Editorial: The European Roma Platform – the main Roma event in Brussels

By Ivan Ivanov

On the 29-30th November 2016, the main Roma event of the year, the European Platform for Roma Inclusion was held in Brussels. The European Commission organised its 10th annual event, which brings together different stakeholders involved in the Roma inclusion at local, national and European level. The goal of the Platform was to give an opportunity to all these players for stocktaking on the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, to discuss the key achievements, and weaknesses.

This year’s thematic focus of the event was Mutual Accountability of all stakeholders. The topic was determined after numerous consultations with European civil society Roma and pro-Roma networks. National Roma Contact Points were also part of the discussion. The political opening of the Platform included representatives of the European Commission when addressing Roma-related issues. In light of recent main EU policy developments, ERIO has become all the more a strategic partner for the EU institutions in assuring the monitoring of their implementation and in advising for further improvement.

Following the political opening, two political panels focused on mutual accountability regarding the effectiveness of policies and funding as well as Roma participation with a focus on youth, women, and children. The speakers addressed the main achievements and challenges while the stakeholders were asked to reflect on their role in advancing Roma integration and fighting discrimination and Anti-Gypsyism. The presentations followed various discussions on the concept of mutual accountability and the relationship between power and competences of different actors on their responsibilities and accountability on the other. The importance of cooperation and partnership was stressed among various actors, recognising their respective specific roles in the process. Some civil society activists were alarmed about shrinking the space of civil society, which affects Roma civil society and its capacity to hold governments and EU institutions accountable.

Anti-Gypsyism was another topic which participants presented as a severe issue that must be addressed urgently, and the first step is for
institutions at all levels to recognize it and condemn it. Another key point discussed, dealt with the importance of a more active Roma participation in politics, as well as an effective monitoring and evaluation and the impact on related policies and funds. Speakers revealed that part of the evaluation must be an assessment of the progress and failures of the EU Framework and NRIS which will provide a better idea of how to further improve it.

During the second day of the platform, interactive discussions were held among the different stakeholders regarding their personal contributions to the Platform, to the improvement of the life of Roma, and the areas in which cooperating actors could make the most impact. Achievements, weaknesses, necessary improvement up to 2020, a vision beyond 2020 and questions of cooperation were discussed and explored.

ERIO at the Commission’s consultation meeting with civil society

On the 7 October, ERIO attended a consultation meeting organised by the DG Justice of the European Commission in Brussels. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the 2016 Commission assessment report of the NRIS, the upcoming European Roma Platform taking place on 29-30 November and the high level event on Roma youth empowerment in Bratislava. The meeting was attended by representatives of civil society and international organisations.

Following the Commission’s assessment report, Council Recommendations will be ready by the 13 October and if approved, they will be adopted by the Council on the 8 December. After a wide consultation with civil society and other stakeholders, the European Commission decided that the focus of this year Platform will be “Mutual accountability of all”.

ERIO at the high-level conference on Roma youth

On 10-11 October 2016, the European Commission and the Slovak EU Presidency organised a High-Level Conference on Roma youth empowerment in Bratislava, Slovakia. The event brought together around 200 participants, representing relevant national authorities from the EU Member States, developing countries, international organisations, EU and national-level NGO networks, Roma and non-Roma youths and media. On 10th October, the event started with the opening panel and continued with workshops which focused on topics related to the Roma youth leadership, Roma youth personal empowerment and access to social rights. ERIO’s Executive Director, Ivan Ivanov gave a presentation in regards to Roma youth political participation. In his speech, Ivan Ivanov stated: “Roma people have to be equally and proportionately represented in politics. They must take the future of their life in their hands as politicians should take the responsibility to be part of the decision-making process concerning the
problems and rights of their communities. Roma should not wait for the political will of the others as we see that this will, often is lacking”. On 11th October the event continued with the political panel with representatives of the European Commission and some member states. Ms Věra Jourová Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality indicated that Roma issues remain one of the challenges for the European Commission and that all stakeholders should be involved in fighting anti-Gypsyism, and Roma social exclusion.

ERIO at the seminar “Atlas of Roma communities in Slovakia”

On the 12 October, ERIO attended a seminar organized by the Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU and the Slovak Liaison Office for Research and Development in Brussels. The seminar aimed to present the results of the Atlas of Roma communities in Slovakia that was prepared by Prešov University. The Atlas monitors indicators (abreast of territorial distribution and living conditions) in relation to the Roma community in Slovakia.

The Atlas presentation was followed by a panel discussion in which ERIO was invited to participate. The debate was about the role of science and research for the preparation and implementation of Roma related policies. Our senior policy officer, Marta Pinto, said: “Equality data is fundamental to promoting non-discrimination. Ethnic data, in particular, is crucial as evidence proving discrimination and for identifying the needs for special policies. It can also help monitoring discrimination and the implementation of anti-discrimination law and determine whether measures to combat discrimination have been effective. Data collection will complement the legal frameworks and political commitment which are all needed. However, ethnic data collection should be promoted provided that proper safeguards are in place. Thus it is important to create a collection process which prevents the abuse of data rather than its gathering.”

ERIO’s 5th workshop with Equality Bodies

On 13 October, ERIO organised its annual workshop with Equality Bodies titled “Ending school discrimination of Roma: The role of Equality Bodies” which took place in Brussels. The workshop was organised in close cooperation with EQUINET and UNIA.

The aims of the workshop were: to promote cooperation between Equality Bodies and civil society to jointly address discrimination against Roma, including in education; to foster discussion between different Equality Bodies, civil society and anti-discrimination experts
on challenges and effective practices to end discrimination in education of Roma children; and to assist Equality Bodies to work effectively with Roma to tackle discrimination. Participants included representatives of Equality Bodies from member states and accession countries, the European Commission, the European Parliament, international organisations and Roma and non-Roma civil society, academia as well as anti-discrimination experts.

The workshop was opened by Ivan Ivanov (ERIO’s Executive Director) who said that the need to discuss a topic such as school discrimination becomes more relevant given the current European Commission infringement procedures against Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic. Anne Gaspard (EQUINET’S Executive Director) mentioned an upcoming paper on discrimination based on race and ethnic origin, which looks at different challenges faced by Equality Bodies such as lack of equality data and under-reporting. Els Keytsman (UNIA’s Co-Director) condemned the special education system in Belgium and urged the government to fulfil its responsibility and address this situation since equal opportunities should be given to all.

Pia Lindholm (Legal Officer, Non-discrimination policies and Roma coordination Unit, European Commission) and Alfiaz Vaiya (Coordinator, European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup) explained how the EU is fighting school discrimination. The current infringement procedures taken by the European Commission against Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic were addressed.

The workshop was followed by three thematic workshops addressing different questions. The first one focused on the existing remedies and solutions at EU level addressing school discrimination. The second one focused on the role of Equality Bodies in fighting school discrimination and the third focused on finding ways to eradicate school discrimination.

The workshop was concluded by Bernard Rorke (Advocacy Officer, ERRC) who highlighted the sense of urgency in tackling school discrimination. “A day a child spends on a segregated environment is lost forever”, he noted.

“Anti-Gypsyism is the foundation to fight school segregation and it needs to be officially recognised as a specific form of racism”, said Ivan Ivanov when closing the event.

Event mini-site: www.erionet.eu/event-131016
ERIO at the 7th EU Diversity Charters’ Annual Forum

On 18 October 2016, the European Commission and Irish Department of Justice and Equality, in collaboration with the Irish Diversity Charter, held the 7th EU Diversity Charters’ Annual Forum in Dublin, Ireland. The theme of this year’s Forum was “Selling Diversity in a World of Diversion”, and discussions focused on how modern-day communications methods could be used to help promote “diversity messages” more effectively in- and outside of the workplace, as well as in the media.

The morning sessions focused on challenges to promoting diversity within businesses, as well as engaging media organisations to communicate diversity messages more effectively. The afternoon sessions continued with “parallel master classes” on various topics of diversity in the workplace, such as employment and unconscious bias.

ERIO is invited every year to the EU Diversity Charters’ Forum, and as it is the only Roma advocacy organisation attending the event its representatives are very active in the discussions in trying to promote the Roma issue within the framework of the Charter, as well as informing and raising awareness about the Diversity Charter among Roma communities and national and local levels.

10th meeting of the EU Platform on Roma inclusion

ERIO was present at the 10th meeting of the EU Platform on Roma inclusion, organised by the European Commission in Brussels on 29-30 November 2016. This event brought together a diverse range of stakeholders (national and local authorities of EU Member States and enlargement countries, international organisations, European institutions, representatives of European and national Roma and pro-Roma civil society, media and academia) to reflect together on how to deepen the implementation of Roma integration policies at national and European levels. The theme of this year’s Platform was the mutual accountability of all stakeholders in the case of Roma inclusion, with an added emphasis on topics considered particularly relevant for the mid-term appraisal of the implementation of the EU Framework of National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020.

The conference opened by focusing on this mid-term appraisal in the form of the FRA’s recent survey on the situation of Roma in EU member states, the results of which were described by FRA Director Michael O’Flaherty as “shocking”. This was followed by two panels on the mutual accountability of all stakeholders with regards to Roma inclusion, the first focusing on the topic of policy effectiveness, the second on effective
partnership and Roma participation. The second day of the event consisted of participatory workshop discussions aimed at reinforcing dialogue and mutual responsibility between the stakeholders present.

ERIO’s Executive Director, Ivan Ivanov, chaired the first panel, noting how the FRA

survey results demonstrate that “there are tremendous challenges that still remain” in efforts to combat anti-Gypsyism and promote Roma inclusion across the EU.

More information can be found here: [http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item_id=36992](http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item_id=36992)

ERIO’s Roma Political Participation #RPP Campaign

The second half of 2016 saw ERIO launch its campaign on Roma political participation (#RPP) in line with our belief that empowering Roma voices through their active participation in political decision-making processes is key to advancing their social inclusion in mainstream society and securing their rights. The #RPP campaign is part of our on-going commitment to raising awareness of the exclusion of Roma from positions in government across Europe, and aims more specifically to sensitise Roma and non-Roma alike to the importance of active Roma political participation for the sake of democracy, social inclusion, and the protection of rights. This campaign has the added ambition of inspiring (largely young) Roma to run for office at various administrative levels of government (local, national and EU) by offering up examples of Roma politicians as role models.

The campaign was divided between three subthemes to place greater emphasis on certain aspects of Roma political participation: empowerment, youth, and gender. For each of these themes we produced a digital flyer and poster (all of which are available at [http://erionet.eu/campaign-roma-political-participation](http://erionet.eu/campaign-roma-political-participation)), where the latter featured Roma politicians (from different EU member states and involved at different levels of government) as role models providing positive examples for young Roma. The posters featured Carlos Miguel (Secretary of State for Local Authorities, Portugal), Petre Florin Manole (State Secretary of the National Council for Combating Discrimination and former local councillor, Romania), and Candy Sheridan (Gypsy Traveller spokesperson and former local councillor, UK).

The final part of the campaign was a video project composed of contributions from young Roma from five European countries – Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Spain. Through their voices, the video sends a message about the power of young Roma to bring about change and claim their rights. It is a call to young Roma to be active citizens, to contribute to public life and to make their voice heard.

You can find the video here, with subtitles translated into different languages: [https://youtu.be/CKWH_GW-BBs](https://youtu.be/CKWH_GW-BBs).
ERIO’s advocacy training for Roma activists

From 21-23 December 2016, ERIO ran its annual advocacy training programme for Roma civil society representatives. The sessions were held in Haskovo and Kurdjali, Bulgaria, and were attended by 30 participants from countries including Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Macedonia and Turkey.

The training was conducted in line with ERIO’s aim to increase the capacity of Roma civil society to contribute more directly to the development of policies that impact Roma communities, and specific topics for the sessions were chosen based on the needs of local-level Roma activists and the requests of ERIO’s network members.

The programme focused on building the advocacy skills and efficiency of advocacy actions of its participants, with added emphasis placed on the involvement of Roma civil society in the policy design and implementation of Roma integration strategies, as well as the local implementation of anti-discrimination law and policies. The trainings informed participants about relevant EU developments in these fields, such as the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, the Council recommendation, Council conclusions, and other European-level initiatives with the potential to support advocacy activities. A further objective was to inform about the different types of EU funds, the practical steps for applying for them, and how to use them to contribute to the successful integration of Roma.

As per these objectives, the training programme was divided into three participatory sessions. The first, entitled “Advocacy skills, knowledge and techniques”, focused on the various stages of the advocacy planning process from issue identification to the articulation of visions and goals. It explained how trainees should identify the right areas of influence and the correct authorities to target depending on their mandate, responsibility, and the relevance of the advocacy action.

A second session, “European-level policies and initiatives”, concerned how advocacy actions could contribute to the more effective implementation of relevant European policies such as the National Roma Integration Strategies and Racial Equality Directive. Trainees were informed of various events and initiatives organised by the European Parliament and European Economic and Social Committee in support of advocacy efforts.

A final session on “EU Funding” explained to the participants how EU funds work, and who the responsible authorities are should they wish to apply for support. Much of the discussion concerned the European Social Fund, which is considered the primary resource for supporting Roma integration initiatives, as well as the Regional Development Fund and IPA funds for EU accession countries. The sessions also covered how to formulate project proposals for funding, and trainees received guidance on how to develop budgets and manage projects.

This training was put into practice through various “practical exchange sessions”. Here, participants were tasked with a particular issue and asked to build their own advocacy strategy, including identification of stakeholders and responsible authorities, the relevant methodology and techniques, and alternative instruments should the advocacy action be unsuccessful. A “Free Session” facilitated the exchange of views on locally-specific issues, and provided scope for feedback on the training and its applicability for the partners’ future work. It also allowed the trainers to touch on issues not included in the National Roma Integration Strategies, such as anti-Roma rhetoric, child trafficking, begging and institutional discrimination.
Inside view of ERIO: Rafael Saavedra

My experience at ERIO has been short but very intense and rewarding, allowing me to actively pursue my professional goals. While working for my Roma rights organisation in Sevilla, Spain, I had often consulted the ERIO website to follow the activities and projects in which it participated, as well as its presence in the different European institutions. It is undoubtedly one of the Roma organisations with the most visibility and presence at the political level, which participates in the elaboration of actions, strategies and processes for the inclusion of Roma people across Europe. This is one of the aspects that I would highlight most from my experience over these months and one of the areas from which I have learned the most.

The work that we do at my organisation in Spain is conducted at the grassroots level, working in direct contact with the Roma population to solve their most immediate and pressing legal, social and economic problems. Here the European focus at ERIO gave me a different perspective. At my organisation in Spain we also conduct work in advocacy and promoting rights in the fields of education, cultural recognition and the fight against discrimination and xenophobia, but our action is carried out from a very localist perspective and it was in this sense that I saw the greatest difference compared with my daily work at ERIO. I believe that Roma advocacy requires both these kinds of focus – both European-level actions and grass-roots advocacy – and that communication between the two levels is crucial in efforts to guarantee the rights of Roma in Europe and effectively foster their social inclusion.

This internship has also been an excellent opportunity to get close to the different departments of the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European Economic and Social Committee and the MEPs working towards the social inclusion of Roma in Europe. One of my objectives with this internship was to get to know better the different institutions and agencies and how their work contributes to a more inclusive society for Roma. The proximity of these organizations to the people they represent has been something that has pleasantly surprised me, since in my country there is a greater barrier to be in direct contact with political administrations.

In summary, I can only recommend to all those people with the desire to orientate their professional career within the scope of Human Rights and Roma advocacy to come to Brussels for a time, since I am convinced that they will benefit from significant personal and professional growth and will have a much broader and international conception of work.