

EUROPEAN DIALOGUE: A SHORT HISTORY

European Dialogue (ED) was a London-based NGO founded in 1990, immediately after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union in 1989. It focused particularly on issues of minorities, discrimination and social inclusion, and undertook a wide range of innovative projects across Europe with other NGO and governmental partners, with particular emphasis on action and capacity-building at the local level. European Dialogue ceased operation in 2009.

European Nuclear Disarmament

The origins of ED were in European Nuclear Disarmament (END), an anti-nuclear campaigning organisation which was launched in 1980 at the height of the Cold War: as nuclear-capable cruise missiles were planned for Europe, it appeared increasingly likely that Europe would be the site of nuclear confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. END argued not just for disarmament (a nuclear-free Europe "from Poland to Portugal") but also for the destruction of the bloc system that had divided Europe since 1945 into 'East' and 'West'. It called for a united Europe of peace, democracy and human rights through the creation of a 'detente from below'. The aim was to stimulate all kinds of social, political and cultural exchanges between people across Europe.

'The remedy lies in our own hands . . . We must commence to act as if a united, neutral and pacific Europe already exists. We must learn to be loyal, not to 'East' or 'West', but to each other, and we must disregard the prohibitions and limitations imposed by any national state.'

The main authors of the appeal were British – E. P. Thompson, Mary Kaldor, Dan Smith and Ken Coates – and it was launched at a press conference in the House of Commons. But their intention was to create a Europe-wide movement, and by summer 1980 it had been endorsed by an impressive list of supporters, mainly in Western Europe but with a small number from the Soviet bloc, among them former Hungarian Prime Minister Andras Hegedus and Russian dissident Roy Medvedev. Several other East European intellectuals signed later. The END Journal, under the editorship of Mary Kaldor, was influential in bringing together the intellectuals and dissidents from all nations in Europe (it was rumoured to be a favourite 'read' of Mikhail Gorbachev). The annual END Convention brought together a wide range of activists, and END drew more and more support from 'opposition' groups and individuals from both sides of the 'Iron Curtain'.

One of these groups with which END built a strong relationship was Charta 77 based in Prague, led by Vaclav Havel and other Czech dissidents. Towards the end of the 1980s, END and Charta 77 were planning to set up a 'European Citizens Assembly' to bring together people from across Europe in debate and shared activities. This planning activity was interrupted by the 'Velvet Revolution' in the then Czechoslovakia in which Havel and colleagues gained power. Almost immediately, the new government under Havel as President saw the Citizens Assembly as a cornerstone of their political aims. They requested that the remit of this Assembly should include America as a major nuclear player, and be called 'The Helsinki Citizens Assembly' (HCA), based on the Helsinki Accords of 1976 and the consequent establishment of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE). Gorbachev too had suggested that the Helsinki Accords and the CSCE should be the basis of future security and co-operation in Europe, after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and NATO.

European Dialogue & The Helsinki Citizens Assembly

After the collapse of communism in 1989, END was re-constituted as European Dialogue, which also became the British base of the international HCA. Mary Kaldor and Kate Soper wrote the ED Founding Document, and Jeanette Buirski was the first co-ordinator and networker. Its sponsors included Charter 88, Liberty and the New Economics Foundation. In determining the input from the UK into the first Prague Assembly in 1990, ED gathered together NGO representatives of a wide spectrum of citizens' concerns, to exchange ideas about how we could all peacefully and constructively co-operate across all national borders. The UK delegation included human rights, democracy and civil liberties NGOs; those representing national and ethnic minorities, and the disabled; 'new radical economics' and environment groups and foundations; women's and LGBT groups; and peace, conflict resolution and disarmament groups. The constituent nations in the UK were also represented: a Scottish HCA was set up, organised by Joyce McMillan, and Northern Ireland and Wales also sent representatives to the first HCA meeting in Prague. The discussion focused on how European Institutions could bring Europe together in peace, universal human rights and democracy - a very wide agenda!

The HCA provided a rich source of international networking, exchange of experience and partnership projects. Originally it worked within four 'Commissions' – Peace and Demilitarisation, the Economy and Ecology, European Institutions, and Women's Issues. An International Co-ordinating Committee composed of representatives from all participating nations met regularly, and there was a small Secretariat in Prague.

In this context during the early to mid 1990s, ED worked on a wide range of issues, responding to conflicts and to the national, cultural and ethnic identity issues which arose after the end of the Cold War. (In retrospect, many of these seem prescient – they are still at the centre of the political stage).

The following are just a few examples. In 1992, ED looked at UK constituent nations and regional representational issues within the UK and a federal Europe in the 'Power to the People' conference; it campaigned for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East in the run-up to and aftermath of the first Gulf War; and it campaigned vigorously for 2 -3 years before and after the war in Bosnia, doing many campaigns to preserve the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural fabric of Balkan society. This included campaigning for Safe Havens for the civilian population caught up in the conflict. ED pioneered the policy of 'humanitarian intervention' during the war in Bosnia, later adopted in the Kosovo conflict. ED also supported reconciliation in the aftermath of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia during the breakaway of Nagorno Karabakh – ED was a main partner in this Transcaucasus Dialogue project. ED's women partners in Armenia and Azerbaijan won the Olaf Palme Peace prize for their courageous and peace-building work on the exchange of prisoners. And ED organised a major 'People's Europe' conference in 1998 to coincide with the EU Intergovernmental Conference of that year, which was funded, inter alia, by the British Government, the European Parliament and the European Commission, and which presented the bottom-up view on European integration.

Focus on Roma & Minority Issues

But ED's strongest and most long-lasting issue was to combat the discrimination and prejudice against the large Roma and Gypsy populations in Europe. After the formal separation of Czechoslovakia into Slovak and Czech Republics in December 1992, it became apparent that the Roma, who often moved between and had relatives in the two new States, were becoming increasingly disenfranchised. Given a very short time-span to register their citizenship many Roma were unable to access this information, and the Roma

faced becoming stateless and more and more outside the provision of state education, health and other services. ED brought a Roma representative from Prague to Britain on study visits in 1993 and 1994, and this led to further contact and communication with Roma leaders and NGOs. In 1998 in partnership with HCA Roma Brno, ED organised an EU-funded conference on Roma Education in Peterborough UK, with participation from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. When Roma asylum seekers started to arrive in the UK towards the end of the 1990s, ED helped to organise a Czech & Slovak Roma leaders visit, hosted in the House of Commons by Jeremy Corbyn MP.

Building on these initiatives and the contacts made, and under the leadership of Jeanette Buirski, now Director of the organisation, ED began developing what would be turn out to be ten years of substantial project work on Roma and minority issues across Europe. To facilitate this, ED moved to more substantial office premises in Goswell Road in central London, with Andy Roberts continuing to act as financial manager, and with additional staff working on specific funded projects. Peter Mercer, a leading British Romany Gypsy activist and Chair of the East Anglian Gypsy Council, who had extensive European contacts, acted as an adviser for all ED's Roma-related work, and played an active role in projects.

This new phase of ED's work began with a pioneering *'European Workshop on Roma – Police Relations'*, which brought together both Roma and police from Western and Eastern European countries to address widespread concerns about oppressive and discriminatory policing. The three-day UK-based event was held in 1999 at a residential training centre in Turvey, Bedfordshire, run by Jerome Mack of 'Equalities Associates', who for the previous ten years under contract with the Home Office had been providing training for the British Police on racism and minority issues. The funders for the initiative included the Council of Europe, the European Roma Rights Centre, and the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID). Nicolae Gheorghe, a leading Roma activist from Romania who would shortly become the Adviser on Roma Issues for the OSCE, and Robin Oakley, a sociologist who had been working with Jerome Mack and with the Council of Europe on these issues, played leading roles in planning and implementing the Workshop.

The Workshop proved highly successful in exploring the issues and identifying potential ways forward, and helped ED to establish working relationships with Roma NGOs in many CEE States and Western Europe. It also led to further cooperation with UK Government's Department for International Development, which subsequently funded a four-year programme of work (2000-2004) led by ED to help the accession states work towards fulfilling EU standards in human and citizenship rights for Roma – The *'Roma Rights and Access to Justice in Europe'* programme (RrAJE). In this programme, ED worked intensively with Roma and other NGO partners in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, and with networking into and sharing experience with Poland and Hungary also. The main objective of the RrAJE Programme was to help to build partnerships between Roma and public authorities and agencies at the local level, and to develop multi-agency strategies for promoting Roma integration. The Programme offered British models for combating discrimination and promoting integration of minorities, using staff of Reading and Greenwich Racial Equality Councils as consultants and hosts for UK study visits, and with Robin Oakley acting as main consultant for the overall programme. A detailed practical guidance booklet, with examples drawn from the project, was published with the support of DFID afterwards.

The success of the RrAJE Programme led to the establishment of several further projects, which built in various ways on the preceding work, and continued ED's cooperation with some of the previous partner NGOs and governmental agencies. The two main initial projects, which ran from 2004-2006 were:

(1) The TRAILER project - *Traveller and Roma Action for the Implementation of Legal and Equality Rights* – which was funded by the EU Community Action Programme to Combat Discrimination, whose aim was to improve the implementation of national anti-discrimination legislation vis-à-vis the EU equality directives. European Dialogue brought together human rights/anti-racist organisations from five European countries (Bulgaria, Ireland, Romania, Slovakia and the UK), all at different stages of implementing national anti-discrimination legislation, with the aim to improve access to justice and to promote social inclusion specifically for Roma, Romany Gypsies and Travellers. The project included a diverse range of interrelated activities which responded to the local needs of Roma, Romany Gypsies and Travellers, and the state of play of national anti-discrimination legislation.

(2) The PRIMER project – *The Project for Roma Inclusion in Mainstream Education Resources* – which was undertaken in Bulgaria, funded by the British Big Lottery, and aimed to improve access to and performance in pre-school and primary education for Roma girls and boys in two locations: in the 35,000 strong Roma neighbourhood of Fakulteta in Sofia, and in Lom, a medium-sized town in the deprived northern region of Montana. It built directly on the partnerships established in the RrAJE Programme in these locations, and was led by Arthur Ivatts, a British educationalist and government adviser specialising in Roma issues. The PRIMER project informed national education policy at the highest level and it produced models of good policy and practice in implementing inclusive and culturally sensitive education curricula for deployment throughout Bulgaria and in other countries to improve education for Roma children.

Although initially, after the Turvey Workshop on Policing, ED's work on Roma issues developed on a more broadly-based front, the need to address policing issues remained acute, and the opportunity to return to these arose after Nicolae Gheorghe had become established in the post of Adviser to the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and the OSCE's 'Action Plan on Roma & Sinti Issues' had received approval by its 50-plus member states. Robin Oakley and Peter Mercer worked closely with Nicolae Gheorghe to assist in formulating relevant sections of the Action Plan, and subsequently (from 2004 onwards) OSCE provided funding for ED to develop a programme to support the implementation of the police-related recommendations, under the title "*Police and Roma: Towards Safety for Multi-Ethnic Communities*". The programme had two main components: firstly, intensive work with the Police and NGOs in Romania, designed to develop a model of good practice for assessing needs and implementing changes, and secondly, a series of Regional Workshops on these issues, including in the Balkans, Russia, Poland and Western Europe. Several former senior UK police officers with relevant experience (principally Chief Inspector Chris Taylor of the London Metropolitan Police) were brought in to assist with these activities. The overall body of experience and materials generated by this programme formed the basis of a comprehensive practical guidance document on Police and Roma which was produced by the OSCE in 2010.

Parallel with the OSCE Programme, ED also developed a quite separate project on Policing and Minorities in Russia – *Ethnic Minorities and Access to Justice in the Russian Federation* (EMAJ). This was developed in partnership with the International Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with Human Rights NGOs based in Moscow and Ekaterinburg. The project, which ran from 2003 – 2006, was funded under the European Union Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), with additional support from the British Government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Its aim was to assist with developing and implementing models for building trust and cooperation between police and minority communities in different regions of the Russian Federation. As with the RrAJE Programme, UK experience was shared through training workshops (in four locations: Moscow, Ekaterinburg, Samara and Krasnodar) and UK study visits. The workshops

brought together representatives of Russian Police and NGOs, and once again UK police officers joined ED's existing British consultants and NGO partners in delivering the workshops. Following completion of this project, the Police and Human Rights Programme of the Council of Europe commissioned ED in 2007 to produce a compilation of international documents setting out standards and good practice on policing in relation to minorities, for use primarily in Higher Police Training Institutes across the Russian Federation (though also for use across Europe more generally).

Although the above were the main European-level projects which ED conducted during this period, ED was also actively working on these issues in other ways as well, notably through another EIDHR/FCO-funded project in Turkey in partnership with Bosphorus University, designed to raise awareness among the judiciary, prosecutors and other criminal justice agencies of the human rights implications of potential future EU Accession.

From around 2006, however, ED began also to develop initiatives on issues relating to Roma, Gypsies and Travellers within the UK. This built on earlier activities, conducted in cooperation with Peter Mercer, such as helping to set up an All-Party Parliamentary Committee chaired by Paul Stinchcombe MP, which was launched in 2003. However, the success of the OSCE Programme's 'Western European Workshop on Police and Roma', which had been held in Derbyshire in partnership with The Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group, resulted in several new projects. The first, sponsored by the Home Office, was to produce background materials on Gypsy and Traveller Communities for use in training by the British Police, and the second, funded by the Barrow-Cadbury Trust, was to undertake capacity-building for the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups, to strengthen their network and capability for influencing policy and practice at national and local levels.

These were soon supplemented by a further project, on '*European Roma in England*', initiated in 2007 and funded by the Department for Children Schools & Families (DCSF), which was concerned at the lack of reliable information regarding the numbers, locations and specific educational needs of children of Roma background deriving from the new EU Accession States. A 'mapping survey' was carried out, based largely on an extensive programme of interviews with both Roma and service providers in the main areas of settlement. A full report of the survey was published in 2009, together with short information and guidance booklets both for managers and for front-line staff.

Vulnerabilities and Closure

During 2007, it was becoming clear that, if the success of the preceding years was to be maintained, ED needed to have a forward strategy that would enable the organisation to overcome its existing limitations and respond effectively to changes in the external environment. Its main existing limitations were that it was totally reliant on project funding, and had no financial reserves, so that financial viability was constantly a juggling act with no security as to the future. As regards the external environment, many funding sources that had been used previously were drying up (eg. UK and EU funds linked to preparation for EU accession), and both EU and most other programmes required provision of co-funding. Without any core funding, ED had no resources of time or money to fund the necessary work to develop new initiatives and keep the organisation alive during financially fallow periods.

Under the continuing leadership of Jeanette Buirski, ED developed and adopted a strategy designed to address these issues, and to pursue new opportunities in the fields of promoting human rights, justice and the integration of minorities. However, with hindsight, this effort probably came too late - if, indeed, it was viable. A major reason was that, with the increasing dominance of the EU as the principal funding body for work in this field, it was becoming clear that the days of small NGOs like ED being able to undertake modest but

pioneering initiatives were numbered: the scales were weighted in favour of the large consulting and research organisations with their head offices conveniently located in Brussels.

ED's circumstances were aggravated by a serious dispute with the EU following a financial audit of one of ED's earlier EU-funded projects, the TRAILER Project, which had been one of ED's most successful projects and had been presented at several EU events in Brussels. In the auditor's report it was alleged that some of ED's country-specific NGO partners had not followed the required accounting procedures, and substantial sums of money were required to be returned. As these small in-country NGOs had no resources to produce such money, and as ED as the coordinating fund-holder was ultimately held responsible, these sums were then demanded by the EU from ED. The scale of these demands was well beyond the resources of ED and its capacity to persist with its initial appeal against the EU's decision.

In late 2009, therefore, ED's Managing Board reluctantly decided they had no option but to close the organisation down. This was a sad ending for a small but pioneering organisation that undoubtedly still had great potential for building on the work it had undertaken in the previous ten years and indeed earlier.

ED's Contribution

The main achievements of ED's work during its latter ten or so years of focusing on Roma and minority issues across Europe may be summarised as follows:

1. It demonstrated the capacity for a small coordinating NGO to build innovative trans-national projects in partnership with other NGOs working on these issues at national and local levels, and to help build their capability to sustain and disseminate the results more widely.
2. It demonstrated the usefulness of sharing UK experience on these issues with other European NGO partners, as well as sharing experience more generally among national- and local-level NGOs across Europe.
3. It highlighted the importance of taking action on these issues at local as well as national levels.
4. It also highlighted the importance of adopting an integrated, multi-agency approach to tackling Roma and minority issues, especially at the local level.
5. It developed effective models for partnership-building between local communities/NGOs and local governmental agencies, and also for promoting the participation of minorities in this process.
6. It highlighted the benefits of working with and through inter-governmental agencies for promoting action to address Roma and minority issues, within a framework of international human rights and inter-governmental commitments.

Jeanette Buirski & Robin Oakley

February 2016