Editorial: The impact of the refugee situation on Roma inclusion

By Ivan Ivanov

It has become clear that the European Union is not ready to face the challenges posed by the influx of refugees from Syria and economic migrants from Middle East and Africa. The EU was not ready either for the free movement of its own citizens within its own borders. Before the “refugee crisis”, Roma migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the West was and still is considered a problem, although this migration flow was legally established in the framework of the Free Movement Directive 2004/38.

The Roma situation has been given increased attention in the EU’s political agenda. It was widely recognised that urgent steps should be taken by the institutions to facilitate the inclusion of Roma in their home countries. A European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies was adopted by the European Commission followed by Recommendations which were unanimously adopted by the European Council. The transposition of these soft EU policies to national level was recently completed and implementation was about to begin but the “refugee crisis” came into the scene.

The Dublin Agreement is not effective anymore and the EU recognises that there is a serious challenge for its external borders and economic and social systems. At the same time, the feeling of insecurity is fuelled by extreme right nationalist and populist parties which constantly underline the danger of terrorism and Islamisation of Europe. The “refugee crisis” spread panic in most member states and Roma inclusion slipped down the agenda. In ERIO’s meetings with officials, very often the “refugee crisis” was given as an excuse to stop or delay the implementation of the Roma inclusion policies. One of the arguments used is that funding for the purpose of Roma inclusion will be redirected for the inclusion of refugees. In addition, anti-refugees campaigns also have a negative impact on the relationship between Roma and non-Roma citizens. The crisis has reinforced xenophobic and anti-Roma sentiments.

During political debates and civil society demonstrations against the acceptance of refugees in Central and Eastern European countries, there are often statements such as “We don’t...”
need more Gypsies, we have enough”, “All Gypsies and refugees out of the country”, “Nation clean of Gypsies and refugees”. Roma are considered a group of foreigners, like the refugees. A Mayor in one of the largest cities in Belgium even said “I prefer refugees than Roma coming from Central and Eastern Europe”. Often, anti-Roma and anti-refugees sentiments lead to human rights abuse. There are reports which indicate violent attacks against members of both groups. Discrimination becomes a regular phenomenon in public spaces such as restaurants, swimming pools and cinemas. It mainly aims at limiting the access for refugees and certain groups of migrants and Roma also fall victims of these policies.

ERIO calls upon the EU to take urgent steps to combat the dramatic levels of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality and religion. Widespread anti-Gypsyism leads to a vicious circle of discrimination in which Roma living in Europe fall victims. It is time for authorities to demonstrate how powerful instrument is the Race Equality Directive in fighting racial discrimination and that it is also applicable in cases of discrimination based on nationality.

ERIO at HIRA conference on anti-Semitism, Holocaust and Roma Genocide

On the 13th of October 2015 ERIO was an invited speaker at a conference titled: “Addressing Anti-Semitism Today: Education of Holocaust, Roma Genocide”. The conference was hosted by the Embassy of Hungary to Belgium and Luxembourg in cooperation with the Institute of Jewish Studies of Université Libre de Bruxelles in the framework of the Hungarian Presidency of IHRA.

Holocaust education was discussed in the first panel. For students to understand empathy, develop critical thinking and be able to work together across differences, it is vital to not only teach the Holocaust but also to retrain teachers. Although there is no correct way to teach about the Holocaust, general guidelines could be made where the Holocaust can be taught not as a Jewish tragedy but an European tragedy.

The second panel dealt with the Roma genocide during WWII. Ivan Ivanov, the Executive Director of ERIO spoke on the efforts of ERIO in promoting awareness concerning the Roma genocide through the project MemoROM (www.romasintiholocaust.eu). The Roma community did not only suffer during the Holocaust, they also suffered before the Holocaust and are suffering today. The MemoROM project focussed on preserving the memory of the genocide and raising awareness about it. When researching about the Roma genocide, it is difficult to find written evidence because of widespread illiteracy in the Roma community and their culture’s taboo concerning speaking about the dead. ERIO has built alliances with the media, academia, Holocaust experts, European Union institutions, local authorities and embassies to raise awareness. ERIO also has created a network for the stakeholders interested in this issue. The MemoROM project was seen by the European Commission as a successful practice, for this reason ERIO is interested in wanting the project to spread throughout Europe. Mr. Ivanov went on to stress the importance of continuing to ally with the Jewish organizations to learn from their experiences in promoting Holocaust awareness.

ERIO’s director Ivan Ivanov speaking at the conference
ERIO partnered with EQUINET to organise its fourth annual workshop with Equality Bodies titled “Fighting hate speech against Roma: the Role of Equality Bodies”. The workshop was held at the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism in Brussels on 16 October 2015. Present at the workshop were Equality Bodies from member states and accession countries, anti-discrimination experts and representatives of Roma and non-Roma civil society.

Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s director, opened the workshop. He said that ERIO aims to provide a platform for the Equality Bodies and anti-discrimination experts to learn about each other’s challenges and successful practices. Jana Balazova (DG Justice, European Commission) expressed the Commission’s view on the need to fight hate speech and the importance of the Equality Bodies in the advancement of Roma rights. She spoke on the European Commission's efforts, specifically the infringement cases launched against the Czech Republic and Slovakia. However, Ms Balazova also stated that the Commission is limited in its capacity to investigate individual cases.

The panels dealt with the topics of EU policies addressing hate speech and stereotypes in a broader sense. Christel Mercadé (DG Justice, European Commission) addressed the legal EU instruments available to fight hate speech. Jeremy McBride (ECRI expert) presented ECRI’s General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combatting Hate Speech.

Moreover, it was expressed by the panellists that efforts need to take place on all levels and using criminal law should be a last resort. Joël Le Déroff (ENAR) said that the Equality Bodies should help citizens to access justice when there is a case of discrimination. Also, he urged them to engage with political actors, journalists and educational institutions. Furthermore, the topic of the Roma in the media was discussed by Jörg Gebhard (Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities). It was said that the Roma are rarely asked their perspective and news reporting remains largely bias. According to Ronald Lucardie, president of ERIO's board, to fight this discrimination hate speech has to be targeted at its source in social settings before it becomes socially acceptable.

During the afternoon, two thematic workshops took place. The workshops focused on how Equality Bodies can tackle hate speech and how partnerships can aid them in achieving their aim. From the workshops it was found that there is difficulty in drawing the line between freedom of speech and hate speech. Moreover, there is a problem in the low number of hate speech cases against the Roma community. Building partnerships with other Equality Bodies, NGOs and governmental institutions is vital to further Roma rights. During the course of the day the participants were able to learn about good practices from other Equality Bodies.

Event hashtag: #fightromahate
Event mini-site: www.erionet.eu/event-161015
Eurodiaconia, ERIO and EESC Hearing on the Gender dimension of Roma Inclusion

Eurodiaconia organised in close cooperation with ERIO its hearing titled “Roma Inclusion: Exploring the gender dimension” on the 21st of October 2015, hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels. The aim of the hearing was to raise awareness about the particular challenges Roma women are facing across Europe when it comes to accessing education or employment, and making their voices heard in the political arena. The current situation of Roma women was first examined by representatives of the European Commission, FRA and civil society. It was stated that gender based violence is a major issue facing the community. Moreover, the Roma women are still struggling when attempting to take financial decisions. When it comes to education, there is an improvement in the statistics but a high dropout rate is still present.

The hearing discussed positive practices to empower Roma women. As a good practice, ERIO’s policy officer Marta Pinto presented the project KEYROMA funded by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme. ERIO was involved as partner in this 2-year project which aimed to boost the socio-economic integration of Roma women through adult education and to increase their chances on the labour market (particularly the service sector). A learning module was developed with the Roma women which included units on attitudes, skills, knowledge and mediation aimed to increase their participation in the service sector.

The module is available in seven languages and can be downloaded here: http://www.erionet.eu/event-211015. The presentation can be found here: www.erionet.eu/keyroma.

Strategies to empower Roma women were then discussed. MEP Damian Draghici spoke on the insecurity and violence facing his Roma community. He also explained to the participants the normalization of domestic violence amongst the Roma. During the session it was continually stated that the Roma women already have will power but are greatly restricted by both the Roma and non-Roma communities. Furthermore, it was discussed that the Roma women need to take control of running projects and positions of leadership to realize their potential. Through the empowerment of Roma women, the Roma community as a whole will develop across all fields.

The hearing brought out key points of highlighting the hidden potential amongst the Roma women and promoting social inclusion with anti-discrimination actions.

MEP Damian Draghici at the hearing on gender dimension of Roma inclusion
ERIO at the Greens and European Free Alliance conference
“Can Europe afford not to sanction against discrimination and racism?”

On the 19 November 2015, ERIO was invited to speak at the conference “Can Europe afford not to sanction against discrimination and racism?” organised by the Roma Working Group of the Greens and the European Free Alliance at the European Parliament in Brussels. Several good examples from national level to combat the discrimination against Roma were presented.

ERIO’s policy officer, Marta Pinto, explained the situation of the Roma in Bulgaria, noting the increase of anti-Gypsyism and anti-Roma sentiments by the media, general society, companies and by state institutions. She said that, despite this negative trend, “there are signs of an emerging period of new opportunities”. Ms Pinto highlighted that, according to some experts, Bulgaria adopted one of the most comprehensive National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) but there are no funds to develop the specific measures for Roma inclusion. However, she gave examples of good practices on Roma integration and in addressing discrimination against Roma. Centre AMALIPE, a Bulgarian NGO and ERIO’s member, organised a successful training program to assist Roma women in their job search. Moreover, organisations such as the Equal Opportunities Initiative Association, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and the so-called Commission For Protection Against Discrimination, the Bulgarian Equality Body were also given as good examples. In concluding her speech, Ms Pinto urged the European Commission to continue to safeguard European law and values and take action against those member states that breach anti-discrimination law. She stressed that a stronger political commitment is needed to effectively fight discrimination against the Roma community.

Overall, throughout the debate it was clear that for participants there is no room for impunity of member states that continue to discriminate and segregate Roma. That is the reason why this fruitful conference paved the way for a continuing cooperation to tackle discrimination, for a Europe of equality, solidarity and justice.

ERIO at the Focus Group of the European Court of Auditors

On 19 November 2015, ERIO participated in a focus group organised by the European Court of Auditors in Luxembourg. The focus group was created to consult on the audit previously conducted by the European Court with the main objective to assess whether the structural funds effectively contributed to Roma inclusion. The European Court asked the following two audit questions:

a) Have the Structural Funds support for Roma integration been effective in the 2007–2013 programming period?

b) Are policy developments on Roma integration...
On 10-11 December 2015 ERIO organised the training “Advocacy for Roma inclusion” in Brussels. The training aimed to assist Roma activists in conducting advocacy campaigns to fight discrimination and improving their advocacy skills to advance the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies, as well as anti-discrimination and social inclusion policies at European, national and local level. The training was developed with the view that Roma community-based advocacy needs to be better promoted, especially at the level of grassroots groups, networks, and organisations with the necessary information and advocacy skills to demand that Roma community needs and priorities need to be addressed. Special focus was placed on the delivery of information concerning Roma rights and recent developments in European Roma policy making at EU and national level relevant to community- and national-based organisations. Participants had the opportunity to put into practice what they learned during the two-days training through practical exercises. The advocacy training offered our team as well as our trainees the opportunity to exchange experiences, and good practice examples in terms of advocacy approaches, and establish new contacts with a view to improving the tools for the social inclusion and non-discrimination of Roma in the EU. The training was very informative and beneficial to all attendees.
ERIO at the EC training on the FRA indicators for Roma inclusion

On the 15 December, DG Justice of the European Commission organised a training in Brussels for civil society representatives on the indicators for Roma inclusion developed by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA).

The European Commission's 2016 assessment report on the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) will use the FRA indicators to evaluate progress on the ground by reporting on measures taken by member states. In the 2016 report, in addition to the assessment of the implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, the Commission will also evaluate the implementation of the Council Recommendation. Thus, the new FRA reporting template includes rights based indicators assessing Roma integration that reflect the Council Recommendation and it is a pilot monitoring tool.

Using the new reporting template, civil society representatives were asked to send their contributions to the Commission by the 31 January 2016. These contributions are vital as they ensure a balanced and fair assessment of the progress on the ground when it comes to Roma inclusion. The next meeting between the European Commission and civil society will take place on the 19 February 2016.

The reporting template for 2016 can be found here (last bullet below “Where is it going?”): ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/eu-framework

ERIO’s #BeyondRomaStereotypes campaign

Our BeyondRomaStereotypes online campaign combats stereotypes and prejudices about Roma.

POSTER 1: He is a Roma and he is a medical student. His ambition makes him a great role model for all the young Roma that want to pursue their dreams.

POSTER 2: She is Roma. She is educated, she is motivated, she is empowered. Should she be limited by a stereotype? Would you like to be limited by a stereotype?
POSTER 3: Roma parents care about their children and want them to be educated as much as non-Roma parents do. Let’s break the stereotype that Roma parents don’t encourage their children to go to school.

Let’s come together and see #BeyondRomaStereotypes on this campaign where we aim to fight stereotypes and prejudices.

**Inside view of ERIO: Yasmin Hegazy**

I started working for ERIO in October and I have been here for four months. Before coming to ERIO I was aware of the injustice the Roma face and the stereotypes that are projected onto the community. During my work at ERIO I gained in-depth knowledge on the hate speech facing the Roma, and their inability to exercise their European Union citizens’ rights. The more I learnt about what the Roma face, the more I gained interest in advancing their rights, especially in the areas of education and housing. At ERIO the working environment was extremely supportive, and the team was willing to share their experiences and advice on how to be a better Roma rights advocate.

Working at ERIO was a great opportunity for me to learn about what advocacy is and to be a part of the advocacy process. For example, during an advocacy workshop organized by ERIO, I furthered my knowledge on what advocacy entails, and on how to advocate at the local, national and European levels. To advance ERIO’s advocacy work during my internship I participated in various tasks. Some of my assignments included updating ERIO’s social media, writing reports, and being part of their online campaign against Roma stereotypes. Moreover, I actively participated in various conferences, and workshops organized by EU institutions and other NGOs. Having different assignments provided me with a wide range of work experience, which I found to be highly valuable for the rest of my career. The most important lesson I learnt during my work at ERIO was that for Roma rights to be realized, it is of upmost importance for the Roma to have participation in the decision making process. The Roma need to be part of forming their agenda and their opinions need to be seriously taken into consideration. I learnt that lesson at the workshop for equality bodies, which ERIO organized. I really enjoyed that workshop because I learnt about the importance of Roma involvement in projects, what is happening at the grassroots level in various EU countries, and also gained in depth knowledge concerning the obstacles that we have yet to overcome. Moreover, I found all of the events to be very interesting, as not only did I learn about different aspects of Roma rights, but also I got to interact with members of the Roma community that provided very interesting perspectives on how to advance their rights.

I would urge Roma activists and young graduates interested in furthering the rights of the Roma to apply to be part of ERIO’s team. It is great opportunity to both learn about the problems the Roma face, and also to be a part of taking a step forward in the realization of Roma rights.