

What Roma Can Do



Education and Culture DG
'Youth in Action' Programme

What Roma Can Do



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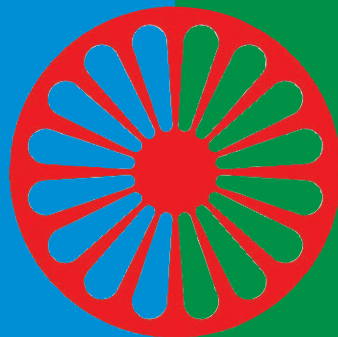


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LET THE ROMA YOUTH BE HEARD



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SPOLETO

30.03.2011 05.04.2011

Let the Roma Youth Be Heard

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What Roma Can Do

Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the European Commission and EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, on 25 August 2010 declared that "(...) during the past weeks, the situation of the Roma - the largest ethnic minority in the European Union - has attracted the attention of policy-makers at both national and EU levels. (...) I believe that the Roma are an important part of the population of the European Union, and that it is of paramount importance that they are well integrated into the societies of our Member States. (...) The integration of the estimated 10 to 12 million Roma – a population as large as Belgium's or Greece's – is a joint responsibility of Member States, EU Institutions, EU Programs and European Non State Actors". Taking into consideration what happened to Roma during the last weeks and on the ground of the significant experience Gsi Italia has acquired within the EU "Youth in Action" Program, we decided to put forward a proposal whose objective is to contribute to an easier young people's participation and to promote cultural diversities throughout some of the Member States, specifically France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Spain, and the "candidate" country Turkey. In order to achieve the two specific objectives, that is to enhance the technical skills of 40 young Roma in journalism and to promote the dissemination of information about Roma social and economic conditions through their direct and active involvement, the following activities have been implemented by the project: a training on journalism, an e-magazine and a final report gathering the success stories of young Roma guys.

We organised a technical training focused on journalism wherey 40 young Roma took part and aiming at creating an e-magazine on Roma issues. The course was held in Spoleto, Italy, from 30 March to 4 April 2011, and led by the



Italian journalists Andrea Gerli and Sara Sagatori, with the cooperation by Benedetto Evangelista, for technical issues. During the training, the guys involved in the project learnt how to write articles and upload them in the online ROMAGAZINE where they could write everything they considered relevant about Roma conditions all over Europe and update contents with new stories and articles.

We also established together a group on Facebook to be in touch and keep on collecting ideas for the Romagazine after the project was finalised.

Another important result of the project is the report WHAT ROMA CAN DO, where we collected success stories of young Roma guys coming from Italy, Spain and Germany. In next pages you can find some examples of Roma's successful integration all over Europe.



Brief chronicle of my life, by Vicente Rodriguez

I was born on April 27, 1988 at the hospital Dr. Peset of Valencia. I was the first child that my parents brought to light and I can say, without fear of being cruel, that nobody expected much from me.

Both my father and my mother grew up in great poverty, my mother in Callosa de Segura of Alicante and my father in Alfalfa, only 5 kilometres from Valencia. I grew up in Alfalfa where I also went to school.

When my parents married they did not have a home so they rented a small flat of 45 meters in a suburb, fifth floor with no lift and I remember those infernal stairs, cracks, moisture, cockroaches, the creaking of the walls in winter and some neighbours, a mentally ill 70-year man suffering from Diogenes syndrome that always threw the garbage when we went back from school and an elderly schizophrenic, who threatened and insulted us every time we left the house by screaming 'bloody gypsies'.

Sedavi and Alfajar, neighbouring towns, were renowned in the 70's for their thriving furniture industry, but when I was born in the late 80's, the financial crisis caused people to sink into misery, leaving a post-apocalyptic landscape in the suburbs, full of abandoned factories and destroyed roads.

I remember the first years of school; they were happy, I learned quickly to read and when I finished the homework before the other children, I had time to draw and write stories. No matter how daunting my environment was. I always found the right motivations to study. When I was seven, my teacher Fina, who always trusted in my abilities and innate curiosity, lent me "The Origin of Species" by Charles Darwin, after which I started studying palaeontology. Unfortunately, my personal and educational circumstances did not favour my right integration in the educational system during the following years.

When I was about twelve, I left school and started going to the market with my parents. Two circumstances led me to leave school – first, a long illness in my back that forced me at bed for months, and second, and most important, the humiliating

treatment made of continuous insults, shouts and threats that some teachers and my schoolmates constantly inflicted on me, even physical abuse some time. I never thought of reporting these facts and I have never told anyone most of the things which happened to me because I was scared. Although I left school, I went to the library every day, borrowed books and CDs and in this way I built, without other imposition than my personal interest, my own school system. I learned English by listening to the Queen, the Doors and Bob Dylan, I learned geography on obsolete atlas and a using a globe from the Soviet Union times that my father found in the trash and that I still have. I learned philosophy by reading the antichrist work of Nietzsche and mixed it with the Koran, the Bible and the X-Men and Spiderman comics, slowly trying to order the knowledge I





was acquiring. Over time, many things have been useful despite my shortcomings in very basic education.

At 14, I discovered the Evangelical Church and began to seriously study theology and history of early Christianity. I stretched narrow ties with the community and learned to speak and behave in public, mainly from the pulpit.

My life passed on smoothly next years. I was immersed in my community life without being too ambitious: church, market, cousins, weddings, christenings, libraries, clubs, some girls, alternative rock, friends, PCs and little more.

When I was 19, and I was seriously thinking of my marriage, I got a call from my uncle Miguel that somehow changed my life. My uncle was the only member of my family who could afford to study and always encouraged me to go back to school. Despite my initial scepticism, he told me that a man called Emilio Israel Cortes was looking for young Roma to take part into a film competition that would culminate in a short film. I was not particularly interested but, at the end, I agreed. I was sure that, once rejected, I could have come back to my comfortable routine. Nevertheless, I was wrong.

When I met Emilio, I told him that I did not graduate and he was quite surprised. The centre agreed to interview me but my participation was not guaranteed. After a while, and when I thought I had been rejected, they informed me I had been selected. That experience was one of the most rewarding I remember but also one of the hardest. I moved to Callosa where my grandparents lived in a sort of garage of 20 square metres with no windows. I slept on the floor and took the train to Alicante every morning. During the one-hour journey, I had time to study and dream of an Oscar. Once arrived, I had to convince Paco Belda (director of photography and project leader) to use my script for the short film.

At the premiere of this short film in Valencia, I met Israel Ramirez. Israel was a young filmmaker and a Roma activist who had won several awards and had a very peculiar vision on how to do a Youth in Action project. Months later, he invited me to the First European Roma Youth Summit in Cordoba. I remember the shock to discover that I was supposed to speak English (language I've learnt by listening to Bob Dylan's songs). Every time I didn't know what to say, I tried to imagine myself as a Minnesota singer and try to find a way to express what I meant. Anyway, it was not difficult for me as I know most of his discography by memory.

Unlike other youth movements, I think the key of TernYpe - International Roma Youth Network – success is the young people's continuous training through a process of mobilization and empowerment. This is exactly what other movements and NGOs don't have, a long-term approach, as what Roma young people need is slowly learning to trust and believe in their own skills.

So far, I have taken part in seminars in Israel, Poland, Slovakia, Germany, Italy and Spain of course. I have also given lectures to various cultural workshops on many topics, from the Roma genocide during World War II, to the Internet and network society, the American graphic novel, the relationship between cinema and Roma etc. I have also published several articles in German and Spanish, and I made three documentaries and a short film. All in just one year and a half!

Currently I'm part of Ternikalo XXI – a cultural Roma youth association -, which represents the dream of many young Roma trying to avoid bureaucracy and theory and focus on the human factor in which we strongly believe.

In my opinion, a truly revolutionary thought which continually inspires me, is not to accept what the world offers me, but do anything like everyone else. Soon everything can turn into something that makes me a better person.



Life History, by Daniel Martinez Heredia

"I've never appreciated the easiest way. I've always preferred the long way, as you can learn more and it is much more benefiting and rewarding once you achieve your goal." This thought reflects one of my great maxims, and bearing it in mind, you can understand some of the decisions I took in my life, but ... let's start from the beginning...

I was born and raised in a marginal district of Barcelona, the district of La Mina, known for its high crime rates. My father was a truck driver and my mother has always cleaned houses. I was curious by nature and I always wanted to know what happened around me. Therefore, while my friends were on summer holidays in their second homes or hotels, I woke up at 4 am to go with my dad on his truck. The most surprising thing is that my father never woke me up. We had a deal: if I wake up by myself, I was allowed to go with him; otherwise, I could sleep in my bed. However, as I loved to be with him, know what he did in his working hours and above all talk to him, at 3:30 I always wake up. It sounds like something silly, also considering I was only five. I think this was one of the great experiences that changed my life as I was able to realise how hard work is. This experience allowed me to wonder what I wanted to be in life, even if I was too young to think seriously of it. However, I realised I shall do my best not to experience the economic hardships my family did. For this, I would have needed to study and learn.

And... Few people believed in me apart from my family. I faced the harsh reality that leads the Roma community to be unsuccessful at school, a reality which is made of lack of trust by teachers and other factors which make up a student's universe. When a young Roma says he wants to study the first thing others tell him is, "Let him study, he is going to get bored and turn back ...". It seems that every year you have to prove with sweat and tears that you do not want to turn back, that you didn't change your mind and keep on fighting against the world. You manage to study despite the lack of confidence and motivation of people surrounding you. And what surprises me the most is that if you do not study, the fault is given to your Roma traits which have come up to the surface and lead you to drop school. There are



no other responsible except you. This is a stance we are accustomed to: never blame a Roma's failure to anyone but him. Is this fair?

When I was adolescent and my sister was still a baby, my family experienced financial hardship. I was growing up and I discovered a world which had nothing to do with my parents' one. While my mother listened to Camaron, I listened to Mike Oldfield, Supertramp and many other Spanish and international musicians which were miles away the Flamenco I listened to at home. I called this time of my life my "Gadjo period" in the sense that I was taking distances from my culture. But this behaviour was the mere result of my innate curiosity which led to examine and question everything around me. Furthermore, it made me realize the greatness of what I listened to and experienced at home. That's why I soon came back to my "most Roma period." I changed my mind and claimed to be like everyone else irrespective of being Roma.

And ... I started developing a critical approach towards everything around me ... I did not understand why in the world

of work, there is a legal provision requiring companies to hire Roma people in certain areas. I did not understand this measure because, in my opinion, what to do is not to force companies to hire Roma staff, but finding ways to give us equal opportunities in terms of employment. To achieve this, training is needed.

Another issue that began to poke my curiosity was the association between crime and Roma. I wanted to know if this belief was true and, if it was, what leads Roma to commit crimes. This is why I decided to study criminology at the University of Barcelona, even if I knew jobs in this field would have been even tougher for me to find...

The first days at the university were shocking. I met teachers which still assert, even if we are in the XXI century, that crime is in the genes and this was the case of Roma people. I would have never imagined that so many people who studied and are considered as experts in this field came to that conclusion. That belief is so rooted to lead other people to state that the only way to face crime was to exterminate Roma communities.

What most surprised me is that neither in the world of education (and hence employment) or in the world of crime, there are no people more guilty than the Roma. In other words, when a Roma is a criminal, it's not the social integration fault, but always a gene pool matter. On the contrary, when a Roma succeeds, the merit is all ascribable to good social policy. However, every time I can, I took my little revenge and I called this period "Gypsies and crime" which deals with the association between Roma people and crime in an objective manner. I found out that crime rates among Roma people stand at normal levels. The conclusions were quite logical. Lack of training leads to hard times when looking for a job, this causes economic instability which in turn results in a lack of training for next generations... It is like a vicious circle.



The conclusion of this study is that the Roma community is not the only responsible for their situation, which entails several factors, i.e. bad social policies.

After university, it was high time I accessed the job market. Despite having studied, I did not have great opportunities and I accepted many jobs to live on. I worked as waiter and as a bricklayer. My colleagues often asked me why I had not a better job... I never knew what to answer. Thanks to my parents teachings, as I said before, I know how hard work is. I know that studying is not enough to find a good job. And thanks to this, I'm still happy, because this helped me to never feel frustration. I still hope to find a job related to my field of tuition, but have to admit that all the experiences I had taught me a lot.

Thanks to my childhood, I can overcome obstacles, but I never gave up my critical thinking. That's why I'm still convinced that when a Roma person decides to study, he manages to graduate in spite of all the difficulties and is not successful in the labour market, that is a danger to the whole Roma community. It stops being an example because others may think that studying is useless if you cannot get a good job. That leads many people to say "why should I study? Look at my cousin, he graduated and he is working as a bricklayer ...". With this I mean that success should be guaranteed to the few Roma students that accomplished their study so they serve as an example for many so that to achieve, in the near future, a better level of education in the whole Roma community. We must stop playing the victims and become the judge and the jury. We should judge everything around us and condemn the attitudes that lead us on the wrong track. By saying this, I mean first to condemn ourselves and not the outer environment.

Last year I was lucky to meet people with a way of thinking similar to mine. I'm talking about Israel, Maria and Anna, the XXI Ternikaló board members. I knew them separately, without knowing they were active in the Roma "fight". I'm luck because I'm part and actively work to change how things are. Actually, this is what a NGO is supposed to do, right?

I have 27 years, I am a father and I'm experiencing the financial hardship my family experienced too... Nevertheless, under many other respects, I'm happy and I consider myself as a lucky man. We just have to keep on fighting, but this is a slow process... We should be convince that, one day, we may achieve our goal and success.

Opre Roma!

The dream of becoming a police officer, the need for a legal advisor and then the Law faculty. A story by Merdjan Jakupov

Emran Elmazi, 25 years old, is one of the successful Roma youngsters. Today he is a student of Law in Germany. Before, like many children he wished to become a police officer.

Let's find out more about Emran and how he succeeded in getting where he is now. Emran originally comes from Macedonia, from a village in the west part of the country. He was born in the capital city of Macedonia – Skopje. Emran grew up in a Roma community and as a nurse and then Romologie in Skopje. Today she works as an attendant. His father was a construction worker, and now works as a cotton spinner. Emran's grandfather was a blacksmith. Emran has one older brother. The most serious problem in the Roma community where he lived was unemployment.

Emran's education started at the age of six. As we know, he dreamt of becoming a police officer, but day after day, everybody starts having new wishes. Every day, he walked a legal advice. That is one of the reasons why Emran decided to study Law. He wanted to know its rights, make decisions in difficult situations, and be able to help his family.

Emran keeps many good memories about his hometown; his childhood was carefree and happy. Another interesting may be "Why Emran's parents decided to move to Germany"?

The main reason was Emran's older brother health. In Macedonia, the health system is not as developed as in Germany.



He decided to study Law because he wanted to know his rights. In addition, he wanted to help his own community to get a better reputation in society.

Emran Elmazi is a very active volunteer in a non-profit organization. He is also the chairman of Terno Drom. Terno Drom is the regional organization of Amaro Drom, a network of Sinti and Roma youth organizations in Germany. Amaro Drom is active from Göttingen with the associate "Projekt Roma Center", from Freiburg with "Ushten Romalen", from Northern-Westphalia with "Terno Drom" and from Berlin with "Amaro Foro". Emran is really motivated. He wants to help the Roma community, and strengthen the voice of young Roma.

Emran doesn't consider himself as a special or successful person. He thinks that German young people still have better opportunities. He doesn't have plans to move to another country. However, "never say never!", as he is used to say.



Violeta: Fighting for young refugees' right in Germany. A story by Merdjan Jakupov

Violeta Balog was born in June in 1987 in Novi Sad, Serbia. She is a member of the Amaro Foro e.V. board, the Berlin-based regional Roma youth association which belongs to the Amaro Drom e.V. network. Since 1995, she has lived with her parents and two brothers in Berlin, where she currently studies as a teacher.

In 1995, Violeta and her family went to Germany due to the difficult economic situation, following the war in the former Yugoslavia. They sought their fortune in Charlottenburg, an area of Berlin. Once in Berlin, they were hosted in a refugees centre, where they met good people. However, they moved from a refugees centre to another between 1995 and 2002. All migrants were hosted in East Berlin, Lichtenberg, Marzahn, Pankow etc. In 2002, the family received an apartment in Hohen-schönhausen.

In these refugees centres her family experienced nice and bad moments. From 1998 to 2000, they were hosted by Red Cross. They lived in a single room; everything had to be share with other families - shower, toilet and kitchen. It was not easy to live such a life: they received breakfast, lunch and dinner and 250DM a month, like in prison. They were not allowed to leave the building and return whenever they wanted; they even needed to show a document pro-





ving they really lived there. In the refugees centre, her family could share their suffering. This was the only positive aspects, as the living conditions were very bad and inhumane.

In 2002, the Balog family received their flat. In the past, they were not legally recognised. They simply had their refugees conditions recognised to delay repatriation. This legal status should be renewed every two or three months. Once they received the flat, the family was allowed to leave the refugees centre and Violeta's parents started looking for a job. Her mother attended several courses in German and then began working.

In 2009, Violeta received a permanent residence certificate, as she was a student. One of her brothers received it too. However, her younger brother and her parents still have a two-year permit.

Violeta is also actively involved in Amaro Drom e.V. In 2009, she was in Bremen for attending the national conference of interior ministers. She had no idea what to expect, but she had fun and met many young people. On the last day, when several workshops were held, she attended the Roma's one. There she met people from Amaro Drom. Violeta leaves them her number and, once in Berlin, she visited them at their headquarter.

From then on, Violeta has become an active member in the town youth movement. She organised many workshops in schools against antigypsyism. She says that young generation should count on Amaro Drom, as the association provides a space where to share experiences and where to find help and support. Young people from Amaro Drom e.V. actively take part in several debates, cultural activities and public actions, such as the celebration of the International Roma Day, held on 8 April, the Herdelezi and other events.

Violeta believes that many young Roma women do not have the freedom she had. To be successful, she went through a long way, she learnt to establish relationships, she fought... She believes that everyone in life can achieve something and that those achievements are real and possible.



I made the first move, by A.i.z.o. Onlus Torino

My name is Draga, I'm 24 years old and I'm the mother of 5 children. I'm a romni from Croatia, the country where I lived until sixteen.

My life was happy, I lived with my parents and four sisters, I regularly went to school like all other children and helped my mother doing the housework and cooking.

A day, a Roma couple coming from Italy talked to my father about their 18-year son which they wanted to marry with an honest girl.

I didn't want to marry at that time, and namely I didn't want to leave my family. I felt myself inexperienced and not ready to give birth to children.

My father accepted my remarks, but when they came back few months later, my mother convinced me to marry explaining they came from a good family and that I didn't have anything to worry about. Even if I disagreed, I gave my consent. The wedding was officiated with a traditional three-day celebration, with more than two hundred guests. After the





one day, I left without even saying goodbye. My parents were happy to see me back but soon they tried to convince me to return to my husband: *"If he is an honest man... You're lucky... If you dumb him you should marry again... Is it worth?"* My mother's wisdom makes me understand a lot of things and when my father-in-law came picking me up I didn't say no.

I started my new life, try to adapt to my new family, I didn't go stealing and worked honestly, i.e. collecting the iron. After my first daughter's birth, things abruptly changed and, by mutual consent with my husband, I was hired by a woman for whom I did the housework. It was cool to be paid for doing this. Women always did the housework without even being paid.

Then I accepted to lead children to school. I do not make a lot of money, but this job allows me to meet new people, talk with teachers and help people.

Today, my dream is to have a home for my children, which start growing up. I would like to leave the camp and give my children the opportunity to study and work abroad. I made the first move and I'm happy. Now it's their turn.

first days, when I was still excited by the turning point my life had taken, I found out that the house where I was supposed to live was a shanty, with no water, electricity and toilet.

I thought at the things I left in Croatia and I started feeling sad, despite women in the camp did their best to be of good company. I was alone with my pain. I turned thinner and thinner and my father-in-law, scared, told me to go back home if I was not happy.

I started dreaming of my coming back and

I started attending university classes, by Marisa R., A.i.z.o. Onlus Torino

Some years ago, I was proposed to work as a teacher for an association dealing with Roma people's issues. As I'm a Sintisa, I accepted with pleasure.

In that period, I was attending university and I would like to graduate to help the community I belong to. I didn't think that job would have changed my whole life. In one of the camps I worked in, there was a nice guy, who smiled to me every time I met him. Actually, he tried to find everyday a new excuse to meet me. At the beginning, I was uninterested in him, but then I felt I could build something important with him, even if I wasn't interested in marrying. At present, it is normal for Sinti to marry when they are 20 or even later, even if I know that in the past they tended to make a family far earlier.

When I told my mother of the Roma boy, she wasn't enthusiastic; he told me that a Gagio would be better than a Roma, as Sinti generally do not melt with them. Maybe she was right, but I was in love with a Roma, not with a Gagio.

First I thought it was like an infatuation, but day after day I realised it was something serious and decided to marry him, in spite of the cultural differences existing between our subgroups.

I first lived in his father's house, because it is a tradition for a young couple to live with their parents-in-law. Unfortunately, it was extremely complicated as I was supposed not to take care of my husband only but also of the whole family.

I only resisted few months, at the end of which I decided to find a home, as people belonging to my ethnics prefer to settle down and gave up nomadic life long ago. My husband immediately accepted, partly because my first daughter was born and we should ensure her a better life.

I'm a clerk now while he is a messenger and I hope he will get soon the Italian citizenship so that he can find a new job and say goodbye to all problems.



A setback, by D. J., A.i.z.o. Onlus Torino

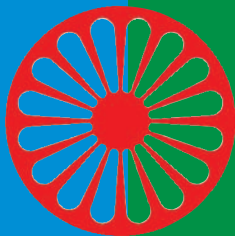
I'm just turned eighteen; I helped my family by stealing in flats, a crime for which you always risk to be caught. We consider the time spent in jail as a setback; of course, we hope it never arrives, but we know we cannot always be lucky. I was convinced I was too clever to be convicted, but a day, after a robbery, the police arrested me and sent me to the detention centre of M. At the beginning, I shared my jail with three guys from Morocco, I started to feel anxious, and it happened every time the door of our jail remained close for days.

I seemed to drive crazy, not to get over that time. I tried to attend all laboratories in the centre, so that to feel free and not to spend so much time in the jail.

I often looked through the only window the jail has, I could see the grass and often thought of my house, family, and relatives. I felt so bad that I couldn't even eat.

Luckily, after a while three Roma replaced the previous convicts: they spoke Romani, our language, and we cooked our meals. When our families came visiting us, they brought us food and we shared everything. I cheered up thanks to my friends and understood how solidarity and friendship are important.

Then, thanks to my family and my lawyer, I was selected for an internship program at A.I.Z.O., an association of Gagé and Roma people based in Torino. In my first day, I met the head of the department dealing with our issues. She was also my father's teacher, and I dare say I know her very well. She asked me to be punctual, to attend school three days a week, and to work two days. I was hired in a shop and deal with printing and other stuff, like photocopies, pack the association magazine etc.



At the beginning, it was difficult to wake up all morning at seven a.m., especially since I was accustomed to go to bed late at night.

At the association, I was taught by three teachers, Laura who taught English, Andreina who taught humanistic subjects and Rosetta, our science teacher. I didn't like to study, as our culture is merely oral and I also pointed this out to them. Soon I started writing, reading and shifted from block letters to italics. That day was awesome! Then I read books for kids, and the teacher wanted me to sum them up, first orally then in writing. It was hard but I liked it. I've never read a book before. At school, I realized I loved drawing. I took a paper, a pencil, and I started drawing something. Everybody says that I'm pretty good at that!

A year passed quickly, I learn many things. I've recently succeed in the middle schools test. I was so scared I cannot get over it, but I succeed. And even if my marks were not that good, it doesn't matter. In a few, I will get a grant to study as an electrician and in September, I'm going to attend this school. I hope to succeed in it too, and then to work, be independent and help my brothers.

What Roma Can Do

Special thanks:

- A.i.z.o. Onlus Turin
- Amaro Drom, Germany

