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## **Social Inclusion of the Roma in Europe**

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

European Parliament, International Roma Day

**Brussels, 8 April 2008**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you today on the occasion of this very special International Day, and I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me.

The plight of the Roma in Europe is a matter of particular concern to me, and my interventions on their behalf are always driven by the same will to improve a situation which I deem intolerable.

International Roma Day is an event which allows us to take stock of what we have accomplished in terms of acknowledging the particular nature of the Roma community. In fact, the situation of the Roma remains morally and socially unacceptable. It undermines the European Union's social cohesion and is thus a matter of concern to us all.

However, when I look around me and see so many representatives of civil society and the European institutions gathered in the European Parliament, I also see in 8 April a symbol of hope. Your presence gives me new reasons to be optimistic, as together we can overcome all kinds of obstacles to Roma integration.

### ***The Roma cause is beginning to be recognised***

The President of the European Commission and I have always clearly stated that we would never accept discrimination against, or the social exclusion of the Roma.

Of course, we must live with our differences and, moreover, living with different people is a source of enrichment. However, we cannot accept that one person is treated worse than another because of these differences. This goes against the very founding values of the European Union.

The Roma cause is gaining significance by the day. It is a political problem which is increasingly recognised, including at European level. I can cite as evidence of this the conclusions of last December's European Council, which mention for the first time the need to address this problem.

The Commission will meet the expectations of the Council and the Parliament next June when:

- we will present to them a report on the situation of the Roma and in particular an analysis of what our policies have already achieved;
- we will also provide a broader vision of equal opportunities in our Communication on the follow-up to the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

### ***An opportunity to strengthen existing instruments***

This growing recognition of the problems of the Roma is giving a new impetus to the actions already undertaken by civil society or the European institutions.

This presents us with a window of opportunity to improve the courses of action available to us in terms of both analysing the situation and adopting strong policies and instruments. We now have a good opportunity to enhance the implementation of our policies. I would therefore encourage all the key players to make every effort to this end.

At Member State level, these efforts include:

- the transposition and effective implementation of Community legislation against discrimination based on race and ethnicity;
- the targeted use of the Structural Funds (but without focusing exclusively on ethnic criteria); and
- initiatives to overcome stereotypes that are negative and harmful to the general public.

***Remaining focused on the main challenges***

We must also try to undertake more coherent action to combat the problem of the social exclusion of the Roma at its root.

- First, more action is needed in the field of education. In order to improve the opportunities of Roma children, it would appear necessary to integrate them in nursery schools or preparatory classes, or provide them with support from teaching assistants.
- Second, we must focus on the employment situation of the Roma. The key factor is an individualised follow-up involving in particular mentoring after returning to work. In order to improve the economic situation of the Roma, we must also consider 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, housing conditions must be improved. It is essential – in the context of improving the urban environment – to develop social housing.
- Fourth, we must tackle the chronic debt of families. This fairly unknown problem often renders the situation of poor communities, including the Roma, precarious. 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, at the beginning of 2008 the Commission reinforced internal cooperation between all departments by creating a "Roma Action Group". On the other, it is willing to cooperate with all the main players, including the 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.

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

The fact is that social cohesion is vital to the democratic stability, security and sustainable development of our continent.

Every International Roma Day has its own symbol. In 2006, it was flowers which were thrown into streams and rivers, and in 2007, it was lighted candles. In 2008, this day is celebrated by planting trees. I believe that this is a very potent symbol: roots in the earth of our common society, a strong trunk, and branches stretching out towards hope and the future.

Thank you for your attention.