Editorial: Roma far from real participation

By Ivan Ivanov

Two years after the adoption of the National Roma Integration Strategies by all EU member states, and one year after the adoption of the Council Recommendations for effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies, Roma civil society is still not part of the process.

We all consider the adoption of both initiatives a very important step forward for Roma social inclusion in Europe. It is also true that all member states have expressed political will to the European Commission to take the issue of Roma inclusion seriously by adopting National Roma Integration Strategies. But it seems this is not expressed in the same way towards the Roma civil society. In most cases local authorities seem even less interested and involved in Roma integration issues.

To contact Belgian authorities regarding the Roma inclusion strategy not only by Roma but also by other stakeholders, is usually a hard task. It is even harder if Roma civil society has to be involved in the implementation process, regardless of what government reports to the European Commission when it comes to consultation and partnership with Roma. In Germany, Roma activists complain of low levels of involvement. They report that a small group of non-Roma “usual suspects” mostly dominate the field, however their involvement does not have any added value to the process. ERIO’s members in Austria are certain that local authorities are avoiding to set up Roma integration programs as this may encourage more and more Roma to come to Austria. In Romania Roma organizations complain that the civil society was not consulted for the elaboration of the national strategy and that it does not fit with the reality Roma face in their everyday life. Unfortunately our research shows that this is the case in most member states.

Consultation with, and participation by Roma is vital if strategy outcomes are to be maximized. Managing authorities are required to ensure the maximum possible beneficiary participation at every stage. In order to have maximum legitimacy and effectiveness, consultation procedures should remain transparent and Roma communities should receive essential information about programs and proposals sufficiently in advance of decision-making deadlines to allow meaningful analysis and input by Roma representatives.
ERIO Recommendations for the Italian Presidency

The new EU Presidency taken over by Italy starting in July until December 2014 is the first of the new EU Trio Presidency (Italy, Latvia and Luxemburg). The Italian Presidency takes place at a crucial moment for the European Union. The EU finds itself in a recovery phase from the economic crisis and the European Parliament and Commission start their new term creating opportunities for a return to the EU founding values of unity, inclusion, human rights and respect. Italy should use this turning point to make social justice and Roma inclusion a priority for their Presidency and ensure that the new European Commission and Parliament keep these issues on the EU policy and political agenda.

1. Implementing the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) at local level

Despite the adoption of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the Council Recommendation, small progress has been made and with no effective results for Roma. In order to guarantee an effective implementation of the NRIS at local level, ERIO calls on the Italian Presidency to: ensure that the NRIS implementation has a stronger emphasis on anti-discrimination measures for Roma, including the most vulnerable groups such as women, children and older Roma who face multiple forms of discrimination. They should work closely with partners such as Equality Bodies as they can play a key role in tackling anti-Roma discrimination.

- Involve a sufficient number of Roma representatives in a meaningful collaboration during the implementation of the NRIS as stated in the European Framework. Effective Roma participation is needed in order for policies to be successful and to have a positive impact on these communities.

- Ensure that the NRIS and anti-discrimination legislation are horizontally adopted in the national system in the different fields such as education, health, housing and employment.

2. Promoting a racism free Europe and fighting discrimination

ERIO welcomes the fact that the Italian Presidency places a strong importance to the implementation of the non-discrimination principle. Although EU anti-discrimination legislation has been adopted, we can observe growing anti-Roma sentiments and anti-Gypsyism as well as persistent patterns of violent attacks and actions against this minority. Europe’s far right is rising and increasingly extremist organisations, public officials and politicians openly discriminate against Roma. In order to stop these trends, ERIO calls on the Italian Presidency to:

- Lead the fight against anti-Gypsyism and widespread racism by upholding the fundamental rights of Roma as citizens of the EU. Promote the role of Roma art and culture as a tool for action in fighting discrimination, breaking prejudices and stereotypes of Roma.

3. Increase effectiveness of the Europe 2020 Strategy

ERIO welcomes the fact that the Italian Presidency will create a debate to increase the effectiveness of the Europe 2020 Strategy. The efficiency of the Strategy is increased if its implementation is complemented with the NRIS. In order to achieve the targets of the Europe 2020, ERIO calls on the
Italian Presidency to:

- Make the labour market more inclusive by tackling the most vulnerable, such as the young Roma who are in disadvantage due to their lack of formal education and discrimination they face daily. Increasing the employment rate of those aged 20-64 to 75% is one of the Europe 2020 targets.

- Urge member states to develop, improve and implement desegregation policies including the non-placement of Roma children in special needs schools. Stopping this practice will improve the quality of education for Roma. Investing in inclusive quality education is vital to reach EU 2020 Strategy targets such as reducing early school leaving rates below 10% and to lift 20 million people out of poverty.

4. Freedom of movement and migration

The right to freedom of movement and residence has been repeatedly violated for European Roma. Many EU member states have expelled Roma migrants from their territory, despite their guaranteed right to move freely within the Union as stated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. As a frequently occurring practice, expulsions of Roma are a significant issue that must be addressed in order to prevent the continued violation of their rights. As such, ERIO calls on the Italian Presidency to:

- Urge the European Commission to ensure that member states respect and implement the Free Movement Directive 2004/38/EC in order to guarantee that Roma and all EU citizens exercise their right to free movement on an equal basis and to prevent future deportations and expulsions of these communities by member states.

5. Enlargement

The situation of Roma living in EU candidate countries is worse than in the rest of Europe. It is urgent to guarantee decent living conditions and protection of fundamental rights to Roma in these countries. To achieve this, ERIO calls on the Italian Presidency to pressure EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans to:

- Transpose and implement the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies at national level or to adapt existing national strategies to European Commission's and Council Recommendation's requirements.


Second SMILE partnership meeting in Brussels

The second partner’s meeting of the SMILE project was held on 7-8 July in Brussels. The aim of the meeting was for partners to share the results of the research phase in the countries involved in the project. The research involves an analysis of historical and social dynamics involving Roma and Gajde in the different project countries. It examines:

a) prejudices, exclusion or auto-segregation criteria,

b) children safeguarding (ethnic specifics and common grounds) and
c) education inside Roma communities (specifics and shared vision with Gajde).
Interview with Roma activists Daniela Novac and Elvira Hasan on Roma education

Interview with Daniela Novac

The situation of Roma communities in many European cities remains very precarious, and because the social misery that Roma are facing is visible and often described in very negative terms, a strong hostility arises among the mainstream population. Ignorance, prejudices, misunderstanding and sometimes individualism make it difficult for Roma people to integrate into society. These are the issues raised by Daniela Novac, a linguistic mediator, who was interviewed by the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) on the 11th of July 2014 in Brussels.

This interview aimed at providing a discussion on the educational background of Roma children by trying to understand the gaps in the projects that are implemented to improve the schooling of Roma children, and then to develop proposals to transform the schools’ environment and to make it more welcoming than it currently is. In this interview, Daniela Novac particularly highlighted the urgent necessity for schools and teachers to become aware of the specific situation of Roma and to realise the extent of the challenges faced by Roma children, including administrative, cultural or family obstacles. While many actors can contribute to this awareness-raising, Daniela Novac insisted particularly on the importance of having Roma mediators working at re-establishing the often broken link between Roma children or their families, and the school system and environment.

Interview with Elvira Hasan

On the 2nd of July 2014 in Brussels, ERIO met with Elvira Hasan, a Roma activist, to discuss the educational background of Roma children in Europe and in particular about the difficulties they face during their schooling period. Unfortunately, it appears that despite the availability of several funds and projects, the situation of Roma communities in many European cities seems to be constantly getting worse as most of those programmes don’t manage to truly lead to a positive change for these communities. Coming back on the negative view of the Roma by the mainstream population, Elvira Hasan insisted, however, on the pessimism and low self-esteem of Roma themselves. Recalling the role of the media in fuelling prejudices, she stressed the importance of having voices that rise up within the Roma community, to make the Roma aware that they are citizens like any other persons, that they contribute to society, and that they have the right to succeed and are perfectly capable to do so. Elvira Hasan delivers here a message of hope, emphasizing the need for Roma people to proudly assert their identity, to break the stereotypes and especially in an area where their exclusion is common, namely education.
Thus, Roma children often face difficulties in terms of education, and Roma communities as well as schools are both to blame because they do not always understand each other, they have different priorities or different traditions. Against the obstacles in education that are often perpetuated later-on in the field of employment, Elvira Hasan suggested that we all should start thinking about the role of schools in the deconstruction of stereotypes through a better understanding of the specific situation of Roma, the acceptance of cultural differences, a systematic presentation in class of the history and culture of the Roma and a better communication between Roma and non-Roma, teachers and parents.

These interviews were done as part of ERIO’s Smile project.

ERIO’s meeting with a delegation from the Government of Vojvodina in Serbia

On the 22nd September, ERIO welcomed a delegation from the Roma Inclusion Office in the Government of Vojvodina, Serbia. The meeting had been requested by the delegation as part of a capacity building project of the Roma Inclusion Office. The delegation explained to ERIO the steps the office had taken to improve Roma inclusion. These included providing scholarships for Roma students, improving Roma access to employment and providing seminars on Roma integration for local coordinators in 13 municipalities.

Ivan Ivanov, Executive Director of ERIO, discussed the current level of progress of Roma integration. The challenges surrounding access to European funding for authorities at the national level was highlighted as a particular concern. Further cooperation between The Roma Inclusion Office of the Government of Vojvodina and ERIO was encouraged for the future.

ERIO at the Awards for Roma Integration Study Visit

The Award for Roma Integration aims to raise visibility of the challenges faced by Roma in the enlargement countries. The three day study tour has been organized by DG Enlargement, EU Commission in cooperation with TACSO. Liane Adle from DG Enlargement emphasized that “Roma integration is one of the key priorities in the area of fundamental rights, forming part of the negotiation process for accession”. She also stressed that “NGOs should join forces to increase EU funding absorption capacity”.

Meeting with the Serbian Delegation in Vojvodina
Ivan Ivanov, ERIO Executive Director, who was a speaker at the meeting, stressed the need for civil evaluation as to where funding for Roma is invested. The necessity of Roma participation in civil society projects, and proportionate representation in local and central government was also emphasized.

**ERIO Mission Trips: From words to practice: acting for Roma equality and integration**

As part of our advocacy activities, we are having mission trips to meet with national and local authorities and lobby for the effective NRIS transposition at national, local and regional level and to cooperate with and involve Roma in that process and for the adoption and implementation of the EC proposal for a Council Recommendation and to cooperate with and involve Roma in that process. These mission trips also include meetings with ERIO’s network members and local Roma communities to identify their needs and to find out what is happening on the ground. This information will be useful to share it with the European Commission for their national progress reports on the implementation of the NRIS.

**Networking trip to Romania**

The aim of this trip was to meet with ERIO network members and other organizations. Additionally, meet with Roma who intend to travel to Western Europe and those who have returned. ERIO’s aim was to learn about their situation concerning education, housing, health and most importantly their employment situation. Particularly, the reasons for low school attendance and unemployment. The reasons for their migration to old member states, whether it was an economic issue or human rights and discrimination issue. Many of the participants were aware of the National Roma Strategy. None of the attending Roma approves or accepts the current Romanian strategy. Most of them have not been involved in the consultations with national authorities; the ones involved complained that their opinion and suggestions had not been taken into consideration in the draft strategy. According to Roma no implementation was taking place, although the Romanian government reports progress. Advocacy templates were disseminated to all participants. There was also disagreement concerning the position of the Romanian President and his participation at the Roma summit in Brussels.

**Networking trip in Belgium**

The meeting was with Serbian and Romanian Roma communities living in this region of Belgium. The
meeting with the Roma took place in one of the most economically developed areas in Belgium in order to see if their situation was the same as the rest of the country, if they were aware of the Belgian Action plan for Roma integration, if they have been consulted during the development of the plan by the federal or local authorities and if they are involved in the implementation and in consultation with the national contact point. The assessment of ERIO was that Roma in this part of the country are not active in NGO or other movements. They have never been involved in consultation and most of them are not aware of the existence of the Roma Action Plan. They have been looking to form contacts with local authorities but there have been no results thus far. We have disseminated copies of the action plan, template letters for advocacy at local and federal level. We agreed that ERIO will help them in advocacy actions and will provide them with the contacts of the national contact point for Belgium. ERIO made a list of the needs of the Roma as well as the suggestions they have for the authorities regarding integration.

**Gent, Belgium**

During this networking trip ERIO met mainly with Bulgarian and Kosovo Roma communities. The purpose of the meeting was the same as for the networking trip to Ostend. In the Gent region, Roma were more informed about the Belgian action plan but they have never been involved in consultations neither for the development of the plan nor for the implementation. Although half of them knew about the action plan none of them knew that there was a contact point or the relevant contact person. ERIO was told that there were a number of local actions within the Gent municipality for Roma integration. There is an ongoing discussion with the office responsible for Roma integration within the municipality.

There were no changes in the situation, but there is communication between local authorities and Roma communities. ERIO disseminated the advocacy templates and asked Roma to be more active in participation, demand to be part of the process and that when they are in need of ERIO's help they are always welcome.

**Networking trip to Bulgaria**

The aim behind the trip to Bulgaria was to meet with Roma communities and the national contact point. ERIO met with Ms, Rositsa Ivanova, a very committed person to the Roma strategy. We discussed the possibilities and limitations for the effective implementation of the Bulgarian Strategy. Lack of political will by many national and local authorities, as well as the lack of specifically allocated funding makes the implementation of the Strategy very difficult.

Another issue is that few Roma organizations are willing to assist the national contact point and many of the NGOs only criticize and oppose the strategy without giving any concrete proposal. Ms Rositsa Ivanova declared that she was open to work with everyone and that she was organizing a broad information campaign on the strategy. Ms Ivanova and ERIO agreed to cooperate closer on the national strategy.

Some Roma were not aware of the strategy but these were mainly Roma who are not active in Roma civil society. ERIO's goal is to provide information on the strategy and the results of its implementation in order to reach as many Roma as possible, regardless of whether they are involved in the Roma movement or not. Employment, education and discrimination issues were also discussed. ERIO disseminated advocacy templates and agreed to assist Roma in advocating with national and local authorities on the issues they raised.
ERIO latest publications


This paper outlines the key findings of three workshops organised by ERIO on the 30th October 2012, 27th September 2013 and 21st October 2014 with Equality Bodies from 20 member states. Part 1 discusses the vital role of Equality Bodies for an effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) and the Racial Equality Directive (RED). Part 2 focuses on the key challenges and potential solutions to effectively protecting Roma against discrimination. Part 3 provides a set of recommendations to the European Commission, member states, Equality Bodies and Roma civil society in order to secure greater practical enforcement of the NRIS and the RED. Part 4 provides good practices of Equality Bodies in effectively addressing Roma discrimination which have been elaborated during the workshops. Finally, Part 5 provides contact details for Equality Bodies.

Implementing National Roma Integration Strategies: Challenges and solutions for local authorities (2014)

This paper presents the important results produced by two conferences organised by ERIO on the 24th October 2013 and the 27th November 2014 with local authorities, on roundtables and on networking meetings done in 2014. The first part of this document emphasises the vital role of local authorities for an effective implementation of the NRIS and the RED. Part 2 focuses on the key challenges faced by local and regional authorities when implementing the NRIS and the RED, as well as possible solutions to overcome them. Part 3 provides a set of recommendations to the European Commission, member states, local authorities and Roma civil society, to ensure an effective implementation of the NRIS and the RED. The last part provides examples of good practices of local authorities that might be helpful in order to achieve this goal.