

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 403 (2016)¹

The situation of Roma and Travellers² in the context of rising extremism, xenophobia and the refugee crisis in Europe

1. The current refugee crisis has shaken the political landscape in Europe, especially in the European Union, the member States of which are the main receiving countries for refugees. Politicians, institutions and civil society have focused their efforts at all levels on managing the influx of refugees, organising their transfer to their destination countries, allocating between countries those already on European soil and settling them.

2. This development has not left European societies untouched. While many civil society organisations and individuals all over Europe have tried their best to manage the situation by providing humanitarian aid and support for integration measures, large parts of European societies have felt anxious and disappointed by the inappropriate response shown by political leaders at all levels, and have demonstrated increasingly xenophobic behaviour towards those they perceive as foreign and a threat.

3. Roma and Travellers have been regarded as foreigners and outsiders in Europe for a very long time. Anti-Gypsyism³ is one of the main reasons why their general situation is not improving, apart from a few instances of progress made in some countries.⁴ Anti-Gypsyist policies harm inclusion efforts as deeply rooted stereotypes prevent politicians from committing themselves to inclusion policies for Roma and Travellers at all levels.

4. This unfortunate tradition of excluding Roma and Travellers from the greater part of society and thereby constructing the image of the societal outcast seems to have been exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis in 2008, which led to painful cuts in the welfare budgets of many European States and subsequently to a corrosion of social cohesion. Not only were inclusion efforts for Roma and Travellers one of the victims of the austerity measures, but the need to find scapegoats led to a rise in hate speech and violent attacks against them.

5. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (“the Congress”) already expressed concern in 2011 in its Resolution 333⁵ on the situation of Roma in Europe: a challenge for local and regional authorities, and stated that local and regional authorities have “a duty to take effective action at the local level and must show leadership and vision, as well as win support from all sections of the community for addressing Roma issues in order to remedy the situation of the social exclusion of Roma”.

6. The current refugee situation has had an impact on a continent that has not yet recovered from the crisis. Inclusion policies for Roma and Travellers, which had already been affected by the financial and economic crisis, are now at even greater risk of being relegated to the background and losing the priority status that these policies for Europe’s largest minority had enjoyed at the national and European levels. There is a risk that political commitment to the inclusion of Roma and Travellers might be seen to be waning, and that policies concerning Roma and Travellers might be discarded in the current context of rising racism and xenophobia, which has been exacerbated by the inadequate response to the refugee situation. This risk of the de-prioritisation of Roma and Travellers persists in spite of international commitment for their inclusion.

7. However, the arrival of 1 million refugees in Europe should not be seen exclusively as a threat. Many studies suggest that a good proportion of the newcomers are young, well-educated and willing to build a new life for themselves. European States should be aware that the refugee crisis might yield economic advantages. This observation also holds partially true for Roma and Travellers. Like the majority of refugees, the average age of Roma and Traveller populations is lower than that of the majority population. In some member States, Roma constitute around 10% of the population. Given that a large part of this Roma population is very young, Europe has a considerable economic asset at its disposal, which is yet to be mobilised.

8. In the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma of 2010, the Council of Europe reinforced its long-standing commitment and urged member States to strengthen their efforts to make this inclusion a reality in Europe. In March 2016, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Thematic Action Plan on the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers (2016-2019),⁶ which lists as priorities the fight against anti-Gypsyism, the support of vulnerable groups and solutions at the local level.

9. The local and regional authorities have a responsibility to implement policies that will ensure access for Roma and Travellers to social rights in the fields of housing, education, employment and health care, as well as policies for their empowerment and political participation through numerous activities that can be implemented at the local and regional levels.

10. In light of the above, the Congress calls on local and regional authorities to:

a. implement measures suggested by Congress Resolution 333 (2011);

b. address the social, economic and security needs of Roma and Traveller citizens through specific measures that include the following:

i. with regard to social and economic rights, implement measures that will ensure access for Roma and Travellers to social rights in the areas that fall within the competence of local authorities, including education, employment, housing and health services, and encourage local authorities to make use of the available social funding instruments to provide

special education and vocational training opportunities for Roma and Traveller youth;

ii. with regard to the safety and well-being of Roma and Traveller citizens to:

– publicly condemn, identify and implement measures to combat public manifestations of anti-Gypsyism that can take the form of hate speech, discrimination, threats, intimidation and racially motivated violence, whether by individuals, organised groups or by local elected representatives themselves;

– design specific measures to guarantee the safety and well-being of Roma and Traveller women, children and youth, who are especially vulnerable groups;

iii. with regard to the fight against anti-Gypsyism and access to justice to:

– take action to combat ignorance, myths and stereotypes concerning Roma and Travellers among the non-Roma population;

– discontinue all discriminatory practices that can be regarded as manifestations of institutional anti-Gypsyism, such as school segregation, forced evictions and expulsions;

– set up specialised institutions, such as local legal clinics to support, effectively and at little or no cost, victims of anti-Gypsyism in the pursuit of justice;

– provide training for local government personnel such as administrative staff, social workers, municipal police forces or other security forces that are likely to deal with cases related to anti-Gypsyism so that they acknowledge it, report it, and effectively and sensitively help the victims;

– develop local educational and intercultural initiatives bringing together Roma and Traveller and non-Roma youth, in order to facilitate cultural exchange, and spread knowledge and awareness of Roma and Traveller culture, language and history;

c. make efforts to turn the prevailing political and social situation, which is exacerbated by phenomena such as violent extremism and the refugee influx, into an opportunity for

local communities to review their integration strategies and policies in order to systematically address the dimension of Roma and Traveller inclusion;

d. exchange information on and implement or adapt the successful examples of Roma and Traveller integration across the continent, with particular emphasis on participation, engaging with the leaders of the Roma community to work in partnership with local and regional authorities, and establish structures to ensure that the voice of Roma and Travellers is heard (including the voice of women and young people), either in the form of specific consultative bodies, or by involving Roma and Travellers in representative bodies for minorities and community groups generally;

e. in the same spirit, promote and support the development or strengthening of local associations for Roma and Travellers that can mobilise and articulate this voice in appropriate forums and act as partners for the local authority;

f. seek collaboration with local and regional authorities in other member States to promote mutual learning through networks such as the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion, set up on the initiative of the Congress.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 20 October 2016 and adopted by the Congress on 21 October 2016, 3rd sitting (see Document [CPL31\(2016\)03final](#), rapporteur: John Warmisham, United Kingdom (L, SOC)).

2. The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

3. “[A]nti-Gypsyism is a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatisation and the most blatant kind of discrimination;”, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), GPR No.13, 24 June 2011.

4. See, for example, www.osce.org/odihr/107406?download=true.

5. <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=1855297&direct=true>.

6. https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=0900016805c5a1d.