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Launch of the EU Platform for Roma inclusion

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

First meeting of the Integrated European platform for Roma
inclusion

Prague, 24 April 2009

Dear Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the Czech Presidency for its initiative in responding to the Council's request to create a European Union Platform for Roma Inclusion. It is an enormous pleasure, and a great honour, for me to be here with the minister, Mr Kocáb, to open this conference, which is the first event of the platform.

I attach great importance to this initiative, because there is no doubt that the situation of Roma in the European Union is very serious. Seen from the point of view of the millions of children and young people growing up in urban ghettos or in segregated rural settlements, the situation is, frankly, tragic. These children and young people generally do not have the same opportunity as other members of European society to lead a dignified life. They are exposed to social exclusion, prejudice, discrimination and sometimes even violence.

Let me say this openly: I consider this to be absolutely unacceptable. It isn't just a horrific waste of human potential. More than anything else, it is ethically and humanly intolerable. I am convinced that this is a question of the basic human values upon which the European Union is built.

We could argue over the number of Roma in the European Union: over whether there are six million, as some people estimate, or ten million, or even more, as is sometimes claimed. But in my opinion this is a secondary issue; their situation would be unacceptable even if we were talking about much smaller numbers. Nevertheless, it's worth pointing out that even the lowest estimates of the number of Roma are higher than the number of people living in Malta, Luxembourg, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia or Slovakia.

We could also spend hours discussing the extent to which Roma contribute to their social exclusion - as individuals and as communities. In my view, we cannot combat negative stereotypes of Roma with meticulous political correctness. Incidentally, many distinguished Roma figures, some of whom are here with us today, urge us to ensure that no subject is taboo, and that Roma themselves embrace their civic responsibilities to a greater extent.

Nevertheless, I believe it is we who have the greatest responsibility, we who represent public authority, whether that is at local, regional or European level. That is because we have a disproportionately greater ability to break the vicious circle of prejudice, social exclusion and self-fulfilling negative prophecies than anyone from the Roma initiatives, or indeed anyone from civil society. Don't misunderstand me: civil society is an enormously valuable partner, but we cannot shift onto it the responsibilities that are incumbent on us, as public authorities. Where the potential for change is greater, the responsibility is also greater. And, on behalf of the European Commission, I want to say, in full solemnity, that we accept that responsibility.

Firstly, the European Union has created a legal guarantee of equal treatment, that is, protection from racial or ethnic discrimination, and makes sure that Member States properly respect this legal framework. We have not hesitated to launch proceedings against a whole series of Member States when they have failed to meet their obligations under this directive.

Secondly, the European Union provides structural funds to Member States, primarily the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. Starting with a joint letter I wrote with Commissioner Danuta Hübner in 2006, we have strongly urged Member States to use these funds in the interests of Roma inclusion.

Thirdly, the European Commission is increasingly willing to provide political leadership on the issue. We are prepared to come out publicly against the racist

violence and repressive attitudes that push Roma further towards the margins of society, and against their stigmatisation as "nomads" or "misfits".

Fourthly, and finally, the European Commission can offer policy coordination and analytical help.

Of course, if we say that the European Commission accepts its responsibilities, then we also have to say specifically which responsibilities it accepts, and which it cannot accept. Because it seems to me that there are two risks we must be aware of:

- The first type of risk is in the passiveness that comes from indifference or from a preconceived pessimism – from the extraordinarily widespread view that Roma have always been at the margins of society and that there's nothing we can do about it. This is not true. It all depends on the kind of policy we pursue and whether we pursue it in cooperation with the Roma themselves.
- The second type of risk, on the other hand, comes from complacent optimism: the idea that it's just a matter of time before modern progress brings advancement to Roma too – or that symbolic gestures alone, like supporting folk festivals and so on, are enough. It would also be a mere gesture (if not a sham) if the European Commission took on responsibilities that it could not fulfil with the legal and financial means at its disposal - if it created the illusion that the problems of the Roma could be solved from Brussels. They can't, because responsibility for policies in such key areas as education, social policy and housing lies first and foremost with the Member States (and their regional or local authorities).

And that is why I am delighted that the Czech Presidency – with the support of the two following Presidencies – Sweden and Spain – has decided to inaugurate today in Prague a process of more intensive policy coordination among Member States in this area, a process that we call the European Union Integrated Platform for Roma Inclusion. The European Commission will of course play an active role in this process, but it does not want to, and is unable to, replace the initiative of Member States: it can only stimulate, support and coordinate. This initiative begins with a small number of States – mainly those that have the largest Roma populations and want to share their experiences not only of individual projects but also of entire policies. We believe in the idea of building a gradual consensus; and we believe that others will gradually join us.

I believe the first steps towards consensus are the common basic principles of Roma inclusion, which Mr Kocáb will present. The European Commission fully supports these principles. We agree with the emphasis on a targeted but not ethnically exclusive approach to the Roma, and on the need for an inter-cultural approach and the development of inter-cultural skills both among Roma themselves and among members of the majority culture. Despite the obvious differences in the situation of Roma in different countries, it is clear that, at the very least, the basic principles should be common to all of them.

And so, in the time between today and the second European Roma summit, which will take place in 2010 under the Spanish Presidency, we intend to work together with the Presidencies to produce more specific recommendations – pathways – for groups of countries with similar characteristics (for instance, those with a predominantly rural Roma population, those with a predominantly urban Roma population, and so on). Undoubtedly, the contributions of Roma and non-Roma activists and academics, as well as the experiences of those EU and other countries taking part in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, will provide a useful input into the process.

I would stress that we are not starting from scratch. As I have already said, the European Commission has been dealing with Roma issues for a number of years;

today, however, we increasingly understand that this issue is far from being one that concerns only the so-called new Member States. A number of Member States have already taken measures that are worth following. I could mention, for instance, Spain's many years of experience in breaking down ghettos and employing Roma through the ACCEDER programme. It is also worth mentioning Hungary's desegregation initiatives, which include a desegregation requirement for structural fund eligibility - and also similar examples from the Czech Republic, such as preparatory schooling for Roma children, a network of Roma teaching assistants and a system of social work undertaken on the ground in Roma communities.

But we have even more work ahead of us - work that we must do together: Member States and the European Union, public authorities and civil society. We must certainly not expect miracles, nor is it right to promise them. This platform, too, will be just one of the tools we will need to break out of the vicious circle of discrimination and social exclusion of Roma.

Overcoming the heavy legacy of the Roma's many years of marginalisation will take a long time, and will certainly not be easy. But we can say with confidence that it is possible – and it is our obligation to work towards it:

- because without a targeted effort to include Roma in normal, "mainstream" education, employment and housing, their situation will not improve (and certainly not in the current economic crisis situation);
- because Roma are European citizens and have full rights to access everything that the European Union offers its citizens at the start of the twenty-first century;
- and above all, because Roma are simply people, and the aim of any serious policy must be the quality of life of people, of all people, without excluding any particular group.

I believe that this conference will inspire the further development of constructive, culturally sensitive and effective policies aimed at the full inclusion of Roma in European society.

I wish all participants a successful conference.