Commission’s 2013 Report for Roma integration

By Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s executive director

In June 2013, the European Commission issued a communication to the EU institutions, titled “Step forward in Implementing National Roma Integration Strategies”. The communication was delivered on the very day the Commission organized the Roma Platform, its yearly Roma event. Both the communication and the debates within the Platform have shown some progress in the inclusion process of Roma in Europe, still further work needs to be done.

Besides the positive developments in Roma integration, the Commission recognizes that EU Member States still have to put more efforts in order to produce real outcomes “… although some steps have been taken at policy level in the Member States, in particular to better coordinate all stakeholders active on Roma integration, effective changes are still insufficient. Furthermore, to encourage further efforts by the Member States, the Commission commits, with this communication, to provide additional support to the Member States notably on their use of EU funds for Roma integration”.

When analysing the data provided by the Member States to the Commission for the communication, stakeholders in Roma integration affairs could notice that the information is sometimes incorrect. Being based in Brussels, ERIO will point out an example from Belgium. With respect to sections “2.1 Structural pre-conditions for effective implementation – (1) Involving Local and regional authorities and (2) Working closely with civil society (2b) Allocating proportionate financial resources”, Belgian authorities seem to positively respond. Nevertheless, not only is this incorrect but there are not even signs from Belgian Federal authorities to take some steps in that direction. Of course the European Commission does not rely on the sole information received by national contact points, yet such reports mislead the Commission on the real processes undergoing in a particular Member State. One further interesting finding involves section 2d, concerning Member States that have taken measures to fight discrimination convincingly. These are Austria, Denmark and Sweden, all of which happen to be countries with a small number of Roma. At the end of each chapter, the Commission points out the gaps in the implementation process, the insufficiency of measures as well as the need of an adequate approach for changes in order to make progress. Moreover, it addresses specific recommendations to be followed by Member States.
The next Commission report will be issued by spring 2014 on progress made on the four pillars of education, employment, health and housing. This will be based on information provided by the Member States, on data collected by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and on the contributions received from civil society organizations. The annual reports will benchmark the efforts made and progress achieved by Member States on Roma integration.

8 April 2013 - International Roma day

We need to guarantee equality of rights to all EU citizens

ERIO would like, on the International Roma Day, to celebrate the cultures and history of the Roma communities and to stimulate debate about Roma inclusion. The Roma have a long history in Europe, and have contributed greatly to society and culture across the continent. This year, in what is also the European Year of Citizens, the onus of the day must be to reflect upon the extent to which Roma are truly integrated into European society.

European citizenship entails the conferring of rights, obligations, and a sense of belonging to all people in the European Union, no matter what their ethnicity, gender or social status. In theory, it exists to bring about equality and ensure we can all live and work wherever we like without fear of discrimination. Sadly, the reality for Roma does not reflect these ideals.

Systematic discrimination towards the community continues to reinforce their social, economic and political marginalization and there are numerous examples of public bodies across the union remaining oblivious towards their obligation to prevent this. Forced evictions and deportations as well as discrimination in access to public services leave Roma unable to exercise their citizenship rights and do nothing to foster a sense of unity and belonging for all.

ERIO Executive Director Ivan Ivanov states: “Whilst Europe deals with the financial crisis, it is important that on days such as this the national governments and the institutions of the EU and its candidate countries hear the voices of Roma people. For Europe to prosper, it must stay true to its values and ensure that equality in every field applies to all communities, not just the majority.”
ERIO’s conference
“Are Roma People European Citizens like any others?”

On 22 April ERIO held a conference titled “European Year of Citizens: Are Roma People European Citizens like any others?” at the EESC in Brussels. The conference aimed to address the extent Roma are able to exercise their rights as EU citizens and the barriers they face in accessing them. Some of the speakers included representatives of the European Commission - Alexander Vajda, DG Justice and Joachim Ott, DG Communication - and various civil society representatives and Roma activists from Europe.

As ERIO’s director noted “When people are lacking access to basic services, are being kicked out of their houses, are treated so badly and in some countries are attacked by mob violence, they don’t know if they belong to that country. According to the laws they belong, but they don’t feel this belonging because of this violence and anti-Roma sentiment.” There was a consensus that what is needed is strong, consistent and numerous legal evidence that discrimination and rights abuses are occurring in order to hold the violators responsible.

As underlined by Alexander Vajda, the daily discrimination and social exclusion that many Roma suffer, is a barrier for Roma to enjoy their full citizenship. For Joachim Ott the main task of the European Commission in times of crisis is to provide hope, not only for Roma, but Europeans in general.

It has been highlighted that the question of belonging to Europe is an underestimated dimension of citizenship. The direct discrimination and violation of rights against Roma is a strong barrier in creating this sense of belonging to a European community.

The afternoon session focussed on the challenges and solutions to ensure equal citizenship to Roma. Some of the challenges mentioned included: lack of sufficient funding and equality of opportunity for Roma, how to preserve and disseminate Romani culture, when integration policies often implies assimilation. Anti-Gypsyism, anti-Roma rhetoric and rights abuses were highlighted as main obstacles to full and equal citizenship of Roma and as impeding Roma’s sense of belonging.
ERIO met with the Swedish Integration Minister

On 24 April, ERIO’s Executive Director met with the Swedish Minister for Integration, Erik Ullenhag. The meeting took place in the Swedish Permanent Representation in Brussels. Minister Ullenhag met with civil society organizations to consult on issues related to anti-Gypsyism. As established during the roundtable meeting on anti-Gypsyism in Stockholm on April 10th this year, this was one of the meetings Minister Ullenhag planned on having with Roma organizations at a national level.

Under his initiative, the Swedish Ministry of Integration will be launching a White Paper on anti-Gypsyism in Sweden. ERIO’s Executive Director presented the actions related to these issues his organization had initiated recently. He also discussed some plans he had for the following year. Furthermore, ERIO’s Executive Director made a number of recommendations as to the different ways one could tackle anti-Gypsyism, whether this was in the past, the present or the future. Lastly, civil society representatives urged Minister Ullenhag to continue fighting against anti-Gypsyism not only at a national but also at a European level.

ERIO at the Roma Platform preparatory meeting

On 3 May, ERIO attended a preparatory meeting for the next European Platform for Roma Inclusion, at the European Commission in Brussels. Over 30 participants were present including representatives of civil society, international organisations active in Roma inclusion in Europe and officials from the European Commission.

The goal of this meeting was to discuss and exchange ideas about the content and organisation of the next Platform meeting titled “It is urgent to make change for Roma children and youth”. This year’s meeting puts Roma children and youth as a top priority.

Although ERIO welcomed the topic of children and youth, we stressed that the Platform meeting should acknowledge and address the widespread anti-Roma discrimination and anti-Gypsyism that pervades today’s society, as they are the root of many problems the Roma have to deal with, such as inequality and poverty. This kind of discrimination takes place in all spheres, sectors and classes of society, in the labour market, in private housing, in access to health and education and it is effectively hindering Roma inclusion and integration. ERIO made clear that as long as we do not acknowledge and address this discrimination, we will be merely treating the symptoms and not the cause of Roma exclusion.
ERIO at the European Commission’s roundtable on Roma integration

On 15 May, ERIO attended a roundtable organised by Viviane Reding (Vice-President and Commissioner on Justice, Citizenship and Fundamental Rights) and László Andor (Commissioner on Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), in Brussels. The meeting was attended by other key European level networks and media. The aim of the meeting was to consult with civil society on the progress of the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) before the Commission’s release of their progress report in June.

Vice-President Reding introduced the discussion by declaring that there are sometimes important discrepancies between what is said on paper and what really goes in reality. The presence of ERIO and other civil society was, therefore, very much appreciated. From ERIO, Mrs Reding hoped to hear how the NRIS were received, what the contents were of the different NRIS and what actions were undertaken as part of their implementation. Mrs Reding added that the strength of the European Union was that each member state was allowed – and even encouraged – to copy the good practices of other member states.

Commissioner Andor then stated that the European Framework that was established two years ago was still of great use, because it allowed them to create a link with the European 2020 Strategy. Because of the Framework, there is a better understanding now of the economic and social needs of and expectations for the Roma community. Because the 2020 Strategy aims at resolving these types of issues, it is possible to apply the legal and financial instruments of the 2020 Strategy to the Roma community as well. However, this is not possible without a constant collaboration and an effective feedback system between all levels of society, i.e. the local, national and European levels.

The civil society representatives present then expressed, on the one hand, their concerns regarding the high levels of discrimination Roma face in Europe and, on the other, their urgency to be allowed to consult the Commission and the member states on certain Roma challenges.

ERIO’s Director Ivan Ivanov stressed that “Member states that demonstrate political will mainly consider Roma as poor people and marginal and all their efforts are in direction to improve the material condition of Roma. It is true that Roma are the largest group among the poorest communities in Europe but not all Roma are marginal and all Roma face discrimination regardless of their socio-economic status. This is why member states should make sure that the Race Equality Directive is part of different policy fields such as education, employment, health and housing. Improving the socio-economic situation of Roma requires funding and with the current crises, it becomes easy for member states to justify their inaction on Roma inclusion with the lack of financial resources. The European Commission should make sure that member states use effectively all available instruments including EU funds”.

You can watch the video of the meeting here: http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?sitelang=en&ref=1078141
ERIO at the debate “Le Temps des Gitans, Regards en Libérété”

On 1 June, ERIO participated in the debate “Le Temps des Gitans, Regards en Libérété”. This get-together was organised by the Espace Delvaux in Brussels and it was meant to allow participants to discuss the current situation of Roma people in Europe, in general, and in Belgium, in particular, with representatives of Roma-related organizations and with several connaisseurs of the matter such as professor Alain Reyniers (UCL), Ahmed Ahkim (Centre de Médiation des Gens du Voyage et des Romans en Wallonie) and Isabelle Doyen (ADDE). ERIO was invited, both, to talk about the “European Policies on Roma Issues” and to take part in the closing debate. The public was responsive and very inquisitive as to ERIO’s aim and message. ERIO clarified the doubts certain people had and answered questions.

ERIO’s training “Advocacy for Roma inclusion”

On 20 June, ERIO organised a training for Roma communities on advocacy and lobbying techniques entitled “Advocacy for Roma inclusion” in Brussels. The main goal of this training was to encourage the Roma to become more involved with Belgian social, cultural and political life. To do so, ERIO invited Professor Peter Vermeersch from the KULeuven and Julie Pascoët from ENAR to enlighten the Roma attendants on the current situation of advocacy, lobbying techniques and networking practices. Professor Vermeersch stressed that there were three key elements to take into consideration when it comes to advocacy: knowledge of existing documents on the debated issue, realism as to the expectations of the activists, and the build-up of a tight-knit and knowledgeable network. Julie Pascoët, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the formatting of the message a lobby group might have. She used the economic crisis as an example; as money issues are on everybody’s mind, a strategy is to reformulate humanitarian policies and aspirations in financially sensitive terms.
As ERIO’s Director stated: “No one will listen to you when you only mention the advantages a possible change might have for you and your community. One also has to sum up the advantages the other party will enjoy because of the change in question.”

In the afternoon session, Marta Pinto (ERIO’s Policy Officer) assisted by Alexandra Sanchez (ERIO’s intern) led a practical session which was meant to further enhance the lobbying skills of the Roma activists present. They were given a concrete situation (“Often Roma girls are not going to school”) and they were asked to solve that issue by relying on the information they had been given in the first half of the day. Finally, participants were also given a list of all key authorities they could address when faced with Roma issues and challenges.

8th EU Platform for Roma Inclusion

On 27 June, ERIO attended the 8th EU Platform for Roma Inclusion organised by the European Commission in Brussels. The meeting gathered more than 200 participants including representatives from Roma civil society, international organisations, academics, local and regional authorities, government officials and EU representatives. The focus of the 2013 Platform was on Roma children and youth. The meeting aimed to provide possible solutions to improve the integration of Roma children and youth and to discuss progress of the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS).

Four panels were held: 1) making change for Roma children from birth to compulsory school age – focus on health, early childhood education and care, and compulsory education, 2) making changes for Roma youth – focus on the transition between school and employment, 3) Roma empowerment: how Roma leaders can drive change, 4) following progress on the ground – shaping policies that work.

Some of the speakers included Viviane Reding (Vice-President of the European Commission for Justice, Citizenship and Fundamental Rights), László Andor (Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), Françoise Le Bail (Director General of DG Justice, European Commission) and MEP Lívia Járóka.

Vivian Reding, somehow disappointed with the slow implementation of the NRIS, stated that the Commission’s report shows that member states have not put into practice what they have pledged. The report shows that “many member states have put in place coordination teams but progress on the ground is very small”, she noted.

Ms Reding went on by stressing that member states need to follow five preconditions to ensure an effective implementation of the strategies: 1) in volvement of local and regional authorities, 2) involvement of civil society, 3) appropriate fund allocation, 4) strong monitoring system and 5) fighting discrimination convincingly.
“I hope that with the Commission’s proposal for a Council Recommendation will help NGOs to exercise more pressure and make sure that what’s on paper is implemented on the ground”, she concluded.


For Lívia Járóka, the inefficient involvement of civil society in the implementation of the NRIS is partly due to lack of resources and funding. As the Commission report indicates, weakness of financial resources due to the current crisis lead to the suspension of the implementation of some strategies. The Commission should urge member to reflect on their strategies to ensure Roma inclusion, she added.

ERIO’s latest publications and statements

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

Social Platform position paper on migration

ERIO, as a member of the Social Platform, contributed to a joint position paper on migration. The paper includes the recommendations to the EU and member states on the situation of regular and irregular migrants, asylum seekers and on the situation of intra-EU mobility for EU citizens. At the end of September Social Platform will meet with Ms Malmström, Commissioner for Home Affairs to present our recommendations and concerns.

Download the paper here: www.erionet.eu/doc-position-paper-migration-social-platform_2013

ERIO joint statement with Eurochild “Roma Children are European citizens too!”

ERIO and Eurochild welcome the integration of Roma children and youth as the focus of this year’s European Platform for Roma Inclusion. Roma children face additional difficulties in realising their rights due to discrimination, poverty and disadvantage. The precarious situation of Roma children is often overlooked and the Platform provides an excellent opportunity to discuss and put forward proposals on how to secure their rights and well-being. “Roma children are often thought of as held back by their community, in general, and by their parents, in particular,” stated Ivan Ivanov, ERIO Executive Director. “Contemporary policies and resolutions often focus on the symptoms of the Roma children’s malaise but not on the actual underlying cause of all their issues: discrimination and anti-Gypsyism. This is what should be tackled first,” he added.

Read the full statement here: www.erionet.eu/doc-statement_ерio-eurochild_ro-ма-children_270613