



European Roma Information Office

# **Roma political participation: a way to reinforce post-2020 strategies**

Conference report

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The **European Roma Information Office (ERIO)** is a European anti-discrimination organisation that promotes political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing information to the EU institutions, civil society and governments. Through its wide network, it aims to combat racist discrimination against Roma through awareness raising, lobbying and policy development.

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## Introduction

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2019, the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) in collaboration with the European Parliament's Vice-President Livia Járóká organised a conference titled “*Roma political participation: a way to reinforce post-2020 strategies*” in the European Parliament in Brussels.

The conference gathered representatives of the European Parliament, European Commission, European Economic and Social Committee, national authorities, international organisations, ERIO network members and Roma civil society.

Building on discussions from our previous event organized on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, the conference intended to promote Roma political participation at all levels to ensure the effective implementation of Roma policies. Only by being empowered can Roma become democratic and participatory leaders in the process of their own inclusion. This conference aims to change the current paradigm where Roma civil society consult with relevant stakeholders, provide recommendations and wait for their approval and eventual implementation making them dependent on the political will of non-Roma authorities. Policies should encourage Roma to be part of the political processes. At the same time, they should remove barriers for Roma to access decision-making power, be the owner of their own strategies and policies and be involved in their implementation.

More specifically, the objectives of the conference were to:

- Explore how political participation can ensure a more effective implementation of current and future EU and national strategies and priorities
- Offer an opportunity for stakeholders and experts to engage in dialogue on how current narratives and political discourses dealing with Roma issues can be changed through Roma political participation

## Welcoming remarks and opening



### **LÍVIA JÁROKÁ, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

Livia Járóká greeted the conference for giving the opportunity to discuss the burning issue of Roma political participation, affirming that these discussions are always valuable as they lead to the improvement we can assess today. Thus, she addressed all the members of the conference but particularly thanked ERIO for establishing permanent communication between Roma grassroots organisations and the European institutions, and also the Commission which made the Roma issue a priority on its agenda.

### **IVAN IVANOV, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE**

As the executive director of ERIO, Ivan Ivanov reminded and welcomed the fact that ERIO's proposition to create a framework for Roma became a reality, after many years of hard work. That being said, he emphasised that, this year, the focus has to be on political participation. Indeed, political participation is a stepping stone for the proper implementation of policies and strategies. He mentioned that Roma represent a community of over 6 million people in the EU, however it seems that they are invisible on the public scene and this has to change. Finally, he recalled that, as an NGO, ERIO's role is not to influence political opinion, but only to encourage Roma political participation both as voters and as candidates.

## Panel 1: Roma political participation as a priority for future Roma strategies



### **LÍVIA JÁROKÁ**, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Lívia Jároká started by reasserting the importance of education as a tool of social inclusion and as a way to make Roma an active part of society from a young age. This link created between the Roma community and the rest of society will then be beneficial in terms of political participation as Roma will be more politically educated and motivated to make their voices heard. In addition, she stressed the need to have more Roma leaders, both in politics and in civil society, in order for young Roma to be represented and to have role models.

### **IVAN IVANOV**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE

Often left aside, said Ivan Ivanov, political participation is yet fundamental and therefore needs to be addressed in urge. The failure to finding solutions regarding Roma issues is, according to him, due to lack of political will and to the non-respect, by political figures, of the promises they make. Therefore, Roma need to be active not only in voting but also in their right to be elected. They “should own their destiny by making their voice heard”. This absence of representation in politics and decision making of the Roma community leads to a lack of coherence in the national level regarding the implementation of policies. In addition, Ivan Ivanov stated that Roma representation in politics is narrowly linked to Roma representation in the civil society, an area in which they are nearly invisible. He used the example of other minorities in Europe which, even though they also face discrimination, can easily be found represented in places such as municipalities, administrations or schools, which is not the case with Roma. Hence, Ivan Ivanov urged the Roma to be more visible not only to represent their community but also to work for the whole society.

## JAMES CARVER, MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



James Carver recalled the difficult situation of Roma in the UK and attested that this situation is common all over Europe since anti-Gypsyism is the last form of acceptable racism. He mentioned Brexit and stressed that the Roma issue should remain common to all Europeans since we need to ensure the bettering of Roma living conditions everywhere. He also underlined that Roma, like any other citizens,

have very different approaches and views in regard to politics, therefore their political activity is necessary to represent this diversity. To conclude, he mentioned the necessity of young people's engagement in politics since it is the only way they can be properly represented. Such representation is not only paramount to better the overall situation of Roma, it is also a very important tool to show the rest of the community the importance of the Roma community and to fight anti-Gypsyism.

## SZABOLCS SCHMIDT, HEAD OF NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES AND ROMA COORDINATION UNIT, DG JUST, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Szabolcs Schmidt specifically mentioned the EU Framework on National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 created in 2011. He explained that in 2018, the European Commission reviewed what they had achieved so far. The main objective was to know if the EU Framework was relevant to the Roma issue. Results showed that the Framework had been relevant, but it was not ambitious enough. Indeed, the fight against discrimination was not mentioned specifically, the goal for education was set very low and it also missed out on the diversity among Roma. Regarding the effectiveness of the Framework, the whole concept was built on flexibility, and he stressed the importance to keep that flexibility for the upcoming times. On the other hand, such flexibility does make it hard to ensure that all member states' program target the goals set. Szabolcs Schmidt claimed that, at EU level, the Framework was doing well in terms of platforms and cohesion policies. However, efforts still need to be made at national level.



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He addressed the need for the post-2020 Framework to find balance between flexibility and effective implementation in all the member states. He added that the issue of discrimination and unconscious segregation needed to be targeted explicitly. Finally, he stressed that to achieve the rightful designing and implementation of these policies, Roma participation at all levels is essential.

**SZABOLCS HORVÁTH**, CABINET MEMBER OF COMMISSIONER NAVRACSICS –  
DG EDUCATION, CULTURE, YOUTH AND SPORT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION



Szabolcs Horváth reasserted the importance for Roma to be and to feel included in society as it is a paramount factor to encourage them to participate in it politically. In order to achieve social inclusion, he notably stressed the need for quality education for Roma children. He underlined the positive effect of sports as a way to foster social inclusion and create a sense of community. Creating a feeling of belonging is not only a way to help Roma participate in political life, it is also a way to bring together Roma and non-Roma in order to fight anti-Gypsyism.

**RODRIGO BALLESTER**, CABINET MEMBER OF COMMISSIONER NAVRACSICS –  
DG EDUCATION, CULTURE, YOUTH AND SPORT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Even though there are some notable improvements in the field of education, in his speech Rodrigo Ballester admitted that quality education for Roma remained a problem today notably when it comes to school abundance, gender imbalance and segregation. He reasserted the need to tackle these issues from early school. He also admitted that legislation against discrimination was not enough, and there was a



need for more specific action, thus a recommendation has been proposed to better solve these issues. Finally, regarding social inclusion, Rodrigo Ballester put forward the importance of promoting Roma culture as it is, in his opinion, the best tool for social integration. He then encouraged Roma to be proud of their culture since, as he stated, *“wherever there is a Roma minority, the brilliant part of its culture resonates at national level”*.

## **Discussion**

During the open discussion the panel was asked practical questions on how to help young Roma to be more active and learn about political participation. In addition to mentioning education, the panel reminded that all European institutions have annual traineeships on the subject. In the past, one organization even had an agreement with the Commission to have specific quota for Roma trainees. Even though it does not exist anymore, such initiatives are possible and can be planned.

The issue of Roma access to European funding was also raised. Indeed, access to European funds can be a problem as it requires strict and lengthy procedures and a good amount of paper work. It was suggested that funds should be more easily accessible especially for

smaller projects. The need to create a window for small groups in order for them to avoid the bureaucratic and administrative complications was also stressed. If that is not done, we will be asking ourselves these questions over and over again.



## Panel 2: How can Roma political participation strengthen the implementation of post-2020 Roma strategies?

**RONALD LUCARDIE**, PRESIDENT OF ERIO'S BOARD



Once again, the importance of youth political participation was mentioned. Ronald Lucardie took the examples of current European events such as the Brexit and the Presidential elections in Slovakia. In both events, young voters made a difference and strongly impacted the voting outcome either by their participation or lack thereof. He added that to really enhance political participation among a community like the Roma,

a solution must be found to make them feel included in the political life, first at national level and then at European level. On this note, he welcomed the fact that the newly elected Slovakian President gave her acceptance speech in multiple languages, including Romanes. By doing so, she sent a strong message that all communities were to be included. Ronald Lucardie then went on to address the practical issue of young voters. He stressed that in order to get to them we should use all kind of new media, mostly social media, as it is something that resonates with the youth. There is a need to make Roma youth aware of their power and to make them own the process of political life.

## ANIKÓ HORVÁTH, ROMA LOCAL LEADER



As a Roma leader, Anikó Horváth, attested that it is very important to give a positive picture of Roma leaders in order to show that Roma can have a way out of their current situation. She mentioned the importance of integration programs in which students and adult can both take part. She greeted the fact that most Roma intellectuals are willing to work for their community, yet she called on Roma leaders to

work more with young people and above all to take part in politics in order to better represent the community and its interests. Indeed, she acknowledged that not many Roma are involved in politics and for that reason Roma representation is still very low.

## ISTVAN ABA-HORVATH, ROMA LOCAL LEADER

According to Istvan Aba-Horvath, to improve Roma political participation, the method must be different depending on the country. He stressed the importance of education and deplored the lack of political involvement on these questions. Besides, he attested that in social inclusion matters there should not be “gypsy or not gypsy” because it involves



everyone, and it is in fact a good way to bring down barriers between Roma and non-Roma. He recommended that political leaders ask more for people’s opinion and give them a chance to express themselves.

## JÁNOSNÉ JÓNÁS, ROMA LOCAL LEADER



Jánosné Jónás addressed the issue of education and of the available programs that do not work in practice. As a local Roma leader in Hungary, she is aware of the situation there and she can see how out of touch some policies are. Therefore, she advised for the revaluation, and renewal of these programs to be adjusted more for the field than to what people think in

Brussels. She underlined the fact that some expectations set in Brussels are too high and not representative of what is actually happening in member states.

## Closing remarks

The cooperation, between Roma intellectuals, leaders, organizations, and institutions is the best way to ensure the effectiveness of local policies. All participants agreed that youth should be a paramount target regarding political participation. Their involvement should be encouraged first through quality education which appeared to be a major concern for them.

This year is very important both at national and European level in terms of elections. Indeed, in addition to the European elections, Bulgaria and Romania have national elections enhancing the necessity to encourage Roma political participation. However, Roma representation does not only imply political representation, but also representation in civil society. Visibility is the main tool to fight the issues the Roma community faces, especially anti-Gypsyism.