

Europeans must learn more about Roma

Statement by Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, on the occasion of the International Roma Day, April 8

On the eve of the International Roma Day, we should remember the long history of discrimination and persecution of the Roma, including the *porrajmos*. Through years the Roma have suffered persistent ignorance and prejudice from the majority population. In Europe today, all too many Roma women, men and children continue to experience multiple discrimination in their daily lives. They are also often hidden from the public view by unemployment and isolation in Roma settlements or special schools.

International and European human rights standards clearly provide for equality before the law and prohibit discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity. There is no place for racism in a democratic society. Governments have a positive duty to bring about equality of opportunity for all. Improved access to housing, education, employment and health care is key for many Roma.

National action plans are one means of addressing these issues and I am aware that new plans have been drawn up in connection with the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005-2015. I will follow the implementation of these strategies during my country visits. Moreover, in a growing number of countries, the establishment of low-threshold complaints bodies such as specialised ombudspersons and anti-discrimination tribunals has already made it easier for the Roma, among others, to access genuine justice.

The institutions and monitoring bodies of the Council of Europe have strived to uphold the full enjoyment of human rights by Roma. This is definitely a priority for the Commissioner for Human Rights and will continue to be so under my mandate. Co-operation with the European Roma and Travellers Forum and other bodies representing Roma will be important.

We should also bridge the knowledge gap. Europeans must learn more about Roma, their history and the diversity of their identities. Roma should be visible in all walks of life. Local authorities have to engage in an active process of mutual integration. In many European municipalities, policies of inclusion and raising awareness have yielded promising results. It is through living, working and learning together that we can eradicate our ignorance and prejudice.

The realisation of Roma inclusion will reinforce everyday democracy and the rule of law. It is the only way to reach a society of substantive equality where everyone has the right to participate and to be heard.