EU’s First Ever Legal Instrument for Roma Inclusion Adopted

By Ivan Ivanov, ERIO’s executive director

All 27 EU Member States have committed to implementing a set of recommendations for more effective economic and social integration of Roma communities. On December 10th 2013, the Council Recommendation was adopted unanimously by ministers meeting in the European Council less than six months after the Commission’s proposal.

This is the first ever EU-level legal instrument for Roma inclusion. With the adoption of the Recommendation, Member States commit to taking targeted action to bridge the gaps between the Roma and the rest of the population. “Today’s agreement is a strong signal that Member States are willing to tackle the challenging task of Roma integration head-on. Ministers have made a unanimous commitment to improve the situation for Roma communities on the ground”, said Vice-President Viviane Reding, the EU’s Justice Commissioner.

The purpose of this Recommendation is to provide guidance to Member States in enhancing the effectiveness of their measures to achieve Roma integration. This process will strengthen the implementation of their national Roma integration strategies or integrated sets of policy measures within broader social inclusion policies aimed at improving the situation of Roma and at closing any gaps between Roma and the general population.

The size and the social and economic situation of the Roma population vary considerably between different Member States. Therefore national approaches to Roma integration should be tailored to the specific circumstances and needs on the ground, including by adopting or continuing to pursue policies that address marginalised and disadvantaged groups, such as Roma, in a broader context. This Recommendation explicitly focuses on measures to promote the integration of Roma without aiming to exclude other marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Integration measures should be based on the same principles in comparable conditions.

In addition to the four pillars of the European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) – access to education, health, employment and housing, the Council Recommendations also focus on key horizontal issues such as: anti-discrimination, protection of Roma children and women, poverty reduction through social investment and empowerment.
The Council Recommendation further provides clear guidelines for some structural measures concerning local actions, appropriate monitoring and evaluation policies, bodies to promote equal treatments and transnational cooperation.

The Council Recommendation only makes the Roma integration approach more comprehensive. After the legal and political support by the EU, now the initiative lies in the hands of the national and local authorities. Adopting the NRIS was a sign of political will by all EU Member States to help Roma to get out of the situation in which no other group finds itself. Political commitment is the next step for a result based approach in Roma inclusion. Only this would convince Roma that their integration is wanted.


ERIO at the Commission meeting with civil society

On Friday 4 October, the European Commission Roma Unit held a meeting with representatives of civil society organisations active in the process of Roma integration. ERIO was one of the invited organisations. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the latest developments in the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) as well as the way forward in the implementation process. The meeting was chaired by Lina Papamichalopoulou, Head of Unit 4 – Non-discrimination policies and Roma coordination, DG Justice (European Commission). Ms Papamichalopoulou opened the meeting by outlining the recent work of the European Commission in the area of Roma integration.

The Commission’s Proposal for a Council Recommendation was then extensively discussed, particularly in relation to its progress and development during Council meetings. It was stressed that the Recommendation should ensure member states remain politically committed to the process of Roma integration. The strong ongoing support that the Lithuanian Presidency has shown for the Recommendation was praised, and it was noted that a Council meeting held on Monday 7 October should provide an indication of when the Recommendation will be passed. Civil society representatives expressed concern about any changes being made to the Recommendation during Council discussions, however the Commission explained that the Recommendation has not seen any substantive changes and it will remain a persuasive soft law, legal measure.

The recent third National Roma Contact Points meeting (30 September - 1 October) was next discussed, which was particularly focused on the role of local authorities in the NRIS implementation process. Then the Commission informed about the setting up of a “Coalition” that brings together a number of key actors in the Roma integration process from different DGs and international organisations. This “Coalition” is mainly an effort from the Commission to coordinate existing actions and programmes to avoid overlapping projects. This cooperation is necessary as many key institutional actors were not communicating during their work on the Roma issue which resulted in the development of overlapping and often inefficient policies.

Finally, the Commission discussed the civil society shadow reports on the NRIS and their importance in the development of the 2014 Commission assessment report. The Commission urged civil society to provide as much information as possible in order to allow it to compile a comprehensive assessment. The emphasis on the local level was again stressed, and the Commission encouraged civil society organisations to include information in their reports on areas neglected in the NRIS, such as youth and women.

ERIO played an active role in this meeting as a civil society organisation focused on providing information and facilitating discussion on issues relating to Roma. During the meeting, ERIO made a number of interventions in order to express its support for the ongoing positive work of the Commission in the process of Roma integration, and to urge the Commission to ensure that the Roma integration process does not lose momentum.
On 24 October, ERIO organised a seminar on “Roma Integration: The Role of Local Authorities” at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels. It aimed to provide a platform where representatives of different local authorities in Europe exchanged ideas and concerns and informed each other about the barriers they face and jointly found solutions to overcome them when it comes to the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) at local level. The seminar brought together representatives of local authorities, EU, civil society, Roma activists, international organisations and academia.

Opening the seminar, Ronald Lucardie (President of ERIO’s Board) observed that the EU has not become what we had hoped, and that lately there has been a regression to extreme nationalism. Ivan Ivanov (ERIO’s Executive Director), stressed that for an effective implementation of the NRIS, a meaningful Roma participation is needed; the translation into practices at a local level and local authorities, as the last link of the chain should participate in the implementation of strategies at a local level. Anne-Marie Sigmund (Former EESC President and Rapporteur for EESC Roma Opinions) highlighted the need for a bottom-up approach on a local and national level. Lina Papamichalopoulou (European Commission, DG Justice) spoke about the need to build trust between the stakeholders involved in the implementation of the NRIS.

She also stressed that regional and local authorities are indispensable in ensuring the social inclusion of Roma - this is why the EU has regular meetings with civil society organisations and asks them to submit shadow reports.

Four rounds of discussion with local authorities then highlighted some of the different practices and challenges that the local communities are facing. A vigorous discussion took place on the benefits of Roma-targeted policies compared to policies that target all socially excluded individuals. In addition, some local authority representatives hinted that it is complicated for some municipalities to access EU social funds. All stakeholders agreed that it was necessary to pass down to the ground level the different EU discussions on Roma integration strategies. During the second round of discussion Mr Le Drenn outlined a successful integration strategy benefiting 50 Roma families residing in his local area. Further, numerous participants emphasised the need to tackle discrimination alongside the implementation of the NRIS as there is a risk that Roma who have benefited from inclusion strategies – such as in education - will not be able to obtain employment due to discriminatory practices. It was also observed that gender-considered approaches to inclusion are vital.
On 21 November 2013, ERIO made a presentation on Roma stereotypes at the European School in Uccle in Brussels. The purpose of the presentation was to deconstruct stereotypes and myths about Roma by informing and raising awareness of the 100 students that attended the meeting.

Marta Pinto (ERIO’s Policy Officer) started her presentation by explaining who the Roma are highlighting their diversity and commonalities and describing their current situation and ongoing discrimination.

As one of the most vulnerable groups in the EU, Roma women must be empowered at the local level.

It was ultimately concluded that as the last link in the chain, local authorities are essential to the implementation of the NRIS. In addition, they are indispensable in understanding the good and bad integration practices on the ground.

The full report is available here: www.erionet.eu/doc-seminar-report_241013
Interview with Zoni Weisz

Today, on Human Rights Day, we interviewed Zoni Weisz, a Dutch Sinti Holocaust survivor. He shared with us memories and childhood experiences during the Nazi regime, and how he was luckily helped by a police officer to escape from his deportation train to Auschwitz. He was 7 years old. This interview will be available in a DVD about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust that we’ll launch in 2014.

ERIO’s latest publications and statements

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

Statement calling for an ethical journalism free of stereotypes and prejudices

ERIO issued a press statement demonstrating its deep concern with and condemning the recent media coverage of the case of a Greek girl found in a Roma camp in Greece. Media is reproducing negative stereotypes and myths of Roma reinforcing prejudices that can incite racism and discrimination against these communities. We urged media representatives to embrace a reporting strategy that ensures a conscientious ethical code of conduct, free of stereotypes and prejudices in order to avoid any form of discriminatory reporting.

Read the statement here: www.erionet.eu/doc-erio-statement_media-coverage-greek-girl_231013
Human rights abuses and discrimination against Roma: October-December 2013

This publication includes snapshots that are illustrations of human rights abuses and discrimination against Roma in EU member states and candidate countries. The period covered is October-December 2013.

Download the paper here: www.erionet.eu/doc-snapshot_2013_oct-dec


This paper identifies violations of the Articles contained in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in relation to Roma people. Where a violated right is identified, specific examples of how that right is violated are provided. Further, recommendations are given with the intention to prevent future violations of the fundamental rights of both Roma EU citizens and residents as contained within the Charter.

ERIO issued a statement strongly condemning recent anti-Roma statements made by French Interior Minister Manuel Valls. Mr. Valls' statements are extremely stigmatising fuelling anti-Gypsyism, and are particularly concerning given the contemporary climate in France towards Roma migrants. ERIO calls on Mr. Valls and all politicians and public officials in the EU to refrain from engaging with anti-Roma discourses that stigmatise Roma people, and may also serve to incite acts of racially motivated violence.


ERIO strongly condemned the manner in which the recent deportation of Leonarda Dibrani and her family from France was carried out. ERIO strongly urges the Hollande government to cease the securitisation of the issue of Roma migration. Likewise, ERIO urges the French government to ensure that all actions taken towards Roma migrants and asylum seekers are not only lawful but are carried out with the utmost consideration of and respect for their dignity and all other fundamental rights.

Open letter to Swedish Minister of Integration on the police register of Roma

ERIO sent an open letter to Swedish Minister Ullenhag stating our concern about the revelation of an ethnically compiled police register of almost 5,000 Roma in Sweden. The existence of this register directly contradicts the deserved reputation of Sweden as a role model when it comes to democracy, human rights and especially to Roma inclusion.

Read the letter here: www.erionet.eu/doc-open-letter_swedish-minister_041013

ERIO’s new projects

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

Keeping the memory alive: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust (MemoROM)

ERIO is the leading partner of this project funded by the European Commission’s Europe for City’s Programme implemented in five different countries (Belgium, France, Spain, Bulgaria and Germany). The 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. By rediscovering the relatively unknown history of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust, we expect to promote tolerance, mutual understanding, and intercultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma.

Read more here: www.romasintiholocaust.eu

Supporting motivations to Intervene on Learning and Experience (SMILE)

ERIO is a partner in the SMILE project funded by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme. This two-year project is implemented in five countries (Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria, United Kingdom and Belgium) and is done in partnership with six organisations. The aim of this project is 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 project SMILE intends to support primary schools in their effort of involving Roma students, creating a welcoming learning environment for the Roma children and families and developing a sense of community through the foundation of a new spirit of community feeling based on the concept of prosociality.

Read more here: www.erionet.eu/smile