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“The importance of historical memory in preventing and
countering discrimination against Roma and Travellers in Europe”

PACE Side Event organised by Georgios Stamatis
PACE General Rapporteur on Roma and Travellers

Speech by Michael O’Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Strasbourg, 23 April 2026

Thank you. It is a great pleasure to be here.

I would like to greet everyone. I am very honoured that we are meeting in the presence of Mr Pfeil; it is a privilege for us all.

I wish to echo what has already been said regarding the work of the Parliamentary Assembly in this area. I greatly appreciate the appointment of Mr Stamatis as PACE General Rapporteur on Roma and Travellers.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the Council of Europe more broadly, particularly for the Factsheets on Roma History, which are an astonishing resource.

One thing on which we can all agree, regardless of who we are, is that our present is shaped by our past: the past of our families, our communities, and our societies at large.

I first learnt the importance of recognising how today is shaped by the past through engaging with the Irish Traveller community. They taught me how essential the horse is to their identity, both as individuals and as a community. The term ‘Irish Travellers’ exists for good reason: they were nomadic for centuries, and horses were integral to their way of life. Because of that heritage, horses remain essential today, and there is significant investment in owning, maintaining, and cherishing them. It is still a work in progress to get the local authorities in Ireland to recognise that, when offering social housing, space must also be made for the horse. When I raise this point in my own country, I am sometimes met with laughter. Yet, for me, it is a vivid example of how the past shapes the present and the choices we must face.

Over the last two years, as I have travelled throughout Europe, I have met with Roma and Traveller communities in numerous settings across five countries while preparing my book, *The Unheard 12 Million*. I was confronted time and again with different, diverse dimensions of how the past shapes the present.

This was brought home to me most vividly in Heidelberg, when I revisited the exhibition on the Holocaust against the Sinti and Roma. Through Romani Rose’s narrations, and the images and artefacts in that exhibition, I was confronted with the horror of the genocide perpetrated against the Roma.

Also, within the past two years, I visited Struthof, a former concentration camp situated near Strasbourg. What happened to people there is appalling, including medical experiments conducted on members of the Roma communities. When examining the history of the site's memorialisation from the mid-1940s, it is only recently that one finds any acknowledgement of the atrocities committed against Roma communities there.

Again, this serves as a reminder of the extent to which a part of history was disregarded, even to the point of being forgotten by many in our societies. In order to support and defend the human rights of Roma and Travellers, we must be aware of this dimension of history.

Another aspect of this relationship between past and present that struck me over the past two years - from Skopje, Berlin, and Dublin - is the diversity of Roma cultures. Beyond their richness and immense contribution to our societies, I saw the extent to which it actively had to be remembered. There had to be an investment in rediscovering some of what was lost and attention paid to what is truly important.

I took several takeaways from my experiences above.

Firstly, remembrance is not automatic; it requires investment. We must consciously and explicitly engage in acts of remembrance in order to understand and address today's challenges. This requires effort and resources. The Sinti and Roma Holocaust Museum in Heidelberg required a major investment of capacity, energy and, as I mentioned, resources. We must never stop prioritising such investment and effort to recover and preserve our past - the past of Roma and Traveller communities.

Secondly, for whom is this important? Remembrance is vital for the communities themselves, for their self-understanding and self-expression. However, it is also essential for the rest of society. Everyone needs to know the past, especially the lived experiences of Roma and Traveller communities across our societies, over centuries.

Thirdly, perhaps most importantly, I learnt that remembering is not merely about reflecting on the past; it triggers a duty to act in the now.

The necessary actions align with the elements of transitional justice - an important area in which we recognise that addressing and healing the past requires specific present-day actions. This involves criminal justice, rehabilitation, restoration - restoring situations that existed prior to the injustices and undoing evils perpetuated as a result, such as the widespread patterns of exclusion and discrimination seen across Europe. It also involves a firm commitment to non-recurrence. Where what is remembered is unacceptable, we must explicitly and actively work to ensure it never happens again.

Finally, it requires celebration. It is important to celebrate these memories, the rich cultural existence and diversity, as part of the extraordinary fabric and tapestry of our societies.

For these reasons, I consider today's topic to be profoundly about human rights. It concerns marking and honouring the human rights of every member of the Roma and Traveller communities. It is also about standing up for the human rights of us all, and for the rich cultural diversity within our societies.

It is on this basis that I pledge today to continue to give this issue top priority in my work.

Thank you.