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The Roma Issue as a Challenge

Retrospective 2008:

- This year we have seen an outburst of anti-Romani violence in Italy, followed by tough governmental containment policies. Roma were declared a “security threat”. This seemingly Italian problem has in fact its roots in a continuous exclusion of Roma in Romania. Nowadays “social exclusion travels”, and the social reality of Roma poverty in ghettos in the East can very fast become a social reality in the West.
- A perpetuation of this situation bears real dangers. Beyond the Italian case; in Hungary we have seen in the last months a series of attacks by non state actors against Romani households. At least four persons died in such attacks with Molotovs or hand grenades. The police is investigating even now nor ruling out racist motivation.
- Only weeks ago the Czech Police barely prevented a well organized crowd of far right activists from reaching a Romani settlement – the events were widely debated in the Czech Republic and reported by the BBC. There is no reason to be complacent, in Hungary, the Czech Republic and in Romania far right groups are gaining ground and becoming less politicized and more militant (Hungarian Guard, Neo Nazi Groups in CZ, etc).
- So the challenge is there and becoming more acute. Social frictions remain a serious danger, as seen in Italy, accentuated by the dismal conditions in Roma settlements, “campi nomadi”, by prejudices and discrimination!

- Nowadays Europe and EU institutions are facing many serious challenges: financial crisis, global warming, assertive Russia etc. Nevertheless the exclusion of Roma also remains a challenge not only for national governments but for the EU as well. Challenges are interlinked, and although Roma face acute own problems in education, employment, housing, health etc.(will not go through these), Roma are not immune to the general problems affecting our societies. The Roma issue needs to be addressed together with other challenges!

Response:

- It has been long acknowledged that the Roma issue calls for coordinated action. National leaders, in Bulgaria in Italy, in Romania have called in 2007 on the EU to get involved. Rights Groups – ERPC have launched the call for an EU Roma Strategy. The EP had a series of resolutions calling for comprehensive action!
- Maybe these are not sufficient reasons to call for a collective, coordinated EU response. I would contend that a serious reason is that “social exclusion travels” (the scale and scope is irrelevant considering the huge impact on Italian society). While it travels social exclusion may cause inter-ethnic tensions. If not tackled meaningfully it will only be exported or imported endlessly. Roma were a diplomatic issue that involved Italy, Romania, at one point Spain and the EU. The roots go deep but as discussed this morning the national governments which have failed to provide meaningful responses during the transition period bear a big share of the responsibility. And, even worse, those governments who were prepared to implement policies that deepen the problems rather than solving them (Italy).
- The Decade of Roma Inclusion is the only existing model of international cooperation concerning Roma. But the lesson learnt of the Decade is that without the international community (EU) involved, without real political will and coordination progress is slow. The Decade is however an initiative that has to be built on, there are many lessons learnt and these should serve for better policy making.

- I would contend that challenges that have an EU dimension need an EU response. The Financial Crisis, Georgia, Kosovo are and were tackled at the EU level. When there is enough political will and challenges are acute, consensus and resources are found, billions of Euros have been found to bail-out banks, to stimulate the economy/businesses. Challenges of all sorts have solutions.
- Seemingly in 2008 decision makers were looking for solutions for a more visible and acute Roma issue (EU and national level). This year Roma have received much attention in the media – mostly related to their situation in Italy. The European Parliament debated at least four times and will debate this week again on the question of an EU Roma Strategy. The first EU Roma Summit was held on 16th of September. Little came out of these debates and meetings besides a renewed acknowledgment that there is a problem!
- Cosmetics won't work. The incidents of 2008 have shown that the EU needs a vision, needs to be better equipped to respond to this ongoing challenge. Common problems such as segregation in education, illiteracy, unemployment and poverty, discrimination, anti- Gypsyism (and the list can continue) need coherent policy responses and a commitment of resources. Roma need to get involved as well, as this challenge cannot be meaningfully tackled without the active involvement of Roma communities!
- In December 2008 the EU-Council will meet and discuss the issue. It is a unique opportunity – EU leaders can now make more than a commitment, they can mandate the European Commission to look seriously into the problems, translate those problems into policy responses, start coordinating the efforts of national governments, and set up impact assessment mechanisms to measure progress.
- This process will take a long time (as everything in Brussels). The challenge is a complex one and there is no Master Plan. But the complexity of the problem should not daunt us. The EU, National Governments (Germany), Roma and non-Roma civil society have a shared responsibility to act! Action is timelier than ever! Thank you!



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Main messages

- On 16 September 2008, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the French Presidency combined their efforts and organised the first EU Roma Summit with over 500 participants.
- President Barroso in his speech at this event stated that *"It is by sending a clear political message to the Member States about the urgent need to act that the European Commission can exercise its role of political leadership in this area"*.
- Member States expressed their political commitment towards the Roma community in the Conclusions of the European Councils of 14 December 2007 and 14 June of this year. The December European Council will most likely incorporate in its conclusions a further commitment towards Roma inclusion by calling the Commission to set up a European integration platform to exchange good practices.
- The European Parliament adopted a Resolution early this year (end of January 2008) on the European Strategy on Roma and has asked to the European Commission to set up a pilot project in support of Roma integration.

- In the coming two years the Directorate General for Regional Policy will set up a pilot programme to support innovative projects promoting the inclusion of the Roma population through actions covering:
 - - **1. Education** : early, vocational and life long, including awareness campaigns targeted at the majority populations
 - **2. Housing, health care and social services**
 - **3. Self-employment support by exploring the development of a micro credit programme**
 - **4. Strengthening of the role of Roma organizations and leaders in inclusion promotion.**

- Through the Cohesion policy we can work together with Member States and regions to better seize and tackle the variety of problems related to Roma integration. Roma societies in the old MSs face different problems than in new MSs and the projects feasible for Slovakia rural communities are different from those needed in the outskirts of big capital cities like Paris and Rome.

- The political momentum is there. We have now to work very closely with the Roma societies associations to bolster initiatives, to address the complex problems faced by Roma and having in mind that we have to work very closely with national, regional and local authorities.