

## Fostering Cooperation and Institutional Capacity for Roma Integration in the Danube Region

<b>Meeting Minutes</b>	<b>October 9 - 10, 2014</b>
	Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs, and Consumer Protection, Stubenring 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria
	<b>Organisers:</b> City of Vienna (Coordinator of Priority Area 10 (PA 10) "Institutional Capacity and Cooperation" of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)) Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria (Coordinator of Priority Area 9 (PA 9) "People and Skills" of the EUSDR) Federal Chancellery of Austria (National Contact Point for Roma Integration)
<b>Facilitator:</b> Elise Lindner, EuroVienna	<b>Minutes prepared by:</b> Danijela Djoric, Elise Lindner
<b>Attendees: approx. 70</b>	
<b>Annexes:</b> Agenda, Outline of the event, Participants list, PPT Roma Strategy in Austria, PPT Institutional Capacity and Civil Society, PPT DG Employment ESF, PPT DG Regio ERDF, PPT EU FRA Evidence Based Policy Making, PPT SEE & Danube Transnational Programm, PPT Central Europe Transnational Programme, PPT Roma Integration in Non-EU MS in the Danube Region, PPT OSF Challenges in use of EU instruments, PPT URBACT Project RomaNet	

### Objectives of the meeting

- foster the discussion on how to improve the situation of the Roma in the Danube Region through better spending of EU funds
- gain insights into specific national challenges; exchange of experience with regard to the four main topics of Roma Inclusion (housing, employment, health, education)
- discuss targeted measures, mainstreaming of measures
- include Roma who are third country nationals and analyse situation in third countries in the Danube Region, esp. on the Western Balkans
- identify potential to increase absorption rates in order to improve the situation of the Roma in the Danube Region
- identify macro-regional challenges and transnational needs and challenges
- showcase and assess projects and best practice
- analyse how to create close links between policy/project development and funding
- create transnational synergies to step up institutional capacity identify and create synergies between the "EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies<sup>1</sup>" and the "European Strategy for the Danube Region" (EUSDR)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/index_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.danube-region.eu/>

## Executive summary

This first strategic meeting involving stakeholders from the Roma Strategy, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and funding organisations brought together more than 70 persons in the premises of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs, and Consumer Protection. During the two days' session, participants discussed how to improve the Roma situation in the Danube Region through better spending of EU funds and coordination between strategies such as EU2020, the Roma Strategy, the EUSDR and the South East Europe (SEE) 2020.

The Roma population is a vulnerable group in terms of poverty, housing, employment, health and education. Vulnerability does not concern all Roma, nor are Roma the only vulnerable group in the Danube Region. This is translated in the European Roma Strategy: **“Roma Integration needs an explicit, but no exclusive approach”**.

The European Commission, in line with its competence in discrimination matters, developed a **European framework for Roma Integration**; EU Member States are in charge of its implementation into national action plans and also accession countries have requirements to fulfil for EU accession.

Reality shows that national situations and ways of addressing the issue of Roma discrimination vary a lot, which highlights the need for flexibility on the one hand, but also the **need for continued efforts on many aspects such as balancing targeted and integrated measures, addressing all aspects of Roma Integration (e.g. health), better monitoring and evaluation, more capacity building and involvement of civil society actors**.

The meeting confirmed the **need to work hand in hand between the Roma and the Danube Region strategies, as 80% of the Roma population lives in the Danube Region**; integration and prosperity of the region cannot be achieved if large vulnerable groups are left aside and segregated. Establishing such strategies has enabled to set Roma integration high on the EU agenda and among decision-makers and to better coordinate national efforts. But strategies must be translated into action, and for this funding, capacity building and empowerment are needed. There are many EU funding sources available to address Roma issues, but absorption rates are too low in some regions and money is not always spent in the most efficient way. During the meeting, participants shared their experiences and issues on the ground as well as good practices and proposals for improved coordination between the Strategies and funding.

## Follow up

Mr Roland Hanak (PAC 9) proposed to establish a **PA 9 working group on the topic of Roma Integration in the Danube Region**, if the need is confirmed and resources are available. Mr Jörg Mirtl (PA 10) called on keeping the momentum in 2015 by addressing the topic of **Roma Integration at the Annual Forum of the EUSDR**, which will take place in October 2015 in Stuttgart. The organisers, the Land Baden-Württemberg, have already confirmed interest.

## DAY 1

### Session 1 – Establishing the connection between EUSDR, Roma Strategy and EU funding

#### Introduction by the organisers

- **Ms Susanne Pfanner (Austrian National Contact Point for Roma Integration)**: thanked Mr Hanak and Mr Mirtl for initiating this event and bringing this idea into action, and outlined the broad interest as shown by the large number of participants from many EU but also Non-EU Member States. One of the main intentions of this meeting is to identify/create synergies and to **reach out to**

**Non-EU Member States** in order to see how they are dealing with Roma Inclusion and what their Roma Inclusion Policy is. She highlighted the crucial role of EU funds to support Roma Inclusion. With this event, the organisers intend **to facilitate exchange of experiences, to address operational challenges and, ultimately, to further increase the use of EU funds for Roma in the new programming period.** Needs assessment in close cooperation with civil society is necessary to provide an evidence-based strategy, but it is also very difficult to tailor the needs of the Roma population, as there is no “one-size fits all”. Roma minority is recognised in the Austrian constitution and integration has been specifically addressed since the mid-90s. Austria has a long and well established coordination mechanism (e.g. Roma Advisory Council) and various initiatives such as the new Roma Dialogue Platform, introduced in 2012 as a common space for all stakeholders. A targeted approach here is also needed to ensure that dialogue is functioning. There are still numerous challenges ahead, which need to be addressed.

➔ For detailed info please see Annex 2: PPT Roma Strategy in Austria.

- **Mr Hanak (PAC 9 of the EUSDR “People and Skills”)** highlighted the synergies between the EUSDR and the European Roma Strategy, which both are quite young (the first since 2011, the later since 2012) and have topics in common, in particular PA 9 (labour market, fight against poverty, education), so cooperation is of uttermost importance. The use of existing EU funding such as the European Social Fund (ESF) is key to ensure implementation of the strategies, as none of them have funding instruments. In Austria, for the EU funding period 2014-2020, the Ministry of Labour will establish a small ESF programme offering special measures for Roma community, with a budget of 1.000.000 € per year.
- He also stressed that this was a working meeting and engaged participants to share their experiences and questions. The large participation was highlighted as a proof that there is a need for organising more events of this kind and he proposed to use this event as a basis for a possible PA 9 EUSDR Working Group on Roma Inclusion.
- **Mr Mirtl (PA 10 of the EUSDR “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”)** presented the obvious connection between the Roma and the Danube Strategy: more than 80% of European Roma live in the Danube Region, which comprises 14 countries (9 EU Member States, 5 Non-EU Member States). Roma communities are concentrated in areas which also belong to the poorest and most segregated in the Danube Region. **Poverty and exclusion can jeopardise European integration**, and this also applies to the Danube Region. Social inclusion is one of the key objectives of the European Strategy EU2020, and this requires also a **place-based approach**, as proposed by Fabrizio Barca in 2009 (“An agenda for a reformed cohesion policy”<sup>3</sup>). This place-based approach can be applied in the Danube Region, which provides an informal setting for cooperation in the EU but also with Non-EU countries on a level-playing field. Roma Integration is a matter of social cohesion, but also a matter of territorial and economic cohesion and therefore requires a cross-sectoral approach.
- This meeting is also addressing the question on **how to bring EU Policies on the ground within the Danube Region**. One of the main goals of the EUSDR is to **foster better spending of EU funds**: large and various funding sources are available for social inclusion measures in the Danube Region: the EUSDR seeks to bundle existing funding into place-based, strategic actions. In this regard, several horizontal actions are needed, and **Priority Area 10 of the EUSDR coordinates four horizontal platforms which all are issues relevant to the Roma agenda**: involvement of local actors incl. civil society (Local Actors Platform), capacity building, Urban dimension (Urban Platform Danube Region), and financing.
- Roma Integration will be for sure further promoted within the next EUSDR Annual Forum in Ulm, planned for October 2015.

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/archive/policy/future/barca\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/policy/future/barca_en.htm)

- Even though there is a great lack of capacity, will and funds, we are trying to raise awareness about this issue and to increase capacity on the national level at least.
  - ➔ For detailed info please see Annex 3: PPT Institutional Capacity and Civil Society.
- **How to focus on the issue of Roma without isolating them?** Ms Brejcha (SK) raised the issue that Roma people are often not integrated to mainstream cultural events and conferences, but are either excluded or targeted by specific events. Mr Varga (HU) also stressed the importance of culture as a vector of Roma Integration. Ms Pfanner stated that the EU Framework for Roma Inclusion focuses on Roma marginalisation, the question raised calls for action, and at the same time is a question of self-perception.

## Session 2 – The European dimension

The European Commission as the author of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which was endorsed by the European Council in June 2011, is a central actor in the process of Roma Integration and in bringing together the Roma Strategy on the one hand, and EU funding possibilities on the other hand.

### The European Framework for Roma Integration and its implementation

- **Ms Ilona Negro, European Commission, Directorate General (DG) Justice**: Such cross-strategic events are highly welcome, because they are very meaningful for all counterparts working on EU2020, EUSDR, Roma etc. It is also very positive that both Roma and Danube strategies have a similar goal and address both EU and Non-EU countries, as Roma Inclusion, as stated by Ms Pfanner, is a **challenge without borders**.
- The EU has no competence on minority issues but is competent in discrimination matters. The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies targets elimination of discriminations towards marginalised Roma in four areas (housing, education, employment and health) in order to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma. The framework builds on the existing legal, political and financial instruments. A key principle of the Strategy is to **support Roma Integration explicitly, but not exclusively. This enables to also address other vulnerable groups facing similar issues and avoid Roma isolation**. Within this Framework Member States have been asked to submit National Roma Inclusion Strategies. The experience shows that the situation is different in all countries: integrated (e.g. DE) versus dedicated approach, national versus locally targeted approach (e.g. HU), ethnic/non-ethnic approach etc. Most Member States needed to work on their monitoring system, and the Commission is helping them. Also action on health and housing is often lagging behind. With the adoption of the first soft legal instrument specifically addressing Roma, the "*Council Recommendation on effective Roma Integration measures in the Member States*", in December 2013, promoting Roma Integration has become part of the *EU acquis*, therefore all accession countries like Serbia for instance, have to observe it once they join the EU.
- In conclusion, the adoption of the EU Framework has put the Roma issue on the EU political agenda, and now it is time for its implementation in the Member States to change the situation on the ground. There is no unique formula for success on Roma Inclusion, and cooperation between stakeholders is a key to improvement.
- **How to address the principle “explicit, but not exclusive”?** One has to make sure that all groups facing similar socio-economic circumstances are addressed (not only Roma), and at the same time that Roma people do not fall out. This implies e.g. actions towards identifying people having no identity.

- **Ms Carmen Podgorean (RO, EUSDR National Coordinator)** asked which criteria are used to define Roma, in order to justify that far larger numbers than those self-identified as Roma in the Census are reported – in unofficial assessments – as belonging to Roma communities. There are very different statistics and methods, as situation differs from one country to another (e.g. ethnic labelling, self-declaration, etc). Inclusion policies targeting poverty in general, without ethnic connotation, can disregard such artificial figures, but where specific positive measures are targeted to Roma ethnics, accurate and documented official statistics should be taken as a basis.

#### European funding schemes in support of Roma Integration

- **Ms Anette Bjornsson, European Commission, DG Employment (ESF)** presented the main features of the European Social Fund concerning Roma Integration, namely the investment priority for marginalised communities. For five EU Member States (BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK) country-specific recommendations require implementation of a specific Roma policy, which will be verified by the Commission before ESF programmes can start. Currently only few ESF programmes have been validated by the Commission and recommendations concern mainly integration of Roma in the labour market and education, in particular pre-school and further education. Here as well national approaches differ: integrated approach, thematic focus (language, social entrepreneurship, etc). Mono- (ESF) or multi-funds (ESF+ERDF (European Regional Development Fund)), etc. There is a bigger focus on Roma women in countries with less Roma inhabitants.
- In conclusion, she recommended awareness-raising of Roma about their rights and developing partnerships at local level and confirmed here as well, that there are a lot of similarities in EU and Non-EU countries.
  - ➔ For detailed info please see Annex 4: PPT DG EMPL\_ESF.
- **Mr Andor Ürmös, European Commission, DG Regio (ERDF)** presented the relationship between Roma Integration and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Comprehensive approaches are introduced in Slovakia and Hungary which have very visible programmes for Roma Inclusion. The **need for more housing measures** for Roma was recognised and the European Commission (EC) amended the ERDF regulation in 2010 to support more housing actions. For the new period, the EC is expecting solid Roma Inclusion measures to be supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds, **Access to pre-school education is better recognised by Member States as an important priority of Roma Inclusion measures**. Focus on transformational changes in health and social care is also required to improve the efficiency, sustainability and accessibility (primarily by marginalised groups) to public services. The negotiations for the new programming period 2014 – 2020 are still ongoing. Guidelines on different thematic areas, including Roma Inclusion were prepared.
- Education and spatial segregation was identified as an important challenge in ERDF supported actions, where Mr Ürmös mentioned that in such cases further guidance should be prepared. Regarding the low absorption rate of EU funds in some countries, new regulatory provisions have been introduced to reinforce capacity building of national and local authorities. .
- Is it better to build infrastructure in Roma ghettos or to enhance desegregation by introducing measures to improve the access to mainstream services? There is no one-fits-all solution, local needs and demographic challenges may differ, which should be respected.
- Several questions on segregation were brought into discussion by participants; conditions will be set up within guidelines and policies for the next programming period.
  - ➔ For detailed info please see Annex 5: PPT DG Regio\_ERDF.

- **Mr Martin Hutter (on behalf of Ms Breznik, City of Vienna)** presented the two EU transnational programmes which cover the Danube Region. The Central Europe programme addresses the western part of the Danube Region and in the period 2007-2013 several projects concerning Roma Integration were financed. In the new period 2014-2020, two priorities of the programme will address Roma Integration (urban and transport related actions). The first call for projects is expected until summer 2015. The Danube programme 2014-2020 is the successor of the South-east Europe programme 2007-2013 and covers the entire Danube Region. Due to the importance of Roma Integration in the region, a dedicated measure will address social inclusion of Roma and other vulnerable groups.
  - ➔ For more details please see Annexes 7 and 8: PPT SEE and Danube Transnational Programme and PPT Transnational Programme Central Europe.

### The need for evidence-based policy making at EU level

- **Ms Sheena Keller (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, FRA)** gave a brief overview of FRA and its work on Roma Inclusion. One of the main activities under its multi-annual Roma Programme is to support the European Commission's Communication of April 2011 on an EU Framework for national Roma Integration strategies up to 2020 by continuing to monitor the situation and to support Member States to improve and develop monitoring mechanisms that can measure progress over time in a comparative way. In 2011 FRA (in cooperation with the UNDP/World Bank/Commission survey) carried out a survey on the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States looking at the areas of education, employment, health, housing and how enjoyment of human rights were taken into consideration. The FRA and UNDP surveys interviewed 22,203 Roma and non-Roma people from areas nearby using face-to-face interviews, providing information on 84,287 household members. For results from the 2011 Roma survey please see the following link: <http://fra.europa.eu/DVS/DVT/roma.php>.
  - ➔ For more details on FRA please see the Annex 6: PPT EU FRA\_Evidence Based Policy Making.

## DAY 2

### Sharing experiences in the field: examples from Serbia and the Open Society Foundations

- **Mr Zarko Sunderic (Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of Serbia)** shared experiences about Roma Inclusion in the Republic of Serbia, as a Non-EU Member State. Roma Inclusion became important for Serbia and the things moved forward because the Roma issue became a political issue as well as part of the European integration agenda. Therefore is political responsibility very important. He presented official (Census 2011) numbers of Roma living in Serbia; Census 2011 was organized in such way so that the official Census interviewers from Republic Statistical Office were accompanied by the person who speaks Romani language, which made the whole process much easier, enabled Roma citizens to answer in Roma language, which is one of the reasons to have an increase of people who declared themselves as Roma in Census.
- There are local mechanisms for Roma Inclusion set in place (dealing with health, education, employment, social welfare). Not all of these mechanisms are fully effective in all municipalities, therefore the government tries to improve their work through increase of their productivity, linking their work better and build up a working cooperation and coordination with local authorities.
- 20 M € are in the pipeline for the next two years, mostly from EU donors, as well as a new Strategy for the improvement of the position of Roma in Serbia and an action plan for the implementation of the Strategy. Serbia tries to promote good practices and innovation, and receives support by the EU.
- In conclusion, Mr Sunderic stated that Roma Inclusion requires strong Roma participation. It is necessary to strengthen the Roma civil society, Roma leaders and specifically youth and to engage

them within local authorities and agencies. The Serbian approach is combination of mainstream and targeting principle.

➔ For more details please see Annex 9: Roma Integration in Non-EU Member States in the Danube Region.

- **Mr Nadir Redzevi (Open Society Foundations)** thanked the participants for their commitment. He has been working for more than 20 years on Roma issues and despite such longstanding experience it is hard to define what and who has contributed to the current situation of Roma. Coordination cooperation is needed to improve the situation, as the Roma policies in place are not optimal. There is **not enough support to local stakeholders in getting funds** (e.g. Instrument for pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)) and it is difficult to translate Roma needs into the existing calls. Civil society is left alone to deal with funds and their regulations. Experience has also shown the need for bridging loans which would resolve cash flow problems. As a response, the Open Society Foundations developed a support programme called MtM (Making the Most) dedicated to Roma policy. MtM operates in 9 countries and has a 5-6 M \$ budget per year in all operating countries. MtM has a local focus, provides **mentoring grants/a project generation support** (more than 1.800 projects supported for a 1/8 investment ratio) and engage Roma people in implementation and management.
- Positive lessons learned: many players – many interests bring the players to act together, which helps the programme to facilitate very successfully the cooperation. Negative lessons learned: authorities primarily focus on developing local economies and hard infrastructure, less favourable to invest in programs for social inclusion. There are not enough capacities (only 10 persons working for MtM) for collecting data and info about the projects and their state of play. There are open issues such as low salaries, language issues which reduce participation of Roma in local administrations.
- Mr Redzevi's conclusion is that institutions have to serve Roma Inclusion on a proper and sufficient way and to change their culture in regard to Roma population.  
➔ For more details please see the Annex 10: PPT OSF\_Challenges in use of EU instruments.

### Workshop sessions on funding instruments for Roma Integration: ESF, ERDF and IPA/ENPI

During the three working sessions participants were invited to share their thoughts, questions and experiences as regard the suitability of the three EU funding mechanisms.

- **The ERDF Workshop** was chaired by Mr Jörg Mirtl, PA 10 and Ms Ivana Lazic, INTERACT. **Main conclusions:** The ERDF workshop focussed mainly on the transnational element of the European Territorial Cooperation Goal of the European Regional Development Fund. Mr Lászlá Moravcsik (HU) of the project PAIRS<sup>4</sup> which was carried out in the Framework of the Southeast Europe programme of the ERDF gave valuable insights about added value of transnational cooperation when it comes to identify best practices. Mr Attila Molnar (HU) commented on the same aspects with regard to an URBACT II project dealing with Roma Inclusion. The discussion also focussed on the upcoming Danube Transnational programme which was discussed i.a. by the Romanian National Coordinator of the EUSDR, Ms Carmen Podgorean. Ms Ivana Lazic from the INTERACT programme commented on the specific challenges of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) projects, e.g. the administrative burden. Mr Moravcsik (HU) stated that there are specific intentions for a follow-up of the transnational PAIRS project, which are currently supported by the Technical Assistance Facility for Danube Region Projects (TAF-DRP). The outcome of the discussion was that ETC is challenging, but also a level where the strategic level meets the project level. Moreover, current migration flows show that Roma Inclusion is a transnational and macro-regional challenge which therefore needs to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pairs-see.net/>

be tackled also on the macro-regional and transnational levels for which the EUSDR provides the appropriate framework.

- **The ESF Workshop** was chaired by Mr Roland Hanak, PAC 9. It was clarified that ESF addresses mainly the question of employment, and connected to it, of education and social inclusion. **Main conclusions:** there is a need to interconnect the EUSDR and the Roma Strategy and to clarify the difference between strategies and funding instruments; to reduce the large gaps between national Roma strategies and reinforce a common perspective; to follow up on DG Regio's initiative to connect the EUSDR and EU programmes, e.g. by bringing Managing Authorities in the Danube Region together, which will have to embed Roma strategy in the programmes; to have coordinating network beyond EU borders completing the EU Roma Network; to reduce bureaucracy and increase capacity building; to streamline information on EU funding in a single place (but this seems very difficult)!
- **The IPA/ENI<sup>5</sup> Workshop** was chaired by Ms Mirjana Maksimovic and Mr Zarko Sunderic, Government of Serbia. **Main conclusions:** there is a need to spread more information about the funds and how to use them, with focus on socially owned enterprises; to learn from good models; to synergize the funds with national budgets; to build capacities and Roma leadership; to focus on Roma youth; to make sure Roma Inclusion is always on local authorities' agenda, especially on political and decision-making level; last but not the least making the Roma issue a "normal" issue.

#### Project example: URBACT project RomaNet

- **Mr Molnar** presented the URBACT II Project: Roma-Net<sup>6</sup>, which includes 9 EU cities as partners and aimed at cooperating in the development of Local Action Plans for Roma Integration by exchange of good practices, mutual learning, using the participation based URBACT methodology. Besides the structured thinking about local strategies, basic achievements of this network were: capacity building and sensitising the stakeholders and decision makers and involving them in Roma Inclusion through networking. Six of the original nine cities received the opportunity to exchange about Local Action Plan implementation in the frame of Roma-Net II Pilot Delivery Network.

➔ For more details please see the Annex 11: PPT URBACT TT Project RomaNet.

#### Experiences of an EESC evaluation project on implementing Roma Integration strategies in the EU

- **Mr Akos Topolanszky (European Economic and Social Committee (EESC))** brought very touching photos from one of the Roma ghettos in Tirana, Albania, showing settlements without water and electricity, people living in very poor conditions. He also gave general info about EESC. His last message brought to the audience was that **Finland is a unique example and best practice example** in dealing with Roma Inclusion which shows that **it is possible to achieve fundamental changes**. It is necessary to constantly apply **long term political commitment**. He delivered several recommendations for long-term changes: **Radical change in Housing and improvement of Educational mechanisms**; Promoting Roma culture and language, involvement of concerned people in all processes especially in tailoring their arrangements and changes and setting realistic goals is a secure way in achieving success in Roma Inclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> European Neighbourhood Instrument

<sup>6</sup> See <http://urbact.eu/en/projects/active-inclusion/roma-net/homepage/>



### Conclusions of the meeting

- Mr Mirtl thanked all speakers and participants and highlighted that the meeting was a real success and showed **the need for an ever closer Europe especially when it comes to Roma Inclusion. He called for Roma Inclusion to be one topic of the EUSDR Annual Forum in Ulm on 29 and 30 October 2015.** He encouraged participants to bring EU policies on the ground and take this experience with them. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region provides a tailor-made framework for project development, but also for discussing Roma Inclusion in a very focussed way and providing an interface to different funds as well as to the (potential) candidate and neighbourhood countries with large Roma Minorities.
- Mr Hanak also thanked speakers, participants and Mr Mirtl as initiator of the meeting. **PAC 9 will try to organise a regular meeting dealing with this topic**, because there is an obvious need for it and Roma Inclusion is an issue that needs to be worked on constantly.
- Ms Pfanner concluded on the differences between countries, but the challenges are more or less the same. Political commitment and consistency are the key measures in achieving changes, as well as empowerment of Roma Civil Society in regard to political issues. She looked forward to the meetings in the upcoming years.