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The need for *convivencia*: European values and non-discrimination at the heart of Europe's Roma strategy

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Second European Roma Summit

Córdoba, 8 April 2010

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to open, in my capacity as Vice-President of the European Commission, this second European Roma Summit.

First of all, a warm thank you to our hosts, the city of Córdoba, the people of Andalusia, and the Spanish Presidency. And very warm greetings to all of you here.

We are in Córdoba to discuss the situation of Roma and the obstacles that prevent Roma from participating fully in society, as well as to identify concrete solutions.

The very fact that the Spanish Presidency has chosen Córdoba to host this European Roma summit is highly symbolic. For centuries Córdoba was at the heart of Al-Andalus, one of the key historic components that preceded the shaping of modern Spain. Historians are still debating about the exact degree how Al-Andalus influenced Spanish and European identity and culture. However, it is undisputed that more than 1000 years ago, one could find here in Córdoba, and elsewhere in Al-Andalus, a unique and until then unprecedented *convivencia* of different cultures and religions.

Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together rather peacefully and jointly created a very powerful culture and possibly one of the most impressive foundations of modern civilisation. United by tolerance they made Cordoba "the ornament of the world" as described by the tenth century Saxon nun and poet Hrotsvita of Gandersheim. The spirit of Córdoba – *el espíritu de convivencia* – which can be understood as a state of tolerance and respect that strengthened cultural and religious diversity – should still serve as a beacon of inspiration and example today. It certainly should inspire our deliberations this week on the situation of the Roma in Europe.

We are here today in Córdoba to reflect on the positive impact that Roma's full inclusion could have on society, on the economy and on people's lives in cities and villages across Europe. Roma have been living in Europe for more than 700 years. These communities have contributed to the rich fabric of our lives – just think of flamenco and the wonderful influence Roma culture has on Spanish culture and in particular on its music and dance!

The European Union is built on fundamental rights and values, and in the respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. Our European values include the protection of people belonging to minorities, the principle of free movement, and the prohibition of all forms of discrimination.

As Vice-President of the European Commission with responsibility for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, I am committed to combating all forms of racism and xenophobia, discrimination and social exclusion on grounds of ethnic origin.

In line with my mandate and in close cooperation with my fellow Commissioners, and in particular with Social Affairs Commissioner László Andor – who will be speaking here tomorrow – I will ensure that the social inclusion of Roma remains high on the agenda of the European Commission.

This Summit has stimulated Member States, European institutions, international organisations and civil society to work toward a common goal: ensuring that every Roma man, woman and child in Europe enjoys the same basic rights and opportunities as any other person.

The first Roma Summit took place in Brussels just 19 months ago in September 2008. Here in Córdoba today and tomorrow we will take stock of what has been achieved since then and reaffirm our commitments.

We have all worked hard to move from recognising and analysing the problems to solving them.

These 19 months have witnessed vigorous efforts to forge new, robust partnerships between all key players and to make EU instruments and policies for Roma inclusion more effective.

They have also shown that ignoring the exclusion of Roma is unacceptable.

The Commission has clear measures focusing on Roma in key areas: fundamental rights and equal opportunities, employment and social policies, education and culture, as well as regional, public-health and enlargement policies.

In December 2008 Member States reaffirmed their commitments and gave EU and national policy-makers clear mandates.

They have, for instance, developed strategic planning and stepped up coordination within central government departments and dialogue with Roma communities.

Just two weeks ago the European Parliament reaffirmed its commitment to Roma inclusion by an overwhelming majority.

I am very happy to see that all key players — especially Roma and non-Roma civil society — have been very active in the run-up to this Summit.

That is the right approach: we all have to strive — within our own areas of responsibility and expertise — to achieve our shared overall objective.

For the European Commission, this means looking specifically at the relevant EU legislation and Funds and at our role as coordinator of national policy and facilitator of policy dialogue.

And the EU's commitment is not confined to the territory of our 27 Member States.

Respect for and protection of minorities, including Roma, form part of the political criteria for accession to the Union.

I am very glad to see high-level representatives of the candidate countries and potential candidate countries participating in this Summit.

Yet, Ladies and Gentlemen, we must admit that, despite our best efforts, the situation of many Roma seems to have deteriorated over the years. That is simply not acceptable.

Too many Roma are still victims of racism, discrimination and social exclusion.

Too many Roma children are still on the streets instead of going to school.

Too many Roma are still denied a fair chance on the labour market.

Too many Roma women are still victims of violence and exploitation.

This situation should encourage us to do more. And we now have the tools: EU laws on combating racism and xenophobia, anti-discrimination and access to the Structural Funds of the EU.

Since 2008, we have realised how programmes that focus on Roma – while not excluding members of other ethnic groups – can help improve people's lives.

Another way of looking at it is mainstreaming. We need to integrate Roma into mainstream schools and jobs. Mainstreaming means effective inclusion.

The precondition for success is equal rights and equal opportunities for Roma.

That is why I don't believe we should waste energy in developing special laws or funds for Roma. Existing legislation and available funds are there to deal with the challenges. We just need to use them more effectively.

What we do need is a strategic approach, based on cooperation between all departments concerned — in the European Commission, in national authorities as well as in international organisations.

Those lessons are clear from the progress report the European Commission adopted yesterday.

Yesterday, the European Commission also issued a new Communication on the social and economic integration of Roma in Europe. The Communication builds upon the evidence gathered over the last 18 months and sets out a clear action programme for the next few years.

It points out that initiatives may look convincing on paper, but that they should first take cultural and historical factors and gender roles into account.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let's put the issue of Roma inclusion into a broader perspective.

We must have an agenda for a truly inclusive society focusing on fighting poverty, improving skills, bolstering social cohesion and increasing employment.

The Commission's proposal for a Europe 2020 strategy is such an agenda. That's why our work in support of Roma integration has to be seen against the background of the Europe 2020 strategy. We must ensure it works for Roma in the same way as it should work for all other Europeans.

The Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion provide a concise set of policy guidelines to help the Member States and the EU institutions design and implement effective measures for Roma and with Roma.

The European Platform for Roma Inclusion launched a year ago has the potential to support policy-makers in the Commission and in the Member States to develop their strategic approaches and to organise such a culture of learning. A culture where the European Union contributes to educate, to advise and, most importantly, to encourage.

We think the Spanish Presidency's proposal to develop a concise, mid-term work programme for the Platform is a good idea.

We need tailor-made approaches to dealing with the needs of various Roma communities. The European Commission Communication adopted yesterday develops a set of integration models for the various Roma communities. We will, of course, do this in close cooperation with all the stakeholders in the Platform.

Such models for integration will allow Member States authorities to choose from a broad mix of instruments and policies that are most suited to their Roma communities.

The European Union can also help creating opportunities through the Structural Funds.

The European Commission is committed — together with many organisations present here today — to strengthening the capacity of potential beneficiaries. That means giving local authorities and Roma communities themselves better access to what already exists.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us be realistic. The situation will not change overnight and it will still take time before we see real change on the ground.

But we must not let that stop us. We should persevere. We cannot afford to let another generation of Roma fail to live up to their full potential — for both moral and economic reasons.

I am glad that this afternoon the World Bank will be stressing the fact that exclusion of Roma comes at a cost. The costs are real in terms of human suffering, lost productivity and the burden on our welfare systems.

If we can convince people that investing in the future of Roma is an investment in the future of society as a whole, then we will have the needed push for ambitious action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have set our sights high, but the goal is simple: let us ensure that Roma enjoy the same rights and opportunities as anyone else.

Roma are no different from anyone else. Give them a chance to study and they will learn. Give them a chance to find a job and they will work. Enable Roma to be a positive part of our societies and play an active role in our policy processes.

As a legacy of this Summit, may I voice the hope that within a generation we will see many, many more Roma politicians, entrepreneurs, actors and football players throughout Europe. In other words, may I voice the hope to see many more active players having a positive impact in our societies.

The spirit of *convivencia* coined the times of Al-Andalus more than 1000 years ago. I call on all of you to help ensure that *convivencia* will not only remain a symbol in our history books. But become a daily reality in our European Union. And this also, and in particular, with regard to Roma.

Thank you!