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## **Equal Opportunities as a Challenge for the International Community**

*Respected Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends*

Pakjivale rajalen thaj rajnalen, Mangle amalalen (Roma)

Si man bar-i satisfakcija so avdie šaj te ovav tumencar ki akaja maškar temutni konferencija. Isi man bari baht ano vilo so šaj te dav дума akale temate (It is a great pleasure to be today with you at this international conference, in particular having the opportunity to speak about this topic.)

Our deep appreciation first of all to the organisers of this conference for their timely and valuable initiative.

The European Commission has for some time now highlighted the difficult conditions faced by the Roma communities in EU Member States, candidate and potential candidate countries.

Roma communities all over Europe continue to experience particularly severe forms of exclusion and discrimination in areas, such as education, employment, housing, and healthcare.

77% of Europeans think that being Roma is a disadvantage in Europe.

Yet, discrimination on the basis of race and ethnic origin is prohibited in the EU in all areas of life (directive 2000/43/EEC).

Renewed efforts of the EU:

In line with the Treaty of the European Union, the European Union has in recent years intensified its efforts to protect individuals from discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation. These efforts have produced results, including the development of some of the most comprehensive and far-reaching anti-discrimination legislation in the world.

A powerful tool kit of financial- and policy instruments are now also available.

Legislation, policy development:

An agenda for non-discrimination was developed during 2007, "the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All".

2008 was the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

The aim of giving special attention to these issues in 2007-2008 is to inform people of their rights to protection against discrimination under European and national law; celebrate diversity as an asset for the EU; and to promote equal opportunities for all in economic, social, political and cultural life.

The Commission coordinates efforts in a number of key policy areas, which are particularly relevant for Roma inclusion, such as education, employment and social inclusion.

The Commission wants to inspire also the EU member states to improve the situation of Roma.

On 16th September 2008, the European Commission organised the first EU-level summit devoted to improving the situation of Roma communities across the Union. The summit gathered EU institutions, national governments and Roma civil society organisations from around Europe. The conclusions of the Summit are submitted to the French Presidency for

further consideration in the Council of Ministers ahead of the December 2008 European Council meeting of EU leaders.

*Financial assistance:*

Substantial amounts of financial assistance, including over €100 million through the PHARE programme, have been provided for projects specifically targeting Roma communities in pre-accession countries. In addition, there are the Structural Funds, and in particular the European Social Fund. During the last programming period 2000-2006, some 275 million EUR were devoted to projects specifically targeted at Roma. During the same time approximately 1 billion EUR was spent on measures targeting vulnerable groups, including the Roma.

Under the IPA 2007 fiche for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia there are funds (EUR 0.6 Million) earmarked to support the implementation of the country's Roma strategy.

*Roma in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia:*

Let me now focus on the situation of Roma in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which bears many similarities to that of the Roma communities in other Central and Eastern European countries.

The Constitution of the country recognizes Roma as a constitutive category of citizens and is based on principles of equality and democratic rights for all. The 2002 population census registered 2.02 million citizens. The country is ethnically diverse with Macedonians constituting 64.2%, Albanians 25.2%, Turks 3.9%, Roma 2.7% and other minorities altogether 5% of the population.

In January 2005, the Government adopted the National Strategy for Roma, aimed at providing enhanced support for the Roma community and for social integration. Indeed it is one of the rare countries which has a municipality run by a Roma Mayor, while the recently established Coalition government includes a Roma government Minister. In addition an Agency for the protection of minority communities has also been established

However, the 2008 Commission Progress Report for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia gives the following still rather grim picture of situation of the Roma:

- In 2007, Roma had the highest rate of unemployment (according to some reports about 70%), the lowest personal and family incomes and the highest mortality rate of any ethnic group.

- Some Roma lack personal documents, such as birth certificates and medical insurance or employment cards, which are necessary to access social insurance, health care and other benefits.
- Roma children still have the lowest levels of participation in primary school, with only 63% attendance.
- Special police units have used excessive and unjustified force, inter alia against members of the Roma community.
- As of March 2008, there were 1,840 refugees/asylum seekers in the country, of whom the vast majority are Roma and Ashkali refugees from Kosovo who entered the country in 1999. Only 28 have acquired refugee status so far.
- There is little progress in equitable representation of the Roma communities, which remain underrepresented within the civil service.
- The Strategy for Roma is being slowly implemented.

The experiences with the implementation of the Roma Strategy in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia indicate that a number of challenges deserve further attention.

- There is a need to strengthen the coordination and exchange of information among national actors, including the Government and other stakeholders, on the Roma Strategy.
- Secondly, as the implementation of the Strategy is most feasible at the local level, more involvement of the local authorities and other local actors is required.
- Capacity building of the Roma civil society is also of vital importance.
- Real progress on the ground also depends on the involvement of Roma themselves at all levels of policy development, decision-making and programme implementation.

For its part the EU has supported a number of programmes supporting the Roma community and promoting tolerance and respect for the Roma in society. The EU Mission has for example provided **grants through the European Instrument for Democracy for Human Rights to promote direct access by Roma to democratic institutions**. Within one project in partnership with the Roma Rights Forum “ARKA”, the Roma Women’s Organization of Macedonia “DAJA” and the NGO “Progress”, trained Roma Case Managers have worked with individual families to assess their needs, and to develop goals and a plan of action for individual family members.

A programme aimed at promoting tolerance in multiethnic communities is also under way in over 25 municipalities in the country through the Soros foundation. 40 Roma families in the Kumanovo and Kriva Palanka communities were recruited for the project. They helped other Roma families with access to free legal help and payment of small fees that represent barriers to participation and integration of Roma in Macedonian society. For example, costs for primary school textbooks, shoes or clothing for children attending school, or transportation for a parent to attend a job training program were covered by the project.

Another worthwhile project was developed in Bitola aimed at providing computer skills to the Roma community there enabling them a better chance of accessing job opportunities and better integration in the local community.

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

It is clear that the implementation and enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation is not enough to tackle the multifaceted and deep-rooted patterns of inequality experienced by some groups, such as the Roma. What is needed is a change of mindset and elimination of the prejudices which the Roma communities have suffered from.

We should look at positive measures which may be necessary to compensate for long-standing inequalities suffered by the Roma, who, historically, have not had access to equal opportunities.

Last but not least, I want to stress that Roma communities are not only victims but also have a rich and valuable cultural heritage to contribute. In that respect the Roma community is an asset to the European civilisation. This is sometimes forgotten in the discussion on the situation of Roma.

Oven but bahtale thaj saste

Thank you very much!