

ROMA INCLUSION

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Civil society paves the way for Roma inclusion

Europe's largest minority continue to be marginalised and discriminated against despite EU initiatives to improve their well-being. Almost half of the existing ten million Roma in Europe live on the edge of poverty and the majority of them face social exclusion every day.

National governments either lack political will to implement EU recommendations or are slow in using the available European funds allocated to Roma inclusion.

Civil society organisations remain the main actors helping Roma to integrate in local communities.

“Even if a lot has been done for Roma, it is not enough,” said Anne-Marie Sigmund, the former president of the European economic and social committee (EESC) and a Roma activist. “There is a missing link between what is done at the European scene and at the local level.”

Vicious circle

Long-lasting discrimination and segregation is the reason Roma face poor living conditions, said Ákos Topolanszky, the EESC rapporteur on Roma.

Roma children face segregation at school, with the highest drop-out rates seen



Archimandrite Athinagoras's project "Lighthouse of the World" focuses on Roma children in his parish

in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Without basic education, Roma cannot get a job and the economic crisis has worsened the situation.

Finland, Austria, and Bulgaria have launched local services to provide job counseling and vocational training. But those small-scale projects are only directed to a limited number of people.

Unemployed and with no education, Roma cannot afford a place to live. They rely on social housing and more often end up settling in a ghetto. Topolanszky believes that if the government would help with the housing problem, Roma would travel much less.

Permanent housing would ensure that Roma children can attend school and complete their education in order to find suitable employment. According to Topolanszky, the Finnish government established a social programme in the early 1970s ensuring housing for all the Roma. It has been one of the most successful integration policies of Roma in Europe, he said.

But Roma themselves can be reluctant

to embark on permanent housing schemes. And the absence of a sedentary lifestyle means schooling also becomes a problem.

Don't preach to the converted

A number of initiatives have been proposed and adopted at EU level but none of them are legally binding. This means that the integration of Roma remains under the sole responsibility of every member country.

“Top-down actions are not the right way forward,” said Sigmund. “You preach to the converted if you keep on taking actions at European level.”

EU governments cooperate with the Commission to adapt their yearly national strategies on Roma. They receive progress reports and recommendations on what needs to be improved. Brussels also offers financial support to local projects targeted to Roma.

The responsibility lies ultimately with the national and local administrations to

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take advantage of the EU support but Roma integration does not seem to be high on the national agenda.

Awarding the civil society

As a result, a lot of the work on the ground is done by non-governmental organisations. They play an important role in closing the gap between the minority-group and the society they live in.

The EESC will award a prize to the three organisations that have achieved significant results in integrating the Roma at the local level.

The prize is awarded to different civil society initiatives from different areas. This year the committee decided to choose Roma as the theme for the prize.

“The aim of the EESC’s Civil Society Prize is to showcase best practices among NGOs throughout the EU so that other

organisations can emulate that work,” said Jane Morrice, the EESC vice-president.

“We therefore chose people who suffer seriously from discrimination in the European Union,” said Morrice. “We wanted to highlight the valuable work that is being done to work with, accept and integrate Roma into society in the member states.”

Morrice said the committee received more than 80 applications from organisations that have done work in housing, education, and training.

“It was good to see those projects in particular where the Roma themselves were involved in the work within the organisations,” she said.

Two-way process

The social and economic integration of Roma requires not only European, local and regional effort but also from the Roma

community.

“There is a need to change the mindset of how people perceive the Roma and also how Roma see themselves,” said Topolanszky.

Sigmund gave the example of a Sinti family established in Sweden. The youngest daughter in the family organised courses to teach the older Sinti women how to write and read. These kinds of initiatives are a great way to integrate with the local community, Sigmund said.

But cooperation is the best way to bring the two communities together, according to Sigmund. As an example, she quoted the one of a Romanian priest who made no distinction between the Roma and the rest of the village. The priest involved both sides into building a well. After the work was completed, the Roma were no longer seen as different but part of the community.

“They were brought together by working together,” said Sigmund.

Roma MEP: We need trust before we can truly belong



Soraya Post [Feministiskt Initiativ]

Soraya Post says she wants to create an intergroup on Roma in the European Parliament, and that Member States which do not respect the anti-discrimination directive should be sanctioned.

Post, an MEP from Sweden, sits on the Human Rights, and Civil Rights, Justice and Home Affairs committees. She is also the Social Democrats’ spokesperson on the Roma. EurActiv spoke with the lawmaker on 7 October.

You are one of two Roma MEPs in the European Parliament. What is your political strategy regarding Roma? Do you intend to propose new initiatives on Roma issues? And what would those be?

Firstly, I already put forward a proposal to create an intergroup on Roma in the European Parliament that will aim to acknowledge the discrimination against Romani people. This intergroup will serve as a good basis for all interested MEPs and civil society representatives to regularly

exchange views and establish contacts.

Needless to say that as a Roma MEP, I will work on having strong language on Roma issues in every piece of legislation the Parliament will be adopting.

Secondly, I will make a suggestion to include Roma history and culture in the EU countries’ national curriculum. Apart from that, it is important to ensure that every event about Roma in Europe should offer interpretation into Romani. It often happens at conferences and meetings that Roma people cannot contribute to discussions because of a lack of translation services.

Lastly, my two main goals during this parliamentary term are to work towards appointing an EU Special Representative for Roma, and creating a Roma Platform.

The EU Special Representative for Roma should coordinate the work that is done in the EU institutions on this issue. The person in charge should serve as a bridge between the Romani, civil society and politicians.

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A lot has been said about Roma integration, and the need to do more at all levels. But what could be done in cases where Roma are reluctant to receive help that is offered?

Building trust is the starting point for a successful integration strategy. The Roma community has been discriminated for decades, and it takes time to believe that whatever is done in their name is for their own benefit.

I haven't encountered a Romani who doesn't want a better life in my 30 years work experience with Roma. But a country has to acknowledge the past first to be able to improve the future.

For instance, in Sweden the government and the Roma went through a reconciliation process. Both sides went through long discussions and negotiations for months before publishing a white paper on Roma. This paper describes the Roma history and culture during 1900-2000. It also acknowledged the discriminatory laws and events the Romani had to go through.

It was very important for the Roma to speak about it. We are also using this material to inform children in schools, and people on the streets, of what happened. It is a way to break stereotypes as well.

How do you build trust?

Involve the Roma right from the start in the local activities and projects. A lot of organisations come with ready-tailored projects to improve the Romani community's life. But no one knows better than a Roma what is needed to narrow this gap. Consult, inform, share, listen, is the right path towards building this trust.

It is a long process, but you need to start somewhere.

Do you think Parliament has a role in shaping the Roma policy at the EU level? And what the MEPs should do?

The Parliament should make Roma

integration one of its priorities. It should also put pressure on the Commission and the Council to give Roma a monitoring status in those initiatives related to them.

We are often blamed for costing money, but there are too many projects out there that ask for money in the name of Roma, without actually spending a cent on them.

From your experience, what is the best way to involve the local authorities to help integrate the Roma?

Local authorities that are not respecting anti-discrimination laws and are acting against Roma integration should be sanctioned. We need to strengthen the anti-discrimination law and make the governments apply it strictly.

Did you feel discriminated as a Roma?

All my life, but I am very lucky. I am blond and blue-eyed. I don't fit the stereotype, but my daughters do, and so do my mother and my husband.

I grew up in fear, mercy and huge mistrust towards the society. This made me become a human rights activist and a politician, because I did not agree with the

picture they had of me.

I always put pressure on myself to show that I am as smart as the rest, and I can succeed. Fifteen years ago, I decided that I will never again feel like a second class citizen. It is important to know your rights, but also to practice them.

In the Swedish national elections last month, the anti-immigrant, anti-Roma Sweden Democrats became the third largest party in the country. Populist parties were also elected in a few other EU countries. How will this influence the Roma integration policies at the EU and national levels?

It all depends how the other political parties will deal with such a situation.

People voted for them because Sweden is not used to seeing beggars on the streets. We had homeless and addicts, but never before the poverty has been so visible in Sweden. There were discussions about prohibiting begging, but we didn't want to have a situation like in Denmark.

When Denmark prohibited begging by law, the Roma bought a trumpet instead and started blowing it on the streets. It turned into a double humiliation, because none of them knew how to play. It didn't do anybody (any) good.



IQ Roma servis supports Roma in finding employment

Roma integration through social housing

Governments and civil society should continue providing Roma with social housing, in order to help them integrate locally, and reduce their travel between countries, says Valeria Atzori, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Adviser on Roma.



Roma children in Bulgarian town.
[Dnevnik, the EurActiv partner in Bulgaria]

“Roma are not travellers by choice. They are obliged to leave because they are thrown out of their settlements,” she said. “When they have houses, they stay.”

This is one of the first EESC conclusions following visits to countries with Roma minorities over the last few months. EESC experts met with the Roma community, NGOs and national authorities in Romania, Bulgaria, Finland, and Spain.

Through these meetings, the EESC aims at exploring civil society initiatives in the Roma integration process, and provide recommendations to EU institutions in November.

According to Atzori, the situations vary considerably between the countries. While in Finland Roma are fully integrated, Romania still struggles to find

ways to communicate with them.

In Romania, the government still lacks political will to help the Roma, despite the creation of a National Agency for Roma Integration. NGOs and the Roma were defensive in their meetings with the EESC, and blamed both the government and the EU for not doing enough.

Romania is also confronting deeply rooted stereotypes about Roma. Atzori said that due to a few Roma that are exploiting the system, a lot of Romanians believe that the minority deserves the deplorable situation they are in now.

This is the reason many Roma travel from East to West, as the situation is better in countries such as Spain. The EESC met with the Instituto de Realojamiento e Integración Social that helps reallocate Roma from shacks into a decent living place.

The institute buys houses on the private market, and rents them to Roma for a symbolic sum. On their side, Roma commit themselves to keep the place in good condition and send their children to school. The institute monitors that these conditions are met for a period of five years.

“This has led to a situation where up to 98% of Roma children are in school,” said Atzori. “The Roma families really engage and respect these terms so they can

keep their homes.”

Rewarding excellence for civil society initiatives

According to Atzori many civil society organisations do an excellent job of helping Roma integrate locally. In fact, when the EESC announced an award for NGOs with the most successful Roma integration projects, they received a record number of 81 applications.

Eight organisations have been pre-selected for the prize. The jury will announce the three winners on 16 October.

ETP Slovakia - Centre for Sustainable Development is one of them. The organisation participated in the Building Hope project, which aims at educating, supporting, and motivating Roma families to build their own homes.

Slavomira Macakova, Director at the ETP Slovakia, hopes that similar projects will become part of the national and European tools for disadvantaged minorities. She also believes that Building Hope allows Roma “develop their potential, grow, integrate and enrich our societies”.

The other semi-finalists come from Finland, Croatia, France, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Greece, and Spain.



ETP Slovakia's project Building Hope guides young Roma families on self-help construction of low-cost houses

Roma NGOs win civil society prize

Three civil society organisations from Slovakia, Greece, and the Czech Republic won the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) civil society prize Thursday (16 October) for outstanding achievements in integrating Roma at the local level.

The winners, ETP Slovakia, the Greek Reverend Archimandrite Athinagoras Loukataris, and the Czech IQ Roma Servis, were selected from 81 organisations that competed with projects for a €30000 reward shared between the top three.

It is no coincidence the EESC chose to award a prize to Roma civil society organisations this year. Following the gains of populist and xenophobic parties in the last European elections, the committee made Roma inclusion a top priority.

“Civil society organisations at all levels need encouragement to foster EU values and combat any display of intolerance,” said Henri Malosse, EESC President.

All three winners work on Roma issues, but focus on different aspects of Roma life.

ETP Slovakia, winner of the first prize, for the past 15 years, has been working on giving an opportunity to every Roma family to own a house through their “Building Hope” project. The programme offers Roma micro-loans, and teaches them how to build

houses, among other things.

“Our services are available to everyone, free of charge, and on a voluntary basis. We do not discriminate (against) our clients on (a) racial basis, but we focus our activities on the most motivated and most needy clients,” said Slávka Mačáková, ETP Slovakia Director. “We try to create positive role models for the others to follow.”

The second prize was given to Reverend Archimandrite Athinagoras and IQ Roma Servis.

Ten years ago, Reverend Athinagoras asked the Greek Church to send him to Africa to help the poor. The church replied that he could go to a new Africa, one that is closer and inside of Greece. Reverend Athinagoras was then voluntarily sent to Dendropotamos, a city near Thessaloniki, whose population is 75% Roma, a quarter of which are minors.

“The situation was so deplorable that not only they didn’t have [food] to eat, but they didn’t know how to eat,” said Reverend Athinagoras.

He established “Lighthouse of the World” in the basement of a church to educate Roma children. Reverend Athinagoras considers education the most important gift a society can give to the Roma, because this will help them come out of the vicious circle of poverty they are in now.

“A Roma child once said he wants to recycle metal when he grows up because that’s what people do,” Reverend Athinagoras said. “He couldn’t imagine anything else because he was not educated to do so.”

Asked what he plans to do with the

monetary prize, Reverend Athinagoras said he will finance the college education of Roma children.

In the Czech Republic, the second prize winner, IQ Roma Servis, works not only on educating the Roma, but on a variety of other projects. They help Roma families to place their children in schools, provide them with training, career counseling, and find housing. IQ Roma Servis also coordinates campaigns to combat social prejudice and discrimination.

The organisation was initially founded by the Roma community and more than 30% of the employees who work for the NGO are Roma.

“Our hard work have earned us a name in the Czech Republic, which makes the Roma in need come to us knowing that support will be offered,” said Katarína Klamkova, Director at IQ Roma Servis.

Eight criteria were taken into account by the committee when selecting the winners. The first three measured the innovation, uniqueness, and creativity aspects of the initiatives. The remaining five focused on the project’s impact on Roma community, duration and sustainability, and the extent of its reach across Europe.



The European Economic and Social Committee awarded a prize to three organisations for their work on Roma integration. [Ecatarina Casinge]

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