Editorial: ERIO’s actions to expand and strengthen Roma civil society

By Ivan Ivanov

Strengthening and expanding Roma civil society is essential to their active participation in public life. In 2016 the European Commission supported ERIO to expand and maintain its network of active and competent organisations. Our actions cover three areas: information and awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building.

Information and awareness raising focuses on human rights standards, including the EU equality directives; developing and providing information about the EU, national and local decision-making processes and possibilities to express needs and concerns at each level; providing information about types of measures that have been successfully implemented to address specific problems. Part of our information and awareness raising initiatives is to organise events with the participation of EU officials. These events provide a platform for participation of different stakeholders where representatives of the European Commission can use their influence to ensure that inclusion policies are translated into national and local practices. All too often, public officials refuse to engage in a dialogue with Roma NGOs. With our roundtable meetings, we encourage national and local authorities to engage in consultations with Roma civil society.

ERIO's advocacy actions at national and local level include specific initiatives addressing relevant authorities with the needs of the local Roma community. Moreover, we assist our network with the development of specific recommendations for policy making and concrete actions for solutions. All advocacy actions have a strong accent to involve Roma in all stages of the policy making and implementation. One of ERIO’s objectives is to ensure the smooth and effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies across Europe and especially in those countries with larger Roma population.

Capacity building activities include training in formulating advocacy messages, on recognising and addressing the relevant and responsible authority; in advocacy skills and techniques and in project develop-
ERIO’s policy focus for 2016 is Roma political participation, anti-Gypsyism and stereotypes. Our main objectives are to achieve greater effectiveness in the implementation of EU anti-discrimination directives in order to ensure the full participation of Roma at all levels of policy making processes at local, national and European levels; lobby ERIO’s network members and Roma NGOs to take part in national Roma platforms proposed by the European Commission, lobby national governments for an effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies and anti-discrimination policies in all relevant fields / sectors and for the adoption of the Diversity Charters promoting the business case for diversity at the local level.

We want to build the capacity of ERIO’s network members in EU funding, project management and advocacy at local, national and European levels and empower and increase the active participation of Roma communities in decision and policy making at local, national and European levels in order to increase trust and overcome prejudices and stereotypes between Roma communities and relevant stakeholders. In addition to member states and civil society, new actors will be involved in this process such as businesses, trade unions, academia and media.

We plan to achieve those aims through: recommendations to the EU presidencies of the Netherlands and Slovakia regarding the situation of the Roma; snapshots about the human rights and anti-discrimination situation of Roma in Europe which will provide short information on discrimination cases in different European countries; a research on the Roma experiences of racist violence and crime with the aim to give a voice to Roma exposed to discrimination and racist violence and encourage them to take similar steps and provide positive examples from other Roma; contribution and assistance to the work of the European Commission by the informal expert group of Roma and non-Roma experts created by ERIO in 2015; training for network members and Roma activists in advocacy skills at local, national and European levels; roundtables on the implementation of the NRIS and anti-discrimination laws and cultural sensitivity about Roma culture, identity, ethnic specifics, lifestyles and needs with participants from local authorities, media and other key players on Roma inclusion; workshop with Equality Bodies and anti-discrimination experts and European level conference on Roma political participation in Brussels. Networking trips to lobby at the national and local levels and to meet with local Roma communities in Austria, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Greece, Italy and Hungary.

We will be producing a factsheet on Roma political participation providing a general overview of the participation of Roma in political structures at local, national and European levels, a digital campaign on Roma political participation to raise awareness of Roma role models in politics. Launching of the European Roma Media Network and a media network monitoring review to document the work of the network in tackling media hate speech against Roma and anti-Gypsyism.
From January until June 2016, the Netherlands takes over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union bringing with it the start of a new Presidency Trio also represented by Slovakia and Malta. ERIO contributed to the Presidency’s work on migration, job creation and fundamental rights with the following key recommendations to ensure the inclusion and equal treatment of Roma.

1. Keep the inclusion and equal treatment of Roma on the policy and political agenda

ERIO welcomes the fact that the Presidency is prioritising migration and the refugee situation. Although it is urgent to address these issues, it is equally crucial to take into account the negative impact the refugee situation is having on the inclusion of Roma. The surge in refugees entering Europe has made right-wing extremism more prevalent and reinforced anti-Roma sentiment. As a result, hate speech, hate crime towards Roma and the violation of their basic human rights is increasing. ERIO urges the Presidency to ensure that the human rights of Roma are protected. Moreover, the refugee situation is pushing Roma issues to the side-line and obstructing the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies, anti-discrimination legislation and the use of funds. ERIO urges the Presidency to ensure that member states and local authorities understand that Roma inclusion is not in competition with the refugee situation since different legislation and funds are available for both groups.

2. Ensure an inclusive labour market for all

It is reassuring to see that the Presidency placed job creation as a top priority since this can help to make progress on the social targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy, particularly lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and achieving a 75% employment rate for women and men. Additionally, this can help achieve the targets and implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. The Presidency should ensure that member states promote a more inclusive labour market by tackling the most vulnerable, such as the Roma who are in disadvantage due to their lack of formal education and discrimination they face daily.

3. Fundamental rights should be respected at all times

ERIO is pleased to see that the Presidency will focus on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in the member states. While the Charter should guarantee fundamental rights to all EU citizens or residents, it is clear that in the case of Roma their rights are routinely violated. The Presidency should therefore call on member states to prevent both the violation of Article 21 as well as further violations of other fundamental rights that result from unequal treatment on the basis of their ethnicity.

The recommendations are available on our website:
www.erionet.eu/doc-recommendations_nl_presidency_2016
ERIO contribution to the EC 2016 NRIS report

The European Commission’s 2016 assessment report on the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) will report on measures taken by member states that reflect both the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the Council Recommendation.

Using the new reporting template, ERIO and its network members contributed to the EC report. Civil society’s contributions are vital as they ensure a balanced and fair assessment of the progress on the ground when it comes to Roma inclusion. The report of the Commission should be available during spring 2016.

Music4ROM project’s closing conference

The closing event of Music4ROM project took place on 11 January 2016 in Brussels along with the Gala of the International Yehudi Menuhin Foundation and the start of the centenary of the birth of Lord Menuhin.

Gilles Apap and his musicians took participants on a musical journey through the pieces of those classical composers inspired by Roma music. Roberto de Brasov and his musicians helped the audience discover the colourful richness of the Romani repertoire from their country, Romania, with Jorge Chaminé’s voice building a bridge between these two groups of virtuosos. Chaminé’s voice, Gilles Apap’s violin, the accordion of Roberto de Brasov and Ensembles “Colors of Invention” and “Rom4Music” paid tribute to the key contribution of the Roma music to classical and other music styles. The speeches of Nymand Christensen, Sub Director of DG Education and Culture of the European Commission, Coen Teulings IYMF president and Jorge Chaminé, international renowned baritone and member of the Board of IYMF, showed the path to be followed: that of peace, fraternity and tolerance.

Music4ROM is a project funded by the European Commission and promotes Romani values to build intercultural bridges, social inclusion and educate children through music. It used a range of activities in its mission to encourage the understanding of others, creativity and tolerance, including: a creation of a repository of Roma music; organising a music ‘Master Class’ for 16 young musicians, from both Roma and non-Roma backgrounds workshops for teachers around Europe, producing promotional material, concerts, etc.

Over the past two years, the project made great progress with 8 partners, including ERIO, across 7 EU countries.

The project website: www.music4rom.com

Closing concert Music4ROM
ERIO at the ARDI launch

On the 26 January 2016, ERIO attended the launch of the European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI). The event was hosted by Cécile Kashetu Kyenge (S&D), Soraya Post (S&D), Gerard Deprez (ALDE), Cornelia Ernst (GUE/NGL), Jean Lambert (GREENS/EFA), Massimo Castaldo (EFDD), Sajjad Karim (ECR) and Roberta Metsola (EPP).

ARDI aims to promote the fight against racism, including anti-Gypsyism and promote racial equality. The Intergroup has the following working groups: Afrophobia, anti-migrant racism, anti-Gypsyism, diversity management, institutional racism, intersectionality, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. The anti-Gypsyism working group is chaired by MEP Soraya Post. We welcome the creation of the European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI) as it comes at a crucial time to fight the worrying rise of racism and xenophobia in Europe. We wish them success in their work!

#rightromahate#UnitedWithRoma

More info here: http://tinyurl.com/gwneems

ARDI website: www.ardi-ep.eu

It’s urgent to take a strong stance against anti-Gypsyism

On the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January, we remember the Holocaust victims and survivors who were subjected to all forms of inhumane treatment during the Nazi regime. As a consequence of World War II, the European Union was founded on the values of respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These values, however, are being threatened by the current rise of racism, anti-Gypsyism and xenophobia. Together with other anti-racist organisations and decision-makers, we have the responsibility to safeguard what characterises the EU; its diversity, non-discrimination, justice, solidarity and equality.

Many of the groups that were inhumanly treated during the Holocaust such as the Roma and Sinti still face unjust treatment and discrimination. Moreover, movements that promote values of the Nazi ideology such as xenophobia, anti-Gypsyism and hate speech are on the rise. Remembering the atrocities of the past is vital to counter this worrying trend and to strengthen any efforts to construct an inclusive and racist free Europe. As a society, we must remember our past to improve our future. Moreover, we all need to take a strong stance against racism and discrimination. Both national and European leaders should be part of these movements against hate speech and discrimination. Above all, all possible efforts need to be taken to guarantee human rights, so that the generations to come would not need to experience the injustices of our past and present.
ERIO at the EC consultation meeting on youth issues

On the 29 January 2016, ERIO attended the civil society consultation meeting with the European Commission DG Employment to discuss the Youth Guarantee, the Youth Employment Initiative and the Quality Framework for Traineeships. ERIO stressed the need to avoid that such measures reproduce the vicious poverty and exclusion circle of disadvantaged youth, such as the Roma. To ensure that these measures are inclusive and target all youth, some key challenges need to be overcome: tackle discrimination and stereotypes of employment services and employers by providing cultural sensitivity training; provide assistance for registration process by facilitating access and providing mediation services to assist those who need; and promote ethnic data collection. All in all, ERIO made a strong call that the most disadvantaged youth should be included in these measures.

ERIO’s new projects

In 2016 ERIO is involved in three new projects that tackle diverse challenges regarding Roma rights and inclusion. The first two are financed by the European Union under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme and the last under the Erasmus+ programme. Early Marriage Prevention Network is a project which aims at targeting attitudes concerning early marriage in the Roma community, foster cooperation between child protection, health and education systems; justice and police to coordinate their activities related to combat the early marriage among Roma communities and raise awareness among different target groups in Roma communities in order to change their attitudes and behaviour regarding early marriage. This two-year project is a partnership of seven partners from five countries. The target groups are children, especially girls who are at risk of early marriage. Social Entrepreneurship for Roma Communities (SERCo) is a project which aims to address the problem of social and economic inclusion of Roma communities in the member states. Its main objective is to streamline Roma social entrepreneurship creation in the National Roma Integration Strategies. The key project target group is the Roma community, especially mediators and community leaders, policy-makers, and public administrators. This two-year project is a collaboration of eight partners, from six European countries. Minorities Groups Education Through Art (META) aims to expedite the eradication of barriers that cause inequity in European education systems by enhancing access, participation and completion of young migrants students in education, through a focus on identifying innovative approaches. The main target group are children in preschool and primary education belonging to minority groups, and children with a migrant background who are vulnerable to social exclusion, marginalization and discrimination. This 18-month project is a partnership of four partners covering three European countries.
ERIO new publication: Human rights abuses and discrimination of Roma in 2015

We have published a new publication titled “Human rights abuses and discrimination of Roma in 2015” which includes snapshots that are illustrations of human rights abuses and discrimination against Roma in EU member states and candidate countries. The period covers events in Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom from January until December 2015.

Download the publication here: www.erionet.eu/doc-snapshot_2015

ERIO new publication: Roma Role Models

Another new publication is a booklet titled “Roma role models” and features profiles of Roma who achieved success in various walks of life. We have produced this booklet with a dual purpose. Firstly, we expect that these Roma role models can inspire Roma, especially the younger generation to achieve their full potential in whatever field they decide to focus on. Secondly, that they can also counteract the negative stereotypes and prejudices about the Roma that persist in mainstream society. The role models explain how they achieved success in their lives and they share their experiences of racism for being Roma. Moreover, they provide some advice to young Roma on how to succeed in life and recommendations to non-Roma on how they can contribute to the inclusion of Roma.

Download the English version here: www.erionet.eu/doc-roma-role-models_en
Download the Romanian version here: www.erionet.eu/doc-roma-role-models_rom

EESC officials visit ERIO’s office

On 16 March ERIO welcomed Ákos Topolánszky and June Bedaton, representatives from the European Economic and Social Committee in ERIO’s office in Brussels. The aim of the meeting was to discuss possibilities of collaboration and the needed policy focus and the problems that should be addressed within the Committee concerning Roma inclusion. EESC representatives assured that there is a genuine interest on their side to cooperate with ERIO and to deal with the issues regarding the implementation of Roma inclusion policies. ERIO presented its policy
I started my internship at ERIO in February 2016 and I have been part of the team for three months. During this period, I undertook a wide variety of tasks, ranging from translation and editing of texts to social media and research reports regarding the Roma population and the social economy in Belgium. The different assignments I completed during my internship have given me the opportunity to acquire a wide range of work experience, which I find to be highly valuable for my future career. Moreover, one of the most fascinating parts of this internship was the opportunity to assist to a number of meetings and conferences organized by the European Parliament and other NGOs about Roma, the state of democracy in Europe, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

The internship has been incredibly enriching for me as it enabled me to get an inside look at the field of human rights advocacy in Brussels and how an NGO like ERIO operates as a bridge between the European Commission and grassroots organizations across the EU. Before coming to ERIO I was aware of the problems and the stereotypes that Roma face, since there is a large Roma population in my home country but during this internship I realized that the issues which affect Roma across Europe are the same. It has also enabled me to learn about the legal framework, which has been established in the European level to tackle discrimination and hate speech against minority groups like the Roma population.

Furthermore, I realized that although great progress has been made in terms of the legal framework and the various programs and funds, which are available for the Roma integration, the process of implementing the legal framework at national level is painfully slow. The living conditions of the Roma communities have not been significantly improved yet which proves that we have to continue advocating for the rights of the Roma. Moreover, the refugee crisis has become a primary concern for all the EU leaders so consequently the Roma issue has become less of a priority. However, we must not forget that it is important to promote the social inclusion of all the people living in Europe. Considering all the above, I believe that this internship constitutes a great opportunity to learn about the problems the Roma face and to contribute to the advocacy work for the Roma communities.

Focus for 2016: Roma political participation, anti-Gypsyism and stereotypes. The discussion focused on the challenges facing the Roma community and what more could be done in order to enable and encourage the political participation of the Roma on the local, national and European level.

Inside view of ERIO: Kondylia Pavlou