

THE UK GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE EU FRAMEWORK ON NATIONAL ROMA INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

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The extensive discrimination faced by Gypsies, Travellers and Roma has been formally recognised by Member States of the Council of Europe since 1969 and there has been no shortage of commitments, declarations and expressions of good intentions by those countries aimed at improving their lives. However, progress has all too often been thwarted at the stage where policies are to be implemented at a national or local level and as a consequence there has been little real improvement.

A recent report by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of the European Union (EU) found that many Roma¹ experience poor housing conditions and the highest levels of discrimination in access to housing, education, employment and healthcare; and that as a consequence their chances in the labour market are diminished.

Faced with high levels of discrimination in their countries of origin, many Roma from the newer members of the EU have decided to exercise their right to freedom of movement within the EU and head towards other Member States. However, the same report found that Roma encounter problems registering their residence and as a result they face similar difficulties in accessing healthcare, education, public housing and work in their new countries of residence.

Meanwhile, as far-right groups have gained political ground in recent years across Europe, hate speech against Roma has increased markedly, to the extent that it has been adopted by mainstream political parties in some countries. This worrying trend was highlighted in July 2010 when the French Government controversially used Roma migrants from Bulgaria and Romania as scapegoats for a rise in criminality and civil unrest in France. President Sarkozy said that Roma camps were a source of *'illicit trafficking, profoundly unfit living conditions, the exploitation of children for the purposes of begging, prostitution or crime'* and announced that the Government would dismantle Roma camps and repatriate irregular migrants from Bulgaria and Romania.

Strasbourg Declaration on Roma

It was against this backdrop that on 20th October 2010 the Council of Europe issued the *Strasbourg Declaration on Roma*, which recognised the fact that Roma across Europe continued to be 'socially and economically marginalised' and indicated that its Member States had adopted a list of 31 priorities and steps,

¹ A term used by the EU and the Council of Europe to include Gypsies, Travellers and other related groups including Roma, Sinti and Kale.

aimed at securing non-discrimination, social inclusion and the empowerment of Roma.

EU Framework for Roma integration

Then, in April 2011, the European Commission followed suit by publishing *An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* (the 'Framework'). The Framework sets goals for Roma inclusion in education, employment, health and housing across the EU. The Framework states that it is '*crucial... to ensure that national regional and local policies focus on Roma in a clear and specific way, and address the needs of Roma with explicit measures to prevent and compensate for disadvantages they face*'. To this end, EU Member States were asked to submit by the end of 2011 a National Roma Integration Strategy ('NRIS'), which specifies how they will contribute to the achievement of the Framework goals. The Framework states that NRISs are required to set '*achievable national goals for Roma integration*' and to identify disadvantaged regions where communities are most deprived. Sufficient funding is to be allocated from national budgets which may be complemented by EU funding with €26.5 billion available to support social inclusion. Importantly, the NRISs were to be designed '*in close cooperation and continuous dialogue*' with Roma NGOs and other stakeholders.

UK Government's Response

The Government's Ministerial Working Group ('MWG') on preventing and tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers was given the task of addressing the Framework's requirements.

The UK missed the deadline set by the EU for the submission of a NRIS and when asked why it had done so, the Government made the point that the EU's Employment, Social Policy, Housing and Consumer Affairs Council had subsequently accepted that Member States should be given latitude to tailor their approaches to national needs by preparing, updating or developing sets of policy measures within broader social inclusion policies, rather than necessarily producing NRISs.

Subsequently, the MWG did publish a list of 28 '*proposed commitments*' that each Government Department was planning to make. However, many of those commitments seem to fall well short of the explicit measures that would need to be adopted in order to prevent and compensate for the disadvantages that Gypsies, Travellers and Roma face within our society.

Despite the EU's indication that the NRISs were to be designed '*in close cooperation and continuous dialogue*' with Roma NGOs and other stakeholders there was little if any real consultation by the MWG with NGOs before the '*proposed commitments*' were published². Had the MWG conducted meaningful

² By way of example, the Roma Support Group was given a mere 3 days to comment on the '*proposed commitments*'.

consultation with NGOs representing the interests of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma then *'proposed commitments'* might have been better framed to tackle the inequalities that they experience. Instead, the *'proposed commitments'* come in for sustained criticism by those NGOs: for instance, the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain asserts that the Government's position *'is very disappointing and unacceptable given the chronic exclusion, poverty and daily discrimination experienced by the majority of GRT communities'*; whilst Friends and Families of Travellers go further, writing that the proposals *'were, at best, disappointing and, at worst, insulting to the Gypsy and Traveller communities and those that work on their behalf.'*

Somewhat surprisingly, when the MWG decided how to respond to the Framework it decided to focus on addressing the needs of Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers and that it would only cover issues affecting Roma where they overlap with those impacting on ethnic Gypsies and Travellers (for example, in regard to education). As a consequence the only *'proposed commitments'* which relate to Roma in the MWG's list are those advanced by the Department of Education.

The MWG's decision not to address the disadvantages experienced by them in our society, save where they coincide with those experienced by Gypsies and Travellers seems to be wholly contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the Framework and to defy logic. The MWG's decision seems all the more baffling when one notes that studies suggest that the Roma population in the UK may well exceed 300,000. The Roma Support Group has taken this issue up with the Government and has stated that:

'This decision was taken despite the fact that the needs of a large Roma population in the UK are perceived by governmental officials as "distinct". Excluding Roma from the UK Roma Integration Strategy contradicts the spirit and the basic requirements of the EU Framework which aims at advancing the social and economic inclusion of Roma population. It furthers the political and social marginalisation of Roma in Britain and dismisses the UK Government's commitment to address their needs and aspirations.'

Conclusion

The EU Framework ends by stating that *'for over a decade the EU institutions have been calling on Member States and candidate countries to improve the social and economic integration of Roma. Now is the time to change good intentions into more concrete actions'*. Unfortunately, the UK Government's response to date lacks the substance required to build an effective platform for protecting the rights of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. NGOs and activists need to put pressure on the Government in order to make sure that it complies with both the spirit and the letter of the Framework and makes a real difference to the lives of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma living in our society.