

**Commemoration Ceremony on the occasion of the
European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day
Strasbourg, 2 August 2019**

**Miranda Vuolasranta, President of the European Roma and
Travellers Forum (ERTF)**

**Dear Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,**

We are gathered here today to pay homage to the victims of the Pharrajimos – to the Roma men, women and children murdered in the extermination camp of Auschwitz on 2 August 1944, but also the Jews, the homosexuals, Witnesses of Jehovah and political dissidents exterminated in several Nazi concentration camps throughout Europe.

They were exterminated because they were aliens, outsiders not fitting the nationalistic model set up by the Nazi regime.

We thought the nightmare was over. We were wrong!

The Roma were no longer locked up in concentration camps but were transferred to miserable settlements, from which they could be evicted at any time. They were no longer gassed but excluded from all means of getting a decent living and frequently assaulted for no reason whatsoever.

In many Council of Europe member states Roma are still denied their basic Human Right sand suffer blatant racism. They remain far behind others in educational achievement, employment, housing and health standards and they virtually no political representation. **How far have we moved since the end of the Second World War?**

Anti-Gypsyism continues to be widespread and is compounded by a striking lack of knowledge among the general population about the history of repression of Roma in Europe.

Extreme right wing, xenophobic parties are no longer a marginal phenomenon. They are represented in parliaments and in coalition governments.

In Italy the far-right leader and minister for the interior Matteo Salvini lost no time in proposing a screening of all the Roma, threatening to deport all non-Italian Roma from Italy and adding “unfortunately, we have to keep the Italian ones”.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In time of economic crises, the tendency to direct frustration against the weak increases and the Roma appear to be easy targets. **To what extent has the Council of Europe continue to make firm commitment to Roma Issues in a time of decreasing democracy?**

However, recent activity within the Council of Europe shows that the Roma issues are swept under the carpet. Does this mean that priorities depend on funding and social fads? Where are the standards, principles and values that this institution is supposed to be upholding? Is the Council of Europe weakening its ability to effectively protect the rule of law, human rights and democracy in all the member states in the face of modern European politics? **12 million Roma in Europe rely on this institution to seek their access to justice and basic human rights.**

I call on the Council of Europe to appoint a Special Representative of the Secretary General on Roma issues as soon as possible as political representative and promoter of Roma equality. I also call on the Council of Europe together with its member states to work together on establishing a Roma Ombudsman, a proposal that was recently introduced by the International Romani Union. The Romani ombudsman will work towards increasing the trust between the community and the institutions / citizens and will protect and improve the rights of the Roma.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is not just the commemoration of a past event. It is a wake-up call for what is awaiting us if we don't act. Fascism, anti-Gypsyism and anti-Semitism are on the increase. I therefore call on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Committee of Ministers to put back on their political agenda the raise of the anti-Gypsyism and the anti-Semitism and consider new and effective approaches on how to intervene and combat an national/member state level these frightening phenomena, which is no longer transmitted secretly but openly and loudly.

These commemorative events should remind us all as right defenders and advocates for social justice to protect those whose rights continue to be violated.