Answer given by Mr Fischler on behalf of the Commission

(21 April 2004)

According to the jurisprudence of the European Court, the compatibility of the Portuguese labelling requirements with article 28 of the EC Treaty will depend on the extent to which:

- the characteristics of the pasteurised yoghurts mentioned are not substantially different, particularly as regards the quantity of bacteria, from those of the fresh product; and
- appropriate labelling is sufficient to inform consumers.

The Commission is examining the need to establish legislation on yoghurt and yoghurt-like products which includes the aspects mentioned by the Honourable Member.

Following that examination, which should be completed in the near future, where it is considered appropriate and necessary to establish additional legislation, the Commission will forward a proposal to the Parliament and to the Council.

(2004/C 88 E/0729)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0708/04

by Erik Meijer (GUE/NGL) to the Commission

(10 March 2004)

Subject: Disappearance of last-remaining sources of income for Roma population in eastern Slovakia and resultant looting, violent clashes and migration

1. Is the Commission aware that the Roma population in the east of Slovakia, which accounts for the majority of the population in many localities and has been increasingly hard hit by unemployment in the last fifteen years, is now being totally deprived of any source of income as a result of cuts in social security payments?

2. Is the Commission also aware that the despair caused by loss of income is meanwhile leading to clashes between the population and the massive police presence in the region, and to the looting of shops and petrol stations?

3. Are the cuts against which popular anger is being directed a consequence of the requirements with which the Slovakian government is expected to comply in order to ensure its country’s membership of the European Union from 1 May 2004, or is the Slovakian government free to increase public expenditure to a level that would enable the underlying causes of social unrest quickly to be removed?

4. Does the Commission expect the present situation to step up the pressure on the Roma people in Slovakia to leave their homeland, temporarily or for the long term, in order to earn money in Western Europe? What will be the impact of any such development now that most of the present EU Member States are seeking to restrict worker migration in the first few years after the new Member States accede?

5. Does the Commission agree that in the extremely difficult circumstances of the Roma people at this time it would be a mistake to seek to explain the disturbances solely by the presence of criminal gangs, and that other measures are needed to solve the current problems than locking up individuals caught breaking the law?

6. What can EU policy contribute to putting the Slovakian Roma people in the position of shortly being able to earn a sufficient income in their present homeland to enable them to continue to live there without having to resort to looting or come into violent conflict with the authorities in order to secure a livelihood?
The Commission has noted the introduction of a new social benefit system in Slovakia, that has led to a significant reduction of the social benefit payments as from the beginning of March 2004 and has been concerned about the Roma unrest and looting in Eastern Slovakia. The Commission is closely following the situation on the ground.

In general, the Commission obviously rejects the use of any kind of violence as a way of making social or any other claims. It continues to support the process of extensive economic reforms undertaken by the Slovak Government, which in the medium-term should increase productivity growth and the employment rate in the country.

However, the Commission has been in close contact with the Slovak authorities on this issue and has expressed its hope that the Slovak Government will urgently use all the means at its disposal to reach a reasonable and measured outcome to this sensitive issue. The Commission has pointed out that particular attention should be given to ease the hardship of the poorest sectors of the population which are likely to suffer most from the reduction of social benefits. Job opportunities should be enhanced in the poorest parts of the country and in Eastern Slovakia in particular. In this context, the Commission welcomes a 14-point paper presented recently by the Slovak Government on ways to improve the situation of the most disadvantaged citizens, particularly the Roma. The Slovak authorities have also reassured the Commission that they will closely monitor police behaviour in the east of the country.

As regards the possible migration of Roma from Slovakia, there is, of course, the possibility, as the Honourable Member points out, that Roma people in Slovakia might leave their home country, temporarily or long-term, in order to earn their living elsewhere. In this context, however, it should be noted that for the first two years after accession, the current Member States will admit workers from the future Member States under national rules rather than under Community rules and that for the most part restrictive arrangements will remain in place.

The Commission is committed to supporting the Slovak authorities as far as it can to solve this issue as soon as possible. While there is no short-term solution to the employment problem of the Roma population in Eastern Slovakia, the Structural Funds, through a mainstreaming approach, will certainly improve their economic and social situation and help create additional jobs which should benefit the Roma communities.

The Community Support Framework for Slovakia in particular addresses the question of Roma and will tackle the marginalisation of Roma through a strategy of integration. Selective settlement development involving improvement of education, health, water, waste water, and road infrastructure will be implemented. Certain measures will be funded at 80% by the EU (the normal limit is 75% for co-financing of public expenditure). The aim will be to begin a process of improvement of living and working conditions, in particular an integrated approach to education, advice, and training, to assist in opening up opportunities, particularly for young people. The Commission is working with the Slovak authorities to set up a sub-committee to the Community Support Framework (CSF) Monitoring Committee for Roma issues, which would provide advice on funding in this area within Slovakia.

In addition, the European Social Fund supports schemes which provide pathways into employment for disadvantaged groups, many of them being part of the Roma minority, which should eventually lead to stable employment, but which through granting an ‘activation benefit’ immediately improve the income situation of the participants. Moreover, the government is preparing a scholarship scheme for pupils from disadvantaged groups, which should not only foster the participation of Roma children in secondary education but will also provide additional financial resources for the families of the pupils. This scheme which is likely to start in May 2004 will be co-funded by the European Social Fund.