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## ***European Roma and Travellers Forum Plenary Assembly***

Address by Nils Muižnieks  
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Strasbourg, 3 September 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to take part for the first time in your annual meeting and to have an opportunity for direct debate with you.

The human rights situation of the Roma in Europe is high on my agenda as, unfortunately, we can see no sign of overall improvement, quite the contrary.

In my first one and a half year as Commissioner for Human Rights, I have actually focused on the situation of Roma in a number of the countries I have visited, namely Portugal, Italy, the Czech Republic and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.

In these countries, I tackled various issues pertaining to the human rights of Roma and, first and foremost, the persisting segregation of Roma children in the education system in various member states, which in my view is one of the worst forms of discrimination. I also warned against the consequences of segregated and substandard housing conditions in many Roma settlements throughout Europe and against the vicious circle of evictions, which generate serious human rights violations for those affected. I highlighted the risk of statelessness to which thousands of Roma who lack identity documents and birth registration are still confronted, focusing particularly on the right of children to a nationality. I also criticised the growing barriers imposed on Roma who want to travel from some Western Balkan countries into the EU. These obstacles constitute a serious breach to the right to freedom of movement and the right to seek asylum. I intend to publish an in-depth report on this subject later this year in order to provide a clearer view on the human rights standards that are at stake as a result of policies of preventing Roma from migrating to EU member states.

I am deeply worried by the rise in hate speech and hate crime against Roma throughout Europe. I find the multiplication of anti-Roma marches led by far-right movements, such as the ones organised this summer in the Czech Republic, particularly disquieting. The expression of deeply prejudiced and racist views on Roma by various French officials over the summer is another bad precedent. In Greece, I was informed during my visit to this country in early 2013 that the racist rhetoric of the neo-Nazi party “Golden Dawn” clearly targets Roma, in addition to migrants and other social groups in the country, and reinforces existing discriminatory policies. The numerous populist statements recently made by politicians and media in a number of EU member states regarding Romanian and Bulgarian migrants can but reinforce prejudices and discrimination against Roma. I believe that much more should be done by the member states of the Council of Europe to condemn and sanction hate speech and hate crimes and to combat pervasive racism against the Roma in

all societal settings. This is especially crucial in the current situation of economic crisis as there is a risk that Roma become increasingly scapegoated for all the negative consequences of the crisis on the majority population.

I intend to continue to raise alarm about human rights violations against Roma as much as needed and will continue, in particular, to insist on the need to combat racism, which is the root cause of many of the difficulties that the Roma face. I regret that many of the national strategies adopted by the member states give little or no importance to the fight against deeply rooted racism and discrimination. Indeed, attacks by far-right extremists are only the tip of the iceberg and much more should be done to combat “ordinary” racism and prejudices in the population, which are the bedrock for violent action by extremists. Policy-makers and public leaders bear a crucial responsibility in this respect and I will remind them, in my dialogue with them, of their duty to firmly condemn and combat all manifestations of racism in order to preserve social cohesion and protect democracy and the rule of law in Europe.

I also think that more emphasis should be put on raising awareness about the past of the Roma in Europe as a means of combating current prejudices and intolerance. In particular, more efforts should be made to improve the general awareness and knowledge about the Pharrajimos (Roma Holocaust) and to establish the truth about other massive human rights violations of the past.

In my work, I rely heavily on the information and input provided by civil society actors, among which the European Roma and Travellers Forum plays a particular role. My staff cooperates actively with your secretariat in the form of exchanges of information and discussions on topical issues. These exchanges are of great significance for the preparation of my country visits and reports. I take the opportunity of today’s exchange of views to encourage you to bring up all national or local issues you deem important to my attention. Although it will not be possible for me to make a statement on each of the problems that arise in the member states, I can raise the most important human rights issues during my country visits as well as in other contexts, for instance through a more thematic approach of some patterns of human rights violations, such as school segregation or evictions.

I note with interest that you intend to change your working methods and to initiate a process of thematic-oriented membership of the Forum, which is likely to broaden the participation of the Roma civil society in the work of the Forum. I am aware that it has been a challenging task for the Forum to establish itself in the institutional landscape of the Council of Europe. I hope that you will be able to make an increasingly substantial contribution to the work of this organisation regarding the human rights of the Roma. Your participation is crucial.

I wish you a very fruitful meeting and look forward to further exchanges of views with you, either in this format or on the occasion of country visits and other events.