CONFERENCE REPORT
Roma Migration: a European Challenge
27 May 2009

On May 27th, ERIO organized a conference on "Roma Migration: A European Challenge", which was held in the European Economic and Social Committee. The four plenary secessions were: Non-Discrimination and Migration, Solutions for Protecting the Rights of Roma Migrants: EU Roma Policy, Roma and Boarder Crossing in Europe: Problematic Practices Concerning Roma Migrants Including Roma EU Citizens, and Sharing Experiences and Good Practices. The conference focused on how immigration works for the Roma in various countries. Problems regarding Roma migrants, such as racism, were brought to attention and discussed along with reasons for migration, and possible solutions to the problems.

Attendants were from the European Commission, various NGOs, and Roma Organizations. Countries represented were Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. The day-long conference brought people together, allowed for ideas to be shared, and issues to be addressed through presentations, pictures, and discussions.

The conference commenced with opening remarks by Mr. Mario Sepi, President of the European Economic and Social Committee. Mr. Sepi stated that one of the many things that EU Member States share in common is the unfortunate fact that discrimination against Roma exists in each of them. Mr. Sepi added that many of the political parties in Europe are racist and xenophobic and that they champion a notion of "cultural racism" which Mr. Sepi describes as a result of these political parties fears and anxieties of their own culture being "contaminated" and tainted. In addition, Mr. Sepi reminded the participants that as a result of the ongoing economic crisis plaguing Europe among others, is the fact that no one "European" culture should be homogenized, and that all cultures should be given their due respect and valued equally.

Non-Discrimination and Migration

To begin the panel discussion, Ivan Ivanov, the Executive Director of ERIO, stressed that Roma permanents and Roma migrants are discriminated in the same way and this proves that first and foremost discrimination is by ethnicity and not by migration. Ann-Marie Sigmund followed by stressing the importance of the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, mentioning that just because the year is over does not mean that intercultural dialogue should end and that particular focus should be given to women and education. She stated that there is a political identity between us all because everyone lives in Europe but that a cultural diversity must be established. On the other hand, the Roma have to become European in order to be accepted into society and that by integrating migration will become easier.

Joachim Ott from the European Commission talked about Racism towards the Roma and solutions for the racism. He stressed that the problem of racism lies in the negative Roma stereotypes which are enforced by the media. Roma are often made into scapegoats and it is easy to tell them apart because they are visibly different. A problem is that other people do not know about the Roma culture, way of life, or on a personal level and only know the stereotypes. Lack of education, territorial isolation, and the color of skin add to the problem of Racism linking it to the problem of Migration. Legally they have the same rights because they are European Union citizens, but these rights are not acknowledged. A target policy and immigration processes are needed to better the problems of Roma Migration.

He also talked about the European Commission's social agenda 2005-2010 which strives to bring jobs and opportunities to all. Roma have to become part of mainstream society in all ways in order to obtain equality. This has to be done economically, socially and politically and their education, employment opportunities, housing, and health care need to be up to par with the majority of the population. Safety is also a big issue for the Roma since they are targeted by violence even from safety authorities. Roma need to be comfortable being Roma, and no one should be discriminated against. The European Commission will continue to stress the importance of Roma issues.

Pascal Charon, the director of the European Network against Racism (ENAR) stressed that Roma, who are EU citizens have the right to migrate and have the freedom of movement through EU boarder states and also pointed out that Research is needed to look into the phenomena of Roma Migration because data is lacking on the on the issue. Spain, Italy and France are the main countries which Roma migrate to and there they are often greeted with persecution and violence by police and gangs. They lack civil rights and have poor healthcare and education. Roma from the newly acquired member states have a harder time migrating and this is not right since mobility is the right of the EU citizen, and therefore, the rules need to be revisited. Infringements to the European Parliament Resolution on the Situation of Roma in the European Union have been found both in member states and many in new member states. The

resolution was not enforced or applied correctly, and therefore, compliance and functioning need to be investigated.

It is the negative perception of the migration debate that has lead to failed policy controls, ethnic profiling, and lack of security protection. A fundamental rights protection has to be built to ensure rights for workers, migration, and the value of a multicultural society. There has to be better coordination of policy instruments dealing with inclusion and this can only be done by investigating and doing research for inclusion of the Roma in European society. Pascal concluded by saying that every situation has to be looked at case by case since every situation is different, and that there also needs to be better communication on the National level with the Roma communities.

The discussion consisted of various questions and statements. The panel said that the UK created the best Roma inclusion policy in Europe and it works, and therefore, other countries should look at the UK and follow its example. The UK representative argued that Roma have suffered, and that it is not as great as they believe.

Samir Mile stressed that the main problems regarding the migration of Roma were not social but rather of safety and security. He also said that they should not be limited to social inclusion, but respected as a group of their own. Nicolae Gheorghe pointed out that the language of the conference is not real language but politically correct language. He said that we should talk in real language which addresses new realities since we just talk about the same things, and these are redundant. He stated that movement should not be detrimental to the children and if the children will be better of in their home countries then families should not migrate. For instance, In Romania children can go to school, if they move they may not be able to go to school. Priority should be education and their rights should be reconstructed around education. Freedom of movement should not be the goal because it hurts the Roma.

Another participant said that Roma communities should be informed about migration, and that an analysis should be incorporated in the policy of the situation of Roma refugees and asylum seekers.

Solutions for Protecting the Rights of Roma Migrants: EU Roma Policy

The second panel was chaired by ERIO's Policy Officer Guillermo Ruiz, and he mentioned that he had observed and been informed by Romanian Roma immigrants in Spain, that although they too experience discrimination in Spain, it is nothing compared to the discrimination they face in Romania, and that in Spain, they are able to feel more "human".

Mr Ruiz's remarks were followed by that of Ms. Belen Sanches Rubio, from the Fundacion Secreteriado Gitano based in Spain. Ms. Rubio had asserted that the Romanian Roma community is currently by far the largest Roma community in Spain, due to Romanian accession into the EU at the end of 2006. Ms. Rubio stated that the Roma population is very vulnerable, especially the women and children when it comes to taking advantage of the basic resources

that they are entitled to in Spain as EU citizens such as health care and other fundamental rights. Ms. Rubio explained that what the FSG in Spain does is to help integrate the Roma and inform them of their fundamental rights which they are entitled to as EU citizens. The FSG has been able achieve this goal for over 2,000 Roma immigrants, Rubio added.

The second speaker on this panel, Bashi Quraishi, the former Chair of European Network against Racism (ENAR). Mr. Qurashi commenced his presentation by reminding the participants that the Roma have been a minority in Europe for over 800 years. That being said, how is it possible that after living here for generations, they can still be discriminated against? Mr. Quraishi followed by making an unusual analogy that the Roma population had it better under the communist regimes in Europe than they do now under the "so-called democratic governments." Mr. Quraishi stated that the EU must acknowledge that there is a big problem in the way that its largest minority is treated, stating, "We can no longer sweep the Roma issues under the carpet and pretend that it will solve itself." Mr. Qurashi explained to the participants that local authorities in Member States are not implementing EU directives as regards to discrimination and racism because there is no sanctions against the Member States who do not do so and thus no motivation to implement such directives. Mr. Quraishi called on the EU institutions to impose sanctions on EU Member States who do not implement such directives and even to publicly shame them for not respecting core European values. In addition, Mr. Quraishi spoke of Roma integration. He reminded the participants that it is the majority and not the minority (Roma) with the power and thus responsible for lack of integration. Finally, Mr. Quraishi spoke about the role of the media and the negative portrayal of the Roma by the media has clear and direct consequences on the lack of respect for the Roma population. Mr. Quraishi called on the state to do groundwork such as promotion of Roma culture and disseminating the positive aspects of Romani culture through the media. "If the media do not do their work properly, there will never be integration in Europe," Quraishi added.

The panel was concluded by remarks from Nicolae Gheorghe, a Roma activist from Romania. Mr. Gheorghe began his presentation by affirming that the Roma "must be recognized as a cultural nation, not as a territorial people or state". Mr. Gheorghe then continued by stating that there is a massive gap between European efforts to eliminate racism compared with European efforts to eliminate the racism and discrimination of Roma. Mr. Gheorghe also stated that with Roma migration to Western European countries increasing in the past 20 years, politicians at the local and national levels, for example like in Italy, can be openly racist against the Roma "with no shame." However, Mr. Gheorghe had also stated that it is up to the Roma and Roma activists to start to seriously take these matters into their own hands. Mr Gheorghe stated that Roma activists today how lost the initiative that they had in the past. Today, Mr. Gheorghe continued, "Roma activists are not as close to the Roma population as are the Roma exploiters and criminals". This must change, Mr. Gheorghe concluded, it is vital that Roma activists regain their momentum and initiative as today as in the case of Hungary last year, Roma are being shot at and killed, something that did

not happen in the past, and therefore the importance for the mobilization of Roma activists is at an all time high.

Roma and Border Crossing in Europe: Practices Concerning Roma Migrants Including Roma EU Citizens.

During the introduction, it was stressed that Roma are not nomads, but travelers. 'Travelers' is an important word and should be used because nomad has consequences and is derogatory. The Roma have to be able to speak for themselves and have their own voice. They face discrimination because they are asylum seekers, immigrants, and ethnically Roma.

Daria Storia, from Italy, talked about how the government takes advantage of people who want security and how it discriminates against Roma. The Roma have a bad reputation in the media and this is an excuse for people, even people of power to discriminate. Officials have adopted polices targeting Roma but there are debates with the new government. An emergency had been declared regarding traveler villages for one year until May 2009. Interventions into the villages were preformed such as monitoring, identifying, expulsing and removing people from illegal camps and moving them into other areas and called these "villages of solidarity." They believed that this was the best practice, to evict the Roma communities which were in the city center and move them to the outskirts where they were forced to live in a fenced community. A bus picked up the children and brought them to school each day. Of course, this only worked in principle since many of the kids did not have proper clothing, let alone go to school. For the Roma which are settled in Italy, the main goals should be normalization and inclusion but the solution they implemented only created outside settlements with outcasts and ghettos and the living conditions are becoming worse and worse.

Gruia Bumbu from Romania pointed out things that should be done to benefit the Roma such as implementing effective policies which would consider the diversity of the Roma. Also, Jobs need to be facilitated and Roma involvement in society needs to increase. Their self esteem has to rise, they have to be taught their rights, and they have to be seen as an opportunity and not a threat or a scapegoat.

Saimir Mile, The president of the French Roma organization, The Voice of the Roma, started his presentation with asking questions. Why are Roma disadvantaged and discriminated? Is it wrong to have two cultures and two languages? The answer to this question was no, but when people speak of the group they are, nevertheless, called disadvantaged. He also pointed out that migration is not the same as mobility.

Some of the poor practices regarding the Roma in France were that recently moved citizens could vote locally after living somewhere for 6 months but the Roma could only vote after three years. This was done on the basis that they were travelers, and therefore, they were viewed as not staying in one place very long, even if they lived somewhere for years. They were still only travelers

with no voting rights. The French Roma want to have the word ‘Travelers’ be considered racist but no one listens.

Like in Italy, Roma were forced to live in integration communities which were gated. There, they were not allowed to work but were expected to pay 30 EUR rent to live there. The government encouraged the Roma to leave France by giving them grants to go back to Romania. They paid 300 EUR for an adult and 150 EUR for a child. Employers who employed Roma when they come to the country with no documents were charged a minimum 900 EUR fine and that money was used to send Roma back to where they came from. The French government did little to promote Roma inclusion and concentrated more on getting rid of them than integrating them in society.

Mile also showed pictures depicting various troubling scenes which happened to the Roma. One image showed a group of Roma who were forced to stay in a gym for two days while being guarded by armed guards. They had no proper food or water and were not even let out to go to the hospital if they needed to go.

During the discussion, the representatives from a UK Roma organization said that they would have appreciated the participation of Roma youths at the conference. They asked if the freedom of movement was oppression from living in their home country rather than the desire to move around freely. They based this question on the horrific crimes which happen against Roma in many countries who then fear for their lives and flee looking for a safer home. The answer was that migration can be both freedom and oppression. They also shared some good practices what are applied in the UK such as Roma being able to get jobs as teacher’s aids.

It was also mentioned that Bulgaria and Romania are not Shengen states, and therefore, the people from there do not have free movement. Roma, who stayed in Shengen areas for more than 3 months, were punished by the Bulgarian government.

Closing Remarks

The conference was concluded by thanking the speakers and participants and acknowledging the very important topics which were discussed from racism regarding migration to solutions and wrong practices regarding the Roma migrants and good practices.