

## **Comment Lithuanian Roma Integration Strategy/Action Plan, implementation and progress**

*By Ana Rozanova*

### **Introduction**

Prior to discussing the specific topics, it should be noted that the document, submitted by Lithuania, is not a National Strategy for 201-2020, but an Action Plan for the period 2012-2014. The title of the document states both the type of it and the period, and as both of these do not correspond to the criteria, specified by the European Commission in its Communication from 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2011, it is surprising that the document was accepted, revised and some positive points were identified. All this leads to a certain doubt regarding how serious is the commitment of the European Commission to trigger substantive changes on national levels and whether the National Strategies, the way they are used at the moment, are really enough to contribute to this cause.

Secondly, it should also be noted that the document was drafted by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania with little or none involvement of other bodies, which again restricts the implementation of the (already limited) actions proposed in the document.

#### **1. Involvement of regional and local authorities and civil society**

##### **1.1. Involvement of the civil society:**

Despite the encouragement of the EC to strongly involve the NGOs, civil society and the Roma community through consultations during the period of drafting the strategy, these consultations were not carried out in Lithuania.

The civil society in the face of Human Rights Coalition and more specifically the organisations, working on Roma (Roma Community Centre, Gypsy Fire and National Roma Integration House) together with other organisations (Lithuanian Young Falcon Union, Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights, Lithuanian Children's Fund, National Social Integration Institute, and Social Employment Centre "SOPA"), reacting to the first public draft of the Action plan, prepared a paper with detailed comments and suggestions for it, focusing specifically on the areas, specified by the EC: housing, employment, education and health. The comments were submitted to the Ministry of Culture prior to the deadline; however, the draft Action plan was approved by the Minister before the expiry of the time, provided for the submission of comments.

To summarise, the civil society made several attempts to participate in the preparation of the document with structured feedback and constructive suggestions, however, this involvement was rejected. None of the comments were introduced in the final text of the Action plan.

##### **1.2. Involvement of Local and Regional Authorities:**

It is not clear, whether the local and regional authorities were involved or at least consulted during the preparation of the Action plan; however, based on the document and in light of the passive or negative developments especially in Vilnius municipality (which is home to the biggest Roma community in Lithuania), it appears the authorities did not take their role in the implementation of the strategy seriously.

In the part, focusing on the goals, objectives, measures, allocations and implementing organisations of the plan, the municipalities are responsible for the following tasks:

**Measure 1.2.6: to prepare and implement the project on healthy lifestyle, to organize events fostering a healthy lifestyle in places of dense population or study of Roma.**

This measure is to be implemented by the Municipality of Vilnius, with the allocated total budget for three years of 20 thousand litas (approximately 5.6 thousand euro). The measure does not give any more precise information, nor does it explain why the honour of the healthy lifestyle project organization is given only to the Roma community based in Vilnius. However, the next measure goes a bit more in depth and concretizes the situation:

**Measure 1.2.7: to organize a cycle of lectures for Roma girls and women on sanitation and hygiene issues.**

The budget allocated for this measure is 11 thousand litas (just over 3 thousand euro), and is almost evenly spread over three years, meaning probably that the cycle on hygiene lectures for female part of the population would last just approximately the same period of time, as Bachelor studies in English literature at Cambridge, making (again, only the Vilnius-based) Roma women true experts on cleanness.

Based on the informal email request on the results of implementation of the above-mentioned measures to the Ministry of Culture, it was confirmed that specifically measure 1.2.6 and measure 1.2.7 were indeed implemented by the “Vilnius Bureau of Community Health” (“Vilniaus visuomenės sveikatos biuras”). More information is not currently publicly available.

The Action plan thus clearly allocated the funding to the municipality of Vilnius only, and only for dubious health measures, which is clearly not enough for a successful integration of the community, ensuring its rights and bringing the level of life up to the average level of the citizens, not even mentioning the need of involvement of other municipalities with any number of Roma. The fact that only two measures is not enough was clearly understood by Vilnius municipality, which in the course of 2012 without allocation of any specific budget for Roma strategies, carried out demolition of 3 inhabited family houses during the temperature -20 degrees, as well as several police raids through the settlement.

Irony aside, it should be noted that the involvement of local and regional level is crucial, especially on the matter of housing and legalizing the settlements or providing alternative accommodations. Illegal housing (which has stayed this way since the Soviet times) of main Roma settlement in Vilnius and problems with accommodation, currently faced by many families, needs to be viewed in long-term perspective in order to find a sustainable solution. This should and can only be done by the local authorities, therefore a document, which completely ignores the main problem, cannot be seen as an adequate National Strategy.

## **2. Allocation of proportionate financial resources**

Total budget allocated for the implementation of the Action Plan is 5 458 thousand litas (around 1.5 million euro) for the period of three years. The resources are proportionate to the insignificant measures suggested in the plan; however, even the rather small budget could have been much wiser spent on different measures, if they are drafted based on the concrete needs, identified by the community, possibly in cooperation with people working in close everyday contact with the community.

## **3. Monitoring to enable policy adjustments**

Based on the response to the informal request on more information on the evaluation and monitoring of the Action Plan, the information on implementation is being currently collected. However, the comprehensive evaluation of the plan is not to be carried out due to the lack of financial means as well as to the small scale of the measures, suggested in it.

## **4. Fighting discrimination convincingly**

The Action Plan dedicates a chapter 4.4 to the “Promotion of public tolerance with regard to Roma”, where it specifies that the Roma do face discrimination, among other proofs bringing the statistics of the Institute of Ethnic Studies at the Lithuanian Social Research Centre, according to which in 2012 59% of the population did not want to see Roma as their neighbours.

The goals and objectives focusing on fostering intercultural dialogue and, more specifically, improving public opinion about Roma have specific measures attached to them. A short summary of the measures is the following:

- Education on Roma Holocaust;
- Supporting unspecified projects, contributing to the goal;
- Improve school education for Roma children;
- Promote the use of Romani language.

The above mentioned measures, though reasonable, are clearly not enough to fight discrimination, especially on a structural level and in the labour market.