

**Opening statement by Denis Huber**  
**Serbian national seminar, Belgrade, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2015**

First of all, I would like to thank all of you for accepting our invitation and being here today for our First national Seminar in Serbia on the inclusion of Roma on local level into mainstream society. In particular I would like to thank Mr. Sasa Mobic, assistant Minister for Public Administration and Local Self-Government, for his opening words and presence.

I think that we can all agree and say that we are convinced that policy measures at local and regional level are decisive for bringing about real improvement in the social inclusion of Roma, in the four main key areas of education, housing, employment and health. The Alliance should be a place to foster that.

**1. What is the Alliance**

The Alliance for Roma Inclusion is an initiative launched by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe after the Strasbourg Declaration (October 2010) and the Summit of Mayors (September 2011). After a thorough consultation process of cities and regions in 2012, the Alliance was officially launched in March 2013. The Alliance brings together cities and regions of Europe who are willing to share their experiences on Roma inclusion with a view to progress towards a better integration of Roma. The Alliance allows stakeholders to move beyond the overall framework of national level and actively support local and regional authorities. With the last participation of the the Latvian City of Jelgava in March 2015 and the City of Anderlecht (Belgium), the Alliance now includes 128 regions and cities from 28 different countries.

**2. Updating of the Council of Europe agenda on Roma inclusion (2015-2019)**

It is now a critical point for the Council of Europe agenda on Roma inclusion as a new strategy on Roma inclusion is currently being discussed by the Council of Europe.

As you know, the Strasbourg Declaration of 2010 sets out the objectives and priorities of the Council of Europe's efforts towards the inclusion of Roma. However, even if many steps have been taken to implement it, the overall situation of Roma is still a matter of concern in all member states. Thus the Committee of Ministers is currently debating an update to this strategy on Roma inclusion, carefully considering its priorities and future actions. Although this discussion process is still ongoing, a few new key objectives have emerged:

- Firstly, more attention must be given to the phenomenon of anti-gypsyism. Improving access of Roma to justice in member states and on a European level, should ensure that discrimination cases are pursued more actively.
- The second priority would be a stronger focus on especially vulnerable groups within the Roma community, in particular Roma women and youth.
- And the third overall objective, which is relevant for today's discussion, is to demonstrate innovative models for local and regional level solutions. It is on local and regional level, where authorities have the most direct contact with Roma communities and at the same is where the greatest and most impactful changes could be achieved.

As regard to the first priority, one measure to combat anti-gypsyism and stereotypes is the recently announced European Roma Institute, which is proposed to be an independent institution with the goal to increase self-esteem of Roma by means of art, culture and history. This unique initiative will try to combat common stereotypes by educating the broad public about all aspects of Roma history and culture.

The Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Inclusion of Roma welcomes the realisation of the European Roma Institute and is looking forward to exploring a possible co-operation.

### **3. The situation of Roma**

As I previously stated, the situation of Roma in Europe remains critical nowadays and even if the Roma issue has been brought to the centre stage by the Secretary General Thorbjorn Jagland since 2010, one has to acknowledge that in many parts of Europe, Roma still face massive discrimination.

Indeed, Roma still face disadvantages and are victim of violence and hate speech. They suffer from poor housing conditions, being concentrated in settlements marked by poverty and segregation with few infrastructures and bad access to social services and institutions. Moreover, they are often vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation, and are ostracised and discriminated in the labour market, while their life expectancy remains ten years below the general average in Europe.

This situation is the result of centuries of discrimination. Unfortunately, the economic crisis seems also to have reinforced the anti-Roma speeches and policies, deepening

even more the gap between Roma and non-Roma in Europe and making it more difficult for Roma to be equally considered in mainstream society.

EU accession negotiations with Serbia are now underway and the implementation of a legal framework for the protection of minorities is part of this process. In this respect, positive measures have been taken by the Serbian government to improve the situation of Roma according to the European Commission, but some issues still need to be reinforced, particularly concerning education, housing and employment.

Besides, our experiences allow us to underline that many local initiatives and high quality projects for Roma inclusion exist and are implemented. This highlights that the implementation of policies at local level is a key point. Taking it into consideration, the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion aims to give visibility to activities on Roma inclusion but also aims to favour exchanges of good practices on Roma inclusion among its participating cities and regions which enables them to speak with one voice, by providing a platform for advocating issues concerning Roma inclusion at local and regional level.

This first national Seminar in Serbia targets that and seeks to create an environment for local authorities' representatives, whether elected officials or staff members, and also for Roma representatives, to favour changes and improvements, and help to solve complex situations concerning Roma inclusion into mainstream society. In this regard, feel free to intervene whenever you think it's necessary. This Seminar aims to be interactive, lively and instructive for everybody in this room.

#### **4. How can municipalities and regions benefit from European initiatives**

One objective of the Alliance is to allow its participants to move beyond the overall framework of national level and have access and benefit from European initiatives. Indeed, participating in the Alliance does not only mean applying for a labeling process of your own good practices concerning Roma inclusion, but it also means being part of a growing European network in which you can share, exchange and learn from each other. Being part of the Alliance thus gives you the opportunity to have access to numerous practices from 28 different countries and then improve your own ones locally.

Local and regional authorities do not have easy access to all the procedures, tools and important people that can help them to implement and sustain efforts, particularly when it comes to Roma inclusion policies. Moreover, they may not have the time and money to sort out what can be valuable and useful in this great European institutional process. In this context, participating in the Alliance allows local and regional authorities to

establish close relation with the Council of Europe, its expertise, its strong network and its privileged ties with the European Union institutions.

The Alliance for Roma Inclusion and the Council of Europe in general, can provide municipalities and regions with such a perspective. The Council of Europe works with all European countries and you can use us to compare and learn from municipalities within your own country and other countries. Our goal is to serve you, so that you may get as much out of this seminar as possible.

In this respect, the Alliance is strongly supporting the implementation of ROMACT and ROMED2, and is committed to ensure an effective and wide dissemination of its conclusions and expertise throughout its network.

The ROMACT programme aims at enhancing the political will and building the capacity of local and regional authorities to develop and implement plans and projects for Roma inclusion. Currently, this program is implemented in some 40 municipalities in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Italy and in the Slovak Republic in synergy with the ROMED programme. ROMED2, is the second phase of the ROMED programme, which aims to improve local governance, including school governance through mediation processes at local level, in order to meet the needs and expectations of all, including Roma in 11 countries. Both programs are joint programmes of the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

Parallel to these joined initiatives, contacts have been established with other European networks of cities and regions promoting Roma inclusion and the fight against racism and xenophobia throughout Europe (such as EUROCITIES, European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR)).

I also want to remind you that in 2007 the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities launched the Dosta!-Congress Prize for municipalities. This prize aims to reward three municipalities for implementing innovative projects for Roma inclusion and empowerment. Such experiences must be encouraged, rewarded and shared.

The Dosta!-Congress Prize seeks to highlight local authorities which work for and, most importantly, with their Roma community, thus providing a much needed example to other authorities.

The 5<sup>th</sup> edition is now launched and the call for applications has started. The deadline for submitting applications is 30 June 2015. The top three projects will receive the Prize Municipalities during a ceremony on the occasion of the 29<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the

Congress which will take place at the headquarters of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in October 2015

Finally, I think it is important to remind you that along with the EU accession negotiation process, 1.5 billion Euros have been allocated recently to Serbia under the Instrument for Pre-accession assistance II (IPAI) for the period 2014-2020. These EU-grants are meant to support reforms in the 'enlargement countries'- such as Serbia – with financial and technical help. In this respect, a comprehensive anti-discrimination strategy for 2013-2018 was adopted in June 2013 by the Serbian government in which the situation of Roma has been addressed. The respect of minorities has thus been defined as a priority sector for these grants. I encourage you to apply for such grants in order to finance Roma inclusion projects.

## **5. Conclusion**

To conclude, I would like to insist that it is essential to rely on the capacities of each stakeholder concerned, starting with local elected officials, and staff of local authorities and also the Roma people themselves when addressing the Roma inclusion issue. I am sure that if we all work together, not only poverty and social exclusion that Roma are facing can be fought, but it can be anticipated and even be prevented.

I am now looking forward to listening to the discussions and panelists, and I hope that the topics we will discuss today will be most useful for everybody. There is a very interesting group of people here, some represent national levels, some expert bodies and many local level representatives. This is an excellent basis for developing an in-depth discussion today, which goes beyond the usual words and phrases. During the discussions and the breaks, take advantage of this opportunity; so that we can progress and take a step towards a better society.