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Anti-Roma rhetoric underpins obstacles to Roma inclusion

Summit of Mayors on Roma: Building mutual trust at the grassroots Plenary Panel – Roma inclusion: what obstacles?

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Posters displayed in Milan during this year's municipal election campaign warned against the risk of the city turning into a "Gypsy town". Though this was an extreme display of anti-Gypsyism and xenophobia, anti-Roma statements by politicians are in fact commonplace in several countries in Europe. Until this stops, efforts to promote the inclusion of Roma in society will rarely bear fruit. Instead, discrimination and violence will continue to be a part of the daily lives of many Roma.

Anti-Roma rhetoric underpins obstacles to Roma inclusion.

Local politicians have a special responsibility for combating discrimination and building bridges across different parts of society. They should avoid using stigmatising speech against the Roma and should not feed the age-old prejudices against this minority. Sweeping generalisations about Roma and Travellers, in particular concerning their involvement in crime, feed the false stereotypes. In a letter posted on the municipal website in November 2010, the Mayor of Nový Bydžov in the Czech Republic held the Roma collectively responsible for the rape of a girl and announced repressive measures targeting the local Roma community.

Another example comes from Hungary, where comments of the Mayor of Tiszaszarvaskő about what he called "Gypsy crime" triggered the setting up of a special 'gendarmerie'. Such vigilante groups have been operating in other parts of Hungary as well.

The consequences of anti-Roma rhetoric by politicians should not be underestimated. Their words can be understood as encouraging violent action against the Roma, such as mob violence and pogroms. Following the Nový Bydžov Mayor's public statements on Roma, extremist groups attacked Roma in the town during a demonstration organised in March 2011. The police failed to provide adequate protection to the Roma on the occasion.

My experience is that anti-Roma political discourse perpetuates anti-Gypsyism. By setting the example for prejudice and discrimination in society, politicians effectively prevent Roma and Travellers from enjoying their rights on an equal footing with others.

In such a hostile context, all efforts made by the Roma communities themselves to break out of their marginalisation and relate positively to the rest of society are jeopardised.

Instead of anti-Roma rhetoric, Roma men and women should be welcomed and encouraged to participate in politics. All members of society would benefit from this. But several barriers have to be overcome. There is a lack of information among Roma about their civil rights and the whole electoral process. In many cases they do not even possess ID documents and are not registered as citizens in the country where they live. In France, I have also encountered cases where French Travellers have not been able to vote in local elections because of discriminatory obstacles to their registration as residents and voters in a municipality.

Schemes with reserved seats for Roma in political bodies should be developed. The Slovenian practice of ensuring one seat in the local assemblies of municipalities with significant Roma populations has created a channel between the Roma and the authorities. This has also encouraged political participation and networks among Roma more broadly. Parties should be more attentive to their Roma constituents as voters and candidates. More outreach efforts are needed to secure voter registration, also among Romani women.

Public life is not only about elections. Participation is about a possibility to influence on a daily basis. More organised consultation is needed between the local authorities and the Roma population, for instance, on housing and other concrete problems. Advisory bodies could be set up to give such consultations more continuity and promote the legitimacy of the Roma representatives.

Municipalities should also be open to support Roma cultural centres. During my visits to Spain and Slovenia I noticed that such centres can have positive effects both among Roma and in their relationship with other communities. Factual knowledge about Roma culture and history is a key tool for correcting well-rehearsed stereotypes. The Council of Europe fact sheets on Roma history should be widely disseminated.

The local administrations have to make serious efforts to recruit Roma civil servants. It is particularly important that Roma can work as police officers, teaching staff in schools and medical professionals. This is essential for labour integration and as a means of building trust between communities in the critical fields of education, health and security.

Housing is an area where the local authorities play an important role and one which has often failed Roma utterly. Sub-standard and segregated housing continues to be a reality for a large number of Roma in most parts of Europe. In some cases, municipal housing policies have increased Roma segregation – the building of walls is an unfortunate and symbolic illustration of this. Migrant Roma tend to live in especially harsh conditions.

Reports of forced evictions, sometimes carried out with considerable violence, are all too frequent. In Italy, extraordinary 'emergency' measures have been applied for some years already to evict Roma from their settlements in Rome and Milan, for example. The European Committee of Social Rights has strongly condemned these practices.

Evictions and sub-standard housing in inaccessible locations have dramatic consequences for Roma families and children. Without a real home they also face difficulties in exercising other rights. Adequate housing is of central importance to the

enjoyment of the rights to health, education, and work and it is an essential component of privacy and family life.

Local authorities can take the lead in fulfilling the rights of Roma to live in dignity in adequate housing, including the provision of public utilities. Roma settlements lacking recognised tenure should be regularised or other suitable housing options offered. During my visit to Spain, I was able to study a housing programme in Madrid which had succeeded in relocating 2000 Roma families from shantytowns to decent apartments over the past decade.

Travellers who continue to move need sufficient short and long-term stopping sites of adequate standard. Other housing possibilities enabling them to live in caravans on land they have acquired should be available as well. It is important that housing offered to Travellers is culturally appropriate which means that the possibility to live in caravans must be preserved.

It seems to me that this fact has not been fully taken into account in the evictions of Travellers announced by the Basildon District Council at Dale Farm in the UK after a long legal process. It would be unwise to go ahead with these evictions. More dialogue is needed between the local authorities and Travellers to build trust and find agreed solutions.

Evictions should only be carried out as a last resort and with appropriate procedural safeguards. Those affected must be consulted, reasonable notice given and access to legal remedies guaranteed. Adequate alternative housing and compensation for all losses must be made available to those affected. Evictions must not result in homelessness.

Education is another area where local and regional authorities are active. While in Romania, I learned that 50 per cent of Roma children did not attend schools. Many of those who did dropped out from school early on. In many countries, Roma children are also disproportionately represented in special schools which cater for pupils with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Every child has the right to education. It is the first step for integration into society. The education of Roma children should be inclusive and desegregated. Decisive steps must be taken to increase the attendance of Roma children in mainstream schools. The Strasbourg Court has made clear that there are obligations that must be met in this field. Particular attention needs be paid to promoting the education of Roma girls.

Pre-school education should be encouraged and barriers to school attendance eliminated. A range of positive measures can be made available to provide additional support and assistance to Roma and teachers and to improve mutual communication. Roma school assistants and mediators have been trained and employed in many member states for the purpose with good results. A Joint programme between the Council of Europe and the European Union is ongoing in this field.

We need responsible leadership and systematic work. Anti-Roma speech, including during electoral campaigns, must be strongly condemned in all cases and punished when it breaks laws against incitement to hatred. Generalisations and the stigmatisation

of entire groups must be avoided. Reviving age-old stereotypes about Roma is playing with fire.

Instead, Roma inclusion must feature high on the municipal agenda. We cannot afford broken and segregated communities. Several sources of funding have already been made available for the purpose, not the least under EU schemes. But I find it astonishing that in many cases funding earmarked for the purpose previously had not been used: many municipalities had in fact refused funds to improve the situation of Roma. Under current economic situation this is quite extraordinary and demonstrates the long shadow of anti-Gypsyism.

Another reason for the failure of previous attempts has been the lack of involvement of Roma themselves. Yet Roma should always be key actors in the initiatives in favour of them. Local efforts for Roma inclusion must bring all the stakeholders together from the planning stage until the final evaluation. When Roma are already participants in the political process and represented in local assemblies this is easier, but in specific projects their involvement must be active and comprehensive.

Although good practices in this field are still outnumbered by unacceptable situations, we must reverse the trend. We already know the elements to success. When old prejudices are left behind, the determined work for inclusion can begin.