



**Statement by Mr Jeroen SCHOKKENBROEK, Council of Europe,
Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues**

DOSTA ! Launch event, Athens, 3 February 2011

- Check against delivery -

Κυρία Υπουργέ, αγαπητοί φίλοι, κυρίες και κύριοι

First of all, and on behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, I should like to thank all of you who have contributed to the launch of the Dosta! Campaign in Greece, starting with the Ministry of Education and in particular you, Mrs Genimata, in your capacity as alternate Minister of Education.

Our thanks go not only to those who have prepared this round table on Roma and prejudices but also to the contributors to the cultural event that will follow, with the participation of Mr Chatzis, whose songs spread the message of tolerance and brotherhood. I should also like to express my appreciation for the work of the NGOs, Roma and non Roma, which have worked hand in hand to prepare this wonderful event

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In democratic societies, there is an important human rights principle that a person shall be presumed innocent until he or she is proven guilty. However, in our democratic European societies the Roma are most often presumed guilty and given no chance to prove themselves innocent. They are suspected and feared not for what they do but for what they are - Roma. Hence the generally perceived need to keep away from them, to retain them in distant settlements, to deny them contacts with the majority in education, housing, employment - in other words, ignore their very existence.

This is not ordinary racism linked to colour or religion - it is the total rejection of a community of 12 million people that has been in Europe for nearly a thousand years and whose members are full citizens of the country in which they live. This rejection is largely based on ignorance.

The DOSTA! Campaign - Dosta in Romani means 'enough' - is tailored to combat this rejection, to end the ignorance. The campaign wants to go beyond the traditional format of combating stereotypes and prejudices. It wants to show that the Roma are our neighbours, our fellow citizens, our fellow Europeans. It shows Roma as they are, in their daily routines, in their family, with their friends, at work, in school, at home, with their hopes and with their problems. It shows the richness of their culture and the harshness of their daily lives.

The Council of Europe has been working to defend and promote the rights of the Roma populations in Europe for over forty years now. We act in many different areas and in many different ways. We help our member States to adapt their laws and put in place adequate policies in the field of education, health, social services, housing and others, with the objective of successful integration and socialisation of Roma. We organise workshops for teachers, roma mediators, lawyers and seminars for public officials.

Our legally-binding mechanisms, starting, of course, with the European Convention on Human Rights and its Court, to the European Social Charter and the Framework Convention on National Minorities, to mention only the most important ones, are offering legal protection and legal remedies against human rights violations. The European Court of Human Rights, for one, has delivered a number of important judgments which have helped and are helping to advance the protection of the human rights of Roma in several Council of Europe member States.

Our other human rights institutions, such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and, of course, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammerberg, have been devoting much attention to the Roma situation, which they have identified as perhaps the most vulnerable minority in Europe. A minority, I repeat, of 12 million people.

Within that vulnerable minority, there are subgroups which are even more at risk. There are women, often disadvantaged not only as Roma, but also within the Roma community itself. And there are of course children, who must be - and are - an absolute priority of our work related to Roma.

In recent years, concern over the deplorable rejection of the Roma has increased in our member states and in international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental. During the last two decades, and particularly after the political changes in the early nineties, the Roma have become more visible, and within the European Union thousands of Roma have taken advantage of the freedom of movement to seek better living conditions abroad - only to find the same rejection. The issue has now transcended national frontiers and become a European political question.

At this stage the Secretary General of the Council of Europe moved into action. He felt that an organisation dedicated to human rights which had worked for forty years on Roma inclusion had to take decisive action to tip the balance in favour of the Roma once and for all. He called a High Level Meeting of all member States on Roma in October 2010.

In a **Declaration adopted on 20 October, 2010**, the Council of Europe member states recognised that *“the primary responsibility for promoting inclusion lies with the member states of which Roma are nationals or long-term legal residents”*. They state, however, that *“recent developments concerning Roma in Europe have demonstrated that some of the challenges we face have cross-border implications and therefore require a pan-European response”*.

The member states agreed on a list of priorities for more consistent efforts by member States, ranging from non-discrimination, women’s and children’s rights, empowerment, and access to justice to social inclusion through education, employment, housing and health care.

The High-Level Meeting also agreed on activities that should be implemented in the short term by the Council of Europe. I should like to mention two key priorities:

- the training of Roma mediators in different fields –school, health, jobs/employment; developing a common philosophy on the role of mediators in the different areas and providing common guidelines on the practice of this occupation. As the Strasbourg Declaration says, the aim is “to streamline, codify and consolidate the existing training programmes »
- develop an easily accessible database/resource tool of the collection, exchange and dissemination of good practices and policies regarding Roma in the member states.

The Strasbourg Declaration instructs the Council of Europe to provide “advice and support upon the request of national, regional and local authorities as well as practical assistance in the implementation of new policy initiatives, especially at the local level, and providing access to training, capacity-building and educational material.”

Of particular relevance to our meeting today is that the Secretary General, on the occasion of the High-Level Meeting, called upon the member states to “adhere to the Dosta! Campaign.”

For the Council of Europe to better contribute to the implementation of these priorities, the Secretary General decided to re-organise resources within the Organisation's Secretariat in a transversal manner. This ensures better coordination both within the Organisation and with national and regional authorities and international organisations, pooling of expertise in the various sectors and more effective use of human and financial resources. The Secretary General has appointed me as his Special Representative for Roma issues to ensure that the decisions of the Declaration are efficiently implemented.

Human rights are not a luxury to be accorded at leisure. They are rights to be accorded here and now. They are rights that belong to each and every human being. Those individuals and authorities that deny the Roma the right to a decent living, should be aware that they are denying their own humanity. The Dosta! Campaign wants to bring home this truth. The Roma in Greece are Greek citizens, having the same rights as any other Greek. They have the same aspirations to proper education, decent housing and a job as any other Greek. They are no different from any of us in their loves, hopes and desires.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I sincerely hope that the Dosta! Campaign will help to make a breach in the wall of rejection, and lead the majority population to a better understanding of our common humanity.

Once again, I should like to congratulate the Greek authorities for joining in this Campaign. I take their commitment as encouraging evidence of their determination to respond to the many challenges in this area in a way which will be effective and consistent with Council of Europe standards. I can assure you that in this endeavour, they can count on the Council of Europe's full support and contribution.

My last remark is in fact a plea to you all. I should like to invite all of you to say Dosta ! **ως Εδώ-Αρκετά** - learn about Roma. Opening your eyes is the first step towards opening your hearts and minds.

Σας ευχαριστώ