

Flower casting ceremony to mark International Roma Day

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

Strasbourg, 8 April 2025

"Deputy Mayor, PACE General Rapporteur on combating racism and intolerance Verducci, Excellencies, dear friends. It's such an honour to be here. It is my second time.

It was the first thing I did when I took up my mandate last year. And I am delighted to be back again. And this year, I meet with you in a context of very deep engagement with the Roma and Traveller communities across Europe.

As I have just been discussing with the young Roma and Travellers who are gathered here, I have met with communities in several countries across the Council of Europe geography in the past year. And it has left me with some extraordinary, unforgettable memories and experiences.

For instance, I am struck by the depth and the diversity and the richness of Roma cultures, with an "s" at the end.

I had to travel this year to get a proper understanding of that "s". The fact that it is not one homogenous culture, it is an extremely diverse one, reflected also in the diversities within the Romani language. I have been struck by the different lived experiences and realities of different communities of Roma in different places. Roma who have been centuries integrated in societies, in some contexts. Roma who have moved only in this generation from other parts of Europe. And sometimes both communities of Roma coexisting with indeed challenges for that coexistence.

Speaking of challenges, I have of course not been blind to the extraordinary deprivation, marginalisation, exclusion, denial of human rights experienced by Roma frankly just about everywhere.

12 million people, the largest minority on the continent and in many ways also the most marginalised, the most subject to a deprivation of respect for human rights. I have seen things I never thought I would see. I saw the most deplorable housing conditions I have ever encountered. And I have worked in many places around the world. But it was in Europe that I encountered the worst.

Being positive again, I have also encountered the most extraordinary activism and energy across Europe within the Roma and Traveller communities. Young activists very well represented here today. It is striking how young people are driving change within and for Roma communities.

Within the community of young people, I see especially women. I see women as the catalyst of change. Women as the drivers of a better future. And that is why later this year I will publish a report on the human rights situation of Roma and Travellers, focusing on the empowerment of Roma women and girls.

One last dimension that must not be forgotten is the Holocaust. On Friday, I visited the Sinti and Roma Holocaust Exhibition and the Documentation and Cultural Centre in Heidelberg, where I was hosted by the extraordinary Romani Rose. He immersed me for that day in the story of the Holocaust and the extent to which this critical part of history, of our history, is so forgotten today and how we must correct that and correct it urgently.

But enough of the past: I am looking of course to the future. That brings me to the laying of the roses in the water. Today will be my fourth time casting a rose in a Roma or a Traveller context over the past year.

The first time was here last year, this very spot, when I threw a rose into the river. And for me personally, it was an act of solidarity. It was a gesture from me of solidarity of the things I wanted to do in the terms of my mandate.

The second time that I cast a rose, it was to place it at the Roma War Memorial in Helsinki. I laid roses at that monument in the cemetery in Helsinki in honour of Roma who had served and given their lives for Finland. And in a way, I laid my flowers there in honour of the extent to which Roma everywhere have contributed so much to the well-being and the very existence of our communities and our societies.

The third set of flowers that I laid were in Ireland, in the city of Limerick in the west of Ireland, where at the invitation of the Traveller community, I laid roses at a monument to all those young Travellers in Ireland who have died through suicide. There is a plague of suicide among young members of the community in that country. Through the laying of those flowers, I hoped to highlight how far all of us must go in standing up for the human rights of the community.

But today is my fourth time to lay a rose. When I cast my rose on the water this afternoon, I will do it as a sign of hope. A hope that we can reach a better tomorrow.

What I also understand is that we will only realise that tomorrow when all of us, Roma and non-Roma, join hands to build that better future.

Thank you."