

Evaluation Report

**“Strengthening the Roma Voice” programme  
2006-2010  
Spolu International Foundation and ERGO network**

**Contributing to a Roma grassroots movement:  
From local community to international network**



## **Acknowledgements**

The “Strengthening the Roma Voice” programme 2006-2010 (Strengthening Programme) has ended. In this evaluation report you will find information on the execution and the results of the programme and gathered lessons for future interventions. The research for this evaluation consisted of document study, interviews with stakeholders and staff members and four field visits to countries where the programme is implemented.

During the field visits I worked closely together with Lili Makaveeva, Biser Alekov and Sanne van den Heuvel. As they were all involved in the Strengthening Programme from the start they were able to reflect in depth on the development of the programme. The reports and analyses they made of our field trips, the discussions we had and the background information they provided where an important input and indispensable for this evaluation report. I also like to thank Adriatik (Tiku) Hasantari, Igor Pivovar, Marin Alla, Vidance Monevski and Mustafa Jakupov. As representatives of the partner organisations in the Strengthening Programme, they where the main spokespersons during the field visits and arranged the meetings we had during the trips.

Further I want to thank all the people I interviewed for this evaluation, among them the staff members of Spolu and ERGO and representatives of international institutions like the European Commission, the European Roma Rights Centre and Amnesty International. I want to thank everyone for the very pleasant cooperation, the openness and constructive attitude during the evaluation. Last but not least I want to thank Ruus Dijksterhuis who awarded me the assignment for this evaluation and who was always available to give additional information and access to contact persons and background information.

Marga Verheije  
January 2011

## Executive summary

The “Strengthening the Roma Voice” programme is a framework programme developed in 2005 and executed by Spolu International Foundation in close cooperation with the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) network. Partner organisations in 8 countries implemented the programme in the period 2006-2010 closely supported and coached by Spolu. The programme was supported by the Dutch Ministry of foreign affairs (TMF programme), ICCO, KIA, CNF and other donors<sup>1</sup>.

The main overall goal of the programme is to contribute to the achievement of equal opportunities for Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, by making a specific contribution to the creation of a grassroots Roma movement. The basic assumption is that if Roma are united in a Roma movement, they are able to make their voice heard, and develop negotiating power to obtain equal opportunities in education, health, employment and housing like their fellow non Roma citizens. Working from this assumption the programme concentrated on the following four goals which all have in common the strengthening and creation of a Roma grassroots movement:

- Consolidating the international ERGO network.
- Consolidating the organisational structure of ERGO members.
- Establishing strong, active, well organised and visible collaborative regional networks and national coalitions.
- Mobilising 5-15 local Roma communities in each member country and increasing social and organisational representative structures within these communities.

This evaluation report is based on interviews with staff members of Spolu and ERGO, field visits to Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Moldova, interviews with external stakeholders and desk research (annual reports, reports of partner organisations, case studies, strategy documents, reports and agendas of ERGO and Spolu meetings).

The visited countries receive most attention in the report. During the visits it was possible to compare the written reports with the situation on the ground and to make it a multiple voice report with input from different sides.

The Strengthening Programme may be classified as a ‘learning by doing’ programme. During the execution many changes were made regarding content, partnership, priorities, roles and relations between the different main players. Spolu went through a transition phase from a pioneer organisation mainly involved in community development at local level, giving small scale support, towards an organisation developing international campaigns and contributing to European advocacy.

The Strengthening Programme can be seen as a strategy, a vehicle, to support Roma to look after their common interests. The chosen strategy – from a grassroots movement perspective to bring equal opportunities for Roma closer – was a way to get grip on the complex situation Roma have to deal with.

Looking to the goals one by one the following may be concluded.

### **i. Consolidating the ERGO network**

At the end of 2010 the ERGO network is entering a new and promising phase. It strengthened its position among other European Roma networks and human rights organisations and is recognized on

---

<sup>1</sup> ICCO (Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation), KIA (Kerk in Actie), CNF (Cooperating Netherlands Foundations for Central and Eastern Europe), Oranje Fonds, Cordaid and the CARDS programme of the European Commission.

European level as an important network bringing the voice of Roma grassroots organisations to Brussels. Through the ERGO network, the ERGO members have access to contacts and information on European Roma policy and debates. And ERGO makes the information from local and national level available for organisations and people working on the European level. But it was not easy to come to this new phase in the existence of ERGO. ERGO went through a searching period where solutions for two issues had to be found. Firstly, how to overcome the gap between the local grassroots work done by most members and the European advocacy work done by Valeriu Nicolae, secretary general/ executive director of ERGO from 2006 -2008. It was a challenge to translate the reality 'on the ground' to the European perspective. The second issue concerned the position of Spolu in relation to the network.

In the first year of the Strengthening Programme much attention was given to the internal structure of the network (internal rules, criteria for membership, a joint strategy, vision and mission). From 2007 ERGO invested in the 'body of knowledge' and during several meetings, working and writing sessions ERGO published its "Strategy on active citizenship through empowerment and grassroots mobilisation" in January 2009 (see annex ii.). This was an important result and pre-condition for the further development of the network. ERGO made steps from an 'exchange platform' with its main aim to exchange experience and information on practices and approaches, towards an 'advocacy network' working on common actions and campaigns to improve the situation of Roma in Europe.

Spolu attempted to enable the ERGO members to take the leadership of the network and to become the main drivers behind the strategy and policy development. It was foreseen that by the end of the Strengthening Programme Spolu could leave the network. But that didn't happen. Spolu remained essential for the network, bringing in financial resources and manpower, as well as the content for the internal discussions. At the end of 2009 Spolu started the discussion to merge Spolu and ERGO into one organisation. The merger took place in 2010 and allows the ERGO Network to benefit from the strong points of both organisations. The result is a new vision on the role and relations with members, a new board, an office in Brussels (advocacy) and one in Utrecht (secretariat).

## **ii. Consolidating the organisational structure of ERGO members**

The aim of the programme was to enable the ERGO members to become independent, professional Roma organisations, recognised as experts and respected as negotiating partners by local and national governments and institutions. This goal is partly reached. During the execution of the programme it became clear that not all partner organisations were able to professionalize to the same degree. Spolu decided to diversify its policy towards the partners and to challenge the promising organisations through extra support, coaching and enabling them to take a leading position in the ERGO network and in their country. For other partner organisations the ambitions became more moderate. The focus was on support to the local grassroots level and bringing the local groups together in regional networks. Other organisations received support for a specific goal. An example is Porojan in Moldova. This organisation focussed on building networks for youngsters and students.

For this evaluation two of the promising organisations are visited, Integro from Bulgaria and RAA from Albania. Both organisations received coaching and training, support to develop their policy and strategy plans and a sound financial administration and structural financial support. The relation between the organisations and the Spolu staff was very intensive. The directors of these organisations were able to use this support in an effective way. It capacitated them to become board members of ERGO, leaders of working groups of the network and key persons in international ERGO campaigns. Integro played a role as Regional Resource Organisation by training Roma organisations and networks in other countries and RAA plays an important role in the Roma Decade process and the international Roma youth network "TernYpe". In their own countries they were able to build a

respected NGO working on local, regional and national level. They have a capacitated small staff of around five people.

In the other countries the supported organisations were only able to reach part of the aims set and were not able to play a leading role in the implementation of the Strengthening Programme. This means they played their role in the building of a Roma grassroots movement but not on all levels. This is caused by different reasons like the position of the organisation among other Roma NGOs and the abilities of the leadership and staff.

Strengthening the organisational development of the partner organisations is a very time consuming and intensive process. It asks a high commitment and learning capacity from the partner organisation and it asks for a careful process in which the demands, local context and assumptions of the partner organisation are taken into account. If this is in place, it makes the approach successful but this is difficult to estimate. This means that Spolu sometimes had to take the gamble and start to invest in an organisation without knowing beforehand the results of the cooperation. In some cases this worked. In other cases it didn't show quick results. In general, the capacity building process takes several years, which is something Spolu and ERGO have to cope with and which makes their work complicated. ERGO wants to work with strong Roma organisations to ensure the effectiveness of the network but as there are still very few professional Roma organisations which are really able to contribute to the strategy of ERGO, it has to work with and invest in organisations which still have to develop their skills, position and constituency.

Lessons that can be drawn are that Roma NGOs, in order to professionalize and to become builders of a Roma movement, need:

- A stable core staff of good quality and willingness and openness for change and development.
- Ownership for the concept of movement building and an intrinsically believe in the importance of a grassroots Roma movement.
- A long term investment and support. Bringing the organisations to a higher level is a slow process which needs structural support taking the local context and the demands of the organisation into account.

### **iii. Establishing strong, active regional networks and national coalitions**

The idea behind the Strengthening Programme is to work from bottom-up; starting with strengthening grassroots organisations and leaders on local level and afterwards bringing the organisations together into regional and national networks.

In Albania and Bulgaria this approach brought the most visible results. RAA reached this goal with the establishment of two regional offices. The coordinators of these offices are doing the local community work and at the same time they bring the organisations they are in contact with together in a regional network. This approach works. The groups in the networks are able to recognise common problems and to translate them into action plans to address the regional authorities. Integro was the driving force behind the Bulgarian regional GORD network. GORD members received training from Integro and learned how to use national and international policy for their advocacy work on regional level. They were successful in designing a common strategy to approach authorities and involve local communities in their work. Both the directors of RAA and Integro invested a lot in the coordinators and leaders of the networks.

RAA and Integro were also able to work on national level. Integro started to lobby for a new policy for Roma issues. The organisation did this on equal level with other national Roma organisations. They didn't act as a formal coalition but all took their own part in the lobbying work and were accepted by the national authorities to participate in the drawing process of the new policy.

RAA acts as the secretariat of an informal coalition of Roma NGOs. The eight participating organisations come together to find a common position on issues important for the wellbeing of Roma in Albania. The process to create trust and transparency between the participants took a while. Before, the organisations were competing about leadership and positions. Now they see the advantage of joining forces.

In Moldova, Tarna Rom was able to create a national Roma coalition trying to influence national Roma policies. The coalition has more than twenty members. This makes it difficult to keep it together. In Macedonia several Roma leaders started the regional Intelpekt network in which professional Roma come together to influence local and regional authorities to improve the situation of their Roma citizens.

During the execution of the Strengthening Programme extra attention is paid to youngsters and students. In almost all countries Roma youth and students networks are established. This approach shows results. The participants of these networks are supported to become the next generation of Roma leaders. They are enthusiastic to learn about how to be an active citizen, how to address Roma problems and how to mobilize others in their community. The young people are more eager to learn and to share, and easier to activate than the older Roma leaders. They understand the concept of empowerment and believe in the importance of networking. A special youth programme was established in 2009 to ensure that skilled youngsters stay involved with Roma issues.

The Strengthening Programme supported the establishment of the networks and helped them to learn how to lobby and advocate. With the end of the Strengthening Programme the structural support of Spolu to the partner organisations and the networks will end. The challenge for all the networks now is to become independent, respected and effective entities able to find financial support to continue their work.

Lessons that can be drawn are the following:

- There is always the danger that the involved leaders start to compete for positions and resources. That is the why the networks need 'core organisations' which can act as secretariat and driving and neutral force creating trust and common agendas.
- When a network has too many members it is difficult to keep it together.
- For grassroots leaders it is difficult to bring the network to a higher professional level and to make it sustainable. For this, leaders are needed with a higher education and used to work in a professional situation.
- Young people have a better understanding of the importance of networks and movement building. The decision to invest more in youth and students networks is promising.

#### **iv. Mobilising local communities**

In all the countries the execution of the Strengthening Programme started with the strengthening of the Roma voice in the local communities. Local leaders are trained to establish grassroots groups leading to self organisation and social structures of the Roma communities. The aim was to mobilise 5-15 local communities per country. This goal is reached. Through the programme local Roma were able to build a positive image. They showed that they are able to bring their demands for equal opportunities in a constructive way. The Roma people involved are enthusiastic about the training and support they receive. Spolu and the partner organisations have more experience and understanding how to mobilize Roma in local communities. It also became clear that in most cases it is not possible for the local Roma structures to stay active on their own. They expect the support to continue.

For the partner organisations it is not possible to stay involved with all local organisations. They lack resources but they also want the local leaders to take their own responsibility and to continue to involve people to be part of a local Roma movement.

On output level it is possible to reach the target (training between 5-15 communities) but on the longer term the outcome is uncertain. Many of the local people involved understand the importance of the building of a Roma grassroots movement but in practice it is difficult to stay involved. Their daily reality is one of harsh social economic circumstances (poor housing, no work, bad health care and education) combined with discrimination and the negative image of Roma (criminality, nomadic lifestyle, etc). In this position it is very difficult to choose for a strategy that needs collective thinking and will only slowly show results.

Lessons learned:

- The development of a grassroots movement is a slow process. Local leaders need long term support to keep them involved.
- The approach worked best in small communities and rural areas.
- Visible results are necessary to keep the local people involved.

#### **v. Main findings and conclusion**

The overall goal of the programme was to contribute to the achievement of equal opportunities for Roma in Central and Eastern Europe by making a specific contribution to the creation of a grassroots Roma movement.

The contribution Spolu could have with this programme has to be put in perspective. Millions of Roma in CEE have to live in very difficult circumstances. Authorities choose to look away from the problems the Roma encounter instead of trying to solve them. The capacity of Roma organisations and networks is weak. Most Roma choose for short-term involvement hoping for quick results instead of investing in a time consuming strategy of movement building. Different key factors which are needed to make a movement successful – critical mass, willingness of other stakeholders (in this case authorities, non Roma population) to take the demands of the movement serious – are not in place.

Having said this, it is clear that the Roma themselves are the most important force to improve their situation. With the strategy to strengthen Roma organisations, their networks and their links between them, Spolu rightly chose to support this process

The ambition was to create and strengthen, in all countries where the Strengthening Programme was run and where Spolu was active in the period 2006-2010, Roma organisations and networks able to raise their voice in a constructive way. On output level the results are reached (see annex i.: Overview results “Strengthening the Roma Voice” programme). This is a success in itself. But, the establishment and support as such doesn’t necessary lead to longer, lasting effective structures. The challenge for the organisations and networks is now to continue, strengthen and show results.

The Strengthening Programme shows that it is difficult to create a critical mass of active Roma who will and can play an active role to represent their communities and work together on national and regional level. The bottom-up approach, giving an important role to local leaders and NGOs didn’t lead to a reinforcing effect resulting in a growing movement. That is why Spolu realized that the more professional and experienced Roma have to take the lead. In all countries these experienced Roma are available and the hope is that young Roma will be able to create a new Roma movement. Their networks are in place.

Through the Strengthening Programme Spolu and the partner organisations increased their understanding of how to cope with the reality of working on grassroots level. There was a constant reflection on the approach of the programme. This resulted in the ERGO Strategy Paper of 2009 (see

annex ii.) in which the root causes of the Roma exclusion are described and combined with a strategy to bring change through empowerment and grassroots mobilisation. Essential in this approach is active citizenship. In different ways the Strengthening Programme contributed to a positive image of Roma. Authorities were approached in a constructive way with clear demands. In the framework of campaigns like the “Typical Roma?” campaign, young Roma were able to show in a positive way how they are able to contribute to the society they live in. This is done through many small scale local activities (cleaning actions, celebrations, etc.) Roma communities showed that they don’t want to act as victims but as responsible fellow citizens.

An important outcome of the Strengthening Programme is the merging of Spolu and ERGO. The result is a stronger, recognized and visible network. The ‘new’ ERGO has a professional staff and wants to be a valuable platform for Roma NGOs who have their basis in their home countries and who want to work together through ERGO to strengthen the impact of their work through common activities and advocacy.

The ‘new’ ERGO Network consists of Roma member organisations working together on advocacy, campaigning, research and dissemination of information supported by an advocacy office in Brussels and a secretariat in Utrecht. In 2009 and 2010 Spolu and ERGO started to apply new methods like international campaigns and the so-called “Monitoring of Local Policies” programme. The aim of the campaigns is to make Roma as active citizens more visible and to make a broader public aware of the necessity to have a more inclusive approach towards Roma. With the Monitoring Programme, information on the implementation of policies on local and regional level, which should improve the position of Roma, is gathered and transferred to the European level.

The Strengthening Programme doesn’t pretend to have the answer how to solve the complex Roma issue. But the programme contributed to: a better understanding how to empower Roma people and their organisations; the importance of active citizenship; the strengthening of the ERGO network; small-scale results on local and national level and experience with international campaigns to address Roma inclusion. Capacity building of Roma NGOs in such a way that the people involved feel ownership for the programme is essential and should be continued to really ensure a growing Roma citizens movement.