



THE ROMA ISSUE WITHIN THE EUROPEAN ELECTORAL DEBATE

**5 QUESTIONS AND 5 PROPOSALS FOR POLITICAL PARTIES
IN VIEW OF THE FORTHCOMING
2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS**

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The European Parliament elections which will take place this coming May are a good opportunity to regain the confidence of citizens in the European project, and to gain the confidence of those groups, such as the Roma population, who have traditionally been more distanced from national and European political debate.

The nearly ten million citizens of Roma origin in Europe, a large proportion of whom suffer situations of extreme poverty, exclusion and discrimination, will look to the European Parliament and Commission which emerge from the forthcoming elections (in which the Parliament will elect a President of the Commission for the first time) to guarantee their status as European citizens, along with effective equality of rights and opportunities.

In recent years, progress has been made in the development of a European framework of policies of inclusion and equal treatment for the Roma minority, and the Parliament has had a crucial role in this. However, we have seen very little real impact on the lives of Roma people. Even worse, we have seen Member States failing to comply with either the spirit or the letter of Treaties, Directives or even national legislation in this area, while the response of the European Union's institutions to such failures has been feeble.

The Roma population does not feel sufficiently protected by the European Union's institutions. Equal treatment is not guaranteed; the right to free movement of European citizens is not respected; families are criminalised and expelled from one State to another without the proper legal guarantees; institutional declarations damage the image of Roma people and incite discrimination and exclusion; and finally the commitments made by Member States in the National Roma Integration Strategies are not honored. At the same time, the populist and xenophobic discourse which is gaining ground in Europe is lending strength to anti-Gypsyism, racist attacks and hate speech.

For all these reasons, the Fundación Secretariado Gitano wishes to contribute with proposals to the European electoral debate, and also to gather and disseminate information about the positions of political parties on certain topics which are of interest to society as a whole, and to the Roma population in particular.

We ask political parties and their candidates to include and explain in their electoral manifestos and in the political debate their position with respect to Roma issues, because we believe these unresolved issues call into question the very principles and values upon which the European project is based.

Finally, the Fundación Secretariado Gitano calls for full participation in the European Parliamentary elections, to avoid a show of strength from those parties which embody exclusion, hatred, discrimination, racism and attacks on the principle of equality of rights for all.

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1 How will your party guarantee, within the European Parliament, the defence of basic rights and equal treatment for all European citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin? Will your party support a more forceful response on the part of EU institutions in the face of racist and xenophobic messages and attitudes?

The EU has always represented a space in which all citizens' rights are guaranteed. However, the growing discourse of xenophobia and racism, and the measures taken by various Member States against groups such as the Roma population, present a serious risk to their compliance with European legislation regarding freedom of movement and residence and with anti-discrimination legislation.

In the face of speeches and measures which clearly threaten the dignity and basic rights of people of Roma ethnicity, and which contribute to the stigmatisation and criminalisation of an entire community (the indiscriminate expulsion of Roma families, the creation of registers based on ethnicity, etc), the European Parliament must demand and promote monitoring mechanisms which guarantee the effective application of the legal instruments available to it (principally Directives). It must also undertake political and legal actions, including the commencement of legal proceedings in the case of violations which endanger the rights of Roma people. These include the rights to freedom of movement and residence, to education and healthcare, to equality and to the protection of personal data. Similarly, the Parliament must ensure that the measures adopted guarantee the rights of citizens and the development of social inclusion policies.

We ask, therefore, that the European Parliament undertakes to effectively monitor compliance with the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43), the Victims' Rights Directive (2012/29) and the Framework Decision relating to the fight against racism and xenophobia (2008/913). We also ask the Parliament to demand that its Member States strengthen and guarantee the independence of their Equality Bodies.

2 What social model and what specific policies will your party support within the European Union in order to overcome the consequences of the economic crisis, ensuring that the route taken out of the crisis does not increase inequalities and leave behind the most disadvantaged groups, such as the Roma population?

The current economic and financial crisis, along with the heralded recovery, may present a unique opportunity to construct a new social model in the EU which will reinforce cohesion and promote equality of opportunities. Decisions taken in the heart of the EU contribute to the design of national policies, and are shaping a social and economic model in which the current priority is the creation of employment.

Access to employment is, without doubt, the best route to the integration of individuals into society as a whole, especially for those at risk of social exclusion, as is the case of a large proportion of the Roma population. The inclusion of Roma men and women in the labour market improves living conditions for families, contributes to economic growth for society in general and improves the social image of the Roma, helping to break down prejudices and stereotypes. For this to happen, it is necessary to foster policies of investment in specialised training and employment programmes, and to create inclusive labour markets.

However, the social model cannot be based solely on employment policies. There are individuals and groups who are very far from entering the labour market and who require social support and systems of protection which will guarantee equal opportunities and serve as a gateway to employment. The future social and economic model of the EU, which the European Parliament created in the May elections will help to build, must respond to the needs of the various groups which make up our society, demanding that Member States offer high-quality public services (employment, education, health, welfare benefits) which are accessible and appropriate for all, bearing in mind the circumstances and starting position of each individual.

We therefore call on the European Parliament to give priority to the objective of reducing inequality, and to take a leading role in working towards it. We expect the new Parliament to promote specific policies to enable access to the labour market for the most disadvantaged groups; to ensure that all Roma students finish compulsory education; to fight against residential segregation; and to guarantee equality of access to national health services for all Roma people.

3 What measures will your party adopt in the European Parliament to ensure that the *Europe 2020* Strategy leads to genuinely “inclusive” growth and that EU funds, particularly the Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020, contribute effectively to the fight against poverty and social exclusion among the most disadvantaged members of society, including the Roma population?

The inclusion of a clear social dimension in the *Europe 2020* Strategy is an achievement and ensures a balance between economic growth and social progress in the projected development of the European Union over the coming years. *Europe 2020* is a good political framework with a powerful financial instrument to help it meet its objectives: the Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020.

In order to offer a response to growing inequalities in the heart of the EU, the new Regulations, especially those pertaining to the European Social Fund (ESF), are focused on the people in greatest difficulties. This focus, which includes the dedication of at least 20% of ESF resources to the fight against poverty and social exclusion, provides an opportunity to direct focus efforts and investments towards the most disadvantaged groups, such as the Roma population.

To lift 20 million people out of the risk of poverty, as the *Europe 2020* Strategy aims to do, is an objective which necessarily has to include the Roma population, given this population’s socio-economic circumstances. However, Roma people must also benefit from the investments made to meet the objectives of the *Europe 2020* Strategy for all citizens. These include objectives in the areas of employment (a 75% employment rate among people aged 20 to 64, when, as for example, among the Roma population in Spain it is estimated at 38%) and education (a reduction in dropout rates to less than 10%, when among the Roma in Spain this rate is 64%). Clearly, the starting position of the Roma population is much further from these objectives than is the starting position of society in general.

The Structural and Investment Funds are a good financial tool to support the social inclusion of the Roma population and to contribute to “inclusive growth”. However, it is necessary to ensure that these funds genuinely reach the Roma population; that what is planned is also carried out; that the use of resources is evaluated and that the real impact on the living conditions of Roma people is measured.

For these reasons, we call upon the European Parliament to guarantee that the Structural and Investment Funds will be used effectively to ensure the achievement of the objectives of the National Roma Integration Strategies, in this way contributing to the achievement of the objectives of the *Europe 2020* Strategy as a whole.

4 What position will your party take in the European Parliament with regard to the monitoring of Member States' effective fulfillment of their responsibilities, as set out in the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and in their respective National Strategies?

In recent years the EU has led the initiatives for the socio-economic integration of the Roma population and put the issue on the political agenda of EU institutions and of Member States. The enlargement of the EU to the East has led to the incorporation of a large Roma population into the citizenship of Europe, living in many cases in conditions of extreme poverty and exclusion. In this context, the need to ensure the inclusion of the Roma population has triggered a change in approach among EU institutions, based on the recognition that specific, target action is required to redress the great inequalities and disadvantages suffered by a large number of citizens of Roma origin. The European Parliament has a long history of adopting Resolutions relating to the Roma population and of launching initiatives of this kind, with due attention also given to gender perspectives.

The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies formed part of this approach when it was launched in 2011 by the European Parliament and the Commission, promoting the development of National Strategies by which Member States make political commitments, principally in the areas of employment, education, health and housing.

It appears that these Strategies have not yet produced visible improvements in the living conditions of Roma families. It is the EU institutions which have the responsibility to guarantee, through the established monitoring mechanisms, that the objectives are met, so that in 2020 we are able to measure progress in the socio-economic integration of the Roma population as stipulated in the European Framework.

For this to happen, the European Parliament created in the May elections must use its power to grant or refuse approval to the next College of Commissioners in order to ensure that the future Commission continues to give political priority to Roma issues. These issues include the guarantee of rights and socio-economic inclusion for the Roma population, and adherence to the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

For these reasons, we ask the European Parliament to ensure the effective continuity of the European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, and to take a more critical position with regard to the lack of results from the National Strategies, using established mechanisms to oblige Member States to effectively fulfill the commitments which these Strategies have created.

5 In what way is your party going to contribute in the European Parliament to strengthen the active participation in EU decision-making processes of various groups within civil society, particularly of those groups with less capacity to influence over the decisions that affect them, such as the Roma population?

There has been a significant improvement in communication between EU institutions on the one hand, particularly those of Parliament and the Commission, and representatives of civil society in general and of various specific groups on the other. A wide range of entities and organisations is regularly included in processes of information-giving and consultation.

The recently-approved *European Code of Conduct on the Partnership Principle for the Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020* is a good example of this inclusive approach. It underlines the role of civil society and its representatives, taking particular care to ensure that representatives of those groups or collectives which usually have the least ability to influence decisions affecting them, such as the Roma population, are included in consultations and participatory processes. It even offers Member States the opportunity to use European resources to train such groups and provide them with the skills necessary for participation, so that these groups stand equal in relation to others who are normally more able to influence decision-making processes. The real risk is that this Code will not be applied in practice and, once again, the principle of Partnership will be reduced to a mere formality for public administrative bodies.

We call upon the European Parliament, as the representative of European citizens, to become the EU institution which most vigorously promotes the effective participation in decision-making processes of the whole of civil society and its representatives, including the Roma population. We call for this participation to be genuine and effective rather than a mere formality, both in the heart of the EU and in its Member States. Furthermore, we ask for the creation within LIBE (the Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) of a stable Working Group to assess and monitor progress in the effective implementation of policies which affect the Roma minority.

The Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) is a Spanish intercultural social entity which has been working for over 30 years for the social inclusion of the Roma population, in Spain and in the European context. We carry out projects and provide services to Roma families, principally in the areas of employment, education, health and housing. However, our work also includes the promotion of policies more actively directed towards the social inclusion of the Roma population, the fight against discrimination and the guarantee of equal rights and opportunities for all individuals. www.gitanos.org