

# ▶▶ The Roma community

## AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN INEQUALITY, DISCRIMINATION AND HOPE

The events which took place in 2008 involving the Roma community draw an accurate picture of the complex situation in which Europe's most important minority finds itself and of the crossroads

where EU institutions find themselves with regard to how to respond to the challenges that poverty, exclusion, discrimination and rejection pose not only for the 10 million European Roma and EU citizens but also for the very process of European construction.

The racist attacks in Italy and other countries and especially the criminalising statements and administrative and legislative measures adopted by the Italian authorities against the Roma community have revealed the breadth and seriousness of the situation suffered by Roma and also the very serious problem facing our societies in terms of how to solve the **Roma issue**. This situation poses a test of the values of defence of the fundamental rights of equality and social cohesion laid down in the European Union Treaties.

Maybe that is why this has also been the year when political initiatives towards the Roma people have taken on particular relevance. The European Parliament has handed down several resolutions urging the European Commission and the Member States to implement concrete measures which guarantee the social inclusion and non-discrimination of those belonging to the Roma minority.

Hence, this year the European Commission, at the request of the Parliament, has compiled a report on the actions being undertaken in support of the social inclusion of Roma. In September the first **European Roma Summit** was held to analyse the situation. The President of the Commission himself, Mr. Barroso, took advantage of the event to present the initiative of creating a **European Platform for Roma inclusion** which, led by the Commission, is designed to unite Member States, Roma leaders, social organisations and other institutions and initiatives (**Decade of Roma Inclusion**, the **Roma Education Fund**, etc.) with a view to achieving more realistic and effective commitment in the areas of equal opportunity and non-discrimination against Roma.

These are encouraging movements and proposals, albeit still timid given the dimension of the drama affecting so many Roma families, but 2008 could



THE MINISTER, MERCEDES CABRERA, ALONGSIDE PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY ENTITLED "THE SITUATION OF MULTI-DISCRIMINATION IN THE AREA OF EMPLOYMENT FACING ROMA WITH DISABILITIES".

go down as the turning point for the *Roma issue* insofar as we are beginning to glimpse a more serious commitment on the part of the public authorities to provide definitive answers to the more serious situation of exclusion and inequality suffered by a group of European citizens.

In this context, others are taking a careful look at the ***Spanish model***. The fact that social policies implemented in Spain are more inclusive of the Roma community and the breadth of many of the specific initiatives implemented here have attracted the attention of those responsible for initiatives of this sort at the Commission and of the governments of other countries.

That may have been why our Foundation was invited to take part in the **first European Roma Summit** held in Brussels. The experience of the *Acceder* Programme, unanimously recognised as a best practice for labour market integration and the European Network ***EURoma*** which the FSG, jointly with the Spanish Ministry of Labour, has promoted in order to achieve more effective use of Structural Funds for the social inclusion of Roma, are seen today as especially valuable and useful initiatives in light of the current context.



JOSÉ MANUEL DURÃO BARROSO, PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION DURING HIS SPEECH AT THE EU ROMA SUMMIT.  
PHOTO: EUROPEAN COMMISSION

## THE SITUATION IN SPAIN

Despite the fact that our country has one of the highest Roma populations and, as already mentioned, is the leader in terms of Roma standard of living and social integration, the Spanish Roma community continues to suffer inequality and there remains a considerable gap in terms of the standard enjoyed by the rest of the citizenry.

These differences are evident in three areas where, despite significant headway made in all of them, they continue to be pending issues and the focus of a policy targeting this community which has yet to be approached in a definitive way by the political authorities.

These areas have to do with:

- 1 Living standards and the guarantee of equal opportunity in fields such as access to employment, quality education, housing and health.
- 1 Discrimination, rejection and unequal treatment still faced by members of this community.
- 1 Recognition and legitimacy of identity, participation in social life and enhancement of social image.

## CHALLENGES FACED IN THE AREAS OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

This year the ***VI Report of the FOESSA Foundation on exclusion and social development in Spain*** was published. For the first time, this report provides specific data on the Roma population leading to very significant conclusions insofar as the inordinate rate of severe exclusion where 12% of the people in this situation were Roma. One out of every four families is affected by situations of exclusion and a third of the families suffer from “severe exclusion”. According

to the report, belonging to the Roma community in Spain today is “the factor which is most closely related to social exclusion of all those which we have analysed”.

### › **Employment.**

The FOESSA Report came out at the time when the effects of the financial and economic crisis in which we are currently immersed started to become clear. The economic crisis has imposed a new and especially negative scenario for Roma. It marks the end of a growth cycle in employment which began in 1996. During this period, Roma progressively became incorporated into the labour market and, despite higher unemployment rates and the persistence of a great deal of underemployment and unstable economic activities, access to employment was one of the main factors giving rise to social inclusion.

Today we are faced with a certain risk of widening the social exclusion gap and losing some of the headway made, not only in terms of employment but also in the opportunities and changes which having a job on the mainstream labour market meant for many families.

At the *Acceder* Programme we found that in the last six months of 2008, demand for our services rose by 20% vis-à-vis 2007 while the number of labour contracts signed fell by 25%. This trend will very likely become worse over the upcoming months.

To cope with this situation, the FSG has come up with a series of measures within the framework of the *Acceder* Programme designed to bolster training and enhance job seeking mechanisms and agreements with companies with which we have been working. It is vitally important for the public administrations to develop measures and resources to lessen the impact of the crisis on the most vulnerable groups which find themselves far removed from the labour market.

### › **Education.**

The educational situation of the Roma community in 2008 is quite similar to that of previous years. Virtual full enrolment of Roma children at primary level has become the norm but absenteeism rates and differences in academic achievement persist. The transition to secondary education, however, continues to act as a barrier which has been insurmountable to date.

The high rate of early school-leavers during the compulsory education period is one of the most important challenges facing the educational system, Roma families and the society at large and is standing in the way to the true social inclusion of the Roma minority.

This year our Foundation had the opportunity to meet with the Minister of Education, Mercedes Cabrera, to discuss this situation and the need for the Ministry to come up with an educational strategy targeting the Roma community and involving the regional education departments as well.

In our view, this strategy should include specific objectives to guarantee the transition to the compulsory secondary level of education, reduce early school dropout rates and involve families and teachers in the process. Just as housing was the key issue for the inclusion of the Roma community in decades past, today it is education and the future of the Roma community and true progress in terms of social inclusion is contingent upon what we do in this field.

### › **The housing situation.**

The Foundation’s 2008 presentation of the *Housing Map and the Roma community* in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing was one of the year’s highlights. This Study has shed light on progress made in this connection since 1991. In general terms, the percentage of sub-standard housing

has been reduced and a gradual trend towards the residential normalisation of Roma families can be observed. Today, most families live in the neighbourhoods which were built during the first and second expansion periods which cities underwent and the number of families living in other more integrated neighbourhoods is growing as well.

Despite this undeniable progress improving the likelihood of social inclusion, the study showed that 12% of Roma families still live in sub-standard housing and that 4% live in shanty towns in our country.

The 2008-2012 National Housing and Land Scheme approved by the Government has taken heed of these data and for the first time has specifically included measures designed to eradicate shanty towns featuring aid of up to €3,000 per year for rent to be supplemented by the regional governments and town halls.

We hope that these measures have their intended impact but that depends not only on the resources made available but also on the political will of many Town Halls to adopt decisions which are often opposed by local residents. Furthermore, the serious real estate crisis which has brought construction and housing sales on the open market to a standstill, should be used as an opportunity for public housing which could benefit the weaker social classes and facilitate the access of Roma youth to dignified housing.

### › The injustice of discrimination

Over half of the surveys gathered by the CIS (Sociological Research Centre, study No 2745) show little or no warm feelings towards people of the Roma ethnic group. This group continues to be the most poorly considered in Spain and the one suffering the most rejection. These attitudes facilitate the spread of discriminatory practices.

Roma continue to receive unequal treatment by reason of their ethnic origin.

Discrimination by reason of ethnic origin is one of the most unjust and hateful practices which our society engages in. While we do have advanced legislation to curtail these practices and protect victims, the *Annual Report on Discrimination and the Roma Community* published by the FSG has once again shown that knowledge of these laws is scant among victims and even among those who are responsible for enforcing them.

Once again we regretfully have to point to delays in implementing measures to promote equal treatment and protect victims of discrimination. The new Ministry of Equality has announced the Government's plans to draft a Comprehensive Equal Treatment Law which will see the light in 2009 and finally implement the European Directive prohibiting discrimination based on ethnic origin. The new law will create a national body in charge of accompanying and providing legal assistance to those suffering discrimination and will bolster social awareness-raising initiatives, spread knowledge about these laws among key agents and conduct studies on the extension and evolution of this phenomenon.

## SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND RECOGNITION OF THE ROMA MINORITY

The other area which sheds light on the status of the Roma community is the latter's degree of institutional recognition and opportunities to participate in social and political life.

There can be no doubt that the steps being taken in our country to acknowledge the identity and existence of the Roma community as an integral part of our common culture and of the joint project in favour of co-existence and social development has a very positive effect on social inclusion and combating discrimination.

The **Roma Cultural Institute** is a valuable government-supported initiative that got off the ground in 2008. The Institute is the best opportunity our country has ever had to spread and dignify the contribution that Roma culture has made to Spanish society. Among this year's activities was the institution of an annual award honouring talented Roma and non-Roma in different fields such as art, painting, literature, politics and research who have contributed to making Roma culture more visible.

The **State Council of the Roma People** is the other major initiative providing opportunities for the participation of Roma social organisations in areas having to do with the development and monitoring of policies targeting this community. Owing to its makeup of different national government ministries, it is also an instrument which can contribute to getting these departments more actively involved in inclusion measures and the advancement of the Roma community.

Both initiatives represent a major opportunity for the Roma community. Moreover, the administrations on which they depend and their components must be urged to develop appropriate content and implement responsible, worthwhile and quality activities, otherwise they will run the risk of being nothing more than aesthetic operations with scant affect in attaining the objectives for which they were created.

Once again we must report on the relevance and dimension of the 8<sup>th</sup> April celebrations, i.e. **International Roma Day**, with ceremonies at the regional parliaments and assemblies and at national government level. These celebrations contribute to sending an institutional message to all citizens acknowledging and celebrating the identity of the Roma community.

Lastly, we cannot ignore the painful event affecting a Roma family, the tragic death of the little girl Mari Luz Cortés. Her father, Juan José Cortés, was undoubtedly one of 2008's most relevant figures in Spain due to his ability to move the Spanish society through his pain and his ability to promote and lead a civil initiative which went over and above his objective of lobbying for stiffer sentences against those committing this sort of despicable act and received the backing of the Spanish society thanks to his serenity in seeking justice and defence of his condition as a citizen.



WORK SESSION OF THE EUROMA NETWORK'S STEERING COMMITTEE IN SEVILLE.



CELEBRATION OF INTERNATIONAL ROMA DAY IN CIUDAD REAL.



THE FSG TOOK PART IN THE DAY DEVOTED TO THE ROMA COMMUNITY AT EXPO '08 IN ZARAGOZA.



THE ROMA POET JOSÉ HEREDIA MAYA IS PRESENTED WITH AN AWARD FROM FOUNDATION'S ROMA CULTURAL INSTITUTE.