

I would like to open with a very recent quote from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in the context of the refugee debate in Europe:

Hungary's historical given is that we live together with a few hundred thousands of Roma. This was decided by someone, somewhere. This is what we inherited. This is our situation, this is our predetermined condition....

We are the ones who have to live with this, but we don't demand from anyone, especially not in the direction of the west, that they should live together with a large Roma minority.

Ten years on, the current leader of one of the founding countries of the Decade, equates Hungary's Roma with the Syrian refugees; likens his fellow Roma citizens to a historically inherited burden; and speaks of a national 'we' who have to live with 'them'.

It would seem to many that we have regressed beyond repair, and beyond belief, when it comes to Roma inclusion in at least one of the Decade countries. But let's not hang a verdict on the whole enterprise based on the garbled words of one man. We've got to look wider and dig deeper before we pass judgment on the last ten years, for a lot has happened since 2005.

Back then the launch of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005 raised hopes, promised much, and in time disillusioned many.

At the launch of the Decade, the head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn stated that *"the Decade offers an opportunity to turn the tide of history"*

For George Soros, the Decade, was just a beginning but it signaled "a sea change" in Roma policy.

So what happened to all those hopes and the hyperbole? As we take stock of the state of Roma inclusion in 2015, what came of the opportunity presented by the Decade "to turn the tide of history"?

I was reminded of the sense of optimism of the time, when we interviewed many of those present at the launch. One Bulgarian activist told me: *"We thought that we as Roma were beginning to matter to other people ... that we were part of something that would ensure our political participation..."*

Another activist from the Czech Republic hoped that by the end of the Decade she would see *"Roma as a natural integral everyday part of the society, visible as bus drivers, shopkeepers, visible in public institutions, (she hoped) that it would become unremarkable that Roma will be visible in ordinary aspects of daily life. I hope for a bright future where our voices would be heard."*

As one Roma activist put it “At the beginning of the Decade there was so much effort that it felt as if a flame was burning. Unfortunately as each year passed by the flame grew dimmer, went down, and down. By the end of the Decade, there’s no flame, the flame went out!”

The verdict of George Soros on the Decade seems very sound to me, when he says that:

- **Positive steps were taken by governments during the course of the Decade, but they were far from sufficient to have any substantial impact;**
- **The Decade gave Roma a seat at the table in negotiations, but that Roma are still “woefully underrepresented” in international organizations, national governments, and municipal authorities;**
- **The Decade raised awareness about the plight of Roma communities but did not lift visible numbers of Roma out of poverty.**

PARTICIPATION

And what of Roma participation? ‘Nothing about us without us’ was the much-cited slogan of the time. What happened to the need to “involve Roma meaningfully in all policy making on matters concerning them”?

Margareta Matache notes in her examination of how Roma actually did participate, that there was broad optimism by many Roma who found that for the first time, doors were open for regular consultation. In some countries Roma advocates began to meet with state representatives, ministry officials and to communicate with local authorities.

Disillusion set in quickly after the first flush of enthusiasm as many Roma activists we interviewed found that governments ignored them, did not take their contributions seriously.

Other Roma activists judged the Decade more favourably and asserted that the level of consultation and dialogue we now take for granted was simply not imaginable ten years ago, but they remained divided on how effective it has proven to be.

Matache concludes that as far as Roma elites were concerned, the Decade succeeded to involve Roma leaders in formal dialogue and negotiations with state institutions in all stages of the Decade.

The Decade provided a model of a participatory approach to devising inclusion policy frameworks and holding governments publicly

accountable – with as much to be learned from its failures as its successes.

Beyond the Roma elites, the ambition to involve Roma communities actively in the Decade went unrealized.

While many projects implemented under the Decade did have some impact on local communities, there was nothing on the scale needed to bring about systemic and sustainable change.

And it would be hard to dispute the verdict of one Roma activist when he said,

“If you speak to normal everyday people at the local level, many have no idea what the Decade was about—at the end of the Decade many people don’t know that there was a Decade”.

EDUCATION

As to change for the better, there is wide agreement that education is where most progress is visible after ten years, and will be remembered as a profound legacy.

Across many countries there is a clear positive general trend with regard to access to early childhood education and care.

Overall as the Commission noted in its latest report, while there are some positive signs: “much more needs to be done to bring about change on a larger scale.”

It is safe to say that while some governments deserve praise for their efforts, much of the progress on inclusive education is attributable to the work of the Roma Education Fund (REF), which was founded at the launch of the Decade in 2005.

For ten years, REF has provided support to thousands of children and young people in education from pre-school to post-graduate studies; built sustainable partnerships with school authorities, civil society, and parents; and produced a significant volume of evidence-based policy research about what it takes to do the right thing.

In the course of the decade REF has shown that school desegregation is possible, feasible and better for all; that substantive Roma participation is crucial for success; and that effective cooperation on the ground delivers the kind of change that can transform the lives of tens of thousands of Roma pupils.

Yet despite all this, some Decade countries remain wedded to systems and habits that perpetuate inequality and segregation.

That the European Commission has launched infringement proceedings against the Czech Republic and Slovakia served as a reminder that ten years after these countries signed up to the Decade, systemic segregation of Roma children in education remains stubbornly pervasive.

In Bulgaria, the latest REF country assessment speaks of worsening conditions where ‘unchallenged ethnic segregation of Roma in education, is exacerbated by an increasingly socially stratified education system’

Just recently the Hungarian Supreme Court gave its blessing for school segregation and effectively exempted religious-run schools from anti-discrimination provisions in the law. The ruling allows a school in Nyíregyháza run by the Greek Catholic Church to lawfully operate as a segregated Roma-only school.

These recent developments are a cause for real concern and stand as a corrective to any overly optimistic prescriptions. However, the difference in Europe today is that segregation of Roma pupils no longer goes unquestioned, unchallenged and accepted as routine.

There is now a broad and basic understanding in the wider society that segregation of Roma pupils is a pernicious practice. At the end of the Decade, even the segregators know that what they do is fundamentally wrong and runs contrary to any shared notion of “European values”.

Another lesson learned over ten years was just how profoundly difficult it is to uproot prejudice and racism. We were told at the beginning of the Decade that talk of rights and justice was too emotive, can only take us so far, and we need to reorient our rhetoric.

The “new realists” held forth the notion that if you present politicians with evidence-based arguments extolling the economic benefits of inclusion for the entire society; if you provide the evidence that investment in Roma inclusion today will bring financial benefits (perhaps not tomorrow, but maybe five or ten years hence), those that hold power will accede to the incontrovertible logic of the economic case for Roma inclusion, and act on this to produce policies that are wise, judicious and will be implemented successfully and smoothly.

Well, some cautioned way back in 2005 that as far as this particular economic fallacy is concerned “it ain’t necessarily so”; and that such thinking was rooted, and remains rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of any concept of the political.

One lesson over the last decade has been that antagonisms cannot simply be wished away, and prejudice does not evaporate in the face of compelling economic data. For politics remains as stubbornly

combative and conflictual as ever, and will never be reduced to “the mere administration of things”.

This is not to diminish the importance of evidence-based argumentation on the functionality and utility of social inclusion, but merely to suggest that beyond the bubbles of experts, bureaucrats and functionaries, there is only so far you can run with this line of persuasion against weak political will to address fundamental prejudice in society.

If the Decade is to be judged on its own terms – i.e. its pledge “to close the gap” between Roma and non-Roma within ten years – then clearly it has not been a success. But only the most naïve could have expected such a social transformation to be launched, packaged and completed within a decade.

It was abundantly clear from the outset that the enormity and complexity of political reform and policy implementation required to undo centuries of racism and exclusion would take far more than ten years.

As the Decade was by definition a forward-looking endeavor, it is worth pondering what it might have meant for Roma children and young people.

A look at the findings on health, housing, employment and education would suggest that for young, excluded and impoverished Roma, the Decade, along with the EU Framework for Roma Integration, and the EU 2020 Agenda for inclusive growth must seem like a joke in the worst possible taste.

National governments, who have ratified the legally binding Convention on the Rights of the Child, stand accused of failing, and on the evidence contained in the Decade monitoring reports, continue to fail in their obligations toward millions of Roma children right across Europe.

As UNICEF put it, Roma children in all countries across Europe remain at risk of systematic violation of their rights, reflected in severe poverty, social marginalization, discrimination, and the denial of equal access to services and of equal opportunities in society. As it was at the beginning in 2005, sadly so it seems to be at the end of the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

Taking a quick scan of Roma-related news items across Decade countries over the last few months of the Decade yields a dispiriting catalogue: reports of police violence and justice denied; violent attacks on Roma neighborhoods; accounts of forced evictions and the toll they take on young and old; and yet still more evidence that racial segregation in several European democracies is a habit that too many white people just can't kick.

So a convincing case could be made by critics that the Decade amounted to nowt. The “tide of history” didn’t turn; Roma inclusion was not buoyed up by a ‘sea change’ in policymaking; the Decade failed to harness the political will to include the Roma as full citizens in European societies.

In fact, critics might say things worsened for Roma over these 10 years, with the rise of far-right movements with explicit anti-Roma agendas, and a hardening of the kind of political rhetoric that scapegoats the Roma for society’s ills, rhetoric that too often constituted incitement to racial hatred.

As economic austerity continues to bite, in many of Europe’s worse-off regions, whole communities are barely subsisting, living from hand to mouth, and just as excluded now as they ever were.

SO WAS IT A LOST DECADE?

It came in with something of a bang, and critics might suggest that it will go out with a whimper in 2015, leaving scarcely a ripple on the public consciousness, with the vast bulk of Roma communities across the 12 participating countries completely unaware that there ever was a Decade. There is nonetheless a case to be made that suggests it would be cavalier to dismiss the entire enterprise as a lost cause.

I have already mentioned the gains made in education. Another durable legacy of the Decade is the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. George Soros describes the Framework as “a copy of the Decade and an expansion of it to all EU Member States.” The European Commission acknowledged the Decade as being “a strong inspiration” for the Framework.

Back in 2005, one ambition of the Decade was to invite more governments to join up. The original eight were joined by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Spain.

So it was beyond all expectations that by 2013, all 28 EU Member States would have submitted National Roma Integration Strategies under the remit of an EU Framework; that the Commission would link Roma integration to its wider Europe 2020 strategy for growth; that the European Council would issue country-specific recommendations on Roma integration to Member States; and that the first ever legal instrument on Roma, a Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States, would be adopted.

Another important Decade lesson learned was that an emphasis on development, partnerships, social inclusion and societal cohesion cannot paper over the cracks when it comes to racism and discrimination.

Combating discrimination was relegated to a “cross-cutting theme” in the Decade, and national strategies failed to make the link between tackling racism and promoting social inclusion.

The European Commission and the European Parliament have fully absorbed this one key lesson from the Decade – that there can be no progress on Roma inclusion unless direct and indirect forms of discrimination are tackled head on, unless the institutional racism that Roma face every day is fully exposed and effectively dealt with.

The latest Commission Communication on the EU Roma Framework issued in June 2015 is very forthright in delineating the failures of Member States to confront anti-Gypsyism - one of Europe’s oldest hatreds; the failures to ensure equal access to quality education for Roma children and persistence of segregation in schooling and housing; and the failures to properly transpose and enforce EU anti-discrimination law at regional and local level to protect the rights and dignity of Roma all over Europe.

At the end of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, Europe is moving towards official recognition of anti-Gypsyism as a long-standing and deeply rooted form of European prejudice; there is full acknowledgment of the need to combat institutional racism when it comes to the misuse of EU funds; and a clear decision that the EU will not abdicate its human rights obligations.

The lived reality in villages, towns and cities where Roma face intimidation and other forms of very direct and indirect discrimination every day, may seem a universe away from resolutions passed in Brussels and Strasbourg.

But these moves must be just the first steps, for when it comes to combating the words, deeds and institutional practices that denigrate and dehumanize our Roma fellow citizens, it is the practical impact that will count.

For, at the end of the Decade many segregated Roma communities in urban slums and rural wastes are even more isolated, more excluded, and feel less secure and safe than before.

The Decade by virtue of its shortcomings, has highlighted the need for a coordinated and public Europe-wide “reckoning with history” to shed light and spread knowledge about the Roma.

As Thomas Hammarberg put it, what we witness today is “*a continuation of a brutal and largely unknown history of repression of Roma, going back several hundred years. ... A full account and recognition of the crimes committed against the Roma might go some way to restoring the trust of Roma communities in society.*”

For if we are to displace the politics of hate with a politics of hope, solidarity and mutual respect, then we need trust.

The Decade did not deliver trust, neither did it dispel anti-Roma hostility and prejudice. Indeed in some countries we witnessed shocking regresses and surges in anti-Gypsyism.

Talking to one of those young Roma leaders who was so optimistic at the launch of the Decade, the bitter sense of disappointment and disenchantment came across:

We were very optimistic back then. But now, it's a disaster, a full disaster. Things became hopeless in Bulgaria ... I left for Germany and started over ... Germany is a much more tolerant place we live among many minorities. All Roma want is the opportunity to work and live normally ... Sad to say the only way to live a normal way of life is to leave Bulgaria.

Tens of thousands of Roma from Romania, Bulgaria and increasingly Hungary, see no future for themselves or their children at home. Emigration is perhaps the most poignant testimony to the failure of the Decade to at least deliver hope for a better future.

Clearly the Decade did not (indeed it could not) deliver the kind of social transformations required to lift millions out of poverty, undo centuries of exclusion, and eliminate popular prejudice and structural discrimination.

But it did set a very necessary, audacious and public agenda: identifying key inclusion policy priorities, insisting on the need to set clear targets with earmarked resources within fixed time limits; tracking progress with regular and robust monitoring mechanisms and calling for structured Roma participation.

And without any doubt the Decade widened the coalition of the right-minded from government and civil society who have committed so much to promoting Roma inclusion. And it's been my pleasure to get to know so many of you over the years.

This actually existing and imperfect Decade template for social inclusion marked a real departure in that it raised the stakes in advocacy terms, and it shone a harsh light like never before on what had long been Europe's hidden and neglectful shame.

Hitherto, anti-Gypsyism had been routinely accepted as a banal fact of life, racial segregation deemed as natural as winter following autumn, and acute poverty understood as a "cultural predisposition".

By the Decade end, there is at least wide recognition that Roma exclusion is one of Europe's biggest democratic deficits, ethically repugnant and economically unsustainable; a recognition that has translated into the EU Framework, with no illusions of the enormity of the task that lies ahead.

As we move forward we have at least a far deeper understanding of what is at stake, and what it will take to undo the damage done in order to fulfill the promises of democracy for all of Europe's Roma citizens.