

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe’ (additional opinion)

(2013/C 11/05)

Rapporteur: **Mr TOPOLÁNSZKY**

On 17 January 2012 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29A of the implementing provisions, decided to draw up an additional opinion on

Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe

(additional opinion).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 23 October 2012.

At its 484th plenary session, held on 14-15 November 2012 (meeting of 14 November), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 127 votes to 1 with 12 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and proposals

1.1 The EESC welcomes and is encouraged by the recent steps taken by the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, other EU bodies, and the Member States to achieve inclusion and integration of the European Roma, for example the Commission’s strategic framework and the adoption of National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) by the Member States.

1.2 At the same time, the EESC points out that “these combined efforts have not helped in any decisive way to remedy the discrimination experienced by many Roma, nor to improve their quality of life or the opportunities open to them”.

1.3 Already, in its exploratory opinion of 2011 ⁽¹⁾, the Committee expressed its concerns about support for the NRIS by civil society and Roma organisations, and it put forward many recommendations.

1.4 The findings of the study commissioned by the EESC and carried out in 27 Member States are consistent with those carried out by the European Roma Policy Coalition (ERPC) and other civil society organisations, and show that apart from a lack of information and general dissatisfaction, there is also widespread frustration and distrust among spokespersons for the Roma community, civil society organisations and their representatives. It seems that the NRISs have not met the growing expectations of the Roma or their sincere hope that the strategies could really help improve social integration.

1.5 The instruments and resources available for implementation of the NRISs appear insufficient to compensate for the continuing negative impact of discrimination and exclusion on the lives and prospects of those concerned. The Committee would therefore like to emphasise the importance of coordinated policies and resources appropriate to the goals which have been set.

1.6 The Committee feels that planning and implementation of NRISs should always follow a rights-based approach, in order to ensure human and fundamental rights.

1.7 The Committee feels that combating discrimination should be a priority in all areas of public life.

1.8 The EESC feels that a positive approach to the social situation of the Roma should become more widespread, and that implementing inclusive policies is crucially dependent on people having the energy, tools and power to shape their own destinies.

1.9 The EESC is in favour of the European Commission’s planned network of national Roma contact points, if it is endowed with the requisite powers, and emphasises that organised civil society, including Roma organisations and lobbies, must be fully involved throughout the development of NRISs (planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation).

1.10 NRIS monitoring and evaluation must be stepped up on a sound, scientific basis, with the involvement of independent observers. At the same time, systems must be put in place to ensure financing for this process.

⁽¹⁾ EESC Opinion of 16 June 2011 on *Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe* (OJ C 248, 25.8.2011, p. 16-21)

2. Background

2.1 In April 2011 the European Commission adopted a key strategic document on "An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020" ⁽²⁾. For the first time in the history of the EU, the Communication sets out the main strategic objectives, which tie in closely with the priorities of the Europe 2020 strategy, the provisions of the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the conclusions of *The 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion* ⁽³⁾. The Communication groups political tasks under four headings: access to education, employment, healthcare and housing. It particularly emphasises the importance of cooperation with civil society organisations and Roma organisations. The Communication advocates setting up and implementing a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism. At the same time, it calls on Member States to draw up and adopt national strategic documents and to submit them to the European Commission by the end of 2012.

2.2 In its conclusions ⁽⁴⁾, the Council supports the Commission Communication ⁽⁵⁾ and states that:

"(The Council welcomes) the Communication of the Commission (...), and encourages the member states **to set achievable national goals** (...) as well as to put in place a monitoring mechanism and make existing EU funds more accessible for Roma inclusion projects". In addition,

— it emphasises the need "to appropriately monitor and evaluate the impact of the [national] Roma inclusion strategies or integrated sets of measures (...)" (Point 23), and

— "encourage(s) the better involvement of civil society and all other stakeholders" (Point 41).

3. **The EESC adopted an exploratory opinion** on "Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe" on 16 June 2011 ⁽⁶⁾. The main messages of the opinion are as follows:

⁽²⁾ An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 (COM(2011) 173 final).

⁽³⁾ The 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion were presented at the first Platform meeting on 24 April 2009. "Explicit, but not exclusive targeting", an "inter-cultural approach", and "aiming for the mainstream" are of particular relevance here.

⁽⁴⁾ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/122100.pdf

⁽⁵⁾ Council Conclusions on an EU framework for national Roma integration strategies up to 2020.

⁽⁶⁾ EESC opinion of 16.6.2011 on *Roma – Societal empowerment and integration* (OJ C 248, 25.8.2011, p. 16-21).

3.1 The EESC welcomes and is greatly encouraged by the steps taken by the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, other EU bodies, and the Member States to achieve inclusion and integration of the European Roma. It is also pleased that these efforts have been stepped up recently.

3.1.1 At the same time, the Committee points out that "these combined efforts have not helped in any decisive way to remedy the discrimination experienced by many Roma, nor to improve their quality of life or the opportunities open to them; in some respects, their situation has deteriorated even further".

3.1.2 The EESC therefore emphasises the need for an integrated, coordinated and coherent pan-European strategy and a determined, systematic national action programme for all policy areas, thus restoring the powers and authority needed by individuals and communities concerned to shape their own destinies (empowerment).

3.1.3 The Committee feels that "the following elements could be suggested to the Member States as the three pillars – to be implemented in coordination – of a ... policy to integrate the Roma that specifically but not exclusively reflects the nature of the problems and the strategic priorities for tackling them:

- a) "a race- and ethnicity-neutral inclusive policy", at the same time as reducing concentrations of extreme poverty and deprivation;
- b) a policy to support empowerment of those regarding themselves as members of any Roma community and acknowledge the social integration they have achieved;
- c) "general policies and publicity to combat racism".

3.2 The Committee stresses "the vital need to actively involve representatives and members of the Roma people and communities in both planning and implementation at every level (EU, national, regional and local)".

3.3 The Committee "would like to participate in monitoring and evaluating these policies on the basis of its mandate from civil society and of the inherent links between it and civil society organisations in the Member States. It aims to be involved in mediating between the EU institutions and organised civil society and to be an active partner in the European Platform for Roma Inclusion and other forms of structured dialogue".

4. Studies and surveys

4.1 With the above in mind, this opinion sets out to compile the recent knowledge, views and experiences relating to the Strategic Framework and the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) of the relevant gatekeeper organisations and European Commission departments, together with civil society organisations, lobby groups and movements defending Roma interests. There can be no doubt that the resulting picture will significantly affect the chances of achieving the objectives set out in the Strategic Framework at Member State level. These analyses include the following:

- various Commission documents on national strategy framing processes and content;
- OSI documents produced as part of its role as a participant and observer and as part of its information dissemination activity, particularly in the new Member States ⁽⁷⁾;
- the European Roma Policy Coalition's questionnaire;
- reports by civil society organisations actively involved in Roma issues such as the ERIO (European Roma Information Centre), and the Center Amalipe on strategy framing processes and content;
- and the results of the online questionnaire commissioned by the EESC and carried out in 27 Member States.

4.2 The European Commission has conducted a brief review of the national strategies submitted to it ⁽⁸⁾; the EESC largely agrees ⁽⁹⁾ with the Commission's conclusions in that review, which are mildly critical. The Committee also agrees that national strategies need to do more in terms of close involvement of local and regional authorities, significantly closer cooperation with civil society, funding consistent with tasks and objectives, policy monitoring and adequate evaluation, and determined efforts to combat discrimination.

4.3 Almost at the same time as the questionnaire commissioned by EESC, a study using similar questions and a similar

⁽⁷⁾ Review of EU Framework NRIS, OSI, 2012, <http://www.soros.org/sites/default/files/roma-integration-strategies-20120221.pdf>.

⁽⁸⁾ National Roma Integration Strategies: a first step in the implementation of the EU Framework (COM(2012) 226); and SWD (2012) 133, 21 May 2012.

⁽⁹⁾ "... Member States are making efforts to develop a comprehensive approach towards Roma integration. However, much more needs to be done at national level. Socio-economic inclusion of Roma remains first and foremost the responsibility of the Member States and they will need stronger efforts to live up to their responsibilities, by adopting more concrete measures, explicit targets for measurable deliverables, clearly earmarked funding at national level and a sound national monitoring and evaluation system."

approach was launched by the ERPC. The findings of both studies were published with a review of the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) in a joint study ⁽¹⁰⁾.

4.3.1 By using the potential of its own networks, the ERPC received 90 usable responses (including 78 from EU Member States) from a wide range of Roma and pro-Roma organisations. Although there were differences from one country to another, respondents complained about the low level of their involvement in the strategy-framing process and the limited impact of their involvement. According to the ERPC study, low levels of activity and influence correlated with the fact that in most Member States, both the strategy-framing process and the publication of results were limited, with a lack of transparency ⁽¹¹⁾.

4.3.2 In order to achieve broader and more effective involvement of civil society, the ERPC recommends developing a culture of ongoing dialogue at all levels going beyond the usual requirements for consultation, at the same time as developing appropriate mechanisms for participation, bringing a high degree of transparency to government action and ensuring regular feedback on decisions. One of the report's conclusions is that "the NRIS show that there are clear and worrying differences in the political will to address discrimination and anti-Gypsyism and to amend national policies to enable greater participation of Roma in all collective areas of society".

4.4 Results of the online questionnaire commissioned by the EESC ⁽¹²⁾

4.4.1 Researchers sent the on-line questionnaire, which included questions in closed categories, to nearly 2 000 civil society organisations and activists involved in Roma issues ⁽¹³⁾. As in the case of the ERPC study, the response rate was extremely low ⁽¹⁴⁾.

4.4.2 The questionnaire evaluated levels of satisfaction with EU and national strategies on the basis of 14 analytical criteria ⁽¹⁵⁾ on a scale of one to five, with answers averaging less

⁽¹⁰⁾ Analysis of National Roma Integration Strategies, ERPC, March 2012.

⁽¹¹⁾ "(...) a large majority of respondents across Member States described the drafting process of the NRIS as lacking transparency. In most of the cases, stakeholders' participation, in particular the involvement of Roma, is still unclear with regard to implementation of the NRIS."

⁽¹²⁾ A study on the participation and activities of Roma and/or non-governmental organisations in the development and approval of national Roma integration strategies. Kontra Ltd., Budapest 2012. Manuscript.

⁽¹³⁾ Using the snowball sampling method, questionnaires sent to nearly 800 addresses reached around 2 000 addresses, which received a total of three reminders from researchers.

⁽¹⁴⁾ In both cases, a total of 78 questionnaires were returned. Answers were received from nearly all Member States, but the proportion of answers from each country varied considerably. Generally there were more answers from countries with the largest Roma communities.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Questions evaluated satisfaction with the content of key areas addressed by strategies, as well as the transparency of the strategy framing process and the various options for becoming involved.

than two⁽¹⁶⁾. Thus, for most respondents the NRISs have yet to show signs of success or convincing political will. These strong negative views may well help to explain the very low response rate.

4.4.3 Overall the study shows that apart from a serious lack of information and general dissatisfaction, there is also widespread frustration and distrust among spokespersons for the Roma community, civil society organisations, and their representatives, who feel that NRISs have not met the growing expectations of the Roma or their sincere hope that the strategy could make a real contribution to significantly improved social integration. Low response and satisfaction levels show that, despite the declared intentions, there has been a failure to sufficiently involve the relevant organisations or to develop effective mechanisms ensuring involvement. At the same time, due (in some cases) to centuries of discrimination and segregation, current processes have failed to inspire sufficient trust among representatives of those concerned.

4.4.4 To a large extent, these research findings confirm and support the recommendations set out in the EESC's exploratory opinion in relation to stepping up civil society involvement.

5. General considerations

5.1 EU institutions and bodies have made considerable efforts and sacrifices over the last few years to help improve social integration of the Roma, while combating their exclusion and widespread exposure to extreme poverty, and supporting their inclusion as fully-fledged European and national citizens in political, economic and social life.

5.2 However, so far these efforts have at best achieved very limited results. Analyses of the NRISs consistently show that they are certainly necessary, but far from sufficient, as a result of which those concerned are ill-informed and suspicious; at the same time most of them are unhappy with the objectives and the prospects for achieving them. This is why adoption of strategic programmes should be seen as the beginning of the inclusion process rather than its outcome.

5.3 The main thrust of our proposals is to develop institutional mechanisms at both national (and also internally, at local and regional level) and EU level, based on broad agreement in principle and political consensus. These mechanisms must be taken account of, not least in various policy areas; they must also be transparent, evidence-based, conducive to achieving the desired effects in a rationally comprehensible and predictable manner, and capable of ensuring broad social involvement, particularly of the Roma and the social factors favouring them.

5.4 Although most strategies have set appropriate objectives, we need to take into account the fact that the instruments and resources available for achieving such objectives appear insufficient to compensate for the continuing negative impact of discrimination and exclusion on the lives and prospects of those concerned. This is all the more so during an economic and social crisis. Inevitably, as research has shown, the crisis has especially affected the most vulnerable social groups, excluded to an extent which deprives them of any residual quality of life or social prospects.

5.5 Policy recommendations

5.5.1 There is a serious risk of failure to benefit from the positive political attitudes to the Roma in the EU; instead, we could once again be facing a setback, which would have serious consequences. The Committee therefore attaches particular importance to monitoring and reviewing government policies with regard to the NRISs to ensure that the possible negative or even harmful effects of such strategies do not outweigh their intended benefits. Effective mechanisms must be put in place to coordinate and adjust policies.

5.5.2 An analysis of NRISs shows that there are worrying discrepancies between, on the one hand, the declared political will to overcome discrimination and social exclusion of the Roma, and on the other the effectiveness of the instruments, resources and mechanisms put in place. The Committee would like to see more determined resistance to using the issue for political ends than has hitherto been the case.

5.6 Anti-discrimination policies and communication

5.6.1 The Committee feels it is very important for the NRISs to follow an explicit rights-based approach in order to ensure that citizens of Member States can fully enjoy their fundamental rights enshrined in EU law and international treaties and conventions on human rights.

5.6.2 Combating discrimination should be a priority in all areas of public life. The Committee recommends that the EU and the Member States should focus their anti-discrimination policies more strongly on identifying cases of discrimination and punishing them in line with European legal traditions.

5.6.3 The human rights of Roma migrants must be defended and exercised, not least in terms of rights to education and appropriate healthcare. Instead of expulsion policies, a more balanced approach should be adopted to integrating Roma migrants as EU citizens from EU Member States.

⁽¹⁶⁾ For different questions, averages ranged from 1.6 to 2.7.

5.6.4 Special efforts are needed to ensure that acceptance of the Roma in the media, in education, and other areas of public life becomes common practice. Programmes should be launched to raise awareness of Roma history and culture, at the same time as reminding people of the problems faced by the Roma due to discrimination and exclusion. It is vital for the Roma themselves to be involved in the process of raising social awareness.

5.6.5 All cases of racism and xenophobia must be identified, with legal sanctions where applicable. In this respect, opinion leaders, the political and media elite in particular, have a special responsibility to bear.

5.6.6 We need to avoid perceiving the Roma as a criminal ethnic minority and talking about them in association with negative social phenomena (crime, anti-social behaviour, etc.); such attitudes should be stamped out. In this respect, particular efforts are needed in the areas of criminal justice and the media.

5.6.7 The EESC feels that a positive approach to the social system of the Roma should become more widespread. The Committee recommends that EU institutions and networks, rather than depicting Roma individuals and communities exclusively within a difficult social context and as a cause of problems, should try to publicise successful individuals and communities who are proud to be Roma and set a good example of social integration and aspirations in Europe.

5.6.8 A decisive factor in implementing integration policies is ensuring that individuals have the strength, tools and authority to shape their own destinies. This is why the policy as a whole, together with its individual areas of action, must help enable those concerned to decide on their own destinies, within the constraints of the rule of law, while ensuring that the majority accepts this development on the basis of shared interests.

5.7 Involvement

5.7.1 The Committee emphasises that civil society cannot merely play a passive, decorative role in the NRIS process; rather, it must become an active agent.

5.7.2 The Committee supports the European Commission's planned network of national Roma contact points, but emphasises that the network only makes sense if it has the requisite powers and resources, especially funding. These contact points must operate on the basis of close, institutionalised cooperation with civil society organisations.

5.7.3 The European Roma Platform must be involved in evaluating strategic programmes. In view of this, its activities should be stepped up.

5.7.4 Organised civil society, including Roma organisations and lobbies, must be fully involved throughout NRIS processes (planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation), not just at national level, but also at regional and local level. This approach must be applied at all decision-making levels, with established operational processes in terms of fora for consultation, transparency, tools and resources.

5.7.5 The Committee emphasises the need for social empowerment of those considering themselves members of any Roma community and for policies promoting their social inclusion. To this end, a support system must be put in place.

5.8 Monitoring and evaluation

5.8.1 Given that monitoring and evaluation are either overlooked or insufficiently integrated into most NRISs, the Committee recommends that all Member States remedy their programmes in this respect, decide on the relevant organisational identities and institutional processes, and identify indicators for particular objectives, together with evaluation methodology, sources of information, etc.

5.8.2 It is vital to review NRISs and constantly monitor them, not least in order to establish whether they set out comprehensive and coherent policies in all five priority areas of the Strategic Framework, whether they address shortcomings in existing frameworks, and whether they put in place appropriate action programmes and adequate funding.

5.8.3 Member States need to ensure that NRISs are in step with national, regional and local development policies, and to enable unplanned negative impacts of these policies on NRIS objectives to be overcome or mitigated.

5.8.4 The Committee recommends that the European Commission establish a network of independent experts in each Member State in order to ensure sound evaluation of the NRISs. Member States must also allocate funding for EU monitoring and (independent) evaluation by civil society organisations, for example under the operational programmes. Monitoring and evaluation activities must certainly be taken account of in programme funding.

5.8.5 The Committee suggests that national statistical offices, under the coordination of Eurostat, develop the indicators required for evidence-based monitoring of Roma strategies, and establish a standardised statistical method for such defining indicators.

5.9 Resources

5.9.1 The Committee emphasises that adequate funding from separate budget headings must be provided, in line with the objectives set out in policy documents.

5.9.2 It is the most vulnerable who are hardest hit by the crisis. In order to meet Europe 2020 strategy objectives, adjustments have to be made, in terms of resource policy and of adapting priorities to the situation. However, these adjustments must be decided on the basis of a transparent process ensuring consensus with representatives of those concerned.

Brussels, 14 November 2012.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON
