Editorial: The Roma Representation in the European Parliament

By Ivan Ivanov

The European Union can play a significant role in promoting Roma participation. To set an example the EU should look inward and develop possibilities for Roma within its own institutions. The EU could also reinforce Roma participation in public life in member states through its financial and policy resources.

The right to effective participation in public life means that Roma should have the opportunities to take part equally in EU elected bodies and institutions.

This year’s European elections gave the chance to two Roma to be elected as members of the European Parliament. Soraya Post from Sweden, member of the Swedish Feminist Initiative and Damian Draghici from Romania, member of the National Union for Progressive Romania. Efforts to increase Roma representation in the European Parliament could include European political parties encouraging Roma to stand for elections.

In the short-term, the European Parliament could create a special working group or committee on Anti-Gypsyism. This would increase the attention given to Roma discrimination by the European Parliament and also further sensitize representatives on the conditions of Roma. This working group or committee could immediately turn its attention to the issue of Roma representation within the Parliament.
On October the 1st, the European Roma Information Office organised the closing conference of the two-year ERNE project “European Roma Integration good practice exchange and policy network” Through an exchange of experiences and best practices, the ERNE project aimed at contributing to the implementation of the National Roma Inclusion Strategies (NRIS) in the particular field of education in order to maximise chances of success for Roma integration. Education is a key element of social policy and all member states are required to give it a particular attention in view of the implementation of their NRIS before 2020. However, evidence shows that Roma children still face specific difficulties in terms of schooling experience, such as low attendance, high dropout rate or discrimination due to their ethnicity and background. Nine European partners coming from different countries participated in this project: the Municipality of Koprivnica (Croatia), Zukunftsbau GmbH (Germany), the European Neighbours – Verein zur Förderung von Benachteiligten in Europa (Austria), Kulturverein Österreichischer Roma (Austria), FormAzione Co&So Network (Italy), University Stefan cel Mare of Suceava (Romania) and European Roma Information Office (Belgium). Representatives from the project’s partners and other civil society organisations attended the conference, as well as representatives from the European institutions, in particular Ákos Topolánszky, Rapporteur of the European Economic and Social Committee and Frank Pierobon, European Commission Representative, DG Education. This event was based on a constructive exchange of good practices by project partners who in turns, presented successful examples and recommendations regarding pre-school education, school education, higher school education and vocational education. A particular emphasis was given to the fact that education is a key-area but that no improvement can be achieved as long as the basic needs are not met. This implies that a lot of efforts have to be made to raise awareness on the situation of Roma people in Europe, an idea which seems to be closely related to data collection issues. Partners also highlighted the necessity to involve different stakeholders in the elaboration and implementation of projects and policies, and in particular the Roma.

For the section of the final conference on the ERNE website, go to: http://erne-project.eu/index.php/en/activities/final-project-conference.html
ERIO’s workshop “Protecting Roma Against Discrimination: the Role of Equality Bodies”

On 21 October 2014, ERIO in close cooperation with EQUINET organised its third workshop with Equality Bodies on “Protecting Roma Against Discrimination: the Role of Equality Bodies”. The workshop was held at the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (Belgian Equality Body) in Brussels and attended by Equality Bodies from 13 member states. In addition, representatives from the European Commission, FRA, UN, EQUINET and Roma representatives attended.

Within the framework of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) and the Race Equality Directive 2000/43 (RED), this event aimed to foster discussion between Equality Bodies, Roma representatives and experts on Roma integration.

The workshop was opened by Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s Executive Director followed by Anne Gaspard, EQUINET’s Executive Director, who stressed the need to keep fighting for equality and to ensure that rights and laws work. Equality Bodies have a key role and EQUINET will continue to strengthen this cooperation. Jozef De Witte, Executive Director of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism, remembered that discriminations against Roma are an everyday reality in all aspects of social life. To end this, we need laws but also independent enforcement bodies, he stressed.

Lina Papamichalopoulou and Pia Lindholm from the European Commission showed that both national and local levels are key to tackle Roma integration and to enforce legislation. Equality Bodies are thus best-placed to face immediate situations on the ground and protect the Roma population. The morning session was then followed by presentations by Jan Jafab from the United Nations, Massimo Toschi from the Fundamental Rights Agency and Tamás Kádár from EQUINET.

The afternoon session consisted of two workshops where participants broke into small groups to discuss and share best practices, to exchange information and ideas about anti-discrimination issues in their own country and discuss challenges and opportunities when it comes to the NRIS and RED implementation.

More information can be found at: http://www.erionet.eu/event-211014
ERIO at the Annual Convention against Poverty and Social Exclusion

ERIO’s representative was one of the key note speakers at the Side Event on Roma Inclusion. The event was organized by Eurodiaconia on November 20 as part of the “4th Annual Convention of the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion”. This year the focus of the Convention was on social innovation and how new creative ideas can contribute to address social needs and to improve people’s lives.

The President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, addressed the opening ceremony, together with the new Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills & Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen.

Bringing together more than 700 participants, the conference highlighted the role of social innovation to create private-public partnerships, promote social entrepreneurship and make a better use of available resources to give support according to each individual needs.

The Side Event focused on Roma poverty and inclusion with the specific objective to identify challenges and solution in the process of Roma social inclusion.

ERIO meeting with the British Ambassador for Romania

On Monday the 24th November, ERIO welcomed Mr Paul Brummell, British ambassador to Romania and Ms Fionn Craig, second secretary of the UK representation to the EU to ERIO’s office. The purpose of the meeting was for the ambassador to discuss the situation of Roma in Romania. Ivan Ivanov, ERIO executive director discussed the state of implementation of the Romanian National Roma Integration Strategy and the steps the British embassy could take to assist in the engagement of Roma civil society in this process. ERIO discussed the steps it is taking to improve the capacity of Roma civil society. This aims to ensure they can actively participate in decision making processes.
at the national and local levels and effectively communicate to Roma their rights and duties under relevant EU legislation. During the meeting the potential for future collaboration between the British embassy and ERIO was discussed. Including through the organisation of ERIO round-table meetings with Roma civil society, local authorities and other relevant actors.

Working meeting on the European Platform for Roma inclusion

ERIO was invited to participate in a meeting organised by the European Commission on the 25 November in Brussels. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the format and content of the next European Roma Platform taking place on the 5 February 2015. The meeting was attended by representatives of civil society, international organisations, local authorities and different Directorate Generals of the Commission.

With its new mandate, the Commission has taken this opportunity to consult with and gather suggestions from civil society. The one-day meeting provided several opportunities for small interactive group discussions between participants to discuss about their experiences of previous Platforms, the purpose and topics of the next Platform as well as participants to invite. After gathering many diverse ideas, the Commission will work on the basis of the suggestions put forward by civil society in order to organise the 2015 Roma Platform.

Art4Rom’s final conference

ERIO participated in the final conference of the Art4Rom project which was held on 26 November in the PressClub Brussels Europe in Brussels.

The Art4Rom project (www.art4rom.eu) is a project financed by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme promoting intercultural dialogue within Roma and non-Roma children through the practice of arts in school and non-school environments. This two-year project is a partnership of eight partners of which ERIO is part of covering five European countries: Belgium, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain. This event brought together...
ERIO held its second conference in Brussels on the 27th November 2014 with local authorities. The aims of the conference were firstly, to identify the challenges to the effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies at the local level. Secondly, to discuss good practice examples of local authorities that have the potential to be effective in other countries. Finally, to discuss the role of civil society to overcome the challenges faced by local authorities. During the first panel, Axelle Cheney, (European Commission, DG Justice), stated that the Commission will now focus on the role of local authorities in achieving effective Roma social inclusion. She outlined three principle tools which could assist local authorities in this process.

Firstly, the provision in the European Structural Fund that requires 20% of funds allocated to member states to be for social inclusion in the next programming period. Furthermore, she stated that next year the Commission will finance transnational cooperation between local authorities to improve Roma inclusion. Secondly, she emphasised the role of the Council recommendation on effective Roma integration measures. Every member state has committed to this recommendation which includes a specific section on the steps they should take to involve local authorities. Finally, she outlined the role of the national Roma contact points to assist in this process.

The discussion then moved to identifying practices of local authorities. Sergi Alegre Calero, Vice-Mayor of the municipality of El Prat de Llobregat, Catalonia, Spain discussed the steps the municipality had taken to improve the situation of Roma in San Cosme. He emphasised the role of municipal pressure through regular inspections of public areas, health etc. had in achieving this. Furthermore, he emphasised the important role Roma participation had in this process. Ronald Lucardie, ERIO Board president concluded the conference by stressing the importance of establishing a continuing dialogue between local authorities and civil society.

For a complete report of the conference go to: http://www.erionet.eu/doc-event_271114_report

keynote speakers who reported on the results of the Art4Rom project. During its intervention, ERIO’s Executive Director emphasized that art is a tool to promote the integration of Roma and combat stereotypes. Through art one can change mentalities and raise awareness among children. Artists can be ambassadors for Roma integration since they can bring change and improve the relationship between Roma and non-Roma, added ERIO’s Executive Director. To conclude, he argued that the Art4Rom project should be taken as a good practice by the European institutions. Education by culture is necessary and concrete results are noticeable after a few years.
ERIO meeting with university Hungarian Roma students

On December 12th, ERIO met with Roma students and teachers from the Hungarian University of Debrecen in Brussels. The meeting was organised in cooperation with the Embassy of Hungary in Belgium with the aim to introduce ERIO’s work to them and discuss the progress of Roma integration at the EU level.

We informed the guests about ERIO’s mission, activities and how it had evolved since its creation in 2003. The major developments that had been achieved at the European level in terms of Roma integration were also discussed, notably the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the establishment of the national Roma strategies. Possibilities on how the Roma students could get involved in ERIO’s work were presented, namely through our internship programme. The meeting was concluded by a short testimony of the Sinti activist Zoni Weisz on his personal experience as a survivor of the Holocaust.

ERIO screening/debate “The untold story: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust”

The 12th of December, ERIO organised a screening of a documentary “The untold story: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust” developed in the context of the MemoROM project which includes interviews with Sinti Holocaust survivors Rita Prigmore and Zoni Weisz, and two experts and academics. The screening, held in Brussels, was followed by a debate. Participants included students, teachers, researchers and Roma and non-Roma civil society representatives. Zoni Weisz was a guest speaker.

After the introduction of the MemoROM project, the testimony of Zoni Weisz was screened, where he detailed what he lived through during the Second World War, escaping from the Nazis. A recorded testimony of Rita Prigmore on the trauma she suffered during the Holocaust and her struggle against the German state to get compensation was also screened. Both testimonies were followed by a discussion with Zoni Weisz on his personal experience of the Holocaust and as Roma and Sinti rights defendant since the post-war period, the discussion quickly progressing to modern day topics and the future of the Roma and Sinti people in Europe.

Through this event it was stressed that more information needed to be made available to the general public and to the Roma on the suffering and resistance of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust as they have often been ignored.
Teachers noted the lack of teaching materials on the topic but are happy to use the MemoROM DVD to assist them in class.

The MemoROM project aims to create an International Remembrance Network to raise awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust in order to fight discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes about these communities.

Visit the project website: www.romasintiholocaust.eu

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**ERIO at ILGA’s conference “Bullying and discrimination in schools – What the EU and the Council of Europe can do?”**


The event was attended by some Members of the European Parliament and their assistants, representatives of the Council of Europe and civil society as well as school teachers.

At the conference, the issue of school bullying and discrimination on the ground of ethnic origin and sexual orientation or gender identity was discussed. The limited EU competences in education were acknowledged and the importance to put the issue at the forefront of EU actions in the area of education was stressed.

Marta Pinto, ERIO’s policy officer, as an invited speaker presented the case of school bullying and discrimination towards Roma children and young people that takes many forms: racist bullying, exclusionary practices and discrimination, by teachers, school staff or fellow students. She shared the experiences of Roma mothers interviewed under the SMILE project, who witness racism and bullying in the school playground. Ms Pinto then explained how discrimination of Roma children takes place when they are improperly and disproportionately placed in “special schools” for pupils with learning difficulties and mental disabilities simply because they are Roma. School segregation on grounds of ethnic origin, she noted, violates the European Human Rights Convention and the Racial Equality Directive and must be brought to an end. Reference to the welcomed EC infringement procedures against the Czech Republic for violation of EU anti-discrimination laws was made. ERIO’s policy officer concluded that a strong political commitment is needed to end school bullying and discrimination. Activities that raise awareness of mechanisms to prevent and address discrimination in education are needed as well as training for all school professionals, social workers and educational psychologists with the aim of creating a school environment that respects and embraces the diversity of its student population.