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Empowering Roma People in Europe: Council of Europe's Programs on Roma Mediation

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Empowering Roma People in Europe: Council of Europe's Programs on Roma Mediation

Abstract: This paper discusses European attempts at Roma integration, focusing on the Council of Europe (CoE) and its Roma-Mediation (ROMED) programs (both I and II) that use the tools of empowerment and cultural mediation on the local level to promote Roma participation in the decision-making process. The aim is to provide an overview of the emergence of Roma integration policies designed and implemented to fight the exclusion many Roma face across Europe and to situate CoE's ROMED among recent developments. The paper is based on the literature that highlights Roma exclusion, on reviewing policy documents from international and European organizations and non-governmental bodies, and finally, on specific program publications.

Keywords: Roma, integration, inclusion, empowerment, Council of Europe, ROMED, Mediation

1. The Roma in Europe

1. Roma comprise the largest set of minority groups in Europe. It is estimated that in the European Union (EU), the Roma population amounts to 10 million people. Originating from the Indian subcontinent, they were first documented in Europe around the 14th century. Many Roma live today in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe—for reasons related to the way the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires treated them—with large communities also in France, Italy and Germany.¹ The minorities labeled “Roma” are a very diverse

1 For an overview of the History of the Roma people in Europe, with a focus on the East and Southeast: D.M. Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, New York: St. Mar-

group and comprise a multitude in terms of religion, language, occupation, economic situation and way of living. The term “Roma” is now widely accepted regardless of the origin or the linguistic differences of the communities to which it refers and has been used by European institutions as an umbrella term for diverse groups of people known as Tsigani, Czigany, Cziganye (from the Greek *atsinganoi*), or Gypsies (from “Egyptians”).

Many European bodies, such as the European Commissioner for Human Rights, have observed that discrimination and other human rights abuses against Roma (and Irish Travellers²) have become severe and that “no European Government can claim a fully successful record in protecting human rights of the members of these minorities”.³ Evidence from research by the EU’s Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and its Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II) has shown that the situation of Roma in employment, education, housing and health has not significantly changed and that “progress has been slow”. FRA also concluded that “discrimination and anti-Gypsyism persist” and that *de facto* segregation in housing and education continue to affect many Roma.⁴

Access to housing, education, health and employment have been identified as the main barriers to Roma integration in Europe. *Anti-Gypsyism* appears to link these barriers together, with the term used to indicate the expression of prejudices and stereotypes that motivate the everyday behavior of many people towards the members of Roma communities.

tin’s Press, 2007; W. Guy (ed), *Between past and future. The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001; D. Crowe and J. Kolsti (eds), *The Gypsies of Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 1991.

- 2 The Council of Europe officially uses the term “Roma and Travellers” to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by its work in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush (a Romani people of Central Europe), Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies: Council of Europe, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/roma> [2017-08-20].
- 3 Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2012, p. 11.
- 4 Fundamental Rights Agency, *Fundamental Rights Report, 2017*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017, p. 103.

In education, considered to be a key to improving life chances and escaping the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion, segregation remains a problem. This is reflected in the area of employment, where Roma participation in the formal labor market remains weak. Research has shown that employment rates are particularly low for Roma in all the member states surveyed, as only 28 percent of Roma aged 16 and above indicate paid work as their main activity, compared to the 45 percent of non-Roma living nearby. The main factors explaining poor employment outcomes for Roma are considered to be the low levels of education and skills and widespread discrimination. Furthermore, leaving school early and a lack of vocational skills and training are reported as the key factors to Roma low unemployment rates.⁵

Housing is considered another key area that needs to be addressed to support Roma integration. European institutions believe that access to adequate housing with basic infrastructure is an essential condition for social inclusion in general and for Roma people in particular. Research has shown that when trying to rent or buy an apartment or house, 41 percent of Roma had felt discriminated against based on their Roma background.⁶ Despite recommendations and efforts towards effective measures, the 2016 report by the European Commission (EC) highlights that “the most important housing challenges—namely fighting segregation and preventing forced evictions—were insufficiently addressed.” Unjustified forced evictions and/or forced demolitions of Roma houses continue to take place throughout EU member states and allegations have been recently raised against Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Slovakia and Italy.⁷

Finally, regarding health, most member states have implemented measures to facilitate access to healthcare and preventive care, in particular vaccination of children and family planning, and to raise health awareness. However, as European institutions have reported, the lack of registration and health insurance coverage can limit access to healthcare for some Roma. To fight exclusion from health services,

5 Fundamental Rights Agency, *Poverty and Employment: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, p. 11.

6 Fundamental Rights Agency, 2017, p. 110.

7 European Commission, *Assessing the implementation of the EU framework*, 27 June 2016, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/1-2016-424-EN-F1-1.PDF> [2017-09-18].

health mediators are becoming increasingly common across European countries, especially in Central Europe (CE).⁸

However, both the EC and FRA have stressed that the national policy frameworks and measures in place do not seem, as yet, to yield significant results on the ground. What is considered to be essential is the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, including Roma, local authorities and civic society. In most cases, the process of drafting National Integration Strategies has not taken into account the Roma community itself. Moreover, national-level participation needs to be translated into local-level engagement of both the Roma and the local authorities.⁹

2. European Programs for Roma Integration

The above evidence shows that it is within the EU institutions that the situation of the Roma has attracted the most attention in comparison to other world regions. What is more, during the last 10 years there has been increased mobility in Roma integration attempts in their countries of residence. A political commitment to Roma inclusion is manifested in the conclusions of the European Council of December 2007 and June 2008 by inviting member states and the EU to use all means to improve Roma inclusion.¹⁰

As it has been argued, one of the key reasons that obliged the EU to suggest that it and its members have a “special responsibility towards the Roma” may have been the process of EU accession and enlargement and a potential migration movement to the west where exclusion is lower and opportunities greater.¹¹ The migration movements of large numbers of Roma to Western Europe as a result of past exclusion, destruction of their settlements and the right to free movement

8 Fundamental Rights Agency, 2017, p. 111. Mediation programs have been implemented at least in six countries of the CE Europe: Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. For the Romanian programs: World Health Organization, *Roma health mediation in Romania*, Denmark: World Health Organization, 2013.

9 Fundamental Rights Agency, 2017, p. 114.

10 G. Fesus, et al., ‘Policies to improve the health and well-being of Roma people: The European experience’, *Health Policy*, vol. 105, 2012, p. 27.

11 N. Yuval-Davis, G. Wemyss and K. Cassidy, ‘Introduction’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, no. 7, 2017, p. 1052.

within EU may have thus contributed to the rise of concern on Roma issues in the EU institutions.¹²

Roma integration programs started some time ago. Already in 1996, the CoE created specific bodies dealing with the human rights of Roma and implemented programs for Roma in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to promote national integration policies. Since the late 2000s, these efforts have accelerated, and European institutions and agencies have also begun to address the situation of Roma people. Roma summits were held in 2008 and 2010, while in June 2009, the European Parliament (EP) adopted 10 basic principles for the integration of Roma. These included explicit but not exclusive targeting, an inter-cultural approach, the involvement of regional and local authorities and civil society, and the active participation of Roma (2010/2276(INI)). In September 2010, the EC set out the Roma Task Force (RTF) to assess the way member states use EU funds in Roma integration. In its report, RTF concluded that the measures adopted were found to be insufficient in facing the social and economic problems of a large portion of the Roma population. To deal with this shortage, and given that anti-racism policies are not able to fight social exclusion on their own, the EC asked the institutions to adopt a Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

The EC focused on the need to reinforce the relations of local government with Roma communities to decrease exclusion. Basic priorities included school and intercultural mediators, local Roma associations, churches, and other agents and associations, as well as the active participation of Roma parents in educational issues, and informing teachers on intercultural issues. Thus, in April 2011, the EC adopted the EU Framework for Roma Integration National Strategies in Member States. According to the EC report published in 2011 (Section 2), despite the improvements in legislation of several EU members, in essence, not much had changed in Roma everyday life, with exclusion and marginalization remaining two of the most important social and economic problems they face.

Further, the EP, in a resolution of 12 December 2013 (2013/2924(RSP)), recognized the need to implement the National Roma Integration

12 Commissioner for Human Rights, *op.cit.*

Strategies adopted by Member States, by calling on them to involve local and regional authorities in reviewing, managing, implementing and monitoring their national strategies; also, the EP requested member states assist and support the local and regional authorities in the measures they need to undertake for the realization of Roma inclusion, as well as in implementing anti-discrimination measures. Lastly, the EP reminded the member states that good practices, such as Roma mediator programs, have been very successful tools on the ground and should be used with greater determination.

Initiatives were also taken by OSCE, which created the Roma and Sinti Contact Point as part of its Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in 1994. The Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 was launched in 2005 by the World Bank and the Open Society Foundation. State involvement though was rather weak. The UN has since the 1990s increasingly addressed the situation of Roma and Travellers in Europe from the perspective of providing guidance to governments regarding human-rights based policies.¹³ Despite these efforts, the EC concluded in 2015 “that progress was not sufficient and further efforts are still needed.” On the other side, the report concluded that, “there are many worrying developments that require further action,” such as fighting discrimination and segregation, anti-Gypsyism and elimination of hate speech and hate crime.¹⁴

3. From Protection to Empowerment of Minorities

Programs implemented by European institutions over the last few years manifest an attempt to review the traditional approach of the relation between majority and minority. As it has been argued, literature on the rights of excluded ethno-cultural groups produced in previous decades treats them more as the *objects* of state law and policy, placing emphasis on the protection of the individual rights of their members. Such an approach with an emphasis on the *protection* of minorities strengthened their position as objects in need of protection, like victims. The emphasis placed on the security and the pre-

¹³ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

¹⁴ European Commission, 2016, p. 94.

vention of conflicts and disputes or the fight against discrimination does not reflect the complexity of relations between majorities and minorities and, in any case, does not provide answers to the multiple needs of the members of these excluded groups. On the other hand, approaches talking about “managing otherness” reproduce the top-down logic to integration and reflect the side of majority and dominant groups since they are the ones in power who do the management.¹⁵

Contrary to this traditional framework, the “empowerment” of minorities presupposes the transfer of power to the side of the minority so that its members can claim their rights and participate actively in formulating and implementing policies concerning them. So, with this change in the way we see minorities and majorities’ relations, minorities are treated as *subjects* and not as some “other”, nor are being placed in a position of total competition to majorities. That is, minorities become real actors and gain power.¹⁶

As the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ (OHCHR) Protection and Empowerment Plan described it in 2005, “human rights are best protected when people are empowered to assert and claim their rights”; and that, as a result, “human rights holders must be empowered to do so”. According to the OHCHR plan, the empowerment of people focuses on two points: first, that human rights holders must assert and claim their rights; and second, that those with the responsibility for guaranteeing human rights must be equipped with the means to do so.¹⁷

The empowerment of excluded and marginalized groups like the Roma may therefore be achieved through their own more active participation and a combination of power and sharing responsibility on the one hand, and institutions that ensure the efficient application of minority policies on the other. Minority groups should become directly responsible for the creation of the conditions under which they can exercise and enjoy their rights, as well as the implementation of

15 F. Prina, ‘Introduction—National Minorities between Protection and Empowerment’, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2014, p. 2.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-10.

17 A. Schaefer-Rolffs, ‘Minority Politics in Practice: Protection and Empowerment in Danish-German Border Region’, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2014, pp. 81, 86.

specific policies. This can be achieved through their immediate and direct participation that offers them the possibility to influence the shaping of policies affecting them towards specific directions. On the other hand, local and regional authorities should transform and be re-structured in such a direction so as to create favorable conditions to accept minority claims.¹⁸

4. Mediation as a Key Tool for Roma Integration: ROMED

The EU is not the only important force in Europe, especially in relation to the evolution of democratic institutions and practices. In many aspects, it is the CoE that is the primary European body in relation to democracy and human rights, and it provides a valuable focus for exploring the scope for intergovernmental organizations to construct shared democratic values and norms, such as in relation to the Roma people. The CoE seeks to continuously design democratic institutions, and not only to apply one specific mechanism. Despite having limited economic influence and being far less well known than the EU, the CoE has produced some important institutions that are of central importance to Europe. The European Charter on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights are probably the best known and most influential.¹⁹

As part of its mandate, the CoE has become the main international organization undertaking the task of implementing programs on Roma integration in Europe in recent years, trying to empower excluded communities and Roma minorities using the tools of cultural *mediation*. The ROMED program has become a fundamental tool in that direction, in both of its phases—ROMED I (2010-2016) and ROMED II (2013-2017)—implemented by the CoE and jointly funded by both the CoE and the EC.²⁰

18 S. Penasa, 'From Protection to Empowerment through Participation: The Case of Trentino—a Laboratory for Small Groups', *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2014, pp. 3-5.

19 V. Lowndes and L. Pratchett, 'Designing Democratic Institutions for Decentered Governance: The Council of Europe's Acquis', in: S. Griggs, A.J. Norval and H. Wagenaar (eds), *Practices of Freedom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 86-88.

20 ROMACT and ROMACTED, two new programs of the CoE and the EC, are currently being implemented in several European countries, continuing the legacy of ROMED. The first aims at build-

ROMED I focused on the training of intercultural mediators from Romani communities. These mediators would then work on improving trust and cooperation among local Roma communities and authorities by acting as neutral as possible between the two sides. The outcome of the work of the mediators is to promote dialogue, cooperation and practices aimed at eliminating distrust and social exclusion at a local level. Moreover, mediators can increase access to the communities so as to promote goals like vaccination and improve the efficiency of school drop-out programs. The overall objective was to increase the inclusion of Roma communities, with a holistic perspective of the specific challenges.²¹

For the period of 2011-2016, more than 1,258 mediators—87 percent of them of Roma origin—were trained and certified in 22 countries, among them Ukraine, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, Lithuania, Russia and Romania, where the largest number of cultural mediators—332—were trained.²² The training curriculum included topics such as the idea of “intercultural mediation,” the identification of a rights-based approach in the work of the mediators, discussion on the Code of Ethics for Mediators developed by the CoE, project management, strategies for building confidence and consensus based on non-violent communication and case management.²³

Mediation has a long tradition in solving social differences and has been used as a strategy in various cases.²⁴ It started as a tool for the integration of the Roma in Europe in the mid-1980s. Even then, the CoE emphasized in its texts the importance of training Roma mediators. The first attempts to use this tool of mediation started at the begin-

ing the capacity of local authorities to design and implement strategies and policies that are inclusive of all, including Roma, and to use European funds for that purpose. The second uses the experience of ROMED to promote good governance and Roma empowerment at local level. Finally, JUSTROM tries to introduce the idea of “legal clinics” to facilitate access of Roma to justice: Council of Europe, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/promoting-good-governance-and-roma-empowerment-at-local-level> [2017-07-09].

21 European Commission, 2016, p. 95.

22 The rest of the countries are: Bulgaria, FYROM, Greece, France, Bosnia, Belgium, United Kingdom, Italy, Albania, Portugal, Serbia, Switzerland, Germany, Spain and Turkey.

23 C. Rus, A. Raykova and C. Leucht, *ROMED Trainer's Handbook*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, pp. 14-16.

24 M. Catarci, 'Intercultural Mediation as a strategy to facilitate relations between the School and Immigrant Families', *Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2016, p. 127.

ning of the 1990s to promote the wider integration of Roma children at school or access to health.²⁵ During the last two decades, mediation has acquired new dynamic and novel functions as a result of the changes that occurred in Western societies because of immigration and interculturality, as well as due to increasing economic inequalities. It consists of employing people with a Roma background, from local Roma communities, or with a good knowledge of Roma issues, to act as mediators. They are trained to become liaisons among Roma communities, non-Roma and local authorities, with the aim of facilitating cooperation and peaceful solutions to local problems.

The tasks that cultural mediators perform are several and varied. They need to be able to assess a situation and propose a plan of action all while including both parties. Cultural mediators help the institutions understand and be aware of cultural practices.²⁶ The basic job a mediator has to do is usually putting out fires when public administration does not respond to its role, when community representation is lacking, or when someone has to intervene in an emergency. Mediators, as integral parts of their communities with a relationship of trust with local authorities, attempt to play an active role by not only responding to problems arising but also often functioning as catalysts of energetic action and practices of active participation and rights assertion. This type of intervention has many advantages because mediators have inside knowledge of the Roma communities since they witness the problems and social exclusion, know the language and (usually) enjoy their community's acceptance.

The human-rights based approach, which is one of the pillars of the work of the CoE, is essential for overcoming the paternalistic perspective often encountered in public institutions, as well as the tendency for complacency in a situation of dependency, often encountered among members of the disadvantaged Roma communities, mainly because they do not believe it is possible otherwise. ROMED I promoted the idea that the intervention of a mediator is necessary to build trust between Roma and public institutions, not as an act of charity but

25 World Health Organization, *op.cit.*

26 M. Phelan and M. Mayte, 'Interpreters and cultural mediators—different but complementary roles', *Translocations: Migration and Social Change*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2010.

as a responsibility to ensure citizens' effective access to fundamental rights. To perform their role as intercultural mediators from a rights-based perspective well, mediators also need practical skills, tools and specific methods to organize their work. ROMED I tried to develop key competences mediators need. For that reason, it proposed a *participatory work cycle* starting with the set-up of support teams, both at the community level and within the public institutions. The work was structured as a cyclical process including participatory planning, implementation and evaluation, leading to empowerment, accountability and better direct cooperation.

However, the effectiveness of mediation is frequently challenged by issues such as the low status of mediators, precarious employment and dependency either on the head of the institution or community leaders, and, moreover, by the unwillingness of local political authorities to cooperate and find solutions to the problems many Roma face. What is more, mediators may be used as a "Trojan horse" by the public institutions, that is, as an excuse to avoid direct contact with the community or as someone to blame in case things go wrong.

5. From Mediator Training to Community Action Groups: ROMED II

ROMED II was implemented in 11 countries and was active for more than three years in 54 municipalities, establishing an equal number of local Community Action Groups (CAG), each with between six and 27 members. It also led to the establishment of working groups constituted by local authority representatives to work together with the CAGs. Implementation of the program commenced in April 2013 and ended in March 2017.²⁷

Following the training of Roma mediators, efforts focused on creating and supporting CAGs, with the aim of promoting the active participation of Roma communities and their involvement in the local decision-making processes. Such groups, consisting of local Roma

²⁷ Countries of implementation were: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, FYROM and Ukraine.

together with existing mediators, were trained and prepared for consultation with officials and other agents.

CAGs were trained on a module that included themes of how to identify problems, seeking solutions and accountability. More specifically, the first theme included ways to investigate the problems of their community through research and documentation; the second, how to identify responsibility and accountability towards the local authorities, the state or the Roma community; finally, on how to prioritize problems that can be easily solved and those that are not easy to solve with available resources, how to look for possible solutions focusing on the ways that the group and the local community can take part (e.g., voluntary work, formulating an opinion, access to the community), how solutions would benefit the general population and not only Roma people, and on how to render a problem into a claim, that is, ways to discuss problems and demand solutions.²⁸

In this process, emphasis was placed on little, everyday problems that concern community members and which could be solved in cost-effective ways through consultation with local authorities. They picked small-scale problems aimed to trigger the education process with Roma groups, on the one hand, and to initiate consultations between parties involved in solving the problems of the communities, on the other. Through this process, it became possible to avoid the early disappointment of the parties involved that might come if the process had started with big problems, such as unemployment.

In parallel with training Roma groups, a series of training sessions/meetings with local officials also took place. These meetings were governed by the idea of *integration* as a mutual process in which all parties involved (both local Roma communities and municipal authorities) have to take mutual steps toward rapprochement. This integration approach contradicts with the widespread logic of assimilation traditionally embedded in most European nation-states. According to the common logic, the communities of the excluded have only two options: they either remain on the margins or they abandon their identities and become like the majority. Hence, even when there is a willingness to

28 R. Calin, A. Raykova and C. Leucht, *ROMED 2: Guidelines and resources for National and Local Facilitators*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publications, 2016, pp. 22-44.

support Roma communities and to fight social exclusion, the underlying logic can be summarized in the question: "What do you prefer? Living on the margins or becoming one of us?" The result of such a dilemma is that when assimilation is not happening, the non-assimilated are blamed. On the other hand, when it is happening, those who escape exclusion move away from their communities, and hence do not act as multipliers to influence other members of the community.

Following a cycle of training with both the Roma communities and the local authorities, joint meetings took place. In these, the CAGs, together with representatives of the local authorities and the mediators, participated in a roundtable discussion with the presence and facilitation of program instructors and managers. These meetings had a double objective: on the one hand, to present and discuss prioritized problems that local Roma communities face and to examine possible solutions as proposed by all parts, and, on the other hand, to develop and strengthen communication and firm relations between the two parties (community and municipality) to establish a systematic consultation process through which problems are to be solved and trust built. The level of success of common meetings depended on the will of the local authorities to participate, the preparation that preceded it and the mobilization of all parties involved. Some of the results of the joint meetings included the meeting and the development of relations of trust between community representatives and local officials, detailed debates on the problems of Roma in the area, and efforts to include Roma communities in the development of local planning.

In an effort to change the situation from its present state, this intervention, at a local level, aimed, among other things, at the following objectives: first, to promote equal and fair distribution of public resources so that the Roma are not excluded, mainly by giving them the tools to claim them; second, to achieve the greater involvement of local authorities and greater support in Roma integration programs; third, to initiate a consultation process in which Roma members participate together with local authorities' representatives; fourth, to promote mutual trust between Roma and local authorities, limiting mutual naming and blaming; fifth, to increase commitment of local

authorities so that they take into consideration the needs and demands of the Roma community; finally, to shape a rights-based approach on the one hand and a respect of obligations on the other.²⁹

The primary aim of the whole effort is for these groups to play a central role in the transition from a passive and dependent, client-relations community to a group of people that processes and analyses problems to move towards claims, based on a relation of cooperation and trust—not of conflict—with local authorities. At the same time, the burden is equally shared with the local authorities who assume their own responsibility to take the needs and claims by Roma communities into consideration, without any exclusion or negative predisposition. The *participation* of Roma communities in local consultations and decision-making constitutes a new means, but also a new objective to develop initiatives at a local level that will take into consideration the needs of their communities. On the other hand, by claiming rights and shedding light on the Roma communities' problems, wider access to the decision-making processes is achieved and an array of opportunities to lessen inequalities is offered.

Of course, programs like ROMED, like every other attempt to mitigate social exclusion, have many difficulties when implemented in the field. Some of these difficulties include the long-term marginalization of group members, illiteracy and the inability to access the labor market. Moreover, the profession of mediator suffers from a lack of recognition since it has not been clearly defined in most countries. What is more, mediators may be used to serve policies that do not aim to improve the life of Roma but at keeping things quiet and reproducing marginalization.³⁰ Finally, experience has shown that negative stereotypes against the participants and the frequency of low self-esteem, lack of experience among state officials and—maybe most importantly—an *ethic* of integration among the authorities does not allow mediators to have a significant impact in fighting exclusion and marginalization.

29 Ibid., p. 16.

30 J. Liegeois, *Developments in mediation, current challenges and the role of ROMED*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publications, 2012, p. 10.

Conclusion: The Need for Recognition and Participation

Recent efforts to empower Roma communities and to use mediation as a tool for integration have created a new dynamic on the ground. They promote a relation of mutual recognition between Roma communities and local authorities that should characterize all practices of governance. It is especially in cases in which citizens have been excluded from the processes of participation on the grounds of their cultural characteristics and where these exclusions are reproduced as “neutral” while in essence favoring established representation forms that empowerment through mediation may create gaps and ruptures and open new possibilities.

Taking stock of the experience of recent years, we can assert that the integration of Roma at a local level has taken a positive course. New methodological tools have been adopted, putting forward bottom-up approaches that require the participation and empowerment of excluded communities, replacing older views of assimilation and patronage. Programs like ROMED promote integration through local development and the participation of local societies. Indeed, practice has indicated that the members of Roma communities have shown an increasing willingness to participate, as manifest by the establishment of 54 CAGs that have worked together with local authorities to develop local plans. Wide participation has also revealed an increased willingness for integration, mainly in response to the growing economic exclusion and the lack of professional prospects for many young Roma. Therefore, ROMED has empowered the communities its participants have worked with and opened local authorities to cooperation with them.

On the other hand, programs like ROMED are not enough to overcome the structural barriers many Roma face—lack of access to social services, racism and a lack of political will by authorities to develop integration policies. The lack of understanding of the logic of integration and the fact that assimilationist perspectives seem to be still dominant at the local level minimize the sustainability and the positive effect of programs aiming at integration. This is paired with a lack of sustainable local integration mechanisms that could join forces with programs like ROMED to increase their effects.

What is at stake for local and national authorities alike is to readjust participation forms of locally excluded groups to the decision-

making processes and to break the reproduction cycle of exclusion. There would be multiple benefits from such a successful attempt, for local authorities—provided the service cost for excluded groups is reduced—and for the excluded groups themselves, but, on the whole, for the totality of the local societies and their development. Existing tools, best practices and experience gained on the ground should be used to bring change.

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