

Presentation by Ian Naysmith,  
Vice Chair of the MG-S-ROM



Thank you Madam Chair and Good morning.

First I should like to thank you for inviting me to attend this important seminar on behalf of the Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on Roma and Travellers (or MG-S-ROM).

I would like to say a few words about the Committee which I hope will underline our strong support for the development of the curriculum framework for Romani and the European Language Portfolio as important elements in the strengthening of the rights of Roma. The Council of Europe has of course long been in the forefront of campaigning for the rights of Roma in Europe, but the decision of the Committee of Ministers to set up MG-S-ROM in 1995 was an important milestone as it was the first Council of Europe body responsible for reviewing the situation of Roma on a regular basis.

Our members are appointed by the member states and are a mixture of permanent and non-permanent members, of Roma and non-Roma, of governmental and non-governmental representatives. So we are assured of having a range of perspectives and some very lively debates. The European Roma and Travellers Forum has a permanent seat at our meetings and I would like to pay particular tribute to their contribution to the work and to ensuring that the voice of the Roma community is clearly heard.

I am particularly pleased that MG-S-ROM has been invited to participate in this event, as, since its creation, the Committee has recognised the importance of the Romani language in advancing the rights of Roma.

Indeed, in addition to the official Council of Europe languages of English and French, MG-S-ROM has for number of years had Romani as a working language - with Romani interpreters - and our recommendations and main documents are translated into Romani. This means that a number of our members can speak in their first language, and we can regularly invite Roma participants from across Europe to participate in our meetings in the fullest sense.

The MG-S-ROM has given attention to the language issue in various recommendations it has drafted for the Committee of Ministers.

For example, we have recently revised the CM Recommendation on the education of Roma children in Europe [Rec(2000)4]. Paragraph 25 of the revised

recommendation<sup>1</sup> expressly refers to a number of Council of Europe materials on the education needs of Roma children, including the framework curriculum of the Romani language, and asks Governments to disseminate this material widely and use it in developing their policies for Roma education. This revised text has now been approved by the MG-S-ROM and will be discussed by the Steering Committee on Education (CD-ED) and, we hope, adopted by the Committee of Ministers early next year. It is a good example of collaborative joined-up working across the different parts of the Council of Europe and with the European Roma and Travellers Forum.

In other recommendations, we underline the importance of the Romani language in developing strategies for Roma inclusion. And the issue has come up in our work in a number of ways:

**First and perhaps of fundamental importance is the need for Roma communities to access information.** Lack of such access is a formidable barrier to full participation in civil, political, social, economic and cultural life. The Romani language is spoken as a first language by millions of Europeans. And it is spoken in dozens of European countries. It is truly a pan-European language. And yet in how many member states does it have an official status? And in how many are official materials routinely translated? And in how many do Roma children have access to their language outside the home. I'll tell you. Not nearly enough.

**Second, the need to for access to education in their mother tongue.** The fact that we are here today is recognition of the importance that the Council of Europe attaches to this - but still relatively few member states have fully recognised their Roma languages under the Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, with the commitment that that brings in terms of language provision.

**Following from that, the need to develop educational material, such as text books and dictionaries, in the Romani language.** A supposed lack of a standardised Romani language is sometimes given as reason for not doing this - or that textbooks and teaching books simply do not exist. But in fact many NGOs and in some cases national authorities (Romania, Finland, Slovakia, Poland, etc.) have developed teaching material in the Romani language.

**This brings me to the need to share this material.** Often material exists but at the level of NGOS, and authorities are unaware of this (MG-S-ROM recently saw an example of this when we held a public hearing in The Hague - one municipality

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<sup>1</sup> The materials elaborated in Council of Europe's project "Education for Roma Children in Europe" such as the collection of pedagogical fact sheets on Roma history, the teaching kit, the guide for Roma school mediators/assistants, and the reference framework for educational policies in favour of Roma, Sinti and Travellers, as well as other tools developed by other Council of Europe sectors such as the framework curriculum for the Romani language or the kit for combating prejudices and stereotypes that was produced in the framework of the Dosta! awareness-raising campaign, should be widely disseminated and used in implementing the above-mentioned provisions.

said they had no Romani language material and an NGO immediately provided the local officer with a textbook in Romani language. This information needs to be shared. More trans-border exchange of materials in Romani and teachers teaching in Romani should take place in Europe. Organisations like the Council of Europe are perhaps well-placed to facilitate this sort of sharing of good practice.

This brings me to a final point which is our recognition of **the diversity of Roma communities** across Europe, and it is something that we are acutely aware of in our work. The Framework Curriculum is just that - a framework designed to be adapted to fit the local circumstance. And so consultation with local communities is essential in developing Romani language teaching at the local level. At the Council of Europe we have taken the Forum's lead and speak of codification of the language, but not standardisation. The rich variation of Romani language should be a source of strength - just as it is for my own language - rather than a barrier to its development.

In conclusion. I would like to pay tribute to all the work done so far in developing the curriculum framework - to DG IV, to the Forum, to other experts. And I pledge MG-S-ROM's continuing support for this work, supported as we are by our committed Secretariat in the Roma and Travellers Division.

For many of us language is an important part of our identity and culture. In the worst of times, language difference can be a source of conflict and division. In the best of times, it can be a bridge between cultures and a medium of dialogue and mutual understanding. As a pan-European language, Romani has a huge potential to become that kind of bridge. But if the language is not taught in schools and children do not have the chance to develop their language skills, then that will not happen. That's why this work is so important.

I wish you a very productive seminar.

Thank you.

## **Appendix:**

### **References to the Romani language in some of the CM recommendations prepared by the MG-S-ROM**

#### **Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on policies for Roma and/or Travellers in Europe**

##### **V. Developing the strategy**

###### *1. Establishing needs*

iii. In case Roma and/or Travellers do not possess any identification papers, authorities should carry out country-wide registration programmes within a definite time frame, free of charge and with simplified procedures, making a special effort to reach categories of population that are more vulnerable due to displacement, limited access to information, literacy problems, etc. (for example, women, the elderly, persons whose mother tongue is different from the official language).

##### **VI. Adopting the strategy**

###### *2. Publicising the strategy and awareness raising*

i. The text of the strategy and of any implementing decrees should be made available in accessible format to all. It should be translated, where requested, into the Romani language or into the languages commonly used by local Roma and/or Traveller communities and should be publicised through relevant media in line with national law or practice (for example, Official Gazette, radio, television, print media, Internet).

iii. Such campaigns should provide information on the situation of the Roma and/or Travellers, on anti-discrimination provisions, on individual rights and on redress in cases of discrimination. Information about anti-discrimination bodies should be in a language which is easily understandable by its main beneficiaries.

##### **VIII. Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the strategy**

###### *2. Publication of monitoring reports*

i. Monitoring reports should be periodic, public, translated into languages used by the communities concerned (for example, Romani), and made widely available through accessible formats (such as audiotape or CD Rom) and Internet to provide an opportunity for good, reliable, public information on Roma and/or Traveller issues.

# **Draft Revised Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Education of Roma and Travellers in Europe**

(version of 14 November following 26<sup>th</sup> MG-S-ROM – provisional version to be further discussed by the CD-ED)

## **Chapter I. Principles of Policies**

Alinea 2. Education policies should include references to Roma and Travellers as part of wider recognition of cultural and/or linguistic diversity and should, where appropriate, provide opportunities for Roma children to benefit of instruction in their mother tongue, based on the principles set in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

## **Chapter III. Curriculum, teaching material and teacher training**

Alinea 18. Curriculum and teaching materials should be made available, where appropriate, for Roma and Traveller children to learn their language, history and culture, in accordance with the provisions of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

## **Chapter IV. European exchange, sharing experiences and good practices**

Alinea 23. Scholarships should be provided for Roma students, as well as to teachers who will be able to teach the Romani language.

Alinea 25. The materials elaborated in Council of Europe's project "Education for Roma Children in Europe" such as the collection of pedagogical fact sheets on Roma history, the teaching kit, the guide for Roma school mediators/assistants, and the reference framework for educational policies in favour of Roma, Sinti and Travellers, as well as other tools developed by other Council of Europe sectors such as the framework curriculum for the Romani language or the kit for combating prejudices and stereotypes that was produced in the framework of the Dosta! awareness-raising campaign, should be widely disseminated and used in implementing the above-mentioned provisions.