

Speech by Thomas HAMMARBERG, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights,

Debate urgent procedure: Recent rise in national security discourse in Europe : The case of Roma

I am encouraged by the fact that this discussion is being organised. The discussion is certainly timely and it brings into focus a problem which I believe is of paramount importance in today's Europe. It touches on what we have in mind when we talk about "European values".

Why is it so important that leading politicians and other opinion makers are careful about their language when they talk about the Roma? Why is it so essential that they avoid sweeping and generalised statements about how Roma people behave? Why – when talking about crime – is it so necessary to make a distinction between the few who have committed criminal acts and all others in the Roma communities who have not?

First, because Roma people are human beings - as all others. We do not blame groups of people for what some individuals may have done. This is a fundamental principle in ethics and human rights.

Second, this principle is even more crucial in the case of the Roma. The prejudices against them are widespread and deep in most parts of Europe. This is again shown in recent surveys. Negative statements from high level personalities tend to cement and deepen these prejudices.

Third, such statements are used by extremist groups - which unfortunately are emerging again in several European countries - with hateful messages of anti-Gypsyism as well as anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. It is serious - some distorted minds have attacked violently Roma families or settlements in this atmosphere of anti-Gypsyism.

Fourth, these statements have a very negative impact on the inner life of the Roma communities themselves. I know this after so many talks with Roma representatives in a great number of states represented in the Council of Europe. Many, many Roma feel the need for discussion within their own communities about what they themselves can do to break out of the marginalisation and to relate positively to the rest of society. But this discussion is largely prevented by the negative attitudes, suspicions and even hostility they meet from the outside. And it does not help that some politicians publically blame them for not trying to integrate.

There are a few Roma who have been drawn into crime, some of them exploited as instruments of organised crime mafias. I saw that one politician rhetorically asked if he should "turn a blind eye" to this. No, but it would be better to use both eyes and see the connection between this and desperate poverty, unemployment, exclusion and harassment. There is absolutely nothing to say that Roma as a ethnic or cultural minority is more prone to criminality than any other group.

I have talked and written earlier about the history of Roma in Europe. I am proud that the Council of Europe has produced a high-quality dossier of fact sheets on the Roma history – even if I had hoped that they would be more widely disseminated in the member states.

Among the Roma themselves the history has of course passed from generation to generation even among those who did not write or read. Many of them are aware about discrimination, slavery and killings in the far past. They do certainly know about the Porrajmos, the Roma Holocaust, when hundreds of thousands of them were executed in the thirties and forties.

They are also aware that it took very long before the mass killings were even recognised after the war. Surviving victims got compensation very late, and in many cases not at all.

I have been told how afraid they are when seeing the widespread hostility against them grow again; the extremist groups targeting them; and leading politicians not really protecting them and even – sometimes – themselves making negative statements against them.

We do have to try to understand all this. And when mistakes are made it is essential that this is recognised. What has struck me in the most recent exchanges has been the almost total absence of self criticism. I sincerely hope that this will not be the case at the high level meeting here in Strasbourg on 20 October.