

# Integrated Programme for the Social Inclusion of Roma

Michel Digne

## A Challenge for Europe

Allow me to introduce my reflections that are the fruits of actions that have been developed in Europe for more than ten years. Most of these actions have occurred in countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, and France. Even if the Roma issue differs in each country depending on its history, its culture, and its political system, permanent features are to be found on a European level.

## A bitter acknowledgement of impotence

In the majority of European countries Roma communities are sedentary, contrary to the situation in my own country, France, where they are called "travelling people" or "Tsigany".

For over fifteen years, considerable programmes created and executed by the European Commission, International Organisations such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) and by Non-Governmental Organisations (Open Society Institute of M.Soros, including European and North American NGOs) have done much good, but they remain insufficient against the struggle of social exclusion in communities and for the integration of Roma people, especially between the years 1995 and 2005. These programmes, though efficient, remained local, regional, were limited by time and were rarely brought into wider-public integration policies.

Unfortunately, I must say, at the risk of becoming rather provocative, having participated since 1998 in a good number of debates, international conferences, seminars, peer reviews, and the like, I have the impression that after ten years, I hear the same discourses, the same debates, the same conferences. By this I mean the same state of affairs exists with the same analysis of the causes of misery, the same abhorrence to discrimination, the same problems found, and the same recommendations - in short, the same frustrations...

## Troubling Reactions to Intolerance

In addition, the financial and economic crisis of 2008 has seen an increase in discrimination in several member states. The recent events that occurred in Italy, Hungary, and Great Britain, show a withdrawal or backwardness of some communities through violent reactions involving exclusion. This should stimulate governmental authorities to take strong action to contain these outbursts of racism because they constitute a danger for social peace and the cohesion of Europe. These developments are a cancer to our societies.

We should not forget that these Roma communities are comprised of between 8-10 million men and women who are European citizens with the same rights and obligations as you and I have.

Concerning the problems posed by poverty, misery, social and economic exclusion of these communities within each of our countries, there is another European dimension that complicates the search for a solution: the migration of greater populations of Roma coming from Central and Eastern European countries into Western European countries. This is our challenge: are we capable at a European level of facing up to these migrations?

The best solution is to allow these European nationals to benefit from favourable economic, social, and cultural conditions in their own countries. The best place to live is at home. We are a long way from this goal. More and more Roma are still excluded citizens. This is, today, the current situation: emigration is, too often, the only solution to migrants to improve their lives and to escape from discrimination and poverty and it brings both misery and disillusionment.

## There are Solutions...

Remaining positive, I know there are viable solutions whereby politicians, civil servants, International and European Institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations and Ministers will know exactly what to do to eradicate the pain. Over the past fifteen years we have expended energy, competencies, expertise, and both public and private money with "generally" positive results even if sometimes they were "mixed". Intelligent solutions have been proposed and in most cases and generally speaking, the goals/objectives were reached. Even failures taught us what to avoid in order for our integration programmes to succeed. Yet we must ask: "since solutions exist why do we continue, like Sisyphus with his bolder, to slowly pursue the same course of action"?

Wherever objectives have been successfully obtained they were, unfortunately, limited by time and very scattered. Often the measures were aimed at too few beneficiaries, over too small a zone. For example, I remember that in 2003, when all NGO's were working on the mediator concept I noticed less than five of them were training mediators in Slovakia, (ten-fifteen students per association) each with a different training programme. Where is the coherence?

So, what are the conditions, before true integration policy is defined at both national member state and European levels, for results - both concrete and measurable - to become permanent?

## The Absolute Necessity for Strong Political Will

Before explaining further, I must repeat and repeat that there are two conditions sine qua none without which no integration programme will succeed: first- strong political will and second- adherence sustained by the public against intolerance, discrimination, and segregation of a part of society. These two conditions are indivisible because politicians are merely elected by citizens, and citizens need to be informed, educated, in civic duty, and in tolerance by public programmes which begin at school. A strong political will would put in place the necessary instruments of co-ordination and evaluation. Equally important is to define programmes of social vocation - not only by law and order which is too often the case - which will assure the implementation, coherence, regulation and financing of this political integration.

## Capitalise the Experiences

Other regularly occurring mistakes are the dispersion of initiatives, and the lack of co-operation between operators. A gathering like today's responds to its own needs; it necessitates a capitalisation of experiences and good practices. Too often, energy and money are lost because each programme is started in a tiny area, which a neighbour carried out beforehand. If a peer review is indispensable in order to advance, then it is insufficient, and each must go further to implement "Resource Centres" that collect the experiences, capitalise the results and put documentation, expertise, and programme evaluations at the disposal of all operators. These Resource Centres (or European Centres) should allow the exchange of good practices, training contributions, and provide a mechanism to give access to this information catalogue.

On the occasion of my mission to Hungary and Slovakia, in 2001, I had the opportunity to initiate, with the support of teachers, and the guidance of the Hungarian Minister of Education, and to create such a Resource Centre in Budapest. Unfortunately, the following elections changed the political will and the centre did not survive. Similarly, with greater success, we have worked since 2003, on the development of a Resource Centre in Presov, Slovakia. The endeavour continues aided by partnerships with a French Resource Centre, Le Centre Alain Savary, located in Lyon. We find the same idea with the creation of the Roma Education Fund, in Budapest, financed by the World Bank, the Soros Institute and several other European financiers.

## The Integrated Programmes

We know that the best results in the struggle against discrimination are obtained within the framework of integrated programmes based principally on these four pillars: lodging, education, employment and healthcare. At the risk of sounding naïve I should remind you that a child cannot effectively study at school if he is starving, if he is freezing, or if he is sick. This course of action necessitates inter-ministerial co-operation which is often difficult to put into effect. Parallel to this course of action there must be co-operation between European territories including NGOs and local authorities like Regions and Municipalities. This is where, more than anywhere else, the State on the national level must assume its responsibilities.

## The Enemy of Good is the Best: Target a Minority to Undo a Stigmatisation

Finally, we deplore the frequent negative and frightening reactions of citizens who share economic difficulties, such as unemployment, yet do not understand why certain social minorities are awarded home improvement benefits and European funds while they are not. This imbalance feeds discrimination and enhances minority estrangement inducing racism and in a certain manner it tends to stigmatise the groups we seek to aid. A solution can be found, following what is undertaken in France: we aim at a category of the population that pertains to certain social and economic indicators, instead of a particular minority group. For example, in France, "Education Priority Policy" (affirmative action in education) aims at citizens who suffer from unemployment, learning difficulties, lack of parental education, lack of professional diplomas, and health problems.

## **An Education in Tolerance**

We realise that with the economic crisis, there has been a return to intolerant and expulsive behaviour. We must, now more than ever, put in place training programmes to inform and train Roma communities, but also mainstream societies. We must teach tolerance and acceptance of differences to our civil servants, medical staff, judges and judicial staff, school teachers, politicians and mainstream society in order to show that diversity is a blessing to society. We must do this before people are cast out, because we allowed the ignorance of racisms to make us fearful of others.

Simply put, we must educate the European citizen to accept those who are different and to remind him that the motto of Europe is:

**United in its Diversity**