Tackling early school leaving

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The Council reached **political agreement** - the United Kingdom voting against - on the recommendation regarding policies to reduce early school leaving, which seeks to promote progress towards the Europe 2020 headline target of reducing school drop-out rates to less than 10% by 2020 (as compared with 14.4% in 2009). Reducing early school leaving addresses the Europe 2020 aims of both 'smart growth' – by improving education and training levels - and of 'inclusive growth' - by tackling one of the major risk factors for unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Despite some significant progress over the last decade, rates of early school leaving in Europe - i.e. the number of 18-24 year olds with only lower secondary education or less, and no longer in education or training - are still too high and constitute an urgent and serious problem in many EU countries.

In general, ministers considered that a successful approach in this area requires consistent, cross-sectoral and comprehensive policies. This is not just an education issue: it has implications across a range of social, youth, health and employment policies. Policies that focus on preventive rather than compensatory measures appear to be the most effective.

Several delegations underlined that support should be systematic from early years to adult life and address, in particular, the need to focus on all levels of the education and training system: structural aspects, school level factors and individual support.

Prevention policies to combat early school leaving

As a follow-up, ministers debated in public, on the basis of a background paper prepared by the Presidency (see Council doc. *9043/11*), prevention policies to combat early school leaving, aimed in particular at the socio-economically disadvantaged, including the Roma.

Commissioner Reding made a short intervention on this subject, recalling the recently issued Commission communication on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 and the important conclusions adopted on 19 May by the EPSCO Council, which is the leading Council configuration on this matter. She recalled that early school leaving creates and perpetuates socio-economic inequality: currently less than half of Roma children benefit from primary education, compared to almost 95% of other European children, and their educational attainment often remains below the average.

Although the situation of the Roma varies from Member State to Member State, it was generally agreed that the majority of Roma people living in the EU suffer from social exclusion, discrimination, segregation and deep poverty and many of them live in territories with limited access to quality services, including in the field of education. The economic and social integration of Roma is one of the priorities of the Hungarian Presidency which, like several Member States, considers it crucial for the present and the future of the EU's competitiveness and the well-being of its citizens. Most Member States have already put in place preventive measures and programmes to tackle this problem, going from special schools and learning support programmes to specific training for teachers, appointment of education counsellors, and targeted interventions. Several ministers underlined the importance of involving families, particularly mothers, in these efforts.

Effective policies for integrating Roma must be based on four pillars: education, employment, health and housing, whilst acknowledging Member States’ primary responsibility in this regard.

Most ministers called for the establishment of a European platform/data base for the exchange of information and best practices on Roma issues.

A summary of this debate, together with the conclusions of the EPSCO Council will be forwarded -via the General Affairs Council - to the June European Council.