Roma integration needs inclusive consultation

By Ivan Ivanov

ERIO representatives regularly meet with their network members and local authorities. Our meetings and observations show that there is a tendency among authorities to seek out a single or limited number of representatives or organizations to represent Roma interests. This approach falsely homogenizes Roma and assumes singular interests; in turn it forms needs and solutions that would not be in benefit of other sections of the Roma community. A very relevant example is the approach of the Belgian authorities responsible for the implementation of the Belgian Roma integration plan. They cooperated with only one NGO, and generalized their consultation as valid for all Roma related groups in the country. ERIO recommends that it is essential for authorities to not rely solely on a limited number of Roma representatives, but instead also actively seek out other perspectives at local and national level, especially those who would be directly affected by particular decisions and measures. Roma involvement needs to begin at the earliest stages of each policy or program initiated by officials, and actively continue throughout all of the stages of the policy implementation and evaluation processes. However, the effectiveness of Roma participation in consultative structures is contingent upon their ability to articulate their needs and interests within the various decision-making bodies.

Member states have different models of consultative bodies, including self-government councils, mixed bodies involving governmental representatives and NGOs, and non-governmental advisory councils. Some comprise of representatives from different minority groups, while others include only Roma representatives. The practice shows that it is preferable that these bodies be composed only by Roma representatives and non-Roma dealing with Roma issues, rather than a range of minorities. Having this narrow focus would allow the Roma voices to be heard and their interest would be effectively taken into account.

Member states should ensure that they fully transpose Article 12 of the Racial Equality Directive. Article 12
requires states to “encourage dialogue with appropriate non-governmental organizations which have, in accordance with their national law and practice, a legitimate interest in contributing to the fight against discrimination on grounds of racial and ethnic origin with a view to promoting the principle of equal treatment”. In the case of Roma, adequately implementing Article 12 requires member states to promote regular consultation with Roma NGOs. They should do so by establishing permanent and ad hoc mechanisms of consultation with the Roma at all levels. In this regard, the idea of the DG Justice of the European Commission to encourage and assist member states to create National Platforms is welcomed by ERIO. National Platforms will involve Roma representatives and different stakeholders dealing with Roma related issues. Also, they will act as advisory bodies to decision-making structures responsible for the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies.

The effectiveness of the implementation of policies in relation to the Roma community could only be achieved with adequate consultation with Roma communities and their equal participation in the processes of integration.

ERIO at the consultation meeting at the European Commission

ERIO was present at the latest consultation meeting, on 30 September, concerning inclusion policies for Roma organised by the European Commission (DG Justice), with representatives of European level civil society, international organisations and academics’ network. In the first session, discussion was focused on presentations of promising practices and projects brought by the civil society. Healthy Communities, an NGO-government project from Slovakia, presented its work. The NGO implements health activities in segregated Roma settlements by training and empowering health mediators from the communities. Moreover, the “Roma Inclusion Index” was presented. The index is a recent publication of the Decade for Roma Inclusion Secretariat, with the aim of proposing and providing an overview of relevant indicators to measure progress in closing the Roma-non-Roma gap in education, employment, healthcare, housing, discrimination and poverty. Additionally, NGOs reported on the effects of the refugee crisis on their work. The main concerns shared were regarding authorities postponing projects in the current context, the increase of hate speech and hate crime towards Roma, and ways to secure the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies.

The second session included presentations from Commission colleagues, which focused on fighting discrimination and anti-Gypsyism. Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s director, spoke on the impact of the refugee crisis on the work of Roma NGOs. He stated that the refugee situation may push Roma issues to the sideline and the surge in refugees entering Europe has made right-wing extremism more prevalent and reinforced anti-Roma sentiment; as a result hate crime and racial discrimination may increase. European Commission’s representatives took note of the concerns and assured the participants of their continued efforts and hearings to ensure continued communication between all the bodies.
Roundtable in Sofia

One of the main ERIO awareness raising activities is to organise roundtable meetings with different local and governmental authorities and other stakeholders to discuss the Roma needs and the challenges of the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). The aim of these meetings is to introduce formal and ad hoc consultation mechanisms to ensure Roma civil society representatives are consulted by officials on a regular basis.

On 20 July 2015 ERIO, in cooperation with the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues of the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria, organised a roundtable in Sofia, Bulgaria. Representatives of different ministries, local authorities, national NGO networks and local Roma organisations attended the meeting. ERIO presented the last assessment report of the European Commission on the implementation of the NRIS. Roma NGOs expressed their deep concern on the forced evictions in the village of Garmen where a number of houses were demolished and Roma were left with no accommodation. Lawyers involved in the case stated that this action is a clear example of discrimination provoked by extreme right-wing nationalistic political parties. Participants discussed how to use more locally tailored knowledge of factors causing discrimination against Roma in order to develop appropriate remedies. It was stressed that the full involvement of Roma is necessary to identify the right social inclusion practices and the development of adequate remedies for protection against discrimination.

Joint open letter for the Refugees #WeApologise

ERIO took a stand this September on the issue of the refugee crisis. Along with other 56 civil society organisations, we co-signed Social Platform’s open letter on behalf of the European and national leaders to apologize for the absence of humanitarian aid for those seeking refuge. The co-signatories recognized the extent to which those seeking refuge are suffering, and the psychological and emotional effect the socio-political situation is having on their lives, and more importantly their dignity. Co-signatories stated that they will continue to urge the European leaders to come up with a pan-European response that respects each individual’s human rights regardless of their status. Additionally, co-signatories reassured those seeking refuge who were arriving in Europe that although the leaders did not take a united stance quickly enough, many European citizens and civil society organizations took a stance to ensure that the refuges have a home and their basic needs meet; as the European Union’s core values of solidarity and human rights have not been forgotten.

Read the full open letter here: www.erionet.eu/doc-open-letter_weapologise
Fact sheet on Hate Speech against Roma in the Media

ERIO has published a fact sheet on hate speech against Roma in the media, to inform about the negative effects of hate speech and give some illustrative examples, and provide different stakeholders with general recommendations on how to fight such phenomenon. There is no universally accepted definition for hate speech. However, an important definition is by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation 97(20), hate speech is defined as covering “all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin.”

Hate speech can take many forms and it is not limited to verbal expressions. It can also be shared non-verbally via symbols, leaflets, drawings, etc. Moreover, hate speech can be present online via social media sites and blogs. The line between hate speech and freedom of speech is often argued to be vague. According to Kent Greenwalt freedom of speech is based on communication of an opinion or message with any cognitive content, while hate speech aims to incite violence and induce certain psychological reactions such as fear, intimidation and other emotional distress in its victim. Therefore, there needs to be limitations on our fundamental right of freedom of speech, so that harm is avoided. Freedom of speech has been limited on the European and International level with Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA, Article 10 (2) of the European Convention on Human Rights, Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They have all stressed the importance of condoning and punishing hate speech.

Anti-Roma discourses and hate speech particularly by public figures influences opinions of ordinary citizens and fuels ethnic tensions between Roma and non-Roma. Hate crimes against Roma and Sinti include incitement to violence, threats, damage to property, arson attacks, physical assaults and even murder. The media has a great impact on the increase of hate speech. As stated by the ONCHR, the media often strengthens negative stereotypes against the Roma community and does not positively promote how multicultural the European Union is. There have been various incidents of hate speech against the Roma. An example of hate speech by public figures is by the French MEP Jean Marie Le Pen. He stated that “Roma are like birds, they steal naturally”, during his BBC Hardtalk interview. He was fined €5,000 for his anti-Roma statement and also got suspended from the Front National party after a disciplinary hearing. In Mr Le Pen’s case there were consequences, however, it has been proved to be very difficult to take legal action against hate speech.

ERIO recommends for the European Union and the member states to penalize forms of anti-Roma rhetoric. They should also implement legal tools to fight discrimination. Moreover, ERIO urges the Roma civil society to continue reporting cases of hate speech and hate crime, and to raise awareness about hate speech and its negative effects. Additionally, ERIO advises the media to embrace balanced reporting and raise awareness about hate speech.

You can access the full fact sheet here: www.erionet.eu/fact-sheets
Human rights abuses and discrimination against Roma

By Ruth Whittle, ERIO

During January and June 2015, we highlighted a wide variety of discrimination and racial abuse cases in towns and cities across member states. This article gives a brief summary of those cases.

In Belgium, we reported on the demands made by the town council of Mouscron to erect a wall around the Roma camp located across the border in the French town of Wattrelos. The authorities insisted that this was not to hide the Roma but to keep them safe.

In the Czech Republic, many racially-motivated attacks on Roma took place, including police brutality and racist slurs towards Roma. Moreover, several individuals, supposedly part of a neo-Nazi group, were charged with arson attacks on buildings occupied by a Roma family. We also saw several cases of anti-Gypsyism in the media, with the publication of anti-Roma news articles and the presence of racial remarks on online blogs. In a positive development, one Roma was awarded damages after suing an online tabloid and its publication of racist insults.

In France, we highlighted one town’s attempts to create a separate bus service for Roma due to their ‘unbearable’ smell, a discriminatory measure preventing access to services. In a northern French town, the Mayor reportedly poured truckloads of manure at the edge of a Roma settlement, presumably to drive Roma out of the town. In another case, a Parisian suburb refused to bury a Roma baby in the local cemetery as the Mayor stated that priority should be given to people who pay taxes. The human rights Ombudsman will begin an inquiry investigating possible discrimination.

In Hungary, our reports focused on a far-right Jobbik MP who published racist remarks regarding the birth rate of Roma families living in the country. In another case, a discrimination case before the Supreme Court found that a Mayor had committed harassment against the Roma as a people. He had wrongly blamed Roma for the murder of a young girl. In April, a Hungarian locality planned to evict Roma tenants from land to be used to build a football stadium. Roma families were given short notice to vacate their homes.

In Italy, a Roma woman and a pro-Roma group sued a textbook company for defining legal terms in a negative way towards Roma. Receiving damages, the Roma woman stated that it caused offence to her ‘personal dignity’ to vilify her on purely ethnic grounds. In Rome, savage police attacks took place against Roma, with evacuations from their makeshift dwellings. Furthermore, there has been an increase in forced evictions in attempts to clean up the city before events such as the Milan Expo and for next year’s Jubilee celebrations.

In Slovakia, we saw the acquittal of ten police officers suspected of torturing several Roma minors for committing a minor offence. The incident was recorded by video and broadcast online but the courts did not accept the material as reliable evidence. In a Roma settlement in Eastern Slovakia, several Roma were injured due to violent police raids. The victims suffered substantial physical injuries and verbal abuse.

In Sweden, sources indicated that flammable liquid was thrown into the premises of a Roma organisation in Malmö. Police have investigated this attempted arson.

In the United Kingdom, we documented several instances of hate against Roma and Travellers. A UKIP MEP of Roma origin received online hate speech during his campaign encouraging Travellers to register to vote. In Brighton, a Traveller woman was the victim of racially motivated vandalism, with insulting names sprayed on to her house. In another case, several Travellers sued the pub, Wetherspoon’s, when they were refused entry because of their ethnic origin.
**Teaching and filming about the Roma culture**

As part of our project SMILE we are carrying out activities aiming at raising awareness about the Roma culture.

Our school training on the Roma history and culture with primary school teachers continues. We hold our second training session which focused on modern Roma history and the Holocaust. During this training we talked about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust and possible ways to counteract rising trends of racism and xenophobia. Trainees listened to the testimony of the Sinti survivor, Rita Prigmore. Not surprisingly, most of the trainees were unfamiliar with the Roma and Sinti experience during the Nazi regime. That is why such trainings are vital and all project partners are doing it at national level. Two more trainings will be carried; one on Roma traditions, symbols and beliefs and another on Roma stereotypes.

We also started the shootings of a documentary which aims to raise awareness about the Roma culture through dialogues between Roma and non-Roma actors of different generations from Belgium, UK, Italy, Bulgaria and Croatia. Each partner will film five dialogues with actors from different generations: two children, two teenagers, two women or mothers, two adults and two people aged over 60.

The SMILE project is financed by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme and deals with the social inclusion of Roma children within the school context. You can visit the project website here: [www.romasmile.com](http://www.romasmile.com)

**An online learning platform with material on Roma culture, traditions and history**

The Game and Learning Object Village (GLOB) is a free online platform to share with teachers, parents and kids interactive learning resources about the Roma community. The GLOB village is part of the SMILE project ([www.romasmile.com](http://www.romasmile.com)) which aims to fight against an early drop out of Roma students by addressing this problem with a prosocial approach and ideas of shared responsibility and solidarity between communities. The GLOB village has five rooms that can be accessed in English, Croatian, Bulgarian, Italian and French. Depending on the section, the content may vary based on the chosen language. The room called “Library” has documents and resources suggested by experts about the Roma’s history, art and culture, and the Holocaust. For example, in the English version, there is a map of the possible Romani migration route. The course ‘Prosociality and Prosocial Behaviour’ is found in the **“Prosociality House”**. The course is a didactic tool supporting the exploration of prosociality, prosocial behaviour and the peace code. In the **“School”** section, there are four courses that the users will be able to utilize in order to further deepen their knowledge on prosociality, Roma history and culture, Romani language, and social competences. The objective of these courses is to increase the
Knowledge of the non-Roma community on key elements of Romani history and the origins of the Roma people. Also, through this course the participants will have a greater understanding of the discrimination and persecution that the Roma have experienced. Furthermore, the section of the “Cinema” contains video resources, documentaries on the Holocaust, history and Roma arts and culture. For example in the Croatian version there is a video on Romani dances and in the Italian version there is a documentary about the Roma Holocaust. The “Room of Rights”, is last section, where documents and texts on children’s rights in Europe can be found. After reading the texts, there is the small quiz on the Rights of the Child. The quiz is a great way to teach children about their human rights.

The GLOB village can be accessed here: http://montescalearning.com/GLOBVillage

Glob Village poster

The European Legal Framework on Hate Speech

The occurrence of hate speech and hate crime is increasing in Europe, for this reason it is important to reassess the European legal framework. The EU requires member states to penalise the most severe forms of hate speech and hate crime according to the Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA (CFD). Moreover, the framework has tools to deal with controlling racist and xenophobic behaviours in the media and over the internet. Another key instrument is the Racial Equality Directive, which ensures the equal treatment of citizens irrespective of their ethnicity. Apart from adopting legal instruments, the EU provides support through financing projects against hate speech and hate crime. For example, there are projects under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020. However, there are gaps in the implementation of the CFD, in articles requiring the penalisation of condoning, denying or grossly trivialising the genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and Nazi crimes, respectively. Moreover, there is an absence of one comprehensive policy that deals with hate speech and hate crime. The European Commission has initiated infringement proceedings against member states failing to transpose the CFD, however these efforts need to continue. Additionally, at the level of the member states, many are unable to collect sufficient data because of underreporting, and data collection related competences are often divided between more than one authority whose data collection efforts are not harmonised. Furthermore, awareness raising efforts must increase at the level of the member states, so that the application of the legal tools can be better understood. When it comes to online hate speech, the internet users that preach it are often difficult to trace back, and it is also difficult to prove their motivation, to make a legal case. There should be efforts to promote a universally agreed upon definition for what constitutes hate speech. A universal definition would be crucial in drawing the line between freedom of speech and hate speech; as currently the extents of each is fully subjective.
My four month experience with ERIO has helped me to gain a practical understanding of advocacy at EU level and in particular, how ERIO operates as a bridge between the European Commission and grassroots organisations across the EU. It has also opened my eyes to the issues which effect Roma across Europe.

This internship provided me with an insight of how an NGO like ERIO is working with EU institutions in order to ensure better conditions for Roma, whether that be tackling hate speech, highlighting forced evictions and their poor socioeconomic conditions. It was great to work with such a dedicated and close-knit team. The tasks given were always interesting and worthwhile: I really felt that my time and work was always valued. I particularly enjoyed research and drafting relevant material, developing ERIO’s social media strategy and participating in the advocacy training.

I found it interesting to focus on the theme of hate speech against Roma, ERIO’s chosen focus for 2015. This issue has become increasingly pertinent, with the rise in online hate. ERIO’s event with equality bodies showed that there is a huge problem with hate speech but Roma fail to report cases because they don’t trust the authorities. Dialogue is hugely important in tackling discrimination and hate speech. I see that it is vital to encourage Roma to participate in the decision making process and support local NGOs and mediators who work directly with Roma. In addition, I learned about the Decade of Roma Inclusion and the realities faced by many Roma in Eastern Europe. Many commentators concluded that this initiative was a failure and the necessary changes were not made to improve the living conditions and basic rights of Roma. The stark reality of conditions for Roma really increased my empathy and helped me to better understand why many choose to migrate to Western Europe in search of better opportunities.

During my internship, the refugee problem in Europe became a crisis: the number of asylum seekers entering Europe peaked and the issue became a primary concern for all EU leaders. With media attention focused on refugees, the Roma issue has become less of a priority. I believe that if Europe really wants to protect its citizens and build a strong Union, it will need to protect the interests of the Roma as well as the new refugees. It is important to promote the social inclusion of a vulnerable group like the Roma in order to ensure that they feel a sense of belonging and feel valued as active EU citizens.

This internship has deepened my knowledge of the Roma issue at an EU level. It has prepared me for a career in research, at an EU institution or at an NGO which works on non-discrimination, minority rights or migration. Above all, I am happy to be more informed about the Roma issue and I hope to continue to break stereotypes and negative attitudes against Roma widely held by the general public.