

Responsibility Empowerment
Activism Citizenship Transparency

REACT

**Make Europe an
equal place for Roma**



Effective campaigning for Roma inclusion

Main conclusions and lessons learned from REACT

To raise awareness of Roma issues is an indispensable component of Roma inclusion policies. But the scope of this challenge is huge. And what 'awareness-raising' means, can be understood in many different ways.

From October 2010 to November 2011, ERGO Network and its members Policy Center for Roma and Minorities (Romania), Integro Association (Bulgaria) and Roma Active Albania, conducted the campaign 'REACT – Make Europe and equal place for Roma'. We proposed a set of campaign activities and approaches that aimed to challenge negative prejudices of Roma, to alter how people view Roma issues and to sway stakeholders, public figures, and policymakers to get involved and commit to concrete action.

As part of the EU Pilot Project 'Pan-European Coordination of Roma Integration Methods', an important objective of REACT was to explore effective campaign approaches, methods and tactics. This document presents – in the shortest possible form – the main lessons learned. It can be read separately and aims to provide an overview of our main conclusions. But it cannot be seen separate from the activities and actions conducted and from which these conclusions arise.

Basics

We took the angle that awareness of Roma issues is not only to know that many Roma live in poverty and face discrimination. That it is not just about clarifying misunderstandings about 'Roma culture' or telling people that to hold prejudices is wrong.

REACT aimed to challenge negative prejudices of Roma, using actions, tools and tactics to encourage people to think again. REACT invited people to come closer, deepen their understanding and become involved. REACT directly addressed policymakers and public authorities. Not only because without their commitment, policies will forever remain paper realities. But also because for Roma to share the responsibility is meaningless, as long as institutions do not fulfil their own responsibility to uphold the right to dignity and equal opportunity of all citizens.

Finally, REACT put Roma themselves – activists, youngsters, students, communities, parents and children – centre stage. Not as exhibits, but as authors and performers of the campaign. To mobilize and empower them and to give them the confidence and skills to play that role has been an important part of what we did.

Context and tactics

European reality today is one of widespread and sometimes very strong anti-Roma sentiment. In that context campaigning for Roma issues is an uphill battle – if you want to really reach people and not merely get noticed.

For a full overview:
www.ergonetwork.org/REACT

You have to be prepared to confront negative reactions, indifferent audiences and possibly disappointing outcomes.

We started this project from the understanding that exactly because of that reason, we should explore and develop approaches fit to this condition. For one, REACT, across the target countries, gave a central role to Roma to tell the stories, to show their claims and aspirations are no different than of any other person, and to convey the message in ways that could touch and surprise people.

Additionally, REACT aimed to mobilize messengers with a broader reach. Examples range from the participation of non-Roma in many of the campaign activities, to the involvement of celebrities and public personalities.

Finally, while REACT provided a framework, a central idea – that empowerment, active participation and equal citizenship are keys to change, and that sharing responsibility is not the same as releasing authorities from their share – but it did not prescribe an activity scheme or rigid timetable. Implementing partners took the lead in defining and running their campaigns. Messages, events, actions and tactics could be adapted to take advantage of opportunities and to react to changing situations and local circumstances.

Lessons or models?

To accomplish a change of attitude towards Roma is a long-term challenge. Progress and results will, in any case always be decidedly susceptible to context factors. A campaign of just over one year on the relatively small scale we could conduct it is too short to achieve any definite impact. It will also be too short to decide which of the achievements we can now present will turn into lasting accomplishments.

Moreover, evaluation of awareness campaigning is relatively virgin ground, with few established evaluation methodologies. Therefore, we want to caution against taking what we have done as models that can be replicated always and everywhere.

Nonetheless, we are confident that the main lessons learned can be helpful for both civil society organisations involved in public awareness, mobilization or advocacy campaigns for Roma issues and for public bodies that want to contribute to positive change

1. No need to simplify?

Exclusion and discrimination of Roma is without exception a complex phenomenon. Conventional campaigning logic would suggest condensing your message to a single dimension and strictly focus on a particular objective.

We did not want reduce the campaign to a single perspective, hammer down superficial answers, or lose the capability to respond to changing circumstances. REACT

campaigns with complex messages, adapted for particular actions and situations, and leaving room for interpretation. REACT did not just want to send a message, but aimed to challenge people to think again, play with their sensitivities and commit them to action.

We conclude that you do not have to simplify your message or push a certain perspective to successfully campaign for Roma issues. Actions and messages have to fit the context and trigger people to enter into dialogue. To attract multipliers messages have to be credible, not simple, and seduce stakeholders and public personalities to become involved.

2. Positives carry a campaign

To a general public, Roma issues are usually painted in a negative light, confirming widespread stereotypes. REACT developed and used positive examples, tactics and messages. These have in common that they challenge existing prejudices of Roma in unexpected ways. The results also show that open invitations to reflect on problems and answers together, are nearly always accepted.

In Bulgaria the campaign choreographed local activists towards positions where municipal administrations recognized them as equal stakeholders. The key was to posture as such – open, reasoned, knowledgeable – against the expectations public institutions generally have of Roma.

In Albania, Roma youngsters connected to their non-Roma peers and got involved in public actions together, triggering the interest of their audiences. Many of them are also part of a generation that gradually starts to make headway in higher education – a novelty in Albania and public life, much to the surprise of media.

In Bucharest, the extraordinary success of the School 136 Alternative Education Club shows not only that kids from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds are much like other children, with talents, aspirations and fears. It also shows the tremendous power of a successful project to mobilize messengers, who are prepared to relay that story, and commits authorities to become involved.

3. Find the right messenger

Who brings your message can be as important as the message itself. REACT demonstrates that messengers with large potential are prepared to commit and become involved if you have a credible story or an engaging and endearing example, such as the Alternative Education Club, promising youngsters or a convincing vision on Roma issues.

The right messenger can be a key success factor in four different ways:

- 1) The involvement of non-Roma as messengers, as well as mixed – Roma and non-Roma campaigning groups, makes people look differently at your message.

2) In advocacy, people speaking from a position of authority in support of your cause and message, are a great asset for your campaign, and a resource you can use to your advantage.

3) The involvement of public personalities enhances both the credibility and reach of your campaign, not least by creating media interest.

4) Personality matters. Perhaps obvious but no less true, the involvement of persons with a measure of charisma and who can put your arguments forward persuasively helps enormously. This applies to actions at all levels, from national media appearances to informal meeting at city hall.

4. Mobilization is key - invest in it

To play an active role in public life is anything but obvious for many Roma. At the same time to campaign for equal citizenship can only be credible when Roma themselves carry the campaign.

Part of the central rationale REACT was to give activists, youngsters, children, and parents the confidence to play this role, to provide them with the skills and tools they needed and the trust it makes sense to be involved. Getting children and parents over the threshold of the Alternative Education Club was extremely difficult at first. Continuously coaching and supporting local activists is intensive, but bears fruit - as the Bulgarian campaign shows. Youngsters in Albania were given the feeling they are part of something bigger and take this home to their communities.

In the end, we have found that it makes sense to go the extra mile to mobilize and empower communities, individuals and activists, even if it means you have to build their capacity from scratch. Moreover, this is the surest route to achieving something lasting since those involved can continue to apply the knowledge they gained and utilize the wider network they became part of.

This also applies to the creation of partnerships with outside organizations: it requires a considerable investment to convince them to become involved, but to make them co-own your initiative is the way to broaden your reach and ensure it can continue beyond the project period.

5. Respond to dynamics & opportunities

REACT was not centrally led: implementing partners to a high degree defined the activities and course of action, to suit the dynamic context in their countries. Not only did this create a high level of ownership, it also put responsibility for activity planning at the right level: where knowledge of local circumstances is greatest.

This arrangement allowed partners to be flexible, react to events and to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities. When we first conceived the campaign and in the planning phase, we could not know that evictions of Roma from France would create unprecedented politi-

cal and media attention. We could not predict that the ensuing process that led to the EU Roma Framework would largely coincide with the campaign. We could also not foresee that the protracted political stalemate in Albania would force us to completely revise the campaign agenda.

The lesson here is threefold: (i) you need to create ownership at the level where developments can be best judged (ii) you need to be entrepreneurial and able to revise your planning in the face of dynamics and (iii) you need to constantly be aware of opportunities to work towards your aims in ways that you did not foresee.

We also found that dedication matters. The implementing organizations were fully dedicated to REACT. However, there were a number of disappointing experiences concerning cooperation with third parties, indicating that a formal agreement in itself is not sufficient to create the dedication to take an activity forward.

6. Local focus makes sense

The main debate on Roma exclusion has focused on national strategies and even international commitments. At the local level – municipalities and cities – attention has mainly focused on project development and implementation. The local dimension of awareness raising efforts, as well as local civil participation, political dynamics and policy formation is relatively underdeveloped. Meanwhile in policy circles a consensus is emerging that the local level is the missing link in strategy implementation.

REACT had a strong local focus: both explicitly – in Bulgaria and Albania local advocacy campaigns were main components of the campaign – and more in the background – in Romania where continuous contact and increasingly close cooperation with city authorities was both a precondition and an outcome of the activities centred around the School 136 Alternative Education Club.

The “Thank you Mayor” campaigns in Bulgaria and Albania propose a certain model for local mobilization and advocacy campaigning. Our experiences across the target countries strongly indicate that effective involvement in national advocacy efforts strongly correlates with local involvement. Finally, it appears that to be part of a larger – European – campaign is an important resource for local activities and activists.

7. Get the media to move along

Mainstream media in the target countries generally report negatively about Roma and are not naturally inclined to relay any other image. Written -national- media in particular is mostly uninterested in alternative perspectives, with editorial lines decided in boardrooms and not by journalists.

That means that to target media for public campaigning on Roma is anything but obvious. In REACT we at-

tempted and tested alternative routes: local media tend to be more open, sports media is more open because they cannot afford discriminatory narratives, and social media offer possibilities to sidestep traditional media.

We also found it is worthwhile to invest in media training and in spotting media talent, who appear well on TV. In addition to gradually build more intensive contacts with individual journalists – in which room is created for genuine dialogue – works. Once you grab the attention of a journalist or editor this way – most often involving triggering a change in his or perspective on Roma, they are often prepared to make considerable room for your story.



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