

5th Dialogue with the Roma and Traveller Civil Society – Strasbourg, France, 20 June 2018

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Plenary session on “Securing political presence and representation for Roma and Travellers in politics, public life and decision making mechanisms”

Strasbourg, France, 20 June 2018

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak at this session.

Since I became Congress Thematic Spokesperson on Roma and Traveller Issues in 2012, I have been working on many different aspects of Roma inclusion policies.

We have addressed housing issues; we have launched anti-Gypsyism campaigns; we have worked on schooling and education.

But there is one field of activity that is particularly close to my heart, because I think it has the biggest potential to improve the situation of Roma in the long run.

I am of course talking about the political participation and representation of Roma youth.

Young Roma face the same discrimination and disadvantages as their elders, but they sometimes also have to cope with the weight of securely anchored traditions. They have to endure the same problems as all young people today: unemployment, social and economic exclusion, difficult transitions to adulthood and an uncertain future, but also carry the heavy burden of constant discrimination.

We must not forget that Roma are not only Europe's largest and poorest minority group, but also one of the fastest growing populations. In an ageing society with higher life expectancy and declining fertility rates, young Roma must form an ever larger proportion of the labour force. The fiscal burden will, to a remarkable part, need to be carried by young Roma women and men.

Let me underline one important point here: Many say that youth is our future. No! Young people are our present. They are capable of bringing change now, not in some undefined future! We need to build all our activities on this potential.

Back in 2014, when I was Rapporteur for the Congress report "Empowering Roma youth through political participation: effective policy design at local and regional levels", my Co-Rapporteur Inger LINGE and I invited many young Roma and Roma youth organisations to discuss with us the actions and initiatives they felt were needed to improve the chances for young Roma boys and girls.

Education and employment were clearly the main fields mentioned in which anti-Gypsyism hinders young Roma to become part of the mainstream society.

As in many countries segregated schools or classes for Roma children still remain common practice, it is hard for those children to later get a job on the mainstream labour market. Less than 1 % enroll in higher education. There can be many reasons for this: the need to contribute to their family's financial situation, experience of discrimination in the application process or bullying and violence in prior education.

Paid employment is the crucial step to get out of the poverty cycle and into the mainstream society.

But we know that, apart from disadvantaged education opportunities, it is common for young Roma to face discrimination when they apply for jobs. In many cases young Roma are told that a job offer is no longer vacant once he or she presents herself or himself in person to a prospective employer.

Both, the discrimination in the education and in the labour sector is an obstacle for young Roma to get involved in politics and civil society. Young Roma are absent from relevant decision-making bodies and processes. They have no possibility to influence policies that could improve their educational and economic situation.

Influencing policies can happen in many different ways, for example in Roma and non-Roma youth centres, in voluntary work, in mainstream youth organisations and projects or in city and municipality councils. Many policy-makers do not understand the problems that young Roma face and fail to design adequate policies. It is therefore crucial to bring young Roma into politics who can represent the Roma youth.

However, this is not easy to achieve. Roma youth are often too passive about participation, they have different priorities including having to work or help their parents. Oftentimes they are not aware if and how they can contribute. Poverty and lack of equal opportunities as well as discrimination often serve to demotivate them.

Dear colleagues, we must not let this happen. We must not lose this generation. If we do, we are losing both on the future **and** present fronts in our efforts towards Roma inclusion.

We as the Congress call on local and regional authorities to develop, facilitate and fund networks, centres and training courses that allow Roma youth to step out of the shadows and become a relevant part in decision making bodies and civil society.

The European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion, that Congress set up in 2013, is therefore pursuing a strategy in which we are building national networks among mayors for Roma inclusion. These networks work as discussion platforms in which mayors can meet regularly to exchange views and good practice models. They can strengthen local and regional capacities for action, identify problems and propose solutions. Overall they promote cooperation among mayors but particularly with young Roma activists and Roma NGOs.

This year in April, the Alliance held a meeting in Athens to strengthen the Greek Roma Network which had stopped operating during the financial crisis. Together with experts from the Council of Europe Roma and Traveller Team and the Central Union of Municipalities of Greece we organized a meeting with 28 mayors to revive the network.

It was in this particular meeting, that it became clear to me what an important role those networks can play as door-openers. One Romani man, whom I met during this meeting, was Marinas MOUKANIS. He had been involved in the old Greek Roma Network many years ago. Through his work in the network, he got to know the processes of decision making and civil involvement. Eventually he ran for a seat in the City Council of Acharnes, a 100 000 inhabitants suburb of Athens, and got elected. Since then he has been representing the Roma in the City Council of Acharnes.

Dear colleagues, I believe that we can make a change if we work closely with the current generation of young Roma. It is on us local politicians to establish structures in which Roma youth can participate actively in politics. I encourage you to raise your voices in your municipalities and ask for those structures where they do not yet exist.

Of course I know that this is not an easy thing to do. The European Alliance of Cities and Regions is happy to assist you in any possible way.

My colleague Tobias Mayr from the Alliance Secretariat and I remain at your disposal for questions throughout the day. We are looking forward to meeting you.

Thank you.