

George Soros address to the International Steering
Committee of the Roma Decade

Prague, 27 June 2011

Distinguished Ministers and Guests:

I am happy to be here at the International Steering
Committee of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. I was present
at the inaugural meeting of the Decade in 2005, when nine
states made an unprecedented commitment to overcome the
exclusion of Europe's most alienated people, the Roma. At
that time, the Decade member states pledged to develop
concrete action plans to ensure progress in the areas of
education, employment, health, and housing. The Decade
has made a lot of progress since then. It has elevated the
importance of tackling the interrelated problems of poverty
and discrimination. The Decade has involved the Roma
communities and provided a forum to discuss what works

and what doesn't. It has encouraged civil society to provide independent evaluation. And it has attracted other states and international organizations to join.

In the last year the European Union has devoted increased attention to the problems connected with Roma exclusion. It is calling on member states to prepare national integration strategies, set clear targets and devote adequate resources towards achieving these goals. It has resolved to bolster the European Roma Platform to coordinate activities of EU member states and to make a difference by 2020. In its latest Communication, the EU is calling on Decade countries to draw on the experience of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and improve their existing action plans.

This offers the Decade a unique opportunity to make a constructive contribution to the EU Roma Framework. It can put its accumulated experience at the disposal of the European Union and in addition it can bring the Roma communities, the NGOs engaged with the Roma and the western Balkan states with large Roma populations into the process.

With the Decade now past its half-way mark, its role is more important than ever.

I spoke with Commissioner Reding about the benefits of integrating the work of the Decade into the EU framework for coordination. She agreed that there are many synergies to explore and lessons to learn from the Decade's

experience. Now it is time to work to achieving this integration for mutual benefit.

We should use this meeting to begin developing a partnership between the EU and the Decade. As a first step, I propose that the next plenary meeting of the Decade should take place in Brussels. It should be used to show how the problem of Roma exclusion could be solved.

Because we know what needs to be done and we have demonstrated it on a small scale. For example, in education it involves providing special assistance to enable Roma children who have been disadvantaged from birth to get the same level of education as other children. By special assistance I mean mentoring and tutoring and having teachers who know how to help the disadvantaged.

Working along these lines for more than 20 years my

foundations have succeeded in educating a new Roma elite who have retained their Roma identity. As things stand now Roma who succeed in getting educated tend to deny their Roma ancestry and become assimilated. Since they don't fit the stereotype they can do so but the stereotype remains.

Enlarging the new Roma elite would help to break the prevailing stereotype. Unless this affirmative education is scaled up, the total Roma population will continue to grow faster than the new Roma elite and the stereotype will remain.

The proposed Brussels meeting should serve as a showcase for the positive achievements of the Decade without minimizing the magnitude of the task ahead. The prevailing opinion today is that the Roma present an insoluble problem and this feeds into the hostile stereotype. Once you

encounter the new Roma elite you get a glimpse of what the future can hold. Instead of despairing, you realize that the affirmative educational approach needs to be scaled up.

Using Hungary as an example, by 2015 some 25 percent of new entrants into the work force will be of Roma origin.

Without properly integrating the Roma population,

Hungary would face a grim future. The same applies to several other members of the Decade. Yet the adverse attitude of the majority population is the worst in those countries. There is no alternative to taking on this challenge.

The challenge is particularly acute for the Decade. Either it develops a full partnership with the European Framework or it risks duplicating efforts of the Roma Platform. But to abandon the Decade would mean losing the participation of

the Western Balkan states with large Roma populations and that would mean an irreparable loss. There is no real choice but to develop a full partnership.