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Respecting and fulfilling human rights at the local level

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Local and regional authorities have a key role in the implementation of human rights in Europe. They deliver services related to education, housing, health and social care, water supply and public order which directly affect the enjoyment of human rights by individuals. I welcome the Congress report on best practices for implementing human rights. It will raise awareness of the human rights duties of local and regional authorities and connects their work with European and international human rights standards.

All levels of governance are responsible for the realisation of fundamental rights. Shared human rights duties between the authorities at national, regional and local level necessitate close cooperation and coordination. Later this week I have convened a meeting to encourage the development of national human rights action plans in Europe. The multi-level implementation of human rights is high on the agenda: national action plans cannot be effective without the active participation of local and regional authorities. As a region, Scotland is implementing its own national action plan for human rights. I participated in the launch of the Scottish action plan in Edinburgh last December.

The situation of Roma illustrates the need for coordinated approaches between different levels and across policy sectors. Most member states have national Roma strategies, and municipalities and regions have an essential role in putting them into practice. Inclusive education and decent housing for Roma are two of the first hurdles. The housing situation of Roma was a principal concern in my recent letter to the mayor of Rome in Italy. Local politicians also have a special responsibility for building bridges across different communities and combatting discrimination and prejudice, including anti-Gypsyism. Last week, I raised concerns about anti-Roma demonstrations taking place in Czech cities.

The Congress is already connecting different municipalities and regions in Europe as networks to foster Roma inclusion. The Alliance and ROMACT and ROMED programmes are making progress at the local level. Yet more needs to be done to encourage municipalities and regions to invest in Roma. The European Union has made extensive funding available for Roma-related projects. However, much of these funds remain unused even under the current period of financial austerity. Municipalities and regions need to take a more proactive stand and join in the activities of the Alliance.

The economic crisis and austerity measures have affected the capacity of local and regional authorities to assume their responsibilities for providing public services. Homelessness is on the rise and there have been cuts to health care and services to victims of violence, for example. Local and regional budgets should be subject to human rights and equality impact assessment so that austerity measures do not have disproportionate effects on vulnerable

and disadvantaged groups of people. Homelessness will not end by moving people living on the streets away or by criminalising begging or sleeping on the rough. We need sustainable solutions which tackle the root causes of problems.

Children, older people and persons with disabilities are among the groups adversely affected by austerity. Child poverty and deprivation is a major concern. Last year, I visited the Tallinn Children's Home in Estonia, where concerns were raised about the lack of psychiatric and psychological services for children, the need for which had increased during the economic crisis. While in Helsinki, Finland, I visited housing units for older persons and met with a municipal ombudsman for patients. The cost of care and the difficult economic situation of municipalities were highlighted in the discussions.

In Andalusia, Spain, I raised the implementation of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities with the regional authorities. Austerity measures had hindered the access of people with disabilities to community services and the regional government had launched an emergency plan against social exclusion to address this problem among other crisis-related issues. During my visit to Denmark in November, I pointed out that some municipalities had built housing facilities in which too many persons with disabilities lived together. Such residences fell short of promoting social inclusion and community living as required by the UN Convention.

Intolerance, racism and xenophobia can be magnified by the economic crisis. In Greece, I observed that migrants, refugees and asylum seekers had borne the brunt of intolerance and racist violence. I met the Mayor of Athens and discussed the situation with the Athens City Council for the Integration of Migrants. Integration measures are instrumental in preventing further tensions and in strengthening social cohesion during the crisis. Municipalities should set up platforms for dialogue with migrant communities to foster their participation in public affairs. While in Spain, I was pleased to note that the Andalusian authorities had decided to maintain universal access to health care for undocumented migrants even after the national government had excluded them from its scope.

Local authorities often have duties related to public order and the enjoyment of freedoms of assembly and expression. Municipal and regional police services provide protection to peaceful demonstrations, including Pride marches. Demonstrations against austerity measures have also posed a challenge to law enforcement officials. I highlighted the disproportionate use of force by the Catalan police in Barcelona in this context.

Police officials should be clearly identifiable during demonstrations and there should be an effective and independent mechanism for investigating complaints made against them. Continuous human rights training among the police is essential for preventing ill-treatment.

We have to improve awareness of the central role of local and regional governance in implementing human rights. Local and regional authorities have a unique opportunity to coordinate the broad range of services provided to their residents in a rights-based and person-centred way. This is particularly valuable as it demonstrates the interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights. Local and regional authorities can ensure that the residents' human rights are not only respected but also fulfilled. Recognising members of local communities as holders of rights and striving to meet their individual needs through systematic and coordinated efforts is at the heart of effective realisation of human rights.