

BACKGROUND PAPER

Context

Today, the estimated 10-12 million Roma resident in Europe remain one of the most marginalised populations on our continent, victims of the persistent discrimination, prejudice and hate speech directed against them. They simply do not enjoy the same opportunities in life as others. This prejudice and discrimination are a gross violation of their human rights.

Recent events have highlighted the continuing discrimination and disadvantage endured by Roma in Europe. Roma have faced a long history of social exclusion within European society, exclusion which is compounded by severe disadvantage across a number of inter-related fields (lack of education, unemployment, poverty, access to healthcare, poor housing and residential segregation, etc).

Anti-Gypsyism is a specific form of racism targeted at Roma and has deep roots in European history. Myths and stereotypes about Roma continue to prevail in the minds of the non-Roma population, rooted in ignorance, fear and segregation, and still largely unchallenged by education. The recent resurgence of right-wing extremism targeted at Roma and other groups, fostered by the economic recession and fed by demagogues, demonstrates that anti-Gypsyism continues to be potent as a populist force.

Discrimination against and enforced segregation of Roma are widespread, both at national and local levels. Roma are frequently victims of acts of physical violence, forced evictions, ghettoisation, expulsion and deportation regardless of citizenship status and associated rights. Research shows that Roma continue to experience severe exclusion, poverty, disadvantage and lack of access to a wide range of social rights. Representatives of the Roma population are rarely involved in the definition of policies and actions and little is done to empower Roma to represent their interests.

Both the Roma and non-Roma populations have civic rights and responsibilities to fight stereotypes and stigmatization, to build a respect for diversity that represents an added value for all citizens.

Initiative to convene a Summit of Mayors on Roma

The increasing discrimination against Roma in Europe and their continued social and economic marginalisation are a cause for concern. The High-Level Meeting convened by the Council of Europe Secretary General, Thorbjørn Jagland, last October highlighted the importance of local and regional action to improve the situation of Roma.

Local and regional authorities are closest to citizens and it is at this grassroots level where concrete measures must be taken and where they will be the most effective. It is imperative to pool together the good practices and numerous activities to promote Roma inclusion that are being carried out in our cities and regions.

To respond to this challenge, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is convening a **Summit of Mayors on Roma on 22 September 2011 in the Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg (France)**. The Summit is being organised in co-operation with the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues and in partnership with the City of Strasbourg and the Strasbourg Club municipal network.

Any attempts to improve the social inclusion of Roma must be supported by society as a whole, that is to say with the full and meaningful participation of Roma in order to succeed. Therefore the Summit It will bring together representatives of municipalities, regions and networks actively addressing the situation of Roma or interested in becoming involved as well as, Roma organisations and elected representatives as well as other institutions concerned with this situation are also represented.

The discussions will focus on relations between local and regional authorities and Roma groups, with a particular emphasis on identifying concrete and innovative solutions to problems encountered. The long-term objective is to establish a pan-European network with the participation of the various actors, which will serve as a framework for providing information and co-operation on the local and regional initiatives.

Objectives

The initiative to organise a Summit of Mayors on Roma was inspired by the existing multitude of stakeholders and proposals for action, as well as the need to take stock of the situation. It will bring together the numerous local and regional initiatives and networks, institutional partners and Roma organisations themselves.

The specific objectives are to:

- examine which obstacles to Roma inclusion exist and discuss how to remove them through local actions to improve integration through education, and ensure equal access to housing, health care and employment;
- explore how to bring about the shifts in mindsets that are required in all parties concerned to fight prejudice and contribute to the acceptance of diversity;
- clarify the sharing of responsibilities between local/regional, national and European levels and decide on guiding principles for future local and regional action;
- reflect on how best to make use of the available sources of funding for activities promoting Roma inclusion;
- agree to establish a co-operation framework which would serve as a platform for coordinating local and regional action, pooling resources and sharing good practices.

Its aim is to bring together the various parties to look at how we can build mutual trust at the grassroots level between the Roma and non-Roma populations, as well as with local and regional authorities which is the main challenge to success. A lack of trust is often a primary obstacle to the work on the ground, and the need for mutual understanding and confidence is reflected in the Summit slogan: "Building mutual trust at grassroots".

Participants

Several categories of participants have been invited to take part in the Summit, namely:

- cities and regions represented in the Congress with an interest in Roma issues, and in particular those that responded to our questionnaire on Roma activities - cities and regions participating in national and European networks active specifically on Roma issues;
- cities participating in the Council of Europe training programme for Roma mediators;
- cities and regions with Roma mayors and/or municipal/regional councillors;
- specific cities and regions which are noted for their work on Roma or for their large Roma community, or which expressed an interest in joining in action on Roma, and in particular those having won the Dosta!-Congress Prize for Municipalities or participating in the 2011 edition of the Prize;
- national and European associations of local and regional authorities;
- municipalities participating in broader European networks which are also dealing with Roma, although not exclusively – for example, the Strasbourg Club, Eurocities, Intercultural Cities or Cities for Local Integration Policy;
- Roma networks and organisations – including Roma youth organisations;
- Institutional and civil society partners involved in Roma inclusion, academics, researchers, etc.