. It might also reduce the number of politicians to the one imposed. It guarantees a minimum of Roma politicians but imposes at the same time a maximum of Roma candidates.

➤ ***Solutions relating to the electoral system barriers for Roma representation***

Changes within the existing political systems and institutions must be done in order to **create equal opportunities** and chances for Roma engagement. Roma-based bodies and political parties could be a first step for Roma to enter the political sphere but they are not influential enough. Roma politicians should enter mainstream parties and take part in mainstream decision and policy making.

Main obstacles relating to electoral education and political experience

The lack of electoral education and political experience was identified as the main obstacle for both Roma political participation and representation. Concerning political participation, civic and electoral education is missing. **Roma voters are not correctly informed** about the way they should vote. This leads, for example, to invalidation of votes due to multiple choices. Social exclusion also leads to **low exposure to parties and political life** which reduce the chance for Roma to feel involved in politics.

Concerning political representation, Roma elected politicians acknowledged their lack of experience as the main obstacle to perform once in office.

➤ ***Solutions relating to electoral education and political experience***

In order to empower Roma as active participants in politics, Roma should be granted with **equal opportunities to vote in an informed way**. Both Roma voters and elected politicians must be targeted. Roma voters should receive **trainings** for informing them of electoral rules. Elected politicians must receive **political trainings** to prepare them for their new position. Those trainings must aim to ensure Roma's active political participation at local, national and European level.



This publication has been funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission. JUST/2015/RDIS/OG/NETW/8655