

Roma networks vs Roma policies: Bridging the gaps at local level

by Alin Ionut Banu,

EPHA Roma Health Fellow

Discussion Paper | September 2017

Introduction

The Roma inclusion process has facilitated many changes over the past ten years across Europe, especially in South-Eastern Europe where the biggest Roma population is officially registered.

In parallel, many NGOs - whether European or national, Roma-led or pro-Roma in orientation – have adapted their strategies according to the European Commission's recommendations and priorities.

The majority of networks created, such as the European Roma Grassroots Organisation (ERGO) or the European Roma Information Office (ERIO), both with secretariats in Brussels, are legitimate networks that cover a great part of South-Eastern Europe as well as the enlargement countries. They effectively act as “transmission belts” between the EU Institutions and Roma communities in EU Member States. These networks and other organisations try to reach the grassroots level as much as possible, using as a script the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). They are trying to respond to the real and pragmatic issues facing Roma communities, by working with Equality Bodies (ERIO) or with grassroots NGOs (ERGO) among others, while also being the main dialogue partners of the EU Institutions concerning the implementation of the European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS).

The high number of European, national, regional and local NGOs or advocacy networks addressing the Roma minority, working mostly in the same communities, raises a number of important questions which this paper attempts to address:

- Does their activity potentially contribute to the “vicious circle” in which local Roma communities are caught up?
- Who monitors and evaluates the NRIS at national, regional and local level, and in what manner?
- Is Roma civil society really involved in the policymaking process?
- Has the NRIS provided sufficient tools and instruments to develop and assure a transparent and realistic dialogue between public institutions and Roma civil society?
- Are there enough or too few Roma platforms, networks or other types of structure for cooperation and coordination at all levels (European, national, regional, local)?
- Is the work reaching the grassroots - as it should -, and in the best possible way?
- And finally, do Roma leaders or grassroots NGOs have the capacity to adopt the same vision and strategy and advocate on behalf of the Roma community?

This paper discusses these questions by looking at the situation in one of Romania's poorest areas, the South West Development Region of Oltenia. The findings are based on European Commission reports and Council Recommendations (2011-2016) as well as research and action undertaken by the Institute for Development Policies (IDP)¹.

¹ www.ipd.ro

The key message is that crucial organisational capacity (programmatic, operational, human resources) to effectively exert their functions as critical “watch dogs” and advocates when it comes to monitoring the implementation of the NRIS at local/regional level is lacking among NGOs. Moreover, since there are no pragmatic and objective mechanisms and instruments to monitor NRIS implementation in Oltenia, NGOs are unable to inform policymakers about existing best practices and alternative public policies.

The Policy background – EU, national, regional, local

While the Romanian Government successfully developed in December 2011 a normative national framework - the National Strategy of the Government of Romania for the inclusion of Romanian Citizens belonging to Roma Minority²³ ((NSRI) - to prompt efforts for Roma inclusion, and a new national authority - National Roma Contact Point (NRCP)⁴ was created to ensure better coherence with EU funds allocation; at the local level, there is a need to increase the transparency of consultative bodies and ensure inclusive involvement of broader civil society in the monitoring and evaluation of the NSRI.

Various national and EU documents, including the European Commission Assessments of Romania’s NRIS implementation (2016⁵, 2015⁶, 2014⁷, 2012⁸) and the *Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens belonging to the Roma Minority for 2015-2020*⁹, have pointed to the need to improve Roma policy-making at local level by setting up an effective monitoring mechanism including NGO involvement, and to foster a constructive dialogue between local and regional authorities and Roma civil society, particularly in the monitoring and evaluation phase of the NRIS.

According to the Strategy, the key actors to be involved are councillors at the municipal level, county councils, as well as legitimate representatives of Roma NGOs.

At least in theory, Roma NGOs should thus be genuinely recognised as critical partners in the formulation and adjustment of priorities, objectives and targets of the NRIS at the local/county/national level. They should have the means and resources to actively monitor, evaluate and formulate public policies on Roma issues as part of the NRIS.

However, while the local level is well embedded in comprehensive national legislation, there is a large deficit when it comes to the de facto functioning of all local structures charged with the design, projection, implementation, monitoring and reporting of the national and European strategies focusing on Roma. For

² <http://www.prefecturabucuresti.ro/resurse/comisii/hg1221.pdf>

³ <http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Site2014/Strategie/Analiza%20implementarii%20strategiei%20Guvernului%20nr.%20121%20din%202011.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/PNCR>

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma-report-2016_en.pdf

Pg 77-78 Country Fiche

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_communication2015_en.pdf

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_implement_strategies2014_en.pdf

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma-integration/romania/national-strategy/national_en.htm

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_romania_strategy2_en.pdf

example, there is an urgent need to increase the transparency of work undertaken by consultative bodies and to ensure the inclusive involvement of broader civil society in monitoring and evaluation.

Discussion

Field research involving extensive interviews and focus groups with Roma representatives both in the local communities and in local official structures conducted by the Institute for Development Policies (IPD) served as the basis for the following discussion, which aims to describe the current state of play pertaining to the actual organisational capacity and gaps in policy practice for dealing with local Roma issues.

IPD's analysis has revealed the following problems:

(a) The County Offices for Roma¹⁰ lack the capacity (human and financial resources) to put into practice local actions in accordance with the priorities of the National and EU Strategies for Roma. While initial training was provided to the first staff members of the newly created offices, most of them have since changed jobs. There is no continuous training to maintain skills at a level to ensure an organisational performance that can meet the official standards;

All actions performed by the County Offices for Roma as part of the County Action Plans are actions that have not required any funding at all other than day-to-day operating costs (e.g., covering the salaries of the experts, information campaigns, conflict mediation, cultural events, and seminars). When asked to demonstrate successful co-option of Roma NGOs, the County Offices for Roma were able to produce signed partnership agreements, but they could not prove wide participation since all documents listed a limited number of Roma organisations (in most cases the same ones).

(b) Formal structures such as the Mixed Working Group¹¹ --- meet on an ad hoc basis, (thereby not complying with the legislation that requires regular meetings) and they do not carry out ongoing analysis of the action plans developed by the County Offices for Roma. Phone interviews conducted by IPD experts with representatives of the County Offices for Roma brought to light that during the last two years, the Mixed Working Groups have been convened only twice at most and that these meetings were merely pro forma as they involved no real discussions about the evolution of the NRIS, whether targets were met, etc.;

(c) County and local level authorities provide no financial guarantees for the implementation of the County Actions Plans; as revealed by an analysis of secondary data related to county level budget implementation.

¹⁰ Structure that is functioning in the frame of the National Roma Agency – governmental structure responsible to monitor and evaluate the national Roma social inclusion measures according to NSRI

¹¹ Structure created in the frame of NRIS that aims primarily to analyze, plan, organize and implement sectoral activities to meet the objectives and tasks of the plan of measures, as set out in the H.G. 1221/2011 for the approval of the Romanian Government's Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens belonging to the Roma minority

There are no budget lines to address the measures and actions as they are foreseen in the Action Plans directly; marginal financial assistance is provided for “one time” events that do not necessarily fit in the plans;

(d) According to the NRIS, each community must have a local expert on Roma charged with setting up local initiative groups and working groups (which are supposed to jointly develop the Local Action Plans and ensure they are incorporated into the local development strategy of the community and into the County Action Plans). However, in reality all of the experts interviewed claimed there are no financial resources to perform their roles and that their proposals are not taken seriously since Roma issues occupy a marginal place on Local Council meeting agendas.

(e) No network bringing together Roma NGOs could be identified in the entire region of Oltenia. This is not due to lack of willingness (since more and more NGO leaders recognise the need to join forces) but because there has been no initiative in this respect. Perhaps this is not surprising given that every report on Roma would signal Oltenia as the least developed region in this regard.

This situation is however detrimental to the development of a number of organisations that are doing excellent community work, but which have no engagement in the public policy cycle to influence the public agenda.

A two-day visit by the head of the European Commission’s DG Justice in the fall of 2014 allowed IPD to organise various consultation meetings with Roma NGO leaders and public policy makers in Oltenia. Since IPD committed to gradually accommodate to foster applied interventions at policy level and in the field in its programme’s initiatives, it has expanded its team of experts conducting thorough documentation and exploratory work to better understand and apply a territorial approach to influence public policies to tackle Roma issues.

(f) Many of the Roma representatives who are part of the County Offices for Roma gradually buy into the “government logic” by paying lip-service to the commitments they vowed to the communities whose confidence they have gained. All too often they prioritise personal gain rather than genuinely representing and advocating Roma issues.

(g) While the County Offices for Roma are located in the Prefectures¹², there are hardly any links, both institutional and de facto, with the County Councils.¹³ This is contrary to any logic as the County Councils are the main legislator at local level having both the political and organisational capacity, as well as the financial means, to support the implementation of Roma strategies.

(h) Despite the fact that there has been substantial institutional innovation in the public sector as the realm of local authority has been enriched on

¹² Public Institution that represent the Government at local/county level

¹³ Public Administrative Authority that it functioning at local/county level and coordinates the activity of all the Local Councils in order to assure the well-functioning of public services

a vertical level by a multitude of new structures either predominantly led by Roma representatives and/or gathering a good proportion of them; on a horizontal dimension, particularly in the private third sector, there has been hardly any initiative targeting the development of organisational capacity. For example, this might include programme documents, monitoring instruments, technical assistance and consultative mechanisms to influence the implementation of public policy by monitoring and advocating for constant and continuous compliance and adjustments with the national and EU level priorities, as well as with the local/county level public commitments.

All participants in IDP's interviews and focus groups also claimed that, while at the national level there is a mechanism to ensure monitoring and evaluation of the National Strategy of Roma Inclusion, at the county/local level there is no trans-sectoral mechanism (i.e., involving education, health, employment and housing) to ensure the monitoring and evaluation of the National Strategy and county/local action plans.

Hence, all participants agreed that the monitoring and evaluation pillar of the entire national mechanism is based on a disequilibrium that captures both the consultative and innovation processes. Organised Roma civil society is neither encouraged nor empowered to officially influence the implementation of relevant government actions (national and local) targeting their communities.

Moreover, until now there also has been no initiative to monitor the activities of the “comitology” created at the local/county level in Oltenia. The legislation mechanisms to support Roma inclusion do not ensure the fostering of a public policy loop which confirms the guiding principles of the NSRI, i.e. participation of Roma civil society and transparency.

In addition to local and county level action plans to support Roma inclusion – only three urban municipalities were able to present IDP with such documents, and access was granted through personal connections rather than direct access as required by the legislation - the IDP experts looked for correlations between these documents and regional level programme documents related to the Regional Development Plan for 2014-2020.¹⁴ However, neither the regional programme documents nor the local and county levels contained any reference. Hence, no links in terms of strategic planning and multi-annual budgeting could be identified between programme documents to support Roma inclusion.

Even though all documents formally meet the “criteria” of being Roma oriented, in terms of actual complementarity (e.g. policy convergence) and field interventions, any actual impact is still far from reality.

IDP experts were also unable to identify any comprehensive report looking at the entire Strategy as a whole - at a sectorial level, public authorities have irregularly produced statistics rather than reports - charting the progress of NRIS implementation in Oltenia and looking at the institutional mechanisms underpinning it over the last ten years. The last monitoring report that included

¹⁴ <http://www.adroltenia.ro/planul-de-dezvoltare-regionala-2014-2020/>

one county from the region (Dolj) was developed in 2004 by the Open Society Institute and Center for Roma Resources, *Monitorizarea implementarii la nivel locala Strategiei Guvernamentale pentru Îmbunatătirea Situației Romilor din România*.¹⁵

In 2017, the European Commission initiated a pilot project at EU level, which specifically aims to tackle capacity building for Roma civil society and strengthen its involvement in the monitoring of NRIS. However, the open call aiming to attract and select 90 NGOs across Europe, failed to reach out to the local level. This resulted in engaging the same NGOs that are already monopolising the national and European arena. One could argue that it is easier to work with experienced NGOs able to effortlessly produce good monitoring reports than it is to engage local inexperienced NGOs that offer unique insights, yet would require training and preparation before they can produce reports to the desired quality.

Conclusion

The lack of NGOs able to exert an impact on public policy is not only because of their reduced competences and capacities to participate in complex cycles of policymaking, but also because of the shortage of structured dialogues with civil society.

For example, in Oltenia there is no such instrument or mechanism for consolidating social and civic dialogue, even though the PO DCA (Administrative Capacity Development Operational Programme) 2007-2013¹⁶ stated the need for developing such a structure.

On the other hand, various studies and papers (including ERIQ's publication, "Implementing National Roma Integration Strategies and the Racial Equality Directive"), emphasise the need to build capacity among Roma to monitor the NRIS and lobby national governments to ensure that commitments made under the Council Recommendation on effective Roma Integration, and to support the active social, economic, political and cultural participation of Roma, are upheld.¹⁷

Despite the fact that, at regional level, the government created a series of agencies, intermediary bodies, contact points, etc. that have direct responsibility for implementing policies, there is no structure for civil society that could play the role of a dialogue partner with public authority.

¹⁵ http://www.romacenter.ro/programe/programmonitorizare/monit_implem_strategie_romi_2004.pdf

¹⁶ http://discutii.mfinante.ro/static/10/Mfp/amcsc/fond_structural/fonduri_structurale/fonduri_Romania/PO_Dezv_capacitate_admin_proiect_julie2007_EN.pdf

¹⁷ http://www.erionet.eu/doc-paper-ebs-and-nris-red_2014

To redress the situation, IDP proposes the following recommendations to policy-makers at national level:

- Establish a crucial “missing link”: a representative, legitimate and competent structure for Roma NGOs, as a counterpart to local government, to deal with NRIS. This could take the form of a Regional Coalition on Roma;
- Make available the necessary instruments to support Roma NGOs’ participation in NRIS management, i.e. supportive financial policies accommodating costs incurred by its implementation, and for establishing a Regional Secretariat for Roma Policy.
- Establish a National Roma Platform, as a form of regular dialogue among national authorities / policy makers, civil society organisations and Roma community representatives, which would enable access to local civil society.
- Ensure that the Platform results are able to influence decision-making on Roma issues rather than having a “conference-style” character with no sustainability and follow-up.
- Ensure greater transparency when it comes to the allocation of funds: for the moment, the required financial resources for the local action plans only exist on paper.

The following recommendations are aimed at **European policymakers** to ensure a better “fit” between EU and national/regional/local policies:

- The EU Framework for NRIS up to 2020 did not fully manage to involve and address the needs of civil society organisations active at regional and local level. However, in light of the Commission policy proposal on Roma issues beyond 2020, this aspect can be further strengthened. It could be achieved both via specific funding for watchdog organisations and through direct involvement in the consultation processes with the relevant authorities in the context of the National Roma Platform.
- The Commission could also encourage EU national governments – in particular, the National Roma Contact Points – to exercise more transparency and inclusiveness in their consultation mechanisms. These practices could prove mutually beneficial for national authorities (by making better use of the expertise and know-how of local NGOs) and for NGOs, which could exploit their full potential by contributing to speeding up the inclusion process.

Finally, in order to reach local Roma leaders and members of the community, **grassroots Roma NGOs** should:

1. Stop assuming they know the needs of the communities. Civil society and the key institutions responsible for the Roma integration process should be restructured and revitalised. They should re-adapt to actual community needs, which should inform tailored demands and recommendations for consideration by the relevant policy makers.
2. Ensure that any interventions and measures at community level are based on needs rather than following top-down approaches. In most cases, the latter are completely disconnected from reality and mainly serve to meet the eligibility requirements foreseen by donors rather than the real needs of communities.
3. Be aware that integration as such cannot be achieved based on projects alone - governments bear a great responsibility for their citizens and they must be reminded of this and held accountable. This aspect puts into the spotlight the independence and integrity of civil society organisations. The latter should be able to fully perform their duties and voice their concerns without jeopardising possible financing opportunities, and regardless of any personal interests in a broader political context.
4. Ensure they develop a well-defined and genuine mission. This is of utmost importance in this context since, if a majority of NGOs continue to pay lip service to, rather than representing the needs of Roma communities, one could argue they are themselves contributing to the vicious circle created around the Roma integration process.
5. Develop competence amongst Roma NGO leaders to understand the mechanics of public policy making and the methods by which it can be influenced.

ⁱ See www.ipd.ro