



Monitoring Roma policies in South-Eastern Europe

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Participation of Roma in mainstream society should be done at the local level. The framework for such participation should however be set by Roma policies the national level. Such policies to improve the living conditions for Roma do exist in South-Eastern Europe, but are these words on paper also implemented in practice? This is one of the central questions for GORD, a network of grassroots Roma groups from Bulgaria. In December 2009, GORD invited 30 representatives from Roma grassroots organisations to an international meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria. The participants came from Turkey, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Albania, and they used the meeting to exchange experiences about Roma policy implementation on the local level.

Quick scan

Representatives from the Bulgarian GORD network started the meeting with a quick scan they had done. The quick scan focused on the implementation of the Bulgarian national Roma policy at the local level. The scan was done in 21 Bulgarian municipalities. The results were really shocking. The research made clear that although a national Roma policy exists, many mayors and local councils are either completely unaware about these policies, or very reluctant to adopt them, because this would mean that the municipality would have to dedicate certain funds for solving Roma issues. This clearly shows the typical attitude of many authorities. In fact, one could describe this as *'applied anti-gypsism'* at the grassroots level. "In fourteen out of the 21 researched municipalities, strategies or plans on Roma issues are missing", said Gancho Iliev, one of the Bulgarian GORD activists who took part in the research.

The Macedonian Roma representatives from the North-East of their country succeeded to include Roma in different institutions through the so-called Ohrid Framework, a Macedonian piece of legislation which provides regulations for minority representation. Further, the Macedonian Parliament adopted a Roma strategy in 2005 and since 2009 it also offers financial support for Roma initiatives. In municipalities where civil society manages to build up pressure, local strategies for Roma are adopted as well. This happened for instance in the municipality of Delchevo. The goal of the Macedonian representatives is to initiate civil groups, which will force the authorities to adopt and implement Roma policies at the local level in more regions. This happens only in the municipalities where there is an active Roma civic structure.

In Albania, the municipalities are usually badly informed about the existence of the national strategy for Roma (this strategy is similar to the Albanian Roma Decade Strategy). Roma organisations are usually seen by municipalities and local governments as structures which bring funds for solving specific issues. The representatives of the Roma Active Albania (RAA) Network are trying to force the local municipalities to implement the national Roma strategy, but the municipalities usually respond that they do not have special funds for Roma issues available. The Albanian network is also lobbying for Roma representation in the administration and in the local councils, but this needs political engagement and the mainstream parties are not interested to put Roma in electable positions.

The Turkish Roma representatives are worried about the existence of any policies for Roma so far in their country and about the steps for democratization, which the government takes. Fortunately, some positive signs were noticed, connected to the meeting on March 14th, 2010. On this day, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan met with representatives of Turkish Roma

organisations, where he announced measures for improving the living standards and actions for countering discriminatory practices in Turkey. The Turkish representatives also shared their experiences with organising a national round table for Roma, where they addressed the Roma issues not only as social issues, but also as a representation in the society.

Similar implementation problems in all four countries

The Roma representatives from the four countries concluded that a lot of similarities exist between their countries, when it comes to the implementation of national Roma policies on the local level. Some of these similarities are the following issues:

- The national strategic documents on Roma policy seem to contain a dressing for international bodies in most of the countries, with no real implementation mechanisms at the local level;
- In places where there are no active Roma organisations, Roma issues are not in the agenda;
- The Roma network members experience high expectations towards them; at the same time they cannot solve all existing problems;
- The limited number of adopted local Roma strategies do not lead to significant changes in the countries.
- Investments in Roma human resources at the local level are needed to ensure equal participation in society;
- Roma representation at local councils is limited and should be strengthened;
- There is a lack of mechanisms which ensure the exercising of active citizenship in the society;
- Mechanisms for introducing the national Roma policies at the local level are missing;
- National Roma policies should also be reflected in the national budgets;
- Changes in administrative law are to be considered in order to ensure that there are mechanisms to link the implementation of the national Roma policies at the local level;
- Growing anti-gypsism should be tackled;

Written by Biser Alekov