

## **ERIO ACTIVITIES**

### **ERIO conference on Roma access to political participation**

On April 16th, ERIO organized a conference in the European Parliament on Roma access to political participation. It has been a very important event for gathering important representatives from EU institutions (as MEP Claude Moraes, Jean Lambert and Gyula Hegy; and the member of the Cabinet of Commissioner Vladimir Spidla, Jan Jarab), EU officials, Roma representatives (as Andrzej Mirga and Rumyan Russinov) and human rights activists. In the first part of the conference, the EU position on Roma political participation has been highlighted; while the second part focused on experiences in promoting Roma political participation. During the opening remarks, Pedro Aguilera, the Chair of ERIO board, reminded that political participation is the most important part of a society because it is through participation that people 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 Roma are direct results of under-representation and, consequently, 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". A full report on the conference will be published on our next quarterly Newsletter.

### **ERIO at study visit "Combating discrimination" at DG Enlargement**

On April 17<sup>th</sup>, ERIO participated in a panel discussion and workshop organized by the DG Enlargement on the role of civil society in the fight against discrimination. The event was dedicated to activists of civil society organisations from candidate and potential candidate countries. ERIO's Executive Director, Ivan Ivanov, delivered a speech on multiple discrimination; he stressed that the Roma is a group often subjected to discrimination on multiple grounds. In the panel discussion, participants discussed the effects of the economic crisis and recognized the fact that the most vulnerable are hit the hardest, which becomes obvious in regards to lack of funding and difficulties in raising important issues. The importance of affirmative action was raised by several participants. ERIO's Policy Officer, Guillermo Ruiz, stated that in times of economic crisis Roma are not only affected because they risk losing their jobs or getting cut off from social benefits, but also because Roma are often used as scapegoats for social problems as recent racist riots against Roma have shown. Following this, workshops were held on the theme "Empowering people subjected to discrimination". The workshop facilitated by Mr. Ruiz focused on how NGOs can cooperate on issues of Roma discrimination. Participants reflected on the need of collaboration between NGOs, the role of ERIO and increasing social and political participation of the Roma community.

## EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

**EC: Commissioner Špidla on violence against Roma in the Czech Republic**

Brussels, 20/04/09 – “Following a brutal arson attack on a Roma family - including their small child - in Vítkov, Czech Republic, I wish to express my deep sympathy to the victims and assure them of my solidarity. Similarly to a recent case in Hungary, I do not intend to comment on the details of this case, as it is clear that the normal judicial process must now take its course. I trust that the Czech authorities will investigate the crime properly and bring the perpetrators to justice. However, I do wish to reiterate my deep concern about the increasing level of aggression against Roma in the European Union. It is clear that there is a pattern of violence targeting Roma, and that this is not a phenomenon which concerns only one or two Member States. I am particularly concerned that the public debate in various Member States is continuously being influenced by populist anti-Roma rhetoric which might be taken, in extreme cases, as instigation to hate crimes. The issue of personal safety of Roma is directly related to the broader problem of their being persistently discriminated against and marginalised in European societies. Unless both the EU and the Member States make significant efforts to overcome the exclusion of Roma, they will remain particularly exposed to attacks on their lives and property. The European Commission strongly condemns all forms of violence against Roma and calls for Member States to increase their efforts to facilitate the transfer of active, evidence-based policies aiming at the social inclusion of Roma. The Roma should be able to enjoy their full rights as European citizens with full access to mainstream education, mainstream jobs and mainstream housing. In this context, I welcome the joint efforts of the Czech Presidency and the European Commission to launch an EU Platform for Roma Inclusion on Friday 24 April in Prague where common principles on the inclusion of Roma will be agreed.”

**CoE: “Italy should eradicate discrimination and xenophobia”, says Hammarberg**

Strasbourg, 16.4.2009 – “Although efforts have been undertaken, serious concerns remain about the situation of Roma, migration policy and practice, and the non-respect of binding interim measures requested by the European Court of Human Rights” said today Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, presenting his report on Italy. “The authorities should condemn more firmly all racist or intolerant manifestations and ensure effective implementation of anti-discrimination legislation”, he said. He also recommends that the representation of ethnic groups in the police should be increased and that an independent national human rights institution, such as an Ombudsman, should be established in order to reinforce human rights protection. Commissioner Hammarberg further recommends improving the situation of Roma. “There is a persistent climate of intolerance against them and their living conditions are still unacceptable in a number of settlements that I visited. Local good practices exist in the country, and they should be broadened.” He further expresses his deep concern about the appropriateness of the census in Roma and Sinti settlements and remains worried about its “compatibility with European standards guiding the collection and processing of personal data.” Moreover, the Commissioner urges the authorities to create consultative mechanisms at all levels with Roma and Sinti, avoid evictions without offering alternative housing and offer appropriate education solutions for children. He also hopes that “the new action plan for social welfare and integration measures is soon implemented and the authorities implement promptly their pledge to ratify without reservation the Council of Europe Convention on Nationality, which would benefit in particular *de facto* stateless Roma children.” The Commissioner reiterates his critique of the draft law on public security for its possible negative effects on migrants’ rights. “Criminalising migrants is a disproportionate measure which risks igniting further discriminatory and xenophobic tendencies in the country” he said.

“Furthermore, the recent provision introduced by the Senate which allows medical personnel to report to the police irregular migrants who access the health system is profoundly unjust and could further marginalise migrants.” Commissioner Hammarberg remains worried by a number of forced returns, on security-related grounds, to Tunisia of individuals who seriously risk torture in that country. “In their duty to protect societies from terrorism, states should not contravene human rights standards such as the absolute prohibition of torture or inhuman treatment. Italy has ignored binding interim measures requested by the European Court of Human Rights to halt deportations, thus seriously jeopardising the effectiveness of the European system of human rights protection.” Finally, the Commissioner welcomes certain positive steps taken by the Italian authorities, in particular the adoption of intercultural education programmes, the decision to ratify the Council of Europe’s Convention on action against trafficking in human beings and the development of a national programme on unaccompanied foreign minors.

## ROMA NEWS FROM AROUND EUROPE

### **Czech Republic: Romanies want protective guards to be created after assault**

Prague, 20/04/09 - Czech Romany activists call for protective guards to be established immediately now that a Romany family has been brutally attacked in Vitkov, north Moravia, Romea association says on its website. The activists say the extremist movement’s rise in the Czech Republic, also due to politicians and the state’s lenience, results in attacks bearing symptoms of terrorism. The guards should cooperate with the police and with local authorities in protecting Romany families, writes Romea, some members of which are part of the government council for the Romany minority affairs. The activists call on politicians, the Interior Ministry and the Czech public to stand up against intensifying neo-Nazism and extremism. “Romanies are the target today, but it could be the turn of anyone of you tomorrow,” they write. The guards should not be set to provoke violence but to protect their families’ members, the appeal says, calling on Romanies to shun open clashes with extremists and not to succumb to the latter’s provocations that are obvious in recent months. Apart from Romea representatives, the appeal, called Enough! (Dost!), has been signed by representatives of Dzeno, another Romany organisation, including the government council deputy chairman Ivan Vesely and the council member Cyril Koky, and members of other Romany groups. A two-year-old girl, who suffered burns in the fire of a family house in Vitkov on Sunday, probably caused by a Molotov cocktail attack, is hospitalised in a critical state. Indignant over the brutal attack, Romanies are preparing a public fund raising and a protest meeting in support of the afflicted family. The Czech Federation of Jewish Communities, too, said it minds the way the state approaches the neo-Nazis. The uncertainty of the responsible institutions and the incapability of using legislative tools to prevent neo-Nazi activities, which include arson and attempts to kill, must stop,” Jewish Communities’ Federation chairman Jiri Danicek says in a press released sent to CTK. Outgoing Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek said after the government meeting today that the state wants to apply both repression and prevention in fighting extremism. The new strategy in this respect should be adopted at the outgoing cabinet’s last meeting due in a fortnight. Another house inhabited by a Romany family flared up in Prosec, east Bohemia, this night. The house was empty when the fire broke out. The police say that either negligence or arson might have been behind the fire. No racial motive has been detected in this case for now.

Source: CTK, <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/news/zpravy/czech-romanies-want-protective-guards-to-be-created/372201>

**Spain: government to press on the EU for the recognition of Roma minority**

Madrid, 16/04/09 - Pedro Zerolo, Spain's Secretary of State for social movements and relations with NGOs, declared that the Spanish government will press on its EU peers for the recognition of the Roma minority in the European Union and for the promotion of an inclusive European citizenship for them and other ethnic minorities. For Mr. Zerolo "it is time to recognize the contribution of Gypsies to the European culture". Spain is going to preside the European Union Council on the first semester of 2010.

Source: <http://www.deminorias.com/noticia.php?ID=19938>

**Spain: Roma settlements in Asturias still experience 'Gitano' apartheid**

Oviedo, 15/04/09 – There are still Roma ghettos in Asturias, as confirmed by a recent survey conducted by Fundación Secretariado Gitano. Although the situation has improved compared to 1991, Asturias' 'Gitanos' continue to live in segregated conditions: compared to the rest of Spain, Asturias count with twice the percentage of separated housing for Gypsies (10% for Asturias and 5% for Spain). This happens despite the region's lower presence of Roma communities compared to the rest of the country.

Source: <http://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticias/noticia.asp?pkid=487270>

**Kosovo: Gypsies relocated by UN remain on toxic land**

Mitrovica, 14/04/09 - Displaced by conflict and stranded by bureaucratic inertia, dozens of Roma families remain on toxic land 10 years after they were relocated there by the United Nations following the Kosovo war. Osterrode Camp and Chesmin Lug Camp were established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1999 as a temporary measure, when the 9,000-member Roma or Gypsy neighborhood on the southern shore of the Ibar River was burnt down by Albanians in the dying days of the Kosovo conflict. The Albanians had accused the Roma of collaborating with the Serb army, a charge the Roma dismiss as unfounded. Whatever the truth behind the charges and denials, almost everyone agrees that moving Roma families near the now closed Trepca mining and smelting complex, onto land highly contaminated with lead, zinc, arsenic and other metals, has resulted in severe health problems in the community. When the World Health Organization tested the Roma's blood for lead in 2004, the readings for 90 percent of the children were off the scale, higher than the medical equipment was capable of measuring. Such children fall into the category of "acute medical emergency" and require immediate hospitalization. Instead they have remained in the camps, ingesting lead through the air, the dirt they play in and through their clothes dusted with lead tailings while drying on laundry lines. Even before their birth, lead enters their bodies from drinking water consumed by their mothers. According to internationally accepted benchmarks drawn up by the United States Center for Disease Control, 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter causes the beginning of brain damage. The measurements from the camps were much higher than in the surrounding population and at levels that exceeded any region WHO had previously studied. Twelve children had exceptionally high blood lead levels, greater than 45 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, more than four times the amount that causes brain damage.

Full article on: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/europe/090414/gypsies-relocated-un-remain-toxic-land>

### **Hungary: outspoken Gypsy's home torched**

Budapest, 15/04/09 - The home of a Roma official went up in flames at dawn last Tuesday in what police say was a case of arson. The incident occurred in Tatárszentgyörgy, a village about 40 kilometres from Budapest that was the scene of a brutal murder in February. No one was injured in the blaze at the home of the deputy leader of the local Roma Council, Lidia Horváth. The house was typical of a lessaffluent Hungarian village home: a somewhat shabby bungalow, part whitewashed, part bare brick, with a satellite dish attached to the wall. Horváth and her partner were out at the time, participating in a community-watch scheme that was set up after the double murder. A journalist asked Horváth to confirm a report that several million forints were owed on the house and that it was up for auction. "We want to move away from here," was all the Roma activist replied, according to the news website Origo.hu. Her partner, József Sztojka, was interviewed by the police earlier in the day. Sztojka, however, insisted that the fire must have been started as a revenge attack. He said the driver of another car, also on communitywatch duty, had seen a black jeep emblazoned with the red-and-white Árpád flag, one of the symbols adopted by Hungarian extreme right activists.

Source: <http://www.budapesttimes.hu/content/view/11656/219/>

### **Hungary: Ombudsman in firestorm over 'Gypsy crime' comments**

Budapest, 16/04/09 - Although civil rights ombudsman Máté Szabó clarified his comments on "Gypsy crime", human rights associations continued to demand his resignation last week. President László Sólyom met with Szabó, reportedly telling him that his remarks had endangered the public's trust in his office and warned that the protection of rights can only be effective if the four ombudsmen work together. The president expressed his hope that Szabó will manage to get the trust of the people back by continuing his civil rights work, which has already revealed numerous irregularities. A statement from the ombudsman's office said Szabó felt the meeting had been instructive. In an interview with the news weekly Figyelő, Szabó said that Hungarian society needs to be warned about "Gypsy crimes". According to the ombudsman "Gypsy crime" is a special type of "livelihood delinquency", often carried out in groups. "This is a collectivist, nearly tribal society, which stands in sharp contrast with the Hungarian society's individualist approach", Szabó said, adding that the state has a crime prevention role and "if a criminal profile is seen, then society needs to be warned, and it has to be called what it is". "I am glad that the ombudsmen for data protection and minority rights would like to solve this problem, but without the majority commissioner, myself, this is not possible", said Szabó adding again it is in the best interest of society to be warned if it is threatened by a specific group of criminals. The Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ) said that such comments coming from one of the most important persons in human rights protection were unacceptable and requested that the ombudsman put out a statement making it clear that his words were improper and offensive, instead of trying to blame the press. In his statement the commissioner said an "unfortunate, but not malicious" headline was the cause of the outrage, adding that, just as before, he condemns racism in all its manifestations, whether in words or in actions. A joint statement by a number of Roma and human rights organisations said that the interview and statement afterwards made it clear that the ombudsman cannot properly fulfil this high office. The Eötvös Károly Institute noted that, besides the fact that the ombudsman's comments were unacceptable, they make it clear that he believes the office is there to protect the majority against the minority, which shows that the ombudsman has no clear idea of what the protection of civil rights means. In order to remove an ombudsman from office, the commissioner needs to resign or must be dismissed by a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

Source: <http://www.budapesttimes.hu/content/view/11675/219/>

### **Turkey: Sulukule, 'let us prevent its destruction', says advocacy group**

UNESCO and the European Union protects the heritage of peoples through the conventions that invite societies to preserve the traces of the passage of peoples on our planet, with their history and their contribution to civilization. The UNESCO Convention of 16th November, 1972 concerning the protection of world cultural heritage and the Convention of the Council of Europe dated 27th October, 2005 on the value of cultural heritage are emblematic documents in this field. This is why EveryOne Group and Coordinamento Sa Phrala are appealing to the local authorities of Fatih and Istanbul, as well as the Turkish institutions, to put a stop to the devastation of the Sulukule district, the only place in the world where there are traces of 1000 years of the history of the Roma community. After leaving India, the Roma people settled in the Anatolia region from where they spread to the rest of Europe. The presence of the Roma in Sulukule, in fact, dates back to the Byzantine period, while in the 16th Century the oldest Roma settlement in the world formed here, a settlement that has survived until the present day. However, in spite of Sulukule being declared a World Heritage Site and in spite of the international "Save Sulukule" campaign - that has been underway for two years - the institutions and local authorities have decided to transform this precious site into a modern area, moving the Roma community elsewhere and razing the ancient buildings to the ground. EveryOne Group, Them Romano and Coordinamento Sa Phrala are asking Unesco and the European Union to intervene and help to put a stop to this destruction. But first of all, they are appealing to the Turkish Government to preserve the world's oldest Roma settlement and to help the Roma community in its restoration.

Source: <http://www.tolerance.ca/Article.aspx?ID=40853&L=fr>

### **Netherlands: Verhagen discusses Roma human rights situation in Slovakia**

Amsterdam, 13/0/09 - In his talks with the Dutch foreign minister Maxime Verhagen in The Hague, the Slovakian deputy Prime Minister Dusan Caplovic roundly condemned the ill-treatment of Romani youngsters by police officers in his country. He announced that an investigation had been instigated, and that the police officers in question would be dismissed. This week the Slovak media released video footage of Romani children being subjected to ill-treatment by police officers in the town of Kosice. The footage shows the police using dogs to intimidate the children, and forcing them to take off their clothes and hit one another. The Roma make up around 10% of the Slovak population. Deputy Prime Minister Caplovic is making efforts to improve the position of the Roma community in Slovakia. Mr Verhagen was gratified by the Slovak government's undertaking to punish these abuses. He said that the Netherlands was concerned by the plight of the Roma community in Slovakia and in neighbouring Hungary. He went on to say that the severe socioeconomic disadvantage suffered by this minority needed to be tackled using a cross-border approach. The foreign minister thanked the deputy Prime Minister for the excellent cooperation between Slovakia and the Netherlands in the Afghan province of Uruzgan. Slovak military personnel have been deployed to guard Camp Holland. The two countries are now looking at scope for partnership in the field of development cooperation.

Source: [http://www.isria.info/en/10\\_April\\_2009\\_50.htm](http://www.isria.info/en/10_April_2009_50.htm)

### **Finland: Romany language on the verge of extinction**

"Laalo, blaato, dzjelto ("red", "blue", "yellow")", Roma children read aloud in the back room of the Vihierlaakso day-care centre in Lahti. They are having a lesson in Kàlo Finnish Romani, the official name for the language of the Finnish Roma minority. Sisters Teresa and Maritsa Borg are colouring balloons while learning the names of colours in Romany. The girls have been lucky:

teacher Marianne Florin is working at the same day-care centre as a subsidised worker, in other words as an assistant, whose salary comes partly from the budget of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy. Marianne Florin has experience in such language circles, even though her own Romany proficiency level is not very high. On the other hand, one lesson a week is not enough to make Maritsa and Teresa fluent speakers of Romany. Unfortunately, they will not have any opportunity to continue their Romany studies in comprehensive school. The situation in Lahti is typical. Only very few Finnish Roma children are taught in their own mother tongue - depending on the year, around 150 children learn Romany at a day-care centre or at school. The figure equals some five to ten per cent of all Roma children in Finland. Not many children learn the language at home these days. The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) has tried to improve the teaching of Kàlo Finnish Romani in schools, and in 2009, the appropriations dedicated to that purpose have been doubled. In fact, some projects to support Roma children and their parents in matters relating to the Romany language have been launched in Finland. "Next autumn we will introduce language immersion groups, so-called language nests, for both adults and children learning Romany. We also plan to organise two language camps in the summer", says Senior Adviser Leena Nissilä from the FNBE. There are a number of reasons for the scarcity of instruction in Romany. Municipalities are not obliged to provide the language, nor are they interested in arranging such instruction, there is a shortage of qualified teachers, or homes lack the understanding or courage to demand instruction in Romany for their children.

Read the full article on: <http://www.hs.fi/english/article/Romany+language+on+the+verge+of+extinction+in+Finland/1135245164243>

### **Chile: mob attacks Gypsy camp in southern region**

Santiago del Chile, 13/04/09 - A mob of more than 100 people attacked a Gypsy encampment near southern Chile's Puerto Montt (Region X) last Friday. The attackers reportedly sought to avenge the death of a local resident, whom they wrongly believed was killed by a Gypsy. The crowd of locals used fire and stones as weapons against what authorities called a peaceful Gypsy community that had been there since November 2008. The crowd had been acting in the belief that a Gypsy was responsible for the recent hit-and-run accident which killed a local man, Juan Alvarado, 29. Police maintain there is no Gypsy connection to the accident. Four cars were set on fire, and tents and other property were destroyed as the Gypsies fled to safety. During the assault, the mob tried to stop the Gypsies from escaping. The police tried to help the Gypsies, but the crowd turned on them. When a local fire-fighting unit arrived at the site to put out the flames, it, too, was attacked by locals throwing stones. District Attorney Sergio Coronado emphasized there was no connection between the Gypsies and the car-death case. "The line of investigation does not lead to the Gypsies. They were ruled out at the very start. The investigation is leading in another direction, and the family of the victim is aware of this," he said. Local officials said the Gypsy community was a victim of "prejudices" on the part of the locals who attacked them. [...] The Gypsies did not formally complain to the police after the attack, but did abandon their site. Gypsy camp spokesperson Juan Carlos Farias said his group will travel to Santiago to meet with the "King of the Gypsies" in order to discuss the matter and consider what legal action they might pursue. Locals have asked that the Gypsies never be allowed back into Puerto Montt. Octavio Alvarado, head of a local neighbourhood association, asked for concrete measures to be taken against the Gypsies returning. Francisco Nicolich, a Gypsy who fled the site on Friday said, "Gypsies have never killed anyone. Every time that something happens, Gypsies are blamed."

Source: <http://www.patagoniatimes.cl/index.php/20090413790/News/Top-News/MOB-ATTACKS-GYPSY-CAMP-IN-SOUTHERN-CHILE.html>

## EVENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

**FRA report on racism to be published on 22 April**

On 22 April, the FRA will present a new report on discrimination against Roma in the EU. This will be the first in a series of publications using data gathered by a major survey, the EU-MIDIS (European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey). Roma were one of the groups interviewed and of those Roma interviewed, 50% considered that they had been discriminated against, at least once, in the previous 12 months.

**First meeting of the Integrated Platform on Roma inclusion in Prague on 24 April**

The inaugural meeting of the Integrated Platform on Roma inclusion will take place in Prague on 24 April. It is being organised jointly by the European Commission and the Czech Presidency of the Council and will bring together 50 experts working in this area. Among them, ERIO's Executive Director Ivan Ivanov will be present. The main aim of this meeting is to define how the Platform will operate. There is a broad agreement that the new EU platform should provide for an open and flexible environment which enables all key actors – EU institutions, Member States, civil society and other international actors and initiatives – to exchange knowledge, experience and good practice, to make and renew commitments for initiatives as well as possibly monitor progress achieved. The background: Roma communities in Europe continue to face persistent discrimination. Following the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007, Roma communities now represent one of the largest ethnic minorities in the EU. However, the richness these communities could bring to European society is often overlooked, tainted by stereotypes and prejudices that manifest themselves in the form of economic, social and political discrimination. The integration of Roma communities is a joint responsibility of Member States and the European Union. In this respect, following from a request of the European Council of December 2007, the Commission examined existing Community instruments, policies and progress achieved towards Roma inclusion. On 2 July 2008, the Commission published its response in the form of a comprehensive report which was presented at the high-level Roma Summit held in Brussels in September 2008. The European Council of December 2008 confirmed Member States' commitment to using the tools available, e.g. the Structural Funds, to support Roma inclusion. The European Union has a strong legal framework to combat discrimination. It uses the European Structural Funds and addresses the issue of Roma discrimination in its awareness-raising initiatives. Moreover, it coordinates a number of key policy areas which are particularly relevant for Roma inclusion, such as education, employment and social inclusion.

For more information on the conference please click on:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=423&langId=en&eventsId=163&furtherEvents=yes>



The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) is an international advocacy organization, which promotes political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing factual and in-dept information on a range of policy issues to the European Union institutions, Roma civil organizations, governmental authorities and intergovernmental bodies. ERIO cooperates with a network of a large number of organizations and acts to combat racial discrimination and social exclusion through awareness raising, lobbying and policy develop-

ment.

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