



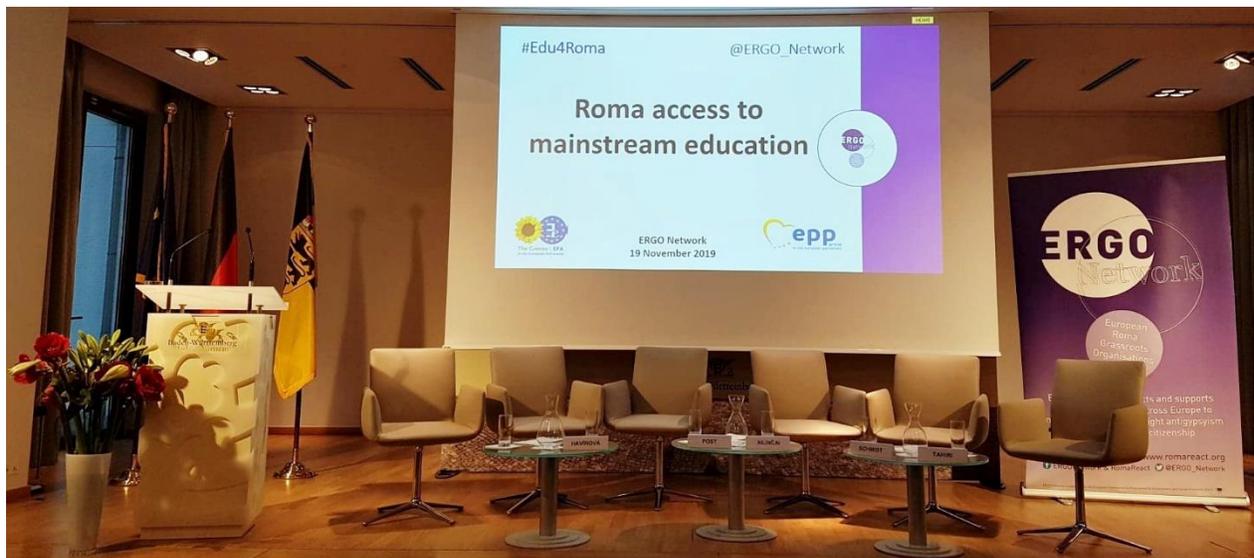
## ERGO Network Annual Public Conference

# Roma access to mainstream education

19 November 2019  
10:00 – 13:00

*Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the European Union*  
Rue Belliard 60-62, 1040 Brussels

### Conference Report



## Conference Programme

<b>09:15 – 09:45</b>	<b><i>Registration</i></b>
<b>10:00 – 10:20</b>	<b><i>Opening Remarks</i></b>
	<p><b>Bodo Lehmann</b>, Head of the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the European Union</p> <p><b>Hon. Romeo Franz</b> MEP (Greens / EFA)</p> <p><b>Hon. Peter Pollák</b> MEP (EPP)</p> <p><b>Soraya Post</b>, Board Member, ERGO Network</p>
<b>10:20 – 11:20</b>	<b><i>What is needed to ensure Roma children can access quality and inclusive mainstream education, combating segregation and discrimination?</i></b>
	<p><b>Kadrin Hasanov</b>, Integro Association, ERGO member Bulgaria</p> <p><b>Zuzana Havírová</b>, Roma Advocacy Research Centre, ERGO member Slovakia</p> <p><b>Aurora Ailincăi</b>, Deputy Head of Division, Roma and Travellers Team, Council of Europe</p> <p><b>Szabolcs Schmidt</b>, Head of Non-Discrimination and Roma Coordination Unit, DG Justice and Consumers, European Commission</p> <p><b>Alen Tahiri</b>, Director, Office for Human Rights and National Minorities, Government of the Republic of Croatia</p>
<b>11:20 – 11:40</b>	<b><i>Q &amp; A and Debate with the Audience</i></b>
<b>11:40 – 12:00</b>	<b><i>Closing Remarks and Next Steps</i></b>
	<b>Jamen Gabriela Hraňaňová</b> , Director, ERGO Network
<b>12:00 – 13:00</b>	<b><i>Networking Lunch</i></b>



On 19 November, ERGO Network organised its annual public event, dedicated this year to debating how to ensure that Roma pupils and students can access mainstream education on equal footing and how to make education systems and establishments more inclusive, by combating segregation and discrimination in education settings. The event was co-organised with the generous support and participation of **Hon. Romeo Franz MEP** (Greens/EFA, Germany) and **Hon. Peter Pollák MEP** (EPP, Slovakia), and hosted at the premises of the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the European Union.

The event was very well attended with over 80 participants, and it brought together ERGO members from the grassroots level in 14 European countries, European civil society organisations and other Brussels-level stakeholders, as well as EU policy-makers from across the institutional spectrum, including the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and the Government of Croatia, who will hold the upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU.



Education is an increasingly important topic in the European public and political discourse, as an explicit objective of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. The latest communication issued by the European Commission on the Evaluation of the EU Roma Integration Strategies 2019, and its previous evaluations, clearly underline the need to prioritise education and training in policy initiatives. Several countries (BG, HU, RO, SK)

received a Country-Specific Recommendation in 2019 regarding improving Roma access to quality education, as well as better integrating them into mainstream education.

However, this positive rhetoric still lacks the desired implementation, and the Roma are still too often left behind when it comes to accessing educational opportunities on equal footing with majority groups, due to structural antigypsyism and its manifestations in education, such as segregation. Existing legal and policy tools, including targeted actions on Roma education, as well as infringement procedures, are not as effective as they could be in challenging ingrained patterns of Roma exclusion and discrimination. From early childhood education and care to second-chance schools and informal education and to training and upskilling for the labour market, every person deserves the right to improve their competences and pursue their personal development.

The event included thought-provoking interventions which fostered a debate aimed at identifying positive solutions and policy proposals based on best practices, in order feed into the post-2020 policy and funding European frameworks relevant for Roma inclusion. Read a summary of the proceedings below, with further links to the full content.

## Bodo Lehmann

### Head of the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg to the European Union

Mr Lehmann welcomed participants to the Representation and provided an overview of the situation of Roma and Sinti in the State of Baden-Württemberg, as well as of the initiatives and projects concerning Roma and Sinti rights and inclusion. He stressed the importance of education and of ensuring equal access for Roma children and pupils, as well as of combating antigypsyism, raising awareness, and building more inclusive societies, free of discrimination and segregation.

👉 *Read Mr Lehmann's full speech [here](#).*

## Hon. Romeo Franz MEP

### Member of the European Parliament, Germany, Greens/EFA Group

Mr Franz stressed his pride at being able to welcome participants in the Representation of his home state, Baden-Württemberg. He also shared with participants his own experience with educational settings growing up, concluding that access to equal and quality education was a pre-condition for a good start in life. Policies such as the EU Roma Framework, the European Semester and European Pillar of Social Rights should deliver more for those concerned. He also highlighted that fighting antigypsyism was a priority, particularly in the field of education.

👉 *Read Mr Franz's full speech [here](#).*

## Hon. Peter Pollák MEP

### Member of the European Parliament, Slovakia, EPP Group

Mr Pollák expressed his regret at not being able to be present in person, but strongly reaffirmed his commitment to ensuring equality in education, which is one of the key priorities of his mandate. No child should be left behind just because they were born in a poor family, he stressed. He also highlighted the key role and responsibility that the European Union has to ensure that Roma children are able to reach their full potential, to lead dignified lives, and to access the labour market.

👉 *Watch Mr Pollák's full video intervention [here](#).*

## Soraya Post

### Board Member, ERGO Network

Ms Post shared her own experience with segregation in the Swedish schooling system, stating that there is an expectation for Roma to have good education results, when there is continuous discrimination in schools. People are blamed for their own poverty and exclusion, while they are not given the same opportunities. Antigypsyism is generalized, and intersectional discrimination is a very important dimension we should be paying attention to. She concluded that allowing Roma children to access mainstream education is not a matter of charity, but of rights, and it is the responsibility of Governments to not differentiate between their citizens.

👉 *Read Ms Post's full speech [here](#).*

## Kadrin Hasanov

Integro Association (ERGO member), Bulgaria

Mr Hasanov provided an overview of the situation of Roma children when it comes to accessing quality, inclusive mainstream education, drawing on the comprehensive research carried out by ERGO Network in five countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria). Main findings show that Roma children still struggle when it comes to educational attainment and completion, and highlighted a series of recommendations to improve this situation, focused on providing more support, allocating more funds, and combating antigypsyism.

👉 [Access Mr Hasanov's full PowerPoint presentation here.](#)

## Zuzana Havírová

Roma Advocacy Research Centre (ERGO member), Slovakia

Ms Havírová shared insights about the specific situation of school segregation in Slovakia, showing that poverty and discrimination continue to hinder Roma children's participation in education. She highlighted the importance of using EU funds correctly to tackle these issues, and presented concrete examples, illustrating the very damaging effects of keeping Roma children away from mainstream education, for both themselves, and the wider community.

👉 [Access Ms Havírová's full PowerPoint presentation here.](#)



## Aurora Ailincăi

Deputy Head of Division, Roma and Travellers Team, Council of Europe

Ms Ailincăi stressed the need for a rights-based approach, prioritizing inclusion, rather than integration, as the latter tends to put the burden of responsibility on individuals. She also presented the draft Council of Europe *Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion* (2020-2025), as well as the results of the INSCHOOL project in six countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, United Kingdom). She concluded by stating that political will was a key aspect in fighting antigypsyism and enduring equal access to education.

👉 [Access Ms Ailincăi's full PowerPoint presentation here.](#)

## Szabolcs Schmidt

Head of Non-Discrimination and Roma Coordination Unit, DG Justice and Consumers, European Commission

Mr Schmidt quoted recent survey figures, which indicate that antigypsyism is still a widespread phenomenon in Europe. He underlined the importance of the integrated framework for Roma inclusion of the Commission, which brought about also the possibility to allocate EU money specifically for Roma inclusion. He stressed that this initiative needed to be continued post-2020, complemented with prioritizing Roma rights also in the European Semester, taking legal action when needed, and ensuring Roma inclusion also as part of the enlargement process.

👉 *Read Mr Schmidt's full speech [here](#).*

## Alen Tahiri

Director, Office for Human Rights and National Minorities, Government of the Republic of Croatia

Mr Tahiri found the meeting very timely, at the moment the new European Commission is just starting, in the context of Brexit, populism, and negative attitudes to further EU enlargement to countries with significant Roma population. He underlined that the Office he is heading closely contributed to the monitoring and evaluation of the National Roma Intergration Strategy, and was involved in chairing the Rome Decade and the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. However, he concluded, efforts are needed from all the stakeholders, and a commitment to address social exclusion and discrimination, particularly of young Roma, women, and children.

👉 *Read Mr Tahiri's full speech [here](#).*

## Q & A and Debate with the Audience

**Roxanna-Lorraine Witt**, from the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, pointed out that there was a need to shift the view of who we target when we speak about mainstream education, from Sinti and Roma people being the problematic group, to the majority propagating discrimination, and asked what concrete proposals were on the table to fight white supremacy and discrimination in our society, so that Sinti and Roma people are no longer denied resources and opportunities.

**Ion Duminiță**, from the Institute of Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Moldova, thanked Szabolcs Schmidt for also referring to European countries outside the European Union and the situation of Roma in these countries. He highlighted the lack of qualified teachers for Romani language, culture, and history, and the need for additional language classes for Roma children, who face three-pronged discrimination, from non-Roma parents, from teachers, and administrative and geographical. He stressed that teachers refused to work in schools from areas inhabited predominantly by Roma, and quality of education was not prioritised. Solutions are desperately needed, not just for EU countries, he concluded.

**Marianne Fast-Matzken**, from SIL International, shared her experience of living and working with minority languages around the world. She inquired about prioritizing mother-tongue based multilingual education, or heritage-language based, which is a tried and tested method throughout the world. She stressed that children needed to come to school and feel at ease, because they find the same culture there, otherwise they will feel displaced.

**Katalin Nagy**, from Pro Cseherat in Hungary, was very involved at the time of the setting up of the Roma Strategy, when a key element was the importance of employment in socio-economic inclusion of Roma. However, as labour market conditions were very much tightening in Europe, she asked Szabolcs Schmidt how can we ensure, in the new strategy, that Roma education and employment will be prioritised by Member States?



**Michal Miko**, from RomanoNet in the Czech Republic, stated that the EU has dedicated a lot of money to Roma inclusion, but results are yet to be seen, as clearly indicated by the Roma Civil Monitor shows quite clearly. He highlighted that Member States kept failing on implementing the principles of the Roma Integration Strategies, hence mandatory mechanisms were needed, because political will is missing, and without it no change is possible on the ground.

**Andy Shallice**, from the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups in the United Kingdom, deplored how Roma, Gypsy, and Travellers children were facing an epidemic of school exclusion, both temporary and permanent. This has been growing in the past 5 years, since the privatisation of the school systems in the UK. He inquired what the European Commission was prepared to do to stop this worrying trend and damaging developments.

### *Responses from panelists*

**Hon. Romeo Franz MEP** noted how all the questions showed how heterogenous the problems are for people with Romani background in Europe. He expressed his commitment to changing the focus, because “we don’t have a Roma problem, but a racism problem. It is the majority which displays antigypsyism.” What are needed, in his view, are strategies to fight these attitudes in the majority population.

**Szabolcs Schmidt** agreed that Roma were denied employment opportunities, usually because it is claimed that their skills are insufficient. The European Commission believes that it is wise to begin the inclusion process from kindergarten. He acknowledged that racism continued to be an issue in need or urgent tackling. While the Commission has no competence on education, it supports the importance of communities being able to maintain their culture, history, and language. Mr Schmidt confirmed that funds allocated to Roma inclusion were not used to their full potential, and that monitoring mechanisms which include civil society were needed. Finally, he stressed the use of legal action and infringement procedures, when all else fails.

**Zuzana Havírová** pointed to many positive examples in Slovakia, where teachers in primary schools started to learn Romani language in order to be closer to the children. There is also a programme preparing Romani students to study at the Economics University, to break the stereotype that Roma can only be social workers. She explained that, in Southern Slovakia, where Hungarian-speaking Roma live, and the issue was that they didn’t speak Slovakian, which is another type of exclusion. She concluded by stating that the education system needed to change from top to bottom, work together with teachers to identify new approaches.

**Aurora Ailincăi** highlighted that there was a balance to be struck between focusing on Roma and focusing on the majority, but both sides were very important. Stereotyping minorities as scapegoats is, unfortunately, a very common practice all over the world, she said. While the discourse always speaks about the Roma in terms of needs and vulnerability, there wasn’t enough focus, in her view, on the potential and the strength of Roma. She appreciated that she was only one of two non-Roma in a six-speaker panel and praised the use of positive examples as very powerful in changing mindsets.

**Soraya Post** concluded the session by stating that a change of focus was deeply needed, in order to acknowledge that the problem is centuries of antigypsyism consensus, which won’t be undone in a day, so a lot of work remains to be done, and everybody is needed on board.

**Jamen Gabriela Hrabaňová**  
 Director, ERGO Network

Ms Hrabaňová began by thanking the Representation of the State of Baden-Württemberg for hosting the event, as well as the European Commission and the German Federal Foreign Office for the financial support. She equally thanked all speakers and participants for the very enriching and fruitful debate, stressing that identifying solutions and policy proposals, based on the practices from the ground, was the most important contribution civil society could bring. At a time when the European level is planning and designing the post-2020 framework, ERGO Network would like to make the case for both targeted and mainstream education approaches, she said. Ms Hrabaňová expressed her satisfaction that ERGO Network was able to bring together different kinds of stakeholders to identify next steps together. However, she warned, the most important element was implementation, which depended a lot on the local level, not just grassroots organisations, but also local authorities. In this context, ERGO is happy to count 7 mayors from the Western Balkans and Turkey present in the audience, as the same evening the Most Roma-Friendly Mayor Award ceremony would take place in the European Parliament. Ms Hrabaňová concluded by hoping that participants could take home some food for thought, about how each of us, in our specific setting, could take the cause further.



*This report was drafted by **Amana Ferro**, Senior Policy Adviser, and **Loredana Dinu**, Policy Assistant (EVS placement) with the ERGO Network Secretariat in Brussels. To find out more about this event, or about ERGO Network's work on inclusive education, please don't hesitate to [get in touch](#) with us.*