

Statement by Denis Huber  
**Launching Conferences of the ROMACT Programme**  
**Albena, 14 October & Bucarest, 15 October 2013**

- Welcoming on behalf of CoE;
- Special thanks to the European Commission for conveying this launching event in Albena and to local partners for supporting its organisation.
- A similar event was also held in Budapest on 4 October 2013. Another one will be held in Bucarest in Romania on 15 October and in Kosice in Slovakia on 5 November.
- Attention on the needs to improve the living conditions of Roma population in Europe has considerably increased in recent years and it is to meet those needs that the Council of Europe has adopted in October 2010 **the Strasbourg Declaration** that identifies clear priorities to work on, as well as a role for the CoE as a support function/role in assisting national but also local and regional authorities in their efforts to improve Roma integration.
- In recent years, there has indeed been a strong development of European and national policy frameworks for the integration of Roma. At the same time, awareness has grown that policy measures at local and regional level are decisive for bringing about real improvement in the social inclusion of Roma, across the key areas of education, housing, employment and health.
- Since 2010, the Council of Europe has changed the way it is tackling the Roma issues, even though there are still too many individual complaints put by Roma people to the European Court of Human Rights about violation of their rights. Other CoE monitoring bodies such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) or the European Committee on Social Rights are also addressing cases of racism, intolerance and exclusion vis a vis the Roma community.
- The CoE has taken, alongside those mechanisms, different steps so to close the gap between European policies and the reality on the ground for the Roma population. At national level, there is the **CAHROM Committee** which is composed of experts from national governments having experience in the area of social exclusion, concerning in particular Roma.

- This Committee is not only focusing on defending key standards but mainly aims at developing cooperation between national government, through peer's reviews, so that they can help each other to identify solution to problems that are often similar in different countries, such as anti-Roma speeches within societies and how these can be addressed.
- However, the Strasbourg declaration is also insisting on the need to develop action at local and regional level. Over the past three years, the Council of Europe with the support of the European Commission's Directorate General of Education and Culture has done a lot of work through the **ROMED Mediation Programme** which is about mediation between public institutions such as schools and Roma communities at local level. However, this Programme has showed that though mediation is a key tool is not enough to solve complex situations and that it is thus equally important to create an environment for Roma representatives but also for local authorities representatives, whether elected officials or staff members, that will favor changes and improvements.
- **The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities** which I also represent is an important asset of the Council of Europe for reaching out/developing cooperation with local government stakeholders and the Council of Europe much welcomed the decision of the Congress to convey on September 2011 the **first European Summit of Mayors on Roma Inclusion**. Such Summit was an important step in the process that led to today's meeting.
- The Mayors participating to the Summit adopted a declaration in which they not only recognized their responsibilities in promoting together with national governments and other key actors including NGOs, but also their needs for support, some of even feeling that they were left alone in facing their difficulties on their territory, and for working together.
- Indeed, even when there is political will, the lack of capacities of local administration to develop, implement and monitor effective policies and projects hamper the implementation of Roma integration strategies at local level and in particular an effective use of EU Funds for that purpose.
- Following the Summit, a call was thus launched to set up **a European Alliance of cities and regions for Roma inclusion**. Such Alliance was set up in **March 2013** after a process of maturation and now counts more 120 cities and regions from 27 different countries.
- The work of the Alliance in general is based on transversal integrated approach, taking into account the Council of Europe, Committee of experts on Roma Issues CAHROM, Intercultural Cities, relevant activities of the Youth Department and others – to achieve its main aim, which is to build the capacity of cities and regions in the Council of Europe member states to develop and define policies, contributing to the inclusion of Roma.

- In parallel to building such as Alliance, the Council of Europe and more specifically the Support Team of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Roma issues has been working closely with the European Commission DGs for Employment and Regional Policy as well as DG Justice to find out ways to concretely assist European local and regional authorities.
- Such efforts have led to **the ROMACT project** which a joint initiative of the Council of Europe, the European Commission and the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion to promote the inclusion of Roma at local and regional level. It is being launched today in Bulgaria but covers others countries (so far Hungary, Romania and Slovakia). We will hear more about it later.
- The project ROMACT thus be a part of a **triangle**, formed together with the CoE/EC ROMED 2 project and the Open Society Foundation's project MERI (Mayors Making the Most of EU Funds for Roma Inclusion). The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) is also planned to be associated in the process of implementation of the triangle activities.
- The target group of the project are the elected representatives and relevant officials. This group, together with the municipality/region administration are also the first short-term beneficiary group of the project. The mid- to long-term beneficiaries are the Roma population and the population of the municipality/region in general.
- For the Council of Europe, democracy start at local level, and such local democracy has now become a fundamental European value. It is contributing to building modern societies, improves both the quality of democracy as a whole, the quality of public services and, therefore the quality of life of citizens.
- In this regard, the concept of local democracy is not only about the distribution of competences and resources between States and local authorities, a relationship that found its expression in **the European Charter for Local Self-Government** whose Guardian is the Congress, and in the concept of **subsidiarity**.

- Local democracy is also about the relationship between citizens and local authorities, whose guiding principle is that of **good governance** that it is strongly influenced by the ways and means of participation of citizens in local public life whether at local and regional level, but also by the desire of local politicians to continuously improve the quality of the local services to those citizens.
- Roma citizens are of course an integral part of the local communities and there should be no difference in the ways they benefit from local services compared to non Roma population;
- I would like to conclude with the following messages. YES, there is still a long way to go to make sure the Roma populations are fully integrated in the local authorities with equal access to rights and services, and that is the case not only in Bulgaria and Romania but also in also in many other countries including in Western Europe. However, such integration is not an easy process. It requires an important process of change that will requires the strong involvement of both Roma communities and local authorities representatives.
- **YES** Mayors, councilors, staff of local authorities need the best possible support they can get in this endeavour and **YES** the Council of Europe and its international partners will provide coordinated support through the Romact program being launched today. In this regard, it should be underlined that the broader partnership between **the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of the European Union**, has precisely for main objective to be more efficient and effective in offering a set of services to local authorities in terms of mediation, capacity building, skills development at the local level, but also monitoring evaluation and assistance in developing projects that can be eligible for European funding.
- However, **NO**, this programme is about telling local authorities what they have to do. On the contrary, it will be very much based on local needs which local authorities are the best placed to assess. Romact will be more focused on how: how to identify local needs, how to ensure that Roma have a place in that process, how to ensure that policy change is acceptable for the whole community as a whole, whether Roma or Non-Roma, how to ensure that project are developed in an integrated way, covering a broad range of services, and how to ensure that projects developed are eligible for funding.
- We rely on you, Mayors, councilors, staff members to make this process a success, not by revolutionary change but by good faith efforts to change the current stay of affaires, step by step, with pragmatic solutions to concrete problems. Progress is possible is there is good will, it is now time to work together to instaure fresh policies and projects to ensure that all citizens and in particular the Roma can take their full place in society with all the right and obligations that this entails. We are convinced that Mayors, Councilors, staff of local authorities do care about all the people who

live on their territory and that no one should be excluded and thus we are confident that we can count on your commitment and cooperation.