



Speech by Andrzej Mirga, Chair of the Roma Education Fund at the Eleventh Roma Platform on November 29, 2017

Panel: “Make the Wheel Roll”

Ms. Commissioner Vera Jurova,
Ms. Livia Jaroka, Vice President of the European Parliament,
Distinguished Members of the European Parliament,
Roma Friends,
Dear Gusts,

First of all, I am pleased, as many are in this room, that the issue of education and transition to job market has been made a topic of the EU Roma Platform.

I’d like to thank Henriett Dinok and Ivan Ivanov for collecting and presenting today the insights from yesterday’s workshops. Some of these will be echoed in my statement.

I also wish that during this meeting and discussion we “will make the wheel roll” as it’s high time to do so.

I am saying this as the Chair of the Governing Board of Roma Education Fund, an organization that supports education of Roma children and youth, and most recently acts also in the field of employment in Europe.

To give just a short overview of what REF does since being established at a Paris donor conference in 2005 within the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

REF has reached over a half million Roma children until now. Between 2011 and 2016 REF supported 4,559 Roma students at universities in 16 countries and out of this number 1,615 graduated so far – some 42%. Yearly, over 5,000 secondary school students and nearly 1,300 tertiary students are supported with various programs.

However, all of this and many more what REF is doing, represents a drop in the ocean in terms of what is needed or what can be considered satisfactory.

Why?



The FRA Report II MIDIS from 2016 provides an answer and the midterm review recalls these data as well.

Margareta Matache from Harvard, in her latest paper from 2017, also points to it clearly.

She indicates that (2010) “Europe 2020: A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (Brussels)” aims to increase “the share of the population completed higher education from 31% to at least 40% in 2020” (p. 2). It predicts that “by 2020, 16 million more jobs will require high qualifications, while the demand for low skills will drop by 12 million jobs” (p. 2).

We can confront these projections and goals with those related to Roma population. FRA’s available data as well as other sources indicate the disproportional or dramatic low percentage of Roma in secondary and tertiary education. Matache recalls that only one percent of Roma reaches tertiary education and only 12 percent from secondary.

How can we, therefore, really “Make the wheel roll?”

Can one percent of educated Roma compete on the job market against an educated majority, from whom 31 percent completed tertiary education?

The conclusion is clear: the challenge is massive, enduring, and systemic. Before we can talk about Roma inclusion in the job market, we have to dramatically increase the percentage of educated, skilled Roma to compete for jobs.

Key messages:

- 1) Roma inclusion in the EU and beyond is unfinished business, so the EU Roma Framework post-2020 must remain.
- 2) Mid-term review indicates where member states are with implementation; EU Roma Framework prioritizes many areas; we are in to comprehensive approach, but prioritizing means selecting few areas and focusing on.
- 3) EU Roma Platform needs to be redefined; I believe, few people are happy with its current form and role; for example, the role of civil society and especially, their shadow reporting could play a key role in monitoring



implementation and use of structural funds and provide needed data from the field how things develop; this is also relevant for national Roma Contact Points, they must be re-shaped and re-defined; many of us are ready be part of such efforts.

A historic remark.

DG Employment Commissioner, at the time, Vladimir Spidla, set up a High level Group for minority's integration at the labor market, in 2006. I was part of this group. Year after, in December 2007, a report was published with a number of recommendations concerning minorities, including visible and disadvantaged one, such as Roma.¹ The publication came up with a number of recommendations, I believe, still relevant today. Among other, it addressed the issue of private sector – big companies and their positive practices regarding managing ethnic diversity in their workforce, something we continue to neglect. Today, state-owned companies contribute one fifth to total GDP, and the rest is produced by private sector. We need to include them as potential employers.

However, in 2008 the world and the EU faced financial and economic crisis and urgent needs to mitigate its consequences pushed aside this issue. The Commission held still two Roma Summits (in 2008 and 2010) but long-term negative implications of the crisis, including austerity programs, also hit the Roma hard.

Today, we are in different moment: in the time of economic recovery and growth in the EU, it is a right time to raise this issue. However, different times do not mean different attitudes.

I would like to recall here the words of Rita Süßmuth who led the HLG and who wrote in her introductory to 2007 report:

“Education is important, but good qualifications are no guarantee for a better access to the labor market. The perception and the attitudes towards specific ethnic minorities in a country and, thus, the related positive, negative or

¹ Ethnic Groups in the Labour Market, An Urgent Call for Better Social Inclusion, Brussels December 2007; Report of the High Level Advisory Group of Experts on the Social Integration of Ethnic Minorities and their Full Participation in the Labour Market, President: Prof. Dr. Rita Süßmuth; under Commissioner V. Spidla.



discriminatory assessment are decisive....”

What’s REF lessons learned after 12 years of existence?

I would rest here with three words: invest, engage and change.

Investment: education needs continues funding and is enduring; governments and ministries of education need to realize that quality education is the path to social inclusion and integration and this is the best investment.

Engagement: prioritizing education seems to be obvious, however, difficult to ensure on all sides; it requires engagement of Roma parent, civil society constant advocacy, education authorities’ commitment - not only to eliminate barriers faced by Roma children and youth, but demonstrating political will and leadership to pursue positive action.

Change: practices and current status of Roma education and employment must urgently change. Both – investment and engagement – are instruments to promote and ensure such a change. I welcome the fact that at least the Commission is ready for such a change.

For my last remark let me say that the labor market will significantly change in near future; developments in IT and robotics will eliminate many jobs available now and that there will be even more competitive labor market. What will be the position of Roma in society if nothing changes? This prospect is not far away from us.