

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Speech of SRSG for Roma Issues Mr. Valeriu Nicolae on the fight against anti-Gypsyism and the Charter of European parties for a non-racist society**

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I wish I could inspire you today. But considering my track record, I am not really that inspirational. This if you do not consider nagging, inspirational.

Nagging worked for me – my mother was in that way very inspirational indeed.

I managed to achieve 4 things that in retrospective sound rather good. In 2003 I proposed the EU Framework of Social Inclusion. I was called 'misinformed', a nice euphemism for crazy and then because I insisted I was called, delusional. In 2011 I received the prize for the best EU Advocacy Campaign for it. At this occasion I learned the translation of nagging, was Advocacy. I also ended up winning the European Citizenship Award of the Parliament of Europe, the best project in Sports and Education of UNICEF and produced the best sold and most award winning Romanian documentary using the same advocacy strategy.

I need your help to be able to be able to brag about five things instead of four. The 5<sup>th</sup> should be this Charter I came here to talk about, the Charter of European political parties for a non-racist society

I am a Romanian Roma. I grew up in a mixed family where my father hated Roma and my grandparents on my mother side hated Romanians for killing most of their families during the Roma Holocaust. So I can say I got the best of both worlds. I was so used to racial abuse, that the first time I

heard Haider the Austrian right-wing politician that was making headlines at the end of the 1990-ties. It felt like our usual table conversations.

Between 1998 and 2000 my country, Romania, was what we now regard as a socio-economic mess. Our neighbouring countries were also struggling, some in even worse situations than us. The Kosovo\* war, the Omagh bombing in Ireland and the forced resignation of the Santer Commission due to corruption were just some of the highlights of those years. Haider was at his apex of power, winning the elections in Austria immediately after Austria had presided the European Union.

Europe seemed to be doomed. The return of racist rhetoric seemed to be irreversible and there were many who thought that the way from then on was, just backwards again.

The anti-Semitic and anti-Roma political speeches from those years sound nowadays almost inconceivable. Old, toxic and insane conspiracy theories became once again popular and used to blame Jews for the economic downturn while we, Roma, were called sub-humans, a pest for humanity, born criminals and scum that should be eradicated from the planet, by leading politicians including a prime-minister.

Neo-Nazi or Neo-Nazi inspired parties were growing continuously. Some of the mainstream parties started to deploy similar rhetoric. Intergovernmental organisations were blamed for the problems from all sides.

We, as Europeans, reacted. One of the best reactions was inspired by a proposal that came in fact, from a mayor - the "Charter of European Political Parties for a non-Racist Society". It was a clear and much needed commitment of high-level politicians against hate. It promised a monitoring mechanism capable to ensure that the same mistakes would not be repeated. The Charter had a spectacular impact in Eastern Europe. Parties responded well to the pressure coming from their European party families. It curbed significantly the anti-Semitic feeling and led to the near disappearance of extreme parties in the region.

The situation improved. Haider was soon out of power and the enlargement in 2004 and 2007 brought progress in Eastern Europe in a

short time span. The Charter was forgotten and the monitoring mechanism was never put in place. Anti-Gypsyism remains strident within the Council of Europe member states but improvements ensued.

The Charter is designed, to help mainstream parties and to pressure fringe parties to stay away from racism. Since its most successful year -2003 - many other parties became involved in our democracies and old extremists were replaced by new and more skilled ones.

Back in 2003, in the resolution 1345 following the report "Racist, xenophobic and intolerant discourse in politics" PACE asked its members to sign the Charter.

This year there are a number of very important elections. Elections that we hope will make our democracies stronger and better. The Charter is the instrument that could help us achieve that.

The European Parliament will endorse the Charter this year. A common initiative to have the Charter endorsed during a joint session in Strasbourg, by the president of the Parliamentary Assembly, the President of the European Parliament and the President of the Congress is envisaged. It would send a very much needed signal of unity and will generate some very much needed positive news.

I need your help to endorse the review of the Charter. We need the Congress to be at the forefront of this initiative as local administrations are the very basis of our democracies. At the level of local and regional authorities the tone for the political discourse is set and Human Rights have to be implemented at the local and regional level.

We need to make our parties and societies better. We need to rebuild confidence in our common values of human rights and democracy. Endorsing this Charter is the first step.

You the members of the Congress are at the very core of our democracies, closest to the people. Your help is needed to make our democracies stronger again.

I want to thank especially, the President of the Congress for her support in the efforts to endorse the charter and John Warmisham for his efforts as

Thematic Rapporteur for Roma Issues and you valued members of the Congress for your help.

Thank you