



Rome, 13 November 2014

Re: ERI Consultation

Dear Dr. Fosztó, dear colleagues,

My opinion on the creation of the ERI Institute as a Member of the Network, as a Researcher with more than 25 years experience on Roma issues and as a Commission Senior Expert on Social Cohesion is **negative**.

Reasons for my negative opinion are:

- 1) We have fought against segregated schools for Roma and we are now suggesting and encouraging an “only-Roma-environment”.
- 2) Theoretically, the idea of a “Roma culture” (ANY culture, actually) as a unique block is meta historic as a category and not based on recent scientific evidences. The term “culture” refers to an anthropological concept ideated in 1871 by E. B. Tylor and is a tool which was born under a scientific paradigm that contemporary anthropologist call “essentialism”. In the globalised and fundamentally interculturalist world we are living in, the use of such concept is unsustainable in scientific terms as it suggest a static vision of human groups that is no longer existing, thus making the very name of the Institute obsolete. See on this the extensive work of Jean-Loup Amselle and Paul Gilroy (to quote only a few among the most recent).
- 3) Such consultation should have taken place long before now. Everybody “knew” about this Institute but the official information regarding it has circulated only few days ago. Why is this secrecy? The process should have been transparent and shared. As an evaluator I have a special regard to procedures and I would like them to be followed as they are the only guarantee against human arbitrary acts.
- 4) There are no indicators as to whether the “perception of Roma” will be improved by the creation of such institute since there has been no analysis on this (or at least it has not been circulated). The failure of the “DOSTA” campaign should have warned against the repetition of similar initiatives. The reason for this is simple: regardless how you portray the Roma (music, artistic contributions etc. etc.) citizens will continue to have in mind the image of destitute Roma begging with their children and living in shanty towns, and again, it is not clear how is the work of this institute going to affect this perception. Moreover, on the methodology that has led to this decision, can it be made public? Where are the needs and risk analysis? Where the forecasts in terms of impact, effectiveness, efficacy? Where the sustainability?
- 5) It is not clear how the situation of destitute Roma will be improved by the existence of this Institute. These resources could be used in a more efficient way in measures made to have a real impact on the ground level. If you solve the problems at the ground level, also the perception of Roma citizens by non Roma citizens is going to improve, but it must be based on the creation of real life opportunities for mutual exchange.



- 6) In a Europe dominated by the European crisis which is affecting all MS with severe cuts to social services and investments money should be invested into initiatives which are sustainable under a cost-benefit perspective. Under this light it appears hardly justifiable the creation of such institute and the relative expenses for an headquarter, especially when considering that many Universities and Research Institutes already have Departments or other structures dedicated to Romani Studies on its various aspects). It is a duplicate of other already existing structures.
- 7) Criteria for selection of scholars, scientists and technicians should always be based on merit, not on race.
- 8) "The Institute will organize regular meetings of a "Partner Conference", a consultative mechanism which brings together selected NGOs, academic networks and private partners". How is this selection going to take place? Where are the criteria?
- 9) OSI is already activating scholarships for Roma students and so is doing the Roma Education Fund. Moreover, scholarships should be entrusted according to merit and necessity (in financial terms) and not on racial basis.

Alternative Proposals

After having expressed synthetically all my doubts I must pass on to the alternative proposals. Such proposals are based on the idea that human beings should cooperate mutually regardless their language, beliefs or heritage, because it is on these universalistic values on which the very concept of European Union has been founded on.

Whether we like it or not, the future society will be mixed. In this new world, the role of European Institutions should be that of fostering and nurturing intercultural dialogue and mutual exchange. Human groups are constantly changing in order to cope with new challenges and developments, and what can be of service, would be the study of these societal changes to understand them and to foresee solutions in favor of social cohesion rather than continuously underlying specificities and differences. Such differentialistic perspective has already led to enormous investments on behalf of all social actor included (EU Institutions, MS, NGOs, Research Institutes and University) who have imagined toolkits only for Roma, housing solution only for Roma, schooling models only for Roma etc. The amount of knowledge and data on Roma is immense, and I think we know pretty well by now what is needed to do. In my vision, this is the time for action and to engage with the design and appraisal of policies that will impact on the social exclusion phenomena as a whole. It is time for action.

Here below I am suggesting some possible ways forward; for example it would be extremely useful to:

- Strengthen and reinforce the European Academic Network of Romani Studies and enhance its possibilities of having a real impact by opening a section dedicated to all the scholars (Roma and non Roma) who actively wants to engage in themes such as that of policy advice with national governments, managing authorities and local administrators. With concrete occasions to link the work of the Network to real policies. For example it would be more beneficial to develop and link to existing policies, a rigorous intercultural methodology for the evaluation and assessment of impact of the intercultural policies.



- Activate national sections of the same network with the aim of supporting MS in the programming, planning and implementation of policies and programs for Roma inclusion based on sound working knowledge of EU and national tools and legislation.
- Strengthen the relationship with the European Commission most pertinent Direction General (DG REGIO; DG EMPLOYMENT; DG JUSTICE; DG EACEA) and make it more effective by acting as a real advisory board, with sound working knowledge of EU tools and policies and of national plans. Presently, the largest part of the policy advice comes from NGOs who are also the beneficiary of the measures they propose. It will be extremely beneficial to include academics and researchers among the social actors to be heard when planning, especially in the light of the fact that their institutions will not participate to bids for the realization of the intervention and are therefore safe from any conflict of interest. Moreover, the absence of Academia in policy advice is one of the reasons for the backwardness of the theoretical framework used (the misuse of the term “community” is an example of this backwardness), a more proactive participation will possibly have an impact and renew the terminology used and bringing in more recent concepts and tools that social sciences have developed in the last century since Tylor.
- Increase, develop and foster the mutual exchange of ideas between academics coming from different background and perspectives and support more occasions for interdisciplinary approaches and actions in order to link efficaciously the four axes of intervention singled out as priorities (Housing, Employment, Health, Education) to sound policy advice.
- Regarding the Network, it is time to open more possibilities of intervention, but in order to do so, the priorities of the Network must be revised giving opportunities also to those within the Network who are engaged on the field of applied social sciences. There is the urgent need to analyze the current dynamics of social change undergoing in our societies, including Roma society, rather than fostering a “museum” approach. Too often policies (and the same National Roma Strategies) have been built on an unrealistic idea of Roma as an undifferentiated group, and such misconceptions has led to the building of interventions and programs not based on a grounded analysis of the situation but rather on a perception not based on a fieldwork direct knowledge.

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