



Recommendations of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO)¹ to the Spanish EU Presidency

Spain takes over the EU Presidency at a historical moment; it will be the first EU Presidency to operate under the Lisbon Treaty and with the Charter for Fundamental Rights. At the eve of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion – 2010 and in times of an economic crisis, the Spanish EU Presidency has the opportunity to strengthen the social pillars of the Treaty, linking employment with social policies and promoting social inclusion of disadvantaged groups such as Roma and migrants. Roma are one of the groups which are mostly affected by the economic crisis in the EU; large parts of Roma live in poverty and social exclusion. It is unacceptable that people as Roma who are living in the European Union, one of the richest parts of the world, are facing substandard living conditions and are not treated equally as citizens from the majority societies. The plight of Roma continues despite considerable efforts made by EU institutions and Member States.

Spain has one of the largest Roma communities in the EU. Although Spanish Roma also face social exclusion and discrimination, Spain is one of the countries which has invested the most over the last years in programs aiming at Roma inclusion. Due to this, the Roma Civil Society expects that the Second European Roma Summit which will be held in Cordoba under the Spanish EU Presidency will become a milestone in the road towards Roma inclusion, where EU institutions and Member States will show a stronger engagement for the Roma cause.

Spain is considered at EU level as the “best practice” with regard to inclusion policies targeting Roma. ERIO hopes that the Spanish EU Presidency will show the same commitment to foster the improvement and strengthening of EU structures and policies aiming at the social inclusion and equal treatment of Roma. This commitment is urgently needed to push forward initiatives such as the European Framework Strategy towards Roma inclusion which would lead to a more effective policy making. ERIO would like to contribute to the Spanish EU Presidency by proposing recommendations for undertaking policy interventions at EU and national levels in areas of crucial importance for Roma.

European policies towards Roma

By the end of the first half of 2010, the European Commission has to report to the European Council on the progress made in promoting Roma inclusion. The European Roma Civil Society expects that this report will include instruments to improve effective policy making towards Roma inclusion. In the same context, ERIO hopes that the

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.

Second European Roma Summit will not be just another event for empty declarations but a place for discussion on effective policy making and strengthening synergies between the various stakeholders. Despite of the increased interest and stronger action of the European Commission and several Member States for promoting Roma inclusion, there is still a lot of space left for improvement. In order to achieve these goals, ERIO calls upon the Spanish EU Presidency:

- To encourage the European Commission to develop a European Roma Framework Strategy of Roma Inclusion. Such a strategy should contribute to set up common goals and indicators with regard to Roma inclusion; improve the policy coordination between the European Commission and Member States; to make the allocation of funds more effective; and to increase the accountability of Member States regarding inclusion policies targeting Roma.
- To make of the Second European Roma Summit a place of debate on concrete measures to be implemented at European and national level towards Roma inclusion. The Summit should be the place from which European institutions and Member States reaffirm their commitment to promote Roma inclusion and announce concrete steps for improving policies which target Roma communities.
- To encourage the European Commission to strengthen the Integrated European Platform for Roma Inclusion making it a forum for policy development. Concrete mechanisms for bringing forward policies and instruments of Roma inclusion should be defined and handed over to the corresponding implementation agencies.

Economic crisis, social exclusion and poverty

In the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion – 2010, the plight of the Roma should be put on top of the agenda. ERIO welcomes the fact that the Spanish EU Presidency has amongst its priorities the recovery from the economic crisis and job creation. This is a crucial issue for Roma communities since they are one of the most affected groups. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that large parts of Roma do not even have a job; they do not have the opportunity to get out from the vicious circle of poverty. Poverty faced by Roma is strongly linked to the discrimination they are facing. The fight against poverty, especially extreme poverty, and (re-)insertion of Roma into the labour markets are two challenges to be met. In order to achieve these goals, ERIO calls upon the Spanish EU Presidency:

- To call upon Member States to take urgent measures to tackle poverty among Roma, implementing a multidimensional approach, carrying out interventions in the fields of housing, (self-) employment, education, health and participation. Special interventions for addressing extreme poverty should also be included.
- To call upon the European Commission and Member States to implement vocational training programmes to foster the (re-) insertion of Roma into the labour markets or to promote the access to adequate self-employment. These should be complemented by awareness raising campaigns on discrimination faced by Roma targeting personnel from employment offices and employers.

- To put poverty and social exclusion faced by Roma on top of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion – 2010. Activities carried out at the European and national level should raise awareness about poverty and social exclusion, largely faced by the Roma.

Citizenship and gender equality

ERIO welcomes the fact that the Spanish EU Presidency has gender equality as a priority. The majority of Roma communities throughout the different European countries are living in poverty, but of these, the most vulnerable group are Roma women and children. Roma women face the biggest barriers in terms of access to adequate education and employment. Roma women face multiple discrimination. They are discriminated because they are women and because they are Roma. The equal treatment of Roma women is one of the biggest challenges in the endless road for equality for Roma. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Spanish EU Presidency:

- To promote a gender sensitive EU policy making targeting Roma communities, taking into consideration the particularities of the discrimination and social exclusion faced by Roma women, focusing on measures aiming at their equal treatment

Health conditions of Roma

According to the Communication of the European Commission “Solidarity in Health: Reducing Health Inequalities in the EU”, COM(2009) 567/4, Roma are one of the most vulnerable groups facing health inequalities; it is stated that life expectancy among Roma is 10 years less than that of the majority population. There is a higher incidence of preventable diseases, particularly those avoidable by routine vaccine, among Roma. Often, there is not the necessary healthcare infrastructure in segregated Roma settlements and villages. As such, most Roma communities do not have access to preventive health services. On top of this, discrimination and mistreatment of Roma by medical personnel and public health administrations are not single cases. The access to adequate healthcare for Roma and a healthcare system free of discrimination represents one of the main challenges for European and national policy makers. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls on the Spanish EU-Presidency:

- To encourage Member States, Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries to develop action plans to meet the health needs of Roma. Such plans should include the following aspects: improvement of infrastructure of the healthcare services provided to Roma; healthcare services should take into consideration the specific needs of Roma, especially with regard to gender; carrying out disease screening in Roma communities living in poverty; undertaking urgent measures to take impoverished Roma away from substandard living conditions which increases the risks of disease propagation; carrying out health prevention campaigns specifically targeting Roma communities; and, implementation of intercultural training programmes for medical personnel and for Roma health mediators.

Roma migration

Roma migrants, both EU citizens and Third Country Nationals, are one of the most discriminated and socially excluded minorities in Western European countries, even within migrants' communities. Often, Roma migrants have to overcome immense obstacles to access basic services such as healthcare and education; their freedom of movement is often strongly restricted as well. Episodes of racial violence, e.g. in Italy, Ireland and Spain, have also been reported against them. Most of the Roma migrants are EU citizens and as such they do not have access to funds dedicated to the integration of Third Country Nationals. In most of the cases, policy makers and administrators have failed to effectively address Roma migration. There is an urgent need to guarantee the inclusion of Roma migrants. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Spanish EU Presidency:

- To encourage Member States to provide Roma, both EU citizens and Third Country Nationals, with all the necessary means to facilitate their social inclusion in the host societies. Unrestricted access to integration programmes should be provided to both groups. Member States should also guarantee the right to free movement of Roma EU citizens and residents, by respecting the principle of equal treatment.

Forced returns of Roma to Kosovo

ERIO is deeply concerned by the planned repatriations of Roma to Kosovo. Repatriations have already taken place from Germany; these repatriations have been carried out despite the lack of conditions for a safe return of Roma. Other Member States are negotiating bilateral readmission agreements with Kosovo authorities. The current situation of Roma in Kosovo is still very precarious; besides experiencing inhuman housing conditions and poor or even no access to healthcare, education and employment, Roma are regularly the targets of racist discrimination and violence. Many Roma still live in camps where there is a high risk of contamination (e.g., the camps located in northern Mitrovica region, such as Camp Osterode). In view of this situation no repatriation can take place and urgent measures should be taken to improve the living conditions of Roma in Kosovo. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Spanish EU Presidency:

- To call upon Member States not to repatriate Roma citizens to Kosovo. Kosovo-Roma living as asylum seekers or refugees should be given the opportunity to stay in the host countries if they wish.
- To urge Kosovo authorities to urgently improve the living conditions of Roma, to close the lead-contaminated camps of Cesmin Lug and Osterode located in northern Mitrovica region and to relocate Roma in adequate housing. Accommodation in refugee camps is only a temporary solution, and under no circumstances must they become definitive settlements. The improvement of the living conditions should be a requirement for the accession negotiations between the European Commission and the Kosovo authorities.