

Speaking notes for Roberto Olla

CEREMONY ON THE OCCASION OF

EUROPEAN ROMA HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

Thursday 24 July 2025

12 noon on the lawn in front of the Palais de l'Europe

Excellencies, dear colleagues, dear audience,

On behalf of Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, I would like to welcome you to the ceremony commemorating European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day. I am honoured to be here to speak together with the representative of the Maltese Committee of Ministers Presidency, as well as Johanna Talewicz, the co-founder and president of the Foundation Towards Dialogue, a prominent expert on the topic also representing the Roma community in this ceremony.

Next week, on 2 August, a commemoration will mark the 81st anniversary of that fateful night in 1944 which resulted in the murders of more than 3,000 Roma men, women and children in the so-called Gypsy-camp (*Zigeunerlager*) in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Overall, an estimated 500 000 Roma were massacred during the Second World War.

We do not need to travel far from here to have painful reminders of those atrocities taking place 80 years ago. Here in Alsace, Sinti and Roma victims were subjected to extreme brutality and medical experiments in the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp.

The Secretary General recently visited this important site of memory and reflection with local secondary school pupils to reaffirm the importance, and the duty, of history teaching and remembrance of the Holocaust for younger generations. Places of remembrance play a vital part in passing on history to younger generations, in particular because our memories of the past are fading with barely any witnesses of the Roma Holocaust remaining.

We gather here together today to remember and pay tribute to those victims. Their voices may be silent, but we must still strive to hear them.

Yet remembrance is also a call to vigilance and action, a pressing reminder for us all to never stop learning the harrowing lessons of this sombre period in Europe's history which we had hoped was far behind us. However, history can repeat itself and indeed today we find ourselves once again confronted with waves of hatred, discrimination and racism, including antigypsyism, political division, nationalism, disinformation, and war. It is with all of these elements – and more – in mind which threaten democracy and peace in Europe that the Secretary General has called for a reset with a New Democratic Pact for Europe.

All of us have a responsibility to act – whether as an organisation or in our own personal capacity – and whether at a global, European, national or local level – and indeed all of us gathered here today – you and me – have a shared responsibility and duty to counter these aggressive tides already on the horizon.

This year also commemorates a significant milestone: the 10th anniversary of 2 August being officially recognised as European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day. This long-overdue acknowledgment by Europe

marked a crucial step toward honouring the suffering endured by Roma communities and ensuring their history is no longer overlooked.

Through its Strategic Action Plan on Roma and Traveller Inclusion, the Council of Europe demonstrates its commitment to advancing Roma inclusion, to supporting its member states in doing so, and to working with all stakeholders to improve the daily lives of Roma.

Remembrance and recognition go hand-in-hand with education and history teaching on the Roma Holocaust which remain a priority for the Council of Europe.

In education lies the foundation for promoting tolerance and non-discrimination and this is reflected in key Council of Europe instruments such as:

- the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on passing on remembrance of the Holocaust and preventing crimes against humanity,
- and the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on the inclusion of the history of Roma/Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials.

I will end today with the words of the Secretary General to those pupils in Struthof last month: “Younger generations need to know what happened here. How it was possible to reach such a degree of inhumanity. We must also engage the younger generation in a New Democratic Pact, offer them perspectives, arm them against disinformation, against the manipulation of history, against everything that made Struthof possible”.

Thank you for your attention.