



COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME



CommDH/Speech(2015)5
English only

Conference presenting the results of the work of the Norwegian Tater/Romani Commission

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Oslo, 1-2 June 2015

Seminar on Measures to Promote Reconciliation

Thank you for inviting me to take part in today's conference presenting the results of the work of the Norwegian Tater/Romani Commission. This work is essential for promoting reconciliation between Romani people/Taters and the Norwegian authorities but it also has a wider significance for reconciliation efforts between Traveller and Roma communities and majority societies in Europe

You will remember the story of the five year old blond girl Maria who, in the fall of 2013, was "found" in a Greek Roma family with which she bore little physical resemblance. The parents were immediately suspected of having abducted her. At that time I took a strong stand against irresponsible media reporting, which propagated age-old myths portraying Roma as child-abductors. This had an immediate devastating impact. Shortly afterwards, in Ireland, at the other end of Europe, the authorities removed from their families two children who did not look like their Traveller and Roma parents. The parents were immediately suspected of abduction. These events illustrate the way prejudices and myths, deeply-rooted in European history, continue to be an overwhelming burden on the lives of Roma and Travellers today.

Age-old myths and deeply-rooted prejudices must be replaced by a narrative based on sound knowledge and understanding of the past. The history of rejection, exclusion and persecution of the Roma and Travellers in Europe must be brought to light and explained to the majority populations. Roma victims of past massive human rights violations have to be recognised as such. To achieve this aim, I believe that truth and reconciliation work, on the model of the work undertaken in post-conflict situations, should also apply to the history of the Roma in Europe.

Few people I have encountered know anything about the history of Roma in Europe. But knowledge of this history is essential for understanding the current plight of Roma and their frequent distrust of state institutions and the majority population. Not many people know that Roma were banned from the Holy Roman Empire in 1501. As of this date, any citizen could catch and kill Roma. In France, Louis XIV decreed in 1666 that all Gypsy males should be sent for life to the galleys, without trial, that women should be sterilised and children put into poorhouses. In Prussia, King Friedrich Wilhelm I ordered in 1725 the hanging of all "male and female Gypsies" over 18 without trial. In Spain, it was decided in 1749 to detain all Roma as a "preventive security measures" in a security operation known as the "Great Gypsy Round-Up", during which more than 10,000 persons were detained and put in forced labour. In part of what is now Romania, Roma were enslaved between the 14th century and 1856. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Empress Maria Theresia imposed a brutal assimilation policy in order to "solve the Gypsy problem" and force Roma to become "Good Christians". As part of this policy, children were removed from their parents.

These are just a few examples of the alternating policies of extermination, exclusion and forced assimilation imposed on the Roma for centuries. I could easily have mentioned other examples from elsewhere in Europe. Rejection culminated in the 20th century with the Roma "Pharrajimos", the Roma Holocaust, carried out during the Second World War.

This part of European history is unknown to the majority of European citizens. Therefore, Roma victims of past abuses are not acknowledged as such. Even the extermination carried out by the Nazis during the Second World War has only been officially acknowledged in some countries, and then only decades after the war ended. Roma contributions to history, culture, the economy, and social and political life have equally been ignored.

Over the last decades some steps have been taken to fill in this gaping hole in European history. Awareness about the history of the Roma is growing, thanks to the work of Romani activists, academics and cultural institutions, and of bodies such as the Council of Europe. Policy-makers have taken important steps in several member states, such as the apology offered in 2015 by the Norwegian Prime Minister to the Oslo Roma for policies during World War II. The Norwegian government had also apologised for past assimilation policies against Tatars and Romani. Monuments have been erected in various places, like the Berlin memorial for the Roma and Sinti victims of the Nazis. In France memorial stones have recently been erected in places of World War II detention camps. The European Parliament recently proposed to recognise the 2nd of August - the date of the "liquidation" of the Auschwitz "Tzigeuner Lager" in 1944 - as European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day.

Yet, memory work regarding the fate of the Roma is far from being completed. In my report on the Czech Republic (2013) for instance I refer to the fact that a pig farm is still present on the site of the Lety former labour camp, in which Roma were detained during World War II before being deported to Auschwitz. It is also of deep concern that, in a context of rising populism, politicians in several countries have even condoned the Roma Holocaust. Slogans and rhetoric which was formerly only used by far-right extremist movements are now sometimes publicly expressed by mainstream politicians. Such rhetoric forms the bedrock for daily racism, trivialises some of the most horrendous human rights violations of the past and deprives Romani victims of any possibility of being considered as victims of injustices. Moreover, it often puts the blame for past and present abuse on the Roma themselves.

One of the common stereotypes one hears about Roma is that "they do not want to integrate". In the face of such prejudice, it is important to be aware of the heavy historical legacy. If, for centuries, police and border guards could hunt down and kill members of your group, would you trust them? How would you feel about seeing a doctor, if you knew that many doctors had sterilised members of your group forcibly or without informing them? How would you feel about majority schools, if those schools had a long history of denigrating your language and culture and assimilating your children? These past policies have to be kept in mind when considering current relations between Roma communities and the police, social, educational and health care institutions and state administrations.

Ignorance of Roma history also brings about indifference to current human rights violations. It leads to the repetition of past injustices, without any consideration and understanding of their consequences on the Roma. For example, the long-standing practice of sterilisation of Romani women without their full and informed consent is still sporadically reported in the 21st century. Some countries have taken steps against this practice. The Czech government for example presented apologies to the victims in 2009 and recently announced a new compensation scheme. However, other countries have yet to apologise for this massive human rights violation, to sanction those guilty for it and to provide adequate redress and compensation to the victims. It is important to send a clear message to society that the racist rhetoric around the need to counteract the alleged "threat of Roma population growth" is not acceptable and to explain how it had led, over the last five centuries, to gross human rights violations against Romani women.

The same sad continuity with the past seems to apply regarding the removal of Roma children from their families, a frequent element of anti-Roma policies of the past with a view to eradicating Roma culture. While it has been recognised in various countries (including Norway, Sweden, Switzerland) that this was a mistaken, even criminal policy, which proved very harmful for Roma children and their parents, I found out in my visits to several countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Norway) that the number of Roma children placed in state care, often in institutions, remains disproportionately high. Roma children are often placed in institutions on grounds of the socio-economic situation of their family, which is closely connected to widespread discrimination against the Roma. Several judgments of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the placement of children have underlined that the socio-

economic situation of a family can never be the sole reason for removing a child from the care of his/her family.

Thousands of Roma in Europe are still stateless, or at risk of statelessness. I have often dealt with this problem since 2012 and I think that the persistence of this problem is yet another manifestation of past policies of rejection. Statelessness is probably one of the most absolute forms of exclusion, a continuation of earlier bans and decrees depriving Roma of all rights.

Ethnic profiling of the Roma by the police has also been a constant feature in Roma history. In many countries Roma have been recorded in special files for alleged public safety reasons, a practice culminating with the registration of all Roma under the Nazi regime. Since the Second World War, serious concerns have repeatedly been raised in several countries about the compilation of data on Roma for alleged purposes of crime prevention, protection of health and safety or migration control needs. Italy was one such country: in 2008, a census of Roma living in camps for so-called “nomads” was held during which Roma were finger-printed. More recently, it was revealed that the police in Southern Sweden were keeping a special file with the names of more than 4 000 Roma.

Ethnic profiling also leads to undue restrictions of freedom of movement. In 2013 I published an Issue Paper on the right to leave a country, which highlights practices of ethnic profiling against the Roma seeking to cross the borders of some Western Balkan countries. Exit denials and passport confiscations, openly targeting citizens of Roma ethnic origin of these countries, were put in place to prevent so-called “abuses” of the freedom of movement regime with the European Union.

Other past policies of police control have an impact on the current situation of the Roma. I recently visited France, where the “Gens du Voyage” (French Travellers) are subjected to exceptional legal arrangements, as a consequence of policies dating back from the beginning of the 20th century. As of 1912, Roma were obliged to carry with them a special identity document, which was transformed in 1969 into an internal travel permit. Moreover, the number of Travellers that can administratively register in a municipality is limited and they face impediments in the exercise of their civil and political rights. Despite recent improvements in the legislation, part of these legal arrangements remain discriminatory and cannot but give Travellers the feeling that they are under constant supervision.

Lastly, past policies of evictions, expulsions and territorial segregation, which have aimed at chasing Roma away or at keeping them under control, continue to be very widespread in today’s Europe. I have dealt with the vicious circle of evictions and segregation in the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.

In conclusion, I believe that it is high time for European states to come to terms with past policies of human rights violations against the Roma, acknowledge their responsibility for these violations, recognise Roma victims and provide remedies. At the same time, states should recognise and highlight positive contributions of the Roma to European history. These are necessary steps towards building a healthier future and stopping the perpetuation of gross human rights violations. Raising awareness about the past is also an important tool to combat growing anti-Gypsyism. Criminal law and anti-discrimination policies alone cannot put an end to hate speech and hate crime, anchored in centuries of prejudices and rejection.

Truth or historical commissions, such as the ones established in Sweden and Norway, are a promising way of dealing with this task. These commissions can show the way forward for many other countries. To succeed, this work must be carried out together with the Romani and Traveller communities concerned. It is time that their views on their own history be heard. Therefore, the work of these commissions could also contribute to establishing new and more effective forms of cooperation between the Roma and state institutions in member states. I will promote these promising practices during my country visits.

The Council of Europe has done important work on Roma history, including the Factsheets on Roma history and the Handbook for education with young people on the Roma genocide. This work should be used more widely in the educational systems of the member states in order to ensure full and fair integration of Roma history into European history teaching.

Finally, I would like to refer to the proposal by Roma NGOs, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and George Soros to set up a European Roma Institute. This could be a useful tool to remedy ignorance and lack of recognition, expand knowledge about history and culture and restore trust and confidence between Roma, Traveller and majority populations.

I hope that this project will contribute to curing European “amnesia” on Roma and Traveller histories.