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EU Roma Week – EU MFF Event
"Roma Equality and Social Investment in the Next EU Budget"

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

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Good morning. It's a great pleasure.

Apologies for not being with you physically. This is the week here in Strasbourg for the Parliamentary Assembly, and unfortunately, that means a lot of commitments for me.

I am particularly sorry because I was at the very first of the Roma Weeks in the Parliament back in 2016 in my then capacity as Director of the Fundamental Rights Agency, and I remember vividly the energy and momentum that was engendered on that day. I want to express appreciation for all the work done in the intervening years by you, by ERGO, but also by the European Parliament. I appreciate its leadership and by the Commission, about whom we have heard just a moment ago.

For me, in my capacity as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, standing up for the Roma and Travellers across the continent is a top priority – has been, is, and will continue to be so.

Here in the Council of Europe, we are talking about some 12 million people whose human rights must be defended, and I spent much of 2024-2025 visiting Roma and traveller communities in order to catch their voices and amplify those voices into rooms and debates and decision-making spaces.

It is essential that standing up for working with and defending the human rights of the Roma and traveller communities must remain at the heart of all of the European institutions in terms of policy, planning, practise and resources.

Why? In the first place, it is a matter of geographic spread. Roma and traveller communities are present in almost all of our countries, be they the member states of the EU or of the Council of Europe.

And secondly, in order to support them to thrive, for human thriving, we have to work across multiple sectors. To use the jargon of human rights, we must never lose sight of the need to pay attention, co-equally, to issues of civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights and well-being.

As we proceed in this regard, both for planning and for the related budgeting, can I recommend that you consider adopting an explicit human rights approach? Briefly, some six elements of what the human rights approach would deliver and require.

The first is the point already made in a welcome way, that everything must be highly participatory, nothing about us, without us. But what does that look like in practise? For sure, it means dealing with established, respected civil society organisations. But it also means dealing in particular with Roma women and young Roma people. How many times in how many places have I seen that the smart ideas, the energies, the vision of how to go forward is in Roma women particularly? And so, please, in participation, make sure this is addressed.

Young Roma people. Again, here, so often I have seen the vision of a better future among young Roma and Travellers. And this must be captured. We must be their partner.

Second, it is essential to go local. Again, time and time, and time again, I have seen how efforts that come from a capital and stay in the capital fail in the capital. It is essential to work with the villages and the streets of our societies. That means that mayors have to be challenged in their vital role.

How often is it not the case that a project on, let's say, housing succeeds in a village because the mayor is for it and fails in a village because the mayor is against it? So this national, regional and local partnership must be strengthened.

Third, we cannot talk about any programming, any budgeting in the context of standing up for the human rights of Roma and Travellers without calling out “antigypsyism”. I was so proud of the moment back in 2016 when in the first time in the parliament, Soraya Post used this term “antigypsyism”. We must never lose sight of the degree of hatred, exclusion and discrimination that is holding our progress back. This must be called out. We must invest in tackling racism across our societies as an integral part of our work.

Fourth, it is essential that we invest, again with resources, in remembering. It is essential that we wake up our European societies to the reality of the genocide and the attempts to exterminate the community. This must be part of the basis for the surge of commitment and energy in solving and addressing the challenges.

Fifth, no less important, we must invest, and again I use the word invest, also in celebrating the diverse cultural identities of Roma and traveller communities today. Not because culture is nice, but it is integral to human thriving and human well-being and it is neglected at our peril.

And sixth and finally, and I chose to mention it because it is so resource intensive, and that is strategic litigation. The EU must find the capacity to invest in strategic litigation. Why? Because what is a human right if you cannot vindicate a human right? Where above all else do you vindicate human rights? In the courtroom. What do you need to get into the courtroom? You need serious resources. A serious commitment to Roma and Travellers well-

being must include an enabling of the capacity to enter the courtroom and to stand up for rights.

And dear friends, as I conclude, just very briefly, two very last points:

The first is we need to work hard but be patient. The scale of the challenges we face is way bigger than any single parliament, any single commission. We must embrace the intergenerational responsibility to look into a lengthy future of sustained effort. And also the funding strategies that you come up with must recognise that this cannot be done in a single budget, in a single parliament, as I said earlier. If we adopt that short-termism approach, we will fail.

And finally, may I ask and suggest and remind us all to be very hopeful. We can together make a difference for the better. We have seen differences for the better already, including in the EU context. But I'm not talking about a naive optimism. I'm talking about a steely determination. And within that steely determination, I think two things are necessary.

The first is, we need political leadership. I need to hear the voices at the top of European politics, be they in the European Union or in any other European context. I need them to say that standing up for and standing with Roma and Traveller communities is a top political priority for our continent.

And side by side with that, I need, and I think we expect to see that political statement is matched by adequate resources.

I thank you for your attention.