

“Change Perceptions:

*Living in an inclusive society with
Roma together”*

Proposals for a strategy of change

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<i>CONTENT</i>	<i>Page</i>
<i>I Background: Blocking force of Roma inclusion: Negative Perceptions</i>	
<i>2</i>	
<i>II Perceptions on Roma</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>1. Attitudes and prejudices towards Roma</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>2. Wrong information and images</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>3. Negative portray in the media</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>4. Victimization of the roma counnity and lack of focus on potentials of Roma</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>III A Vision for a positive perception and its implementation</i>	
<i>6</i>	
<i>1. Possible vision</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>2. Implementation of the vision: basic elements that the vision becomes reality</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>3. Seven areas which are key for the change of perceptions</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>4. Open question</i>	<i>10</i>

I. Background: Blocking force of Roma inclusion: Negative Perceptions

Only few social issues trigger as much emotion and controversy within Europe as the issue of "Living together with Roma communities". The conflict between the French government, European institutions and Human Rights organisations is only one example. It is clear that the complex issue of Roma inclusion needs much more commitment, and that not only from politicians. Besides negative developments there are also many positive ones. A broad range of initiatives have been taken by the EU, Member States, NGO's, private foundations and other organisations – especially the EU summits for Roma inclusion - to improve the situation of Roma and to work for inclusive societies which have to be taken into account. But there is one essential aspect which needs much more attention in order to create positive change for Roma in general:

This is that negative perceptions- meaning negative attitudes and images, prejudices and wrong information – do not only influence the daily life of Roma, but also block positive developments for inclusive societies.

Every problem or conflict consists of 2 aspects: One is based on facts and the other on emotions. Both have to be dealt with. Emotions can be "blocking forces" if they are overlooked– and with negative attitudes positive and sustainable solutions cannot be found. If emotional problems are not solved there will always be resistance towards the solution of factual problems. Example: Roma make the experience to face a strong barrier when they are becoming successful, could leave a special support system and would be able to enter in the systems of the mainstream society. At this moment they face prejudices like they are not willing to integrate or are nomads – reasons for "not becoming a normal client". Perceptions have also a direct influence on discriminations with which Roma are confronted in nearly all areas: You can only be discriminated against when people have the perception that you don't have the same rights or the same potentials than the others. The need to deal with perceptions – the emotional factor - is very often forgotten in strategies, action plans and projects. This paper has therefore its focus only on perceptions without denying the urgent need to address the factual situation in the fields of education, employment, health care and housing for example at the same time.

II. Perceptions on Roma:

Although there is only few data available, it can be said according to recognized experts and NGOs: the perception of Roma, Sinti and Travelers is mainly shaped by negative attitudes and images, prejudices and wrong information. Some examples:

1. Attitudes and prejudices towards Roma

- ***Attitudes***

A special Eurobarometer in 2008 shows:

- *around a quarter of Europeans would feel uncomfortable having Roma as neighbors: a striking difference to the level of comfort with a person from a different ethnic origin in general;*

- *There are strong differences between Member States: 58% in Poland would feel confident to have Roma as neighbors whereas only 14 % in Italy and 9% in the Czech Republic would feel as such.*

The example Italy:

A survey published by La Repubblica in 2008 found that Italians had a negative opinion of immigrants and that their aversion against the Roma was even greater:

- *60 per cent of interviewees felt personally threatened by the presence of the Roma.*
- *68 per cent thought that all Roma camps should be dismantled and Roma populations expelled from the country.*
- *The percentage of interviewees who had trust in policies of social integration of Roma was quite low: 27 per cent.*
- ***Prejudices***

Historic sources do support the view that some of the Roma resorted to stealing as a means of subsistence. Fortune-telling and other forms of mystification helped conceal their reputation as a people with low sense of morals but

- *the construction of this reputation took place five or six centuries ago*
- *yet today, Roma remain married to crime in the public mind.*

2. Wrong information and images

- ***Roma seen as “nomads”***

The association of Roma with nomadism remains very strong although

- *the overwhelming majority of the Roma throughout the world have been settled for decades*
- *only some Roma in a few western European countries (France, Ireland, Netherlands, and United Kingdom) are still nomadic, with large caravans.*

Settled people, on the whole, do not trust nomads and in a European society where the majority of Roma were pressed into a life of piety, serfdom and drudgery, gypsies represented a blatant negation of all the essential values and premises on which the dominant morality was based.

- ***Roma have "no integration will and are responsible for their low social and economic standing".***

Scores of politicians, experts, and lawmakers have reiterated the widespread belief that

- *the Romani minority's problem stem from their unwillingness to integrate into mainstream society*
- *The closed character of the Romani culture expresses that they want to remain separate*
- *Very often members of the mainstream society are strongly against to any government funding targeting only the Roma. The Roma themselves are sceptical of any such efforts, fearing a backlash from the majority population.*

Research has consistently demonstrated that, given the choice, Roma prefer to integrate in general, rather than live in a segregated, parallel society. Roma today are struggling for equal and just participation in mainstream society, while wishing to preserve their unique culture.

3. Negative portray in the media

According to an internal report of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO):

- *the clear focus of most reporting is on criminality, violence, and immigration as a threat to public safety*
- *this causes a biased portrayal of the relation of ethnicity to violence and clearly obstructs other aspects such as social exclusion, hidden violence, forced segregation, environment, education*
- *there is a rare appearance of Romani characters in mainstream movies, TV series, and radio broadcasts present*
 - *for the most part, either negative stereotypes of Roma (as cunning thieves, witches, snitches, criminals, and violent individuals), or*
 - *Clichés of “Romani culture” focused around music, fortune telling, bohemians, and free spirits*
 - *In a similar vein, Roma are visibly absent from talk show audiences on subjects not related to Roma issues. This lack of representation is worrying considering that in some countries close to 10% of the population is of Roma origin.*

4. Victimization of the Roma community and lack of focus on potentials of Roma

Roma are also often portrayed in way that people feel pity with them. This is counterproductive because research shows that most of the people think that the "victim" is responsible for its own negative situation. "Victimization" also brings the person in a situation of powerlessness and lack of dignity. At the same time it is also a denial of the potential of Roma. There is nearly no positive focus in reports

- *what Roma have achieved*
- *which kind of skills they developed in order to survive under these kinds of circumstances*
- *What kind of success stories could give motivation and encouragement for positive developments?*

This lack of positive perspective could also easily become a kind of self - fulfilling prophecy.

III. A "Vision" for a positive perception and its implementation

Therefore it is of crucial importance to work on the change of perception towards the Roma community.

1. Possible "vision"

In order to do this successfully we need a strategic aim – a vision. This vision should be elaborated together with the mainstream society and the Roma community on the basis of the assessment of the current situation. But it is also important for the success that the vision is more attractive than the resistance which is always a part of the change process. A "vision" for the change of perceptions could be for example:

"Roma are seen as respected members of our societies and feel as such."

2. Implementation of the "vision": Basic elements that the vision becomes reality

For a successful change process the main elements of the assessment above have to be addressed and concrete proposals with an action plan be worked out. In this way also the gaps between the vision as the "guide for change" and the current situation can be filled out. When developing adequate measures the following guiding principles for the implementation should be considered.

2.1 Avoiding counterproductive elements

- *Addressing opportunities and problems at the same time: there must be a balance between problems and solutions- to avoid problems on the one side leads to the denial of the reality and to have not enough focus on solutions on the other side doesn't give enough perspectives*
- *Addressing "critical aspects": it has also to be considered in which way the Roma community itself contributes to the problem;*

- *Mainstreaming: reducing the "ethnicity" aspect is of crucial importance – otherwise the whole issue won't be considered in all the relevant fields of politics. It also means that the issue should be much more integrated in the civil society movement.*

2.2 Work on the driving forces for "implementation"

When elaborating strategies and action plans also the driving forces – that means all the aspects which give "force" and motivation for the strategies and action plans - have to be integrated, e.g.

- *the commitment for Roma gives the EU` credibility towards Human Rights*
- *elimination of social exclusion reduces yearly high losses of European countries : According to the study "Economic costs of Roma exclusion" of the World Bank– published in April 2010 – the vast majority of working-age Roma lack sufficient education to participate successfully in the labour market. As a result European Countries are loosing hundreds of millions of Euro annually in productivity and in fiscal contributions.*
- *support of existing initiatives like the "Dosta! Campaign" of the Council of Europe strengthens the impact*
- *the unused commitment of the Roma community increases involvement and ownership*
- *new kinds of partnership, e.g. with private foundations and the civil society, could give more impact*
- *There are unused funds which could increase actions and impact like the available budget of the "Structural funds".*

2.3 Work on the blocking forces for "implementation"

When elaborating strategies and action plans for the change of perceptions also the blocking forces – that means all the aspects which are hindering the improvement of the situation - have to be addressed, e.g. :

- *lack of political will and national commitment*
- *the portray of ROMA in the media*
- *lack of lobby and public support*
- *lack of Roma "Peers"*
- *Lack of systemic and long-term approach.*

3. Seven areas which are key for the change of perceptions

3.1 Dealing and cooperating with the Media

Addressing and Cooperating with the media is of particular great importance. Few other sectors have so much influence on our perceptions:

The media is a key actor when it comes to improve the information on Roma. But the media is not only a mean of providing information and circulating knowledge. Few other professions produce images as potent as those televisions and radio broadcasts by journalists which influence our perceptions, attitudes and images than any word ever could. These issue are also addressed by the “Dosta! Campaign” of the Council of Europe. But nevertheless it remains an undervalued and under-used resource to sensitize and to establish empathy with Roma at the national but also at the local and European level. Therefore the media should ask itself – and we should ask the media: Are there success models in the media which can be transferred to other organizations? What are the elements? What are the conditions? What are the failures? In which way can the problems of social inclusion be addressed by the media without being counterproductive or denying problems?

3 Proposals

- *Trainings and background information for journalists on Roma issues and establishing a network of journalist dealing with this issue*
- *A special TV and Radio prize for excellent broadcasts on Roma like it was done in the framework of the CIVIS media prize - also with the aim of a stronger involvement of Roma e.g. in TV programs, talk shows, etc.*
- *Self representation of the Roma community: targeted programs for Roma on their rights and obligations but also background information for Roma on best approaches for their participation and self representation – Example: TV and online production for and by Roma.*

3.2 Participation and Self-determination of the Roma community

In order to avoid any form of victimization of the Roma community the following aspects should be considered when developing strategies and action programs:

Responsibility and ownership of initiatives: members of the Roma community should engage themselves actively and be integrated from the start of any initiative. The Roma community should increase their internal cooperation, develop closer partnerships between themselves and actively engage itself in the public discourse. The participation of the Roma community should also be visualized.

3 Proposals

- *Training of democratic leaders should be considered and members of the Roma community should develop programs for peers by themselves*
- *The professional presentation of the Roma community has to be improved and visualized*

- *In order to broaden the self- determination of the Roma community at local, national and European level 2 or 3 Roma NGOs should be financially supported and the Roma community should also be asked for a financial contribution.*

3.3 Need for political leadership

Research show that perceptions can be influenced in a positive way when there is a clear and strong political leadership – supported by the media. But political leadership is nearly absent especially in the case of Roma. To deal with the situation of Roma is for many politicians difficult because this issue is very controversially and negatively discussed nearly in all Member States – including the local level. Therefore politicians having this subject on their agenda fear to lose elections. Many politicians are not prepared to risk tackling issues as emotional, complex and sensitive as Roma integration, and shy away from tacking a stance in the belief that they do it it may lose them the election. But this behavior underestimates the following elements:

- *The most successful societies in economic terms are those which have an open approach to ethnic, cultural and religious minorities*
- *Demographic developments and the birth rate of Roma show that the percentage of Roma community will increase. It is estimated that in 2030 Roma will present 50% of the workforce in Hungary*
- *There are a lot of success models for Roma integration in nearly all areas which are not known*
- *The focus on Roma as problems and not in their potentials leads to missed opportunities*
- *Cooperation and knowledge transfer between and with local communities is often not used by politicians although it would strengthen their own position.*

3 Proposals

- *National and local action plans elaborated with the civil society including the Roma community – initiated by politicians*
- *Addressing positive aspects of Roma and Roma inclusion in political resolutions and political programs*
- *Use of political speeches: Mentioning the Roma community in a positive context – without denying existing problems. For example in the New Years Eve speeches of Presidents and Chancellors in the EU Member States.*

3.4 One common message by different actors towards their different target groups

Perceptions can also be influenced if different actors work closely together and give one common message towards their different target groups. One example of this approach is the common reaction of the British government, police, media and Muslim community after the London bombings: There was a 500 % increase of Islam phobia in the UK. After this public initiative it felt down immediately to the "normal". Such initiatives are missing but the Roma summits with their follow up initiatives create a unique opportunity to do so.

3 Proposals

- *Strengthen the Roma platform at European level and initiate similar initiatives at level and local level. Representatives of the mainstream society should be involved including the media in order elaborate such a messages*
- *Use of the common message by different actors at the European, national and local level but also in TV Spots, publications and public statements*
- *Organize high public events at the International Roma Day at the EU, national and local level with one common message towards the civil society and the media.*

3.5 High cultural events: showing the potentials of Roma

Culture and especially music are very influential tools to influence perceptions – music is even more influential than any picture. Culture is especially important when it comes to the change of perceptions on Roma because culture is linked to potentials and not to problems. Positive contributions by Roma in the field of culture are rare in the media but also in culture events^– besides music. To go a small path is needed here: To show the extraordinary contribution of Roma in the field of music – without repeating stereotypes, having a folkloristic approach or reducing the image of Roma as traveling emotional musicians.

3 Proposals

- *Integrate Roma culture in the work of European Cultural Capital*
- *Organize a high cultural event of Roma together with the media like the famous musician Bono has done it for Africa*
- *Put the issue of Roma culture on the political agenda especially at the local level – creating common initiatives with the local media.*

3.6 Involvement of Local communities

In order to support inclusive society's regular knowledge transfer especially between the local levels should be organized. To have a special focus on cities and to learn from their horizontal structures could also support positive national and European developments: Cities are in general much better equipped to deal with complex issues and to establish working structures which can reflect the interdisciplinary needs of a problem

3 Proposals

- *Create an “ European network of cities working on Roma inclusion” - especially to organize regular knowledge transfer on good practice / success models and to identify obstacle for inclusion*
- *Use the network with the knowledge transfer to give policy impact to the national and European level*
- *Communicate the results to other existing networks (e.g. European cities against racism, Eurocities, network of European cultural capitals, CLIP) and the Committee of the Regions.*

3.7 A communication process on Roma issues which gives feed back to the citizens

Perceptions can also be influenced if citizens are asked for their opinion and also for proposals for action in a specific field. On the basis of that a strategy and action program could be elaborated which integrate arguments for actions together with the Roma community. It is than of crucial importance to inform and to give feed back to the citizens who had been asked before about the concrete results. A similar process has been used in France when elaborating the Charter of Fundamental rights and in the UK when the perception of the crime rate was influenced by the government. A new study has also shown that the construction of Minarets e.g. is accepted when there is an open debate on these issues at the local level.

3 Proposals

- *Establish a forum with on open culture of discussion with and on Roma with different target groups at the local level*
- *Give information about the situation of Roma and address wrong information at the same time*
- *Provide all concerned with more feedback about the outcome and the impact of the common action program or the joint proposals.*

4. Open question

Change is possible - and change is urgently needed to improve the situation of the Roma community. What are the real obstacles that we are not doing it strongly enough?