



“Roma Access to Political Participation”

Conference report

On April 16th, ERIO organized the conference “Roma Access to Political Participation” at the European Parliament focusing on the participation of the Roma population in politics. It was a very important event as important representatives from EU institutions gathered (such as MEP Claude Moraes, Jean Lambert and Gyula Hegy; and the member of the Cabinet of the European Commissioner Vladimir Spidla, Jan Jarab), EU officials, Roma representatives (such as Andrzej Mirga and Rumyan Russinov) as well as human rights activists. In the first part of the conference, the EU position on Roma political participation was emphasized; while the second part focused on experiences in promoting Roma political participation. The conference was opened by Mr. Ivan Ivanov, Executive Director of ERIO. Mr. Ivanov initiated the meeting by stating that there are two general assumptions when it comes to the matter of Roma and political participation. Firstly, that the rights of the Roma are effectively addressed, secondly, that few Roma can make a difference in policies. Mr. Ivanov went on to debunk these assumptions by reminding the attendees that Roma are currently underrepresented, and in fact in some countries, not represented at all. Mr. Ivanov then concluded the conference’s opening remarks by revealing the notion that the Roma are the most isolated and discriminated minority in Europe according to the findings and research of numerous NGO’s.

During the opening remarks, Pedro Aguilera, the Chair of ERIO’s board, reminded the participants that political participation is the most important part of society because it is through political participation and voting that the population can influence the shaping of policies. "In the last 50 years - he stated - only a few Roma have been elected to the European Parliament, out of a population of over 10 million. Ideally, or proportionally speaking, there should be 24 Roma in the European Parliament". Heavy unemployment and poor living conditions among the Roma are direct results of under representation. Consequently, the Roma lose interest and motivation to participate in politics due to

under representation. "It would be a great achievement - Aguilera continued - if there were 3 speakers of the European institutions who were Roma. More Roma are needed in the European Commission and Parliament".

EU Principle of Political Participation

The first part of the conference focused on the "EU principle of political participation". MEP Jean Lambert was the first to speak on the issue. Mr. Lambert stated that political participation was the most important part of society because it is through political participation that people can influence the shaping of policies. In the last 30 years, Mr. Lambert continued, only a few Roma have been elected to the European Parliament, even with the current Roma population of the EU surpassing 10 million. With such a number, proportionally, or perhaps ideally speaking, there should be 24 Roma representatives in the EP. Mr. Lambert also spoke of the underrepresentation of Roma in the EU, which he asserts are directly linked to the poor living conditions and heavy unemployment which the Roma population are subject to. As a result of underrepresentation Mr. Lambert continued, the Roma lose the interest and motivation to participate in politics. Mr. Lambert closed his presentation by stating that it would be a momentous improvement if 3 speakers of the EU institutions were Roma, and if more Roma were elected and nominated to the EP and the Commission.

Mr. Lambert's presentation was followed by one his colleagues, MEP Gyula Hegy. Mr. Hegy implied that all members of the EP should get together and work in unity to find a solution to this very pressing problem. Mr. Hegy brought to mind that participation is one of the most difficult issues in European politics for all minorities, as is evident by the fact that only 785 of the former EP were non-white, jokingly calling it "One of the whitest places I've ever seen, even the cleaners are white". Mr. Hegy reminded the audience that "evil may triumph when good men do nothing". Mr. Hegy was referring to the fact that people in Europe can see the unfair state that the Roma are and yet people refuse to stand up for this oppressed minority. Mr. Hegy went on to add that the ideal proportional representation of Roma in the EP, meaning 24 MEP's, is also an issue of power, or in this case the relinquishment of it. Consequently, in order for the Roma to empower themselves politically, many European MEP's would have to relinquish their seats in the EP, and in reality power, something that they are not prepared to do. Mr. Hegy concluded his remarks by stating that as a result of the recession and economic situation, the situation for the Roma is getting worse by the day, and that in times like these, "the poorest of the poor will suffer most". It is therefore important, Mr. Hegy concluded, to make a stand and for these issues to be heard, especially with the upcoming EP elections.

Enrika Chiozza's of the European Commission's DG Employment and Social Affairs presentation followed Mr. Hegy. Ms. Chiozza stated that the concept of social

inclusion can only be achieved and implemented by political participation. Therefore, Ms. Chiozza continued, it is very important to encourage Roma to vote and to be elected. Ms. Chiozza reminded the participants that giving the Roma the right to vote is not enough to fulfill the concept of social inclusion, and that governments and especially political parties must take on the initiative of integrating disadvantaged groups into the scope of election campaigns by keeping them constantly informed of their rights. Ms. Chiozza closed her remarks by exclaiming that a jointly developed plan by the European NGO's and institutions must be developed to promote social inclusion of the Roma.

Past and current experiences in promoting Roma Political Participation

After a vibrant question and answer period, followed by a brief coffee break, the second issue of the conference, "Past and Current Experiences in Promoting Roma Political Participation" was the subject for discussion. This section of the conference was opened by Isabel Alonso, Ministry of Social Affairs for the Spanish EU Presidency. Ms. Alonso opened her remarks by stating that every minority group in Europe suffers from the reality of being underrepresented in the EP. Ms. Alonso then proceeded to inform the participants with a very bold statement, saying that Spain does not have a "Roma problem because they do not have minorities". In terms of politics, Ms. Alonso made clear that in her opinion, the creation of a Roma party is not the solution to solve the problem of political participation among the Roma. Ms. Alonso provided evidence to this claim by testifying to the experience of a Roma party in her native Spain which she maintains was a failure due to the fact that Spanish Roma did not want a "Roma party" but to be represented in all political parties, because the Roma in Spain just want to feel Spanish like other Spaniards. Ms. Alonso concluded her remarks by stipulating that although there have been many positive developments over the past 20 years, "political commitment, and not just political willingness is needed" in order to truly achieve something positive for the Roma community.

The subsequent speaker in the second section of the conference was Joachim Ott, from the Commission's DG Employment and Social Affairs. Mr. Ott opened his presentation by bluntly declaring that "doing nothing for the Roma is no longer a political option". Mr. Ott went on to state the positive side of the issue by affirming that more has happened in the past two years in the Commission for the Roma than in the past 50 years. Mr. Ott followed by explaining that the Commission and member states have for the first time clearly committed themselves at the national and community level to produce an overall strategic approach concerning the Roma, which is geared to full participation of the Roma not just in politics, but also in labour and cultural life. In order to achieve success in this matter, Mr. Ott urges the notion that a culturally sensitive

approach must be taken in the effort to integrate the Roma and other minorities into mainstream society. Finally, Mr. Ott concluded his remarks by maintaining that “inclusion is a two-way process, and that we the majority must convince not just the other group but ourselves” in the matter of integration and the acceptance of intercultural integration.

Ms. Katarina Mathernova, of the Commission’s Directors for Regional Policy wasted no time in getting down to the point of her presentation when she immediately stated that political participation starts at the local level, including schools. Ms. Mathernova then went on to suggest that the Commission should pay specific attention to member states with significant Roma populations and observe if the funds that they receive from the EU are being used in the context of bettering the lives of Roma. Ms. Mathernova then informed the participants that a pilot project for Roma inclusion received a wide amount of support from the European Parliament and that the EU institutions should focus on creating policies which adhere to the improvement of the Roma situation in Europe. Ms. Mathernova concluded her remarks by expressing the fact that political participation is about “taking ownership and eventually leadership” of a situation.

Ms. Eleni Tsetsekou, from the Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe, (DARE,) was next to present. Ms. Tsetsekou started her presentation with a very disturbing statistic. Ms. Tsetsekou stated that the Council of Europe had very recently created a blog with the question: Do you consider Roma as equal citizens?- 85% of children answered ‘No’ to this question. Although Ms. Tsetsekou made clear her obvious concern for abovementioned statistic, she also informed the participants that an enormous amount of progress concerning the emancipation of Roma has indeed been very visible over the past few years, citing the creation of the Forum for Roma as an important step forward. Ms. Tsetsekou followed by suggesting that effective participation of Roma in politics is a start, but that we must also measure how the Roma are able to influence the decision-making process. Ms. Tsetsekou concluded her remarks by echoing a concept that most of the previous speakers had stated: “awareness raising and changing of the negative stereotypes in the mainstream population” is needed in order for the Roma to progress as a people in European society.

Mr. Andzrej Mirga, the OSCE’s Senior Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues was next to present. Mr. Mirga began his presentation with a rather sombre statement revealing to his listeners that there was more optimism for change five years ago before the enlargement of 2004 than there is today. At times speaking with a different tone than the previous speakers, Mr. Mirga stated that blame must not only be placed on the state or on political parties but also on the Roma themselves for their lack of will in engaging in politics. Mr. Mirga then went on to affirm that their indeed has been a

noticeable “boom” regarding development of civil society and consultation with the Roma population. However, Mr. Mirga did also point out the fact that many previous speakers also mentioned regarding the fact that the largest minority in Europe is underrepresented as is evidenced by the EP elections campaigns. Mr. Mirga followed by bringing to attention the tragic shooting death of a Roma family in Hungary, stating that the situation is much different today than it was in the past. Referring to the fact that in the past even though Roma were discriminated and even intimidated, shooting at Roma and subsequently murdering and burning down their homes was virtually unthinkable. Mr. Mirga closed his presentation by proclaiming participation in politics, and the very idea that a group of people feel that their voice is being heard can in itself prevent conflict. While on the other hand, a group which feels left out and not heard are more likely to be more deviant towards society.

Mr. Mirga’s presentation was followed by that of Mr. Rumyan Russinov, Deputy Director of the Roma Education Fund. Mr. Russinov commenced his presentation with rather encouraging words, in that a few hundred Roma currently hold posts in local governments as well as in mainstream political parties, such as in Hungary and Romania. Mr. Russinov had brought to attention the matter of minorities. He stated that the Roma must take positive examples of other minorities who succeed in getting their voice heard throughout the majority of society, such as the case of the Turkish party representing the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. Mr. Russinov then went on to state the advantage of having more Roma in mainstream political parties in Europe at the local, national and European level, stating that “the Roma can bring more horses to the national and European guard”. To conclude his presentation, Mr. Russinov suggested that the Romani politicians should not only be used to solve Roma problems, but also to solve problems in general. In order for this to occur Mr. Russinov added, that mainstream parties must open doors for Roma, and not shy away from inclusion policies.

Bernard Rorke, Director of the Open Society Institute in Budapest followed Mr. Russinov’s remarks. Mr. Rorke began his presentation by stating that the Roma issue in the past 15 years has definitely moved from the margins of politics to the very centre of it. However, Mr. Rorke continued, the Roma issue being moved to the centre of the political realm and the increasing amount of civic activism will not be enough to create real advancement for the Roma if there is no significant increases in the realm of political participation. Mr. Rorke ended his presentation by exclaiming that “too much time has been lost and we do not have much time to avert a social crisis”.

The conference concluded with remarks by Jan Jarab, Member of the Cabinet of Commissioner Vladimir Spidla, Employment and Social Affairs. Mr. Jarab began his discourse by declaring that Roma need to be involved in political life in the “broad sense of the word,” in order to feel included in society like other citizens. Mr. Jarab further

exclaimed that society must continue to directly or indirectly disrupt the Roma from access to a decent life and employment, something that is taken for granted by everyone else. Mr. Jarab reminded the audience that the concept and make of 'Europe' is changing every day. Europe does not just have, and should never be subject to having just one identity. Mr. Jarab concluded his remarks and the conference by stating that "Roma politicians can give something useful to Europe, challenging the concept and status of the ethnonationalist state," and that Roma politicians and candidates can uniquely bring 3 identities to the political scene, their 'Roma' identity, their 'national' identity, as well as their 'political' identity.