



“Everybody Loves Belonging to an Intellectual Community”

The Hungarian founding member of the Phiren Amenca international network, RGDTS, has been operating for five years, coordinating the work of a number of volunteers all over Europe from Budapest. Its goal, however, is much more complex: it offers self-respect, civic engagement, strengthening of European identity, and, in particular, a dialogue between Roma and non-Roma people. With grant support from the *Europe for Citizens* programme, the organisation has been given an opportunity now to assess, summarise and make available for others the experiences of its members. Coordinator Marietta Herfort told us about their activities.

‘Phiren Amenca’ is a Roma expression. What does it mean?

It means ‘Walk with us’. It refers to a kind of common thinking and activity, in which we try to involve young Roma and non-Roma people, mainly through volunteering programmes. Phiren Amenca encompasses volunteers and their coordinating organisations who are committed to the fight against racism and prejudice.



If I get it right, volunteering here is not only a goal, but also a tool.

Volunteering and non-formal education are among the best ways to overcome the multiple disadvantages of Roma people, because they give them self-respect and self-awareness. They teach those concerned how to stand up for their rights, improve their communication skills and enhance their Roma, Hungarian and even European identity. Our goal is to assign Roma volunteers to non-Roma locations for service and the other way round; we firmly believe that it can positively affect social changes. For us, however, volunteering is only one aspect; we also offer our members opportunities of training and meeting others. Twice a year, we hold one-week seminars on issues such as Roma history, anti-Romani sentiment, Holocaust and remembrance, activism... Those who come here will also share their experiences, but it’s also important that Roma voices should be heard more strongly in Europe.

What feedback do you get?

The most important thing is always the ‘I’m not alone’ feeling: I’m not alone with my opinion, with my problems, questions and thoughts. That was also pointed out by our

research, conducted with support from the Europe for Citizens programme, in which we examined the experiences of three hundred volunteers. It was important for us to be able to revise the result of the work we’d done, to assess where we are now and to show Europe this effective and good practice – not concealing, of course, the difficulties, either. We conducted in-depth interviews and surveys with organisations and young people about volunteering, local employment and learning opportunities, motivation and the role of political and civil organisations. The conclusions drawn will be presented next March, at a partnership-building conference to be held in Budapest.

Are there any foreign youths currently working in Hungary and Hungarian Roma volunteering in the partner countries?

Yes, there are; we have a volunteer boy from the Ukraine, as well as a Romanian girl, who develop websites and organise programmes. By contrast, young Hungarians work in foreign schools and migrant centres, organise youth clubs in Albania and participate in a media

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research conducted in Vienna. There was a year when we only had ten volunteers altogether; by now, their number is seven times as high. First we had much more non-Roma applicants, but in the past few years, more and more young Roma people have shown interest in this opportunity, as everybody loves belonging to an intellectual community.

Did you manage to reach the less qualified, non-urban layers, too?

That's always harder. Social media helps a lot, but our former volunteers are also very useful, because they present a good example. When their foreign service is over and they go home, they usually give an account of where they've been, what they've been doing and how they've benefited from it. Many people find us through them.

In Germany and France, the culture of volunteering and civic engagement is quite well-developed. How much do Hungarians understand what they mean?

Many think that a volunteer is someone who is exploited, working without pay. So we need to give it a prestige. It's not easy to turn up in a segregated school and say 'when you finish school, join a volunteering programme'. Therefore first we try to involve young people in local programmes, and then take them to youth exchange programmes

and meetings. That's usually effective, because they can see how diverse this world is, and they can meet young Roma people all over Europe, which gives them great motivation, say, for learning English.

Being different is not easy...

Often it is really hard to leave home, where you face discrimination, for another place where you can see the same – this is something many of the participants told us during the research. These conversations have also highlighted the key role of volunteering. There were, for example, two young Boyash people in France, working in a nursing home. For a long time, the residents were rather reserved with them. They, however, tried to steal pieces of their culture into their work: they taught dances to the residents and cooked them Roma dishes. At the end to the programme, it was the elderly residents who asked them to show videos and play their music... And you can achieve that in one year.

How can you maintain the relationships established in each project?

Our former volunteers regularly visit our educational programmes as trainers and workshop leaders, and they can also bring new ideas to be implemented together. For example, they're already involved in planning next year.

How can you proceed as an organisation?

We would like to send a volunteer to each country to coordinate local work, and we also want to be more active in Northern and Western Europe. In Hungary, we're trying to involve those young Roma people in the structured dialogue who have already completed our programmes and are ready for it. Not only should they understand the decision-making processes, but later on they should also be able to influence them.

As regards the research, can you share any detail from the interviews with us? Are there any early lessons learnt?

For me, it was interesting to read the story of a Romanian girl, for example, who was 27 seven and had never even crossed the county border before. She needed extra support from us even in such apparently simple things as how to get along in a big city or travel alone. Volunteering has shaped her a lot; she has become a self-confident, experienced and resourceful person, now working in Liverpool. Another girl wanted to work in Munich, but her parents weren't happy about their child being so far away. These phenomena point out that, although young people have their concerns, too, they have a very different approach to being a European citizen from the previous generation, and that change is one of the very goals we're working for. •

Interview: ZITA KEMPF