Editorial: “Working for Roma with Roma is not enough”

By Ivan Ivanov

Various sources and reports indicate that employment is the field where Roma face the highest discrimination. According to a Fundamental Rights Agency survey, only 25% of Roma respondents reported to be employed or self-employed, compared to 64% of the non-Roma respondents. Regardless of their level of education or skills, many are denied employment on a purely racist basis, due to their ethnicity. The European Commission midterm review of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies states that “Improvement in education has not been effectively translated into employment... One of the reasons for the lack of progress could be that measures... do not properly address barriers on the demand side, e.g. by monitoring and fighting discrimination”. These conditions are linked to various forms of discrimination and anti-Gypsyism.

Entrepreneurship could lessen the effects of prejudice and discrimination which undermine Roma employment prospects. According to a World Bank report, given the high saturation of the result, entrepreneurship could be a solution to overcome employment discrimination together with guarantying Roma’s equal participation in the labour market.

Article 16 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights guarantees the freedom of the individual to conduct a business. This introduces a concept crucial to modern society, as its “main aim is to safeguard the right of each person in the EU to pursue a business without being subject to either discrimination or disproportionate restrictions.” The 2013 Council Recommendation, also urges Member States to take measures “supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship” within Roma communities. This confirms the potential of such measures to promote the equal participation of Roma, who are likely to face additional barriers and constraints when seeking employment.
Building an inclusive Europe that embraces Roma culture

Ahead of the International Roma Day on 8 April, ERIO would like to take this opportunity to celebrate Roma culture and traditions. The European Union prides itself on its rich, ethnically diverse landscape, which is also reflected in its motto, United in Diversity. In fact, Europe's vibrant cultural landscape continues to flourish due to the richness and diversity that the Roma community contributes to European society. Unfortunately, in the present-day climate of rampant nationalism and xenophobia, minorities are seen with increasing distrust. But peoples cannot exist in isolation, which is why ERIO calls on Roma to take pride in their identity and their culture, celebrate it and promote it.

ERIO would also like to take this opportunity to raise awareness with regard to the persistent discrimination the Roma continue to face in Europe. Anti-Gypsyism remains ever present and Roma continue to face systematic discrimination and numerous human rights violations. Although the Roma remain a vulnerable group across Europe, it is most reassuring to know that the values on which European diversity and inclusion are based are supported by policy measures and strategies that aim also to include the Roma, such as the National Roma Integration Strategies developed by Member States, the 2013 Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States, or the most recent Conclusions on accelerating the process of Roma integration, adopted by the Council in 2016.

Entrepreneurship has the potential to lessen unemployment through job creation as an alternative to job search. Entrepreneurship will provide Roma with the means to support financially themselves and their families. By strengthening financial security and promoting equality, Roma entrepreneurship can therefore contribute to greater social cohesion and good community relations. Finally, entrepreneurship could provide opportunities for Roma to promote their culture. When considering ideas for their business, it can be very innovative and motivating to develop entrepreneurial skills by exploring different elements of Roma culture.

Roma entrepreneurship can create new jobs, thus contributing to the economic empowerment of the Roma communities. This, in turn, contributes to the diminishment of social difference and eases existing social tensions. With this in mind, Roma entrepreneurship demands further support and development by the state and private business sector. This is necessary for the general economic growth of the countries Roma live in. This is because, unlike majority populations across Europe, the Roma population is young and growing.

According to a report drawing on the results of the UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma 2011 survey, Roma are 2 to 3 times more likely to supply the European labour market with new workers and if EU wants to avoid putting its labour market in danger and put an end to the on-going waste of human potential, Roma unemployment must be dealt with. What better way to deal with it than creating a supportive environment for the establishment of Roma entrepreneuships?
On this important day, in addition to celebrating Roma culture and identity, ERIO would like to reaffirm its commitment to fostering equality and inclusion. In light of this, ERIO’s Executive Director, Ivan Ivanov, stresses that “ERIO will continue to advance Roma identity and culture in the pursuit of fairness, social inclusion and mutual respect for all Europeans.”

Training development workshop on anti-Gypsyism anti-bias indicators

On 20 April, ERIO and CEJI collaboratively organized an expert group meeting, where participants shared their experience and knowledge in the interest of the development of course activities and methods for an online course on anti-Gypsyism bias indicators for police officers, prosecutors and monitoring organisations. The workshop was organized in the context of the project Facing all the Facts!

Read more about this project on the project website: www.facingfacts.eu

ERIO as invited speaker at the EESC public hearing on possible means of redress for Roma

On 19 May 2017, the European Economic and Social Committee organised a public hearing on “Equal treatment, equality bodies and other possible means of redress for Roma” in Brussels. The discussion evolved around the topics of available mechanisms for Roma victims of discrimination and the usefulness of redress models. ERIO, as an invited speaker, suggested possible solutions in order to address Roma's discrimination and increase knowledge amongst Roma of redress mechanisms. As its executive director Ivan Ivanov underlined, an effective use of available mechanisms is crucial to overcome Roma's lack of trust and low awareness of
their rights. Actually, to work with Roma communities is a very challenging task because of these issues. Since the adoption of the Equality Directive, official reports allow to keep track of the advances concerning equal treatment in the European Union. When it comes to Roma’s issues, these reports always account for the same weaknesses and gaps. This proves that models of redress are already available, but their use is still not effective.

The agenda of the event can be found on www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-roma-redress-means-programme

**ERIO’s conference on Roma entrepreneurship**

On 8 June 2017 ERIO organised a conference “*Roma entrepreneurship: a possible solution to labour market discrimination and exclusion?*” to explore the option of entrepreneurship as an innovative approach which could guarantee Roma’s rights to equally participate in the labour market. Ivan Ivanov (Executive Director, ERIO) opened the conference stressing that despite the existence of National Roma Integration Strategies, it is of the utmost importance to identify ways in which Roma can help themselves and employment is one of the few spheres where Roma have the opportunity to do that. Regrettably, however, discrimination bars all policies and keeps Roma on the margins of society. Nevertheless, “since employment is at the centre of Roma integration, it is our duty to explore its potential to foster integration”, said Mr. Ivanov.

Georges Dassis (President, EESC) explained that, numbering 12 million, Roma are the most important, but also the most disadvantaged ethnic minority in Europe. He stated that the EESC takes into account the specific problems of Roma and recognizes discrimination and anti-Gypsyism as the principle obstacles to Roma inclusion. Jana Balazova (EC, DG Justice) added that the Roma remain one of the most underrepresented groups in the labour market, which is due to low level of education, lack of skills, and widespread discrimination. The 2016 Commission’s monitoring and assessment report concerning Member States’ efforts in advancing Roma inclusion revealed that despite some positive developments in the area of education, progress made in areas such as employment, healthcare, and housing remains very limited. In light of this, Ms. Balazova explained, the European Commission encourages Member States to tackle Roma inclusion using a more targeted approach.
After acknowledging the discrimination that Roma people face on a daily basis and in a variety of areas, Madi Sharma (EESC) stressed that entrepreneurship can be transformative. She explained that entrepreneurship brings empowerment and self-belief and leads one to realize the responsibility of looking after oneself, but also after others. She therefore called on everyone who has ever faced discrimination to take matters into their own hands and claim the power to change not only their lives, but also the lives of others.

Dominique Bé (EC, DG Employment), however, reminded everyone that we must be aware of the challenges that we are facing and should manage our goals and expectations accordingly, while Gabriella Nagy (Embassy of Hungary to Belgium and Luxembourg) emphasized that the topic of entrepreneurship requires a multidimensional approach and that we must maintain our trust in a better future, despite current delays and setbacks.

Entrepreneurs José Heredia (Argonauta Productions) and Obada Otabashi (We Exist) shared their entrepreneurial experiences which have unfortunately been influenced by discrimination. Mr. Heredia emphasized that Roma inclusion depends primarily on the elimination of anti-Gypsyism and institutional racism, while Mr. Otabashi urged those who face difficulties in the form of discrimination and exclusion not to give up hope.

Ákos Topolánszky (EESC) acknowledged the importance of employment for the integration of the Roma minority and stressed the importance of supporting the creation of enterprises and introduced the option of social enterprise to promote Roma integration.

Roma entrepreneur Obada Otabashi (We Exist)

Lens Lapauw (Microstart) shared information regarding the project A-TIEM, currently underway in Ghent, specifically aimed at helping the city’s Roma community in becoming entrepreneurs. This involves reaching out to the Roma population offering them assistance in a variety of ways, including free advice, courses, assistance with financial planning, coaching and even loans.
Finally, Ronald Lucardie (Board President, ERIO) brought to everyone's attention that entrepreneurship demands creativity and requires that one looks beyond one's personal wellbeing or the wellbeing of those around him. He concluded by saying that the evils of discrimination and exclusion cannot be solved by entrepreneurship alone, but must be tackled on a variety of levels and in a multitude of ways.

Racism and discrimination are significant obstacles for Roma who seek equal access to the labour market, but they are not insurmountable. Entrepreneurship therefore holds massive potential, but it depends on a concerted effort from the Roma community and from the national and EU officials. Moreover, entrepreneurship can be fundamentally transformative not only on an individual level, but also for the surrounding community and for the general society. Yet the inclusion of Roma cannot depend on entrepreneurship alone, but must be combined with efforts to end discrimination and achieve equal treatment in other areas as well.

ERIO at a consultation meeting with the European Commission

On the 5 April, ERIO attended a consultation meeting organised by DG Justice of the European Commission in Brussels. The meeting was attended by EU umbrella Roma and pro-Roma civil society and international organisations. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the thematic focus and the format of the 2017 European Platform for Roma Inclusion which will take place on 27-28 November 2017 in Brussels.

The format of the Platform will be similar to the one used in 2015 and the topic will be “Transition from education to the labour market”. The next consultation meeting is planned for mid-June.
Training for Roma mediators on social entrepreneurship

ERIO organised a training on social entrepreneurship in Brussels done in the context of the SERCo project. The training, delivered by the Réseau d’Entreprises Sociales (RES), took place in Brussels from over the course of 4 days in June and July and it consisted of preparing Roma to act as mediators on social entrepreneurship. This round of training will be followed by another, in which the first-round trainees will train four Roma each, with the support of the SERCo partners.

The ultimate goal of the SERCo project is to promote social economy as an effective instrument for national and EU Roma social inclusion strategies and the approach chosen by the SERCo partners aims to promote mutual learning, sharing and cooperation among different stakeholders in order to provide Roma mediators with the necessary skills for supporting the planning, establishment and sustainability of social enterprises within Roma communities.

The training took place in all partner countries at a date determined by the participating local organisation.

Preparations of the 2017 EU Roma Platform continue

On 26 June, ERIO attended another consultation meeting with the Roma Team of the European Commission and other civil society representatives.

The aims of the meeting were to a) discuss a one-page document which will guide the discussion of the Platform; b) discuss the structure of the Platform and c) be updated about the EC evaluation of the NRIS and midterm review of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

The Roma Platform will be hosted by the European Economic Social Committee in Brussels between 27-28 November. The EC midterm review is in its final consultation stages and will be adopted by the Commission at the beginning of September.

As part of their consultation strategy, the Commission will launch a public consultation on 19 July until the end of October. We encourage our members to contribute to this public consultation that will be published on http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/news.cfm?item_type=962&orderBy=PublishDate

The next meeting will be in mid-September 2017.
Inside view of ERIO: Danijela Stajic

Prior to starting my internship at ERIO I was familiar with the issue of discrimination against Roma in Europe. In fact, Roma inclusion has been on the European agenda for quite some time, but patterns of socio-economic exclusion have relegated members of Europe’s biggest ethnic minority to the status of outcasts forced to live as second-class citizens. My experience as a member of ERIO’s team, however, exponentially expanded my understanding of the issues Roma face in Europe.

However, for me this experience represented an avenue for growth both inside and outside of the office. Interning at ERIO was the first time I worked on Roma issues firsthand and I found it very valuable, because it gave me the opportunity to obtain answers to very specific questions and see how things actually develop on the ground, which is impossible to do in a different setting. This also helped me to understand the value of human rights legal protection. I learned much on the EU’s approach to the subject, including the EU legal framework, anti-discrimination policies, and national Roma integration strategies. Furthermore, my internship really reinforced what I had learned in my coursework at University of Toronto and expanded my understanding on how Roma rights organizations function.

Interning at ERIO was not simply a step forward in my professional development, but rather a life-changing experience as I was introduced to a whole new world where theoretical concepts we students encounter in classrooms are transformed into clear and visible reality of the lives of people. We constantly talk about human rights, but working at ERIO has made me realize what it means to have these rights and how to fully exercise them. It has also exposed me to the frequency that these rights are violated and the importance of organizations such as ERIO to helping those whose rights have been violated, as well as trying to prevent the violations from occurring again in the future.

I now have a better understanding of what it means to work in the human rights field; this experience has reinforced my decision to go into a field where I would be able to work for an organization such as ERIO. I was very sad to leave but confident I have indeed learned a great deal. I have really enjoyed the atmosphere at ERIO and the wonderful people I have worked alongside.