Editorial: “Transition from education to the labor market” - topic of the 2017 European Roma Platform

By Ivan Ivanov

ERIO welcomes the choice of the European Commission’s DG Justice to dedicate the topic “Transition from education to the labour market” to the next European Roma Platform which will take place on 27-28 November this year. The topic ERIO previously suggested for the Platform was “Roma access to entrepreneurship as solution for eradicating discrimination in the labour market”, a topic closely linked to the one the Commission has chosen. The transition from education to the labour market is a key factor for the successful social inclusion of Roma. This is the moment where many Roma face injustice and unequal treatment.

National governments should evaluate their employment policies to date and seek ways to eliminate any paternalistic attempts to “mainstream” Roma issues. Creating short-term work opportunities for Roma with pilot projects is only a short-term solution. NRIS are there to provide the first push for Roma’s empowerment and to ensure that member states assume responsibility in a broader national equality in employment agenda that would benefit not only Roma but everyone. The focus of such an agenda should be the transition from education to employment and counteracting discrimination and negative perceptions. All other areas considered to be important for Roma inclusion are interrelated.

What ERIO has promoted over the last 12 years is the full and effective equality for Roma, which can be spelled out as including: access to quality education and equal access to employment and self-employment opportunities. Anti-Gypsyism serves to obstruct the implementation of policies aimed at improving the situation of Roma and institutions and all key stakeholders should be involved in challenging the prevailing climate of discrimination collectively. As long as racist prejudices and stereotypes pervade public opinion about Roma, measures aimed at furthering Roma equality in employment will encounter resistance and will likely fail. Member states should
ERIO’s policy focus for 2017 is Roma entrepreneurship, 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:

**ERIO’s aims and activities for 2017**

- **Recommendations to the EU presidencies of Malta and Estonia** 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; **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 and national 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 entrepreneurship 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 Germany.

We will be producing a **Factsheet on Roma entrepreneurship**, a **digital campaign on Roma entrepreneurship** to raise awareness of Roma role models in entrepreneurship. **Media network monitoring** media hate speech against Roma and anti-Gypsyism.
Between January and June 2017, Malta assumes the Presidency of the Council of the European Union at a crucial period for Europe. The climate of rising xenophobia fuelled by populist and extreme right nationalist parties has had a strong knock-on effect on Roma in the EU, as they are often targeted in the rhetoric of anti-immigration parties. As well as a surge in anti-Gypsyism and hate speech, instances of violence against Roma in several member states are also on the rise. **We call on the Maltese Presidency to speed up efforts to ensure Roma’s equal treatment with respect to their fundamental rights.**

1. **Maintain Roma inclusion as a priority in the EU political agenda**

While the current refugee situation and the need to reform the Common European Asylum System understandably remain key EU priorities, it is important that these concerns do not replace the commitment EU institutions and member states have made to Roma inclusion. It is now more important than ever for national and EU officials to **speed up their work on Roma inclusion and to not let this priority be displaced by the refugee situation.** The latest findings of the FRA’s EU-Midis II report demonstrate that, while already at the mid-term stage, the **EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020** has only had very limited successes on the ground. The report indicates gross inequalities in living standards between Roma and non-Roma in the EU, which should be urgently addressed.

2. **End anti-Gypsyism and guarantee the rights of Roma**

It is reassuring to see that the Presidency placed rights of minorities and vulnerable groups as one of its priorities. As demonstrated by the European Parliament’s report, an increase in violence and discrimination against minorities and the protection of human rights is being challenged in many parts of Europe. According to the FRA’s EU-Midis II report, 41% of Roma felt discriminated against because of their ethnic origin in the past five years. **Roma urgently need to be protected from discrimination and violation of their rights.** Therefore, we ask the Presidency to work towards the effective and urgent implementation of the EU Framework at the national, regional and local levels, compliant with the 2013 Council Recommendation and the 2016 Council Conclusions, while ensuring Roma’s participation in that process, particularly of Roma women and youth. Moreover, the Presidency should ensure that member states **horizontally adopt anti-discrimination legislation in the national system** in the different fields (i.e. education, health, housing and employment) and follow the recommendations outlined in the 2014 European Commission’s implementation report on the Racial Equality Directive. Member
states should also be called upon to prevent the violation of Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

3. Maximise the full potential of all EU residents in the labour market, including the Roma women

We welcome the fact that the Presidency is focusing on improving the participation of women in the labour market. However, this should not only focus on high-end management positions in major enterprises, but should equally target women in the most vulnerable social positions such as Roma women who are in disadvantage due to their lack of formal education and discrimination they face daily. As the FRA's EU-Midis II report demonstrate, only 1 in 4 Roma aged 16 years or older reports being employed or self-employed. Roma women report much lower employment rates (16%) than Roma men (34%). The success of the social targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy relies to a great extent on maximising the full potential of all EU residents, including minorities like the Roma in the labour market. This could be done by encouraging Roma entrepreneurship as an alternative to improve Roma women's participation in the labour market and combat discrimination in recruitment. Additionally, this can help achieve the targets and implementation of the EU Framework and the 2013 Council Recommendation.

4. Ensure EU accession to the Istanbul Convention

ERIO welcomes the Presidency's prioritisation of ending violence against women. This is particularly important given that in Europe, 1 in 3 women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. Moreover, ethnic minority women in particular, Roma women, are more likely to face attacks on their physical integrity, such as forced sterilisation which still occurs in Czech Republic and Slovakia. The EU accession to the Istanbul Convention would be a vital step to fight violence against women. As such, the Presidency should encourage member states and the Council of the European Union to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention. This will protect the lives of many women in Europe.

ERIO's contribution to the EC assessment report on the National Roma Integration Strategies

Like previous years, ERIO contributed to the European Commission’s 2017 assessment report on the National Roma Integration Strategies which will be published in autumn 2017.

This year’s report will also provide some assessment on the mid-term review of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

We are grateful to those members who sent us their contribution which we shared with the Commission.

Here you can read ERIO position paper that was sent to the Commission: www.erionet.eu/doc-position-paper-midterm-review-eu-framework_2017
ERIO at the Civil Society Europe plenary meeting

On 20 January 2017, ERIO participated in the plenary meeting of Civil Society Europe (CSE). Members were updated about the latest CSE’s developments and actions and the 2017 work plan.

CSE members have drafted a paper on the budgetary control of NGOs funded by the European Union. The paper is a contribution to the upcoming report of the European Parliament on the same topic to be adopted this year. A recent CSE development consisted of a survey of European civil society organisations carried out in 2016 which shows evidence of shrinking civic space in Europe where assaults on CSOs have increased. Finally, discussion about the preparations for the Treaty of Rome anniversary also took place.

CSE website: www.civilsocietyeurope.eu

ERIO at the EESC conference “Tackling long-term unemployment in the EU”

On 28 February, ERIO took part in the conference “Tackling long-term unemployment in the EU” organized by the EESC Labour Market Observatory (LMO) in Brussels.

One of the main topics of the conference were the specific challenges as regards the inclusion of Roma into the labour market, as well as anti-Gypsyism. The discrimination against Roma continues to be a problem in Europe: it is widely pervasive and highly damaging. It occurs not only in the labour market, but also in schools. Discrimination in schools results in poor education and lack of qualifications, which ultimately causes Roma to be subject to precarious employment conditions.
As an invited speaker, ERIO shared some insights from the project SERCo “Social Entrepreneurship for Roma Communities.” This collaborative project aims to promote social economy as an instrument for national and EU Roma social inclusion strategies, encourage capacity-building and personalised support for sustainable social enterprise creation among Roma and equip Roma mediators with the necessary skills to support the planning, establishment and sustainability of Roma social enterprises. Efforts such as the SERCo project have the potential to ensure that Roma participate in the labour market and are lifted out of poverty.

In conclusion, it is a cause of great concern that unemployment rates among Roma are 3 times higher than among non-Roma. This statistic is all the more troubling if we take into account the fact that the right to dignified work is a human right. However, measures that aim to increase the employability of Roma must incorporate efforts that would promote social inclusion and combat discrimination simultaneously.

Info Day and Public Roundtable on Roma Social Economy in Belgium

On 3 March 2017, ERIO organised an info day and roundtable which focused on Roma social economy in Belgium. Representatives of the Roma communities, experts, local authorities, and representatives from NGOs were among the many participants who attended the event. The aim of the meeting was for the attendees to learn about the SERCo project as well as to exchange ideas and good practices on Roma social entrepreneurship. The project aims to address the problem of social and economic inclusion of Roma communities as a way to fight employment discrimination.

Among the panellist was Marta Pinto (representing the Belgian project partner ERIO), gave a presentation about the project and its activities. Belgian economist Dennis Stokkink who explained the concept of social economy and the importance to draw a distinction between social economies versus social aid. Elvira Hassan, a Roma mediator, residing in Charleroi explained the challenges that she has faced in the attempt to start her own social enterprise.

Towards the latter part of the event, participants were divided into small groups for an interactive session in which they were able to identify the needs of the Roma communities in Belgium, obstacles, most importantly solutions on how to address these issues.
Meeting with a Croatian delegation

On 20 March 2017, ERIO held a meeting with a Croatian delegation of 14 representatives from different institutions during a study visit to Brussels. The aim was to meet with European networks, working on Roma issues in order to learn how they advocate for Roma rights at EU level.

The introductory part of the meeting focused on the works that ERIO provides, such as information, advocacy work and capacity building. As explained during the meeting, ERIO work with EU institutions, local and national NGOs, as well as with Roma communities to identify problems, work with local authorities to help address them. Some of the important documents and tools discussed during the meeting were the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategy which focused on discrimination on the grounds of education, employment, healthcare and housing. In addition, ERIO explained the different themes that it focuses on each year, such as education, Roma political participation and this year’s theme which is Roma entrepreneurship. The participants inquire about partnering with ERIO to embark on future projects and also to provide them with some tools and information that they may use to help enhance their work on advocacy for Roma.

Inside view of ERIO: John Trajer

The six months I have spent with ERIO as an intern have been a valuable opportunity for me to build on my existing knowledge of EU Roma-related policies and equality law, as well as to gain a stronger advocacy perspective on the challenges that continue to frustrate efforts to improve the situation of Roma across EU member and candidate states.

The clearest message that I have gained over the course of this process is that, while a strong policy and legislative framework exists for promoting the social inclusion of Roma and combatting their discrimination, there are several inhibiting factors that persist in denying the production of concrete results on the ground. This was nowhere more clear than in the release
of the FRA’s shocking findings on Roma in its MIDIS II survey. These demonstrated just how much work still needs to be done, and pointed to a critical lack of political will in ensuring the effective implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies.

Some of the most interesting parts of my internship were learning more about what different organisations, institutions and governments are doing to counter this apathy that continues to stall efforts to improve the situation of Roma. To cite some examples, the European Commission’s ‘for Roma, with Roma’ initiative has supported numerous activities and events targeted at deconstructing stereotypes between Roma and non-Roma communities, particularly among young people. The ‘Atlas of Roma Communities’ project discussed at the Slovak Representation to the EU highlighted the necessity to supply governments with more accurate data on Roma communities, not only as a means of facilitating more informed Roma inclusion policies, but also to increase the accountability of governments to their Roma citizens. ERIO’s annual workshop with equality bodies offered a platform to share ideas on how to combat discrimination against Roma, particularly in such an important sphere as education.

The most valuable part of my internship experience, however, has been learning more about ERIO’s own vision for promoting Roma inclusion, and particularly their emphasis on bringing Roma themselves into the advocacy and decision-making processes. I have been given a privileged insight into ERIO’s efforts to build the capacities of Roma civil society at the local level to lobby for the more effective inclusion policies, and have enjoyed the chance to be involved in European projects aimed at using art as an inclusion tool in schools (META) and improving the labour market situation of Roma through the social economy (SERCo).

I also benefited greatly from direct involvement in the ‘Roma Political Participation’ campaign, where I learned about the importance of empowering Roma voices not only for the success of the EU’s integration strategies, but also for more tolerant, inclusive and democratic societies across Europe. This experience taught me much about how campaigns are run, and gave me the chance to be creative and hone my digital design skills.

Overall, I am hugely appreciative for the six months I got to spend at ERIO. Through my tasks and discussions with colleagues I have gained new skills and knowledge that I plan to take with me to the next step of my career. I will be keenly following ERIO’s activities in the future and wish them the greatest success in all their endeavours to come!