

Statement by Jeroen Schokkenbroek, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues, Council of Europe

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Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the Hungarian Presidency and the Commission for the opportunity they have given me to kick off this panel session, which is about reactions to the European Parliament Resolution of 9 March 2011 and the recent Commission Communication. I have been invited to comment in particular on the Commission's European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

Being the first commentator in a meeting such as this is always somewhat of a challenge, especially when the main document to discuss is still very fresh. At the same time, I feel reassured by the fact that other commentators will follow and I hope you will therefore forgive the rather inexhaustive and impromptu character of my comments. They should be seen as a first reaction only, from the specific perspective of the Council of Europe (CoE).

In initial reactions to the Communication I have read some criticism about a lack of substance. I believe this is not entirely fair, since the Commission quite rightly points out that it does not wish to detract from the primary responsibility of member States for the social integration of Roma. The CoE strongly endorses the call for national Roma integration strategies - our own Committee of Ministers similarly adopted a Recommendation to member States on national Roma policies in 2008. In addition, there are important substantive elements in the proposals: I welcome the setting of targets in the key areas of education, health, housing and employment as well as putting in place tools to measure progress. These proposals are extremely important. But however crucial these policy areas are it is also important to recall that the problems widely faced by Roma in Europe cannot be understood in terms of lack of social integration only. Roma face hostility, rejection, racist violence, even threats to their life, hate speech and direct and indirect discrimination from mainstream society, not to mention lack of participation in public life or the obstacles many Roma face in accessing the justice system to defend their human rights. In short, there is a very strong, broader human rights dimension here, which cannot be dissociated from the lack of social and economic integration of Roma. They are two sides of the same coin.

In the face of the scale and complexity of the problems of Roma, we need complementarity of action and cooperation between different actors at European

level because each organisation has its own specific tools, competencies, resources, experience and areas of expertise to contribute. No single institution or organisation can pretend to be self-sufficient in supporting member States to find the right solutions. We should build strategic coalitions.

Seen in this light, I must confess some disappointment at reading the Communication: whereas the EP Resolution dedicates a paragraph explicitly to the need for a cooperation mechanism between the EU, the CoE and other organisations, no such text can be found in the Communication. However, there is long-standing cooperation between the EU and the CoE on Roma issues, and the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma of last October encourages its further development. I hope that this point can be taken up somehow in the ongoing Council discussions.

The phenomena of rejection and hostility I mentioned earlier are not limited to attitudes of the majority populations. We see that they are unfortunately also translated in attitudes, actions and inaction of some public authorities, national, regional and especially local. This is borne out by a series of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and decisions and recommendations of CoE monitoring bodies such as the European Committee of Social Rights. There is an essential need to engage with these authorities, as well as with the majority population, if we want our common efforts to succeed in achieving progress towards the integration of Roma. Engagement with public authorities at all levels should also serve to ensure that Roma communities and organisations are given their full voice in designing, implementing and monitoring integration measures targeting them. This is an important principle of the CoE's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Such efforts cannot succeed without the active participation of Roma themselves.

These are key points for the CoE and it explains why we had expected that this broader human rights dimension would have figured more strongly in the Communication. This dimension was highlighted in the Strasbourg Declaration adopted only a few months ago, and the European Parliament's Resolution refers to key human rights obligations of member States (ECHR, European Social Charter). We believe references to European human rights standards and relevant CoE Recommendations on national Roma policies would have strengthened the text, as would a mention of the Strasbourg Declaration.

I will not rehearse here what action the CoE is currently taking to implement that Declaration. I have presented our plans at the previous Platform meeting last December in Brussels held under the Belgian EU Council Presidency. But I would like to highlight a few actions which are particularly well-suited for cooperation between the EU, the CoE and indeed other international organisations like the OSCE. I do not need to recall that fundamentally, we pursue the same objective

of overcoming the marginalisation and rejection of Roma and that the 27 member states of the EU are also members of the CoE.

First, the European Training Programme for Roma Mediators (ROMED) which is now operational, with school, health and employment mediators being trained in a first group of 15 countries. The EU has from the outset expressed strong interest in cooperating with the CoE on this Programme and I am delighted at the announcement in the Communication that the Commission wishes to join forces with us on this. This Programme provides a very practical direct inroad into improving interaction locally between Roma communities and public institutions. At the same time we must work to help local authorities to enhance their capacity to socially integrate Roma communities, and the CoE Congress of Local and Regional authorities is preparing initiatives in this area in order to build a strong coalition of local authorities working for Roma integration.

Second, since the previous Platform meeting, the CoE's Committee of Ministers has set up a dedicated intergovernmental committee of experts (CAHROM) and given it the key task of analysing, evaluating and exchanging national policies, programmes and action plans for Roma integration. This Committee, which held its first meeting only 10 days ago, has strong potential to develop into a forum for serious and frank discussions of what factors lead to success or to failure in integration measures and policies, so that lessons learnt can be shared among governments. CAHROM will in substance be a precious tool for the EU too, in assessing progress towards reaching the Roma integration goals.

In this connection, the CoE is working on a European database on national policies and good practice, which should bring together information from sources such as member States, European/International institutions including FRA as well as NGOs and Roma organisations. I believe there is ample scope for partnerships with the EU and others to ensure that access to such information is much easier than today.

To conclude my few remarks, and to avoid any misunderstanding: while some points of criticism can be made, I believe that the Commission Communication provides an important signal and further step towards ensuring that Roma integration is taken more seriously across Europe. Be assured that the CoE is ready to cooperate with you.

Finally, I hope and trust that the EU member States, who will soon be called upon to adopt their own Council conclusions on Roma integration will bear in mind their commitments and guidelines for national strategies they have adopted within the CoE framework and recognise the need for cooperation and strengthened partnerships in order to be more effective in achieving our common

goals. We count on the support of the Hungarian EU Presidency in this. As I said, we need strong coalitions for change.

Thank you for your attention.