

Conference on “strengthening Roma networks at local and regional level”

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Dear Mayors, Councillors and Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Four days ago, we honored one of the most important days of the year: The International Roma Day that is celebrated annually on the 8th April.

This tradition dates back to the First World Romani Congress in Orpington, close to London, on 8 April 1971. On this day, 23 Roma representatives from 9 different countries came together to discuss cultural and social issues. They adopted the official Romani flag and the anthem “Gelem Gelem”. It was the beginning of the Roma Rights movement.

47 years after this first conference, we find ourselves in another conference. In a different time, yet still striving for the same goals.

For me it is a strong symbol, that after almost half a decade we still hold regular meetings and conferences on how to improve the living conditions of our Romani friends, on how to fight racism and discrimination against Roma and on how to foster Roma inclusion. It shows, that we did not lose track.

Many of you were and are facing numerous problems in your municipalities, both financially and humanitarian. Still, you are here today. It shows that there is a real commitment to Roma Inclusion on local and regional level in Greece and that we can build on this commitment. I am very happy to be part of this conference today and I want to thank you all for coming.

For many years now, the Congress has been very active in promoting Roma Inclusion on local level. We believe that inclusion can best be implemented in a constant dialogue with mayors and regional representatives. We see you as the crucial bridge that connects the activities of the Council of Europe, with the elected representatives, the civil society and the Roma communities.

In 2013, exactly 5 years ago, the Congress launched the *European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion*. The aim was to unify the efforts and action of Congress members supporting Roma Inclusion.

Today the Alliance has 130 participating cities and regions from 29 different countries. One of its main goals is to cooperate closely with existing national Roma networks or promote the founding of such

networks. We believe that national networks provide the best platforms for the exchange of views and best practice.

We do not need external experts because the experts are sitting right here in this room. Every one of you has his or her own very specific experiences and success stories to tell; everyone can contribute to our common effort. What we need is a frame, in which such a dialogue can take place. National Roma networks are the ideal platform in which this exchange can be made possible.

Last year the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion launched such a network in Ukraine, called the “Ukrainian Alliance for Roma Inclusion”. During a meeting in November 2017 in Kiev, participants discussed ongoing activities undertaken by the municipalities. They also spoke about their future plans on Roma access to housing and identity papers. As you can see, the national networks are well capable of addressing the specific issues that the municipalities and regions of a country face.

The European Alliance is active in other fields as well: We promote Roma Inclusion as for example in the Dosta! Congress prize. Since 2007, every two years, the Prize is awarded to municipalities that have implemented innovative projects to ensure diversity in community life and combat racism towards Roma. The name of the prize derives from the Romani word “Dosta!” meaning “Enough!” or “Stop!”.

During the 2017 Autumn Congress Session, the prize was awarded to the City of Volos from this country for its dedication to increase the number of Roma children in secondary education. Volos has already a history of progressive municipal policy towards Roma. It won the prize previously in 2009. I am very pleased to have Sofia HALARI, President of the Social Welfare and Solidarity Professional Training Institute of the Municipality of Volos, here today, who will tell us more about Volos’ engagement later.

And we have yet another anniversary to celebrate:

Exactly one year ago, the Congress adopted the “*Declaration of Mayors and Elected Local and Regional Representatives of Council of Europe Member States against anti-Gypsyism*”. By signing this document, mayors and regional authorities are given the opportunity to clearly and publically position themselves in the fight against anti-Gypsyism.

The signatories express their will to reject all forms of discrimination, violence or incitement to hate speech against Roma in their municipalities or regions. They refuse to display, publish or distribute in any way views and positions that could stir or incite anti-Roma sentiments. They declare to refrain from any political alliance building or co-operation with political parties that incite racial or ethnic prejudices. Rather they encourage members of the Roma and Travellers communities to become themselves active in the political representation, as representation of ethnic minority groups is an integral part of the democratic process.

Until now, 83 representatives from 32 member states have signed the declaration against anti-Gypsyism. In Greece, only the municipalities of *Volos*, *Paranesti*, *Avia Varvara* and *Samos* have signed the declaration to date.

I encourage everyone, to take a stand against anti-Gypsyism **today** and sign the Declaration at the end of our meeting.

Dear colleagues,

Just this week I read the news about the mayor of Wissous, a French municipality south of Paris, who was taken into custody after threatening members of the Roma community in Wissous with a knife and a handgun. It is incredible to learn that this incident happened on the International Roma Day, a commemoration day which is there to remind us of our **obligations** towards our Romani friends.

But let us not be discouraged. Let us take this as a motivation to keep fighting for Roma inclusion. Let us strive for inclusive communities, in which everyone is respected, regardless of his or her ethnic belonging. Once again, I would like to thank everyone for coming and contributing to today’s meeting. Together, we will be able to develop a strong Roma Network in Greece.

Thank you.