



31st sessions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Strasbourg, 20 October 2016

Statement by **Mr Valeriu Nicolae**, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues

Dear members of the Congress

May 2012 - two teams from Bucharest, Rapid and Dinamo are playing for the Romanian Cup. I took my son to the game. At one point over 10,000 people in the stadium started to chant against the Rapid team – perceived in Romania as a team of Gypsies. “We’ve always hated the gypsies, f**k you Rapid,” reverberated around the stadium.

My child, a 10-year-old who loves sports, froze and started crying. He asked me if we were going to be killed. I tried to calm him down and I yelled at the people that were chanting around me. Some of them seemed thunderstruck and deeply ashamed. My child didn’t watch football for two good years. Words can kill not just innocence and love, they can kill people. Racism has been the motive for abject killings – some of those crimes have been motivated by anti-Gypsyism.

I am a Roma. For me anti-Gypsyism is not yet another trendy notion to be debated during conferences. I was called a crow, a stinky-Gypsy; I was spit on, beaten, threatened, and discriminated in school and at work because of being a Roma.

I had to explain to my son why people in the public transports, on the streets, in his school and in the stadiums talk like we are scum and sub-human.

Anti-Gypsyism is shocking and a shame for all of us, people that live in democracies based on respects for human rights.

Yes, things are better than they were 20 years ago. In the last two weeks the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Romanian Prime Minister, the Deputy Secretary General and the Director of the Fundamental Rights Agency took a picture with the same T-shirts I wear now here. UEFA has been very supportive and helped us spread the campaign fighting anti-Gypsyism on the stadiums with amazing results. Today, there are more Roma than at any other time in history involved in governments and inter-governmental organisations. But we are still by far the most under-represented ethnic minority when it comes to decision making positions in all these institutions and at all other governmental levels.

Yes, we Roma need to take more responsibilities towards being active citizens of our countries. But that cannot happen if we continue to have major political parties closing their eyes to blatant hate speech targeting us. It cannot happen if we continue to be the most likely scape-goats for whatever wrongs happen in our societies.

You will have in me and my team some very strong partners. We plan to develop a series of very concrete technical solutions to assist you in solving some of the most strident problems in Roma communities. Our Romed and Romact programs are already doing this but we will do more.

Anti-Gypsyism and ensuring that Roma children's lives will be better are at the core of my mandate. We plan to help local authorities to develop pilot programs that will transform schools into engines of social inclusion. We believe that a series of targeted measures built on a life-cycle approach can bring about major changes in the Roma communities. We will support you and your municipalities and regions in making Roma inclusion happening.

As a child I did lots of sports. I played football and basketball. For the poor Roma child I was, the state rations of sometimes-fresh meat, fruit and vegetables received by any youngster playing sports were an extremely strong incentive during the Communist times when good food was a luxury.

Hot showers, equipment as well as warm gyms and training camps were some other things I thought to be almost magical, especially during the cold winters or summer holidays.

But what I liked the most was that in my teams I never felt I was the stinky Gypsy most of the people around me said I was. In the team I was just a good player and my teammates treated me with friendship and respect. Some of my stronger friendships created then remain strong after three decades. I learned most things I know about hard work, discipline, competitiveness, ambition and respect from sports. I believe my personal success was possible because of what I learned playing sports.

I still believe sports are magic. But I have learned that magic is simply not enough to stop violence and racism. For that we need serious and constant campaigning, education and prevention. We need local administrations, governments and inter-governmental institutions to step in and do what some sports bodies have already been doing for years. Recognizing that there is racism and violence in our societies and in sports is important, but only a first step. What we need most now is to fight against them, openly and efficiently. We all need to feel that we are playing in the same team.

This is also the reason why I am strongly committed to working on a European wide charter against anti-Gypsyism open for signatures to all political parties.

Reports as this of today are very useful. Now we need to make the next step. We need political parties to formally commit to stopping anti-Gypsyism. There are still too many politicians who believe that using racist rhetoric against Roma is a way to win elections. This type of making politics is both irresponsible and dangerous.

We need the Alliance and as many local elected politicians as possible to promote such a charter against anti-Gypsyism. We need you to encourage responsible political participation of Roma in mainstream political parties. We need mainstream political parties to promote Roma models through membership and leadership. We need you.

www.coe.int/roma