

Shadow Conclusions of the EU Roma Summit, 16th September 2008

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Acknowledgements

Overall, the EU Roma Summit sent a positive signal. It indicated political will within and outside the European Union to address the often dire situation of Roma in Europe. The EU Roma Summit reiterated the need to find effective and coherent EU-wide solutions to the social inclusion of Roma, as expressed by the overwhelming majority of stakeholders present, including Roma representatives. The highest level conference targeting Roma to date, the Summit brought together four Commissioners, including the President of the EC, along with Mr. George Soros and representatives of governments, EU institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the World Bank, the UN, and representatives of civil society. Among a number of promising statements, the speech of Commissioner for Freedom, Justice and Security, Mr. Jacques Barrot, was most notable. The Commissioner clearly condemned racism against Roma and reaffirmed his commitment to ensure respect for fundamental rights in Italy and the EU.

I. The Message of the European Commission:

Despite these positive signals, we, the members of the EU Roma Policy Coalition (ERPC), believe that the European Commission has not lived up to the expectations of assuming a strong leadership and coordination role in setting up a framework for action that would see the rhetoric of the Commission officials translated into concrete steps and policy proposals. Furthermore, the shared responsibility of the Member States and the European Union for Roma inclusion was not promoted by the European Commission. It did not seem to propose a more proactive role than it has in the existing policy framework, in which responsibilities lie with Member States supported by fragmented and ad-hoc Community instruments[1]. In our view, the European Commission made it clear that without a strong mandate from the European Council, e.g. the political commitment of the Member States, it will not be in a position to propose a progressive and long-term Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion. The ERPC finds this message from the Commission to be ambiguous and insufficient.

The proposal for an integrated European Roma Platform, which President Barroso of the European Commission made during the EU Roma Summit, needs to be clarified. Over the last five years the EC initiated a number of expert reports on the social inclusion of Roma. The conclusions of these reports, which have underlined the need for a comprehensive EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion and for the establishment of a Roma Unit within the European Commission, have not been followed by adequate policy responses. An integrated European Roma Platform should translate into creating a permanent and focused structure within the European Commission capable to ensure the efficient functioning of the existing Inter-Service Group as well as of future dialogue mechanisms among relevant stakeholders.

ERPC welcomes the setting-up of a "Platform" as long as it will be a mechanism that enables the development of a concrete EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion and the establishment of efficient inter-institutional mechanisms. ERPC believes that Roma inclusion is a shared responsibility of EU Institutions/Administrations and Member States, as President Barroso emphasized in his statement. We welcome the endorsement of the ERPC Summit Declaration by Commissioner Vladimir Spidla and the pledge to take the proposals into consideration as part of the European Commission's follow up of the EU Roma Summit.

The Summit proved that while Roma and non-Roma NGOs and government representatives were more pragmatic and policy-oriented, the position taken by the European Commission was less progressive or forward-looking. The European Commission voiced concerns regarding the abysmal situation of Roma in Europe, echoing the issues raised by civil society. Lacking a strong commitment to propose effective solutions, long term strategies, actions to establish coordination mechanisms and facilitate implementation and monitoring based on clear benchmarks and indicators, however, it failed to live up to expectations.

II. EU Presidency and Governments' messages:

The French Presidency openly welcomed the Declaration of the ERPC to the Summit, which calls for a coherent, long-term, and comprehensive EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion and the establishment of effective implementation and monitoring mechanisms within the European Commission. The French Presidency to the EU underlined the need for immediate follow up and pledged to build upon the ERPC Declaration in the Council deliberations in December 2008.

ERPC is pleased with the statements of Member States' delegations present at the Summit. The clear support for a comprehensive strategy at the EU level emerged as their main message. Nonetheless, a number of delegations expressed their concern related to the "Europeanisation" of Roma issues and asserted that an EU Roma policy can only coordinate national actions; it cannot assume the role of the Member States in Roma inclusion, shifting the main responsibility from the national to the European level.

However, the delegations of the Member States strongly promoted concrete actions to be undertaken at the EU level, such as the development of an EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion, the establishment of a Roma Unit, and other mechanisms at the EC level in the area of implementation. The need for better monitoring and improvement of the use of the Open Method of Coordination was also emphasized. ERPC welcomes this development.

III. European Parliament Message

In line with its last four resolutions, the European Parliament shared a clear vision for an EU Roma Policy. A long-term comprehensive EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion, a Community Action Plan on Roma, measures to address anti-Gypsism, and monitoring and implementing mechanisms at both the EU and national levels were the key elements of the MEPs' messages to the Summit.

IV. NGO Messages

NGOs underlined the need for an EU Roma Policy, the establishment of a Roma Unit at the European Commission, and effective mechanisms that are able to implement and monitor such a Policy. The importance of the engagement of Roma representatives and grassroots organisations was reiterated by NGOs and by other stakeholders. The need for the Fundamental Rights Agency to have a distinct focus on monitoring anti-Gypsyism across the EU was also a key message to the Summit shared by many NGOs.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations:

a.. The EC should take bold action to address the challenges of Roma inclusion. The development of an EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion that builds on existing Community instruments, identifies clear goals and targets, and establishes effective coordination structures is a shared interest of the EU and its Member States.

b.. The mandate of the proposed "EU Integrated Platform for Roma" should be better defined and include the responsibility to propose concrete policy actions. While not an end in itself, this process has to be built on a firm commitment to policy development and institutional reform.

c.. Member States, which consider the development of an EU Roma policy as an opportunity to strengthen their efforts at national level, should provide the political backing to the European Commission during the European Council in December 2008.

d.. The French Presidency to the EU, consistent with its position on the ERPC Declaration to the Summit, should support a clear mandate to be included in the Presidency Conclusions inviting the European Commission to develop an EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion and to establish institutional mechanisms to coordinate that strategy.

e.. The upcoming Czech and Swedish Presidencies to the EU should take specific actions and launch a consultation process towards the development of an EU Framework Strategy for Roma Inclusion and put Roma inclusion high on their Presidency priorities.

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The European Roma Policy Coalition (Coalition) – www.romapolicy.eu - is an informal gathering of NGOs operating at EU level in the broader areas of human rights, anti-discrimination, anti-racism, social inclusion and Roma and Travelers rights. It is the mission of the Coalition to propose to and advocate for sustainable and comprehensive strategies of EU institutions and decision makers, aiming to tackle the individual/structural discrimination, poverty and social exclusion that Roma communities face in the European Union. The Coalition advocates for the full realization of the human rights standards for Roma.

[1] See: Commission Staff Working Document, Community Instruments and Policies for Roma Inclusion, (COM (2008) 420), <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=553&langId=en>