

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe’ (exploratory opinion at the request of the Hungarian presidency)**

(2011/C 248/03)

Rapporteur: **Mr TOPOLÁNSZKY**

In a letter dated 15 November 2010, and in accordance with Article 304 TFEU, Mr Péter GYÖRKÖS, Ambassador, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, on behalf of the Hungarian Presidency, to draw up an exploratory opinion on the

*Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe*

(exploratory 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 27 May 2011.

At its 472nd plenary session, held on 15 and 16 June 2011 (meeting of 16 June 2011), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 138 votes to 3 with no abstentions.

## 1. Summary and recommendations

THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE:

1.1 thoroughly welcomes and appreciates all the efforts made hitherto by the European Union to reduce the segregation of the Roma <sup>(1)</sup> and promote their social integration through resolutions and legislation drawn up by its institutions, structures established for cooperation, and funding from the Structural Funds and other financial instruments;

1.2 at the same time, 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;

1.3 emphasises that it will only be possible to improve this difficult situation by means of an integrated, coordinated and coherent Europe-wide strategy and a determined, systematic action programme that covers all policy areas and is implemented at national level, thus equipping the individuals and communities concerned with the powers and authority they need to shape their own destinies (empowerment). It must be possible to put this action programme into practice at local authority level (subsidiarity);

1.4 therefore welcomes the proposals set out in the European Commission’s communication <sup>(2)</sup> on a European

Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, and attaches great importance to their consistent implementation at both national and EU level; wishes to be a committed partner in this process;

1.5 nonetheless feels that this long-awaited strategy has not lived up to the expectations it raised; it could have been more ambitious, more specific and better structured;

1.6 considers that the following elements could be suggested to the Member States as the three pillars – to be implemented in coordination – of a realistic, feasible 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 – addressing the concentration of social problems and reducing extreme poverty and deprivation;

b) a policy to support empowerment of those who regard themselves as members of any Roma community and the celebration of social inclusion they have achieved;

c) general policies and publicity to combat racism;

1.7 emphasises the need to involve local civil society representatives, scientific specialists and the social partners in policy consultation, formulation and implementation, and 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) – in line with the intention of the adopted Commission Communication;

<sup>(1)</sup> This document is based on the definition set out in the CoR opinion on *The social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe* (OJ C 42, 10.2.2011, p. 23): ‘(...) the term “Roma” used in the present opinion is an umbrella term which includes other population groups (the Sinti, Gypsies, Travellers, Kale, Camminanti, Ashkali, etc.) with similar cultural characteristics and a history of social marginalisation and exclusion within European society’.

<sup>(2)</sup> COM(2011) 173 final.

1.8 emphasises the need for firm representation of the public interest, and therefore calls for systematic planning and implementation, and also for policy coordination; it likewise stresses the importance of local policy-framing and differentiated approaches based on genuine needs, as well as a presentation of the facts of the situation, and consistent evaluation on a permanent, systematic basis.

1.9 draws the Council's attention to the need to find a way of giving back proof of nationality to those Roma who do not dispose of one any more for some reason, so that they have a guarantee of entitlement to European citizenship without discrimination, and to keep this injustice at the top of the agenda for as long as it remains unresolved;

## 2. Introduction

THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE:

2.1 agrees with the assessment of the situation in the European Commission's report on *Roma in Europe* <sup>(3)</sup>, and with the proposals set out in the Communication on *The social and economic integration of the Roma* <sup>(4)</sup>;

2.2 endorses the Committee of the Regions' opinion on *The social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe* <sup>(5)</sup> calling for recognition and support for the strategic role of local authorities and communities and for integrated regional policies;

2.3 reiterates the proposal set out in the European Economic and Social Committee's exploratory opinion on the *Integration of minorities – Roma* <sup>(6)</sup> and in particular the proposal to extend use of the processes set out in the open method of coordination; also confirms its stance set out in the Resolution on *The situation of the Roma in the European Union* <sup>(7)</sup> concerning the defence of the fundamental rights of all Europeans and combating discrimination, racism and xenophobia in all countries;

2.4 reiterates the message of its opinion on **Integration and the Social Agenda** that efforts to combat discrimination must be stepped up by implementing existing legislative instruments and strengthening public policies and social commitments to integration <sup>(8)</sup>;

2.5 very much agrees with the analysis of the situation and proposals set out in the European Parliament's report on an *EU strategy on Roma inclusion* <sup>(9)</sup>;

<sup>(3)</sup> SEC(2010) 400 final.

<sup>(4)</sup> COM(2010) 133 final.

<sup>(5)</sup> Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on *The social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe* (OJ C 42, 10.2.2011, p. 23).

<sup>(6)</sup> OJ C 27, 3.2.2009, p. 88–94.

<sup>(7)</sup> OJ C 48, 15.2.2011, p. 1.

<sup>(8)</sup> OJ C 347, 18.12.2010, p. 19–27.

<sup>(9)</sup> European Parliament, INI/2010/2276, 24.11.2010.

2.6 fully accepts and shares the values of non-discrimination and inclusion of excluded persons, enshrined in the Lisbon strategy and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;

2.7 supports the ten Common Basic Principles formulated in the course of cooperation on the 'Integrated European Platform for Roma Inclusion', which have already achieved widespread acceptance, and calls attention to the need to apply them, not least at national level <sup>(10)</sup>;

2.8 very much appreciates the fact that the Structural Funds and other national, regional and local financing instruments <sup>(11)</sup> have been made available to support the implementation of policies to include Roma people, and suggests that, in the interest of social empowerment, funding for these policies be guaranteed using adjusted procedures and providing adequate technical assistance which take into consideration the multi-faceted nature of the issue, such as access to health care, vocational training, jobs and housing;

2.9 welcomes the proposals set out in the European Commission's document on a European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, and attaches great importance to their consistent implementation at both national and EU level; wishes to be a committed partner in this process;

2.10 nonetheless feels that, although the document has been a long time coming, it has not fully met the expectations it raised. The EESC believes that the system of goals needs to be better defined and more explicit in terms of the tasks ahead of us, and points out the importance of an open Europe-wide social discussion on this issue. With a view to ensuring its success, the EESC stresses the vital need for evaluation mechanisms and performance indicators. It therefore sees the conclusions that the Council has adopted in May and that the European Council is set to endorse in June as a particularly important factor in both social and operational terms;

2.11 points out that exclusion of and discrimination against the Roma result in significant social costs and government expenditure, whereas inclusion clearly brings economic benefits <sup>(12)</sup>;

<sup>(10)</sup> Especially with regard to 'explicit, but not exclusive targeting', an 'inter-cultural approach', and 'aiming for the mainstream'.

<sup>(11)</sup> European Social Fund, European Regional Development Fund, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development / World Bank, United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>(12)</sup> 'The vast majority of working-age Roma lack sufficient education to participate successfully in the labor market. (...) As a result, European countries are losing hundreds of millions of Euros annually in productivity and in fiscal contributions to the governments. (...) The annual fiscal gains from bridging the employment gap are much higher than the total cost of investing in public education for all Roma children (...) The share of Roma among the working-age populations will rise as majority populations in Eastern and Central Europe are aging rapidly. Equal labor participation among the Roma is essential to shoulder the nationally rising costs of pensions, health and other costs of aging.' Economic costs of Roma exclusion, World Bank, 2010.

2.12 supports and participates in the activities of the EU Roma Network, the Decade of Roma Inclusion, the European Summit on Roma Inclusion, the Equality Summit, the Integrated European Platform for Roma Inclusion, the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion, and numerous other forms of cooperation, where it represents the values of civil society in the broad sense of the term;

2.13 emphasises that the European Union and its institutions have already made significant efforts in terms of regulation, guidance and funding, with a view to framing, adopting and implementing inclusive policies targeting the Roma;

2.14 at the same time, is concerned to note 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 even deteriorated further. Even though a large majority of Roma are EU citizens, with exactly the same rights and obligations as any other citizens of the Member States, it has to be recognised that they still face constant, serious discrimination on labour markets, in education, housing, healthcare, access to public services and in their freedom of movement;

2.15 is aware that there are significant differences in the situations of different groups of Roma: while many are well integrated into the areas where they live, be they urban or rural, others live in poverty and extreme deprivation and experience permanent exclusion. Finally, a small number follow a distinctive nomadic lifestyle, which bothers those with whom they come into contact;

2.16 maintains that it is essential to empower people living in poverty and experiencing discrimination. Fully-fledged self-determination requires freedom of choice. In general, a decisive factor in the implementation of integration policies is that individuals must 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 those concerned to develop the ability to decide on their own destinies, within the constraints of the rule of law;

2.17 firmly believes that Roma should not be given special rights but that it is necessary to fully respect their European citizenship, while also guaranteeing them all fundamental EU rights as well as all citizens' rights, to ensure that those rights are respected and to penalise any failure to do so, particularly where people responsible for law enforcement act in an unfair and discriminatory way;

2.18 points out that among the Roma themselves women, children, the elderly and the disabled are disproportionately affected by exclusion, and that the social and economic crisis can only aggravate these negative phenomena;

2.19 is convinced that it will only be possible to remedy these problems by means of an integrated, coordinated and coherent strategic programme and by following a firm, systematic approach in all policy areas; is pleased that EU institutions and bodies (not least the EESC) are working together with the Hungarian government, currently holding the Council presidency, to put in place the conditions for dealing with the problem, and recommends that in the period of the Polish presidency, a Ministerial Conference be held to discuss the experiences and the results achieved.

### 3. Policy recommendations <sup>(13)</sup>

THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE:

3.1 notes that the traditional approach to defining the Roma target group is based on majority perceptions of who the Roma are. Although such an approach may be useful from, for example, a research perspective, and may be an effective way of assessing the nature of social exclusion, any method identifying the Roma on the basis of external racial features violates fundamental human rights, particularly the right to define one's own identity, besides being pointless and politically untenable;

3.2 recommends that, contrary to the traditional approaches, Member States respect the fundamental values of the adopted strategic framework and, at the same time, meet the 'explicit but not exclusive' requirement of the ten basic principles adopted by the Platform for Roma Inclusion. In line with the four areas of action highlighted in the Commission Communication (education, employment, health and housing), they should bring together three strategic policy angles that reveal the nature of the problems and the options for action, and that together form the three pillars of a realistic, feasible policy to integrate the Roma:

- a) a race- and ethnicity-neutral inclusive policy – addressing the concentration of social problems and reducing extreme poverty and deprivation;
- b) a policy to support empowerment of those who regard themselves as members of any Roma community and the celebration of social inclusion they have achieved;
- c) general policies and publicity to combat racism;

3.3 a race- and ethnicity-neutral inclusive policy – universal access, addressing the concentration of exclusion and reducing extreme poverty and deprivation:

3.3.1 instead of focussing on ethnic and racial features, a non-discriminatory integration policy must tackle problems linked to social exclusion, irrespective of racial features, such as those in the fields of education, employment (including

<sup>(13)</sup> This section makes recommendations concerning the policies in general or their context, but, for reasons of space, cannot go into detail on issues relating to each policy.

different forms of employment, such as entrepreneurship, self-employment, etc.), health and housing, as indicated in the Commission Communication. It must take account of the geographical concentration of socio-economic disadvantages, regardless of the make-up (ethnic or otherwise) of the group of people excluded and, along the lines of the Europe 2020 strategy, give priority to solving two specific problems;

3.3.2 the first of these priorities is consistent implementation of the 'full access' criterion. Apart from overcoming discriminatory effects in legal terms, 'full access' also encompasses requirements for physical accessibility and usability, adjustment to needs, affordability, and quality in line with standards. Besides removing legal obstacles, the aim is to bring public services closer to residential areas where the Roma population is highly concentrated, and to improve transport connections to institutions and to services that they have a right to access due to their circumstances;

3.3.3 there are two main ways in which exclusion can be concentrated: 1) in geographical and residential terms, and 2) in institutional terms, where service providers (including public service providers) deal with socially excluded clients (the institutional segregation effect);

3.3.4 it is possible to dilute the concentration of exclusion, firstly by focussing on targeted improvements to institutional conditions and to the poorest and most sub-standard residential areas, and secondly by reducing cases of isolation through reforms promoting institutional integration and deliberately setting out to boost intermingling and interaction;

3.3.5 full access is a key aspect of the basic fundamental objectives of the Lisbon strategy: hence, activities relating to the labour market and other social aspects, as well as greater mobility and education, continue to be priorities. Strategic documents in the last few years have included a renewed, stronger focus on health, in particular public health, as well as on housing and urban development policies, with an emphasis on getting rid of isolated housing, camps, and other places of segregation, while developing local economies, community-based initiatives, micro (self-employed), small and medium sized businesses, and publicly or privately (NGO) managed municipal services. Alignment of strategies to combat child poverty with Roma strategies is a priority issue (supporting mothers' access to employment by strengthening municipal responsibility for child education; ensuring fuller access to pre-school and early learning facilities, while keeping in mind subsidies and incentives for the education and further education of children whose parents live in poverty);

3.4 a policy to support empowerment of those who regard themselves as members of any Roma community and the celebration of social inclusion they have achieved;

3.4.1 it is absolutely vital for those claiming to share the same identity to be able, on their own initiative and together with their chosen peers and as a community, to choose their own path and preserve the language, culture, customs etc. constituting the basis of their identities. This is why the national Roma integration strategy has to pave the way to enabling those who claim Roma identity to develop their own communities, and their own public forums (media), and organisations, and to make them work as well as in case of any other minority groups suffered by social exclusion. It is equally important for government and non-government autonomous Roma organisations to have the same organisational scope as other ethnic minorities and, where appropriate, in proportion to their numbers, the same financial support as other ethnic minorities;

3.4.2 for this to happen, interculturalism, a vivid, two-way interaction and communication, and integration - in terms of principles, theory and good Community and institutional practices in Europe - must become a real factor for action and part of everyday life;

3.4.3 the key element of affirmative policies is to enable people belonging to a minority to make their voice heard and have their interests represented. We need to support tools and approaches helping them highlight their social handicaps and a political struggle to overcome these handicaps;

3.4.4 empowerment policies should endorse affirmative actions to promote labour market entry for Roma people, including their elevation to high-ranking positions in business, public administration, politics, media, sciences and the arts, while also helping them to start their own small and medium sized businesses.

### 3.5 *Anti-racism policy*

3.5.1 The target group of an anti-racism strategy is society as a whole; the political dimension of such a strategy is driven by the belief that in a dynamic, developing, fair and human world, people's social position should be essentially achieved on the basis of skills and talents, and not based on of birth-related advantages or handicaps which determine their chances of doing well in life. Equally, they should not have to suffer the fallout of the exclusion they undergo. Inherited, non-changeable features such as gender, origin and religion should not constitute grounds for discrimination. Anti-discrimination law offers the most powerful range of instruments to ensure that these principles are put into practice. It would also be helpful if European anti-discrimination legislation were implemented in full at national level in the various fields of action and in the regulatory systems. Such legislation is, however, effective not simply because of the penalties it applies and their deterrent effect, but also because law-abiding citizens, who make up the majority in a democratic society, endeavour to live in compliance with the letter and spirit of the law.

3.5.2 Given that it is more difficult to 'dissuade' people or to wean them off their prejudices and racism through rational arguments, anti-racism policies are mostly based on behavioural models and communication patterns disseminating a positive image of non-violent models of communication, cooperation and problem-solving, based on rational interests; at the same time, they condemn aggressive and racist types of behaviour based on prejudice and hate. In this respect, opinion shapers, the political and media elite in particular, have a special responsibility to bear.

### 3.6 *Strengthening the 'evidence-based' nature of the strategy*

3.6.1 Over the past two decades the EU has achieved significant progress in various policy areas in terms of the objective evaluation of social exclusion and the fight against exclusion, incorporating the results of such evaluation in social policies. The availability of data is an essential prerequisite for applying and evaluating suitable policies. In spite of efforts made to date, there is still not much data on either the overall population or the target groups. Given the goals of the strategy, progress is needed in the following areas:

3.6.2 'Race-/ethnicity-neutral inclusion policy': in further developing methods to evaluate various forms of poverty and deprivation, work is needed to measure the extent to which exclusion is concentrated, and to highlight the impact of measures taken on the basis of the relevant policies; The Committee recommends that Eurostat and the Member States' statistical services add indicators of extreme poverty and exclusion to their exclusion indicators, and that they develop the principles of a statistical quantification and processing method to measure extreme poverty and deprivation.

3.6.3 On this basis, the Member States should identify, within their strategies, territorial units (urban areas, shanty towns, inner cities, camps, isolated districts, rural settlements, etc.) characterised by a particularly high concentration of exclusion and extreme exclusion in inhabited areas, irrespective of whether or not public opinion sees these areas as being populated by Roma. The Committee recommends that the Member States draft urban planning strategies to do away with these areas or to make them inhabitable, establishing mechanisms based on the evidence needed to monitor these strategies.

3.6.4 'Roma empowerment policy': handicaps and disadvantages can only be identified if those claiming ethnic identity ask to be recorded in public registers as members of a given minority. However, in the absence of such a request, we need to categorically and resolutely ban any reference to race based on racial features in national registers; given that data on ethnic minorities is particularly sensitive, we need to guarantee, by all possible means, maximum protection for personal data, while at the same time ensuring maximum publicity for aggregated data on minorities.

3.6.5 In parallel with reducing exclusion and poverty and alleviating their most extreme forms, the Committee suggests that support be given to linguistic, cultural, educational and community programmes for developing the Roma community, where they are truly able to reach their fellow Roma.

3.6.6 'Anti-racism policy': based on research at both EU and national level, it should be made possible to monitor changes in prejudices towards the Roma, the extent of such prejudices among various social groups, and the impact of policies on the development of ethnic prejudices and racism. We need to establish awareness-raising campaigns targeting the public at large, that aim to combat the exclusionary attitudes and racist prejudices that can be seen in the population. We should also ensure that they are monitored on a regular basis.

3.6.7 We strongly recommend monitoring not only the trends of prejudices and racism, but also the positive impacts and social benefits of public and civic society initiatives, good practices aiming to reduce anti-Roma prejudices and xenophobia and improving intercultural inclusive integration.

### 3.7 *Aspects of general interest in implementation at national level*

3.7.1 Complexity: the Committee would point out that, in a wide variety of areas, we need to devise measures to strengthen the positive role played by the Roma in society, improve their living conditions and promote their integration; these measures should be stepped up to the level of systematic policies. For this to happen, we need firstly to tie elements of different policy areas in with one another, secondly to organise cross-sectoral good governance relations, and thirdly to begin systematic implementation at political level. This requires a unified, concerted approach by all parties involved in implementation.

3.7.2 All parts of the programmes must be coherently inter-linked (coherence) and integrated (consistency). A third key aspect of implementation is planning and the establishment of priorities (sequential action): in other words, realistic goals can only be achieved by progressing through well-planned stages and successive components. This requires a properly functioning coordinating authority with the requisite competences.

3.7.3 Integration policies must be planned and implemented with a focus on real needs, in a differentiated, flexible manner, enabling specific local (regional) features to be taken into account in the best way possible. Integration strategies should be planned and implemented as 'two-way streets', on the basis of reciprocal efforts and influences, and aimed at mutual benefits for all.

3.7.4 An essential prerequisite for using calls for expressions of interest and EU funds is simplification of the conditions for tendering and reporting. Carefully designed implementation should give due focus to capacity building, appropriate coordination and the support of engaged political will; the involvement of stakeholders' representatives in the planning process is also crucial.

3.7.5 Evidence-based implementation – indicators: policies must clearly show their effectiveness in a verifiable fashion, i.e. they must be shown to be effective in relation to the original objectives. Policies must not expose us to greater damage and risks than those from which they were designed to protect us, nor must they be unnecessarily costly. This is why significant - but insufficient - work has been done to make this policy more strongly evidence-based. In efforts to integrate the Roma, it is particularly important for us to be able to evaluate not just the programmes, but also the policy as a whole: we therefore need, at both national and EU level, to promote a culture of evaluation, a stronger system of requirements, the standardised establishment of socio-economic and social statistics performance indicators, always referring to the appropriate target group, and the organisation of a scientifically-based institutional evaluation facility. Adequate funding for this purpose must be addressed.

3.7.6 The EESC supports the implementation of the EU's Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 and of the national policies that contribute to it, but would like to participate in 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.

3.7.7 Participation and representation: no integration policy can make sense either in theory or in practice unless those concerned are closely involved. We therefore need to avoid paternalistic procedures which restrict rights; at the same time, it is appropriate to secure the closest and most diverse involvement possible of Roma grass-root organisations, local civil society representatives, scientific specialists and social partners in decision-making, implementation and monitoring as stated clearly in the Commission Communication and

other relevant documents. In the target areas, it is particularly vital to take positive measures to ensure that especially disadvantaged groups (women, single mothers, people with a foreign mother tongue, disabled people, etc.) can participate in politics.

3.7.8 The validity, credibility and effectiveness of policies are essentially linked to close involvement and ownership by their primary beneficiaries. This is why we need to involve representatives of the Roma community at European, national and, of course, local level in framing and implementing policies to promote their integration (inclusion through participation).

3.7.9 Social exclusion and its extreme forms often go hand in hand – in different ways in different Member States – with behaviours, lifestyles and habits that are different from those of the majority of the population (e.g. travelling, specific activities such as collecting and selling second-hand goods, or specific craft trades). Particular attention should be paid to these specific characteristics when drawing up national strategies. However, in some cases the attitudes attributed to the ethnic group are downright deviant and criminal. Ensuring peaceful cohabitation of opposing cultural norms, while constantly striving to keep the tensions and antagonisms caused by differences in attitudes and behaviour within the limits of the legal framework, should be goals that define the specific inclusive nature of national strategies and, at the same time, the particular challenge they need to meet. To this end, it is important to provide opportunities for open communication and procedures that are also accessible to the main parties concerned, in which context multiculturalism experts – including people of Roma origin or identity – and social workers will have a primary role to play in terms of both public services and community programmes (mediation, prevention, reconciliation services, etc.) – as indicated in the Commission Communication.

### 3.8 *Prospects for the future*

3.8.1 The EESC believes that, thanks to the combined efforts of the EU institutions, governments, Member States and local authorities and communities, the EU may now be at a historic turning point: it may finally produce a policy to benefit the EU's most excluded and disadvantaged ethnic group, based on a common approach that is likely to end not in costly failure but in intelligent, humane results. The Committee wishes to give its full support to this process and its implementation.

Brussels, 16 June 2011.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Staffan NILSSON

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