

**20th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional  
Authorities - Tuesday, 22 March 2011 (afternoon)**

Statement by **Mr Jeroen Schokkenbroek**, Special Representative  
of the Secretary General for Roma Issues

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Mr President,  
Members of the Congress,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking you, Mr President, for giving me the honour to address this distinguished body today. I congratulate the Congress with its decision to hold a current affairs debate on the situation of Roma in Europe and the challenges for local and regional authorities. I hope and trust that this timely debate will mark the beginning of a new era, an era of strong, concerted and above all determined efforts by local and regional authorities in Europe to radically improve the desperate situation of the Roma in many parts of our continent. Roma communities face huge problems in accessing health care and employment, they face substandard housing conditions, segregated and low-quality schooling for Roma children, forced evictions and acts of hostility, violence and hate speech,

including from politicians at national and local level. The universality of human rights, including social rights and the prohibition of discrimination, often remains a theory that is not applied to Roma. This state of affairs is not new, but the current economic crisis risks seriously aggravating the situation.

There is no need for me to dwell much longer on the deplorable situation many Roma in Europe find themselves in. There exists an overwhelming body of evidence from Council of Europe, European Union, OSCE and NGO sources – including our monitoring bodies and the European Court of Human Rights – that amply documents the situation.

The real question is: what are we going to do about about it? Yes, there have been efforts within member states, but, as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has said, progress has been very modest and very slow.

It is high time for action. This is the main message that the Strasbourg Declaration of last October sends to all stakeholders, not least to local and regional authorities in member states. It is no longer possible to close our eyes to the situation and simply assume that the problems will go away. They won't; they will only get worse unless action is taken. We cannot afford to wait. It is high time for determined and robust action by local and regional authorities to radically improve the situation of the Roma.

I will come back to the role of local and regional actors, but allow me first to give you a brief sketch of some recent action undertaken by the Council of Europe itself.

The High-Level Meeting on Roma, convened at the initiative of the Secretary General with strong support from Commission Vice-President Reding, led to the adoption of the Strasbourg Declaration in which the governments of member states agreed on a list of priorities which should guide action, in the first place action by and within the member states themselves. But the Strasbourg Declaration also gives important direction to the role and work of the Council of Europe in this area. It welcomes the Secretary General's decision to reorganise resources in a transversal manner within the Council of Europe Secretariat. My own appointment as Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues must be seen in this context, but also in the context of stronger coordination on Roma issues within the Council of Europe secretariat as well as external coordination with other international organisations, especially the EU and the OSCE, and with civil society, including Roma associations and NGOs such as the European Roma and Travellers Forum.

The Declaration also emphasises the need for further cooperation on collecting, analysing and exchanging information on policies and good practice on Roma within member states at all levels: national, regional, local and international. We are currently developing an

electronic database to collect such information from a wide range of sources and make it much more easily accessible for all stakeholders, not least regions and municipalities that can draw inspiration from policies and initiatives that have proved to be useful in other parts of Europe or even in the same country. The Committee of Ministers has recently created a new committee of experts on Roma issues (CAHROM) whose main task is precisely to analyse and evaluate policies and practices within member states so as to identify good practice and share lessons learnt. The Congress has been invited to participate in this new Committee and I am delighted that your rapporteur Mr Warmisham has been appointed as your representative.

In addition, the Declaration states the agreement of member states to set up a European Training Programme for Roma Mediators. In the past three months, the curriculum and the concept for this programme – the ROMED Programme - have been developed and a first round of in-country training sessions has already started. Roma mediators are persons, most often Roma, employed to facilitate, in an impartial manner, communication and contact between the local Roma community and public authorities and services at local level. Experience has shown that their work can make a real difference: improving access by Roma families to health care, increasing school attendance by Roma children, better access for Roma to employment services and vocational training, etc. Under the ROMED Programme,

the Council of Europe will, to begin with, train at least 400 mediators in a first group of 15 member states in 2011. I should like to thank publicly the Congress for the support it has already given to this initiative, notably by informing local and regional authorities about it and asking for their support.

Regarding Roma mediators, I would like to draw your attention to two important points. The first is that we are encountering many mediators whose employment is precarious; in quite a few cases, they are employed on short-term contracts or employed not by local authorities but by associations or NGOs. I am convinced that Roma mediators are in fact a very important pragmatic tool for helping to ensure that basic public services are delivered to Roma communities, in other words to help local authorities meet their responsibility to reach out to the population as a whole, without exception or exclusion. Through you, I would therefore plead that local and, where appropriate, regional authorities have recourse to mediators and do so in a sustainable manner by providing more stable employment for them and recognising that this is a genuine profession. This is money well invested in social integration.

Secondly, while I am convinced that appointing mediators and equipping them with the requisite professional skills is useful and necessary, it is not enough. Mediators will encourage Roma to knock on doors of local public services, but they cannot force those doors to

go open. As the saying goes: it takes two to tango. Hence the need to work with local authorities to achieve a better understanding of what the role of mediators is and how they can contribute to dialogue between the authorities and the Roma community but also to counter prejudice and stereotypes vis-à-vis the Roma. As a first step, we are associating local authorities with our ROMED training sessions in the different countries, but there is a clear need to go beyond this, as I will explain in a moment.

Mr President, members of the Congress,

The High-Level Meeting of 20 October 2010 has created a new momentum and dynamic in our action on Roma and I am convinced that the Congress has an essential part to play.

The High-Level Meeting underlined the key role of local and regional actors in addressing the situation of Roma. To quote the Secretary General Mr Thorbjørn Jagland during your Plenary Session of last October, regarding the role of local authorities:

“You are at the forefront of the efforts to integrate Roma and Travellers. It is at the local level where most challenges are, but it is also at the local level where best practices have been found. We want to build on this precious work and experience, and work with the Congress in order to achieve the critical mass of positive change”.

Speaking of best practices, we must remind ourselves that the picture is not wholly negative. Several successful projects and initiatives have been launched in the last years at local and regional levels, which have achieved a better integration of the Roma into society. I will give you two examples, mentioned in an excellent document published recently by the European Parliament.

Regarding employment, the Spanish project ACCEDER, developed by the Foundation Secretariado Gitano, has set up a network of employment services in 50 municipalities of Spain, addressed mainly (but not only) to Roma people. The involvement of local authorities and Roma experts in the project has helped to get jobs to 40.000 people in the last ten years. This programme has been co-financed by the European Social Fund and the local and regional governments, which is an example of cooperation between European funding and local involvement.

Regarding health care, Romania has implemented a health mediators programme which has increased Roma access to health services as evidenced by an increased number of Roma patients enlisted in general physicians' practices and obtaining insurance cover, and an increased rate of vaccination. Again, the involvement of local and regional authorities played a key role in the success of this initiative.

In order to make a decisive move forwards, we need to build strong coalitions for change. This will undoubtedly require strong efforts by all concerned, not least the Congress and its national delegations, to mobilise local and regional authorities across Europe.

To mobilise them into adopting policies and practices that actually work, to employ mediators, to end segregated schooling, to learn from each others' successes and failures, to learn how to handle and overcome popular anti-Roma sentiment, to involve the Roma community in local policy-making through dialogue and consultation, to increase their participation in local life, to make municipal staff more attentive to the socially disadvantaged situation of Roma and practical ways to improve it, to mainstream the specific needs of Roma in the development of non Roma-specific policies in areas such as spatial planning, housing, employment, education or health care. To mobilise and train local and regional authorities to submit projects for funding by the EU's structural funds and to be aware of the role that the Council of Europe Bank can fulfil in financing projects, including as part of a co-financing package for national contributions matching EU funds.

There is definitely a vast potential for effective action through a European programme for mobilising local authorities and increasing their capacity to respond to the needs of Roma communities so as to promote their social inclusion and the full respect of human rights.

I would suggest that the Congress is uniquely placed to consider taking a lead role in this context.

However, this mobilisation will not always be easy: it is one thing to build a European cooperation framework for municipalities that are already active in addressing the situation of Roma on the basis of the values and standards of the Council of Europe. It is quite another thing to bring in municipalities that may have been largely indifferent so far as to the fate of their Roma population or even characterised by a climate of outright hostility to these populations.

That said, these challenges should not prevent you from undertaking action, on the contrary: they are a key reason for taking action. William of Orange, also known as William the Silent, once put it very sharply: "One need not hope in order to undertake, nor succeed in order to persevere". Regarding the Roma, we are not without hope, nor are we without any successes at all, on the contrary!

The Council of Europe looks to the Congress for initiating a new dynamic in favour of Roma integration at local and regional level, picking up on the new momentum generated by the High-Level Meeting.

I assure you that we stand ready to support your efforts in every way we can. I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead.

Thank you for your attention.