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Council of Europe Congress announces Summit of Mayors to address Roma issues

Strasbourg, 23.03.2011 – Practical initiatives for the improvement of the situation of Roma in Europe were debated on 22 March, at the [20th Session of the Congress](#) of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. A Summit of Mayors in autumn 2011 will be at the top of the Congress' political agenda in this respect. It will be attended by cities and municipal networks acting for Roma integration, local and regional representatives from the Council of Europe's 47 member states, and in particular Roma elected members. In addition, the *Dosta!* Congress Prize for Municipalities implementing innovative Roma policies will be awarded at the October Session of the Congress.

John Warmisham, Congress Rapporteur on Roma, commented on measures aimed at integrating the Roma population. He called on members of the assembly and on local and regional representatives in Europe to work actively to secure Roma integration in such areas as housing, health and employment. "We must offer Roma the means to participate fully in society", he said, noting also that it is at local and regional level that the most effective measures can be applied, and that this is also the level where citizens have the easiest access to political decision makers and to their rights.

Jeroen Schokkenbroek, the Council of Europe's Secretary General's special representative for Roma issues, said that the Council was looking to the Congress to give fresh impetus to the integration of Roma at local and regional levels and that the Congress was ideally placed to play a leading role in this area. He went on to describe recent action by the Council of Europe to draw governments' attention to this issue, in particular the Strasbourg Declaration, adopted at a high level meeting on Roma on 20 October 2010.

Congress members were also addressed by Rudolf Sarközi, President of the Advisory Council of the Roma national minority in Austria, who welcomed this co-operation at European level. He said that Roma communities had experienced major difficulties in many European countries, and that they had never attracted as much attention as they were receiving now. The time was overdue, Sarközi said, for the Roma to be given a proper place in society.

The crucial role of local and regional authorities was also described by Pilar Varela Diaz, Mayor of Aviles in Spain. Her city has implemented a wide-ranging programme to offer Roma communities access to decent housing, as well as health and education. A long-term programme commitment has led to the rehousing of 121 families in suitable accommodation, the demolition of shanty dwellings and proper access to public services. It has taken 20 years and 11 million euros of investment, she said, but the success of the project is mainly the result of the social consensus arising from the participation of the groups concerned.

The Congress has two chambers, the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions. It brings together 318 full and 318 substitute members representing more than 200 000 European territorial communities.

President of the Congress: Keith Whitmore (United Kingdom, ILDG), President of the Chamber of Regions: Herwig van Staa (Austria, EPP/CD), President of the Chamber of Local Authorities: Jean-Paul Frécon (France, SOC)

Political Groups: Socialist Group (SOC), Group of the European People's Party – Christian Democrats (EPP/CD), Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (ILDG).