



## The Decade of Roma Inclusion – Between Hopes, Glitches and Failures

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In June 2003, the World Bank and the Open Society Institute organised the conference "Roma in an Expanding Europe". It brought together an unprecedented number of Prime Ministers and high-ranking politicians to discuss positive steps in addressing social exclusion of Roma in eight European countries. At this conference, eight Central and East European governments agreed to launch a "Decade of Roma Inclusion".

The conference, as the organisers reported in their press release afterwards, "succeeded in garnering support for the *Decade* from the highest level of government in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the European Commission and the Council of Europe, the United Nations Development Programme, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and most importantly, Romani leadership." This was seen as a "sea change in Roma policy and the political will necessary to change the lives of Roma in Europe."<sup>1</sup>

However, although this was without doubt the most successful conference to date on Roma, the event had been preceded by small glitches and was to be followed by more serious oversights.

### **An early start turns into a missed opportunity**

The most notable of the initial glitches concerned the representation of Roma at the conference. The organisers had invited around 70 so-called "young Roma leaders" as Roma representatives, but the selection process had in a number of cases been controversial. A number of important older traditional leaders were excluded, which hardly constituted the most diplomatic approach and risked offending some Roma communities.

The conference had failed to include an appropriate representation from the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF), a body that was being founded at the time and the establishment of which in fact was announced at the conference by the highest representative of the Council of Europe, Secretary-General Terry Davis<sup>2</sup>. Its exclusion punctuated the issue of representation, as ERTF members consist largely of traditional Roma leaders. Most of them were not very keen on the conference's "young Roma leaders", regarding them to a certain extent as a political threat. Supported by the Council of Europe and Finnish Government, the ERTF has yet to publish an official position on the *Decade*. Some Roma leaders are wary of the *Decade* exactly because they perceive it to be competing with the Forum.

There were frictions and often competition between the large international organisations and Roma NGOs. Because of the controversial choice of Roma representatives at the conference, there was little mediation to prevent them from escalating, which complicated the entire partnership process envisioned by the *Decade*. One example is the tension between the most important Roma NGO in Romania, Romani Criss, and UNDP Romania, when both ended up competing for government-funded projects to implement the National Strategy for improving the situation of Roma.

At least as serious a flaw that bedevilled the *Decade* from the start was that the 2003 conference aimed to prepare the ground for the launch of a "Decade of Roma Inclusion" that was only to

begin in February 2005. In the more than eighteen months that passed in between, there was work proceeding behind the scenes, with thematic working group meetings and governments drafting National Action Plans, but to all external purposes there was a gap of more than one and a half year. Such a long gap between the “advertising phase” and the start of a political event like this is far too long a timeframe to maintain the initial momentum. All the more so when a well-designed communication strategy is lacking or failing to adequately reach mass media and Roma communities and there is no sufficient financial support and coordination.

That problem was exacerbated because the conference was followed by some important political changes that created new obstacles for the *Decade*. It appeared that the planners had not taken the possibility of such changes into account, though many were not unexpected.

For example, in the 2003 elections in Croatia and Serbia and the 2004 elections in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Romania some of the most important politicians who had attended the conference in Budapest were voted out. The replacement in 2004 of Hungarian Prime Minister Medgyessy, arguably the most instrumental politician in the *Decade*, and the departure of the highly active and media-savvy Hungarian Minister of Equal Opportunities, Katalin Levai, were other setbacks.

In Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, who were to join the EU on 1 May 2004, the enlargement process was obviously the main priority for the first half of 2004. This meant that interest in the *Decade* was diluted, and it emerged that no measures to avoid this had been put in place. No public debates or mass media campaigns promoting the *Decade* were organised during 2004. None of the major politicians seemed to have been persuaded to publicly promote the initiative, in spite of the huge political leverage the World Bank has in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the June 2004 elections to the European Parliament, important supporters of Roma issues were not re-elected, though fortunately two Roma women were elected as Hungarian MEPs, Livia Jaroka and Victoria Mohacsi, which does increase the visibility of Roma issues in the European Parliament. In September 2004, the new European Parliament as well as a new European Commission started five-year terms. As expected, it was the countries that were most reluctant about the *Decade* who nominated the European Commissioners who are arguably the most relevant to its aims. Former Czech Prime Minister Vladimir Špidla was appointed as the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and the Slovak Ján Figel' became the Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism. On the other hand, the most active Commissioner when it came to Roma issues, Anna Diamantopoulou, did not return in the new Commission. The conference in Budapest had not targeted any of the potential new Commissioners and their future staff or any of the likely new Members of the European Parliament.

By the end of 2004, most people had almost forgotten about the *Decade*. Roma communities knew even less about it than they had known before the 2003 conference, and at least half of the main politicians who came to Budapest had changed positions or lost interest in the *Decade*. Between July 2003 and January 2005 there was practically no news on the *Decade* and even the young Roma leaders seemed to lose their interest in what had promised to be a fantastic opportunity.

### **The launch of the decade: A second chance gone to waste?**

A strong push at the beginning of 2005 from the Open Society Institute and the World Bank appeared to put the *Decade* more or less back on track. The summit that was organised in Sofia to launch the *Decade* on 2 February 2005 almost managed to replicate the success of the conference in 2003, involving important national politicians. But unfortunately, the conference did not manage to trigger the much-needed synergies with European and international institutions envisioned in summer 2003, as no major senior bureaucrats from the European Commission,

OSCE, Council of Europe or UN attended. Important members of the European Parliament were also missing, in stark contrast with the attendance of the President of the European Parliament at the meeting of the European Roma and Travellers Forum just a couple of months later<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, the climax in February was again preceded and followed by a series of glitches, arguably even more serious this time.

To start with, Roma press agencies were not granted access to the reception before the conference<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the choice of the National Theatre as the venue, rather than the more appropriate Bulgarian Parliament, was echoed by a lack of interest among the Bulgarian media and Bulgarian politicians.

The organisers paid marginal attention to the interim President of the European Roma and Travellers Forum, Rudko Kawszynski (who wasn't even invited to speak) and other important traditional Roma leaders and activists. This made securing the much-needed Roma support even more problematic. The presence on the stage of an almost unknown young Roma woman from Slovakia, seated alongside prime ministers, high-ranking politicians, George Soros and World Bank President James Wolfensohn, when the best known Roma activists were seated somewhere in the audience, could easily be considered offensive, not just by traditional Roma but by anyone with a knowledge of protocol.

In an echo of earlier oversights, the organisers of the *Decade* seemed not to have planned an approach to the replacement of the World Bank President in 2005. Knowing that the US government would appoint the new president, the *Decade* could have lobbied the administration in Washington to keep the *Decade* as a priority on the World Bank agenda.

Similarly, adequate long-term planning would have foreseen the problems that would result from the decision to put someone based in the US and scheduled for retirement in early 2005, OSI Vice-President Deborah Harding, in a leading position on a programme in Central and Eastern Europe. Her retirement, immediately after the conference, left a lengthy gap in the *Decade's* development, even though the time of her retirement was known well in advance.

The Roma programmes of the Open Society Institute (OSI), which normally would have played a strong role in steering the *Decade's* development, at the time of writing still lack an overall coordinator or a clear vision for the future. Their much-needed evaluation and overhaul remain overdue. Cooperation with the many initiatives of the OSI, some of which would be excellent partners, their many spin-offs and existing Roma partnerships is still largely lacking, or remains invisible because of an inadequate communication strategy.

The other crucial component of the *Decade*, the Roma Educational Fund, is in an even worse state, as five months into the *Decade* it still practically does not exist yet. There is also little hope that its activities will start in the near future.

National launches of the *Decade* are receiving little attention in the media and at the time of writing this article, the last press releases on the *Decade* on the OSI website are from February 2005. The *Decade* portal provides little information and notably contains just one person in its "Who is Who in the Decade" database.

Five months into the first year of the *Decade*, very few if any accomplishments are visible. More or less unknown to Roma communities, struggling with its structures and strategy, the *Decade* of Roma Inclusion needs more than anything, some immediate results and publicity.

### **Is there still hope?**

In recent years, international organisations have published many reports demonstrating the abysmal situation of the Roma in Europe, many of which proposed strong political commitments

and seemingly useful recommendations. Until now, these have had limited effect. In fact, the social exclusion of Roma and anti-Gypsyism in Europe continues to increase. The *Decade* needs to bring concrete results to start making a difference in the everyday life of Roma.

The *Decade* does have the potential of providing amazing opportunities. There is an unprecedented political commitment to positive action for Roma from the countries taking part in this ambitious project. The *Decade* also fits very well into one of the main priorities of the European Commission – the Lisbon strategy<sup>5</sup>.

The *Decade* could compensate for gaps in European antidiscrimination legislation as well, if it manages to prompt the EU to adopt more of the much-needed affirmative measures that would actually secure effective equality, rather than merely discouraging discrimination. At the moment, the European Union's Race Directive<sup>6</sup> offers too limited a scope for such positive action.

Moreover, the *Decade* provides a near-perfect platform for accessing European Social Fund resources for projects focused on Roma, as the National Action Plans clearly underline the social exclusion of Roma and propose urgent and targeted measures to curb it. European Commissioner Špidla has already approved the use of ESF funds for *Roma Decade* goals in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Roma Educational Fund activities, developed in the framework of the *Decade*, could stimulate the programmes of the European Commission's Directorate-General on Education and Culture. The impact of the work of the EuropeAid Co-operation Office and the Directorate-Generals on Enlargement, Employment and External Relations on Roma would be greatly enhanced if the *Decade* would succeed in bringing the existing good practices of the OSI to their attention. A comprehensive European Roma Policy needs to be advocated at the level of the European Commission, and the existing political support for the *Decade* must be used to its maximum potential in pressuring the European Commission to keep the Roma issues high on its agenda.

To conclude, the most important issue here revolves around the fact that the *Decade* has been advertised as a real partnership between national governments and Roma communities. The lack of such a partnership until now has arguably been the main cause of its failure to establish noticeable improvement in the situation of the Roma so far. It has also made it more difficult to attract substantial new European funding for Roma communities.

The Decade of Roma Inclusion has an enormous potential for becoming a turning point in the situation of Roma in Europe. But for that it needs, like most European institutions and national governments, to move from words to deeds.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Society Institute, "Prime Ministers Endorse "Decade of Roma Inclusion," Called by George Soros", 1 July 2003, [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/news/decade\\_20030701](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/news/decade_20030701)

<sup>2</sup> Speech by the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Conference "Roma in an Expanding Europe", Budapest, 30 June 2003, [http://www.coe.int/t/e/SG/SGA/documents/speeches/2003/ZC\\_2003\\_%20300603\\_Budapest.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/e/SG/SGA/documents/speeches/2003/ZC_2003_%20300603_Budapest.asp)

<sup>3</sup> April 6<sup>th</sup> 2004, Brussels – European Parliament

<sup>4</sup> Zoran Dimov, "Regarding the omission of Roma Journalists in Sofia", *Romservis*, 5 February 2005, [http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=servis/z\\_en\\_2005\\_0031](http://www.romea.cz/english/index.php?id=servis/z_en_2005_0031)

<sup>5</sup> Heads of State and Government of the European Union met in Lisbon in 2000 and launched a series of ambitious reforms at national and European level on jobs, growth, the environment and social networks. See <http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs>

<sup>6</sup> Council of the European Union, *Directive of the Council Implementing the Principle of Equal Treatment Between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin*, Brussels, 20 June 2000, 2000/43/EC