



Minutes from the Second meeting of the European platform for Roma inclusion *Improving the quality of education for Roma¹*

Brussels, September 28, 2009
Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU
Square De Meeûs, 30. 1000 Brussels.

Context: The second meeting of the integrated European Platform for Roma inclusion took place in Brussels on 28th September 2009. The meeting was co-organised by the European Commission and the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The Platform, which was launched in April 2009 in Prague and brings together experts from Member States, EU civil servants, the main international organisations, NGOs, representatives of Roma civil society as well as academics and experts in the field. The aim of the Platform for Roma inclusion is to provide an arena for exchanging knowledge, experience and good practice, for making commitments on specific initiatives and possibly for monitoring progress achieved towards the inclusion of Roma in Europe.

The second meeting of the Platform focused specifically on the theme of education and examined in particular the root causes of Roma exclusion from quality, mainstream education, as well as examples of possible ways forward.

I. Political opening

The meeting was opened by State Secretary Christer Hallerby (Swedish Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality), Commissioner Ján Figel' (European Commission Directorate General for Education, Training, Culture and Youth) and Commissioner Vladimír Špidla (European Commission Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities).

¹ Report by Rafal Naczyk, journalist.

In his opening speech, State Secretary Hallerby stressed that education plays a fundamental role in enabling every individual to participate in political, social and economic life and is a key issue in the fight against exclusion and discrimination of Roma. He recalled that the right to education is a basic human right, referring inter alia to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. With a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, every Member State should, in particular, make primary education compulsory and available to all and take measures to encourage regular school attendance and to reduce drop-out rates. State Secretary Hallerby called for three major challenges: improving the use of key indicators measuring the situation of the Roma in education, health, employment, housing and welfare; moving from short-term projects to structural reform; and changing people's prejudiced attitudes towards the Roma. State Secretary Hallerby also highlighted the latest incidents of violence and protest against Roma. In contrast to these growing tensions, several successful initiatives have already been undertaken in order to consolidate and foster intercultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma communities. He urged Member States to share good practices and better learn from each other's experiences. In this context, he argued that a strong investment in education is not enough to change the situation.

Commissioner Figel' agreed that Member States should intensify their efforts to exchange ideas about systemic, strategic and practical measures which could help tackle Roma exclusion with a multidimensional approach. Although not the only solution, he highlighted education as a key dimension for the social inclusion of the Roma at the European, national and local levels. Commissioner Figel' recalled the situation of the Roma in education: Roma children have very low enrolment rates in pre-primary education and some of them never enrol in school. When they do, they often find themselves in segregated classes and schools, leading to lower quality education. Very few enrol in higher education. Commissioner Figel' recalled the commitments some Member States have made, for instance, as part of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. He also argued in favour of the promotion of an environment of trust between Roma families, schools and public authorities. Commissioner Figel' emphasised that a general approach of equity can help combat educational underachievement. However, additional targeting at national level is needed for reaching the groups most at risk of exclusion. He also stressed the fact that one of the most important aspects of the Roma question is the urgent need to foster intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Commissioner Špidla emphasised the key role played by the Presidency of the Council as a driver of the Platform process. He welcomed the fact that the Swedish Presidency decided to set education as a key challenge to be discussed at the second meeting of the Platform. Commissioner Špidla underlined that having access to quality education is the way to have equal chances in society, as it is the way out of the vicious cycle of unemployment, poverty, poor housing conditions, bad health and social marginalisation. He highlighted that efforts to improve the access of Roma to quality education cannot be a stand-alone policy but have to be firmly embedded in policies which aim at improving the socio economic situation of Roma, fighting against discrimination, improving the health status of vulnerable groups, and investing in urban rehabilitation.

II. The Issue : Key problems of Roma in the education system

Mihai Surdu (Roma Education Fund) reported about the key problems faced by Roma in the education system and emphasised the fact that equal access to education is necessary for a successful social inclusion of the Roma. All studies demonstrate that Roma spend on average less than half of the time than the other pupils in the education system. Participation rates in preschool education are extremely low while the transition towards secondary education is very slow. A large number of Roma youths who succeed in getting into secondary education finally end up dropping out of school. The proportion of Roma who have never gone to school remains very high (50% of Roma children in Romania and Bulgaria, 25% in some villages and towns in Serbia). Mihai Surdu also denounced a “disproportionate placement” of Roma children in special schools or segregated settings. In Slovakia, 60% of the children placed in special schools are Roma. What is more, those who follow a mainstream curriculum are often sent to separate classrooms that provide education of a lower quality. Such an approach poses a serious obstacle to the social inclusion of Roma and encourages the creation of ghettos.

III. Discussion and Stakeholder Reaction

In the ensuing debate, Lívía Járóka (MEP, EPP-ED, HU) asked Mr. Surdu about the role of Mayors and local school authorities in central and eastern European States. She pointed to the fact that local authorities sometimes favour segregation of Roma children, despite the policies adopted by central governments. Mr. Surdu agreed that the issue of segregation is a typical problem at the local level, even though the problem has already been acknowledged in a number of countries. To overcome these barriers, the Roma Education Fund is developing partnerships with the local authorities with the help of civil society organisations.

Bernard Rorke (Open Society Institute - Roma Initiatives) highlighted the systemic over-representation of Roma in special education in Slovakia. He wondered whether the Swedish Presidency would play a leading role in convincing EU Member States that no child should be wrongfully placed into special education because of his/her ethnicity.

Katarina Mathernová (Deputy Director General, European Commission DG Regional Policy) gave an account of a visit to Slovakia, where she was struck by segregation school policies at local level. Mr. Surdu reacted by stating that the most appropriate approach to preventing segregation is to condemn early-tracking and to revise existing school enrolment procedures.

Nina Arnhold (Senior Education Specialist at the World Bank) asked about the situation in other countries - such as the Czech Republic or Serbia. She mentioned the possible impact of the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights vis-à-vis the tracking of young Roma pupils (the "Ostrava II" case). Mr. Surdu explained that the Roma Education Fund has launched a Call for proposals to increase the enrolment of Roma children in kindergartens in the Czech Republic.

MEP Lívía Járóka reacted by stating that it was no use “re-inventing the wheel” as long as there was no change in mentality at the local level. In her opinion, talking about national policies adopted in the capitals is of no use, if the general population does not change its attitude towards Mayors and school authorities. She insisted on the fact that despite all existing non-segregation policies, Mayors and school directors may act the way they do

because a lot of parents do not want their children to sit in the same classroom as Roma children.

Beate Winkler (Representative Forum Roma Inclusion in EU – Freudenberg Foundation) underlined the need to go beyond emotional messages and adopt a systemic approach that would target structural changes, and involve professional and technical assistance.

Deyan Kolev (Chairman of the Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance in Bulgaria) asked how the Roma Education Fund is promoting intercultural education, with a global perspective for the entire education system. Mr. Surdu argued that intercultural education should be the priority for any school. The approach of the Roma Education Fund is to mingle pupils of various origins in the classes. He also pointed out that there are not enough mainstream schools in which Roma could be integrated. Finally, he stressed that ultimately all governments are responsible for the quality of their schools.

Valeriu Nicolae (Senior Adviser at the Open Society Institute in Budapest) insisted on the active citizenship of Roma themselves and highlighted that integration must be a two-way process.

Katarina Mathernová argued that Structural Funds support concrete tools and innovative projects aiming at improving the Roma communities' situation. She insisted that all actors within the Member States (governments, local authorities, and civil society) need to engage in a dialogue for Roma inclusion. She recalled that a Call for Proposals has been launched (closed on 25th September 2009) for a pilot project focusing, among others, on early childhood education and care.

Michael Guët (Head of Roma and Travellers Division – Council of Europe) argued that teaching Romani history and culture in mainstream classrooms is one of the best mechanisms to understand Roma pupils.

Isabel Alonso-Luzuriaga (Chief of Programmes Unit – Spanish Ministry of Health and Social Policy) insisted that the Roma situation in the EU has to be treated with a multidimensional approach. To tackle the issue of desegregation, Roma will have to be integrated through a global national policy that empowers their social, economical and housing conditions.

Gabriela Hrahaňová (Director – Czech Government Office for the Roma Community) brought up the results from desegregation experiences in the Czech Republic: when there are more Roma children in a class, pupils belonging to the Czech majority are pulled out by their parents. The mainstream population is still driven by stereotypes and fear. Therefore, the best attitude is to increase awareness campaigns. Ms. Hrahaňová also explained that national policies are difficult to implement at local level, as a result from decentralisation.

Belinda Pyke (Director, European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) insisted on the fact that education policies and Roma inclusion policies have to meet, both at the national and European levels. She explained that the 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma inclusion discussed at the first meeting of the platform (in Prague in April 2009) and annexed to the EPSCO Council Conclusions of 8th June 2009 could be used as valuable guidelines when formulating public policy measures in this area. Finally, she wondered how education does affect Roma boys and girls in a different way.

Eva Sobotka (Human Rights and Networking Coordinator – European Union Fundamental Rights Agency) mentioned the EU MIDIS survey on discrimination felt by the Roma. She also suggested drawing up strict guidelines ensuring that school segregation is an invalid approach in any case.

Joost de Laat (Economist, Human Development for EU and Central Asia – World Bank) commented that during the last decade, many experimental education initiatives were implemented around the world. He argued the Platform to share more experiences in order to evaluate their impact.

Ruus Dijksterhuis (Director – Spolu International) reported on an experience in Hungary, where a local organisation succeeded in providing access of Roma youths to education. She suggested creating working groups to build concrete projects in this field.

IV. The way forward: Transferable policies and good practices from international and national initiatives

Adam Pokorny (Head of Unit, European Commission DG Education and Culture) announced in his introduction the launching of a valorisation and dissemination conference in March 2010 that will look at a range of programs supporting Roma education - for example, the Life Long Learning Program. Priorities shared by all Member States at the level of Roma education include early school leaving, learning basic skills, literacy, and has to do with the education of children with a migrant background and the improvement of access to early-childhood education and care. At the end of 2008, the Council adopted a new strategic framework along with four policy priorities articulated around a number of objectives the Member States have to achieve by the year 2020. One of these four priorities is specifically the promotion of equity. Mr Pokorny insisted on the fact that in relation with this process, Member States should share practices and exchange information in order to learn from each other's experiences of supporting Roma education.

Margareta Wiman (Deputy Director – Swedish Ministry of Education and Research) explained in her presentation that the Swedish education system is predominantly free of charge and focused on mainstream solutions. There are no special institutions for Roma children. The idea behind the Swedish school system is to offer integrated preschool for all children in the local area, whatever their ethnic origins or disabilities. Pupils are invited to be placed at the compulsory school in their local area, but they can also choose a different public or private school. Sometimes, special measures are required i.e. for children whose mother tongue is not Swedish or pupils with learning disabilities. Compulsory schools are responsible for ensuring that every child has knowledge of national minorities (culture, language, history and religion). Mother tongue tuition and bilingual tuition have an important role to play supporting the minorities' languages. Roma pupils face some difficulties in completing for their schooling: they show a high rate of absenteeism and early drop-outs; mother tongue tuition does not always work as expected; there is also a lack of Romani teachers and text books; finally Roma pupils have the tendency not to say they are Roma for fear of harassment and discrimination. Several initiatives have been launched to improve the situation, but according to Ms. Wiman, more needs to be done. A special assignment has been given to the National Agency for Education to support the development and production of books, tuitions and materials in Romani and other national minorities' languages.

Andor Ürmös (Head of Department – Hungarian Ministry for Social Affairs and Labor) gave a presentation on the implementation of desegregation through the equal opportunities funding policy). He explained that the idea came from the fact that the government was not satisfied with the little impact EU funding seemed to have made on Roma inclusion (in particular in education), even though millions of Euros were spent in this frame since 2004. Desegregation in public education appeared to be difficult to achieve, because of the reluctance from some municipalities. Therefore, the Ministry set up a desegregation criterion as a condition for accessing EU funding: the "equal opportunities funding policy" only provides for grants to projects with a desegregation policy. More than 1200 equal opportunity plans were approved in 2008. The equal opportunities funding policy has also been implemented in the field of culture (attention to Roma culture must be proved in project planning in order to get funds).

Letitia Mark (Director – Roma Women's Association Timișoara) focused her presentation on a project driven by women in Timisoara, in Western Romania, to provide educational support for Roma children, particularly those who had abandoned school. Ms. Mark highlighted that in Romania Roma educational segregation persists to this day: even when Roma children are legally entitled to attend mixed schools, some school directors reportedly discourage parents from enrolling their children, suggesting they go to segregated classrooms. With funding from the Open Society Foundation (OSF), the Roma Women's Association inaugurated a programme in August 2008, achieving the following main activities: identifying schools that are still segregating Roma children; providing assistance to school-aged Roma children in the core disciplines; providing school education for 14-18 year-olds; teaching Romani language and culture; offering civic education, medical and psychological counselling; providing inter-cultural training opportunities and activities for parents, teachers and children; and driving children from suburbs to central schools. As the association recognises that in the Romani community, taking care of children is the duty of women, the key role of mothers and women is highlighted in all aspects of the program's activities.

V. Discussion and Stakeholder Reaction

Ian Naysmith (Senior Policy Adviser – United-Kingdom Department for Communities and Local Government) wondered if Sweden was collecting data on Roma pupils. Margareta Wiman answered that the Swedish authorities were not registering ethnic data but that studies were regularly done using proxies.

Heather Grabbe (Director – Open Society Institute Brussels) wondered how much placement of pupils in schools was affected by prejudices from non-Roma parents (who would remove their children from schools welcoming Roma) in Sweden. Ms. Wiman answered that this was not a relevant problem in Sweden.

Christoph Leucht (Policy Officer – Freudenberg Foundation) wondered if extreme-right Jobbik municipalities do make use of anti-segregation programmes. Andor Ürmös answered that the link between getting funding and planning/implementing an equal opportunities policy (in the frame of the "equal opportunities funding policy") specifically intends to push the idea of Roma inclusion through local resistance.

Toby Linden (Director – Roma Education Fund) wondered how the Hungarian government and national policies could strengthen the capacity of municipalities to design effective and

efficient interventions for the Roma. Andor Ürmös answered that the Ministry helps all Mayors dealing with the problem of Roma exclusion.

Natalia Alonso (Deputy Director – Amnesty International) commented the fact that Roma segregation remains a major problem for many Member States and that results from data collections on this trend are getting worse.

Valeriu Nicolae wondered how much the desegregation programme in Timișoara costs. Letitia Mark explained that 150 Euros per person were needed (on a sample of 500 pupils).

VI. Intervention by Commissioner Vladimír Špidla

Commissioner Špidla emphasised in his conclusion, that the Platform is providing a new political level of cooperation that respects the areas of competence of municipalities, regions, Member States and the Community. The Platform process opens the way to coherent actions among these actors. He welcomed that the Swedish Presidency was committed to the success of this process by having chosen the theme of education. Commissioner Špidla recalled two of the 10 Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion: first, the principle of an explicit but not exclusive approach of Roma inclusion; second, the aim to get Roma into mainstream employment, housing and education. He stressed the importance of ensuring holistic policies that include all actors in all sectors (education, employment, health, social affairs, etc.). Commissioner Špidla insisted that the Commission can not only enforce modern non-discrimination legislation and provide financial support for Roma inclusion but also provide political commitment and leadership, stressing the need for a "coherent action" against Roma exclusion.

Conclusions by State Secretary Christer Hallerby

State Secretary Christer Hallerby repeated that access to a higher level of education of Roma people can break the vicious circle of discrimination against Roma. He also focused on the fact that segregation costs more to the society than integration: the consequences of segregation are a loss of talents and productivity. Mr. Hallerby stressed the fact that education policy is not only a responsibility for the authorities but also for the parents, and that EU needs to establish trust relations between Roma families and social actors by promoting intercultural approaches. Finally, he agreed with Commissioner Špidla on the fact that Roma must be active subjects of policies.