



**Keynote address by Mr Thorbjørn Jagland,  
Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

**Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Plenary Assembly of the European  
Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF)**

**Thursday, 6 September 2012, 9.30 a.m  
(Strasbourg, Palais de l'Europe, room 1)**

*Embargo against delivery /Check against delivery*

Mr President,

Delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my address to your Plenary Assembly in March last year, I informed you about the follow-up we were planning to give to the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma.

Today, a year and a half later, it is a good moment to take stock of where we stand.

Let me start with **ROMED, the European Roma Mediators Training Programme**, launched in 20 countries in the areas of education, health and employment.

The employment of mediators in our member States has brought positive and, in some cases, remarkable results. We have seen that in areas where mediators are deployed, a higher number of Roma have access to education/ healthcare/ employment, the institutions have a more adapted way of addressing Roma needs and mutual relations have improved.

What we aim to achieve now is to promote a more clear understanding of the concept of mediation among public authorities. This can be partly achieved through training session, but it is also important that key principles of effective mediation are spelt out in Council of Europe texts. I am happy to inform you that next week, the Committee of Ministers will be asked to adopt a Recommendation to member states on mediation as an effective tool for promoting respect for human rights and social inclusion of Roma.

I personally met some mediators and I was impressed with the results of their work. Some mediators work with hundreds of families where we see immediate effects of their work such as increased numbers of children in schools and higher percentages of vaccinated people.

More than 850 mediators have been trained so far by a group of experienced trainers. The common aim of the European Commission and the Council of Europe is to have a total of 1000 mediators trained by the end of the year and I am confident that this target will be reached.

I am also encouraged to see that several countries have included mediation in their National Roma Integration Strategies. As a result, some countries have started the process of institutionalisation of mediation. Others like Romania, Bulgaria and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” have increased the number of mediators and are focusing now on the quality of the mediation.

A second main strand of action concerns **stronger co-operation between governments to share policies and practice.**

I have often said that it is high time to shift accents from adoption of texts towards concrete action focused on effective implementation of existing standards.

In a year, the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM) has developed and implemented new working methods. At the request of a member state, groups of countries are set up to work together on a specific policy question, analysing the situation in the requesting country and offering ways of improving it.

This work has focused on school attendance, the role of local authorities, and social housing solutions. This autumn, it will be pursued on topical questions like ending school segregation and addressing the lack of sites for travellers. For me, this type of sharing in order to advance together is intergovernmental co-operation *par excellence*.

This work of sharing information about which policies and measures actually improve the situation of Roma is further backed up by the **online database on Roma-related policies and good practices** we have created.

This tool already includes about 40 good practices identified in member states through Council of Europe committees and monitoring bodies, by the Commissioner for Human Rights or by the international partners. The Forum could make a very useful contribution to this exercise by providing further examples of “promising practices”.

A main development since I addressed you last year is the holding of the **Summit of Mayors on Roma Inclusion** last September which paved the way for the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion. This Alliance will be a European framework for peer-to-peer cooperation among local authorities in order to strengthen their capacity to work effectively for Roma inclusion. Later this month, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and my Special Representative for Roma Issues are organising a consultation meeting on working methods and local needs and priorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many important texts have been agreed about Roma inclusion, both at European and national level. The main challenge is to get them implemented in practice. First and foremost, this requires action by member States. The Council of Europe has an important role in stimulating and accompanying such processes. We monitor respect of human rights standards, develop policy recommendations for member States and take practical initiatives to trigger improvement on the ground.

Much of this work is about reinforcing skills and changing attitudes, learning how to engage with Roma communities, treating Roma as citizens, building relations of trust.

And what about the Roma themselves? Against a long historical background of widespread marginalisation, rejection and discrimination, many Roma face serious obstacles for their integration in society. Efforts to achieve a radical improvement can only succeed if Roma themselves are able to play their full part.

In turn, this requires that authorities involve Roma in the design and implementation of relevant policy measures but it also requires empowering Roma to exercise their rights in dignity and in full equality with everybody else. Yes, Roma should have a responsibility, like everyone else, for their lives, well-being and participation in society.

But this seems like a distant dream for many, for whom the hurdles are simply too high to be able to jump out of the margins. It takes courage to take steps for an uncertain better future and to leave behind the certainty of continued misery or dependency.

**Empowerment of Roma** is therefore a second strategic objective, which should go hand in hand with work to change attitudes and build skills of public authorities.

Empowerment is also central to our activities with Roma women and young Roma. The same is true for our training programme for lawyers helping Roma to use legal remedies in national courts for alleged violations of human rights. In six countries, more than 120 lawyers were trained in the standards of the ECHR and the European Social Charter since the beginning of last year.

But there are obvious limits to what the Council of Europe or other international organisations can achieve in this area. By definition, empowerment cannot be simply imposed from the outside, it has to be triggered and supported from within the community itself. Creating positive dynamics within communities, building on good examples is absolutely crucial for overcoming resignation and fatalism.

The growth of the Roma movement is itself an embodiment of this process of standing up for your rights and claiming dignity and justice. I am convinced that speaking with a unified voice will make this movement stronger and its calls better heard.

In the past two years, Roma issues have become a high priority on the agendas of the European Union and the Council of Europe. Eyes are turning to the Forum, and expect it to rise to the occasion by being a driving force for change. Being proactive, mobilising the experience of Roma organisations to propose and encourage measures and policies that are more effective and make a real difference. I have already given you several examples of Council of Europe action which offer wonderful opportunities for input from and cooperation with the Forum.

As you know, the Committee of Ministers has asked me to undertake a review of the operation of the Partnership Agreement and cooperation between the Forum and the Council of Europe. I have asked the Directorate of Internal Oversight to carry out such a review. The process is currently nearing completion. I expect to receive the results soon and be able to present them to the Committee of Ministers.

You will understand that I am therefore not in a position to discuss the content of the review today. It is also above all for the member states, which have asked for the review, to do this.

What I want to say is that I am encouraged by the declaration which was agreed last month among Executive Committee members, delegates and founders of the Forum, stating their intention to engage in a process of reform of the Forum, and stressing the importance of increased co-operation with the Council of Europe.

I believe this is a positive development and would encourage you to bring this to the attention of the Committee of Ministers so that it can be taken into account in its discussions.

The inclusion of disadvantaged Roma in European societies remains a key priority for the Council of Europe. It will require sustained work along the two main strategic lines I mentioned: strengthening the capacity of Member states at national and local levels, supporting them in concrete ways to achieve much-needed progress, but also empowerment of Roma, at the level of communities, families and individual women, men and children, enabling them to become part of a process of change.

This is not an easy task. Decades, even centuries of exclusion cannot be solved by quick fixes. Education will be essential, as is resolute action to combat discriminatory attitudes and media stereotypes. Authorities and the public at large need to learn to see and treat the Roma as citizens. Many Roma need to be given the chance to become active citizens.

In progressing towards these goals, we will build on what we have set in motion so far. Our human rights monitoring bodies will remain vigilant on the respect of Council of Europe standards. We will use and expand the new tools we have developed for practical cooperation between governments and between local authorities. We will continue to work in partnership with the European Union and other organisations.

For governments and European organisations alike, strong and united Roma movement is essential for moving in the right direction, for ensuring real change on the ground. I hope and trust that you will agree and that this will guide the process of reforming and strengthening your Forum.

Thank you for your attention.