

Zeljko Jovanović **Director Open Society Roma Initiatives Office**

Phenjalen thaj Praralen, misto avilen
Brothers and sisters, welcome.

We are here this evening at the Tajsja Prize Ceremony thanks to many I would like to express our gratitude:
the National Theatre in Belgrade for hosting us tonight.

Then,
The Federal Foreign Office of Germany
the Open Society Foundations,
the Council of Europe,
the Alliance for the European Roma Institute,
the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg.
Government of Serbia and Dunav osiguranje
And other supporters of ERIAC

And special gratitude to
Our members many of them online
our Barvalipe Academy, Our board Pakiv and our brilliant team led by
Timea Junghaus.
I would like to ask them to riase so we can see them
Let's thank them all with a strong applause

The first Tajsja ceremony took place in Berlin where ERIAC has its home, a country full of painful history. This Tajsja ceremony takes place is in Belgrade our second home.

This is also my home. Before I left 15 years ago, this is where I started my life and my political activism. I grew up in this country of leaders who had a huge influence not only the Roma movement in former Yugoslavia and Serbia but international Roma movement. This is the country of Dr Rajko Djuric, Sait Balic, Djura Simic and other giants. This is the country of Roma artists and cultural producers of late Trifun Dimic and Saban Bajramovic, Zoran Tairovic, Dragan Ristic,. This is the country of Roma public intellectuals Bajram Haliti, Ljuan Koka, Osman Balic and others.

Can we have a round of applause for these and other giants.

They and others started before me and others who are younger like those who are today the leaders of Opre Roma Srbija.

But I also grew up here in this country and region where I lived through bloody wars and ethnic nationalism. The nationalist propaganda around me not only influenced the animosities between the majority populations but infected the us Roma. We distance from each other as "Serbian Roma" "Muslim Roma" or "Shiptar Roma" or Romanian Roma, sometimes we even only call ourselves as Muslims or Shiptars.

ERIAN is a vaccine for this infection. This event tonight is not an entertainment. It is a message that our talent that we carried through generations, despite of everything we faced, is beyond the borders of our citizenship, religion, dialects or any other difference. It shows our talent and beauty that we have beyond the borders, beyond religions and beyond the divisions.

Today here at the heart of Serbia we represent the talent of more than 12million Roma in Europe and 20 million in the world. Today we represent the talent of those who lived before us for those who will come after us. This shows not who we should be, but who we are beyond time and space. Our talent is a gift of nature or as many say gift of God. No one can take it away from us.

This Tajsja Prize ceremony is a message to the region where we again see the evils of the past surfacing again. In this region we have never through a bomb or fire a bullet. Our talent transcendent even our identity and our culture has universal value. It shows us a way out of destruction of hate, a way to the future to tomorrow.

So the message is don't get stuck in the past. Look at the tomorrow. When we meet in the tomorrow the only truth will be the answer to the question are we in a bigger conflict and hate each other more than today or are we ready to live and work together.

Let us look at not what sets us apart, but what brings us together. Tonight, ERIAC, all our supporters, Tajsja, you who are here, those that watch online and all who will come here to the stage will open the doors of unity. Let us open that door with the strongest possible applause for those that come next after me.