

Conference on the Power of remembrance addressing antigypsyism through heritage and culture

Athens, 29 May 2026

Opening Speech by Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear Minister, dear Sofia,

Dear Georgios,

Dear friends,

It is an honour for me to open this conference dedicated to The Power of Remembrance: Addressing Antigypsyism through Heritage and Culture.

The theme of this gathering touches upon something profoundly political: the way our societies choose to remember — and sometimes, what they choose not to see. Or to forget.

For a long time, the history of Sinti and Roma occupied a peripheral place in the European memory of the Holocaust. This absence was not merely a historical gap. It was a moral failure. A silence that spoke louder than words.

Today, we are asking an essential question: how do we make visible the experiences that have long been pushed to the margins of European narratives? How do we ensure that “never again” truly means never again — for everyone?

Culture plays a particular role here. Cinema, images, stories — they do not simply illustrate history. They shape the way we understand it. They determine which faces become familiar, which suffering becomes recognisable, and which lives enter our collective consciousness.

For decades, Roma and Sinti were often portrayed through stereotypes: criminality, marginality, exoticism. Not as individuals with their own voices, histories and humanity. Not as people who belonged to the Europe that was being built.

This is why the question of representation is also a question of dignity. And dignity cannot be selective.

Over recent decades, new narratives have emerged. Survivors, and later their children and grandchildren, began reclaiming their voices. They chose to tell their own stories — to move beyond the gaze of others, beyond a perspective shaped by prejudice and antigypsyism. That is an act of extraordinary courage. And it is our responsibility to listen.

But this conference also reminds us of something else: memory is not permanent. It must be actively defended. It takes only a few political decisions — to close archives, to silence testimonies, to rewrite history as an instrument of power — and decades of remembrance can be undone.

The story of Memorial in Russia is a striking and sobering example.

For more than thirty years, Memorial worked to preserve memory and to illuminate how one part of society inflicted repression upon its own citizens. Its work was not merely historical. It drew a direct line between the violence of the past and the abuses of the present.

When the Russian authorities dissolved Memorial, they were not attacking an organisation. They were attacking the idea itself — the idea that a society should be able to look honestly at what it has done. They were afraid of what honest memory reveals.

Because memory creates resistance.

A society that understands the mechanisms of repression is quicker to recognise their return. A society that preserves the voices of victims is less vulnerable to the glorification of violence and authoritarianism. And a society that acknowledges the crimes committed against Roma and Sinti is a society that takes its commitment to human dignity seriously.

Through heritage and culture, our objective is not only to preserve the past. It is to build the future.

A future where the stories long kept in the shadows are finally brought into the light.

A future where “never again” is not a phrase we repeat — but a promise we keep.

Let our culture of remembrance, our remembrance work, be active, modern, boundaryless and without any voids.

Because memory is not an archive. It is an active stance. Let us take that stance — together, clearly, and without exceptions.