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## **Shared Responsibility: Towards a European Roma Policy**

~~Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort~~

European Parliament – Conference 'Towards a European Roma Strategy – from commitments to results'

**Brussels, 6 March 2008**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to this conference in my capacity as the lead Commissioner for the issue of Roma inclusion. The problems facing the Roma and the policies concerning them are multidimensional.

I must begin by saying that the current situation of the Roma in Europe is unacceptable from an ethical, social and human point of view. The situation of the Roma populations is a threat to social cohesion in Europe, as we are tackling not only discrimination against individuals but also the social exclusion of an ethnic group at collective level. While extreme poverty in Europe has (in general) become an individual rather than a collective challenge, for disadvantaged ethnic minorities – in particular the Roma – it remains a collective challenge.

I am convinced that the political importance of this problem is being increasingly recognised, as demonstrated by the fact that the need to acknowledge the difficulties of the Roma has for the first time been mentioned in the conclusions of the European Council. Evidently, we must meet the expectations of the European Council and the Parliament and provide, as part of our "non-discrimination package" in June, not only a broader vision of equal opportunities in our policy communication but also a detailed document analysing what has already been done and what could be done in terms of our Roma policies.

However, in this connection, it should be made very clear that the European Commission is not just beginning to recognise these problems. It is not merely reacting to the expectations of the European Council, nor has it been concerned with the problems of the Roma only since 2008. As long ago as the beginning of the last enlargement process, the Commission identified the situation of the Roma as one of the candidate countries' biggest problems. It emphasised the Copenhagen criteria aimed at the Roma and periodically evaluated the measures taken by the candidate countries.

In my country, the Czech Republic, this pressure from the Commission undoubtedly contributed greatly, for example, to resolving the most serious problem - the lack of Czech citizenship of many Roma. The Commission's insistence also influenced the Czech Government's decisions to create a political strategy for Roma integration targeting primarily the aspects of their social exclusion, and an interministerial committee with strong participation from the Roma themselves, etc. However, the EU has also been responsible for:

- substantial financing of the PHARE programme for civil society capacity building, including specifically Roma NGOs;
- the Community initiative EQUAL, which has targeted groups experiencing difficulties on the labour market, while also supporting projects aimed at the Roma;
- several very useful twinning programmes with the old Member States concerning non-discrimination or even Roma integration in particular, etc.

This was more or less the case for all the other accession countries too.

Nonetheless, we often hear the criticism that "the Commission was very much involved in the enlargement process but lost this positive influence after the accession of the new Member States". I do not believe that. The new Member States currently have access to much greater funding than they did before in the form of the European Social Fund and the Commission strongly and publicly encourages them at political level and at the level of technical communication to use this funding for integrating the Roma.

Moreover, all Member States were obliged to transpose and implement Directive 43 prohibiting any discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin. The Commission is very demanding – indeed several Member States, including the old ones, complain

that it is TOO demanding – as regards this transposition, as demonstrated by the considerable number of infringement proceedings.

However, it is clear that the situation requires a lot more coherent action in order to meet the greatest challenges. There is growing consensus among the stakeholders, including civil society, that the main challenges are as follows:

- First, education. Roma children are all too often disadvantaged in this process because they do not receive pre-school education (nursery school), do not receive the assistance they need in primary school, or are placed in separate schools. In order to improve their integration and above all their opportunities, it would appear necessary to integrate them in nursery schools or preparatory classes, or provide them with support from teaching assistants.

- Second, the key factor in improving the employment rate of the Roma is an individualised follow-up involving mentoring (coaching) after returning to work. In order to improve the economic situation of the Roma, we must also think of ways to integrate their independent activities in the formal economy. Training schemes for would-be entrepreneurs or microcredit-type initiatives, for example, might influence them in this direction.

- Third, in order to improve the Roma's housing conditions, social housing must be built which is affordable to Roma populations. Above all, housing allocation must be based on transparent rules and must not have a "punitive" character (the Roma should under no circumstances be moved on from one town to the next, or forced into the suburbs or unsanitary apartments with exorbitant rents).

- Fourth, the chronic debt of families is another, often little-known, problem, which renders the situation of the Roma precarious. This debt is sometimes a consequence of bogus lenders. In order to combat this problem, we must both promote modern social work (using accurate knowledge of the Roma's situation) and penalise all forms of illegal lending.

- In all these contexts, effectively combating discrimination is a condition which, although not sufficient in itself, is an indispensable factor for tangibly improving the living conditions of the Roma.

The Commission is fully aware that it must strike a balance between competencies and leadership. On the one hand, the Commission reinforced (at the beginning of 2008) internal cooperation between all departments by creating a "Roma Action Group". On the other hand, it is willing to cooperate with all the main players including the public authorities in the Member States and civil society, by encouraging them to take measures in the above-mentioned fields and supporting them in this process. The Commission is convinced that in several Member States an approach more specifically targeted at the Roma – without excluding other ethnic groups – would be desirable also with regard to the use of the Structural Funds.

It is our common task to do everything in our power to encourage the Member States and decision-makers at all levels in parliaments and governments to make the necessary commitments. Let me be quite clear: we are facing real problems, such as a lack of political will, a lack of ideas for practical solutions at government and local levels, where a certain fatalism often prevails, and the quantitative and above all qualitative lack of projects run by Roma or pro-Roma partners.

As you can see, we will take action. However, given that the primary responsibility lies with the Member States, it remains to be seen how policies and instruments can be implemented most effectively, so as to have a decisive impact on people's lives.

At the last meeting of the Roma Decade Steering Committee, Ms Levai rightly emphasised that effective Roma inclusion policies cannot be implemented without the participation of the Roma communities and Roma civil society themselves. We

also have to raise awareness within the business community, the media, the advertising industry and among citizens in general of the issue of Roma inclusion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union must accomplish its tasks of giving political guidance, providing funding and facilitating cooperation and dialogue.

I believe that Roma integration is necessary for social cohesion, since the marginalisation of one group leads to the disintegration of the whole of society .

Moreover, it is quite clear that social cohesion is vital to the democratic stability, security and sustainable development of our continent.

Thank you for your attention.