



European Round Table

Event Report

“Perspectives and Policies towards Integration of Roma into the European Societies “

***Thursday, 29 September 2011
Belgian Federal Public Service
Foreign Affairs
Palais d’Egmont, Salle Orange
From 2:30pm to 5:30 pm***

The Round Table was organised by the Centre for European and International Cooperation (CEIPA) in close cooperation with the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. The event was attended by over 60 participants representing governments, EU institutions, EU agencies, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and academia from the EU and EU Member States, the Balkan countries and other countries and organisations having interest in the subject of Roma and their integration in the European societies. Below are the summary and the main highlights of the Round table.

Mr. Peter von Bethlenfalvy, CEIPA Executive Director, who chaired the whole event, opened the Round table by welcoming all participants and introducing the speakers. He thanked the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and in particular H.E. Ambassador Denise De Hauwere, Director, South East Europe and Mrs. Sabine Capart, Attaché South East Europe for providing major contribution to the organisation of this Round table. Mr.von Bethlenfalvy praised the good cooperation of CEIPA with the World Bank, the University of Pécs, the Region of Catalonia and the EU Agencies, such as the Fundamental Rights Agency. He finally thanked the members of CEIPA for helping organising this event.

Mr. Geert Muylle, Director General for Bilateral Affairs at the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Cooperation, Kingdom of Belgium started his intervention by stressing the importance the Belgian government ascribes to the issue of treatment of minorities and in particular to the policies of the EU towards Roma minority within and outside the EU borders. The right of minority is for the Belgian government the universal right to be observed by each citizen.

Of estimated 15-16 million Roma living today in Europe approximately 12 million are residents of the EU, whereas 3-4 million live in the Balkan region. However, neither has the treatment of the Roma minority by national majorities received so far a thorough policy analyses, nor have the views and attitudes of the Roma minority towards their respective national majorities obtained a sufficient policy response. Belgium was one of the first countries among the founding EU Member States to pay attention to the Roma issue. The Belgian initiative in the nineties aimed at facilitating reintegration of Roma returnees in the countries of origin (in particular the most vulnerable groups such as women and children) and focusing on reinforcement of the local authorities and housing led to a large scale joint multi annual project at the EU level. This project, carried out in partnership with the Netherlands, Finland, Slovakia, Romania and the Balkan region focused on education, housing and employment opportunities of the Roma population. Both, the project's strengths as well as its weaknesses helped reigniting fresh discussions and new approaches towards the Roma minority in Europe. The new EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 encourages EU Member States to take an integrated approach towards Roma inclusion by promoting education, health, social issues, employment and security issues. It recommends a combination of comprehensive national, regional and local integration strategies focusing on Roma in a clear and specific way by furthering measures aimed at compensation for disadvantages they face. However, major efforts should be also undertaken by the Roma themselves to understand other cultures and values. The EU 2020 Strategy corroborates this argument while acknowledging that the socio economic integration of Roma is a two ways process, requiring the need for change of a mindset of both the Roma minority

and the national majority. Mr. Muylle hammered home a long term, human rights based approach to be followed by all stakeholders in order to allow a successful integration of the Roma. He finished his speech by extending his thanks to the CEIPA for organising the Round table and wishing the speakers and participants a fruitful and productive discussion that can shed more light on this issue and hence generate new initiatives for the future.

Mrs. Patsy Sorensen Payoke, Director and the co-founder of CEIPA began her intervention by underlying the need for bringing back on the agenda the issue of Roma population. While welcoming the new EU Strategy 2020 she expressed her scepticism over the theoretical approach of this document, which is rather unknown to a lot of practitioners in the field. She went on by pointing to the perceptions of the Roma in EU countries where they are often qualified as troublemakers – which she said is perhaps the way they draw attention to themselves. But there are also the so called “deluxe Roma”, with their members showing off their fortunes and living in big, nice houses. Some Belgian cities such as Gent, Antwerp and Brussels claim to have as many as 5000-7000 Roma members, although the exact number is not known. On the top of it the issue of trafficking in human beings among the Roma is insufficiently examined. We need more study and data collection on the Roma to be able to understand this population. Mrs. Sorensen named some good initiatives such as the Finish Roma plan and the Romanian initiatives, adding that the time will test the sustainability and usefulness of these projects. When speaking about the Roma issue we need to pay specific attention to the position of women and children, the problem of early marriages among young girls and the fact that they are often excluded from education process. More efforts should be also made to help their reintegration in the countries of origin where the conditions should be created so they do not need to move to other countries. Mrs. Sorensen ended her intervention by calling for better understanding of this old culture and for more projects targeting their conditions in the countries of origin.

Mrs. Katarina Mathernova, Senior Advised on Roma inclusion at the World Bank started by pointing out to her previous function as Deputy Director General at the European Commission, where she was also responsible for the use of structural funds targeting the Roma population. The funds were believed to be a leverage the EC could use to enter into dialogue on the Roma issue, until the summer 2010 when the subject got a new, politically charged dimension. Of all the Roma in the EU, a huge majority lives in Central and Eastern Europe, whereas only 2% of them migrate to the Western Europe. In CEE they face abject poverty in the settlement where they live a sedentary life, with pockets of people living in conditions worse than in Africa. But the prerequisite for the solutions should be policies based on facts and good understanding of their condition, not stereotypes prejudices and discriminatory approach. Referring to the example of Slovakia, a relatively well off country, Mrs. Mathernova qualified the Roma settlements as segregated, lacking infrastructure and with the life expectancy not

higher than 30, contrary to 48 years elsewhere. For the time being, this dire situation has unfortunately little prospects to get better. Speaking about the possible solutions she said that beyond the data issue, there are several areas that need to be tackled. These include education (the earlier schooling, the better), employment, housing and health. The World Bank is developing programmes to facilitate financial inclusion of the Roma in order to bring them into the financial system and make them familiar with payments, bank accounts and other financial transactions. However, what is most needed is a responsible policy making, concluded Mrs. Mathernova.

Mr. Miquel Angel Essomba, Director of UNESCO Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain first introduced the three main topics of his presentation: 1) the situation of the Roma in Spain 2) the topic of Roma inclusion in Spain and its relevance for other EU countries and 3) the basic idea of common basic principles of Roma integration approach developed by the EU Council. He went on by describing the progressive process of the Roma social exclusion which ended with the 1978 Spain constitution, placing the Roma at the equal footing with other Spanish citizens. Although no exact numbers exist it is estimated that there are nowadays about 600 000 Roma in Spain, of which 100 000 in Catalonia. Comparable to the other EU countries their communities show similar features such as strong social exclusion, important adaptability to the place they live in, strong internal community cohesion, strong sense of and propensity towards tradition regarding innovations and strong family structure (the sense of large, extended family). Among challenges regarding their social inclusion one of the most important one is the issue of education. The question is whether we have convenient methods when it comes to the schooling of Roma children. Instead of adapting Roma to the school we should try to adapt the school to the Roma, in order to accommodate their way of living and family functioning. Mr. Essomba illustrated his argument by describing how older Roma children, especially girls who look after the younger ones should be allowed to come to school later or have the opportunity to leave their little brothers and sisters in a school nursery. He also advocated intercultural approach consisting of treating the Roma as we treat migrants from other continents, in order to give them more visibility. But to promote their integration more should be done about progressive transformation of Roma structures. Transition process is very slow and is not sufficiently assisted by the public bodies. Touching upon Roma European mobility Mr. Essomba pointed to the factor of strong national affiliation, making the Roma people from Spain closer to the Spanish, rather than to their ethnic Roma relatives from Romania. He recommended this fact to be used as an opportunity to foster their integration. Finally, talking about the EU Common Basic Principles Mr. Essomba stressed the Principle n°2- multilateral social inclusion, Principle n° 4-promoting digital and ITC competences, Principle n° 5-furthering gender issue and Principle n°9-the importance of civil society and promotion of non formal education settings. He wined up his intervention by adding that the Roma themselves should be more involved in policies and events concerning them.

Mr. Ioannis Dimitrakopoulos, Head of Equality and Citizens' Rights Department at the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights reminded that the Roma issue was relatively invisible till 20-30 years ago. The growing awareness of the human rights situation in European countries, the so-called "domestication of human rights" contributed in gradually focusing attention to the social exclusion of the Roma.. He went on by acknowledging the difficulty and complexity of the multifaceted issues that Roma face, but expressed hope that the EU and EU Member States now appear to be ready to take the necessary steps towards resolving it. In the summer of 2010 the removals of Romanian Roma from France served to bring the issue to the limelight and prompted the EU to take urgent action by creating a special task force, which reported on the use of EU structural funds for Roma integration in December 2010 on bottlenecks at national, regional and local level the report, absence of administrative capacity, no involvement of Roma civil society and a general lack of data. On the basis of this report in April 2011 the EC presented a Communication on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, focusing on four main areas: employment, education, housing and health. It requested EU Member States to develop evidence based integration policies following 10 Common Basic Principles. The FRA is tasked to collect data systematically and to assist Member States in developing monitoring mechanisms. Previous FRA research, in particular its EU-MIDIS survey of 2008 displayed findings pointing to high discrimination levels and lack of rights awareness. In 2011 the FRA has surveyed again Roma in eleven Member States. The results will be gradually rolled out in 2012.

In his intervention **Mr. István Szilard, Chief scientific Adviser, University of Pécs Medical School, Hungary** concentrated on health issues regarding Roma. To show the difficulty of collecting data on Roma health he started by citing the example of the Ombudsman in Hungary that forbids recording data regarding nationality and ethnicity. Although guided by good human rights intentions, it also prevents collecting evidence on Roma health record, making it more difficult to develop an appropriate, evidence based policy. Poverty is the number one killer and the cause for a number of diseases among Roma. The spectrum of chronic diseases is more significant than in other parts of the population. Consequently, and in spite of the lack of reliable data it is clear that their life expectancy is decades lower compared to the other part of population, whereas the child mortality is significantly higher. And those facts are not isolated to one or two countries but concern Europe as a whole. In order to bring remedy to this it is crucial that the public programmes take an integrated, holistic approach, encompassing the variety of factors such as poverty, gender and social exclusion. It is also fundamental that a preventive care reaches out the Roma community. Insufficient awareness of health issues is further aggravated by the lack of access to the health services, often linked to the fact that they even do not possess an ID card. At EU level there is also a shortage of training. Even the NGO's lack information, knowledge and skills to help them act in the Roma communities. As a result, there is very little understanding of health issues among Roma and absence of understanding by medical and care personnel of particular Roma community problems. An approach based on 'cultural anthropology' aspects

would likely be more effective than to handle the Roma problem under the general 'umbrella' of poverty. Roma mediators are also in short supply, especially in Central and East European countries. In addition, Roma people are often labeled as troublemakers and the public opinion is rarely favourable to them. To smooth out misconceptions from both sides, it would be necessary to enhance cross-cultural communication and change the perspective, and to consider the Roma as migrants in their country of origin. Mr. Szilard reiterated the importance of education as a baseline issue, quoting the good example of the Pécs 'Gandhi' Secondary School specifically designed for Roma children. The experience of this school demonstrates that the delicate balancing of interests can produce successful results. He also addressed the issue of health concepts and difficulties posed by the dominant Western approach to it. He advocated the approach of health promotion through the building of healthy public policy and creating a supportive environment and community action while developing personal skills and reorienting health services. The project implemented by IOM with the financial support of the Belgian government organized training workshops for trainers, to enable the communities to build themselves. The project had a snowball effect, being successfully completed by over twenty trainers. Mr. Szilard ended his speech with the Latin quotation of Cicero, saying that the health of people is their primary right.

The Debate was kicked off by the discussion about the successful Spanish Roma integration policy, especially with respect to housing. The Roma community in Spain is mostly concentrated in the southern region of Andalusia, where in the 60's and 70's a big internal migration from the rural areas to the cities took place. As a result, the Roma population found themselves living in the streets in the outskirts of the cities in extremely precarious conditions. Following the National Plan for Roma People devised in the 80's and implemented by the local authorities, flat apartments were built to accommodate the Roma population, which in turn resulted in the creation of ghettos in which they replicated the rural patterns of life in the urban context. However, the Spanish good example is also due to the fact that Roma speak Spanish or Catalan, which favours their integration into the local environment. In addition, in Navarra, Madrid and elsewhere in Spain, the projects were carried out in partnership with the banks and NGOs to teach them budgeting and enabling them to take small loans to start their own business. This showed the importance of local community action and the role of local governments in the integration process.

Some participants raised the question of Roma communities elsewhere in Western Europe and the neglect from the official authorities to consider them as autochthonous population. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency was said to be rightly placed to give a crucial push and raise awareness of the Roma in Western Europe. The EU 2020 Roma Integration Framework is a good platform for the future, but its success will depend on the political will of EU member states to implement reforms and strengthen Roma integration into European societies, while avoiding their assimilation.

H.E. Ambassador Mrs. Denise De Hauwere, Director South East Europe, Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation extended her thanks to the speakers and participants for their active contribution to the Round table discussion. She concluded the debate by pointing to the work that lays ahead for the social workers in cooperation with the Roma people to improve their living conditions and enable their better integration into European societies. Mrs. De Hauwere reiterated the complexity of the subject and reminded about the challenges that lay ahead. She expressed her hope for the Round table to generate some good ideas that could help developing new solutions in the future.

Mr. Peter von Bethlenfalvy winded up the meeting, which was followed by the reception from 5:50 to 7:00 pm at the Egmont Palace, kindly hosted by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.