



ERGO Members:

RAA Albania
EDROM, Turkey
Integro, Bulgaria
Tarna Rom, Moldova
SPOLU IF, Netherlands
Roma Progress, Macedonia
Policy Center for Roma and Minorities, Romania

April 2010

'The Trap'

The detrimental effects of positive reporting

Valeriu Nicolae

Sharing positive practices among member states is indeed something needed. But if we continue to ignore failures leads to loss of credibility, increased frustration of the majority and Roma population alike, and a waste of European money, because of the repetition of mistakes. Bureaucratisation of Roma issues within the Commission and Member States through employment of Roma experts in decision-making positions is one of the main solutions presented, not because it would be a magical panacea but because it is an issue, which continues to be ignored despite obvious benefits.

The trap of “positive practices”

When it comes to monitoring and evaluating social inclusion, and EU-funded projects on Roma in particular, the European Commission focuses exclusively on positive case studies. In this paper we argue that such an approach is wrong and that without significant improvements in the evaluation and funding practices for EU Roma-related projects, we will see various detrimental effects in the long term.

The positive evaluation of Roma projects is overwhelmingly subjective.

It is in the direct interest of everybody involved to present any EU Roma project, successful or not, as a positive case study. NGOs depend on EU funds for Roma projects. In order to function and employ staff, these NGOs need to continue receiving European funds. Therefore, they have a direct interest in over-estimating their initial applications and embellishing their results, because successful projects are the only ones promoted/rewarded by the Commission.

National governments also need to access EU money. At the moment, the absorption rate of EU funds in countries with a large Roma population is abysmal. In the view of the public, the level of absorption of available structural funds is often directly linked to the success or failure of the respective government. In most of these countries, the number of Roma-related projects is fairly small, and the projects are often of poor quality. Local administration and other social partners are often reluctant to get involved in projects targeting the social inclusion of Roma due to rampant anti-Gypsyism, among other factorsⁱ. Project design in general is blind to the many forms of anti-Gypsyism, which are obvious to the experts working at grassroots level and invisible to those within the EU structures and national

info@ergonetwork.org • www.ergonetwork.org

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** consists of Roma organisations that focus on the **Roma grassroots empowerment** and **mobilisation** and promotes **active-citizenship awareness**. ERGO assesses the **dynamics and mechanisms of change** and **propose concepts and methods** that creates the opportunity for Roma to **become respected citizens** in their societies and to **make their voice heard from grassroots up towards the European level**.

governments. The positions and salaries of the governmental bureaucrats responsible for the approval and evaluation of structural funds depend on higher rates of funds absorption, and this factor often leads to exaggerated positive evaluations and undeserved high ratings of approval for poorly conceptualised Roma projects.

The Commission has many reasons to present Roma projects as positive practices.

The European Commission has a poor record when it comes to the social inclusion of Roma. This is problematic, considering that the Roma population in Europe is higher than the individual population of more than a third of Member States. The poor record, in part, stems from the lack of formal mechanisms within the Commission to address the social inclusion of Roma. Furthermore, Commission lacks Roma expertise: it has never employed a Roma expert in a permanent position or within the cabinet of a Commissioner. Despite great rhetoric about diversity, the Commission remains one of the most exclusive organisations when it comes to employment of Roma. Thus, practice is in strong discrepancy with the fact that the Commission has acknowledged since 2004 that Roma are the most discriminated ethnic group in Europe, and the fact that it pressures governments to involve Roma in their structures.

To make matters worse, the existing informal structures are ineffective. Despite good legal framework, a Unit on Anti-Discrimination, an Interservice Group on Roma, and an Interservice Group on Racism, we witnessed in the last years a surge in anti-Gypsyism. The Commission has barely reacted, aside from some good but with limited or no effect statements from second rank officialsⁱⁱ during meetings focused on Roma issues. The Community Action Plan Against Discrimination 2001-2006 did not include any meaningful actions tackling anti-Gypsyism. The Roma Interservice Group, tasked with coordinating all Roma initiatives of the EC, has a secretariat, which consists of one person within the DG Employment and Social Affairs. She admits that she has never visited a Roma ghetto, herself. These inadequacies paint a picture of a rather poor attempt to address the social inclusion of Roma.

The Commission already has a (somewhat undeserved) bad image with the common European public. Acknowledging the many failures of Roma projects will not help in this regard, and it would also have negative repercussions on the careers of those in charge of Roma related-issues. These factors make open discussion of failures within the Commission itself an unlikely, or even impossible task.

There is no truly independent review of any of the structural funds.

Independent reviews of the use of structural funds are paid for by the European Commission. As a result, the reports tend to lack any significant criticism towards the Commission. Furthermore, the funding of some of the reviewing bodies (for example, European NGOs) is directly linked to the Commission, making the incentive to offer criticism even lower. Even those stakeholders who do not have an immediate interest in praising the Commission do not want to risk their possible future chances to access European funds.

The intent to promote positive practices is good, but leads to bad results.

The portrayal of all projects as successful creates a credibility gap. Projects are approached with scepticism by those who work with Roma communities and who should implement them, even when (exceptionally) they show good practices. Once a project has been portrayed as successful, the Commission may wish to see it replicated in other countries. However, the socio-economic conditions of Roma are hugely different, not just among member states but also between different regions of the same country, things otherwise

info@ergonetwork.org • www.ergonetwork.org

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** consists of Roma organisations that focus on the **Roma grassroots empowerment** and **mobilisation** and promotes **active-citizenship awareness**. ERGO assesses the **dynamics and mechanisms of change** and **propose concepts and methods** that creates the opportunity for Roma to **become respected citizens** in their societies and to **make their voice heard from grassroots up towards the European level**.

recognised by the Commission itself at the level of discourse. This means that even good projects may not be replicable, let alone poor ones. This difficulty is compounded by limited expertise and interest in Roma issues at the national government level, and lack of consultation with national Roma experts. As a result, the Commission has made some embarrassing mistakes such as presenting the replication of a project as a success, despite the fact the project didn't even startedⁱⁱⁱ.

Governments engage in little open experience-sharing on issues related to the social inclusion of Roma. This is partly related to shortcomings (identified by many experts) of the Open Method of Coordination, which is the only available EU mechanism related to the implementation of social inclusion of Roma policies.

Reporting is often false, distorted or biased.

Unfortunately, the practice of false, distorted or biased reporting demonstrating inexistent, or exaggerated, progress within EU funded projects on Roma is silently sanctioned by the EU. EU monitoring and assessment mechanisms are too diplomatic and tend to focus almost exclusively on positives. In practical terms, this tendency discourages constructive criticism and objective reporting on poor or failing practices. The focus on positive practices often backfires: governments or implementing organisations present exaggerated positive reports of poor projects, and this leads to further financing. This cycle perpetuates itself and discourages constructive, but critical, analysis of failures. This leads to the repetition of mistakes and inefficient use of EU or national money.

It is remarkable that at this moment, not a single case study of the European Commission focuses on assessing a failed project. At the same time, there is overall agreement among the main stakeholders that the majority of the interventions targeting social inclusion of Roma produced lower than expected results.

We risk a balloon effect – the reporting on Roma projects presents more and more positive practices and achievements on paper while at the level of Roma communities these results are less visible and sometimes minimal or non-existent. This approach can create tensions and frustrations and lead to crisis in the long term.

Are there solutions?

Solutions will require political will from member states and efficiency and innovativeness from the Commission. Of course, the Commission should adopt general measures to improve its activity such as encouraging constructive criticism and involving critics in designing solutions rather than sidelining them. Here, however, I suggest a number of solutions directly relevant to Roma related issues.

- a. Support the establishment and functioning of an independent network of Roma experts responsible for the independent assessment, evaluation and monitoring of EU and Member States initiatives targeting the social inclusion of Roma. As a general rule, none of those experts should be involved in any EU-financed projects in order to ensure their independence.
- b. Encourage a critical but constructive review of the many failures of the EU and Member States in addressing the problems related to the social inclusion of Roma. Publish a black book (“lessons learned”) on Roma social inclusion.
- c. Create formal mechanisms within the Commission able to deal with the extremely

info@ergonetwork.org • www.ergonetwork.org

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** consists of Roma organisations that focus on the **Roma grassroots empowerment** and **mobilisation** and promotes **active-citizenship awareness**. ERGO assesses the **dynamics and mechanisms of change** and **propose concepts and methods** that creates the opportunity for Roma to **become respected citizens** in their societies and to **make their voice heard from grassroots up towards the European level**.

complex issues related to Roma inclusion. A coordination Unit might be the best solution.

- d. Encourage the employment of experts on Roma issues in the cabinets of Commissioners – this is the fastest way to ensure expertise on Roma within the Commission.
- e. Focus on active citizenship of Roma. The main failure of EU and Member States relates to the lack of active participation of Roma citizens within their respective national societies.

ⁱ Lack of Roma related expertise, illegibility, lack of human resources and know how in accessing Structural Funds

ⁱⁱ With the remarkable exception of Commissioner Vladimir Spidla

ⁱⁱⁱ During a conference on March 1st in Budapest 2010 – the replication of ACCEDER project in Romania was presented as a success story while in fact the project is not even started in Romania