

31st SESSION

The situation of Roma and Travellers¹ in the context of rising extremism, xenophobia and the refugee crisis in Europe

Resolution 403(2016)²

1. The current refugee crisis has shaken the political landscape in Europe, especially in the European Union, the member States of which are the main receiving countries for refugees. The priorities of politicians, institutions and civil society on all levels have focussed on managing the influx of refugees, organising their transfer to their destination countries, allocating those already on European soil between countries and settling them.

2. This development has not left European societies untouched. While many civil society organisations and individuals all over Europe tried their best to manage the situation by providing humanitarian aid and support for integration measures, large parts of European societies have felt anxious, disappointed by the inappropriate response by political leaders at all levels, developing xenophobic reactions towards what they perceived as foreign and a threat.

3. Roma and Travellers have been regarded as foreigners and outsiders in Europe for the longest time. Anti-Gypsyism³ is one of the main reasons why their general situation is not improving, apart from small instances of progress in some countries.⁴ Anti-Gypsyist policies harm inclusion efforts as deeply rooted stereotypes prevent politicians from committing to Roma and Traveller inclusion policies on all levels.

4. This unfortunate tradition of excluding Roma and Travellers from the majority society and thereby constructing the image of the societal outcast seems to have been exacerbated by the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2008 that led to painful cuts in welfare budgets of many European States and subsequently to a corrosion of social cohesion. Not only were Roma and Traveller inclusion efforts one of the victims of the austerity measures, the need for scapegoats led to a rise in hate speech and violent attacks against them.

5. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe had already expressed concern in 2011, in its Resolution 333⁵ on the situation of Roma in Europe as a challenge for local and regional authorities, and stated that local and regional authorities have “a duty to take effective action at the local level and must show leadership and vision, as well as win support from all sections of the community for addressing Roma issues in order to remedy the situation of the social exclusion of Roma.”

1 The term “Roma and Travellers” is being used to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

2 Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 20 October 2016 and adopted by the Congress on 21st October 2016, 3rd sitting (see Document [CPL31\(2016\)03final](#), rapporteur: John WARMISHAM, United-Kingdom (L, SOC)).

3 Anti-Gypsyism is a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatisation and the most blatant kind of discrimination. – European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), GPR 13, 2011.

4 See, for example, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/107406?download=true>

5 <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=1855297&direct=true>

6. The current refugee situation has impacted a continent that has not yet recovered from the crisis. Roma and Traveller inclusion policies that were already affected by the financial and economic crises are now even more at risk of being demoted and losing the priority status that these inclusion policies for Europe's largest minority enjoyed on the European and national levels. There is a risk that political commitment for the inclusion of Roma and Travellers might be regarded as secondary, and Roma and Travellers discarded in the current context of rising racism and xenophobia that has been exacerbated by the inadequate response to the refugee situation. This risk of Roma and Travellers being deprioritised persists in spite of international commitment for their inclusion.

7. However, the arrival of one million refugees in Europe should not be seen exclusively as a threat. Many studies suggest that a good proportion of the newcomers are young, well-educated and willing to build a new life with their own hands. European states should be aware that the refugee crisis might yield economic advantages for all sides. This observation holds also partially true for Roma and Travellers. Like the majority of refugees, the average age of Roma and Traveller populations is lower than that of the majority population. In some member States Roma constitute around 10% of the population. Given that a great part of this Roma population is very young, Europe has a considerable economic asset at its disposal, which is yet to be mobilised.

8. In the Strasbourg Declaration of 2010, the Council of Europe reinforced its long-standing commitment and urged member States to strengthen their efforts to make this inclusion a reality in Europe. In March 2016, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Thematic Action Plan on the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers (2016-2019),⁶ which lists the fight against anti-Gypsyism, the support of vulnerable groups and solutions at the local level as priorities.

9. The local and regional authorities have a responsibility to implement policies that will ensure access for Roma and Travellers to social rights in the fields of housing, education, employment and healthcare, as well as empowerment and political participation through numerous activities that can be implemented on the local and regional level.

10. In light of the above, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities calls on local and regional authorities to:

a. implement measures suggested by Congress Resolution 333 (2011);

b. address the social, economic and security needs of Roma and Traveller citizens by specific measures that include the following:

i. with regard to social and economic rights, to implement measures that will ensure access for Roma and Travellers to social rights in areas that fall within the competence of local authorities including education, employment, housing and health services, and to encourage local authorities to make use of the available social funding instruments to provide special education and vocational training opportunities for Roma and Traveller youth;

ii. with regard to the safety and well-being of Roma and Traveller citizens to:

- publicly condemn, identify and implement measures to combat public manifestations of anti-Gypsyism that can take the form of hate speech, discrimination, threats, intimidation and racially motivated violence, whether by individuals, organised groups or by local elected representatives themselves;

- design specific measures to guarantee the safety and well-being of Roma and Traveller women, children and youth as especially vulnerable groups.

iii. with regard to the fight against anti-Gypsyism and the access to justice to:

- take action to combat ignorance, myths and stereotypes concerning Roma and Travellers among the non-Roma population;

- discontinue all discriminatory practices which can be regarded as manifestations of institutional anti-Gypsyism, such as school segregation, forced evictions and expulsions;

- set up specialised institutions, such as local legal clinics to, effectively and at little or no cost support victims of anti-Gypsyism in the pursuit of justice;

⁶ https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805c5a1d

- provide training for local government personnel such as administrative staff, social workers, municipal police forces or other security forces, that are likely to deal with cases related to anti-Gypsyism to acknowledge it, report it, and effectively and sensitively help the victims;
 - develop local educational and intercultural initiatives bringing together Roma and Traveller and non-Roma youth, to facilitate cultural exchange, to spread knowledge and awareness of Roma and Traveller culture, language and history;
- c. make efforts to turn the prevailing political and social crisis situation exacerbated by phenomena such as violent extremism and the refugee influx into an opportunity for local communities to review their integration strategies and policies in order to systematically address the Roma and Traveller inclusion dimension;
- d. exchange information on and implement or adapt the successful examples of Roma and Traveller integration across the continent with particular emphasis on participation, engaging with the leaders of the Roma community to work in partnership with local and regional authorities, as well as establish structures to ensure the voice of Roma and Travellers is heard (including the voice of women and young people), either in the form of specific consultative bodies, or by involving Roma and Travellers in representative bodies for minorities and community groups generally;
- e. in the same spirit, promote and support the development or strengthening of local Roma and Travellers associations that can mobilise and articulate this voice in appropriate forums as well as act as partners for the local authority;
- f. seek collaboration with local and regional authorities in other member States to promote mutual learning through networks such as the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers, set up as an initiative of the Congress.