The 2013 European Year of Citizens

By Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s executive director

2013 is dedicated to the rights of all EU citizens. The European Commission will promote dialogue with governmental authorities, representatives of civil society and businesses. This dialogue will take place during meetings and conferences across Europe to discuss the rights of European citizens and together build a vision of how the EU should be in 2020.

According to Commissioner Vivian Reding, “Citizens are at the heart of the European project. The EU is not for politicians, it is for people. This principle is what guides our work here in the European Commission. […] The Commission also wants to hear the citizens’ views - regarding everyday issues as well as on which direction Europe should move in and how they think it should be run in the future.”

One of the objectives of the European Year of Citizens is for people to learn about their rights, use them and benefit from them as individuals. One of the conclusions of the EU Citizenship Report 2010 shows that EU citizens are not fully benefitting from their rights due to their lack of awareness about them, especially the right to move and reside freely within the EU. Other reports and surveys show that Roma, as EU citizens, not only do not benefit from their rights but their rights are also regularly violated by institutions and other EU citizens.

The Year raises many questions. The right to free movement is a basic right of all EU citizens. Although the Commission is working to ensure that EU law on freedom of movement is correctly implemented and that barriers preventing citizens from moving across and beyond the
EU are removed, a large number of Roma continue to be subjected to deportations. This makes Roma feel they are not respected as EU citizens and that EU laws and principles do not apply to them.

Hopefully the goals and objectives of the 2013 European Year of Citizens will boost an effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies so that Roma’s socio-economic status is improved and citizenship rights are fully respected. Only when Roma are treated as equal citizens, we might see them travelling within the EU not due to poverty, exclusion or discrimination but for career and leisure purposes.

ERIO met with the Irish EU presidency

On 6 February, ERIO met with a representative from the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The meeting followed up our submission of recommendations to the Presidency, with the aim of ensuring that the current Presidency keeps the Roma issue on the agenda. Over the next 6 months Ireland will have the chance to influence policy to improve the socio-economic situation of the 10-12 million Roma in Europe.

ERIO celebrates its 10th anniversary!

For the last 10 years ERIO has been involved in fighting racism against Roma and in promoting the inclusion of Europe’s largest minority. To celebrate our 10th anniversary we have created a brand new logo and given our website a new look! Come check us out!

Visit our website: www.erionet.eu
Some of our key recommendations to the Irish Presidency:

1. National Roma Integration Strategies

In order to ensure effective implementation of the Strategies, ERIO calls on the Presidency to:

- Ensure that the Commission pressures member states, enlargement and candidate countries to efficiently and swiftly transpose and implement the Framework at national and local level and implement the changes and improvements to their Strategies recommended in the Commission’s assessment in May 2012.

- Ensure that the Commission’s monitoring of the implementation of the Strategies is thorough and involves dialogue with Roma civil society. The monitoring should ensure that Strategies include a human rights approach, including a focus on anti-discrimination, anti-Gypsyism and gender.

2. Poverty and Social Exclusion

It is crucial that in the wake of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, the EU engages with communities in its own territory who remain to be integrated in to mainstream society. To achieve this, ERIO calls on the Presidency to:

- Put pressure on member states to ensure a smooth implementation of the EU 2020 Strategy which should include a balanced level of a social and economic dimension.

- Focus the debate during the 2013 European Year of Citizens on how to improve the social engagement of Roma and ensure they have a voice in local, regional, national and European political debate.

3. Equality

More needs to be done to ensure the implementation of current anti-discrimination legislation since Roma across the EU remain heavily discriminated against in both the public and private lives. ERIO calls on the Presidency to:

- Pressure the Commission to ensure that the Race Equality Directive is being effectively transposed and implemented by member states. All necessary measures need to be taken against hate speech, anti-Gypsyism and intolerance in the member states.

- Act in the spirit of the European Year of Citizens and ensure equal access to EU citizenship rights to all EU citizens. Roma, as European citizens, are often denied their EU rights in their daily lives.

4. Movement of Roma communities

Migration

Despite often migrating due to persecution in their home country, Roma find integration into a host society incredibly difficult and are frequently denied the basic rights which they migrated to secure. In order to improve this situation, ERIO calls on the Presidency to:

- Advocate the fundamental rights of Roma to migrate to, live and work in their territory. Stress the unacceptability of member states expelling and deporting Roma, which causes unnecessary hardship to thousands of families and has little long-term effect.
• Ensure protection of Roma migrants from exploitation in the black market. ERIO welcomes the Presidency’s intentions to advance agreement on the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen Convention.

Asylum from the Western Balkans

The large Roma population in the Western Balkans sadly remains today one of Europe’s most marginalized. In addition to the high levels of poverty, they also suffer racially aggravated violence and significant direct and indirect discrimination.

Read the full recommendations here: www.erionet.eu/doc-recommendations-irish-presidency_2013

ERIO at the EPP session: “Establishing a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Roma Holocaust”

On 29 January, the European People’s Party Roma Working Group hosted an open session at the European Parliament in Brussels: “Establishing a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Roma Holocaust”. The aim of the session was to discuss MEP Lívia Járóka’s proposal for a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Roma Holocaust. ERIO was invited to give the closing speech and show a short video of the Roma experience in the Holocaust.

ERIO’s screening of a short video, “The untold story: Roma Holocaust”, shone a light on the persecution of Roma and Sinti in Germany before and during WWII. The self-produced video documented the progressive enactment of anti-Roma legislation over more than a century that culminated in the genocide now known as the Roma Holocaust.

In providing the closing speech, ERIO Executive Director impressed on the audience the importance of awareness-raising events such as the proposed European Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Roma Holocaust. Highlighting the similarity in the de-humanizing language of Nazi legislation and current anti-Roma discourse, he called for the European institutions to officially reject these negative stereotypes so as to give greater strength and legitimacy to those fighting for Roma interests.

ERIO calls on the Presidency to:

• Pressure EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans to prioritize the integration of Roma by developing and/or implementing their own National Roma Integration Strategies.

• Ensure that the completion of the Common European Asylum System pays due consideration to fundamental rights and are sensitive to the precarious situation of Roma asylum seekers, especially those coming from Kosovo.

Read the full recommendations here: www.erionet.eu/doc-recommendations-irish-presidency_2013
ERIO’s short video on the Roma Holocaust

Far too often, the Holocaust during WWII is associated merely with the Jewish persecution. However, there is another genocide that is frequently forgotten; a genocide where hundreds of thousands of Roma also fell victim and were too persecuted by the Nazi regime.

As a way to raise awareness about the experiences of Roma during the Holocaust, ERIO has created a short video “The untold story: Roma Holocaust” which can be viewed on our website: www.erionet.eu/videos.

It has subtitles into more than 20 languages.

ERIO at a consultation meeting with the UN Roma Task Force

On 18 February ERIO and other ERPC members attended a consultation meeting with the Geneva-based UN Regional Team and the UN Roma Task Force in Brussels. Representatives of the International Organisation for Migration, the World Bank and the European Commission also attended the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting was to hear inputs from representatives of civil society and to include the expert knowledge of NGOs working directly and daily with issues specifically related to the problems faced by Roma.

Chairing the meeting, Jan Jařab (OHCHR Regional Representative) pointed out the problem of lack of coordination in relation to dealing with problems of discrimination and violations of fundamental rights targeting Roma.

Attention was drawn to the need of concrete action, as opposed to mere formulations of good intentions and goals, as the issues discussed are occurring everyday with severe and daily consequences for the Roma.

Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s Executive Director, pointed towards and reminded everyone of the structural problem consisting in the fact that advocacy groups cannot address the responsible and relevant actors at national and local level. This in turn requires the UN to regularly, clearly and effectively address government agencies at national and local level about the discrimination and violations of rights suffered by Roma as individuals and as a group.

He also encouraged to take into consideration the lessons to be drawn from the positive results in removing barriers of Roma to access education, where special needs by Roma were accommodated. These needs included Roma pupils being taught in Romani and teaching being conducted by representatives of the Roma community. These experiences should be taken into consideration and implemented to increase the access to health facilities of Roma. In relation to this Ivan Ivanov drew attention to registration procedures in health facilities, which do not register Roma ethnicity, hereby creating administrative blind spots of the actual scope of the problem.
Interview with Rita Prigmore - a Sinti Holocaust survivor

On 28 February ERIO interviewed Rita Prigmore, a Sinti Holocaust survivor in Brussels. She shared with us her story, and the terrible experience of being the subject of Nazi medical experimentation during the Second World War. Born in Würzburg, Germany on the 3rd March 1943, Rita was stolen from her mother at birth simply because she was a Sinti twin. She was taken to the town's University Hospital along with her sister, and together they became part of a project trying to chemically induce a change in their eye colour. Whilst Rita miraculously survived, her sister was not so fortunate, becoming one of the millions of Roma murdered in the Holocaust.

Reflecting on the racist morality used to justify their treatment, Rita stated that:

“Racism is, I think, the cruellest thing on earth.

We have so many beautiful people from different countries here [in Europe] and we don't need another Auschwitz... basically, when it comes down to it, we are all the same”.

Today, Rita is an activist fighting for tolerance and understanding. Despite her experiences of terrible suffering and a protracted legal fight for justice, she remains committed to spreading a message of peace to all peoples:

“My message is to show love and compassion, and show help where you can. Always put yourself in the same position that you could be the other person and it could happen to you. Hate and racism are even worse than the knife. A knife you can take out and the wound will heal. But hate, dishonesty and racism are not right.”

ERIO at Accept Pluralism Conference

On 6 March CCME organised a European conference to discuss the results of the research project ACCEPT Pluralism in Brussels. ERIO was invited as a discussant to comment one of the conference panels “Tolerance and Policies of Inclusion”. During her intervention, ERIO’s Policy Officer Marta Pinto, stressed that Roma inclusion policies need an integrated approach which includes different fields such as anti-discrimination, health, employment, housing and education.
The National Roma Integration Strategies are a step forward towards fighting anti-Gypsyism and the exclusion of Roma, however, many need improvement in order to include a human rights approach, she noted. Political will, fighting anti-Gypsyism and institutional racism are vital to ensure change, she added.

Roma should not be viewed as passive victims. Instead, she said, Roma need to be seen as active agents of change, who can make a positive difference in their lives. This active involvement of Roma is crucial for policies to be successful. Roma parents should be involved in schools through the assistance of cultural mediators; Roma should be involved in all stages of policy development, implementation and evaluation. Ms Pinto warned about the danger of using concepts such as “culture” and “identity” since they tend to essentialise groups and create an “us/them” mentality. Perhaps, she concluded, promoting common values such as human rights, acceptance and empathy can lead to more inclusive policies.

ERIO’s latest publications

You can consult our website and download our two latest publications.

The European Commission’s main achievements in Roma inclusion (2012)

This paper deals with the main achievements of the Commission in trying to achieve Roma inclusion. It first looks at initiatives conducted with civil society to promote Roma integration. It then looks at policy initiated by the Commission, in particular the framework laid down by the Commission for the National Roma Integration Strategies. Internal bodies set up by the Commission including the Roma Task Force, the Government Expert Group on Non-Discrimination and the Roma Unit in DG Justice are considered. Funding offered by the Commission to promote Roma inclusion are discussed.

Download the paper here:
ERIO’s new projects

We are currently involved in two new European projects which are described below.

European Roma Integration Good Practice Exchange and Policy Network (ERNE)

We are a partner in this two-year project funded by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme. The project is implemented in seven European countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Croatia). It aims to develop a platform for the sharing of good-practice information between actors in the education of Roma in four areas: pre-school, school, higher education and vocational courses.

Read more here:
www.erne-project.eu
www.erionet.eu/erne

Arts for Roma Children (ART4ROM)

Art4ROM is a new project ERIO is involved in which is financed by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme promoting intercultural dialogue within Roma and non-Roma children through arts. This two-year project is a partnership of eight partners covering five European countries: Belgium, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain.

Read more here: www.erionet.eu/art4rom
Follow the project: www.facebook.com/pages/Art4ROM/321611934612217

Guidelines on how to apply for European Commission funds (2012)

This guidebook provides an overview of essential information concerning the funding programmes of the European Commission: Structural funds, Operating grants, and Call for Proposals for civil society projects. The guidebook is divided into three corresponding sections, giving detailed information about each type of funding and the working areas they cover. This guidebook provides detailed guidelines for organisations about the necessary steps and major requirements in order to develop a valid and strong application. It also presents detailed instructions about all the required application documents of the different application procedures.

Download the guide here: