

ERIO Newsletter

Roma and the Mainstream Media

By Ivan Ivanov, ERIO's Executive Director

Many EU Member State governments have proved to be insufficiently responsible in promoting a culture of tolerance, rejection of racism, discrimination and xenophobia through the media. During crises, both political and economic, the blame usually is attributed to the most vulnerable groups of society, which in most cases means minorities. The alarming results of the opinion polls in Europe (one of them is the Euro-barometer conducted yearly by the European Commission to assess the opinion of the European society on different matters and also these related to tolerance anti-racism and anti-discrimination), show that Roma are considered as the most hated ethnic group in Europe. This opinion, which is often fuelled by the media, is a result of the message being disseminated that Roma- the "Others" are dangerous and responsible for all failures of the state. This creates a feeling of insecurity among the mainstream society and reinforces anti-Roma prejudices. It also removes moral obstacles and tolerance to pure hatred. In this situation, anti-Roma actions by racists and extremist groups, no matter the outcome, are considered by society as a "defense action" and are therefore justified and or condoned.

Many media representatives continue to justify their expressions of intolerance with the concept of Freedom of Speech. It is not the only fundamental freedom and it does not have priority overall all other values or rights, as all fundamental values in a democracy should be treated equally

importantly. For example the right to live without fear or intimidation, the right to dignity both on a personal and a group level and the right to be an equal member of society without suffering discrimination and exclusion.

History shows that widespread racist statements and opinions have resulted in tragic events for humanity such as the Holocaust and other atrocious events where Roma and other minorities have been subjected to genocide, human rights violations and intimidation. It should be stressed that Racist views are not like other views or opinions present in society to should be reflected in the media. Racism is not just an opinion, it is crime which leads to suffering violence and even to death.

The media must not become a tool for Anti-Roma propaganda

The media without a doubt plays a key role in our perceptions of society. Bluntly it is a realm of fighting for cultural hegemony, a battle of racism against the democratic values. During political elections, anti-Roma rhetoric is used as the main tool for radical nationalist parties. Presenting Roma in the media as devils is to the benefit of both the politicians fighting for the ethnic vote as well for the media owners. This is due to the fact that a significant of readers of readers buy and watch media products promoting negative images of Roma. As the old saying goes, as bad news make the best headlines.

It is a matter of good anti-racist legislation and professional ethics to not give a free platform to racist and extreme right groups. The media must not become a tool for Anti-Roma propaganda.



In this issue...

- ...Our Editorial
- ...'Media4diversity' seminar:
 - ERIO's involvement
 - The awarded article on Roma
- ...New ERIO's Guidebook: Let your voice be heard!
- ...ERIO's recommendations to the EU Czech Presidency



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

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‘Media4Diversity’ Seminar in Prague

ERIO's Executive Director Ivan Ivanov attended the seminar Media4Diversity held in Prague on the 5th and 6th of February.

This seminar gathered representatives of 30 selected initiatives by media or civil society organisations aimed at better diversity in reporting in the European media, as well as leading media professionals, experts, academics, anti-discrimination NGOs, equality bodies and policy makers active in the field of diversity and media. Altogether, up to 100 people from most of the EU Member States brainstormed and debated the way forward and finalised recommendations, which were included in the ad hoc publication.

In a world of uncertainty, where differences create difficult realities across Europe, the media can exercise enormous influence in the shaping of opinion and accepting social diversity. Where questions are being raised about the value of diversity this seminar and the recommendations that resulted from it will be important in strengthening the diversity in media content across Europe.

The Prague seminar also offered the occasion to award those journalists who, through their writing, help foster a better understanding of the benefits of diversity and who encourage readers to consider more closely the issues of discrimination and inequality. Very significantly, this year, the Commission dedicated a Special Award for an article concentrating on Roma issues.

Pascale Krémer, journalist at Le Monde, won the joint first prize with her article “Homophobie et football: la leçon de Chooz” (Homophobia and football – The lesson of Chooz) on gay players in a local football team. It looks at how the lucrative marketing world of football helps perpetuate discrimination against gays and lesbians but also examines the positive measures taken by the football leagues across Europe to combat it.

The other joint first prize went to Ole Hall, journalist at the Danish Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten. His article “Danske muslimer udsat for chikane” (Danish Muslims are subject to harassment) reveals how Danish women who convert to Islam suddenly go from being a member of a majority to becoming a very visible minority in their home

country. As such, they face the same prejudices and hostility from society as Muslims of foreign parentage.

Christiana Martins and Marisa Antunes won the third place with their article “Elite à prova de racismo” (Racism-proof elite) about successful Portuguese citizens from minority backgrounds who have broken through glass ceilings. It was published in the weekly Portuguese newspaper Expresso.

For the Special Roma award, Mika Kontourousi, journalist at the Eleftheros Tipos wrote the article “Η Γιουζγιάν σπάει τα σύνορα της φυλής της” (Yuzyan “breaks” the borders of her tribe). It describes the problems Roma women are confronted with when they try to move away from their traditional roles in society.

The Journalist Award scheme is one of a wide range of awareness-raising activities taking place as part of the EU's 'For Diversity. Against Discrimination' information campaign. European Youth Press and the Association of European

Journalists are partners of this Award edition.

The winning entries for the journalist award scheme were selected from over 545 articles from all 27 Member States submitted between January 1st and October 31st 2008.

The jury members underlined the high quality of the articles submitted. Each of the four European winners will each receive a grant for a research trip to the EU country of their choice.

Mr Ivanov was part of the jury for the Special Roma award and together with Commissioner Vladimir Špidla delivered the prize certificate to the Greek journalist.

Media can exercise enormous influence in shaping opinion and accepting social diversity



Mr. Spidla and Mr. Ivanov with the awarded journalist, Mika Kontourousi (EC Photo Service)

“Yuzyan breaks the borders of her tribe”

Awarded article by Mika Kontourousi

Hereby we publish the article awarded with the Special Roma price.

It has been originally published by Ελεύθερος Τύπος, (Eleftheros Tipos, www.e-tipos.com).

A YOUNG ROMANI GIRL SPEAKS TO ET.K ABOUT HER STUDIES AND HER DREAMS

She is discontented with the mentality of the Gypsies and wishes to help girls her age to take a step forward. She was born with the “stigma” of being different. 21-year old Yuzyan Tzevatoglu (whose name means “wind”) is a Muslim Gypsy from the city of Veria. She “broke” the barrier of her society, and managed to free herself from the strict traditions of her tribe at an early age.

“Ever since I was young I’ve had one single goal: to go to college. I studied a lot. I liked learning.”

She went to a regular school, learned to write and speak “our” language perfectly, when other Gypsy youngsters refused to go to school. She finished secondary school with a grade point average of 14 and got a place at the Social Work Faculty at the Technological Educational Institute of Egaleo. She didn’t have any problems of social integration.

She speaks Greek, Turkish, Romany and some English. “My goal is to become a social worker. To help all Gypsy girls my age to take a step forward. To expand their horizons. To be educated and not to be afraid.”

Education

In European societies, the Romany are the most populous minorities. In the three countries with the largest Romany communities (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania) only a very small number of children go to primary school. The percentage of children that continue into secondary education ranges from 10% to 35%. In all three countries, only 1% of them have gone into higher education. Yuzyan does not want to be bound by erroneous standards. She wants to move up the social ladder. She doesn’t want to

be scorned because of her origin and her dark skin. She is discontented with the mentality with which Gypsies are brought up. She doesn’t like the way they live. She doesn’t pity them; she believes it is a matter of choice.

“Romani women get married young. They stay at the shed or the shack and bring up the children, cook, wash the clothes and do other housework, in conditions similar to those in Third World countries. They don’t have any goals.” She says that the role of dedicated mother wouldn’t allow her to grow in the fabric of social equality. Yuzyan started earning a living at a very young age, out of necessity. She started selling tissues and flowers in Xanthi when she was 7 years old. And when she came to Athens she didn’t give up her work as a fortune-seeking street vendor. Concurrently with school, she would work until late at night to bring her family some money. “I was never ashamed of what I did. I had a way of approaching people. I knew how to talk to them. I made many acquaintances. I didn’t succumb to sexual advances nor did I ever fall victim to sexual exploitation.”

She gave up working at the traffic lights on busy roads at the age of 17. She believed that she was gifted with other skills. She no longer wears flowery skirts. She wears

trousers and works as a cashier in a well-known restaurant chain. She is paid 700 euros and gives 400 euros to her family to help them with the household needs. In her spare time she goes to the cinema. She reads mostly psychology books. She listens to Greek music, mostly belly-dance songs, because they are similar to gypsy sounds. She hangs out at bars in downtown Athens and is friends with many of her college mates. Her eyes reflect her thirst for life. She recently made a trip to some European

countries, which was funded by the Children and Family Support Centre. “I visited England, Romania, Finland, Scotland, and Germany. I couldn’t live there permanently. It’s very cold and the people don’t have fun like the Greeks.”

She gave up working at the traffic lights on busy roads at the age of 17. She believed that she was gifted with other skills.



Reactions

Emancipated to "a degree that is dangerous for Gypsy customs", Yuzyan is an object of dispute among Gypsies. Friends and relatives consider her an example to avoid. "Girls my age don't hang around me. Their families don't let them. They think I'm going to influence them and cause them to change their way of life".

She doesn't mind, though. On the contrary, she feels proud. But she never forgets where she comes from. "I'm a street child. And I will always be." Yuzyan wishes "Me magave e balame dekikenamen unaren gibi", which means "I wish Greek people help us take a step forward and consider us their equals." The 21-year old Gypsy girl lives in a house in the Votanikos area in Athens. It is a single-family house with four rooms and a yard. A house without any amenities, where nothing is taken for granted; neither heating nor electricity and water. Yuzyan and her family strived their entire life to find a safe home that wasn't made of canvas and rugs. "In Xanthi we lived in miserable sheds. We were barefoot, walking in the mud." So now they say they're happy that they have sofas to sleep on. "At least it's a shelter for humans. Our rent is 200 euros." The house has many shortcomings. One stove is used to warm up 8 people. There is no sewage system. "In the past we used to sleep on the floor. We would hug each other to keep warm. We had no water. But some neighbours gave us beds they didn't need anymore, so now we are more comfortable".

Her mother, Refiee, only does housework. She no longer works. Her father works at the traffic lights, selling flowers. Each basket with more than 30 roses costs 20 euros in total. "But most of the time he doesn't manage to sell them all. He returns home with barely 10 euros." Yuzyan's 5 siblings don't go to college. They hardly go to school. They receive a rudimentary education at the Children and Family Support Centre.

Against those traditions that foster stagnation, Yuzyan travels like the wind –which is the meaning of her name-

towards a different life.

Yuzyan was born in a shed, in a village of Veria called Drosero. "Some 100 of us lived together. Without food, water, or clothes. We were trying to survive with the money we earned by selling flowers and tissues. We even sold candles at the church. My grandmother was a coffee-cup fortune-teller and my mother used to beg for money." The Gypsy ghetto-like society of Thrace is more closed. Sepetci, Balkac, Pomaks, Albanians, and Gypsies all live together. Or at least they try to. "They would steal our things. We had to move from one village to another many times." The "sweep" operations for their removal were frequent, so they moved continuously. They left Xanthi when Yuzyan was 7 years old. They came to the slums near the Tavros vegetable market. The "balamos" treated them with prejudice and disdain, because they considered them harmful to the civilised urban city. Their racially divided society was often a target of police raids and neighbour attacks. They moved to the Kolonos area. The house owner was reluctant. He didn't want them. "He would break the water pipes so that we wouldn't have water. When he died, I explained to his brother that we needed a place to stay. I assured him that I'd soon find a job and that I would pay him the rent myself."

At that point the Children and Family Support Centre was a godsend for the 12-year-old Yuzyan. She learned to read and write a bit, paint, speak Greek, dress better and communicate.

She went directly to the last grade of the Kolonos primary school, and then to a high school in the centre of Athens.

"I had difficulty with the language. At first I didn't have any friends. They discriminated against me." Her biology professor told her: "We are not racist, we are anti-Gypsy." Every night at home the fights over the daily money the family needed were deafening her. She couldn't study. Her family didn't care about whether she would be admitted to the next class year. To them, the goal was for her to bring money back home. And if that didn't happen, beating was the only way to make her obey.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Conference on Roma and political participation European Parliament, Brussels 16 April 2009

FOR FIRST TIME ROMANI LANGUAGE WILL BE WORKING LANGUAGE IN A CONFERENCE IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

At the eve of the European Parliament election, this conference will seek solutions to overcome the barriers that prevent Roma from accessing the decision-making process and to encourage European leaders to promote Roma political participation at European and national levels.

ERIO's guidebook for media relations

ERIO published 'Let your voice be heard', a small but useful guide that aims at enhancing media activism of Roma organisations and advocates.

It was produced in collaboration with 'Redattore Sociale', an Italian news-agency specialising in social issues, which is among the few media sources that depict the Roma situation without prejudices, stereotypes or stigmatisation. At the moment, the four page guide is available in English and Italian but will also be translated into Romanes, Sinto, Bulgarian, Romanian, Spanish, German and other languages.

This guide was composed because we believe that the media play a significant role in the stigmatisation of the Roma minority across Europe. The media may be an important factor in fuelling the witch-hunting against the 14 million people minority, but can also be a significant ally in the fight against discrimination and prejudices.

Most of the time, journalists seem unaware or unconcerned of the consequences of their daily work. Journalist's language can be crucial in the cultivation of prejudice, xenophobia and even incitement to ethnic hatred.

Many journalists lack Roma sources of information and have very limited contact with Roma communities. Several prefer the "safe approach" and choose to interview non-Roma experts – politicians and police officials – in talk-shows and news features about criminality within Roma communities. The purpose of this guide is to give Roma organisations advice on how to deal with the media and journalists and reverse this negative trend, both at the local and national levels.

The time for action (and reaction) has come: Roma have to start being present in the media in a totally different light. This change predominantly has to come from the Roma community: being passive is no longer an option. The Romani struggle for equal rights and opportunities is gaining momentum and the Roma community has to take advantage of this situation. On the other hand, as a result of the economic crisis, there is an increasing amount of prejudice and hatred directed towards the Roma population. However when a crisis arises, the fight for more decent conditions has to rise to the occasion as well. *An extract from the guide is available*



here for our readers.

Let your voice be heard!

With few and simple actions, Roma organisations and activists can try to overturn the negative trend of their public representation. In order to make your voice heard, we suggest:

Go local: Start your media activism from the local level, that is, where the episodes of intolerance, violence and witch-hunting take place but also where a constructive relationship among communities may be built up. Proximity has to become a factor of integration and mutual understanding, not the spark that ignites conflicts.

Don't be passive: Every time negative news regarding your community appears on the media, react clarifying your position, explaining your opinion, giving your reasons.

Speak with one voice: Try to nominate a spokesperson for your community or organisation. This would make journalists' job easier. They will know 'who speaks in the name of whom' and have a phone number to call or an email address to write to when it is the case.

Be documented! Prepare documented fact-sheets and 'facts & figures' files on your community. For example: how many people male up the community? Where are they from? How many minors? How many unemployed? How many attacks have been launched against your community? And so on. Your 'facts & figures' files have to be your community's response to official data. These records shall be produced both at the local and national level.

Produce your own news: Denounce and report as widely as possible any episode of violence occurred against your community. Document it with video footage, pictures, interviews, testimonies. A brief training session in the use of those tools can be



sufficient to get important results.

Open your doors: let the press get to know your community. Closeness can only help prejudices and stereotypes. Invite journalists for a tour in your settlement, get to know them and let them get to know you. That can quickly remove a lot of communication barriers. Journalist can also view with their own eyes the state of deprivation in which many Roma communities live.

Get friends: Local journalists are a very fundamental contact: many times, national witch-hunting sparks from local news. Contact the media in the area you are working. Inside every newsroom, try to find journalists that could be sensitive to Roma issues. If you have something to say, you will know who to contact. If they want to hear your opinion, they will know who to call. Try also to get in contact with those journalists that, with their features, disseminate misinformation regarding your community or organisation.

Let yourself be helped: If you have the possibility to have contacts with some good-willing media professionals, ask them to train someone in your organisation in order to improve your communication resources.



Be present on the web: Internet is the easiest way to exchange and produce information. It is the arena where you can post your press releases, disseminate your information and publish your documents.

Be positive: When not in crisis time, try to agree with local/national media the publication of 'good news' regarding your community: best practices for housing, education and employment, success stories, examples of integration and cohabitation...

Fight stereotypes: answer back to the most common stereotypes on your community with tangible facts that can deny them



ERIO's recommendations to the Czech EU Presidency on the Social Inclusion of Roma

Promoting "cultural diversity as a source of creativity and information" is one of the priorities of 2009, the European Year of Innovation and Creativity. This political message is of great importance because many politicians, especially those from right-wing parties, as well as an important part of the European media, present cultural diversity as a source for social conflict and as a threat to the so-called 'European' identity. Such opinions contribute to the continuing perpetuation of discrimination and racism that is experienced by large percentages of Roma throughout Europe. The racist riots against Roma in Spain and Italy and the criminalisation of Roma from Romania in Italy and Finland last year are indicative of the gravity of the 'anti-Gypsyism' movement in Europe. Since discrimination faced by Roma is strongly linked to the poverty they face, their situation is only going to get worse in light of the current financial crisis and consequent high levels of unemployment throughout Europe.

For these reasons, ERIO warmly welcomes the motto of the Work Programme of the Czech EU-Presidency – "Europe without barriers" – since it has deep significance for the Roma community. The Czech EU-Presidency calls for a "Europe without internal economic, cultural and value barriers for individuals, enterprises and economic entities". It is imperative that the barriers are removed that prevent Roma from being socially included and receiving equal treatment.

In order to achieve Roma inclusion, a stronger commitment is required from European institutions and national authorities. In keeping with this commitment, the European Council has called upon Member States and the European Commission to undertake specific actions to promote Roma inclusion. ERIO believes that a European Framework Strategy represents the most effective instrument for successful policy making towards Roma. ERIO would like to assist the Czech EU Presidency in this task by proposing recommendations for undertaking policy interventions, at the EU and national levels, in areas of crucial importance for Roma.

Promoting a European Framework Strategy on Roma

Over the past years, a large amount of EU and national funds have been diverted for activities promoting the social inclusion of Roma. Unfortunately, this high level of investment is not reflected in reality, with no noticeable improvement being observed in the living conditions of many impoverished Roma communities. This failed investment is related to the lack of a European Framework Strategy towards Roma and to a lack of policy coordination, both within the European Commission and between European and national governments. A European Framework Strategy and strong EU policy coordination would lead to an effective allocation of resources and the achievement of long-term objectives.

ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Encourage the European Council to request from the European Commission the development and implementation of a European Framework Strategy towards Roma. Such a strategy should contribute towards filling the gap, in terms of policy design and implementation, between the European Commission and Member States; improve policy coordination within the European Commission; and set up practical guidelines for an effective allocation of funding in programmes targeting Roma. Member States should be required to report on policies affecting Roma communities in all relevant fields of intervention.
- Request the European Commission to set up the announced European Platform on Roma Issues as a forum from which concrete steps forward will be taken in terms of policy arrangements for Roma inclusion.
- Call upon the European Commission and Member States to focus on Roma in the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. In countries with sizeable representative Roma populations, policies and measures tackling social exclusion and poverty should be included in National Action Plans and in Peer Reviews on Social Inclusion and Social Protection.

Roma and Education

ERIO welcomes the increased interest of European institutions in issues of migration and education, as reflected in the European Commission's Green Paper "Migration and Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Education Systems", and the public consultation on the Paper. Since there are large numbers of Roma who are migrants, this is a topic of major interest for Roma communities. Nevertheless, Roma are facing even a more critical situation in their own countries, particularly in the new EU Member States. Most Roma children and young people attending segregated schools and acquire very low levels of education; this consequently prevents them from accessing higher education and adequate employment. The majority of Roma children and young people are at the lowest level of the education scale throughout the EU.

All necessary efforts should be made for integrate Roma children and young people into mainstream education. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Call upon the European Commission to focus, within negotiations about the future "Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training Beyond 2010", on the integration of disadvantaged groups, especially Roma and people with an immigrant background, into mainstream education. The new programme should include the support of school desegregation programmes benefiting Roma children and young people, and

lifelong learning measures that specifically target unemployed and low-skilled Roma in order to re-insert them into the labour market.

Rise in racist violence and anti-Gypsyism

In 2008, the wave of anti-Gypsyism continued to rise throughout Europe.

One of the most blatant and stark incidents of violent anti-Gypsyism took place in November 2008 in Litvinov, Czech Republic, where about 500 people linked to the right-wing Czech Workers' Party violently attacked a Roma neighbourhood with stones, firecrackers and petrol bombs.

However, racist incidents against Roma occur not only in the Czech Republic but also in Italy, Hungary and Spain, sometimes ending in fatalities. The rise in anti-Gypsyism does not only assume physically violent forms, but is also spread widely through media and political discourse. The negative portrayal of Roma in the media particularly contributes towards the strengthening of prejudices against Roma, especially in times of economic crisis.

This is unacceptable in European countries that are committed to defending human rights and democratic values. It is necessary to mobilize all necessary legal and institutional efforts to staunchly combat any form of anti-Gypsyism, wherever it may occur. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Take the lead in the fight against anti-Gypsyism by calling upon Member States to implement as quickly as possible the European Framework Decision on Xenophobia and Racism, which was adopted by the European Council in November 2008; to put in place all necessary legal and institutional arrangements to combat racism against Roma; and, to work towards achieving a societal consensus, especially with the participation of media enterprises and political parties, to eradicate anti-Gypsyism in their countries.

Mobility, Migration and Integration

ERIO welcomes the call of the Czech EU Presidency for full liberalisation of worker movement within the EU. ERIO hopes that such a political message and commitment will

be positively reflected in the treatment of Roma migrants throughout Europe. In 2007 and 2008, issues of Roma migrants occupied newspaper headlines, especially in Western European countries, in a manner that presented a very distorted picture of the recent migration of Roma communities. Most Roma immigrants living in Western

Europe are citizens of the European Union.

Yet often, they fall in a grey zone; on one hand, Roma are often limited in their rights with regard to free movement. On the other hand, they are mostly not entitled to access integration programmes for migrants. Most Roma migrants within the EU, both EU citizens and Third Country Nationals, face social exclusion, poverty and discrimination. Legal and institutional arrangements ensuring full respect for the fundamental rights of Roma, and their social

inclusion, should be guaranteed. In order to achieve this goal, ERIO calls upon the Czech EU Presidency to:

- Encourage Member States to guarantee, without restriction, the right to free movement of Roma EU citizens and residents, by respecting the principle of equal treatment and applying no restrictive standards when it comes to enforcing national and European legislation on fundamental rights. The European Commission should constantly assess whether national governments are acting according to European treatments.
- Take the lead in proposing a new European Policy Programme for Freedom, Justice and Security, which will replace the Hague Programme (2005). The new programme should be based on a human rights approach that ceases to address migration as a security issue focuses instead on the inclusion of people with a migrant background, gives up the criminalisation of so-called irregular migrants, and develops framework conditions for their regularisation.
- Encourage the European Commission to adopt a Directive providing sanctions against employees of irregular Third Country Nationals in line with international human rights treatments and which do not affect the rights of immigrants.



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