

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) Plenary Assembly

Strasbourg, 6 September 2013, 9h30

Statement by **Mr Jeroen Schokkenbroek**, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

The Secretary General was unfortunately unable to attend this Plenary Assembly of the Forum and has asked me to represent him. I am very happy to be with you today.

The creation of the Forum eight years ago was a landmark in the history of the Roma's struggle for recognition and equal rights. It succeeded in gathering a representation of a broad range of Roma NGOs in Europe and put human rights at the centre of its aims and objectives. The partnership agreement with the Council of Europe, a human rights organisation par excellence, provided a launchpad for the Forum to carry out its mission.

This Plenary session is also very important. You have had the lucidity to recognise that there were certain shortcomings in the Forum's functioning, that improvement was needed and you have had the courage to launch a process of necessary reforms for the future. While I cannot comment now on the specific changes you have debated – this is a matter for the Committee of Ministers to discuss next month - I congratulate you for engaging in a reform because the challenges ahead are many and the obstacles may seem insurmountable.

You know better than I do that the Roma are at the present moment going through very difficult times. In several European countries anti-gypsyism has reached dangerous levels, sometimes even putting at stake the life of Roma individuals. We have taken due note of the urgent call for action that you, together with the ENAR and ERGO networks, addressed to the Council of Europe and other organisations recently, asking for a stop to the escalation of violence against Roma.

In response, let me be very clear: this is a matter of serious concern to the Council of Europe. Last year, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Declaration on this issue which officially recognised anti-Gypsyism as a specific form of racism. You know we are pursuing awareness-raising work through our Dosta! campaign, which was recently launched by the national authorities in Spain and Lithuania, with Slovakia lined up for this autumn. We train lawyers in member states to become more effective in defending the human rights of Roma in the courts. Our expert Committee CAHROM will next month examine the Forum's proposal for a Europe-wide recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide.

Yes, the overall situation is bad and calls for responses, also by the Roma movement itself. What does this mean for you, as Forum?

Your challenge, perhaps today even more than before, is to stand up united and resolute against the marginalisation and discrimination imposed on the Roma populations. Your challenge is to put the Forum in the forefront in the battle against injustice, to give hope to the Roma populations struggling against all odds, to be visible and credible whenever and wherever the occasion arises.

It is your responsibility to ensure that your basic documents (statute, rules of procedures) will form a solid basis for the effective and efficient functioning of the Forum in the future.

It is first of all essential that the Forum be as representative as possible. The Forum cannot have the representativity of a parliamentary body but it should nonetheless encompass the main forces of the Roma community in Europe. The credibility of the Forum amongst the Roma communities largely depends on the support of these forces and the acceptance of its actions by the Roma population.

That support is possible if the Forum acts in a united way for the Roma communities in all their diversity. An organisation that operates as a closed shop cannot succeed in this. Openness, inclusivity and transparency are key to legitimacy, credibility and hence effectiveness.

Credibility will also depend on a clear and identifiable mission which responds to the challenges ahead and to the aspirations of the European Roma communities.

I understand that you intend to develop thematic work. This could help the Forum to be more precise in its objectives, to focus on concrete and constructive activities and to build up valuable know-how on specific issues. Here again, it is important to be inclusive in order to bring in the wealth of expertise, ideas and energy that exists among many Roma activists and organisations in Europe.

One major issue which has an impact on all other issues and which needs to be tackled seriously is the empowerment of Roma organisations and communities in all our member states. Nothing can be achieved if the Roma are not convinced that change can happen and that they themselves have to be actors of that change. Such conviction comes from empowerment, from a sense of responsibility for one's own future and well-being. The Forum can, in this area, play an important mobilising role through national organisations in bringing about the necessary changes in the Roma society which will help it to stand up against injustice and discrimination.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

The challenge is great and time is short. There are a major tasks lying ahead. As you well know, the improvement of the living conditions of the Roma and the end of their marginalisation and discrimination is one of the top priorities of the Council of Europe. It is my strong hope that this plenary session will result in a meaningful set of reform measures that will make the Forum stronger and provide concrete perspectives for enhanced impact, along the lines mentioned in the decisions taken by the Committee of Ministers following your interim progress report of this spring.

I am saying this because I believe a strong and effective Forum is in the interest of the Council of Europe and other international organisations. Above all, I am saying this because I believe it is in the interest of the Roma population.

For these reasons, I wish you wisdom in your deliberations and decisions and a successful outcome of your session.

Thank you for your attention.