INTERVIEW WITH IVAN IVANOV, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN ROMA INFORMATION OFFICE

Segregation of Roma: "Positive, compulsory action is required"

By Nathalie Vandystadt

Under the aegis of the Swedish Presidency, the EU is convening, on 28 September in Brussels, its platform for Roma inclusion. The central theme is education, an area, among others, with immense needs, as underlined by Ivan Ivanov, executive director of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO).

What are your expectations of this second meeting of the European platform for Roma?

In the beginning, I had almost no expectations. Many of those concerned, including people from the Commission, were not clear about how the platform should operate. Should it be a separate body?

A group of people, organisations and/or institutions? Then, in April, it was decided that it would not be a new body set up by the Commission, but a process. This process would involve European institutions, as well as each Presidency of the Union, and probably high-level representatives from each member state, intergovernmental organisations and NGOs, such as ERIO.

What integration processes are we talking about?

It is a question of seeing how to adapt the main European policies to the Roma, and to what extent they can help to improve their situation. This was explained in April in Prague, on the occasion of the first meeting. The Commission then explained that there would be an in-depth review of current policies to see whether they are working in the case of the Roma.

The new anti-discrimination directive should also help to reduce discrimination against them. Lastly, it is a matter of sharing best practices - as was the case in Spain, where such measures were adopted - by implementing it in Romania, for example.

How do the Roma live in Europe today?

They are faced with a high level of discrimination and racism, coupled with a high level of poverty, in all areas: education, health care, employment, housing, access to services. The Roma need better education; illiteracy is very high among them. They need to break free from segregation and segregated schools, where they receive poor education, and join normal schools.

Segregation is not unique to the Central European countries...

It also exists in Western Europe, in France, Ireland, and, in certain cases, Spain. But segregation had, for a long time, been institutionalised in Central Europe. Not only are the Roma segregated at school, but they are also pushed into ghettos, and kept away from the cities. There is no transport in these places. Some ghettos have neither running water nor electricity, such as in Slovakia.

Can we speak of progress in Central Europe while extreme right groups are organising themselves against the Roma?

The situation is worse. In the past, the Roma had work, even if they were relegated to unskilled tasks. Twenty years ago, they were the first victims of the liberalisation of the economy. They became impoverished. Then, extreme right groups, which were increasingly present on the political scene, realised that playing the ethnic and racism card would bring them votes. Their populist statements raised tensions between the Roma and the non-Roma. Everywhere, minorities are the weakest part of society - and the Roma are in minority everywhere. They are blamed for all the problems. Today, in the Czech Republic, for example, they are accused of being at the origin of the re-introduction of visas by Canada.

Will the re-introduction of Canadian visas change anything in the Czech Republic?

The Canadian decision is temporary. It is precisely to prompt the Czech Republic to take the Roma problem seriously. It is not simply an immigration problem; it is a political problem. But, once again, if Canada re-opens its visa-free borders to Czech citizens, it will not solve the problem. The issue is a European one: there must be a serious campaign against anti-Roma discrimination, because it is clear that the Roma are the most rejected population in Europe. According to last year's Eurobarometer survey, between 25% and 48% of Europeans do not want to live with the Roma, will not let their children study with Roma children, and do not want to have Roma friends. The highest figures are in the Czech Republic and in Italy.

Why this rejection?

There are no proper integration policies. There is no political desire to improve the situation. We also need a serious programme to promote Gypsy culture. Their culture, traditions and mentality are not known. It is precisely because they are unknown that others create stereotypes and prejudices. In the newspapers, there is only negative information about the Roma. This is why, in addition to these anti-discrimination and information campaigns, we must create mechanisms to allow the Roma and the non-Roma to interact. For the time being, the Roma are nowhere. There are no Roma doctors, lawyers or politicians. While Europe has 14 million Roma, there is only one Roma member of the European Parliament.

What is your recommendation?

Positive, compulsory actions [today, these depend on the willingness of member states - Ed] in terms of education and employment. We must close these special schools for the mentally handicapped, where Roma children are sent, and organise preparedness courses for the language and cultural environment of the country. ■

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