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European Academic Network on Romani Studies

Statement of the Scientific Committee
of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies (RAN)
on the Council of Europe's proposal for a European Roma Institute

30.04.2014

The Scientific Committee has been invited by the Council of Europe to communicate its views on plans to set up a European Roma Institute. We do so on the basis of the information available at the time of writing this communication, realising that the plans have not yet been finalised. We believe that RAN can and should play a key role in further discussions of these plans. With the following we wish to provide input into this discussion.

Some details have now emerged of the proposed European Roma Institute (ERI), initiated by George Soros and announced by European Commission President Barroso at the Roma Summit in Brussels on 4 April. According to a 'draft non-paper' dated 25 April 2014, a consultation process was initiated within the Council of Europe by Sixto Molina of the Roma Support Team and Claus von Barnekow, Ambassador of Denmark to the Council of Europe, last February. The consultation will come to an end on 22 May and the proposal will be forwarded to the Committee of Ministers for approval in June.

According to the proposal, the ERI will be funded by the member states, the European Commission and other sources with an annual budget of 1.5 million Euros. It will initially be based at the Council of Europe, and the Roma Support Team will serve as Secretariat. (The Roma Support Team has recently incorporated the Council of Europe's Romed, Romact, and Dosta projects, all led by Aurora Alincai). The legal framework will be a so-called 'Partial Agreement' by which a selection of member states agree to support the initiative. It has been reported that so far Luxemburg, Moldova, Switzerland, and Denmark have agreed to back the proposal.

An Academy called ‘Barvalipe’ will serve as the governing body of the ERI. It will consist of 20 public intellectuals of Roma origin. They will invite 10 non-Roma experts to join them. This Academy will elect the ERI Board from among its members.

The ERI will carry out “intellectual investigation, artistic and cultural production”. It will help establish “Roma chairs” at various universities and will coordinate a network of those chairs. It will also organise an annual “campus”. The ERI will also provide other institutions with a “licence” to carry out training and research on Roma culture and identity.

The SC of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies has already, in its meeting with Council of Europe officers in May 2013, emphasised the need for quality assurance of activities, publications and information on Roma through a system of open and transparent peer review. It has further emphasised the need to rely on a broad body of experts in respect of academic discipline, regional expertise, gender, age, and background. It has recommended to the Council of Europe not to delegate research and policy drafting to selected individuals, but instead to draw on a peer-review college, and it has advised the Council of Europe to recognise the value of skilled and certified academic expertise and not to conflate research and the promotion of information and knowledge with advocacy and political representation.

We believe that the academic rigour of research and training in Romani studies, their reputation, their appeal to early career and aspiring researchers, and their ability to flourish in an environment that promotes genuine intellectual freedom and creativity are best protected within established and recognised higher education institutions that are subject to the standard procedures of student and staff selection and promotion, peer-review scrutiny of research and research ethics, and quality assurance of curriculum design and delivery. The academic engagement with Roma culture belongs within universities. It deserves to maintain the same reputation as other serious academic disciplines. Only on that basis is it possible to produce knowledge that can inform policy and public attitudes in a reliable and transparent manner.

Training and research in Romani studies deserve to be granted more financial and human resources. But they are best delivered by institutions that have the capacity, the reputation, and the experience to do so. It is also important to further develop programmes that support individuals of Roma background who wish to embark on academic careers. Roma who aspire to take on leading roles in academic management should be encouraged to do so on the basis of their qualifications, not on the basis of their ethnic background. Similarly, non-Roma experts should have to compete for key roles in academic management on the basis of their academic merits and achievements; they should not be awarded such positions merely because of their personal connections with Roma activists or their ideological support for advocacy initiatives.

To this end, governments, multi-lateral organisations and private foundations should work to support and help enhance research and training facilities in Romani studies at recognised higher education institutions. They should support networking activities among institutions and individuals engaged in Romani studies and help promote intellectual enquiry in the field of Roma culture by facilitating training opportunities for aspiring and early career researchers.

The European Academic Network on Romani Studies (RAN) was set up jointly by the European Commission and the Council of Europe in 2011. It has since acquired a membership body of over 300 specialist researchers who are vetted through a strict and transparent procedure on the basis of their qualifications and scholarly achievements. It has created both internal and external communication structures, promoted the visibility of research on Roma culture, supported aspiring and early career researchers and created new opportunities specifically for early career researchers of Roma background while maintaining the principles of peer-review scrutiny and merit-based eligibility for grants and other support. In May 2013, a collaboration protocol was agreed with Council of Europe officers and the ERTF, according to which the Council of Europe would draw on the body of expertise hosted by RAN in the form of a peer-review college (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/romastudies/Report_meeting_22May2013.pdf).

This protocol can and should form the basis of a comprehensive strategy to promote the dissemination of credible knowledge and information on Roma culture and to strengthen research and training in Romani studies in a way that is governed by principles of scientific rigour, quality assurance, and transparency. We propose that the Roma Support Team of the Council of Europe should provide secretarial support to the Network. The Network will continue to elect a Scientific Committee, possibly with a reduced number of members and a more clearly laid out set of working procedures. The Scientific Committee will incorporate, in advisory capacity, the EU, as a transnational governance organisation; the ERTF, as an umbrella organisation of Roma NGOs on the basis of its existing cooperation agreement with the Council of Europe; and the Open Society Institute, as an independent organisation with an interest in the promotion of Roma culture. A Partial Agreement may be set up by the Council of Europe to regulate the manner in which member states will support the Network.

Under this arrangement, the Network will continue to engage in the activities that it has led so far: It will promote networking opportunities and training for aspiring and early career researchers in Romani studies. It will create new opportunities for young researchers of Roma background to gain access to mainstream research outlets. It will support the dissemination of reliable knowledge and information on Roma society and Roma culture to policy makers at local, national and European levels. It will promote the visibility of Romani studies and it will offer a platform for discussion of key concepts, methods and research ethics. In addition, if funding is available, it could engage in new initiatives to enhance the quality and capacity in the field, for instance by working with member states and national research councils to extend calls to support research on Roma culture and training in Romani studies. It could also offer quality assurance and accreditation services to a network of local and national bodies whose aim is to promote Roma culture.

All these activities will continue to involve Roma and non-Roma working together on the basis of high professional standards to ensure that Romani studies is allowed to maintain and enhance its standing within mainstream academic scholarship.