

**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 when doing so 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. At the time, 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

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.

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, 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 National Roma Integration Strategies ('NRISs'), which specify 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. It was expected that sufficient funding would be allocated from national budgets which could 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.

At a later date the EU's Employment, Social Policy, Housing and Consumer Affairs Council had 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.

UK Government's Response

The UK 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.

Rather than produce a NRIS the UK Government provided the Commission with a collection of documents which it considered satisfied the requirements if the Framework.

In relation to England, the Government provided the EU with the *'Progress report by the ministerial working group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers'* which contains 28 'proposed commitments' across a range of departments and its general integration strategy for minority communities, entitled *'Creating the conditions for integration'*.

The Government's submissions with regard to the position in Scotland and Northern Ireland consisted of a summary of a range of policies, without an overarching framework.

The Government's submission with regard to Wales was based upon the Welsh Government's own framework *'Travelling to a Better Future' A Gypsy and Traveller Framework for Action and Delivery Plan*.

Review by the EU of NRISs

In an address to the European Platform for Roma inclusion on 22 March 2012, Viviane Reding the Vice-President of the European Commission made a preliminary assessment of the national strategies submitted by member states. She emphasised the *'general need to apply a comprehensive approach'* with *'strong coordination and monitoring'* and indicated *'that there is still a lot of room for improvement'*. She also placed particular emphasis on the needs of women and children.

The European Commission has subsequently published a Communication reviewing the NRISs submitted by Member States². The Communication tends to focus on the positives, rather than the negatives and highlights examples of best practice. However, a careful reading shows the UK's response to the Framework is lacking in key areas: in healthcare, for example, the UK fails to satisfy any of the four basic measures required by the Framework; whilst in relation to employment, the UK is assessed as endorsing the general goal of the Framework, but only satisfying one out of the seven specific measures the Framework requires.

In its Communication the EU Commission does criticise those Member States, including the UK, that have failed to allocate sufficient funds to their NRISs. In his article *'Damned with Faint Praise'*, Bernard Rourke states: *'on the crucial question of putting your money where your mouth is, or in EU terms, securing the financing necessary for sustainable implementation, there is a big problem'*³. The

² National Roma Integration Strategies: a first step in the implementation of the EU Framework (21.5.12)

³ Bernard Rourke, 'Damned with Faint Praise', European Voice (23.05.12)

Commission recommended that *'Member States should show a clear commitment to securing their financing up to 2020'*. Whether the UK will abide by this recommendation remains to be seen.

Other criticisms of the UK Government's response

Reviews of the NRISs by other organisations have exposed additional failings. For example, Eurochild lists the UK amongst those countries whose NRISs *'have little to no mention of the importance of ECDE [early childhood development and education] concomitant measures for improving it amongst Roma children'*⁴.

Exclusion of Roma

Of greater concern is the fact that when the MWG considered how to respond to the Framework it decided to focus on addressing the needs of ethnic Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers and that it would only cover issues affecting non ethnic 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 non ethnic 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 non ethnic Roma in England, save where they coincide with those experienced by ethnic 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 non ethnic 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.'

Failure to consult

The MWG's failure to address the needs of non ethnic Roma properly in its response to the Framework is perhaps explained by its failure to consult adequately with Gypsy, Traveller and Roma stakeholder groups.

⁴ Eurochild 'Review of National Roma Integration Strategies' (May 2012).

The European Roma Policy Coalition (ERPC) recently conducted an EU-wide survey of stakeholders in the Framework on their inclusion in the formulation of national strategies⁵. Respondents from the UK reported that the drafting process was "*not transparent at all*" and that "*no meaningful participation was foreseen in the implementation process*". The ERPC's conclusion that "*a stronger and more effective Roma participation in the implementation of the NRIS is needed*" clearly applies to the UK and echoes the European Commission's view that: "*civil society, and in particular Roma organisations, should not be considered as passive recipients of change, but should be called upon to play an active role in generating it*".

Had the MWG complied with the EU's indication that the NRISs were to be designed '*in close cooperation and continuous dialogue*' with Roma NGOs and other stakeholders and conducted meaningful consultation with NGOs representing the interests of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma then the '*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 very same NGOs. For instance, the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain asserts that the UK Government's response to the Framework "*is very disappointing and unacceptable given the chronic exclusion, poverty and daily discrimination experienced by the majority of GRT communities*"; whilst Friends, Families and Travellers go further, writing that the proposed commitments "*were, at best, disappointing and, at worst, insulting to the Gypsy and Traveller communities and those that work on their behalf.*"

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 in the future to the lives of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in the UK.

⁵ 'Analysis of the National Roma integration Strategies' (March 2012).