



MEETING REPORT

Roma Network Meeting

Brussels, 19 & 20 October 2015

On the 19th and 20th of October 2015, Eurodiaconia held its 7th annual Roma network meeting in the office of Caritas International in Brussels.

Stephan Burger, Policy and Membership Development Officer at Eurodiaconia, welcomed the participants and started the meeting with a devotion. After a tour de table where the participants introduced themselves and their work with the Roma community, he presented the latest EU developments in the field of Roma inclusion.

Stephan Burger, Eurodiaconia, '2015 EU developments & Eurodiaconia initiatives'

Stephan Burger started with an overview of 4 key initiatives by the EU institutions and pan-European partner organisations over the course of the last year:

1) The Open Society Foundation and Council of Europe are planning to set up a 'European Roma Institute'. Introduced at a side event of the 2015 European Roma Platform, its key aim will be to increase the self-esteem of Roma and to combat negative stereotypes through an institutional structure which transcends national boundaries and short-term projects. The decision-making process about governance principles, budget and location is still ongoing; in the future, both individuals and organisations should be able to become members of the ERI and contribute to its activities.

2) The European Commission is preparing for the creation of national Roma platforms to promote better coordination and mutual learning amongst stakeholders at national and local level. The platforms will hopefully also increase access of civil society organisations to their respective National Roma Contact Points. An official consultation with EU-level organisations active in the field of Roma inclusion will take place on 27 November 2015.

3) The European Roma Information Office is currently setting up a European Roma Media Network and looking for journalists and media experts interested in joining its ranks. The aim of the Network will be to inverse the negative role played by the media in disseminating and reinforcing stereotypes and inciting hatespeech against Roma; it will raise public awareness of cases of anti-Gypsyism and promote a more balanced portrayal of Roma across national media outlets.

4) With the official ending of the so-called Roma Decade (2005-2015), the secretariat of the 'Decade of Roma inclusion foundation' has released a detailed Roma Inclusion Index, evaluating progress made towards Roma

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inclusion in the Decade's 12 participating countries (which include both EU Member States and non-EU countries) since 2005.¹ The Decade might continue after 2015 with a greater geographical scope, including new countries with significant Roma populations, and linked more strongly to the EU Framework on National Roma Integration Strategies (which exists since 2011).

In addition, three of Eurodiaconia's latest initiatives were presented:

1) Based on discussions held by Eurodiaconia members at the 2014 Roma Network meeting in Novi Sad, Serbia, Eurodiaconia recently released 'Guidelines for diaconal organisations on Roma participation'. A consistently raised objection about the way in which the process of Roma Inclusion is being coordinated is that it fails to sufficiently involve the Roma themselves. They are treated as passive receivers of services rather than as active actors, which entails the risk that projects don't correspond to real needs and that Roma have no sense of co-ownership over the direction and shape which the process takes. The Guidelines list a variety of methods to increase Roma participation at the level of project development and service provision.

2) To help its members with obtaining funding from both EU programmes and private foundations, Eurodiaconia has published a funding toolkit under the 'Resources' section of its website. The toolkit provides guidance on writing a project proposal, contains an overview of various funding programmes and their eligibility criteria, and concrete examples of member organisations which have successfully applied for external funding.

3) In 2012, Eurodiaconia carried out its first survey of members' projects in the field of Roma inclusion. The purpose of this survey was to gain a better overview of the types of activities its members are involved in, and to enable members to exchange project details and contact information across national borders. Three years onwards, Eurodiaconia members have developed and implemented a great variety of new projects, aimed at supporting Roma in different national contexts in fields such as education, employment, political empowerment and health. For this reason, Eurodiaconia has decided to update its report in 2015, which will be released by the end of the year.

To access the presentation, please click [here](#).

Ivan Ivanov, European Roma Information Office, 'The impact of the refugee crisis on Roma inclusion'

Ivan Ivanov, Executive Director of the European Roma Information Office, delivered a keynote speech on the impact of the ongoing refugee crisis on the Roma inclusion process. He came to Brussels 10 years ago when the situation of Roma was at a critical stage, with differences observed depending on geographical locality: In Eastern Europe, the standards for the Roma community were very low, and although Roma in the West had a better life and rights, they still belonged to the most disadvantaged groups there as well. Thus, the question arose of how to make sure that the rights of Roma are protected within Europe.

When Ivanov worked in the Roma Human Rights Centre, he observed a lacking availability of legislation on Roma by the European Court of Justice. After having moved to Brussels, he proposed policies on Roma inclusion and started advocating for a European strategy. However, he was confronted with questions regarding the necessity of a specific approach for Roma inclusion, which according to him is needed because of the special circumstances the Roma community face: Roma are one of the most discriminated minority

¹ Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Spain.



within Europe, as recent data of Eurobarometer support.²

Furthermore, Roma are neglected by state leaders who do not want to deal with issues regarding Roma migration such as ensuring access to health care, the labour market and education, Ivanov explains. Governments raise questions of why they should spend funding on integrating for example Bulgarian Roma when Bulgaria has an own budget for supporting their Roma community.

He then moved to explain the connection between the current refugee crisis and Roma integration, stating that for example demonstrators often link both issues by saying that they cannot deal with refugees anymore as they are having enough problem with Roma already, or even publicly stating that they prefer taking refugees over people from the Roma community. Also with regard to hate crimes against both groups, often confusions occur, with people attacking Roma as they took them for refugees and vice versa. Furthermore, he explained that both groups are not understood to be separated in their problems, funding support and legislation.

Ivan Ivanov emphasised that religious organisations have consistently been at the forefront when it comes to addressing anti-Gypsyism and promoting inclusion. He provided the following recommendations:

- We need to raise awareness amongst local authorities that Roma and refugees should not be treated as competing groups. Roma Inclusion and refugee support are separate aims which are separately funded.
- We have to engage with the media and combat negative stereotyping. The media can be an enemy or an ally to our cause. However, we have to be strategic in choosing which media outlets we want to engage with. Media are rarely independent; they can be strongly tied to the ideology of certain (anti-Roma) political parties, and some journalists will seize any opportunity to criticize the political establishment.
- Roma activists should not play victims, as has often happened in the past. Instead, they should emphasise their rights as equal citizens, criticise constructively, and cooperate effectively.

During the Q&A session, country-specific experiences with the public perception of Roma and the promotion of a better image were shared. Here, especially the role of (social) media was discussed, stressing the need to use it for spreading information about Roma and thereby positively influencing the public perception of the Roma community.

Jens Højland, Kirkens Korshær, 'International Staff Exchange'

Jens Højland from Denmark introduced the idea of an international staff exchange in the field of social services. The idea grew from his own plans to change the workplace in the Church Cross Army where he has been working with homeless people for three years. He is searching for a placement in Romania and in return also for someone who could replace him in his position in Copenhagen.

As advantages of this exchange he stressed the ability to develop a better understanding of the language, people and politics in a foreign country, especially in Romania or other countries where Roma usually migrate from. This would help people in communicating with members of the Roma community when returning to their

² Eurobarometer (2015). *Special Eurobarometer 437: Discrimination in the EU 2015*. Brussels: European Union



initial work with Roma in their home country. He also acknowledged difficulties of the idea, mentioning that there has to be first of all a willingness to leave work place and country, there has to be a certain compatibility of workers to be exchanged, and of course there are questions related to money, transport and accommodation to be solved.

In the question and answer session, the possibility of pursuing the exchange over the EU program 'Erasmus Plus' were discussed. Furthermore, concerns about the language barriers, resources and the added value of the exchange were raised.

'Group Work: Current challenges and responses'

At the end of the first day, a group work session took place to inventise developments, challenges and recommendations regarding the process of Roma Inclusion across Europe. Participants were divided into three main geographical groups: Scandinavia (Denmark, Sweden, Norway), Central and Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia) and Western Europe (Spain, United Kingdom, Italy). Towards the end, the following similarities and differences could be observed between the respective countries:

Group 1: Central and Eastern European members

- In the Central and Eastern European group, concrete progress regarding the situation of the Roma community has not been observed. Although some members were enthusiastic about initiatives such as the EU Framework on NRIS, the implementation is perceived to be lacking. They stressed that progress was only seen on paper, but not in reality.
- Regarding the challenges, members from this group especially stressed the exclusion of Roma children from quality education. They explained that Roma children are often pushed off into separated classes or 'special schools' for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the high drop-out of Roma children remains a problem.
- As a means to overcome these obstacles, the group participants proposed an increase in scholarships for Roma children and teenagers to enable them to receive quality education and break out of the cycle of poverty. Establishing role models and leading by example were stressed to be an important step towards abolishing prejudices. However, they also acknowledged that the demand for such scholarships is already much higher than the amount of available scholarships.
- This leads to another issue that was mentioned: the unavailability of budgets for Roma inclusion. Governments have been cutting budgets for social integration in reaction to the economic crisis and are moreover not allocating funding meant for Roma inclusion.
- As a last proposal for change, the need for Roma participation in developing and running projects was mentioned.

Group 2: Western European members

- In the second group, the perceptions of progress with regard to Roma inclusion have been different: Some members observed a standstill in developments regarding Roma integration. Mixed progress was observed by Spanish members who explained that Roma have been relocated from abandoned areas. Furthermore, Spanish educational programs for mothers and children showed promising results.
- However, problems such as the early drop-out of girls from school due to child marriage were stressed



- as well, hinting also to the still existent problem of gender inequality within the Roma community.
- Another challenge mentioned was the problem of bringing Roma people into regular employment.
- In a UK context, the empowerment of Roma people was stressed as an important factor for future development; initiatives would be more sustainable if Roma people were enabled to continue projects by themselves.
- Furthermore, the use of Roma mediators was considered to be an important development for the future, as well as the ensuring of stable housing.

Group 3: Scandinavian members

- Denmark and Norway host a comparatively small number of Roma. When the EU expanded and Roma came in bigger numbers, they faced a lot of prejudices and generated a heated media debate. In Sweden by contrast, the situation is different: there is a strong political will to integrate Roma which is producing positive results.
- In Norway, Roma face special challenges as the country is not a member of the European Union. People from the Roma community enter the country as tourists and are not entitled to social assistance, except for emergency help. Furthermore, the legislative situation is difficult regarding children's rights, as it is unclear to what extent they are entitled to education and housing there.
- Another challenge for the Roma community was the discussion about enforcing a law which prohibits begging. This would have made it difficult for the Roma community to ensure their existence legally.
- With regard to proposals for change, the group stated that more international accountability in the field of migration is necessary.

Study visit: Roma and Traveller Service Point, Brussels

Background

The study visit took place at a regional integration centre which works with Roma mediators in Brussels. Koen Geurts, the centre's coordinator, presented the centre's activities together with Darius Mihai, one of the Roma mediators working for the centre. They started by explaining the situation of Roma in Brussels, stating that approximately 10.000 Roma live in the city right now. A considerable number of them are Romanians or Bulgarians who came in the 1960s and are well integrated into society.

After the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007, another large group of Roma migrants came into Brussels. Before 2007, they would have been illegal in the country and only been able to survive through begging, having no chance for legal work or social assistance. After 2007, they could find work, for example by registering as an independent worker or by benefiting from state-supported employment schemes, and after 3 months of working also from social assistance. Nowadays, they usually move in with persons they already know (usually family members), working in iron collecting, construction or seasonal work to earn money and eventually afford an own place to live. Some even set up own businesses and bars in which they hire members of the Roma community again. Others are partially living on social welfare.

Despite improved circumstances, most Roma in Brussels still face problems such as finding employment. School attendance of Roma children is also below average. Furthermore, there is a lack of public acceptance of the Roma community in some neighbourhoods: people complain about Roma children playing on the street and about gatherings of bigger groups which raise the noise level and create fear among the residents. Another



issue is homelessness amongst certain groups, such as of the Slovakian Roma which are hard to approach and integrate. They are the most visible in the public sphere as they live in squats or on the street, having no social network to depend on.

Project

The integration centre works on **three core areas**: It operates as a support point for Roma and travellers, as a mediation service and as a training centre.

The **support point** provides Roma and travellers with information and contact details of service organisations and public institutions such as schools, municipalities and legal advice providers. With regard to schooling, the integration centre supports Roma in important steps such as the search for a school, registration, collection of documents etc. It also provides information, advice, training and mediation to the public institutions dealing with people from the Roma community. Koen Geurts stressed the communication barriers existing between teachers and Roma parents. The teachers often claim that Roma parents are not interested in attending parent meetings or ensuring their children attend classes.

This is where the **mediation service** comes into play. Mediators facilitate communication and collaboration between Roma and schools, public institutions and social actors. They bring conflicting parties together and discuss and translate problems if necessary. The aim with regard to schooling is to increase school performance and attendance of Roma children by involving parents in the process and increasing knowledge about and understanding of the Roma community. Although improvements have been seen, Koen Geurts also pointed to remaining difficulties, such as financial problems of Roma to pay for education, lack of places in schools and early school drop-out (related to teenage pregnancies, for example).

The **training centre** supports young people to obtain vocational skills and aims to improve their opportunities to enter the labour market. It organises personal development meetings and provides guidance on conducting job searches.

To access the presentation, please click [here](#).

'Beyond physical needs: The spiritual dimension of Roma inclusion'

The central aim of the session 'Beyond physical needs' was to assess the added value of missionary activities to promote Roma empowerment and inclusion. Two organisations who combine social services with religious dialogue were invited to share their experiences:

Krisztina Naszadi, Hungarian Reformed Church

Krisztina Naszadi presented the Roma Mission of the Hungarian Reformed Church and presented the outcomes of various interviews, capturing the positive effects of Church work with the Roma community. The Roma population in Hungary is concentrated in the poorest areas and a majority of Roma children do not go to school. Two years ago, the work with Roma was started by the Synod and since then a great number of stories have been collected. Krisztina Naszadi retold several of them, for example about a former homeless who became a student again, or about a former criminal who managed to become a pastor.



She continued by explaining the added value of spiritual work with the Roma community, focusing on **five key points**:

- First of all, the Church helps them in strengthening a **positive identity**. Roma often have troubled identities due to the history and perception of the Roma community, and in Christianity some found a more positive identification.
- Secondly, the spiritual dimension is a **tool of empowerment**, Krisztina Naszadi explained, giving them hope and confidence.
- Thirdly, Roma may get **social mobility through experiencing a 'calling'**. One interviewee told about his growing motivation to learn and receive education after his conversion, pursuing to become a religion teacher and to build bridges between Roma and non-Roma.
- Fourthly, many interviewed Roma embraced **Christianity's or Protestantism's ethics**, Krisztina Naszadi retold. They grew up without much supervision or education as children, having no one to instruct what is right or wrong.
- Lastly, spirituality contributes to **community building**. Roma are welcomed in a community where they can manifest and develop themselves.

To access the presentation, please click [here](#).

David Blowers, Salvation Army

David Blowers from the Salvation Army in the United Kingdom presented his views on the value of a spiritual approach for Roma people. He has been working with Roma who have recently migrated to the UK, many coming from Central and Eastern European countries. As part of an approach focused on 'change of hearts and minds first', he presented the Salvation Army's intention to plant new congregations among Roma and foreigners and to involve them actively in evangelising activities. Although this approach is by no means the only one which the Salvation Army employs in its engagement with Roma, it has been described by Roma migrants themselves as more effective than one which focuses on promoting social cohesion alone. By instilling a new sense of purpose and promoting an identity which transcends anti-Roma stereotypes, a spiritual approach meaningfully contributes to social cohesion – it is also being followed through with several Slovakian Roma communities in their country of origin.

To access the presentation, please click [here](#).

The Q&A Session illustrated the different approaches which members take when it comes to translating their diaconal identities into practice. Whilst some proponents of missionary activities amongst the Roma argued that these yielded demonstrable positive outcomes, some concerns raised were that a divide would often remain between Roma and non-Roma congregations, and that converting Roma to Christianity should not be treated as the ultimate aim of the inclusion process. Religious dialogue could take place in an informal setting without the intention to proselytise.



'Meeting the needs of Roma migrants'

The aim of the session 'Meeting the needs of Roma migrants' was to focus on the particular challenges related to integrating migrants who had arrived in the country only recently, as opposed to Roma whose families had been living in the country for generations. The former group had grown significantly in size since the EU enlargement of 2004 and 2007, when several countries with a large Roma population became EU member states, and faced significant obstacles in terms of language, social inclusion and employment opportunities across Europe. Two members shared their experiences from a Norwegian and a Dutch context:

Johanna Fraenkel, Church City Mission Oslo

Johanna Fraenkel works in the Church City Mission in Oslo which is the largest and oldest mission in Norway, being involved in different social services which range from child to elderly care. Johanna Fraenkel started by explaining the situation of Roma in Norway: As Norway is not a member of the EU, Roma can only come as tourists and have no access to social welfare. They are in need of sanitary areas, housing, food and clothing. In order to make a living, they beg or pursue artistic actions. Usually, Roma come for three months in summer and sleep in the forests, then they return to their home countries, Johanna Fraenkel explained. They often experience deprivation and poverty.

The Church City Mission supports Roma's basic needs by providing a shelter home with about a hundred beds, a health centre for paperless migrants and two food locations, for example. The mission furthermore runs a project for prostituted Roma and explores Roma culture by making music and recording CDs together. Johanna Fraenkel brought several copies to the meeting in order to share them with the other participants. Additionally, advocacy and outreach work is pursued to build knowledge of society on the Roma community.

Geesje Werkman, Kerk in Actie

Geesje Werkman from Kerk in Actie presented the case of a family she works with in order to showcase the particularly marginalised position of stateless Roma. The family consists of twelve members which used to live in a shelter in the Netherlands. The family members were stateless, and repeated attempts to obtain official papers from the Dutch government failed – in the end, several family members were deported to Serbia. The difficult situation led to a separation of most family members, with some living in Serbia whilst others managed to receive US citizenship because they were born on its territory, and the remaining ones being spread across Europe as they found shelter there.

Geesje Werman called upon the participants to support stateless Roma by checking if their countries have policies on statelessness in place, and by using their position as a church to advocate for positive change for Roma. She encouraged everyone to keep on supporting the stateless Roma community and finished by stressing the difficult situation they are facing.

Group work: Future cooperation of the network

As a last point on the agenda, future cooperation of the Eurodiaconia network was discussed. Participants reviewed the current format of the Roma newsletter, discussed options to improve cross-national cooperation, and reflected on the thematic focus of the next Roma meeting.



- Regarding the **newsletter**, some members expressed the wish to reduce the circulation interval from every month to once in two months. Furthermore, it was asked whether small country reports on the situation of Roma could be included, for example by looking at one specific country in each newsletter. It was recognised that the input from member organizations would be essential for this. Another proposal was to decide on one topic and collect input from all members on it, publishing the comprehensive discussion in the newsletter. Finally, the newsletter could contain entries introducing a concrete project or expert working on Roma inclusion within the membership.
- **International cooperation** between member organizations was welcomed by most participants, especially with regard to exchanging expertise and sharing knowledge. However, it was considered as a weak point that there was a lack of Romanian members in the network which would be of great value in discussing Roma-related issues.
- For **future network meetings**, members proposed different topics as thematic priorities, including the gender dimension of Roma inclusion, the definition of 'integration' in terms of assimilation (implying a loss of identity), Roma participation, social enterprises and the application of a rights-based approach to Roma inclusion. As a side note, the wish to have more external speakers was expressed, including representatives from European Roma organisations, Members of the European Parliament, national political actors or European Commission officials.

At the end of the discussion, Stephan Burger thanked everyone for their attendance and participation and closed the last session of the network meeting. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in the last quarter of 2016 (location to be confirmed).