Recommendations of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO[1]) to the Czech EU-Presidency on the Social Inclusion of Roma

Promoting "cultural diversity as a source of creativity and information" is one of the priorities of 2009, the European Year of Innovation and Creativity. This political message is of great importance because many politicians, especially those from right-wing parties, as well as an important part of the European media, present cultural diversity as a source for social conflict and as a threat to the so-called 'European' identity. Such opinions contribute to the continuing perpetuation of discrimination and racism that is experienced by large percentages of Roma throughout Europe. The racist riots against Roma in Spain and Italy and the criminalisation of Roma from Romania in Italy and Finland last year are indicative of the gravity of the 'anti-Gypsyism' movement in Europe. Since discrimination faced by Roma is strongly linked to the poverty they face, their situation is only going to get worse in light of the current financial crisis and consequent high levels of unemployment throughout Europe.

For these reasons, ERIO warmly welcomes the motto of the Work Programme of the Czech EU-Presidency – "Europe without barriers" – since it has deep significance for the Roma community. The Czech EU-Presidency calls for a "Europe without internal economic, cultural and value barriers for individuals, enterprises and economic entities". It is imperative that the barriers are removed that prevent Roma from being socially included and receiving equal treatment.

In order to achieve Roma inclusion, a stronger commitment is required from European institutions and national authorities. In keeping with this commitment, the European Council has called upon Member States and the European Commission to undertake specific actions to promote Roma inclusion. ERIO believes that a European Framework Strategy represents the most effective instrument for successful policy making towards Roma. ERIO would like to assist the Czech EU Presidency in this task by proposing recommendations for undertaking policy interventions, at the EU and national levels, in areas of crucial importance for Roma.

Promoting a European Framework Strategy on Roma

Over the past years, a large amount of EU and national funds have been diverted for activities promoting the social inclusion of Roma. Unfortunately, this high level of investment is not reflected in reality, with no noticeable improvement being observed in the living conditions of many impoverished Roma communities. This failed investment is related to the lack of a European Framework Strategy towards Roma and to a lack of policy coordination, both within the European Commission and between European and national governments. A European Framework Strategy

1. The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) is a human rights advocacy organisation promoting the rights of Roma communities throughout Europe. ERIO lobbies European institutions, national governments and international organisations in order to bring about improvements in policies concerning Roma communities. ERIO cooperates intensively with Roma organisations and supports them in establishing their concerns and demands to European and national decision-makers. The ultimate goal of ERIO is to contribute to the eradication of racism, discrimination and social exclusion faced by the majority of Roma in Europe.

and strong EU policy coordination would lead to an effective allocation of resources and the achievement of long-term objectives. ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Encourage the European Council to request from the European Commission the development and implementation of a European Framework Strategy towards Roma. Such a strategy should contribute towards filling the gap, in terms of policy design and implementation, between the European Commission and Member States; improve policy coordination within the European Commission; and set up practical guidelines for an effective allocation of funding in programmes targeting Roma. Member States should be required to report on policies affecting Roma communities in all relevant fields of intervention.

- Request the European Commission to set up the announced European Platform on Roma Issues as a forum from which concrete steps forward will be taken in terms of policy arrangements for Roma inclusion.

- Call upon the European Commission and Member States to focus on Roma in the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. In countries with sizeable representative Roma populations, policies and measures tackling social exclusion and poverty should be included in National Action Plans and in Peer Reviews on Social Inclusion and Social Protection.

Roma and Education

ERIO welcomes the increased interest of European institutions in issues of migration and education, as reflected in the European Commission's Green Paper "Migration and Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Education Systems", and the public consultation on the Paper. Since there are large numbers of Roma who are migrants, this is a topic of major interest for Roma communities. Nevertheless, Roma are facing even a more critical situation in their own countries, particularly in the new EU Member States. Most Roma children and young people attending segregated schools and acquire very low levels of education; this consequently prevents them from accessing higher education and adequate employment. The majority of Roma children and young people are at the lowest level of the education scale throughout the EU. All necessary efforts should be made for integrate Roma children and young people into mainstream education. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Call upon the European Commission to focus, within negotiations about the future "Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training Beyond 2010", on the integration of disadvantaged groups, especially Roma and people with an immigrant background, into mainstream education. The new programme should include the support of school desegregation programmes benefiting Roma children and young people, and lifelong learning measures that specifically target unemployed and low-skilled Roma in order to re-insert them into the labour market.

Rise in racist violence and anti-Gypsyism

In 2008, the wave of anti-Gypsyism continued to rise throughout Europe. One of the most blatant and stark incidents of violent anti-Gypsyism took place in November 2008 in Litvinov, Czech Republic, where about 500 people linked to the right-wing Czech Workers' Party violently attacked a Roma neighbourhood with stones, firecrackers and petrol bombs. However, racist incidents against Roma occur not only in the Czech Republic but also in Italy, Hungary and Spain, sometimes ending in fatalities.. The rise in anti-Gypsyism does not only assume physically violent forms, but is also spread widely through media and political discourse. The negative portrayal of Roma in the media particularly contributes towards the strengthening of prejudices against Roma,

especially in times of economic crisis. This is unacceptable in European countries that are committed to defending human rights and democratic values. It is necessary to mobilize all necessary legal and institutional efforts to staunchly combat any form of anti-Gypsyism, wherever it may occur. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Take the lead in the fight against anti-Gypsyism by calling upon Member States to implement as quickly as possible the European Framework Decision on Xenophobia and Racism, which was adopted by the European Council in November 2008; to put in place all necessary legal and institutional arrangements to combat racism against Roma; and, to work towards achieving a societal consensus, especially with the participation of media enterprises and political parties, to eradicate anti-Gypsyism in their countries.

Mobility, Migration and Integration

ERIO welcomes the call of the Czech EU Presidency for full liberalisation of worker movement within the EU. ERIO hopes that such a political message and commitment will be positively reflected in the treatment of Roma migrants throughout Europe. In 2007 and 2008, issues of Roma migrants occupied newspaper headlines, especially in Western European countries, in a manner that presented a very distorted picture of the recent migration of Roma communities. Most Roma immigrants living in Western Europe are citizens of the European Union. Yet often, they fall in a grey zone; on one hand, Roma are often limited in their rights with regard to free movement. On the other hand, they are mostly not entitled to access integration programmes for migrants. Most Roma migrants within the EU, both EU citizens and Third Country Nationals, face social exclusion, poverty and discrimination. Legal and institutional arrangements ensuring full respect for the fundamental rights of Roma, and their social inclusion, should be guaranteed. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Encourage Member States to guarantee, without restriction, the right to free movement of Roma EU citizens and residents, by respecting the principle of equal treatment and applying no restrictive standards when it comes to enforcing national and European legislation on fundamental rights. The European Commission should constantly assess whether national governments are acting according to European treatments.

- Take the lead in proposing a new European Policy Programme for Freedom, Justice and Security, which will replace the Hague Programme (2005). The new programme should be based on a human rights approach that ceases to address migration as a security issue focuses instead on the inclusion of people with a migrant background, gives up the criminalisation of so-called irregular migrants, and develops framework conditions for their regularisation.

- Encourage the European Commission to adopt a Directive providing sanctions against employees of irregular Third Country Nationals in line with international human rights treatments and which do not affect the rights of immigrants.

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