Speech by Hans Heinrich Hansen  
02.06.2011 FUEN Congress with focus on the Roma

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends

We have made the subject of the Roma in Europe the focus of today’s discussions, and an important part of the whole congress. This is because the Roma have been discriminated against for a very long time, and from many sides, and because we are of the opinion that it is time that the voice of the Roma should be heard to a greater extent with us. I am well aware that today’s main subject will not be completely welcomed by all of our members, because the question of the Roma in Europe is a very complex issue, and not only are there no simple solutions, but there are also a number of unresolved questions.

This is why, during the preparation for the congress, it was very important for us not to approach the issue with naivety or false expectations, but that the focus should be on the transfer of knowledge. Because when we look closely at many of the judgements made, they do turn out to be prejudices.

Who, and what, are the Roma, and what can FUEN, as a minorities organisation, do for them? These were the key questions we asked ourselves.

During the preparatory phase we were often asked why we were dealing with the subject of the Roma. Don’t our other minorities in Europe also have major problems? Aren’t we overdoing things with this subject?

I can fully understand the thoughts behind such questions. But I think, without question that we, FUEN, cannot and must not close our eyes to the most urgent minority problem in Europe while at the same time claiming to be the umbrella organisation for the autochthonous minorities of Europe. And there can be no doubt that the most urgent problem is the Roma issue.

If we don’t want to bother ourselves with them, then we are acting just like the politicians that we accuse of not reacting to minority problems in time and thus causing the escalation of conflicts. And we are also dealing with this issue for another reason: As a minorities organisation, we of course show solidarity, because we know only too well what it is like to be left on your own.

I do not need to repeat here and now how extremely acute the issue of the Roma in Europe is at present.

• Hungary’s EU Council presidency has made the situation der Roma a focal point for action.
• The European parliament has debated a report on the situation of the Roma.
• The European Commission has developed overall guidelines.
• And it is expected that the heads of states and governments will also pass a resolution at the next EU summit.

The Roma issue is not unknown territory for FUEN; we have Roma organisations as members which have been taking part in our congresses for years.

But the Roma issue has never been a core issue or main focus of FUEN. This is why we have looked around for allies and experts, who will help us with regard to the special situation of the Roam as a minority.

Personally speaking, I am very happy that we have managed to attract the support of a friend of mine of many years, the former Minister for Federal Affairs and European Issues and Head of the State Chancellery in Thuringia, Dr. Jürgen Schöning, in dealing with this issue together. Jürgen Schöning had already contacted Commissioner Rehding regarding this issue when he was a government minister.

Besides Jürgen Schöning we have also found another cooperation partner, someone who is without doubt one of the best known experts in Europe – and here I mean Tilman Zülch, President of the Society for Endangered Peoples.

Mr. Tilman Zülch, thanks to you too for declaring the support of your organisation in helping us to tackle this issue. I hope and believe that the cooperation with the Society for Endangered Peoples will be advantageous for both sides.

Speech

When you look at the programme for the day you will see that we have invited numerous experts, each of whom will be making an initial statement which will provide stimulus for the debate.

I would once again like to welcome Mathäus Weiss from the Sinti in Schleswig-Holstein, Ms. Renate Schnack, adviser to the Maro Temm Project, and Mr. Heuss from the Central Council of the Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg.

After the short speeches, Dr. Jürgen Schöning will moderate a panel debate, which will also give us the chance to discuss the issue with you. We’d like to ask you to get actively involved in the discussion, and look forward to a fair and objective discussion.

But let me just say a few words about why FUEN should deal with this subject, and what main points they should concentrate on.

Here I would like to refer to our resolution that we sent out in advance of the congress.

You know that the Roma (the word Sinti is only commonly used in Germany) originally came from the Indian subcontinent and emigrated towards Europe in the 14th century, and from there throughout the world. Many settled in the central European states of Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary.

The exact Roma population in Europe can only be estimated. It is generally assumed that there are between ten and twelve million Roma in Europe. This makes the Roma Europe’s largest ethnic group.

• The history of the Roma reads like a book about banishment, discrimination, exclusion and targeted annihilation.
• And in the recent past the Roma have also been under great pressure – they were for example almost completely driven out of Kosovo during the recent war; and in Bosnia as part of the so-called “ethnic cleansing”.  
• And in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia, the Roma have regularly been the target of verbal and also violent attacks.  
• In some countries, there are places where “Roma not desired” signs are part of the townscape.

In this context I would like to remind you of the situation in Autumn 2010 as the French president expelled the Roma, and used emergency legislation to set up reception camps for Roma near the larger cities.  
The EU, represented by Ms. Rehding, Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, vehemently protested against this.

It is certainly no exaggeration when publications dealing with the Roma speak of “third world islands in Europe”.

It is therefore absolutely essential, indeed a fundamental prerequisite, that the improvement of the Roma’s living conditions and the rigorous elimination of overt and covert racism must be the centre of all our efforts.

The situation the Roma are in is a disgrace for a civilised Europe.

It is also important to emphasize that the Roma are a very heterogeneous European minority, which is also characterised by national, regional, local and internal differences and singularities.  
The problems and challenges faced by a Sinto in Schleswig-Holstein are very different from those of the Roma in Kosovo.

But let me emphasize one thing at the end of my brief introduction that is an important point for us in FUEN.  
• In Europe there have been numerous analyses, strategies and approaches, about we can deal with the problems of the Roma. But at European level it has long been openly discussed about how the billions provided for the improvements in the life conditions of the Roma, and the billions that will have to be made available in the future, have not been purposefully invested, and even worse, only a fraction of this funding has actually reached those for whom it was intended.

I think this is an important point where FUEN, bearing in mind its limited means, could make a difference. Because we know that minority issues and minority conflicts can only be solved when minorities are accepted as equal partners in a society.

This of course requires an obligation on the side of government and the majority population to recognise the minorities as a group in society that is to be protected and sponsored, without compromise or concession.  
At the same time the minorities must be loyal to the state. There can only be sustainable solutions to minority issues when we can establish this mutual trust.

Why am I saying all this to you? Because in all the documents currently lying before the European Union, the issue of the Roma as a national minority only plays a peripheral role, if at all. But a serious willingness to recognise the Roma as a minority – as part of society – is a fundamental prerequisite for every solution.

The idea of solving problems by throwing money at them has always failed – it is primarily about mutual recognition and on-going interchange at eye level.
I am well aware that this is a lofty ideal, and many will think – “Easily said, but impossible to do.” And people of my age may think: “Not in my lifetime.”

So I ask again: what can we, what can FUEN, do for the Roma?

I’d just like to ask you think back a bit; as far as your own minority is concerned, what it was like in your region a few decades ago, and if anyone back then believed it would ever be possible to really achieve equality.

I can at least speak for my homeland, the German-Danish border region, when I say that a few decades ago nobody could believe that the minorities and the majorities would ever accept and recognise each other – let alone support one another.

So let us together contemplate whether FUEN can at least do something to provide some modest assistance in promoting cooperation between Roma, the majority population and the other minorities.

• At the end of this day of discussion, together with the speakers and experts, and our partners, we want to formulate a joint Eisenstadt Resolution regarding the Roma issue.

• I would also be very pleased - and I will actively work towards this end - that we have more than just an interesting afternoon with good speeches and discussions, but that we also expand the subject in terms of new ideas and projects.

It would also be greatly to FUEN’s credit if it would take a stronger position in Europe on this subject.

I thank you for your kind attention.