

European Roma Summit

Open Letter to the Participants

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Rroma settled in Europe more than one thousand years ago and are a trans-national European minority on this continent. That they are European is often not accepted nor acknowledged by many individuals and countries.

Their history is often reduced to a long litany of discrimination, attempts at extermination, exclusion, poverty, and now, Rroma are mostly considered to be a social problem. While all this did and still does occur, a closer look at the facts shows that in countries and regions where they were left in peace, Rroma actually integrated and lived peaceful lives.

With the rise of the nation states in Europe in the 19th century and the climaxes that resulted from Nationalism in the 20th century, the situation clearly deteriorated. In many countries the exclusion and discrimination do continue. That Rroma never had nor wanted to have a country puts them at the mercy of the policies of the places they live in.

With eight to twelve millions Rroma in Europe, Europe is faced with a challenge: How to accept and integrate them. For if this doesn't happen, Europe will face a problem of proportions that are no longer manageable. One often speak about a "Rroma Problem", we prefer to say that it is Europe as a whole that is faced with one. Today, basic human rights, the foundation of the European Union, are still not respected. Worse, as seen lately in Italy, policies based on ethnicity are put in place by a European government, with almost no concrete reactions.

Officially, Rroma are citizen of the country they live in. In practice, they are often considered to be second-class citizen at best, and administrative discrimination is a fact in many countries. Clearly, some laws have been enacted, some window dressing has been put in place. Policies vary from self-government, reserved seats in parliaments, to minority status, but these are not addressing the fundamental issue of the recognition of Rroma as true citizen of their countries and of Europe.

Europe has passed enough laws, conventions, directives (for example 2000/43, EC 29/6/2000; 2000/78, ZC 27/11/2000), about human rights and minorities and the European Union's members have signed all of them. But these are often not respected. In practice, not all European countries have updated their laws to reflect these directives, or, have often not enforced them.

Populism is on the rise, and all too often, politicians look for scapegoats. Italy suddenly awoke to the fact that among the more than one million Romanians in their country, there are about 100,000 Rroma. Certainly not one million, and certainly not since a few months. No, some of them have been there for several years.

We have to ask how can the political processes be influenced to try to change and improve the situation of Rroma in Europe. How can local laws be changed, how can local attitudes and stereotypes be addressed?

There certainly needs to be more education of the majority population to counter the usual prejudices and to allow them to open their minds towards Rroma. The press, but also many NGOs are in dire needs to change their representation and thoughts about Rroma. All too often, these represent and reduce Rroma to a poor, uneducated, unemployed or to outright criminals. If all Rroma did conform to these stereotypes, where would we be today? But without changing this, how can one further the Rroma integration in Europe and how can one change society so that Rroma are considered to be citizen like any others?

In the 21st century, there are still many Rroma who live in the middle of Europe like in the third world. No real houses, no water, no electricity, no infrastructure provided by the state, segregation in school, police excess, and indifference from the local population at best. Apart from the segregation and discrimination, this is not only true about Rroma but is also a fact in many rural regions in the new European Union members.

Experience has shown that in such difficult situations, Roma lose their traditions, language, and culture. And this happens here in Europe, in the European Union. This process of acculturation in turn, increases the difficulties in integration. Marginalisation prevents Roma from improving their situation. Children have few chances to study in good schools as they are still discriminated against or put into special schools. Incentives from governments are often ill thought. We, as Roma, still do not understand why this is still the case and think that this is inadequate. Roma are still not truly respected within the European Union, even though this institution is the very one based on the respect of all.

Politicians have not done much to change this. They should turn towards integration, and not resort to populist measures. Demonizing Roma as the archetypal “foreigner” is dangerous...

A lot of time was lost, and the policies put in place were not effective. We, Roma, have enough of seminars, conferences, speeches; we want concrete facts, work, political will, decisions about Roma, decisions and actions which will generate true changes. And make sure Roma are recognised as true European people. We also have enough of groups, coalitions, which are pushing themselves on the forefront, saying they represent Roma, often without any Rom in their ranks. All too often, one Rom is taken as a partner, as a figurehead in projects aiming at helping Roma.

It seems to us that all too often, Roma are still not trusted as true partners. There is a pattern of paternalism both at political and grassroots level. “We know what is best for you” is still the norm. Inclusion of truly representative organisations, based on democratic structures, is still not the norm. We wish to see more projects initiated by Roma for Roma, on the premises of “Roma help Roma” in full partnership with political organisations and NGOs.

Three years into the Roma decade, the increasing issues, the lack of overall progress begs for a new approach and decisive action. The time is now right to go a new way. To give ourselves the goal to truly resolve some of the problems Europe is facing, and to push for the integration of Roma. We need to educate both communities to change the mentalities and thoughts. The general population needs to understand and accept that Roma are Europeans, that they are part of our common culture, and Roma need to change and open themselves towards the challenges of the future. Let's not focus on the past, focus on the “victim” syndrome, but look proudly forward at what we can achieve.

We sincerely hope that this meeting will mark a turning point. The list of participants, with the president of the European Commission, Mr. Barroso, with Mr. Soros, with ministers from various governments etc., shows the importance of the challenge. We hope that all participants will look for a common road and strategy to change the deteriorating situation of Roma in Europe. We hope that Roma and Roma organisations will be considered as true partners in this process.

Roma have changed in the last twenty years. Many young ones are becoming true activists, are organising across national borders. The manifestations against some of the Italian policies in Italy, Vienna, Madrid, have shown that they are ready to take their destiny in their own hands. Roma organisations, such as this IRU have also changed, have democratised, become more transparent. But they need support. Roma organisations have all too often be deprived of financial support for concrete projects. We, as the IRU, but also on behalf of other representative organisations, ask once again to be considered as full-fledged partners. We would like once again to stress that without support from the Roma community at large, no program can succeed.

The European Union also needs to monitor the Roma situation and its member states closely and react immediately. The Italian case shows that this is alas not yet the case. Disrespect of policies, principles, and laws should not remain without any consequences. The European Union should act decisively against any attack against democracy.

We, as the International Romany Union, want to thank Slovenia for the opportunity to present our views to Europe at large, and also Croatia, where we will organise shortly the 7th Roma World Congress. We hope that France, with its tradition of human rights, and the Czech Republic, the next president of the European Union, will continue to further the dialogue but also will take concrete actions to improve the overall situation of Roma in Europe.

For if we, all Europeans, including Roma, do nothing, we are facing a potential catastrophe. If the situation in some countries deteriorates, Roma will move. And this in turn will fuel resentment and further exclusion. The time to act has come. We hope that as the IRU, but also on behalf of other Roma grassroots organisations, we will be partners in this endeavour.