Editorial: Working for Roma with Roma is not enough

By Ivan Ivanov

Working for Roma with Roma is a call to the non-Roma policy makers, project implementation agencies, experts, local and national authorities where Roma are absent or their representation is so low that they cannot influence decision-making processes. It has been clearly documented that the involvement of Roma in decisions relating to their integration has been inadequate. This has led to the failure of a number of initiatives aimed at Roma inclusion.

Working for Roma with Roma is just the first step on the path to Roma integration - our understanding of full integration is Roma working for Roma and for anybody else in their society. This would mean that Roma are no longer passive beneficiaries of policies run by non-Roma. It would also mean Roma taking responsibility for decisions relating to their own social inclusion and taking policy implementation into their own hands. This responsibility should be extended to serving other minority and disadvantaged groups to ensure their well-being and equal treatment. Once achieved, the full participation of Roma in public life would make distinctions between Roma and non-Roma utterly meaningless.

Another frequent explanation in the literature for the lack of progress of Roma-related policies is the so-called lack of political will. This is correct, but who’s will? In any case this is not the lack of Roma’s political will as they are not represented in the politics, nor in public administration. It is time for Roma to realise that their political participation and political representation is crucial if they want the social inclusion of their communities to depend on their own political will.

This is why we think working for Roma with Roma is necessary but not enough. Things should go further. Positions and responsibilities in this relationship should be changed, or at least should be changeable.
Roma’s political participation is essential to safeguard their rights

On the occasion of the International Roma Day, ERIO would like to stress the importance to promote Roma’s full participation in political structures at local, national and European levels to ensure the effective implementation of Roma related policies, including the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). As stressed in the Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the member states, empowering Roma by promoting their political participation in society is critical to advance the process of Roma inclusion.

Roma have a history of exclusion and continue to be denied access to decision-making processes and institutions. “To guarantee the rights of Roma, it is essential to ensure their genuine political participation so they are adequately represented in local, national and European decision-making structures,” notes ERIO’s Executive Director Ivan Ivanov.

The “For Roma with Roma” motto should be genuinely applied at all levels. Roma need to be empowered to become democratic and participatory leaders in the process of Roma inclusion. To ensure this, conditions have to be created to grant them with equal opportunities to be represented in decision-making institutions. More investment is needed in political training and education aiming at Roma’s active political participation at local, national and European level. Roma’s political participation is closely linked to their inclusion enabling them to be involved in decision making processes concerning the design, implementation and evaluation of Roma related programmes and policies. It will further ensure the effective implementation of the NRIS at national and local levels. As Mr Ivanov concludes, “It is crucial that Roma stop being passive recipients of policies affecting them and become equal participants in society.”

ERIO at the EESC hearing

ERIO was an invited speaker at the European Economic and Social Committee hearing “Anti-gypsyism: possible responses” that took place in Brussels on the 5 April. The hearing highlighted the need to focus attention on anti-Gypsyism and possible ways to fight such phenomenon. ERIO’s senior policy officer, Marta Pinto, provided some tentative indicators to measure anti-Gypsyism such as incitement to death, hate, intimidation and violence towards Roma; denial of fundamental rights; discrimination and socio-economic disadvantages. Moreover, Ms Pinto discussed the strong impact of the current refugee situation on Roma inclusion. As she said, “With the refugee situation, Roma inclusion slipped down the political agenda and is used as an excuse to stop or delay the implementation of Roma inclusion policies.”

More information, including agenda of the hearing can be found here: http://tinyurl.com/zaoqbf1
ERIO at the FRA consultation meeting

On 11 April 2016, ERIO participated in the informal meeting of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) to discuss the ongoing work on indicators tracking progress on Roma inclusion and FRA's cooperation with civil society organisations on this issue. Other networks also took part in the discussions such as ENAR and Pavee Point Travellers’ Centre Ireland. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the practical application of S-P-O indicators and the possible role by civil society organisations in generating ethnically disaggregated data for monitoring progress of Roma integration. In particular, the meeting discussed the conceptual framework of the indicators framework and the various approaches to data collection.

FRA presented the latest developments of the FRA's Fundamental Rights Platform and the conceptual framework of the S-P-O indicators and the reporting tool. The civil society organisations’ feedback was on the reporting tool and how it can be used.

During the brainstorming session on the possible role of civil society organisation in gathering ethnically disaggregated data, ERIO's executive director, Ivan Ivanov, stated: “Data is crucial for monitoring the progress of Roma integration. The lack of such data was the reason for the failure of many programs and policies aiming at Roma’s social inclusion. ERIO supports the suggestions of FRA for working with statistical offices to apply ethnic identities in censuses, working with academia on indirect methods for identifying ethnicity. We find very important the generating data at community level with capturing rights holders’ perspective. Any approach which could bring accountability, transparency and effectiveness in the implementation of Roma-related policies should be used properly. At the same time we should make sure that we do not play with fears of Roma people and raise awareness and largely inform of what is the purpose of ethnic data collection and why we need indicators for the monitoring and reporting processes.”

ERIO Conference “Strengthening Roma’s political participation”

On 10 June, ERIO in partnership with the European Economic and Social Committee organised a conference “Strengthening Roma’s political participation” in the EESC in Brussels. The conference aimed to advance Roma’s political participation at the local, national and European level, and to offer an opportunity for stakeholders and experts to engage in dialogue on how best to
increase Roma’s participation and representation in politics.

Ivan Ivanov (ERIO Executive Director) opened the conference and reminded participants about the on-going need to promote and ensure Roma political participation. “Roma political participation is still low in the EU: with an estimated Roma population of 6 million, one would expect 2% of political representatives to be from the Roma community. However, this number has not yet been achieved in 2016”, he noted. Mr Ivanov explained that some barriers and obstacles are still blocking Roma involvement in politics as voters and as representatives. He believes Roma should take themselves the responsibility and not leave it to other parties or politicians. Moreover, he pointed out the need to make Roma political participation possible in public life and in politics and give them access to decision-making processes and institutions.

Georges Dassis (EESC President) said that Roma should be involved at all stages of the decision-making in order to achieve effective policies that can improve their situation within the EU. They should be strongly involved in the development of the national strategies from the preparation, implementation to the evaluation, he added. This view was shared by Dora Husz (EC, DG JUST) who stated that Roma should be involved from development to the implementation of policies including policy review at all levels.

Candy Sheridan (Norfolk County Council Planning Committee Chair) shared her story and the challenges she faced to get involved in politics as an Irish Traveller woman. According to Nadezhda Mouzykina (National Democratic Institute), Roma representation is still disproportionate at both European and national levels, although the situation at the local level is improving. She identified barriers that could explain low Roma’s political participation: the lack of political will; the political system and mechanisms that make difficult for Roma to compete; the manipulation by mainstream parties of Roma, putting on their list to secure votes; the general mistrust of Roma after years of segregation; the technical difficulties such as the lack of documents, the lack of infrastructures and of voter education and some issues such as voter intimidation or vote buying; and the disunity among Roma community.

Anna Striethorst (Open Society Foundations) stressed the importance of Roma activism for Roma inclusion. Some potential solutions for improving Roma political participation pointed out included: offering education to the citizens, through for example campaigns inviting Roma to use their rights to vote, or give support to organizations that educate voters; preparing candidates for office and assist them while in office; engaging a stable dialogue (at least 2 years before the elections) with Roma voters for differentiating simple mobilization from real participation.

According to MEP Benedek Jávor the main problem with Roma political participation and representation is the inherited anti-political sentiment. Unfortunately, Roma might think they have nothing to do in politics. It is crucial to change this way of thinking.
(FRA) explained that there are no legal barriers to political participation of Roma, but that the main problem is the implementation of the existing legislation.

Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia, as the first Roma MEP, considers the voting system as the main obstacle for more Roma to get involved in politics. The first Roma woman to be elected MEP, Lívia Járóka, underlined the importance of learning-process for better involvement of Roma in politics and that Roma political participation should be an everyday process, supported by Roma and non-Roma. According to Madi Sharma (EESC), since Roma is one of the main issues nowadays in Europe, the main actor and speaker should be Roma. For her, one of the barriers Roma face is the lack of know-how in politics. Thus, Roma need to be empowered and their access to social and economic rights should be ensured which in turn will give them access to political rights.

See photos here: www.erionet.eu/event-100616

ERIO at the LIBE Hearing on the fundamental rights situation in the EU in 2015

Ivan Ivanov speaking at the Hearing on fundamental rights situation

On 16 June, ERIO was an invited speaker at the Hearing “The situation of fundamental rights in the European Union in 2015” organised by the LIBE Committee at the European Parliament in Brussels. The main objective of the hearing was to contribute to the on-going dialogue on the mechanisms and methods to better safeguard the fundamental rights of persons in the EU.

On the first session “Fundamental rights in the European Union in 2015: Assessing achievements and challenges”, Józef Nagy, Rapporteur on the situation of fundamental rights in the EU, reminded the audience that fundamental rights are legally guaranteed in the EU but their implementation still needs to become fully effective. As in the current climate filled with fear, culture of respect, dialogue and openness are more than needed for improving the situation of fundamental rights in the EU. Olivier de Schutter, professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, presented the study on “Follow-up to the European Parliament’s Resolution of 8 September 2015 on The situation of fundamental rights in the European Union (2013-2014)” and Matjaž Gruden from the Council of Europe, presented its Annual report on Fundamental Rights and pointed out that problems are geographically spread and worryingly, many of the difficulties cannot be regarded as merely transitional difficulties, but are rather a result of deliberate will of policy-makers to disregard the fundamental rights.
During the second session “The rights of minorities, Roma, intersex people and people with disabilities”, Ivan Ivanov, ERIO Executive Director denounced the generalized and institutionalized discrimination Roma are still experiencing in Europe. He reminded the audience that Roma discrimination is a widespread issue, not only happening in Central and Eastern Europe but in the whole EU. In fact, anti-Roma sentiment is still rising. For example, according to an Eurobarometer study, 40% of Europeans would feel uncomfortable if their children had Roma schoolmates or have a Roma neighbour. He explained that the main causes are the failure of various initiatives to take into account the systemic discrimination of Roma, the lack of coordinated measures and the persistent anti-Gypsyism in all parts of society. Racist stereotypes are used to legitimize non-action and continuation of discriminative policies. The fear of political costs continues to block implementation of policies helping Roma, with preference being given to intentional segregation, such as for example in education. Mr Ivanov warned the audience about another concern: the current impact of geopolitical developments in Europe on Roma situation, such as the rise of far rights parties, anti-terrorist measures and the refugee crisis. Finally, he recognized that legislation on Roma issues does exist but its full implementation is still needed as well as its scrutiny. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize anti-Gypsyism with a particular emphasis on the role of media. Discrimination has to be eradicated, compensated and eliminated, he concluded. Other civil society representatives included: ECMI, OII-Europe, EDF and HRDN.

More information can be found here: www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/libe/events.html?id=20160616CHE00191

META advocacy roundtable on education and arts for inclusion

On 20 June 2016, ERIO organised an advocacy roundtable in Ghent, Belgium. The roundtable was organised as part of the META project which aims to advance the eradication of barriers that cause inequity in European education systems, in particular those of children from an ethnic minority or with a migrant background. Participants included minorities’ representatives, educational experts, practitioners and representatives from the public and private sector, and local authorities. The aim of the roundtable was to identify local needs of stakeholders and the key challenges faced by local authorities, regarding the effective implementation of inclusion and education policies.

During the roundtable, insufficient provision of basic needs, lack of mediation structures and low involvement of parents and teachers in projects were identified as the main challenges. More inclusive policies, such as intercultural and inter-communities projects, were recommended as the most appropriate solution in a ‘super-diverse’ context.

Visit the project website (www.meta-project.eu) and Facebook page (www.facebook.com/metaeducationthrougharts).
ERIO at the Commission’s meeting with civil society on the 2016 EU Roma Platform

ERIO was invited to participate in a consultation meeting organised by DG Justice of the European Commission on the 17 June in Brussels. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the next European Platform for Roma inclusion that will take place on 29-30 November 2016. The meeting was attended by representatives of civil society and international organisations.

During the meeting, small interactive group discussions between participants took place to discuss about the topics of the next Platform. After gathering many diverse ideas, the Commission will work on the basis of the suggestions put forward by civil society in order to organise the 2016 Roma Platform.

Interviews with stakeholders about social economy projects for Roma in Belgium

In the context of the SERCo project, ERIO has carried out interviews with different local actors such as public institutions, Roma NGOs and activists, and non-profit organisations to identify problems, potential solutions and good practices regarding the implementation of social economy projects within Roma communities based on the interviewee’s experience.

Both of our Roma interviewees, showed the current gap existing between the Roma and social economy. According to them, social entrepreneurship is still a minor concern in the community and information about it still takes time to spread. According to the think-tank Pour la Solidarité, much has still to be done from the social economy networks to address specifically the Roma issue. Many projects concern Roma but never specifically target them. This situation creates a vicious circle where very few Roma are either aware or trained in this domain; hence their visibility being very poor, the relevant networks or organizations concerned by social economy do not tackle enough the problems this community faces.

It can then be argued that both parties (Roma and social economy organizations) still have to bring their concerns closer to each other and try to work out solutions by working closely together. This means better collaboration, information, training and knowledge about the Roma community from social economy organizations and knowledge of the benefits of social economy, from the Roma community.
Inside view of ERIO: Jessica Dinstel

I started a three-month internship at ERIO in May 2016. Before my internship, I was aware of the Roma situation in Europe such as deportations and discrimination. However, being part of ERIO I learnt additional knowledge about Roma, human rights and anti-discrimination issues such as the EU legal framework, EU policies, and national strategies. I also understood the multiple obstacles that Roma are facing in their access to basic needs and respect of their rights.

I learnt about how an NGO like ERIO is working with EU institutions and grassroots organizations and how it lobbies on anti-discrimination and social inclusion issues. Moreover, I learnt about the importance of researching, reporting and sharing key knowledge, as an important part in NGO’s work. Finally, my internship was a chance to gain first-hand experience and knowledge of the day-to-day work of an advocacy organization.

Another interesting part of my internship was the opportunity to assist with different events such as meetings, conferences, roundtables. I have attended conferences and hearings organized by the European institutions in Brussels. It was the opportunity to learn how the EU works on Roma issues, what their competencies and limits are. It added to my theoretical background a relevant practical experience. I also could observe how the EU and NGOs co-operate together. At the local level, I had the opportunity to observe how projects progressively take shape, how organizations work together in a project, as partners and which role ERIO plays in this process. Finally, I got a deep overview of the interactions among institutions and stakeholders.

My internship at ERIO was a great opportunity for understanding the work achieved for improving the Roma situation and the range of challenges faced at the European, national and local levels. Moreover, it was the occasion to meet key actors working on Roma issues as well as Roma representatives. Ambitious and resourceful, I believe, they really deserve to be known by everyone. Through their stories, I got inspired as the intern I was but also as a citizen and as a woman.

Although my experience at ERIO was really positive, I also realized that advocacy for Roma, their integration, their effective access to basic needs all around Europe is a very long process where NGOs have to stand their ground and keep advocating. They play a crucial role in ensuring that Roma issues will stay a priority in the EU agenda. I also realized that discrimination and exclusion affect Roma among all member states. I personally regret that only few victims speak loudly about their stories and that anti-Gypsyism, evictions, segregation, hate speech almost became generally accepted and too often go unpunished. However, once again I noticed the important role played by NGOs for reporting, denouncing those discriminations and raising awareness about the Roma situation. Finally, I am convinced that this internship is a great opportunity for those who want to learn more about NGO’s work and Roma issues. It is an enriching experience on both professional and personal levels.