

Roma from Across Europe Join Forces in Brussels to Address the Roma Representation Crisis and the Risk of Failing EU Roma Policies

Under the title "From EU Roma Strategic Framework towards Strategic Roma Participation and Representation", the Roma Center e.V. organised a conference in Brussels on 15 and 16 October 2024, inviting Roma organisations and experts from United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Serbia, as well as politicians and diplomats. The conference was held in the European Parliament with the support of the Green MEP from Germany Rasmus Andresen.

This event was an important milestone towards a true transnational self-representation of European Roma as delegates discussed the need for a new model of relations with the European Union and decided to create a strategic alliance to ensure Roma participation in the decision-making at EU level.

Participants agreed that 80 years after the Roma Holocaust during the World War II the right-wing extremism poses once again an existential threat to Roma people in Europe. This calls for a shift in focus from "Roma inclusion" to Roma Security and urgent reform of EU Roma policies which do not seem to reflect the new realities that directly affect Roma, such as the rise of the far-right and the war in Ukraine. Concern was expressed that politicians with neo-Nazi background convicted of anti-Roma hatred in their home countries were welcomed into the European Parliament after the June elections, while Roma were politically excluded and isolated, contrary to the objectives of the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation launched by the EU Commission in 2020.

Delegates at the conference pointed to the risk of failure of the EU Roma Strategic Framework due to the imbalance in representation of Roma in the relations between the Commission and the national governments. Disturbing trends were highlighted:

- Significant retreat of European politicians from their commitments to Roma;
- Lack of elected Roma representatives in the European Parliament;
- Declining number of Roma working in the EU Commission;
- Increasingly difficult dialogue or complete lack of dialogue between European and national institutions on the one hand and Roma communities on the other;

- Reducing the role of local Roma organizations to that of government sub-contractors and service providers helping social workers, teachers and police do their job (something that turns them into an appendage to the state administration and contradicts the goals of the Roma movement);
- Replacement of the specific Roma issues with the broader social issues of the poor, unemployed, people with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, etc.
- Continued neglect and disregard of the Roma identity in the majority of European countries, although the Roma language and culture have been declared by UNESCO as endangered and requiring special protection.
- Continued disregard for the plight of Roma refugees from Ukraine, and especially Roma refugees from the former Yugoslavia, who have yet to receive recognition and compensation for their expulsion and suffering during and after the Kosovo war.
- Downplaying the number of Roma Holocaust victims, which according to recent studies may have far exceeded 2 million people.

It was also highlighted that the majority of people appointed by governments to act as National Roma Contact Points in the respective countries are from non-Roma backgrounds and often Roma are unaware of their existence. The Roma Contact Points are unable to make the necessary contact with the Roma communities and inform or consult them, but remain mere clerks writing reports, which means that their designation as Roma Contact Points does not correspond to their actual function. Roma cannot influence governments' choice of who to appoint to national Roma contact points, but Roma can create a European Roma Contact Point and empower it to balance these unequal relations that currently exist. This was discussed as one of the possible objectives of the strategic alliance that began to take shape at the Brussels conference.

The gap between the intentions stated in the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the reality on the ground four years after its adoption requires the intervention of independent Roma organisations, professionals and experts to assist the Commission achieve the 2030 targets - not individually, but collectively, as a well-structured and self-organized body that does not rely financially on those it is supposed to monitor and negotiate with. Some delegates voiced their concerns that the very donor institutions may soon find themselves in the hands of people with anti-Roma views who can use the available funds and the collected data about Roma against the Roma. The logical question was raised: If the European authorities are unable to prevent the anti-Roma political forces from entering the European Parliament, how will they prevent them from entering the other structures of EU and gaining access to even more political power and financial resources?

The participants in the conference were united around the opinion that since no one in Brussels is currently able to give such guarantees to the Roma and the fight against anti-Gypsyism has fallen out of the priorities of the European political parties, the Roma intelligentsia in Europe have no choice but to the fastest way to self-organize and create an alternative mechanism for

Roma autonomous representation outside the existing political structures, from which the Roma have already being excluded with the strangest possible argument - this is democracy.

In conclusion, it was summarized that at this critical moment for Europe and the world, the Roma have the legitimate right to formulate and defend their own political interests. And if the doors of the European Parliament are closed to European citizens of Roma origin, they shall freely exercise their political and civil rights through other means and methods - what exactly these means and methods shall be is to be decided in the coming months through consultations and dialogue with other Roma organizations, experts, politicians, diplomats, academics from and outside the EU. It is time for the Roma to reject marginalization and victimization, to rediscover their own potential and strength and to seek new allies and friends not only in Europe but also in the world, because the Roma represent a global community with a strong will to survive and prosper wherever they are.

Brussels, 16 October 2024