

International Expert Seminar – Transition from Education to Employment for Roma Youth / Plenary Session 4 – Brijuni, Croatia, 26 September 2018

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Debate on “Policy Initiatives at local, national and international levels to sustain Roma employability and labour market insertion”

Brijuni, Croatia, 26 September 2018

Dear guests,
Dear colleagues,

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak at this plenary session.

We have heard many great initiatives that reflect our joint European activities in the field of education and employment for Roma youth so far. It is encouraging to learn about the many European and national approaches preparing stable paths for Roma youth into education and employment. Likewise, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe actively stresses the need to ensure the empowerment of Roma youth. For the Congress the current young Roma generation is the key player for successful Roma Inclusion in the society and labour market of tomorrow.

The 2014 Congress report “Empowering Roma youth through political participation: effective policy design at local and regional levels”, by Congress Rapporteurs Inger LINGE and John WARMISHAM, highlighted that education and employment were the main fields mentioned by young Roma in which anti-Gypsyism hinders them to become part of the mainstream society.

The young Roma to whom our Rapporteurs talked to insisted, that if Europe misses the chance to support the current generation of young, motivated Roma, we miss the chance to fight anti-Gypsyism.

For us, it is important to explore the role of local and regional authorities and what they can do to improve the situation of young Roma. We are convinced that measures in all kind of aspects regarding Roma Inclusion are much more effective when local authorities are mutual partners in the projects.

Mayors are public officials who are closest to the people – both to the Romani and non-Romani communities. They know best what their communities need and how these needs can be addressed. Moreover, they are the ones who often receive international funds and who are responsible for their spending. Many times, huge responsibility is given to local authorities on how and in which way projects are implemented.

They are, so to say, the “**bridge**” that helps international and national project managers reaching the communities and implementing their projects effectively.

We think that when talking about sustainable access to employability and labour market, the crucial role of local authorities needs to be addressed broadly.

Congress activities

The Congress has therefore launched its own initiatives that are meant to encourage and support mayors in designing a future, especially for young Roma, in their municipalities. Every two years the Congress awards the Dosta! Congress Prize to three municipalities from Council of Europe member states that have implemented innovative and creative initiatives to effectively ensure the long-term inclusion of Roma within their borders. Clearly the communities’ diversity must be respected and their active participation in democratic life must be ensured.

I am pleased to announce that we will open the application process for the next Dosta! Congress Prize in spring. The next “Dosta” will be awarded in September 2019. I invite you to encourage municipalities from all over Europe to apply for the prize and to share their stories with a European audience.

In fact, exchanging stories and maintaining a regular dialogue between local authorities is one of the basic principles of the Congress work in the field of Roma Inclusion. In 2013, the Congress has launched the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion, which sets up national networks among mayors. These networks work as discussion platforms in which mayors can meet regularly to exchange views and good practice models. They can strengthen local and regional capacities for action, identify problems and propose solutions. Overall they promote cooperation among mayors but particularly with young Roma activists and Roma NGOs.

In the past year we have set up a national network in Ukraine and strengthened a network in Greece. On 11 October 2018 the Alliance will organise a meeting in Tirana among Albanian mayors to set up an Albanian network for Roma Inclusion.

I am happy to tell you that our network in Ukraine, set up in December 2017, is already bearing fruits. The 10 cities and regions that participate in the network have launched 12 projects addressing different needs of the local Roma communities.

Four of these projects are focusing on education and employment. In the Transcarpathia and Odessa region, projects for enhancing pre-school education for Roma children are currently developed to support the children from the very beginning and prevent them from early school drop out. In the regions of Kyiv and Odessa the projects implement vocational training and employment programs for Romani women. Due to the close cooperation between the 10 regions and municipalities, mayors and regional representatives can constantly evaluate, compare and thus benefit of each other's experience.

The vibrant projects in Ukraine show to us, that a lot can be achieved with the support from the local and regional authorities. But mayors and regional authorities do not only play a crucial role as initiators of specific projects. They are – as “bridges” – also able to keep in mind the overall picture of the living conditions that many Roma face.

Bearing in mind the overall picture

Lack in education and paid employment are major parts that leave many Roma marginalised and unable to improve their living conditions. However, those issues are just puzzle pieces that make the big picture.

Other factors as inappropriate housing and the lack of ID cards play a crucial role, too. The many problems that young Roma face every day are interconnected and depend extremely on each other. A young person can gain excellent skills from vocational training, but won't find a job without an ID card or a registered address. Furthermore, finding a paid job is unfortunately heavily dependent on discrimination and anti-Roma sentiments. All these factors form a vicious circle from which it is hard to escape. Anti-Gypsyism further fuels this vicious circle.

Mayors have the power to address anti-Gypsyism and break the vicious circle as a whole. They can take action in the field of ID cards and employment at the same time, thus giving the communities an income and consequently access to better housing and improved living conditions.

So what can municipalities actually do?

Municipalities and regions can for example initiate or fund support programs for Roma children in school, as it is currently the case in Ukraine. Or they could offer scholarships for Roma students who aim to achieve higher education, thus improving their chances on the job market.

In particular, they could offer internships within the municipality administration, thus giving visibility to the Roma communities in the political administration and enhancing the youth's self-representation and communication skills.

Last but not least, mayors can contribute by offering vocational trainings, especially for young adults and women. Empowerment through vocational training can reduce anti-Roma sentiments in the population. When mayors become clear role models in the fight against anti-Gypsyism, it is likely that the population of the municipality refrains from prejudices and stereotypes.

The fight against anti-Gypsyism

However it is not always easy to address mayors in the fight against anti-Gypsyism. In 2017, Congress has therefore launched a **Declaration against anti-Gypsyism**, that gives mayors and regional representatives the possibility to take a stance against the discrimination of Roma.

Signatories of the Declaration express their will to reject all forms of

discrimination, violence or incitement to hate speech against Roma in their municipalities or regions. They refuse to display, publish or distribute in any way views and positions that could stir or incite anti-Roma sentiments. They even declare to refrain from any political alliance building or co-operation with political parties that incite racial or ethnic prejudices. Rather they encourage members of the Roma communities to become themselves active in the political representation, as representation of ethnic minority groups is an integral part of the democratic process.

I am pleased to announce that we have recently received our 100th signature and for me even more pleasant is the fact, that this signature comes from Croatia: Mr Ivo Zinic, County Governor of Sisak-Moslavina County signed the Declaration against anti-Gypsyism as the 100th signatory this summer.

I would like to invite all of you to spread the Declaration and ask your local mayors or regional representatives to sign it. It is an easy and effective way for them to adopt a position in the fight against anti-Gypsyism. The declaration is currently available in 23 languages. I am happy to provide you with copies in English, French and Croatian.

To conclude, I would like to ask you to keep the Congress activities in mind when you work with local and regional authorities. The Congress is always happy to cooperate on the topics of employment and education, and more broadly on Roma inclusion and the fight against anti-Gypsyism.

I remain at your disposal for questions throughout the day and look forward to meeting you.

Thank you,