

## Access to rights and civil dialogue for all second focus group

**Rome 24 November 2011, at Istituto Don Sturzo**

**Meeting Date:** 24<sup>th</sup> November 2011 at Istituto Don Luigi Sturzo, via delle Coppelle 35 Roma

### **Attendees:**

*Pierluca Ghibelli*, projects coordinator for Italy

*Dana Mihalache*, president of the Association Spirit Romanesc

*Mihai Montean*, secretary of the Romanian identity Party

*Anna Stanescu*, president of the Social Cooperative Risvolti, Rome

*Luca Dal Pozzo*, vice president of Cgm and president of Sol.co Imola and vice president of CECOP Europe

*Ruggero Signoretti*, president of Consorzio Nausicaa, Rome

*Ferdinando Firenze*, Connecting People Soc. Coop. Soc.

### **Welcome and introduction**

Attendees were welcomed by Pierluca Ghibelli who thanked all the participants and opened the focus group by briefly summing up what was discussed in the previous focus group. The summary was focused on the factors of attraction of Italy as an immigration country and the phases of mass migration from Romania to Italy. It was overall noticed that Romanian migration to Italy has been defined as a circular migration generally perceived as “temporary” by the immigrant who tends to maintain a strong link to the home country and is more interested in political life and activities back in motherland rather than the host country. Moreover it emerged that Romanians seem to participate more in activities that involve cultural issues rather than political ones.

### **Structure of the focus group**

After the presentation of the discussion framework, the aims of the focus group were presented. First of all participants were invited to discuss and reflect on the main obstacles to political and civil participation of Romanian citizens in Italy, trying to propose possible solutions in terms of instruments and good practices to enhance participation. Attendees were also invited to provide a forecast on the future trend of political and civil participation of Romanian residents in Italy in the future years.

**Pierluca Ghibelli**, started the discussion with a brief digression on the participation of Romanians to administrative election, providing a general framework. According to the representatives of Romanian associations the scarce participation to local elections (both in terms of lists subscriptions and actual voting) seems to be a surprise. By confronting the election in 2007, 2009 and 2011 an increase in subscribers, both electors and elected, can actually be noted. The trend is deemed to increase in the next few years but still remains inferior to that of other (old) EU citizens living in Italy even though there are not many differences with referring to younger Europeans (such as Polish).

We should not forget that participation in Romania has had a descendent trend since 1990 from 80% to 60% and in the next 10 year down to 50%. Participation in the diaspora of Romanian elections (for the Parliament, Presidency and European Parliament or referenda) is superior to the participation of other EU states where Romanians have the right to vote. According to Ghibelli we shouldn't be surprised if Romanians –resident in Italy– who decide to vote are a just a few. First of all most of them belong to a recent immigration phases. Secondly Romanians appear to be disillusioned about politics even back home due to corruption and incompetence of politicians. Thirdly many Romanians live in Italy but have “hearts and minds” back in Romania and follow Romanian political life with more interest than the Italian one. The Romanian diaspora and continental commuting should be studied in a comparative way specially with referring to Italian, Greek, Polish in north Western European Union.

On the one hand it is normal that Romanian participation is fragmented given the political diversity that characterizes Italy. Moreover active and passive participation implies a certain time for people to socially integrate and depends on quantitative and qualitative aspects such as education, individual growth, social belonging, ideology, religious belonging. Moreover, the hunt for votes of Italian parties right before the elections renders it difficult to have an “ethnically” compact vote. Up to now the political offer in Italy, has not been strong enough to involve the Romanian community which is very much linked to its roots, and is a bit too confused to represent a valid model for those who wish to enlarge the administrative vote to extra communitarian people who are resident in Italy.

**Dana Mihalache**, president the Association Spirit Romanesc, briefly exposed her opinion on the matter of Romanians' participation to Italian democratic life. She started her intervention by specifying that, to her, circular migration does not necessarily imply an obstacle to integration and participation of Romanians in Italy nor they certain return back to motherland. The fact that a Romanian family buys a house in Italy may reflect the fact that they want to live in Italy but could also be just an investment. Participation is becoming more

and more perceived as a useful practice both for people who intend to stay in Italy, so that they can better integrate, and those who intend to return to the motherland. For the latter, participation to political life is considered to be enriching. By living and learning in a country where political life is less corrupted and more democratic they can bring good practices back home.

Dana underlined that, according to the experience of Spirit Romanesc, whose primary aim is to promote Romanian culture in Italy and facilitate the relationship between Italy and Romania, political and civil participation has had a positive trend in the past few years. Italian political class has open the doors to the participation of Romanian citizens to politics and advantages has been recognized from both sides. Work is managed in a common way and opportunities to work with each other have increased.

Within Spirit Romanesc the trend of increased participation is very tangible also thanks to the debating groups, organized by the association, in which political actors at the territorial level are invited to discuss and enter in dialogue with the Romanian community. During these meetings the social and cultural situation of the local community are investigated and discussed on. Awareness of the social and cultural condition of the local community is a fundamental element: without knowledge it is very hard to become good politicians. By working on social policies and in the voluntary sector one can understand and get to know the social situation of a local community. Therefore education, dialogue and voluntary practices should be enhanced.

The future of Romanian participation appears to be positive. Romanians are not just “numbers” as they used to be in the past, they start to be people, with names, stories, enterprises therefore, according to Dana Mihalache, we are going to expect positive trends of growth.

**Mihai Montean**, secretary of the Romanian identity party considered the participation of Romanian in voluntary actions on the territory a good idea but underlines that one necessary requirements to do so is for people to have enough time to start such a path. Moreover time availability is a necessary requirement for Romanians who intend to participate to political life. One of the main obstacles to it is, in fact, Italian bureaucracy: Romanian citizens need to subscribe lists in order participate in local elections which means they have to take a day off work and go to the local city hall to subscribe the list losing a work-paid day. If considering that Romanians come to Italy mostly to work and that they are generally disappointed with politicians both in Romania and in Italy it can easily be explained why it is very hard for them to take a day off work to fulfill bureaucratic requirements.

A good incentive to enhance participation could be to facilitate participation to political election by equalizing Romanian condition to that of Italian citizens. This is obviously very much linked to party's will to capitalize the votes of Romanian citizens and is therefore not that easy to be reached and will therefore depend on the discretion of city majors.

It must be observed that once hope and trust of a population are broken it is very hard to win them back. The theme is very delicate and reliable people/candidates should attend the political scene.

Yet, according to Mihali Montean the future does not seem to show an improvement in this sense. In Romania parties are not willing to provide people with hope and still rely on the fact that, near elections, people have to vote and, off the two evils, they often choose the lesser.

According to **Anna Stanescu**, president of the Social Cooperative Risvolti in Rome, participation of Romanians to the Italian democratic life is very much influenced by the perception of locals' opinion on their presence. Often it is very difficult for foreigners to express an opinion if not asked for or listened to. A strong motivation is therefore needed.

Criticisms on Romanians presence in Italy are very common and certainly an element that could enhance a different perception of Italians towards Romanians is the work done by association and cooperatives.

As a cooperative, for example, Risvolti works a lot on cultural mediation, and often tries to find out ways to face prejudice against strangers but found out that the day to day action is quite strong. 95% of Risvolti's workers in the social sector is composed by strangers who provide services to elders in the local community with excellent results. People trust the workers, got to know them and appreciate them. The same can happen in general, at a cultural level, if strangers start occupying more relevant roles and start being seen not just as excellent carers but also good professors, doctors, politicians.

The future of Italy in general appears to be more and more cosmopolitan ; negative attitudes will not disappear but will certainly decrease. If the feeling of belonging to a new community (in this case the Italian one) will become stronger amongst the Romanians, certainly political participation will increase.

An important role, in this sense, is carried out in general by the media, that are relevant in the shaping of Italian culture. Media should start dealing with non national Eu citizen not only with relation to crime, fashion and gossip but also by providing data and successful stories of social entrepreneurship, social help, friendship and so on.

With relation to the experience of **Ruggero Signoretti**, president of the Nuvola Consorzio, the scarce participation of Romanians in the democratic and civil life of Italy is linked to the transitoriness perception of their permanence in the country. This is evident, for example in the case of job contracts. Often immigrants tend to prefer a shorter but more remunerative job contract rather than a stable one. This might be due to the fact that many of them wish to come back to their country of origins and do not want to be committed over a certain point. This changes, for examples, in the case of women who have children while living in Italy because they are forced to establish a relationship with the country and the local people.

It is very important, for people who work in contact with minorities, such as Romanians, to make them feel at home and highlight the perception that investing on common wellbeing on a day to day basis is as important for them as their return to the home country. Improving the daily wellbeing helps them living in a better way and feeling more part of the society.