

Event Report

Hearing on the Future EU Roma Strategy Proposals for Action post-2020

26 June 2019, European Economic and Social Committee



Comité économique et social européen
European Economic and Social Committee

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and social justice
through action

On the 26th of June 2019, Eurodiaconia held its *Hearing on the Future EU Roma Strategy: Proposals for Action post 2020* at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). In the context of the ending EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, the event brought together stakeholders from civil society and policy makers engaged in Roma inclusion to debate the persistent obstacles to Roma integration and to identify common priorities and recommendations for more effective EU strategies for Roma integration in the future.

During the opening panel, Gesa Böckermann, *Policy Officer* at Unit D.1. Non discrimination and Roma coordination at DG JUST, summarized the outcomes of the evaluation of the EU Framework for national Roma integration strategies up to 2020.¹ The evaluation found that progress towards the integration goals was rather limited and that the framework would have benefited from a specific discrimination goal. However, it was stressed that the framework was the start of a promising process and that there was a significant added value in putting the issue onto the European level, including by establishing coherence with the European semester cycle and the structural funds.

The first panel on Roma inclusion at the local level consisted of presentations from Anca Enache, Helsinki Deaconess Institute, Anita Tóth and Kriszta Naszádi, Reformed Church of Hungary, and Ragnhild Ekelund, City of Gothenburg. They discussed the daily reality of Roma, facing discrimination, limited access to education and insufficient social counseling. At the second panel, Isabela Mihalache, European Network against Racism, Jamen Gabriela Hrabanova, ERGO Network, and Gonzalo Montaña Peña, Fundación Secretariado Gitano further discussed how future EU approaches could better tackle the manifold forms of discrimination.

In his concluding remarks, Antero Kiviniemi, Permanent Representation of Finland to the EU, reaffirmed Finland's commitment to promote social cohesion during the Finnish Council presidency, which would also include Roma. Ákos Topolánsky, representing the EESC, called for a concrete,

¹ European Commission, Report on the Evaluation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, 2018.

rights based and efficiently monitored common vision and strategy and emphasized the importance of a truly pro-Roma language and environment at all levels.

In general, the event praised the efforts made towards Roma inclusion by European institutions and called for the development of a follow up strategy to the EU framework to boost Roma inclusion. There was strong consensus on the fact that Roma inclusion must be addressed through long term strategies and that close cooperation among EU institutions, with civil society as well as sufficient institutional weight of Roma Contact Points are required. The EU strategy should make use of other frameworks such as the SDGs by linking their mainstreaming goals with Roma inclusion goals. It is crucial to ensure that EU funding is in line with and supports the objectives of the EU framework.

In detail, the panelists discussed the following problems and recommendations to improve the living conditions of Europe's largest minority:

- **Putting the fight against Antigypsyism at the center of our efforts**

The panelists agreed that both policy makers and pro-Roma civil society organisations should contribute to a better understanding of antigypsyism as a specific type of structural discrimination against people of Roma ethnicity. This form of discrimination is strongly incremented in institutions and leads to discrimination against Roma in daily life, for example on the labour and housing market as well as in accessing public services. Recognizing the existence of this specific form of racism would be crucial to develop less fragmented approaches to Roma inclusion.

Therefore, the panelists suggested that:

- A possible future EU framework should put measures against discrimination at the core of its efforts and mainstream such measures in institutional structures, policies and legislations as well as funding instruments.² Member states should be incentivized to actively address the problem by developing concrete measures and indicators.
- Governments should be encouraged to make the concept of antigypsyism operational by adopting concrete legislation on the issue (as it has been the case in Romania) and by increasing efforts to identify hate-crimes as well as supporting the victims.
- At local and national levels, state employees, such as law enforcement officers and teachers, should be educated to identify and prevent antigypsyism.³ Awareness raising campaigns and/or social media campaigns should be promoted as promising examples. They can be related to national events, such as Roma prayer days, conferences or the Holocaust Memorial Day.

² Alliance against Antigypsyism: Developing measures to combat antigypsyism after 2020: Guidance for European and national stakeholders, 2019

³ Ibid.

- **Addressing education and segregation in schools**

While there remain major gaps in almost every area of the framework, for instance in housing and access to health or care services, the lack of access to education among both Roma children and adult Roma was highlighted as one of most significant barriers to Roma inclusion. Especially in Hungary, segregation in primary schools and preschools is growing due to antigypsyism and spatial segregation. This problem tends to strengthen discriminatory attitudes already existing among children and youth and, therefore, may lower education standards and outcomes in the long run.

Therefore, the panelists suggested that:

- EU institutions and national governments should promote and provide funding for inclusive schools and inclusive free time activities. Capacity building among teachers should be promoted. Teaching diversity and Roma culture in schools and after school activities are important steps to improve educational outcomes of Roma children.
- EU institutions and national governments should increase efforts to provide access to education and training as well as labour market integration support for adult Roma.

- **Supporting Vulnerable Groups among Roma**

The evaluation of the EU framework concluded that diversity among Roma people was not sufficiently addressed. EU mobile Roma, for their part, tend to face specific barriers and discrimination when accessing social rights. Their situation might become worse as neither host countries nor countries of origin tend to take responsibility for this specific group.

Therefore, the panelists suggested that:

- The EU should take a clear stand of rights of Roma who migrate within the EU. A possible follow up framework should target this group by providing local actors with capacities to inform about access to social services and provide them with legal advice.
- Member states should be encouraged to facilitate registration processes for EU mobile Roma and to promote housing solutions, as this group is particularly affected by homelessness.

- **Empowerment and capacity building**

The event concluded by highlighting the importance of sustainable and long-term change, which requires solutions that empower Roma people and make them agents of their own lives. Roma are usually excluded from opinion-forming and decision-making processes and underrepresented in public services working on Roma issues. As a consequence of the lack of opportunities there is a growing distrust in institutions.

Therefore, the panelists suggested that:

- A possible EU follow up framework on Roma inclusion post-2020 should include the involvement of Roma communities and (pro-) Roma civil society organizations as a transversally applicable principle for Roma inclusion projects and NRIS.⁴
- To lower the threshold for Roma accessing services and to contribute to more mutual trust, member states should invest in capacity building for local staff in NGOs and governmental departments dealing directly with Roma and increase the number of Roma working in (public) social and legal counseling services.

⁴ Eurodiaconia, Towards a post-2020 EU Roma Inclusion Strategy, 2019