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I want to thank the organisers for bringing together all of you and giving me the opportunity to speak with you. Today, I see many people who I have been meeting for many years. Fifteen years ago, as a young student of law, I started seeing some of you raise your voices for the rights of our Roma people. You were the inspiration to change my life plans to become a lawyer and perhaps get a job in public administration. Instead, I became an activist. Having another career, my life would be easier—as it would be for many of you. But this is not a career for many of us. This is a mission.

Over the years, we were raising our voices together and demanding from governments to take responsibility for their own citizens of Romani origin. We did not want to see any more private donors, international organisations and NGOs delivering services to us while our own countries did not care about us.

We got the OSCE action plan, the Decade of Roma Inclusion and finally the EU Roma Framework. We also demanded to take part in the public administrations and governments responsible for these policies. We claimed participation in many cases by voicing the slogan “nothing for us without us”. The rhetoric, if not the substance, of Roma participation has become a mantra for national and international, governmental and intergovernmental institutions in a way that was previously inconceivable.

So, years of capacity-building have produced a tiny stratum of Roma capable of institutional participation. Many of us had to make a choice between joining public administration and staying in Roma civil society.

This was a hard choice to make. Many of you had to leave organisations you created, projects you designed, and people you long worked with. The best and brightest of our civil activists wanted to become civil servants. Roma activists moved from the streets into offices and from mobilisation to administration. Many of you had to make this hard choice for a greater good.

Institutional participation has created a distinct niche role for former Roma activists that is recognisable across Central and South-Eastern Europe. We might call this type the Roma-in-charge: a person of Roma ethnic origin, selected by government, given an advisory role, but denied any decision-making powers.

The Roma-in-charge is a person who is given an impossible task—to resolve problems that the whole public administration cannot resolve or does not want to resolve.

Many times, the Roma-in-charge is asked to help those in power to stay in power. Otherwise the Roma-in-charge will not stay in his job.

Co-opted, the Roma-in-charge enters a higher comfort zone in terms of income, status and recognition—a comfort zone which is in many cases removed from the quality of life of the average Roma citizen.

Such comfort functions as a sophisticated tool of financial and political control. Both the Roma-in-charge and our civic organisations have been controlled by financial dependency—either by personal remuneration for the Roma-in-charge, or access to governmental or EU funds. As governments use European funds to outsource a range of service provision to NGOs, many Roma organisations and individuals—with the best will in the world—have unthinkingly mutated from independent civil

society watchdogs to utterly dependent clients. As a consequence, governments have muted our critical voice.

In terms of political control, the Roma-in-charge finds himself in the worst of all positions because the Roma-in-charge is seen to be powerful but is actually powerless. The Roma-in-charge is burdened from the outset by the weight of great expectations and the depth of power constraints: he has no power to decide over paving roads or piping water into Roma communities, over bussing our children to school from a remote mahala; nor does he have the power to desegregate a school. Therefore, Institutional participation allowed for public administration to be proud for employing Roma but not for the community to be proud of the better life they have.

However, we have no choice other than to keep walking ahead. This is not to diminish our achievements in term of institutional participation over the last 10 years. The challenge is to move beyond simply paying lip service to the notion of Roma participation.

Those in authority have allowed us to participate, but real power to achieve the change we dream about and aspire to will never be given to us. Using every available democratic, we must take power ourselves. I am confident that this is possible—our social and political circumstances today are incomparably better than those of African-Americans in slavery or black South Africans under Apartheid. If they did it, we can do it. Therefore, we must see institutional participation as only a stage along our way.

We need to nurture leaders committed to empowering others, leaders whose ethnic origin will not be considered as an exclusive entitlement to financial support from donors or political support from our communities. Instead our ethnic identity should be a moral imperative to serve for the betterment of others who face injustice. To meet the challenges and uncertainties our next generation of leaders need to demonstrate the leadership of Roma, not only as an ethnic community, but also as

a political community with self-determined purposes and with the collective power of our citizenship.

We need leadership that can organise and mobilise citizens before elections, to get out and vote, and after elections to hold those elected to account, to challenge politicians when promises are not kept. This approach will enable a long life for you as mediators because you will have the support of your communities.

This is no easy task. The coming of democracy did not bring deliverance but rather disappointment and a loss of trust. Our exclusion worsened, our sense of security was threatened as never before by violence from state and non-state actors. The experience of police harassment, brutality and ethnic profiling has meant that the law enforcement authorities have yet to win the trust of Roma communities in Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Slovakia and the rest of Europe.

Despite this, we must not lose confidence and hope for the future. We are no longer at the beginning of the way. Increased participation at various levels of state institutions marks our real progress and represents a significant step forward. We should be proud of what has been achieved and keep our eyes on the prize for the work to be done in future. To be cynical about how far we have come is to refute the efforts of all who rightly struggle for increased and meaningful participation. If we dismiss participation as unnecessary, we will blind ourselves to the possibilities about how best to participate. However, the institutional participation of the Roma-in-charge is just not enough. To move from ineffectual, top-down participation driven by tokenism, we need bottom-up organising, driven by values of leadership for the pursuit of justice. These values are in us. These values are here in this room.

As serious people who care about millions of lives, we have some choices to make. The choice is before all of us who work in institutions that support you: the Open Society Foundations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the Norway Grants. On the one hand, we have a choice to continue losing the voice of Roma and to continue looking at our Roma communities as beneficiaries in need.

Or we can contribute to the creation of future leadership within Roma communities and look at the Roma as citizens who need to accumulate power to keep governments accountable and to speed the pace of change.

The choice is also on us as Roma. Are we going to continue working on our own, being or pretending to be a Roma elite, or we will enable others to undertake the responsibility for leadership we are taking today.

My choice is to enable Roma to undertake leadership. It is my conviction and determination that Roma need to be able to advocate, with or without the Open Society Foundations.

Over all these years, I have learned from many of you here that power and a fair chance will not be given. We need to demand it and take it. We are in a new stage and we need to take the next step and use all means of democracy and citizenship to enforce change. Every each of us has this responsibility. If not us, who? If not now, when?