

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Lichtenštejnský Palace, which belongs to the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic and serves as a meeting place for the Prime Minister and his guests.

It has been a long day; and this is my first Steering Committee meeting that I have attended as the National Coordinator of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised by the manner and the flow of the discussion. I listened very carefully and with great interest to the feedback that we received from the representatives of the International Roma Civil Society, and I am thankful that we had the opportunity to share our, in some cases diverging, opinions, which I hope will yield improvements in the situation of Roma minorities.

So after such a productive day, I think that all of us deserve a delicious dinner. This palace as it stands right now is built on an unusual ground plan of an irregular hexagon. The initial Palace had two quite tall and impressive towers, which rose from the main western facade. However, these towers were removed in 1831 by the palace's new owner, the General Jan Josef, the Prince of Liechtenstein, after whom the Palace is now named and whose coat of arms are mounted above the portal. At that time, the palace had only one floor.

Its present day appearance, with the second floor, dates to 1864 when the miller František Odkolek purchased the Palace. The former Baroque facade was replaced by a Neo-Renaissance one, and the palace interiors were also remodelled.

Between 1979 and 1991, the palace was renovated and adapted to serve the purposes of the Government Presidium. The disastrous floods in 2002 devastated the ground floor premises, and the palace had to undergo another, costly renovation.

Today, we are in the Brown Salon on the ground floor. The halls and rooms are used for working meetings and friendly gatherings. On the upper floor is the Golden Salon. I am particularly delighted that tomorrow we will meet there for the 20<sup>th</sup> Steering Committee meeting of the Decade, because it is reserved for the Prime Minister's high level meetings. On the second floor there are also suites, which have hosted such guests as Spanish King Juan Carlos and his wife Sophia, Queen Elisabeth II of the United Kingdom, and Japanese Emperor Akihito with Empress Michiko.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me welcome you here once more with a glass of wine. I would like to wish you a pleasant evening accompanied by Roma music. Since the weather has cooperated, we are lucky to have the renowned Roma band Kale playing for us in the atrium. I hope you enjoy the dinner and the music so that tomorrow we will be refreshed and ready for further interesting discussions!

Cheers to all of you!