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**Budapest Conference on Democracy and Human rights**

***The situation of the Roma in Europe  
Budapest, 28 June 2011***

Mr Chairperson,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguish speakers,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking the Organisers of this Conference for giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished audience today to comment on the situation of the Roma in Europe. I will do so from the perspective of the Council of Europe, an international Organisation of 47 European States whose mission is to promote and protect Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law.

To begin with the conclusion about the situation of Roma: their situation is bad, very bad, unacceptably bad. Few would contest this, but there is some debate of whether this is a social problem or a Human Rights problem. Minister Martonyi referred to this. For the Council of Europe problems widely faced by Roma in Europe cannot be understood in terms of lack of social integration only. This is amply borne out by the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and the findings of our other human rights institutions such as the European Social Charter, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the Commissioner for Human Rights. 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.

The phenomena of rejection and hostility 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.

When we speak of the conditions of the Roma what comes easily to mind is their sub-standard lodgings, often deprived of water and drainage facilities, poor

health, lack of education and unemployment. We rarely think of the thousands of well-educated Roma throughout Europe who have a job and live in normal housing.

Undoubtedly, the poor living conditions of the majority of the Roma over the centuries have created a negative image of a community that lives on the margin of society. This attitude of society is not restricted to Roma: it is prevalent wherever living conditions are difficult and unemployment high.

What is specific to the Roma community is that their negative image is not restricted to the poverty-stricken majority but projected on all Roma, irrespective of their living conditions and their level of education. In other words, it is at least as much their ethnicity as their living conditions that is the object of prejudice and mistrust. Referring to the Roma as "*blacks*" – as happens in Central and Eastern Europe – is indicative of ethnic rather than social discrimination.

Examples of ethnic prejudice abound. When in 2006 Livia Jaroka, a Hungarian Roma MEP was mocked and ridiculed in an e-mail sent to other MEPs by a Bulgarian observer, it was her ethnicity and not her social condition that was targeted. Nor was any distinction made by the football crowd in a Bucharest stadium chanting "*Die Gypsy*". And when Roma children are placed in special schools for mentally retarded children it is not because of their poverty image or because they are mentally deficient but simply because they are Roma.

Physical aggression and arson has not been limited to Roma living in ghettos. Roma living in ordinary housing have been badly injured and seen their home burnt down.

The Roma are not just discriminated against because of their poverty, but that very discrimination has turned the majority of the Roma to the poorest amongst the poor. It has kept them in a poverty circle which so far has been very difficult to break. Born of uneducated and unemployed parents and bred in sub-standard lodgings, often without running water or drainage facilities, at a distance from town centres, and often without transport, their main concern is survival. Like their parents, many Roma children grow up without any schooling and remain unemployed.

Hygienic conditions in the settlements vary from poor to abysmal and tuberculosis and skin diseases are frequent. Life expectancy is about ten years less than that of the majority.

Rejection is total. There is a general uproar whenever Roma families are allocated social housing. Evictions – in winter and without alternative accommodation – are frequent and often to the satisfaction of the general public.

Getting a job – any job – is extremely difficult. As an example, when a fair-haired, fair skinned Roma from Vilnius managed to get a job, he was dismissed the minute it was discovered he was Roma. The same misfortune befell a Roma in Rome when he gave the address where he lived.

In recent years, the Roma are no longer ignored in their ghettos: in countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, they are repeatedly the target of violent attacks, harassment and intimidation. This is part of a broader trend: as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance put it in its 2010 annual report: today, racism and intolerance are no longer limited to the fringes of society, as is evidenced by the success of extreme right-wing parties in a number of member States. It noted that anti-Gypsyism is one of the most acute problems for many European societies. In Western-European countries, Roma migrants often face double hostility: they are migrants and they are Roma.

There is frequent criticism of the diffident character of the Roma and their tendency to stay apart from society. Is it surprising that in the face of such obstacles they lose faith in the majority and all hope of change?

Our first reaction is to blame governments for their inaction – and there is no doubt that national authorities have a lot to be blamed for. But, at a deeper level, it is the mistrust and prejudice of the average man in the street that is at the root of the problem and we must recognise this sad reality.

Age-old prejudices are not wiped away overnight by laws and regulations. As the saying goes "*you can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink*". A dynamic is needed to stir up public awareness and make people reflect on the wrongness of their attitudes.

This dynamic exists. Anti-discrimination laws are in force in practically all European countries, even if many are not sufficiently implemented. Court judgments, national and international, have been delivered over the last few years condemning discriminatory behaviour towards the Roma community.

In particular, there is an increasing number of such judgments by the **European Court of Human Rights**. Three cases concerning the right to equal education and condemning school segregation are worth mentioning:

- *DH and others vs Czech Republic* (Roma children placed in special schools with mentally deficient children) (2007)

- *Sampanis vs Greece* (Roma children placed in separate schools on a purely ethnic basis) (2008)
- *Orsus and others vs Croatia* (Roma children placed in separate classes) (2010)

The European Committee of Social Rights, set up under the **European Social Charter** of the Council of Europe, has given decisions against Bulgaria, France, Greece and Italy on the living conditions of the Roma, and both the **European Commission against Racism and Intolerance** and the **Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities**, both bodies of the Council of Europe, have published critical reports on the situation of the Roma in various member states.

Even if the countries concerned take time to implement the judgments, decisions and recommendations a momentum has been created to bring about change.

This momentum will however slow down and eventually come to a halt if public opinion does not change. If governments are delaying the introduction of reforms to do away with segregating schooling, it is mostly because the public do not wish their children to sit in class with Roma children. And if they do, the Roma children are taunted and bullied by the non-Roma children.

In a moving testimony given by the two schoolchildren –today adults – involved in the Czech school segregation case at a recent International Conference in Prague on Desegregating Education in Central and Eastern Europe, they said that life in the ordinary school was so painful and discrimination by both teachers and children so blatant that they felt more at ease in the special school, in spite of being with mentally retarded children.

Ms Viktoria Mohacsi, a former Hungarian MEP, summed up the situation in her country as follows *"There is huge resistance to it from Hungarian parents, the police, local authorities.."*

Mr Zoltan Balog, Hungarian Minister for Social Inclusion, could not have been clearer and more correct when he said *"We can achieve nothing if we do not convince at least part of the majority on the importance of Roma integration"*.

And I would add that not much can be achieved if the Roma themselves are not empowered to assume responsibility and to have confidence in reforms. Minister Martonyi earlier this morning stressed the importance of dialogue. It is high time for a dialogue to move forward on Roma integration, to dispel misgivings and establish confidence for living together. Dialogue figures prominently in the action taken by the Council of Europe.

It is a key purpose of **the Council of Europe campaign Dosta!** which means "enough" in Romanes and which has been introduced in several of our member states with considerable success. Getting to know the others and their culture can be the beginning of mutual understanding. In February this year I launched this campaign in Greece, together with the Deputy Minister of Education, and other countries are in the pipeline.

The **Council of Europe High Level Meeting on 20 October 2010**, convened at the initiative of **the Secretary General** following the expulsions of Roma from France to Romania and Bulgaria last year and the ensuing political tensions, marked a turning point in starting a dialogue. The **Strasbourg Declaration** marks a new commitment of our 47 member States and has set in motion several processes:

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has set up a dedicated intergovernmental **ad hoc committee of experts on Roma issues (CAHROM)** and given it the key task of analysing, evaluating and exchanging national policies, programmes and action plans for Roma integration. This Committee is conceived as a forum for dialogue between governments, 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 be a precious tool for assessing progress towards reaching Roma integration goals.

**The Roma Mediators Training Programme (ROMED)**, agreed upon at that Meeting, also aims at establishing dialogue but at local level, in matters relating to education, health and employment. The Programme follows a rights-based approach and develops a clear concept of what the mediator should be: not a representative of the authorities nor a Roma activist, and definitely not a paternalistic figure who takes over responsibility.

We see the mediator as a neutral intercultural intermediary who assists in improving communication and cooperation between Roma and public institutions, stimulates responsibility and involvement and empowers the Roma community to have confidence in reforms. Training of mediators has started in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Turkey and Ukraine.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe will, on 6 July, together with Ms Androulla Vassiliou, European Union Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, officialise a Partnership Agreement on Roma mediators.

In the past four months we have already trained over 400 mediators, but thanks to this partnership, we will be able to train a thousand mediators for 2011 and 2012.

An important aspect of mediation is that the dialogue tends to extend to the whole circle of poverty- lack of education, miserable housing, poor health, unemployment. The school mediator is not without knowing that it is not enough to get the child to school. He/ she is aware of all the handicaps which the child has to face – uneducated parents, limited space for work, distance from the school, bullying in class, poor health. Likewise the health mediator is aware that it is not enough to ensure medical assistance. The unhygienic conditions in the settlement are one of the main causes of ill-health; lack of education is another. And every mediator, be he/she a school, health or employment mediator knows that without identity papers, there can be no school, no health services and no employment. The mediator will work with both the local authorities and the Roma community to help create the conditions on both sides for improving Roma integration.

Will it work? We believe it can.

The Bulgarian town of Vidin has shown how dialogue can work. Drom, a Bulgarian Roma NGO, worked with both Roma and non-Roma parents in Vidin to raise awareness of the importance of education and to promote racial tolerance. The NGO provided free bus rides from the ghetto to the non-Roma school, monitored the Roma pupils' performance and attendance, dealt with racist acts and trained the teachers in charge. The initiative succeeded in integrating 400 Roma children into regular schools and the local authorities in Vidin have now taken over the funding of the programme.

This and other examples of good practice need to be widely known – which is why the High Level Meeting agreed **to set up a data base for exchange of national policies and good practices**. The data base is in preparation and should be operational by the end of the year.

Earlier on, I said that the general public is to blame as much as if not more than the public authorities for maintaining the Roma in their dire situation. This does not in any way reduce the responsibility of the authorities, and more particularly the local authorities in ensuring peaceful cohabitation, avoiding racial tensions and guaranteeing a decent living for all their citizens, whatever their ethnicity.

In my address to the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at their 20<sup>th</sup> session on 22 March, 2011, I called on the regional and local authorities of Europe to take their responsibility by *"adopting policies and practices that actually work, and to employ mediators, to end segregated*

*schooling, to learn from each others' successes and failures, to know how to handle and overcome popular ant-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".* I am convinced that, though the organisation of the **first Summit of Mayors on Roma by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities** on 22 September this year, a further step forward will be made towards mobilising local and regional authorities to increase integration of Roma at local level and building their capacity to do so.

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, thus, should also serve to ensure that Roma communities and organisations are given their full voice in designing, implementing and monitoring integration measures targeting them.

I would like to finish by stressing that, in the face of the scale and complexity of the problems of Roma, we need **synergy and complementarity of action and cooperation between different actors at European level** because each organisation, whether it's the EU, the OSCE, the Council of Europe or others, each organisation has its own specific tools, competencies, resources, experience and areas of expertise to contribute. No single institution or organisation in Europe can pretend to be self-sufficient in supporting member States to find the right solutions. We should build strategic coalitions. With the Council of Europe's High-level meeting of last October and the recent endorsement by the EU of a new strategic framework, Europe has now created a strong dynamic for mobilising public authorities in European countries to take, at long last, the much-needed concrete action to make the social inclusion of Roma and the full respect of their human rights a reality.