

Development of the Roma Rights Movement in Turkey

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The Roma rights movement in Turkey, starting a few years ago with the courageous efforts of a small number of pioneering activists in a few towns, is a new phenomenon for Turkey, which has received a justifiable welcome within the human rights community. Before discussing the hopeful story of Roma associations in Turkey, this article will review the development of Turkish legislation on freedom of associations and the state of affairs today.

With the EU integration process gaining speed in Turkey, as it is the case in other legal fields as well, a series of far-reaching legal reforms in the area of freedom of association have been made in recent years. Notwithstanding their deficiencies and lingering undemocratic features, the changes in the legislation on foundations in the period 2002 – 2005 have undoubtedly encouraged the process of founding many Roma and other minority associations and, in broader terms, have given inspiration to ideas and developments in Turkish civil society.

Turkish legislation on associations: A brief history

Pursuant to the first Law on Associations of 1909 (Cemiyetler Kanunu), no permission was required to form an association; the fact that an association was formed should have been reported to the authorities after it had been formed. Similarly, the Law on General Meetings (Genel Toplantılar Kanunu) adopted in the same year, did not require associations to obtain a permission in order to hold meetings as long as the association's activities did not involve violence.

Freedom to hold a meeting and found an association were also cited amongst the “natural rights and freedoms of the Turks” in the first Constitution enacted after the proclamation of the Republic in 1924. With the apparent aim of introducing a more centrist and controlling approach, clauses requiring association members to be older than 18 years old and not have been

convicted of murder or forfeit of civil rights and a provision empowering the government to at any time inspect any act or action of associations were inserted into an amended Law of Associations as the Constitution was enacted.

The 1926 Civil Code (Medeni Kanun) provided a general framework for legal personalities and thus brought a considerably democratic expansion. The Civil Code envisaged that if a community of people disclosed their will of forming an association in its statute, this group assumes a legal personality; and if this legal personality wished, it could make an application to the relevant administration and have the association registered accordingly. The Civil Code further prescribed that, if the objective of an association would be contrary to law or public morality, it could be terminated by a judge; the Civil Code did not cite the grounds for prohibiting associations or restricting their operations due to the fact that founding associations focusing on acts regarded as criminal by law would anyhow be considered a crime. However, the democratic spirit and principles of this law, which was not guided by suspicion of associations and left the control of associations to the members substantially, could not be exercised properly due to the authoritarian nature of the regime during the single-party era that lasted until 1946.

A dominant characteristic of the new Law on Associations enacted in 1938 and its subsequent amendments, as well as of other legislation relevant to freedom of association, was the imposition of prohibitions and restrictions with respect to the objectives and functions of associations and their members. The imposing of a series of restrictions in the Law on Associations aside from the clause of “lawlessness”, constituted the creation opportunity for criminal liability outside of the Criminal Code and limited freedom of association at almost all times. This repressive regime was a major deterrent to the establishment of Roma and other minority associations whose members faced criminal punishment for violating the law and fell at odds with the Ministry of Interior Affairs up until the last few years.

The democratic provisions of the 1926 Civil Code were effectively rendered null and void by amendments to the 1938 Law on Associations, which eliminated self-governing powers of associations by their elected bodies and transferred the governance of associations to the hands of the state. Amendments undertaken in 1946 while Turkey was entering the multi-party era prohibited the formation of associations based on “family ties, communal ties, and race.”

The complicated bureaucratic procedure for founding an association enforced by amendments to the Law on Associations in 1972 effectively introduced a “permission” regime. Furthermore, the amendments increased the number of prohibited grounds for founding associations and restricted the rights of members of associations. Freedom of association of public officials and students was also further curtailed. The restrictions in the 1972 law were justified in the

explanatory notes of the law on the grounds that “the increasing number of associations shows a trend which might be referred to as too much of social life.”¹

The police state concept displayed itself more visibly in both the 1982 Constitution, adopted after the 1980 military coup, and in amendments to the Law on Associations enacted in line with the new Constitution. The new provisions, which suppressed freedom of association through the concept of “public order”, revealed a perception of associations as dangerous for the state and a focal point of potential crime. The prohibitive mentality dominant in the law widened the field of prohibited activities as well as those activities subject to permit, restricted even more the right to form an association and become a member of one, and provided a basis for total state control of associations.

Turkey’s government undertook to reform legislation related to freedom of association in the period 2002 – 2005 in order to bring this area of law in compliance with the European Union’s *acquis communautaire*. The general legal grounds of the amending law dated March 2002 stated that amendments have been undertaken to several laws within the framework of the Turkish National Programme related to the European Union’s *acquis communautaire*, after making reference to the 1999 EU Helsinki Summit at which the Council of the European Union recognised Turkey as a candidate for EU membership. With the advancement of Turkey’s progress towards EU accession in the period 2002 – 2005, democratic reforms which could not have been put into effect for decades took place in a matter of a few years. As a result of this process, a new Law on Associations was enacted in November 2004.

Amending legislation and continuing problems

The work of non-governmental organisations in Turkey, including the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (hCa) in the field of freedom of association during the years 2002 – 2005 has revealed that amendments to the legislation on associations notwithstanding, a number of problems continue to exist with the implementation of this legislation. These problems can be summarised as follows:

Problems originating from the judiciary and the administration: Discriminatory practices by judicial officials and public administrators; resistance on the part of the bureaucracy to changes in the field of civil rights and freedoms; lack of knowledge by public officials in the judiciary about amendments to the legislation; perception of some non-governmental organisations as potential criminals and intense court case pressure over NGOs through trials against members of NGOs as well as cases aiming to close down NGOs; domination of the state in NGO-state relationships; and obstacles encountered to the usage of funds from foreign donors.

¹ Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (September 2002), *Freedom of Expression and Association - A New Legal Framework*, Study Report. Available at: <http://www.hyd.org.tr/?pid=361>

Problems originating from non-governmental organisations: Lack of knowledge of the legislation concerning associations; communication and cooperation deficiencies; the need for the broadening the horizons of non-governmental organisations regarding what might be done in their struggle for rights; and lack of general legal knowledge and the human rights approach that results in the impasse of NGO members when they come face to face with challenges directed at them by the public administration, especially during the founding stage of the association.

Problems originating from the social environment: Deficient democratic culture and civic organisation consciousness; and lack of tolerance for cultural diversity²

The implementation of the new legislation on associations has been problematic, owing especially to the resistance against the new democratic principles on the part of public officials in the judiciary and public administration. However, even though the legislative reforms undertaken in the field of freedom of association have been insufficient, these reforms and especially the rules on founding associations have accelerated the emergence of civil society organisations in a promising way.

Thanks to the amended legislation, restrictions on founding associations have been considerably narrowed; prohibitions related to membership were eliminated; children were allowed to form associations; formalities requiring associations to report international activities have been decreased; the powers of the police have been curtailed; and a notification procedure replaced the permit regime with regards to activities. Despite remaining provisions which allow the banning of associations on the grounds of illegal activities, the scope of such activities has been narrowed. The abolishment of the ban on founding associations on the basis of religion, race, or social class made it possible for the emergence of many associations which would have been prohibited in the past. Along with associations of Kurds and Assyrians which were prohibited in the past, an opportunity has arisen also for Roma to make their own associations. In 1996, for example, the Roma Solidarity and Cooperation Association in İzmir was closed down by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the grounds of violating the ban on associations founded on ethnic grounds. The application to establish another NGO under the name “Gypsy Solidarity and Cooperation Association” was also refused. Roma activists in İzmir also attempted to register another organisation under the name “Musicians from Thessalonica”. However, in the meanwhile the law changed again and the Association of Roma People in İzmir was re-established in 2006 when the ban on founding associations on an ethnic basis was abolished.³

² Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (February 2004), Freedom of Association in the Process of EU Reforms, the Study Meeting Report. Available at: <http://www.hyd.org.tr/?pid=349>

³ Radikal Daily (12 August 2004), “Freedom to Associations” (Derneklere Özgürlük).

Roma associations in Turkey

Roma people in Turkey have organised themselves by establishing associations in many towns and districts in the last 10 years. Within a very short period of time, Roma organisations have expanded geographically and developed their organisational capacities proving that they are true members of Turkish civil society. The development of the Roma rights movement was especially intensive during the period 2004 – 2007. EDROM (Edirne Roman Derneği / Edirne Roma Association), one of the leading organisations of the Roma movement, was founded in March 2004 during a period in which efforts to integrate with the EU were at a peak.

Edirne Roma Association (EDROM)

EDROM operates in the Thracian region, especially Edirne and Kırklareli, where there is a sizeable Roma population. The association is the first centre for Roma people and gave impetus to mobilisation efforts of Roma in many other towns and districts in Thrace.

The Association, which was initially founded with the name Edirne Gypsy Association for Cultural Research, Solidarity and Development (Edirne Çingene Kültürünü Araştırma, Geliştirme, Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği – EDÇİNKAY), changed its name to Edirne Association for Research, Development and Solidarity with Roma / Edirne Roma Association (EDROM) in February 2006 because the majority of associations that are members of the Federation of Roma Associations prefer to call themselves Roma instead of Gypsy.

Unlike Roma in various parts of Turkey, they were for proudly embracing the term “Gypsy” that is laden with derogatory meanings in social life. The activists from EDROM advocated that in order to combat social prejudices, they should be confronted instead of being avoided: Likewise, they regarded the term “Roma” as sounding foreign and literary; so all in all, they wanted to refer to themselves. However, the general tendency among other Roma associations was to employ the term “Roma” (since the word “Gypsy” resonated negatively amongst the general public), and thus, as a sign of respect for the general will, they changed their name as an association.

The association describes their objective as being “To work for the mobilisation of all Roma people in Edirne under an association, in order to seek solutions to their problems, and to eliminate prejudices against Roma people in society.” EDROM undertakes a leading role among Roma associations thanks to collaboration with public authorities, local administrations, other non-governmental organisations and professional chambers. The association, considered as the representative of Roma people in Edirne, sets a unique example through its participation in international platforms and the implementation of EU-funded projects.

Some of EDROM's activities implemented in collaboration with other Roma associations, non-governmental organisations and public authorities since its establishment are as follows:

- First International Roma Symposium, organised in collaboration with Accessible Life Association (Ulaşılabilir Yaşam Derneği - UYD) in 2005;
- Summer camp for poor children, organised in Edirne together with the Community Volunteers Foundation, Governor's Office, and Edirne Municipality in 2006;
- Collective marriage celebration, organised in collaboration with Social Solidarity Foundation of the Edirne Governor's Office and Edirne Municipality in 2006; and
- Circumcision ceremony organised in collaboration with Social Solidarity Foundation of Edirne Governor's Office and Edirne Municipality in 2006.

Projects and activities, implemented by the EDROM in collaboration with international organisations and institutions, can be summarised as follows:

- The project "Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey", implemented in collaboration with the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (hCa) from 2006-2008. EDROM participated in capacity building and human rights trainings and strengthened its institutional capacity. It visited Dom Groups, located in Diyarbakır, as a part of the field research study of this project and supported them in setting up their own associations.
- Thanks to the experiences gained through the project "Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey", EDROM successfully applied for the EU-funded project implemented by Civil Society Development Center entitled "Strengthening Institutional Capacity of Civil Networks". Within this project, the EDROM implemented the component "Strengthening Institutional Capacity of EDROM for the Culture and Rights of Roma" which aimed to improve the capacities of member associations of the Federation of Roma Associations through a series of trainings. Priorities of the Federation of Roma Associations until 2010 were specified in meetings and a three-year programme was prepared. Furthermore, the building of the website for the Federation of Roma Associations was started. The chief purpose of this website is to provide assistance to Roma associations for the legal problems they face. Finally, EDROM has printed and distributed a booklet, called "Being Roma' (2007);
- Scholarships were provided for 17 Roma children from poor families who were achieving well at school as part of the donation given by Global Dialogue Institute in 2007;
- The Project for Cross-Borders Cultural Collaboration with Roma Folk Music was conducted as part of European Union's Cross-Borders Collaboration Programme between Bulgaria and Turkey. Within this project, a CD containing folk music in Turkish, Roma and Bulgarian, was prepared based on workshops conducted with

musicians selected from Bulgaria and Turkey, and distributed. The main purpose of this project was to introduce young Roma musicians and to encourage them to ensure continuity of their work (2007).

EDROM has also contributed to many nationwide and international meetings and supported surveys and studies on Roma of Turkey implemented by various organisations. The Association is the first point of contact for Roma people in Edirne who have experienced violations of their rights. Furthermore, EDROM provides assistance to Roma in their communication with public authorities, obtaining certificates of poverty, enrolment of Roma children at school or finding jobs for Roma people.

Roma associations and the process of establishing federations

The organisational development of Roma communities in early 2000s, mainly in 2003, which started in Samsun, İzmir, and Edirne, has also resonated in other cities of Turkey in a short period of time. The democratic atmosphere, supported by the EU integration process and the tendency for discussing ethnic issues in a more open way, including through the media, facilitated the boom of associations and increased the visibility of studies on Roma people in Turkey. A warm welcome on the part of the human rights community for the Roma associations in İzmir and Edirne has encouraged initiatives to establish new organisations and cooperation between Roma associations and public authorities at the local level has dispelled fears of being organised.

In the period 2004 – 2007, Roma associations were established in Edirne (city centre, Lalapaşa, İpsala, Enez, and Keşan districts), Tekirdağ (city centre, Muratlı, and Malkara districts), Kırklareli (city centre and Lüleburgaz district), Balıkesir, İzmir (city centre and districts), Mersin (city centre and Ceyhan district), Adana, Ankara, Bartın, Çanakkale (city centre and Evreşe district), Aydın (city centre, Söke, and Kuşadası), Samsun, Zonguldak, Manisa (Akhisar and Salihli district), Diyarbakır, and İstanbul. Today, there are more than 40 associations in 16 different cities of Turkey; however, only a few of them are active.

In February 2006, soon after the associations began to operate, 11 Roma associations established the Federation of Roma Associations (Roman Dernekleri Federasyonu / ROMDEF) under the leadership of EDROM in order to unite their powers and to create effective policies. The number of ROMDEF's members increased to 13 with the participation of two more associations: Association of Roma in Lüleburgaz, Association of Roma in Muratlı – Tekirdağ, Association of Roma in Malkara – Tekirdağ, Association of Modern Roma in İzmir, Association of Roma in Mersin, Association of Roma in Adana, Association of Roma in Keşan, Association of Roma in Ankara (Romankara), Association of Roma in Bartın, Association of Roma in Lalapaşa, Association of Roma in İvrindi – Balıkesir, Association of Roma in Kırklareli, and the Association for Research, Development and Solidarity with Roma (EDROM). According to

information provided by Erdinç Çekiç, President of the Federation, the Federation has almost 5,000 members.

In May 2006, a second federation of Roma associations, composed of some associations that are not members of ROMDEF, was established: Federation of Anatolian Roma Associations (Anadolu Roman Dernekleri Federasyonu). This organisation unites mostly Roma associations that are operating in the Aegean region.

The federation efforts of Roma associations at a time when they are highly inexperienced is an issue being criticised by Roma activists. The inexperience of member associations and lack of institutional capacity and resources prompted some members to vest the federation with unrealistic expectations. Though the federation must operate with the financial support, experience, and knowledge of member associations, it is expected from the board of directors, even from the president of the Federation to assist associations. The most important expectation of member associations from their Federation is to find continuous financial support that will keep their organisations alive. Naturally, the main reason for establishing these federations has been the financial difficulties experienced by these young associations and the need to develop operational ideas that might create effective results.

Working fields of Roma associations

A Roma association in Turkey typically operates in many different areas, ranging from seeking solutions to the housing problems of Roma to occupational trainings, studies related to Roma culture, circumcision and marriage ceremonies, etc. In fact, this broad scope of activities is not always the choice of Roma organisations but is often dictated by the circumstances. The accumulated problems of Roma communities, limited access to social services by Roma and lack of knowledge of human rights approaches amongst Roma create a wide range of problems to be dealt with. Many associations find themselves engaged in activities which they did not initially intend to undertake.

In an article, published in the newspaper Radikal, Erdinç Çekiç, Chairman of EDROM, stated that the establishment of a cooperative for collecting frogs and snails in Edirne and ensuring that people who collect garbage would work in a healthier environment are their prioritised objectives. However he summarised the works completed by EDROM in the last two years as follows: "Twenty-three persons have found jobs, scholarships were given to 16 children, eight houses were repaired, wheelchairs were given to three persons, and books were donated to 60 children. Interviews were made with Roma language speaking whitesmiths, blacksmiths, and caners and a Roma dictionary of 1,050 words was prepared."⁴

⁴ Radikal Daily (30 June 2006), "Let Him/Her be a Roma, but an Organized One" (İlle Roman Olsun Ama Örgütlü Olsun).

EDROM's statute defines the association's objectives as follows:

- To conduct scientific studies in order to research and develop Gypsy culture, and to submit reports and study results to relevant institutions;
- To compose music, dance, and theatre groups, to prepare shows, and to stage them;
- To ensure that courses for illiterate people are opened;
- To ensure that members have regular income by developing their cultural and artistic skills;
- To conduct studies in order to promote inter-communal relationships; to protect and develop positive traditions and customs;
- To increase the education level of children of association's members through scholarships and similar supports; to open local student dormitories and reading halls;
- To promote cooperation and unity between members;
- To reinforce the consciousness of social peace between communities;
- To ensure economic development of members through donations to be received and job opportunities to be created;
- To contribute to increasing the education level of the public through conferences, panels, and the media;
- To establish relationships with relevant organisations and institutions in order to solve problems of Roma communities and to collaborate with them regarding the solutions;
- To be a member of "Foundation of Those Intending to Live and Let Live Humanly", which is planned to be established;
- To prepare projects for developing handicrafts skills;
- To organise trips to the countryside, artistic events, and entertainments to promote unity and togetherness between members and to develop solidarity;
- To encourage events such as charity bazaar, collective circumcision, and sports events;
- To support talented artists; and
- To create job opportunities for members who are in need of work.

Actually, Roma activists are doing their best to have concrete achievements in a sea of problems. Typical areas of activity of Roma associations in Turkey can be summarised under the following topics.

Housing: Activities to provide healthier and safer conditions for those whose houses have been destroyed due to urban transformation projects, together with other relevant human rights organisations, chambers and bar associations; information campaigns, legal advice and lobbying before the public authorities. In this frame work, the Sulukule Roma Association, Istanbul, has established a successful partnership with related organisations and filed a lawsuit against demolition in the neighbourhood. Some Roma organisations such as EDROM and the Mersin Roma Association are trying to find solutions through on site improvement activities for the housing problems of Roma families who live in unhealthy conditions;

Education: Roma associations assist with the school enrolment of Roma children who do not have any identity documents or were displaced; organise summer camps for poor children in collaboration with other NGOs; provide scholarships and education equipment for Roma students; and provide academic support to Roma children. Another channel in the field of education is conducting trainings to build the capacity for Roma associations;

Health: Organising collective circumcision ceremonies for Roma children in their regions is one of the chief activities of many Roma associations. Furthermore these associations assist Roma people in obtaining poverty certificates which are needed to receive free medical services. The Association of Roma in Mersin has also organised a campaign against drug addiction.

Employment and occupational training: Occupational training courses for Roma people; and attempts to create job opportunities for young Roma with the support of the governor's offices, municipalities and chambers of commerce. For instance, the Association of Roma in Mersin organised a bamboo processing course and as result almost 40 Roma teenagers obtained a professional skills.

Cultural studies, research and documentation: Attending and organising national and international meetings and symposiums; and producing publications on Roma in Turkey. EDROM and several other associations also have various projects for promoting Roma music.

Solidarity and charity work: Promoting legal marriages; communicating with authorities to register children who lacks official documents; assisting Roma to obtain social security documents; and solidarity activities such as coal aid to poor families.

Seeking legal redress for human rights violations: The traditional mistrust of law and public authority by Roma has slowly changed in recent days. For example, in April 2007, İzmir Contemporary Roma Association filed a criminal complaint against a renowned actor who stated during an interview, "They made a Gypsy a Sultan and first thing he did was execute his father". Also, in July 2007 some activists from the same association challenged in court their non-admittance to a restaurant on the basis of their ethnicity. The Sulukule Roma Association have also assisted Roma people who were evicted due to urban transformation projects in filing lawsuit against such actions.

Roma associations: Risks and opportunities

Like other non-governmental organisations, Roma associations also face a number of risks while they are trying to achieve their goals and learn to utilise their resources. Identifying these risks and opportunities may increase the effectiveness of their work.

Risks:

The fast expansion of the number of associations, which is not paralleled by an equal advance in the quality of Roma rights advocacy, is an obstacle for cooperation among Roma associations and thus, they cannot work together to create synergy due to varying levels of competence. Though there are currently more than 40 associations in Turkey, very few of them are active.

The efficacy of Roma associations is weakened by the competitive scene, instigated by two separate, rivalling federations. Furthermore, member associations are expecting a solution to their financial problems from the federations' board of directors and even their presidents.

Lack of regular funding for Roma associations is the most important obstacle to maintaining the institutional capacity of Roma associations. Most of them do not have the necessary equipment, such as computers, telephone, fax, internet connection, etc. and have problems paying office rent as well as administrative expenses. But in this regard, same situation is observed in many other associations.

Roma activists tend to attach too much importance to being a member or chairman of the association's board of directors. This causes the management to appear as a tool of governance for association's members and the illusion is created that managers have unlimited powers. It is also observed that being a manager in the association is perceived to be a step towards a political career. This fact is sometimes overshadowing the independence of associations.

The failure of associations to streamline general purposes into concrete objectives not only diminishes their effectiveness, but may also disappoint Roma activists as their valuable efforts in struggling for their rights are wasted by working in too many fronts with limited resources. Since Roma associations typically include an exceedingly comprehensive list of activities in their statutes, their efforts might be inconclusive. As it was noted previously, the existence of various vital problems that must be faced with urgency in Roma communities is an obstacle for the Roma associations to adopt an organised working style.

The common misconception amongst many Roma activists that donors provide support for any kind of "project" related to Roma issues harbingers the "project" myth. Given the financial difficulties of Roma associations, there is a high drive to acquire funding, and even for activities which do not require any financial support to be performed is there a keenness to look for donors.

Most of the Roma associations have difficulties in carrying on their routine association operations since they do not have enough knowledge about the legislation on associations. Especially Roma activists who are becoming organised in Anatolian towns cite the lack of knowledge of the legislation on associations as a crucial problem, principally when the erroneous

application and misguidance from provincial administrations for associations lead them in the wrong direction.

The deficiency of relations between most Roma associations and other human rights organisations does not allow Roma associations to take advantage of the experiences of other civil society organisations. Strong Turkish nationalist attitudes dominating some Roma associations appear to be a serious deterrent for them to take action against rights violations. The perception of justice through the international judicial bodies, particularly the European Court of Human Rights, as a kind of national treason is not rare. Though such attitudes have been softened in recent times, efforts to avoid action which involves confrontation with the state are still prevalent among Roma activists.

Although support offered to Roma associations by local authorities, especially in Anatolia, has promoted self-confidence amongst their members, such support also tends to patronise Roma organisations and slow down their development as independent advocates for the rights of Roma.

Opportunities:

The interest of donor institutions to support activities to promote the rights of Roma and to improve their living standards is increasing. Among the projects that are developed, not only those devised by well established human rights NGOs but also the grassroots Roma NGOs are attracting support.

Increasing support from academic circles, chambers, other NGOs and volunteers for activities against the urban transformation projects encourages grassroots Roma organisations to be more determined in this very tough road for the advocacy of their rights.

The media still provides an important medium for bringing the problems of Roma into the focus of the social agenda, even though it continues to handle Roma issues in a highly superficial and sensational style, presenting Roma people as “musicians and dancers”.

The increasing tendency among international Roma NGOs to implement joint projects with and to provide support to the Roma organisations from Turkey is another factor accelerating the learning process of Roma activists.

The availability of Roma university students is a very significant prospect for Roma associations many of which do not have any educated members. Leaders of these associations are trying to utilise this opportunity by ensuring that educated young people are involved more with the projects and activities.

Changing attitudes towards the law: Until recently, Roma individuals would rarely choose to pursue legal action for discrimination or other rights violations. The reasons for that had to do not only with lack of financial resources and lack of access to legal professionals, but also with mistrust on the part of Roma of the judicial system and its ability to solve their problems. There are indications in recent years that these attitudes are slowly changing and more Roma are prepared to seek legal remedies.

Finally, it can be noted that Roma activists are incorporating values such as civil society ethics, empathy, tolerance towards other cultures and opinions and are trying to develop a new democratic framework, far from the nationalist style of the official discourse, about key concepts such as human rights and the rule of law.



The human rights training of the project, İzmir, January 2007



The human rights training of the project, İstanbul, November 2006



The capacity building training of the project, Mersin, November 2006



The advocacy training for the NGO's, İzmir, May 2007

EDROM Experience in Roma Rights Movement

An interview with Erdinç Çekiç, Chairman of EDROM (Edirne Association for Research, Development and Solidarity with Roma / Edirne Roma Association) and Turkish Federation of Roma Associations, regarding the development of the Roma rights movement in Turkey and the experiences of EDROM throughout this process.¹



Erdinç Çekiç, Chairman of EDROM. Photo: Tolga Korkut.

EDÇİNKAY is the first Roma organization in Edirne. How was it founded?

It was founded by seven people in March 2004 but I was not a member in those days, the founding chair was Fikri Ocak. We organised a general assembly in June of the same year. In this general assembly, a new administrative board, with me as the chair, was elected and we have been working since then. EDÇİNKAY² was founded with the thought of establishing a Roma dance group. But following the first general assembly, it adopted a social perspective for its policies and since then we have worked to make it an organisation that voices problems and seeks solutions.

In which areas did you focus in the first days?

In our early days, when we were still inexperienced, we organised the first “Roma Rights Symposium” in Turkey. This was the first event of EDÇİNKAY. EDÇİNKAY managed to organise this symposium at a time when it had still not been reconciled with its own tradition and had not introduced itself to its base, the Roma community. However, it also had positive results; it helped EDÇİNKAY meet the organisations with whom it is collaborating today and introduced this new body which started operating in this field.

The name of the association, EDÇİNKAY, was changed to EDROM. Can you tell us why?

The name of the association was EDÇİNKAY until the end of 2005. In 2006, a time when Roma people were organising rapidly in other cities and founding associations under the name “Roma”, our organisation also appropriated this name by amending its statute. The reason why

¹ The interview was conducted by Ebru Uzpeder on 15 January 2008.

² Edirne Çingene Kültürünü Araştırma, Geliştirme, Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Derneği (Edirne Gypsy Association for Cultural Research, Solidarity and Development).

such associations preferred Roma in their names is of course the negative connotations of the word “Gypsy” in Turkish society as well as prejudices against Roma people.

What kind of activities and projects are currently being organised by the association?

Though EDROM is seen today as acting in almost all areas, it is principally active in providing solutions. We are dealing with many different problems such as education, food aid, Roma rights and violations of these rights. We are assisting the Roma people to reach public authorities, and we are discussing the problems of Roma communities with the Prime Minister.

As you know, Turkish legislation on associations has been amended in recent years. What do you think about the impact of these amendments on the emergence of many Roma organisations?

Yes, many Roma associations were founded in recent years thanks to the positive contribution of the legislation on associations. I don't think these associations encountered serious difficulties. In other words, if the associations know the legal framework well, they will not face many difficulties. However, it is a fact that the boards of these associations do not know the laws and regulations sufficiently!

What is the approach of public authorities, such as provincial and municipal authorities, towards Roma associations?

Not in our initial days in Edirne, but since we accelerated the association's operations we have received significant support from municipal authorities and the provincial governor and we have always established close relationships with them. We have even received support from the local police department, for instance, we built the training room at our association thanks to funding given by the local police.

What about political parties, what is their approach?

We have not established close relationships with political parties; however we have met several times with the deputies and ministries of the governing party in order to discuss various problems of Roma people. But we have tried to stay away from political parties.

What can you say about the number of Roma associations currently active in Turkey and the effect they have had?

Currently there are more than forty associations; however the number of associations that are conducting effective and sustained operations for Roma people is around ten. I don't want to cast a negative outlook but Roma people are not performing well despite the fact that they have organised rapidly.

Why do you think that Roma people have organised so rapidly?

First, current efforts to found associations became visible immediately due to the fact that nothing had been made for this purpose until today. Second, as I said before, the efforts were

greatly sped up by the availability of EU funds. Also, while some organisations started to conduct some projects for Roma people, politicians have noticed that organised Roma would mean more votes for them. I believe that these developments have contributed to the rapid founding of associations of Roma people.

What kinds of activities are being realised by Roma associations?

For instance, vocational training courses were organised by the Association of Roma People in Mersin and approximately 40 Roma have jobs now. Our friends in Lüleburgaz are working on welfare issues and particularly trying to ensure that Roma couples who did not have official marriages are legally married. The Association of Roma in Muratlı made big progress on accommodation issues; the association is drafting projects to buy land and construct housing. The Roma association in Ankara (Romankara) is working on a different project, one that will gather young Roma people from Ankara and ensure that they know each other. We, as EDROM, are trying to respond to the various requests that we receive and to resolve a number of problems. We feel a significant responsibility for this issue. Recently, one of our people who built a car from a water engine was hit by a car and the authorities confiscated her vehicle. The poor lady was desperate and she sought our help. We visited the public authorities to find out what happened. We learned that the vehicle was registered at the traffic directorate and when we visited them and explained the issue and provided the documents that the woman was very poor, she received her vehicle and the fines against her were dropped. The happiness that this woman has shown for her vehicle also makes us happy. When Roma people feel that there is someone to support them – when they say that “they are behind us” – this is very important for us. Also, as EDROM, we are organising human rights trainings and symposiums and we are attending international meetings of Roma people, trying to produce ideas for the future of Roma people in Europe.

The associations have aligned themselves under two different umbrella federations. Why are there two different federations of Roma associations in Turkey?

Yes, although the purpose and the objectives are the same, two different federations were established. Of course these are democratic formations; non-governmental initiatives. But it is understood that some associations do not like the path our federation follows or do not like the work of our federation and they decided to establish another one. I don't want to present ours as the sole Roma federation; all of our Roma friends may get involved in new federations and do their best. However, I believe that there are political and economic expectations because there is a belief that financial support will be given from Europe to any kind of organisation related to Roma people.

What are the positive and negative effects of federations to Roma associations?

The federation is the most serious platform around which Roma people establish contact with each other. We have the opportunity to share the experiences of EDROM with other associations under this federation. We discuss not only achievements but also failures so as not

to repeat the same mistakes. It is of course a tool for Roma people to speak louder. However, the most negative aspect of the federation is the fact that it was established too early, before the associations were fully institutionalised. The associations that are a part of the federation expect the federation's management to make up for their deficiencies since they currently do not have resources and experience to become self sufficient. When their expectations can not be met they are demoralised; therefore we try to explain them that the federation was not established to serve the associations. I believe that these issues will be overcome as time passes.

What are some of the problems that Roma associations encounter?

One of the most important problems is the lack of a coherent policy when the association is founded. Founders of associations do not have a clear idea about the mission or action plans of the association for their first two years. The second most important problem is the fact that the financial burden of the association is laid on the hands of only a few people. In most cases, when funding for the administrative expenses of the association is not available, the association ceases its operations. Since Roma people who have economic power in our society are not supporting the associations and insist on staying out of this formation, Roma activists face serious difficulties. I guess some well-off individuals do not want to identify themselves as Roma. Support by persons who are well-established in society could be instrumental in ensuring that the associations are healthy, gain recognition in the areas in which they operate, and establish effective relations with other institutions.

Do you think that Roma associations are contributing to the solution of problems that Roma communities face?

Roma associations have only a very recent history. Currently, they are not in a position to find solutions. Associations are at a stage where they are trying to identify the problems. For instance, as EDROM we have given scholarships to students in the last year. Of course, this cannot be considered as a solution for the problems of education but at least we are trying to take a step towards the solution. We found jobs for 10 people this year and we are making a contribution only to a very small part of the problem, but this is what we can do for the time being.

What kind of relations have you established with the Roma movement in Europe to date?

Currently as EDROM, we are a member of ERGO (European Roma Grassroots Organisation) and ERIO (European Roma Information Office). As the Turkish Federation of Roma Associations, we are a member of ERTF (European Roma and Travellers Forum).

What is your take on the relations between Roma organisations and other non-governmental organisations in Turkey? Do you have a critical opinion?

The answer to this question, from EDROM's perspective, is that we are very lucky. We had a head start in meeting and collaborating with human rights organisations that are working on the problems of Roma people. We have taken advantage of this opportunity. However, I believe that other organisations do not have such advantages and are not as successful as we are. Although

they are collaborating with their local municipalities, they are not very successful in establishing relationships with non-governmental organisations.

Critically, I must state that when a human rights organisation that never worked on the problems of Roma people previously suddenly starts to deal with the issue, I consider it ironic. However, if it is an organisation that was already working on such issues we must respect its efforts to share its knowledge and experience with Roma organisations. We are always trying to find opportunities for collaboration with human rights organisation such as these.

Many Roma in Turkey do not believe that the legal system can help them. How could this problem be overcome?

Roma people are still not aware of the significance of the law as a tool. Roma people must be aware that they have the same constitutional rights as everyone else and that the legal system works for all citizens. We must overcome this mentality first. In other words, it is clear that we cannot progress with the mentality of “who am I to demand my rights from the state”.

Though small, there has been a tangible change in the public opinion about the deeply-rooted problems of Roma people and violations of basic rights. I think that Roma associations have made a contribution to this change in public opinion. What do you think?

Absolutely. Roma associations are useful in revealing the existence of a problem, even the fact that so many Roma associations have been founded highlights the existence of problems. Also, the media is now more interested in the situation of Roma people. For instance, as an association we participated in a serious television programme and discussed whether it was proper to be called Gypsy or Roma for three full hours of a four hour programme.

What kind of changes do you expect for Roma people and associations in 10 years time?

Ten years is a bit too long for my projections. But I believe that if Roma associations continue to operate as they are doing now, they would not be in a more effective or reliable position than they are today. If they try to handle the problems from a proper perspective, maybe 30 percent of them could become more reliable and influential organisations open to collaboration in the eyes of government, other NGOs, or the public. If we fail to talk about our problems, if we fail to ensure that problems are solved within the legal framework, we will not be able to benefit from the European Union accession process properly.

