

SLOVENIA CONFERENCE

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PREAMBLE

There are between eight and twelve million Rroma in Europe. There are more Rroma than the citizen of many countries who are now in the European Union. There are five times more Rroma than there are Slovenians, twice as many as Denmark or Finland!

Many people came to Europe over the centuries: The last ones to arrive were the Slavs, the Bulgars, the Hungarians, yet Rroma, who arrived before the Magyar, yet are somehow still considered to be alien to Europe.

The fact is that at the time where Rroma arrived, many of the countries that are now part of the European Union did not exist. They were parts of other Empires or kingdoms, such as the Byzantine and later the Ottoman Empire, or were simply not yet in place. In fact, the concept of Nation did simply not really exist in its modern terms.

In the more than thousand year of Rroma history in Europe, Rroma never wanted or tried to create their own country within Europe. Had they done so, maybe history would have turned out differently...

Rroma are Europeans, Europeans before the concept Europe actually came to be, at home all over Europe. Rroma are spread through all countries, and are an integral part of the European culture. Their contribution to the overall European culture cannot be denied, and their integration and attachment to Europe is a fact. European they are, European they will remain.

Rromanes, the Rroma language, is an integral part of the Rroma culture, and, as such is one of the earliest transnational languages in Europe. More people speak Rromanes than many of the officially acknowledged European languages.

RROMA PROBLEM?

The fear of a massive Rroma migration is a fear that stems from the misconception that all Rroma are travellers. Only a small minority among Rroma as a whole ever travelled. Most Rroma, once they arrived in Europe, settled, and many have stayed in the same place and country for centuries.

One often hears nowadays that there is a “Roma problem”, a problem often associated to a social issue. But what are the roots of such a statement?

The problem is actually the creation of nations in Europe. Nations, especially the ones created towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries have tended to be created on the premises of a nation. A nation, a language, a culture. And minorities all over Europe did not fit in this nation scheme.

This does not only apply to Roma, but also to other ethnic and cultural minorities such as the Turks in the Balkan, the Jews all over Europe. The fact is, in such nations, there is no place for other cultures. The latest developments in former Yugoslavia, for example in Bosnia and Kosovo, have shown that Roma are still driven out. Kosovo is a particularly dire example, for Roma in Kosovo were really integrated in the society: they were doctors, judges and lawyers, farmers, and generally sided with the Albanians. But, in spite of this integration, based on a nationalistic ideology, they were forced to leave their country.

That this is contrary to the spirit of the European community is clear to everyone. We are all Europeans and at home in Europe.

Fact is, Roma are now the largest European cultural and ethnic minority in the European Union, yet discriminations and prejudices remain the norm, not only in the newest European Union countries, but also in Western Europe. That these prejudices are sometimes deeply anchored can be seen in the latest events in Italy, where a murder, being attributed to a Rom (although it wasn't one) unleashed a wave of history in the press.

The fear that Roma would make use of the right to travel and establishment within the European Union, a right given to all European Union citizen has been used by various populist politicians.

Fact is, not more Roma than other people are migrating within Europe. One can say that if a million of Rumanians were to chose to live in other European countries, there would be no more and no less than the usual 10-15% of Roma among them, the same percentage as in the country itself.

THE FUTURE

Roma are proud citizen of their countries, and European citizen in their culture and hearts. Unfortunately, if policies and the general attitude of the population doesn't change, they are more and more marginalised.

The list of failed policies that European states tried through the centuries is long as it is disheartening: ethnic cleansing, forced immigration to the colonies, forced assimilation, slavery (in Romania only), state discrimination. Yet all these policies have not changed the fact that Roma are still here, and are still part of Europe.

In the twenty-first century, it is time to reconsider those policies and to change them. Fact is, the countries with the least historical persecution of Roma are the ones where the “Roma issue” is also the smallest one.

Integration and dialogue are key. Integration and acceptance that Roma have a culture, have a place in Europe, regardless of the country they are from are the most important. As the International Romani Union, we are glad to see that the Slovenian government cites intercultural dialogue as one of the key points of their European presidency.

This dialogue should not forget the Roma, for intercultural dialogue starts in one’s own backyard, in the heart of Europe. We are sure that this will not be forgotten by this presidency.

One step that we would really greet is the official recognition of Romanes as a European language. This would give a positive sign that Europe as a whole is at long last ready to confront its history and demons, and ready to accept that Roma are European.

THE PROBLEMS

That there are issues, that there are problems cannot be denied. Yes, there are Roma who beg and steal, but cannot this be said of any population in Europe? Isn’t rather the fact that when a Rom steals, the general population is comforted in their views about all Roma? Isn’t there a form of collective guilt at play here?

Fact is that if nothing is done, Europe will create a self-fulfilling prophecy. There will be a true Roma problem. But it is not too late now to redress the situation and turn it around.

Integration and education are keys. Without integration and acceptance by the general population, there cannot be a decrease of the consistent discrimination that one often feels as a Rom. This is not the Roma who are at fault here, but rather the rest of the population.

Education is also key, as if Roma are barred from studies, or at least put in such a position where the discrimination is so strong that few of them dare to continue their studies, Europe will have a problem. In many countries until recently, Roma

were put in special schools, effectively barring them from further studies. In those, the European States failed them: They are responsible for a proper education.

Although there are laws, European laws and laws within the countries, Roma are felt as aliens, and as such, often implicitly excluded. The discrimination against Roma at all level shows that actually, the European conventions such as the one on children are violated on a daily basis. The police in most European countries is still profiling Roma and do not consider them to be Europeans.

In Kosovo or in Bosnia, European and International conventions have been disregarded by all parties and the European Union has turned a blind eye. Roma were victims of those conflicts, and the European inaction in those matters has made it worse. In those countries, de facto, Roma were ethnically cleansed and nothing remains from more than thousand year of history.

In many former communist countries, the legal situation of property has not been fully resolved and many Roma cannot prove ownership for their homes or obtain new land to build themselves a home.

WHAT CAN AND SHOULD BE DONE?

As Roma, we have seen many failed programs and failed policies. Unfortunately quite a few of these have proven to be alibi exercises... So what can and should be done?

As we already said, the official recognition of the Rromani language – Romanes – would be a great sign of hope and a sign that at long last, Europe is ready to come to terms with their largest minority.

Any help at the European level in furthering this language and culture would be more than welcome!

Integration and Education are the two key elements. Integration requires information, requires the will at all levels to change the attitudes of the general population towards Roma. That this is in everybody's interest should be clear.

Education needs to be furthered. Helping the most disadvantaged to get a proper education is one of the state's core responsibilities. So why isn't this being done for Roma?

For new policies to succeed, to show concrete results, they need an active involvement of the Roma community. Too often, Roma policies have been paternalistic. We would greet a greater involvement of Roma in shaping those

policies and be a partner. As the International Romani Union, we are ready to take an active part in this process.

We would also greet concrete steps to resolve the issues of ethnic cleansing, the situation of Roma in Kosovo and Bosnia, and potentially in other countries.

Without the umbrella of the European Union, a consistent policy and help of the Roma community is not possible. Roma are spread all over Europe. Some of the core problems they face are the same in all countries. It requires a European Institution to give the necessary impulse to change policies.

Let's work together, at European, at State levels, to guarantee the application of the European Parliament resolutions regarding Roma (for example April 2005, May 2006 on Roma women), to change the attitudes, to work towards a better live, to change the policies and create a better Europe for everybody. Europe and its member states should declare their engagement in such a project, a project to change society, to integrate Roma, a European population.