

## **Commission Roma conference closes on a pragmatic and optimistic note**

The conference "EU projects in favour of the Roma community" hosted in Brussels by the European Commission has closed its plenary session on Thursday afternoon (11.3). Organised by Directorate General for Education and Culture, the conference aimed at disseminating the results of various EU programmes which fund projects related to Roma people, as well as creating a space for debate and learning between policy makers, representatives of the civil society, project promoters and the public at large. In the words of **Odile Quintin**, Director General for Education and Culture, "*we are now at a stage where we want to transform the success of the projects into long term policies, aiming at improving the living conditions and opportunities for each member of the Roma community*".

More than 400 participants shared their experiences and expectations during the intense one and a half days in a series of workshops, plenary sessions and networking breaks. The conference was accompanied by an exhibition of 21 selected projects, co-financed through European funds in the fields of education, culture, youth, citizenship, employment and regional policy. Moreover, the photography exhibition "A Butterfly Flaps Its Wings" by **Zsuzsanna Ardó** gave an artistic touch to the event, as well as the Roma music band **Zongora**. The conference took place under the banner of the 2010 **European Year** against **Poverty and Social Exclusion**.

Prof. **Ian Hancock**, distinguished Romani scholar and director of the Romani archives of the University of Texas, gave the start with a keynote speech on Wednesday morning. Citing George Orwell, who said that "the first effect of poverty is that it kills thought", he gave a comprehensive historical and contemporary perspective on the Roma communities in Europe. "We cannot make history of we do not know our history" he claimed, while drawing a complex picture of the cultural differences inside different Roma communities. On the one hand, these differences are important and should be taken into account in the field of education. On the other hand, the representatives of the Roma should insist on their commonalities instead of their distinctiveness, in order to have a more powerful voice in the public arena. He reminded of the fear and deep psychological damage that was inflicted on the Roma population by centuries of slavery, as well as the lesser known Roma Holocaust (Porrajmos) which do not encourage self-determination. For Prof. Hancock, the solution for the discrimination of the Roma community and the consistent association of the words "Roma" and "problem" rests on two keywords: **communication** and **compromise**.

**Andrzej Mirga**, senior advisor on Roma and Sinti issues to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recalled the progress made in the last decade on the topic of Roma, especially in the field of growing awareness among countries and at the European level, to which the Roma movement contributed substantially. There are still a lot of challenges though, especially in terms of resolving concrete problems at the local level and in increasing an attitude of individual determination in the community itself. In this sense, a change of paradigm seems to be needed, focusing more on encouraging individuals to take responsibilities for their own destinies.

The non-Roma need to learn humility from the Roma and from people working on the ground level, said **Bernard Rorke**, director of the Open Society Institute. "*We need a new approach so that the next generation of Roma children is not a lost generation*" he added, "*as well as a strategy to address the challenges of the development of new extreme right groups in*

*Europe*". He strongly advocated against segregated schools and called for more conditionality on the distribution of European structural funds.

It is clear that legislation (e. g. the anti-discrimination directive) is not enough and that we need a combination of legislation and policies effective on the ground, said **Ivan Ivanov**, Director of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO). However, the paternalistic approach in which Roma is seen as passive recipients of funds should be avoided. Socio-economic inclusion and the respect of Roma identity are two sides of the same coin. To reach these goals, European policies should focus on a small number of priorities with a leverage effect: early childhood education, transition from school to professional life and the fight against prejudices and stereotypes.

Looking back at what has been achieved at the European level, **Katarina Mathernova**, Deputy Director General for Regional Policy in the European Commission reminded the 10 basic principles for Roma inclusion, identified by the European Roma Platform. An integrated approach is needed to include the 2 Es- education and employment- and the 2 Hs- housing and healthcare.

This was also one of the recurrent themes in the 3 parallel workshops on the topics of integration through intercultural dialogue, lifelong learning and social inclusion through community involvement and housing. Another topic highlighted by participants and speakers was the role of the media- including the community media and social media- as an effective way to bridge differences between communities, to increase knowledge about the other and to touch a "mainstream" audience. Other topics touched upon during the lively discussions were the importance of cooperation between different actors – educators and trainers, local authorities, employment agencies, families- in a long term approach that takes time to build, but is the only effective way to ensure the success and sustainability of the projects.

During the conference, three young Roma activists related their personal experiences of discrimination, but also of educational and professional success; their testimonials had a strong effect on the audience. The equal access to quality education was emphasised by the speakers as the key to make the young Roma the decision-makers of their lives, as well as giving them the opportunities to be active in public life.

In parallel to the conference a seminar brought together experts from the academia, discussing the challenges and opportunities of a potential network on Roma culture and Roma studies.

The final plenary meeting brought together **Belinda Pyke**, Director for Action against discrimination in DG Employment and Social affairs and **Vladimir Šucha**, Director for Culture and Communication in DG Education and Culture, who insisted on the explicit recognition of Roma aspect of European policies, as well as the "self-interest" of the non-Roma population in the Roma inclusion: the potential of the largest European minority is immense, especially taking into account the European demographic crisis. "*We simply cannot afford not to include the Roma in employment market and not use this resource*", he said.

The conference ended with the presentation by **Dolores Ruiz Bautista** from the Spanish presidency of the second Roma summit that will take place in Cordoba, on 8 and 9 April 2010.