



**From the forgotten genocide of WW II to the hate of the
21st century**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is often said that history does not repeat itself – a reassuring thought for Europeans who for the last 60 years have experienced peace and prosperity.

There are no fascist dictators in Europe today; in general, there is no official persecution or institutional discrimination. All European member states have ratified the European Human Rights Convention and numerous other human rights agreements and conventions. Yet, if we analyse the situation of the Roma in Europe today, we discern that persecution and discrimination have taken a

more subtle form. Roma children are not officially barred from ordinary schools.

They are simply assessed as being mentally retarded and therefore placed in special schools. There are no official barriers to employment but Roma men and women are not given a job because they do not have the necessary qualifications. There are no living areas specified for certain communities, but Roma families do not manage to find lodging in ordinary housing.

Slowly but surely, without discriminatory laws, the Roma in Europe have been relegated into ghettos, deprived of education and rendered jobless and penniless. We have moved from official persecution to unofficial apartheid. Without resorting to any discriminatory laws European societies have managed to push the Roma into oblivion, often to the general indifference of governments and the public.

The official, organised anti-gypsyism that led to the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Roma in World War II has been replaced by populist anti-gypsyism, sometimes officially condemned by governments but allowed nonetheless to thrive.

In a 2012 report on the Human Rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe, Mr Thomas Hammerberg, former Council of Europe

Commissioner for Human Rights, draws up a tragic list of injustices, covering anti-gypsy rhetoric, police abuse, coercive sterilization, segregated schools, lack of access to health care and employment, forced removal of children from their biological parents, destruction of property, statelessness and collective expulsions. The report deplors "that at a number of key moments member states have rendered European-level calls to tackle Roma exclusion hollow by openly flouting those expressions of concern".

The style and method have changed but the ideology remains. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, in a Recommendation on combating anti-gypsyism and discrimination against Roma, adopted in June 2011, defines anti-gypsyism as "a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination which is expressed, amongst others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatisation and the most blatant kind of discrimination".

A founding member of the leading political party in Hungary last month provided an excellent illustration of this dehumanising attitude. He said that "Gypsies are animals and behave like animals ... these animals should not exist ...". Last week, the media reported that a citizens' patrol squad flying the flag of a political party went into a hospital in Bologna to expel Roma from the

emergency room and bathrooms. A similar event took place in Greece, also under the auspices of a political party.

Already a year ago, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Declaration expressing deep concern about the rise of anti-Gypsyism and racial violence towards Roma in Europe.

In its Declaration, the Committee of Ministers calls for a number of concrete actions by member States, ranging from vigorously, swiftly and publicly condemning all acts of racist violence against Roma and anti-Roma rhetoric, to diligently investigating and prosecuting anti-Roma hate crimes.

The Declaration also stresses that Roma inclusion efforts are bound to produce limited results if they overlook the interdependence between social inclusion and anti-discrimination. Strategies for Roma inclusion should include measures to combat discrimination and address anti-Gypsyism. We need to change attitudes among the non-Roma population.

In a speech at the High-Level Conference on Empowering Local Actors to counter violent Extremism held in Brussels last month, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjorn Jagland, spoke about this “fanatical hatred of the Other” and added that

“if Europe wants to remain a region of peace and prosperity, we have to embrace diversity”.

Should we perhaps be less complacent and self-satisfied, less sure that history will not repeat itself? Should we start looking at our past to ensure we do not relive it?

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel sounded the alarm in a speech on 30 January on the occasion of the anniversary of the rise of Hitler and his regime to power. She said “The persecutions, the stripping of rights that finally resulted in the Second World War and in the crime of civilization called the Shoah were facilitated by the fact that a large majority averted their eyes and stayed silent”. Shall we stay silent in the face of aggressions, evictions, deportations and humiliation of the “Other”, the Roma?

There has been silence around the Roma and Sinti victims of the Second World War. There was silence at Nuremberg and that silence persists for all the injustices committed against them since the 2nd World War and up to this very day. It persists not only among the public and the media, except to denounce their petty thefts and misdemeanours; it persists amongst governments and national institutions. It is a silence which allows discrimination and persecution to thrive under the alibi of democratically elected governments, anti-discrimination laws and international

conventions. It is a silence which is making a mockery of our democracies.

We shall not be silent. We have not been silent for a long time. Council of Europe work on Roma issues dates back to the 1960s. Over the years we have drawn up numerous recommendations to governments and drawn up standards for housing, education, employment and health to be applied for Roma communities. Several monitoring bodies – the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Social Charter – report regularly on the situation of the Roma in the various member states and make recommendations for their improvement. There is a steadily growing number of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights finding violations of human rights committed against Roma.

Recommendations and monitoring exercises are important for combating anti-gypsyism. However, the alarming escalation of anti-gypsyism in the last few years demanded a new approach. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe felt that it is high time to shift accents from adoption of texts towards concrete action focused on effective implementation of existing standards. The High-Level Meeting of Council of Europe member States held in October 2010 was intended to respond to that challenge.

The Strasbourg Declaration adopted at the Meeting proposes innovative and concrete measures which create a new environment of mutual trust and respect between Roma and non-Roma. Most of all, the Declaration provides an impulse to Council of Europe activities on Roma issues and a fresh look at the roots of the problem and the methods to resolve it.

The Strasbourg Declaration puts the empowerment of the Roma, and the creation of mutual trust between the Roma, the non-Roma and the authorities at the heart of the Council of Europe action.

The **empowerment of the Roma** is fundamental for the improvement of the living conditions of the Roma. The Roma have to stop being resigned to their fate as victims. They have to stand up for their rights as citizens of the country they live in. The proposals of the Strasbourg Declaration are aimed at this change in outlook.

Foremost amongst the innovations, and most relevant to a change of environment, is the setting up of a European Training Programme for Roma mediators in education, health and employment (ROMED). Mediators have been used successfully in a number of member states and have been instrumental not only in solving problems but in establishing trust and confidence between the Roma, the non-Roma and the authorities.

The use of mediators in several countries has helped the Roma to get social security, identity documents and other rights to which every citizen is entitled. They have helped them to feel responsible for themselves and their families, to realize they are demanding rights and not begging for privileges. We have drawn up a human rights- based programme and, by the end of 2012, trained more than 1000 mediators in 20 member States, including here in Belgium, in cooperation with the Social Integration Service under the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Social Integration and the Fight against Poverty. In 2013, mediators will also be trained in Bosnia Herzegovina and Austria, which have joined the programme, and courses on specific issues and challenges will be carried out in the other member states. The European Commission is partner in this venture.

The empowerment of Roma women is an essential part of this exercise. Roma women are discriminated against because they are Roma and within their own community because they are women. Early marriages, traditional taboos and a patriarchal mentality are some of the major obstacles to Roma women getting their rightful place in society. At the same time, we believe Roma women are key agents of change because they want a good future for their children. We organize bi-annual conferences which allow Roma women from all over Europe to discuss these obstacles and ways to overcome them.

Young Roma are another key group. The future of the Roma population largely depends on them. We work regularly with Roma youth organisations to bolster their potential as agents for change. If the Roma are to fight for their rights they must also be given the legal tools to do it. For this purpose we carry out training courses for lawyers on using the human rights standards of the European Court of Human Rights and the European Committee on Social Rights in defending Roma rights before national courts.

Change cannot be achieved by the Roma alone. Empowerment is key but we also need goodwill and commitment on the part of the authorities and the non-Roma population. We are tackling this in various ways.

We have set up an on-line data base of good practices to allow the authorities to learn from the experience of other regions or countries. We are also setting up a network of cities and regions to provide a framework for capacity-building, exchanging information and good practice. The European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion will be officially launched on 20 March this year and will be run by the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Ms Reding already spoke about the crucial role of cities and villages for Roma Integration and I fully agree. We are in discussion with the European Commission on a joint project to be operated under this Alliance.

And finally a new inter-governmental body – the committee of experts on Roma issues (CAHROM) – provides the essential link between the member states in working together towards the improvement of the status of the Roma in society. To enhance this link the CAHROM is organizing thematic groups on specific policy questions raised by a member State with a view to sharing experiences. For example, last week a thematic group visited Belgium at the request of the government to look specifically into policies regarding halting sites for nomadic Roma. The results of these visits are promising and member States have welcomed these new working methods as an excellent means to share good policies and best practices.

But it is not only the authorities that have to act: the majority population needs to change its negative attitude towards the Roma. For some years now we have an awareness-raising campaign called “Dosta” (meaning ‘enough’) which we have launched in 14 countries. It is not a one-off campaign but a permanent on-going exercise to eradicate progressively prejudice and stereotypes towards Roma. We expect to launch this campaign in Lithuania and Spain in April 2013. All these activities are directed at ensuring mutual trust between the Roma and the non-Roma, without which no progress can be made.

But more is needed.

Remembrance of the events which occurred during the Second World War remains a sensitive and painful issue for Roma. Work covered by the Council of Europe and OSCE/ODIHR includes the production of teaching materials on Roma history and culture, the organisation of events and working meetings on the Roma genocide, and the setting-up of a website devoted to Roma Remembrance.

Mr Hammarberg, in his report which I mentioned earlier on, proposes that truth commissions be established "in a number of European countries to establish the truth about the mass atrocities against the Roma people. Ideally, this should be a Europe-wide undertaking. A full account and recognition of these crimes might go some way in restoring trust amongst the Roma towards the wider society."

Truth commissions that recognise the genocide of the Roma and all the persecutions, discriminations and marginalisation of the Roma to this day would bolster and vindicate our work in establishing the mutual trust that is needed for a cohesive society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Time is running out. Extreme right-wing parties are mushrooming all over Europe and acquiring credibility and legitimacy. We are in

the middle of an economic crisis where people look for scapegoats to direct frustrations. We have to act now – if not, history is going to repeat itself.