

The Missing Piece: Empowerment of Roma Grassroots Organisations in EU Roma Integration Policies

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The EU and the Roma: a short introduction

The salience of the Roma as a critical issue of EU policy has never been greater than it is today (Sobotka & Vermeersch 2012; Goodwin & De Hert 2013). The EU's decision to expand eastwards has highlighted Roma minorities as the most discriminated and excluded minority group in Europe. According to 2012 estimations on the Roma population by the Council of Europe (CoE), 10 to 12 million Roma people live in Europe - approximately six million of these in the EU. The highest percentages are present in Central and Eastern European Member States: almost 10% of the Bulgarian population is Roma, followed by 9.02% in Slovakia, 8.63% in Romania and 7.49% in Hungary. Accordingly, although several resolutions and reports on the situation of the Roma communities in Europe have been produced in the past, it is with the completion of the fifth enlargement wave in 2007 that their socio-economic inclusion has promptly become a high priority issue on the EU policy agenda. As Sobotka & Vermeersch observe elsewhere, prior to 2007 "the EU relied on the method of enlargement conditionality in order to promote better protection of minorities in the accession states" (2012: 801). As a result of the so-called Eastern Enlargement, Roma moved from an item on the external relations agenda to a key priority of internal EU policies (Goodwin & De Hert 2013: 16; Sobotka & Vermeersch 2012: 804).

From Integration Policies to Civil Society Awards

The last decade has seen major progress in the development of EU policies for Roma inclusion. Different EU institutions have contributed to make this issue central in the political debate: the European Parliament (EP), creating the political momentum towards a future EU Roma Policy, the European Commission (EC), on the frontline in the promotion of Roma integration in Europe and responsible for the negotiations with the Member States, and the Council of the EU, outlining the main principles on Roma inclusion and providing recommendations on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States.

With its 2011 Communication establishing a EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (hereinafter "Roma

The fourth edition of Roma Pride has brought Roma civic activism back in the spotlight. This Roma-rights mobilization, taking place every October in several European cities, has emphasized the centrality of an active civil society in pursuing a successful integration of the Roma in Europe. The 'Award for Roma Integration' and the 'Civil Society Prize 2014' conferred last October by the European Union (EU) to Roma and pro-Roma Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have confirmed this approach. Nonetheless, a general discontent towards the EU Roma Integration Policies exists within the Roma Civil Society, who calls for stronger support to and the promotion of "Roma-led change". This Policy Brief investigates the reasons behind such discontent and identifies the 'distance' from Roma communities as the Achilles heel of EU policies. It argues for further efforts by the EU to empower Roma organisations operating at the grassroots through community capacity building, structured dialogue and simplification of the funding mechanisms.

Framework"), the EC has defined the integration of the Roma as "a social and economic imperative for the Union" and provided Member States with a tool aiming to foster the development of integrated and effective social inclusion policies. Based on the 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion, presented for the first time at the meeting of the European Platform for Roma inclusion in 2009, the Roma Framework has underlined the crucial

role of civil society in fostering Roma integration, specifying that the framework's ambitious goals cannot be reached without "a clear commitment from Member States and national, regional and local authorities coupled with involvement of Roma civil society organizations".

The importance of an active civil society and an engaged and participatory Roma community has been repeatedly highlighted in EU policy documents, and received great attention from all EU institutions. In the last years, the EU has directly (via calls for proposals) or indirectly (through the Structural Funds) funded several projects and civic organisations promoting and enhancing the integration of the Roma community at the local level. This "financial commitment" has been further emphasized by the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 regulations, according to which Member States shall allocate an appropriate amount of the European Social Fund resources to capacity building for non-governmental organisations, in particular in the fields of social inclusion, gender equality and equal opportunities. In regard to Roma integration, the thematic ex-ante conditionalities in the Common Provisions for the EU's Cohesion Policy clearly assert that "a national Roma inclusion strategic policy framework [has to be] designed, implemented and monitored in close cooperation and continuous dialogue with Roma civil society, regional and local authorities". This proactive approach towards civil society has recently taken a symbolical turn: for the first time two different (monetary) prizes have been conferred by the EU to Roma and pro-Roma CSOs.

The first 'Award for Roma Integration' was granted on 1 October by the European Commission to seven organisations working on Roma inclusion from the so-called "Enlargement Countries", namely the Western Balkans and Turkey. As stated in one of the press releases published by the EC, the aim of this award – corresponding to €14,000 per organisation – was "to raise the political importance of integration of Roma as part of the enlargement process, to enhance the role of the civil society and to show the commitment of the EC to support Roma people". The second 'Civil Society Prize' – worth a total of €30,000 – was endowed on 16 October by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to encourage civil society initiatives supporting and facilitating Roma integration in the EU, thus making "a significant contribution to promoting European identity and integration".

Despite the great symbolic importance of these events, contributing to the visibility of local Roma and pro-Roma organisations from the national level to the European scene, several criticisms continue to be raised by Roma civil society actors.

Encouragement or Consolation Prizes? A Roma Civil Society Perspective

The recent prize award ceremonies are an interesting opportunity

to zoom in on the role played by Roma civil society in the EU policy-making and -implementation processes for Roma integration. These high-visibility and funding-oriented events sum up two of the main features of the current EU approach towards Roma CSOs, in that they: (i) contribute to their legitimisation, by fostering their public recognition among other relevant stakeholders, and (ii) attempt to strengthen their capacities, by providing them with financial support. Investigating these two aspects facilitates the understanding of EU Policies for Roma Integration, thus creating the ground for some recommendations.

First, a short analysis through the lens of legitimisation. The prizes awarded by the EU to CSOs dealing with the integration of the Roma community in Europe do not only have a monetary value but also, and above all, have a symbolic significance. These prizes institutionally legitimize the crucial role of civil society in contributing to the success of Roma integration policies: in his speech at the 1 October ceremony, Štefan Füle, outgoing European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, has reiterated an expression previously employed by Viviane Reding, former European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, affirming that CSOs are "the eyes and ears of society and are therefore critical in building a bridge between the governments and the Roma communities". As such, the EESC President – Henri Malosse – has asserted that they "[...] need encouragement to foster EU values and combat any display of intolerance". These statements certainly help create the ground for the official recognition of Roma and pro-Roma CSOs as crucial actors in the development and implementation of Roma inclusion strategies. Nevertheless, the EU process of legitimisation of Roma civil society is often perceived as partial as it does not sufficiently differentiate Roma grassroots organisations from pro-Roma CSOs working at the international and national levels. Even though both kinds of organisations are included in the acronym "CSOs", some substantial differences can be detected in terms of organisations' proximity to the local communities and level of expertise and professionalization. While Roma grassroots organisations are closer to the local and most disadvantaged Roma communities, pro-Roma international and national CSOs are more professionalized and experienced in managing Roma inclusion-oriented projects. As the collaboration between the two types is not systematic, these differences frequently lead to significant discrepancies between the assessment of the needs at the local level and the policy interventions identified for their satisfaction.

Second, we focus on the EU funding mechanisms. Roma grassroots organisations have recurrently contested the position of the EU as a donor and the distribution of the funds allocated to Roma integration-related activities. The difficult access to and excessive bureaucratization of the EU funding mechanisms tend to facilitate global pro-Roma CSOs thus disadvantaging smaller Roma organisations operating at the grassroots. As, local

organisations generally miss the professional expertise required for applying for and managing grants as well as the financial resources necessary for participating in co-funded programmes (often adopted in EU-funding schemes). This approach can lead to two main interrelated results: on the one hand, the establishment of elite networks of pro-Roma CSOs, and, on the other hand, the subsequent weakening of Roma grassroots organisations. While the former jeopardizes the already evident fragmentation of the Roma civil society, the latter has the dangerous potential to isolate the most disadvantaged Roma communities, thus enduring the “inter-generational vicious circles of social exclusion” (Kóczé, 2013: 1).

Furthermore, concern has been raised about the significances of a top-down “funding-centred approach”, where the resolution of problems via short-term funding initiatives often prevails on the adoption of long-term solutions based on the involvement and empowerment of local communities and organisations. Without an appropriate participation of CSOs in the decision-making process, facilitating the bottom-up identification of funding priorities, such an approach maintains and reinforces the relations of dependence between the donor and the grantee and obstructs the development of sustainable and fruitful partnerships. Roma CSOs are more and more dependent on the priorities of the EU Agenda and predominantly operate as passive executing actors, being excluded from the policy development process. This hampers the proper assessment and mapping of the local communities’ needs and discourages a Roma-driven change. In his online article “Investing in a Roma-Led Change” (2014), Zeljko Jovanovic, director of the OSF Roma Initiatives Office, has clearly summarized this discontent: “a Roma NGO should be more than a legal entity, there to execute a project, produce short-term gains, represent the good intentions of their donors, and publish photos of abject misery to legitimize the whole process. Funders should help organizations not only to survive from project to project but also to attract and nurture a team and peers, improve leadership, gain the trust of Roma and other people, and increase their contribution to public decision-making”.

Getting closer to Roma communities: some recommendations

In the last years the EU has shown commitment towards the integration of the Roma communities in European societies on multiple policy fronts. Nonetheless, further improvements and joint efforts are needed to develop a new policy framework addressing one of the most controversial and thorny inequality issues in Europe.

The “distance” from the most disadvantaged Roma communities at the local level and the consequent disengagement towards their real needs have been often identified as the Achilles heel

of EU policies for Roma integration. Such distance is evidently associated with the lack of appropriate empowerment measures addressing grassroots organisations. As Kóczé (2013: 5) has affirmed elsewhere, “without vibrant local organizations in the most disadvantaged Roma communities, national and international Roma activism will continue to be detached from the local level, and limits on its effectiveness will remain”.

This “missing piece” within the EU Roma integration policy structure determines policy dissatisfaction and generalized discontent, and risks diminishing the considerable efforts made so far. Consequently, some prompt policy developments are necessary:

1) Empower Roma grassroots organisations through community capacity building

Although Roma grassroots organisations are the mouthpiece for the local community needs, their insufficient level of expertise and professionalization often hinder them to transform these needs into solution strategies and concrete actions. The existing capacity-building activities envisaged by the EU policy frameworks on Roma inclusion are mainly based on training. This current approach should be broadened and should move towards community capacity building - more focused on human resources and organisational development. Different actors operating at the local level should participate in such a capacity development process, from the more professionalized pro-Roma CSOs to the local authorities. Roma grassroots organisations need to develop an organisational structure and to improve their leadership, governance, mission and strategies. EU policies should contribute to reinforcing their role and legitimisation by other stakeholders, including national governments.

2) Develop a structured dialogue with Roma grassroots organisations to foster their involvement and active participation in policy-making and consultation processes

Effective and sustainable strategies for the integration of the Roma communities cannot be achieved without an in-depth needs assessment. This implies that Roma grassroots organisations should dismiss their role as mere executing actors - usually implementing activities set up by others - and become an integral part of the strategy-making process. Although the EU has often emphasized the centrality of the active participation of institutional and non-institutional local actors at all stages of the policy process, Roma grassroots organisations are habitually uninvolved in the consultation phase. Mechanisms for setting up a structural dialogue with Roma communities and grassroots organisations should be developed and implemented as soon as possible. Along the lines of the Structured Dialogue with young people framed by the EU, this initiative should serve “as a forum for continuous

joint reflection on the priorities, implementation, and follow-up” of European cooperation in the field of Roma integration. The participatory process in the Member States could be organised and ensured by National Working Groups involving Roma grassroots organisations.

3) Facilitate the access to funding mechanisms at the local level

As exhaustively explained above, EU funding mechanisms – both direct, via call for proposals, and indirect, via Structural Funds – are not yet accessible for Roma grassroots organisations. This inaccessibility reinforces their dependency from global pro-Roma organisations and significantly hampers their organisational development. As one of the main international donors in the field of Roma inclusion, the EU should promote a simplification of the funding accessibility process at the local level. In the framework of the European Structural Funds, national governments should be encouraged to develop sub-granting financial mechanisms based on simplified procedures. This process should be accompanied by appropriate strategies strengthening the collaboration and partnership between larger pro-Roma CSOs and Roma grassroots organisations, aiming to foster the transfer of financial management know-how.

Conclusion

In order to become more sound and effective, EU policies for Roma integration need to get closer to the local and most disadvantaged Roma communities. Such a challenging goal can be reached only by empowering Roma organisations operating at the grassroots. This empowerment process requires a joint effort from the EU, the national and the local levels. It should be focused on three main interrelated principles: community capacity building, structured dialogue and simplification of the funding mechanisms. Successful and sustainable Roma integration policies should take into account these three components simultaneously and strengthen the co-operation among all the relevant actors involved in the process.

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Note on terminology

This Policy Brief employs the term “Roma” as an umbrella encompassing different related groups throughout Europe who have more or less similar cultural characteristics (Roma, Sinti, Manouches, Kalés, Boyash, Ashkalis, Égyptiens, Yéniches, Travellers, etc.) whether sedentary or not. The use of this generic term – chosen by Romani leaders at the First World Romani Congress in 1971 – has practical purposes and does not intend to underestimate the diversity of the communities it refers to, nor to neglect their cultural, social and linguistic differences.

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