

Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future

June 30–July 1, 2003

The following remarks were delivered by OSI Chairman George Soros at a dinner during the conference on June 30, 2003.

I am really very happy to have the occasion to address you tonight and I am very happy that this conference is taking place. So first of all, I'd like to thank my co-hosts the World Bank and the Hungarian government, particularly [World Bank President] Jim Wolfensohn, who's taken the time to come here and attend the conference. I really appreciate your involvement in the Roma issue, because coming from Australia or some distant land, you do not really have first-hand acquaintance with the problem. So you really have shown great understanding and it's a tremendous help for all of us. And the Hungarian government, and of course naturally the Finnish government, and the Swedish government, and the Council of Europe Development Bank, and UNDP [United Nations Development Program], and all the governments that are represented here. The prime minister of Bulgaria [Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha] is here. I haven't seen the prime minister of Montenegro [Milo Djukanovic], who was here this morning. And a number of them are coming in tomorrow morning for a very important meeting, so I want to thank them all.

I will not talk about the Roma problem because you know more about it than I do, so I will not go into that at all. I will tell you a little about my involvement and then in particular I would like to talk about *where do we go from here?* Several journalists asked me today why I am so involved in the Roma issue. And my answer to that is: How can I not be involved in the Roma issue? This is one of the greatest social iniquities that still prevail in this region so it is natural that we must address it. That's why I'm so glad that this meeting is taking place, because it means that the issue is now recognized and therefore we have the makings of tackling it. And I'm very hopeful that in fact we will succeed.

I set up a foundation in Hungary in 1984. That was the first foundation I set up in this part of the world. And immediately the board of the foundation said we had to address the issue of Roma. And I remember getting on a plane—I think it was in 1987—and seeing a Roma, and he was accompanied by a rather attractive woman, which maybe added to my interest, and he spoke very cultivated Hungarian. So I started talking to him and it turned out that he was going to a conference in Finland discussing folk music and he was a collector of Roma music—the original Roma music, not the Gypsy music that you hear in restaurants and weddings. And he studied it and was collecting material. And then he asked me who I was and it turned out that his trip and his research were supported by the foundation. This gave me really a great deal of satisfaction because he represented the two requirements for success in dealing with the so-called Roma problem. One is that he spoke very cultivated Hungarian, therefore he was fully equal to anybody—so equality. And the other was that he was actually researching and rebuilding Roma

culture, which is also very important—for Roma to have confidence and interest and pride in their culture.

So in a way, he represented what I hoped could be accomplished. And I think that we have now been involved in supporting Roma initiatives for more than 15 years. In Hungary, now it goes back to 1985, let's say—that's 17 years. In Romania it's 12 years, in other countries it's about 12 or more than 10 years. And even though the problems and general conditions of Roma are perhaps worse today than they were 10 years ago, I think that a great deal of progress has been made in developing a Roma that is educated and that accepts and is engaged in being Roma. I think this is essential for progress because, let's face it, when Roma manage to progress in society, given the discrimination, it is a very natural inclination to try not to be Roma, to meld into the general population, to assimilate. And therefore what is left, what the rest of the population sees, are the disenfranchised, the underclass. And that is the stereotype that prevails in society. And to break that stereotype you need Roma who are educated and who remain Roma. And they are the ones who can advocate their cause the best—and you are here, actually. A lot of you are here. And so that is a very hopeful sign and something on which one can build.

So we have been, as a foundation, trying to empower Roma. I don't have a blueprint of how to resolve the problems, and different people have different ideas and I would say that if Roma are different from "normal" people, they are certainly different from each other. And there are tremendous differences of view and as a foundation we have supported this. I do believe in pluralism, it's very much part of the Open Society Institute, and we don't have the final answer—there is no final answer—so it is Roma themselves who have to find their way. And I think it's happening. But of course they can't do it alone and they can't do it with just the support of the foundation. It does require a concerted effort.

And that takes me to *where do we go from here?* We now have brought together really a high level conference, with a large number of people involved, a lot of attention in the media—that's wonderful. But if that's all we are doing, frankly I don't think that is really worthwhile. We really have to set in motion a process that is going to make a real difference and I think we've got it. I think that this idea of a Decade of Roma Inclusion, starting in 2005, is an excellent idea that is gathering momentum and I hope that before the conference is over we will have the endorsement of the governments. I was very encouraged by the remarks of Anna Diamantopoulou, the Commissioner [for Employment and Social Affairs] of the European Union, because in fact what we had in mind is really what the Commission is doing in improving social inclusion. So it fits right into that program. And I think it's very important that the European Union should take the lead, that the governments give it priority and be actively engaged. And of course engage the Roma themselves. So I think we have the makings of something that really will make a difference over the next decade. And it will take that long, and it will take a year to plan it, and I'm very grateful to the prime minister of Hungary [Peter Medgyessy], who is willing to take the lead to act as the convener for putting this project together. And with the support of the European Union and the World Bank, UNDP and so on, I think we will have a really major effort over the next decade.

So I think we all feel very good this evening and I think what will justify us feeling good is if we meet a year from now when the Decade of Roma Inclusion will in fact be announced in all its detail. So that is my hope for this conference. And I hope that we will actually get there by tomorrow. It is not assured, because we will have a meeting with the various governments tomorrow, but I'm confident that they will endorse this idea, and then we are setting in motion a process that will carry us a very long way. Thank you very much.