Social situation of the Roma and their improved access to the labour market in the EU

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Magda **KÓSÁNÉ KOVÁCS** (PES, HU) on the social situation of the Roma and their improved access to the labour market in the EU. It considers that there is a need for a coordinated approach to improving the working and living conditions of the Roma community that aims at the following three objectives: i) increasing economic opportunities for the Roma; ii) building human capital, and iii) strengthening social capital and community development.

Pointing to the fact that policies targeting the Roma have, in a number of cases, not improved their situation, MEPs request that, in all EU and Member State actions which particularly affect Roma, the stakeholders of the Roma community participate as decision-makers.

Strengthen education policies: MEPs stress the need for targeted education policies which address Roma families and encourage active participation. The report notes that the level of qualifications among Roma still remains far below the EU average. The gap between labour shortages and a high unemployment rate are linked with low skill levels among Roma. In this context, MEPs support the Roma to increase their qualifications as a priority and urge the Member States to guarantee that Roma women and girls have access on equal terms to quality education.

The report notes that the vast majority of Roma graduates do not return to their communities after leaving university (some even deny their origins). MEPs recommend that a comprehensive programme package be planned which will promote and motivate Roma graduates' return to their community and employment within their community and in its interests.

It is also necessary to adjust vocational training programmes to the needs of local labour markets and give incentives to employers who provide unskilled people (including Roma people) with work and offer them training. MEPs also call on the Member States to use EU funds to preserve and protect traditional Roma activities.

Combating discrimination in employment and improving social and economic integration: MEPs note that the Roma are under-represented in high-prestige occupations. They call, therefore, for the effective implementation of Directive 2000/78/EC, which prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. They also draw the attention of the Member States to the fact that this social dichotomy may compel many Roma job-seekers to transfer from the legal to the informal economy, and that a coordinated effort is needed at EU and Member State level to entice those employees back into legal employment with work-related and social security rights.

As regards the employment of Roma women, MEPs call on the Member States to improve Roma women’ s economic independence by promoting easy self-employment and start-up measures for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), access to micro-credits. They underline the fact that the solution to the social and economic problems of the Roma calls for a comprehensive approach and a long-term, coordinated solution, involving housing, education, health-care and labour market policies. MEPs suggest to the Commission and the Member States that all measures intended to improve the situation of the Roma

should be considered as an inseparable part of the measures designed to support regional development and social inclusion. They stress that the basic prerequisite for promoting social inclusion and access to the labour market for the Roma is that they be given equal social and political rights.

Other measures are also highlighted to eliminate racial hatred and incitement to discrimination and violence against the Roma in the mass media.

The struggle to survive on the margins of society: noting that the Roma culture is marked by a strong family tradition, MEPs highlight the importance of conserving and affirming the specific cultural characteristics of the Roma in order to protect their own identity. They consider that the process of integration must be initiated at an early stage in life, in order effectively to provide alternatives to poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, it is necessary to

provide an institutional framework for community-based social and educational services for children and families which meet regional and personal needs. The Commission is called upon to provide particular support for programmes for the early integration of Roma children in all countries where EU resources such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance or the Structural and Cohesion Funds, can be accessed. MEPs also **call on the Commission to take the initiative** to identify the most efficient ways of supporting the social, economic and cultural integration of the largest minority in the European Union and to take concrete measures to resolve the complex transnational problems of the Roma.

In conclusion, MEPs draws the Member States' attention to the risk that adopting excessive measures as regards Roma communities could lead to a worsening of the minority's already dramatic situation and could jeopardise their chances of integration. They invite the Commission to and the Member States to work with NGOs, Roma communities and leaders in order to develop a jointly acceptable plan for the social inclusion of Roma and to implement projects intended to combat negative stereotypes of the Roma at all levels which can be supported by the Structural and Cohesion Funds and also by specific programmes such as Progress and initiatives such as the 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogues and the forthcoming 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The Commission is called upon to assess specifically the impact of the objectives and instruments of each of its sectoral policies on the Roma, along with developing a coherent political strategy and achieving a high level of coordination. They ask the Member States to adopt clear employment policies for the Roma population, with support measures to facilitate their phased integration into the labour market.

MEPs criticise the 4 Member States (France, Greece, Belgium and Luxemburg) that have not yet ratified the 1995 Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities to ratify the Convention urgently. They call on the Member States to:

- create an EU-level expert group including representatives of the Roma to coordinate Member States' Roma strategy and the use of EU funds for its promotion;
- establish partnerships between the various organisations representing Roma interests and the appropriate institutions of the Member States;
- devise instruments such as concessionary credit or public grants and that, in the planning of farm subsidies, make it an important objective to enable Roma citizens to attain conditions in which they can earn a living from farming; so that, in addition to or instead of seeking paid employment in farming, they would be open to the idea of seeking innovative forms of agricultural work, including social cooperatives, thus justifying the provision of the necessary resources;

MEPs consider that creating the database is not an alternative but a precondition for a system of assessment and evaluation which can weigh up the impact of exchanges of best experiences and of the use of resources. They recommend that the Commission adopt more consistent and uniform expectations of all development programmes financed from EU resources from which it is possible to demand an account of the prevention or reversal of social exclusion of the Roma.

Others measures proposed by the MEPs are as follows: i) a wide-reaching information campaign addressed to the general public and the Roma people about national programmes in the Member States for improving the living conditions of the Roma; ii) the ongoing monitoring of measures and activities and their impacts on the improvement of the position of the Roma in the labour market; iii) solving housing problems for Roma living in rural areas; iv) supporting NGOs focusing on Roma, at EU, national and local level, in order to monitor the implementation of policies and programmes intended for Roma.

Lastly, MEPs call on the Commission and the Member States to establish an EU-wide forum in which social movements, trade unions and NGOs representing the Roma and their interests can consult one another on a permanent basis.