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Updating the Council of Europe agenda on Roma² inclusion (2015-2019)

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² The term "Roma" used at the Council of Europe refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

Updating the Council of Europe agenda on Roma³ inclusion (2015-2019)

Across Europe many Roma continue to live on the margins of society, where they are frequently subjected to discrimination, prejudice and hate. In spite of national and European efforts over many years, the situation remains of profound concern. It is time to update our approach and relaunch the strategy for Roma inclusion.

Our commitments are set out in the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma (2010), which continues to lay down the fundamental orientation of the Council of Europe activities in the field of Roma, and other relevant policy documents and standards. The aim is not to revisit these, but to ensure that we are pursuing them strategically, with a relentless focus on effective implementation to overcome the gap between standards and reality.

It is proposed to extend the initiatives we know work and establish new initiatives where there are gaps in our approach. The following proposals draw on the lessons of recent years and focus our energies on the interventions which can have the most meaningful effect.

Introduction

The full inclusion of Roma in European society has been of great importance to the Council of Europe for several decades. In 2010, the Council of Europe strengthened its political commitment to Roma inclusion through the adoption of the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma⁴. The Strasbourg Declaration sets out orientations for member States and the Council of Europe, combining social and economic inclusion in society — notably in the areas of education, housing, employment and health — and the effective protection against discrimination.

The Strasbourg Declaration and numerous specific Roma-related recommendations of the Committee of Ministers, resolutions and recommendations of PACE and the Congress, the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR), the recommendations of monitoring bodies and the Commissioner for Human Rights have provided member States with guidance and evidence for their own Roma policy. Over the years, member States and the Council of Europe have taken many steps to implement these standards and improve the situation on the ground. The Council of Europe has supported these efforts with European operational programmes, some of them run in co-operation with

³ The term "Roma" used at the Council of Europe refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

⁴ CM(2010)133

international partners. The third report on the follow-up to the Strasbourg Declaration is appended.

However, together these steps have not provided the deep change that is needed. Monitoring results show time and again that the problem of Roma exclusion – while varying across member States – remains widespread and warrants pan-European concern. The situation looks unlikely to improve any time soon as Roma continue to suffer from discrimination on a variety of fronts: low participation in education, precarious housing and health conditions, underemployment and extreme poverty keep many Roma trapped in a seemingly inescapable cycle of exclusion.

This cycle must be broken. However, in many member States anti-Gypsyism is on the rise and political solutions are becoming more difficult and more urgent than in the past. On the ground, many municipalities are facing great difficulties in their attempts to respond to Roma issues.

The opportunities that came with the freedom of movement saw a large number of Roma moving within the European Union. Visa-free travel from a number of countries into the EU has led to a further increase in Roma migration, which sometimes has been used to trigger anti-Roma sentiments. These movements exposed, sometimes stridently, the need for efficient measures to address the social exclusion of Roma both in destination countries and countries of origin.

It is therefore urgent that we now look again at our approach, acknowledging its limitations, understanding our challenges and together committing to a more strategic, targeted and effective approach.

The role of the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is uniquely placed to promote Roma inclusion because of its rich political and operational expertise in this area, its pan-European membership, its legal instruments — notably the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter and the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities — and its monitoring and advisory bodies and co-operation activities. The combination of these assets makes the Council of Europe an indispensable pillar of European Roma inclusion policies.

Roma inclusion is a priority also for the European Union and the OSCE, albeit with partially other priorities and a different set of instruments. The congruence of aims is the basis for the close inter-institutional co-operation which exists today.

The Council of Europe has the role of supporting the efforts of member States to develop and modernise the policies and actions to promote the inclusion of Roma and exchange best practices. An important part is played by convention and non-convention based monitoring activities, in order to objectively assess the progress made. The Organisation can also offer political advice and campaign support, and provide competence-building opportunities for members of Roma communities, civil

society organisations, local and regional authorities, enforcement bodies and practitioners working in the legal professions and the media. By establishing a regular and productive dialogue with Roma organisations at European level, the Council of Europe helps to give Roma a voice in the international arena.

Our medium-term priorities and their implementation

Given the huge challenges, but also taking account of the present budgetary climate, the Council of Europe must carefully select its strategic priorities and combine its core competencies, build upon the initiatives which have proven the most valuable and innovate through the development of new initiatives.

The work of the Council of Europe should have three priorities: the fight against anti-Gypsyism, stronger local-level implementation, and improving the situation of the most vulnerable - women, children and young people.

At the core of these priorities is the role of the Council of Europe to support national, regional and local authorities in their implementation of their commitments on Roma and development of inclusive policies and institutions.

Full usage will be made of the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM) as appropriate in the design and implementation of the priorities, which will be overseen by the Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group on Social and Health Questions (GR-SOC).

The actions implementing the priorities will be further developed in the process of preparing the programme and budget for the biennium 2016-2017.

First priority: Tackle anti-Roma prejudice, discrimination and crimes (anti-Gypsyism)

Anti-Gypsyism must be tackled by legal responses and preventive awareness-raising. The results of the monitoring activities of the Council of Europe and evidence from other sources show that Roma still suffer from widespread discrimination in many member States. The first priority must therefore be to strengthen the legal protection of Roma, notably in the fields of human, social and minority rights, and to improve their access to justice.

In recent decades many member States have already taken a number of important steps, including the adoption of more forceful anti-discrimination legislation and the setting-up of independent equality and anti-discrimination bodies. On the other hand, the persisting negative stereotypes, fear-mongering and hate against Roma in European society often make it difficult to achieve a political breakthrough. Even where sufficient funds for operational programmes supporting Roma inclusion are available, in particular in the European Union, their implementation is sometimes limited by fear of antagonising the general public.

All institutions of the Council of Europe are engaged in securing the full application of European standards in order to abolish the discrimination of Roma, in monitoring the progress achieved, and in building the capacities of public authorities responsible for the delivery of justice free of discrimination. The ongoing programmes strengthening human rights education for the legal professions and police forces should be continued and expanded. Co-operation on Roma issues with equality bodies and ombudspersons in the member States, as well as with the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), will be strengthened to reinforce the effectiveness of human rights protection mechanisms at national level.

Furthermore, in terms of improving the general opinion towards Roma the Council of Europe currently runs successfully the "No Hate Speech" campaign against racism and hate on the Internet, which is highly relevant in the fight against anti-Gypsyism. The messages and materials of the "Dosta!" campaign aimed at breaking stereotypes and bringing non-Roma closer to Roma citizens, could be integrated in an appropriate way into national action plans and Roma integration strategies. The Council of Europe has also started to work on Roma history, including the systematic extermination of Roma under Nazi rule in the 20th century; with the support of interested member States this work should be developed in order to integrate more widely elements on the history of Roma in the school curricula.

In addition to the continuation of these actions, the Council of Europe should introduce three new lines of action:

(1) Improving the access of Roma to justice

New approaches for providing primary legal aid to Roma and other vulnerable groups, recently started as a pilot project, should become a wide-scale initiative managed by the Council of Europe. Protection at national level would imply remedies enabling anti-discrimination bodies and human rights institutions (Ombudspersons offices and Constitutional courts, including the whole chain of judicial professionals) to take an active role in persuing discrimination cases at national level.

(2) Improved mechanisms for the reporting of hate crimes to authorities

Racist crimes against Roma and other vulnerable groups are notoriously under-reported.⁵ The Council of Europe should therefore support the implementation of innovative solutions developed in some member States through a new initiative.⁶ Prosecution of multiple discrimination of vulnerable groups (Roma women and girls, LGBT and migrants) often requires special skills and techniques in order to attain the standards set by the European Court of Human Rights. Capacity-building activities would strengthen the

⁵ See also PACE Resolution 1967 (2014) "A strategy to prevent racism and intolerance in Europe", § 8.1.6

⁶ Example: *True Vision* in the UK, <http://www.report-it.org.uk/>

capacities of judges and prosecutors to provide adequate protection to these groups at national level.

(3) **European Roma Institute**⁷

The European Roma Institute (ERI) has been proposed as an independent institution with the mission of increasing the self-esteem of Roma and reducing negative prejudice of the majority towards Roma by means of arts, culture, history and media. The idea originates from discussions by Roma intellectuals over the past four decades. Prestigious Romani arts and culture organisations, prominent artists, cultural producers and intellectuals are convinced of the value of this initiative, which is also backed by the Open Societies Foundations. The EU has indicated its ability to finance projects by the new institution.

Second priority: Demonstrate innovative models for inclusive policies for the most vulnerable

Roma communities as a whole are often living in isolation and abject poverty, which makes them extremely vulnerable to violence, crime, economic and cultural discrimination. Within these communities, Romani women, children and youth are particularly vulnerable to multiple discrimination and specific forms of violence, including early or forced marriage, domestic violence, trafficking and forced begging. Young Roma women and men receive insufficient support in their transition to autonomy and working life and risk permanent exclusion. Roma women, children and young people are fundamental for bringing about social and economic change in Roma communities, and their full enjoyment of rights requires special support.

Member States are aware that more needs to be done to break the vicious circle, particularly in order to improve the housing situation and the access of Roma children and young people to inclusive quality education.⁸ Forced evictions of Roma communities from their habitat without adequate alternative accommodation have not entirely disappeared from the European landscape. Segregated schools and classes still exist in several places, in spite of European case-law against educational segregation in all its forms. Unfortunately, gender equality and the situation of Roma women — mentioned as priorities in the Strasbourg Declaration — are often secondary aspects of national strategies and action plans for Roma inclusion.

The Council of Europe is engaged in programmes assisting, albeit in a limited way, the most vulnerable in a number of areas. This includes the “Roma Youth Action Plan”, action in the context of the “Strategy on the Rights of the Child” (2012-2015) and programmes strengthening gender equality and assisting the empowerment of Roma women, including through micro-credits to encourage entrepreneurship as currently prepared by the Council of Europe Development Bank. These targeted activities should continue and be expanded.

⁷ Currently discussed by the GR-SOC (document GR-SOC(2015)10)

⁸ CM/Rec(2012)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education

The Council of Europe cannot substitute national authorities but should demonstrate innovation by stepping up its action in favour of the most vulnerable groups. In addition to the continuation of the successful actions mentioned above, the Council of Europe should therefore introduce two new lines of action:

(1) Gender equality and empowerment for Romani women

Together with Roma women's associations and initiatives and in co-operation with public authorities, the Council of Europe should develop a new initiative to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment based on recommendations from Roma Women's International Conferences and strategies developed by Romani women (co-operation with the European Union will be sought).

(2) Making children's rights accessible to Romani families

A new initiative on children's rights, empowering Roma parents and their children shall be developed, aimed at strengthening the awareness and the access to children's rights, fighting the abuse of Roma children within and outside their own community, and building capacity of professionals to develop child-friendly and discrimination-free public services in education, social, health and justice.

Third priority: Demonstrate innovative models for local-level solutions

Policy measures at local and regional level are decisive for bringing about real improvement for the social inclusion of Roma. For this to be possible, local and regional authorities must be in a position to develop integrated policies and projects and the participation of Roma must be strengthened. Many local and regional authorities are committed to furthering Roma integration but need support, expertise and resources in order to succeed.

The ROMED2 and ROMACT programmes are emerging initiatives, implemented with the European Union and in co-operation with numerous stakeholders at European, national and local level, which have already been successful in providing innovative and effective models for strengthening Roma participation and local development.

ROMED2 aims to improve participation of Roma by mobilising Roma communities and bringing them closer to local decision-making. ROMED2 uses processes of mediation and democratic participation, empowering Roma and local administrations for more effective civic dialogue and cooperation. This programme is at different stages of implementation in 12 member States and further efforts are needed to strengthen impact and sustainability.

ROMACT aims to facilitate capacities and resources for local development in areas with majority Roma population. ROMACT provides support to local administrations to implement inclusive good governance practices and sustainable plans of development and links them to relevant resources, including better access to and

use of EU funds. Progress has been made in the implementation of this programme in six member States by promoting further cooperation between Roma communities and public authorities through mutual working strategies, shared ownership and commitment to local development. This work should be stepped up.

Accompanying measures

There is also a case to be made for adapting certain Council of Europe working mechanisms with regard to Roma. The following steps are proposed:

- Publication of a regular “digest” of all Roma-related case-law and results of the Council of Europe monitoring activities and country reports;
- Appointment of Roma Rapporteurs in additional intergovernmental committees of the Council of Europe, such as CDDH, CDPPE and CDDECS⁹;
- Increased and institutionalised co-operation with other international institutions with a clear political dimension, notably the European Union and the OSCE, i.a. by setting up a regular dialogue that seeks to find synergies and avoid duplications in the work of the different European institutions;
- Result-oriented dialogue with a wider range of Roma organisations, including the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF), as currently discussed at CM level¹⁰, and closer co-operation with the European Union in this field.

⁹ As recently suggested by the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM). DECS-ENF and the CCJ already appoint Roma Rapporteurs.

¹⁰ GR-SOC(2015)3rev

APPENDIX

Third Progress Report on the Follow-Up to the Strasbourg Declaration

1. This report follows on from the previous implementation reports provided in 2011 and 2013.¹¹ It follows in its structure the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma, adopted at the High-Level Meeting on Roma organised by the Council of Europe on 20 October 2011.¹²

Non-discrimination and citizenship

2. Since the adoption of the Strasbourg Declaration, most member States have enacted national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination, and set up independent bodies with the mandate to fight discrimination, often inspired by the General Policy Recommendations issued by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).¹³ Many member States, among them all 28 EU countries, have adopted strategies or action plans for the integration of Roma. This is a major step forward. However, implementation remains poor. All too often, results are insufficient, particularly in the key areas of education, employment, housing, health and (in some cases) civil registration. In most existing strategies, the absence of realistic proposals and policies to address anti-Gypsyism, together with insufficient participation and representation of Roma, is a major problem. National action plans often do not follow a comprehensive approach but target only certain policy sectors without regard to the overall coherence of Roma inclusion policies.¹⁴ Furthermore, poorly designed and insufficient funding, inadequate engagement of public authorities and ill-placed decentralisation measures continue to prevent a significant change.

3. The European Court of Human Rights continuously receives applications alleging violations of the rights of Roma. In recent months, the Committee of Ministers has supervised the execution of judgements dealing, for instance, with segregation in education; forced sterilisation of Roma women; ineffective investigations into allegations of forced sterilisation; lack of access to medical records; refusal to grant a pension to a Roma widow; obligation of Roma and Travellers to leave the land where they were stationed; and authorities' failure to protect Roma from violence from the police and civilians, to investigate racial motives of attacks or provide redress.

¹¹ Documents SG/Inf(2011)11rev and SG/Inf(2013)27

¹² CM(2010)133

¹³ Specifically General Policy Recommendation no.2 (Specialised bodies to combat racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance at national level), no.7 (National legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination) and no.13 (Combating anti-Gypsyism and discrimination against Roma)

¹⁴ Cf. CM/Rec(2008)5 on policies for Roma and/or Travellers in Europe

4. Violations of the social rights of Roma are a continuing cause for alarm. Fifteen out of 110 collective complaints under the European Social Charter concerned the situation of Roma. The violations found by the ECSR were linked to the right to protection of health; the right to social and medical assistance; the right of the family to social, legal and economic protection; the right of children and young persons to social, legal and economic protection; the right of migrant workers and their families to protection and assistance; the right to protection against poverty; and social exclusion and the right to housing.

5. A consistent execution of ECtHR judgements and ECSR decisions is not always secured, however. Weaknesses in terms of implementation exist particularly in three areas:

- Housing, in particular modalities of forced evictions, absence of alternative accommodation, risk of homelessness, residential segregation etc.;
- Education, in particular educational segregation and the systematic placement of Roma children in schools for children with mental disabilities;
- And issues related to the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes.

6. The Commissioner for Human Rights has identified, in his country-specific and thematic work, several areas of concern including the worrying levels of anti-Gypsyism, statelessness, forced evictions and limitations to the freedom of movement in the context of international migration.

7. The Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities continues to be deeply concerned about the persisting situation of the disadvantages for Roma, in spite of a number of national, international and other initiatives. The Committee has consistently highlighted the need for States to make determined efforts to ensure that Roma are able to participate fully in social and economic life on the basis of full and effective equality. It also underlined that States and societies should cease to treat Roma as a problem to be resolved; the task was rather to create societies that do not generate the exclusion of Roma.¹⁵

8. The protection of the rights of Roma children is one of the priorities of the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2012-15. The training of Roma mediators in education, and measures against discrimination and segregation of Roma children in education and health systems are among the principal mechanisms to achieve that aim. Particular attention is given to the rights of Roma girls. Raising the awareness of Roma children and Roma communities on children's rights remains an important task.

9. Access to justice is a continuous problem for many Roma in Europe. The fact that many do not have identification papers and residence documents is a major obstacle. There is also ample evidence that discrimination against Roma is

¹⁵ Ninth activity report covering the period from 1 June 2012 to 31 May 2014, p.12

systematically under-reported and often inadequately prosecuted. The number of cases brought by Roma to national or European courts is extremely low, compared to the discrimination and racist acts many Roma communities have to face. Every year, one out of three Roma in a number of member States, becomes the victim to assault, threat or serious harassment with a perceived racist motive.¹⁶

10. The Council of Europe has tried to assist member States through operational programmes and pilot projects in their effort to implement the "Strasbourg Declaration" and to strengthen non-discrimination and citizenship. Recent programmes include:

- Primary legal aid to vulnerable groups, which has led, for instance, to the creation of a national aid hotline and legal aid centres
- A significant series of "training of trainers" for legal and police professionals, on Roma-related issues of discrimination in the context of the HELP programme
- Two "European Action Days" in the context of the "No Hate Speech Movement" with a focus on hate against Roma
- A "Roma Youth Action Plan", implemented since 2011 to strengthen young Roma's identity and the diversity within the Roma community, to build a strong Roma youth movement and to develop programmes for participation and human rights education
- Programmes to assist the empowerment of Roma women and gender equality¹⁷, study sessions and follow-up meetings

11. The Council of Europe has also provided assistance to member States through programme areas and projects financed under the EEA/ Norway Grants mechanism in order to improve the situation of Roma in member States involved in these programmes:

- Under Programme Area 32 "Correctional Service and Non-custodial Sanctions" a Roma Monitoring Committee was established in Romania in order to evaluate and monitor the implementation on six projects, limited to funding aimed at improving the situation for Roma population within the correctional service system and the Council and actively participating in the Committee meetings. Under a project, part of the mentioned programme, "Strengthening the capacity of the pre-trial detention system to comply with the relevant international human rights instruments", 20 police officers working in pre-trial detention centres in Romania were trained on antidiscrimination and human rights. A best practice guide and leaflet on preventing the discrimination in pre-trial detention centres, including Roma and other vulnerable groups will be developed with Council of Europe's assistance.

¹⁶ European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, The situation of Roma in 11 EU member States. Survey results at a glance, Vienna 2012

¹⁷ Thanks to a financial contribution from the Finnish Government

- Under Programme Area 30 “Schengen Cooperation” a project “Human rights protection and further development of necessary skills and knowledge of police officers, especially those working in multi-ethnic environment, including Roma communities” has started in Bulgaria by the end of 2014 and the Council of Europe provided and is continuing to provide expertise on human rights and antidiscrimination with a special focus on Roma related matters (two training curricula, one manual for police officers is in process of development and a series of seminars and workshops will be organised).

12. The Internet is used increasingly to incite hatred and intolerance of Roma and other vulnerable groups. With the “No Hate Speech Movement”, the Council of Europe has developed a highly visible campaign, mobilising a wide range of partners primarily among young people against hate speech on the Internet. Hate against Roma has been one of the priority themes of the campaign.

13. Several national and local awareness-raising campaigns have been run, targeting the public at large and specific stakeholder groups, notably media professionals, public administrations and teachers. The objectives of the *Dosta!* campaign, so far launched by the Council of Europe in co-operation with national authorities in 17 member States and Kosovo¹⁸, are the fight against prejudice, stereotypes and anti-Gypsyism; and the promotion of Romani culture, history and language. In many cases the campaign’s impact has unfortunately remained limited.

Social inclusion

14. Educating the majority population on the history of Roma and their discrimination, and improving the access of Roma themselves to education are both important elements of any policy in Europe to strengthen Roma inclusion. The consideration that, in democratic societies, everybody should enjoy equal opportunities so that they can exercise their right to education and benefit from a quality education, commensurate with their aspirations and abilities, must fully apply to Roma as well.¹⁹ Aspirations and abilities — the latter point is important as many Roma come from a background that is known to be indifferent to education or in which educational achievement is actively discouraged.

15. Public authorities, schools, and higher education institutions must therefore devise effective measures to encourage educational achievement and they must avoid measures that would leave Roma children isolated, e.g. through zoning regulations that de facto leave Roma children in schools with relatively few children from majority groups and/or with a majority of children from disadvantaged

¹⁸ All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo

¹⁹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education

backgrounds. "Separate but equal" has historically been neither a recipe for success, nor has the "equal" part of the slogan actually been true. The Commissioner for Human Rights has repeatedly criticised the continuing segregation in the educational system and the widespread housing segregation, from which Roma, in some member States, still suffer.

16. A particular issue concerns effective access to education for children from vulnerable groups, including Roma migrants in an irregular situation and street children. In addition to coming from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, and in many cases being left to their own devices, the children concerned often lack identity papers. In some countries, all children living on their territory for any period of time, and regardless of their formal status, have an effective right and obligation to attend school but in other countries the lack of official documents is a very effective barrier to school attendance.

17. The Committee of Ministers has itself underlined the important benefits resulting from employment of persons with a Roma background to act as mediators between Roma communities and public institutions, notably in terms of improved school attendance and access to quality education, and the improved access to healthcare and other public services.²⁰

18. Here again, the Council of Europe has, through operational programmes, supported the efforts of member States to strengthen the social inclusion of Roma. Recent examples include:

- The ROMED1 Programme²¹, under which over 1 300 mediators in 22 member States have been trained to improve the quality and effectiveness of the work of school, health and employment mediators, with a view to supporting better communication and co-operation between Roma and public institutions.
- The ROMED2 Programme²² empowers and assists Roma communities to engage actively in the decision-making processes at local level and supports public authorities in 80 municipalities to work effectively towards the social inclusion of Roma.
- The ROMACT Programme²³ aims to strengthen the capacity of elected officials and senior civil servants in local and regional authorities to promote Roma inclusion by improving the delivery of services, the responsiveness and accountability of local authorities towards Roma citizens.
- The initiative "Quality education in Romani for Europe" (QualiRom), focusing on raising literacy levels in Romani, has published an extensive database with some 16 000 pages of teaching and learning materials for teachers of Romani in Arlije, East Slovak, Finnish, Gurbet, Lovara and Kalderaš languages.

²⁰ Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)9 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on mediation as an effective tool for promoting respect for human rights and social inclusion of Roma,

²¹ Joint programme with the European Union

²² Joint programme with the European Union

²³ Joint programme with the European Union

19. Women's rights and gender equality, important aspects in the "Strasbourg Declaration", are often secondary in the Roma National Action Plans. In addition to the existing Council of Europe initiatives to support the empowerment of Roma women (development of Roma women's networks, review conferences, effective mainstreaming and monitoring of gender aspects in national strategies) the Secretariat recently started exploring the possibilities for a new joint programme with the European Union addressing this issue. The Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) and the European Union are starting a new joint programme supporting Roma women's entrepreneurship with micro-credits.

International co-operation

20. Already prior to the adoption of the "Strasbourg Declaration" the Council of Europe had maintained good co-operation with other international organisations active in the field of Roma inclusion. Our objectives correspond closely to the strategic orientations chosen by the partner institutions, notably the EU, the OSCE and the United Nations. Until recently, the "Coalition of International Organisations on Roma Inclusion"²⁴ has helped to share experience between the participating institutions and open the way towards project-based co-operation. Since 2010 efforts have been made to improve this co-operation, which still presents a number of challenges.

21. Efficient co-operation with the European Union is one of the main objectives for the Council of Europe. Some good steps have been taken over the years, which have led to a number of joint programmes including ROMED and ROMACT. The joint programme "Regional Support for Inclusive Education" in Southeast Europe promotes the concept of inclusive education as a reform principle with a specific focus on children who are at a higher risk of marginalization and exclusion. The joint programme "Promoting Human Rights and Minority Protection", a regional project for Southeast Europe aimed at improving access to rights for minorities at various levels of government, is based upon Council of Europe standards in this field and in particular on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). Better inter-institutional co-operation and co-ordination is of utmost importance for the future.

Outreach to the local level

22. Awareness has grown that policy measures at local and regional level are decisive for bringing about real improvement in the social inclusion of Roma. It is fundamental that local and regional authorities are in a position to develop integrated policies and projects. To achieve this it is important to ensure that the participation of Roma and Roma experts improves significantly, in order to mitigate

²⁴ The "Coalition" brought together a number of funders and international organisations, including the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Development Bank, the World Bank, UNDP, the European Union, EEA/Norway Grants and the Open Society Foundations

the risks of inappropriate or counter-productive measures taken by local administrations. Many municipalities are committed to doing their utmost in their struggle for Roma integration, but feel alone and poorly equipped; they need support, expertise and resources.

23. The role of regional and local authorities in the implementation of national strategies and the development of policies towards the integration of Roma has been a cornerstone of the Council of Europe's work. Programmes like ROMED and ROMACT assist local and regional authorities in their efforts to enhance democratic participation and empowerment of local Roma communities, and to make public institutions and services more responsive towards Roma communities.

24. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, through its "Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion" which currently brings together more than 120 cities and regions with the aim of speaking with a common voice against social exclusion, contributes to this task. The Congress Bureau recently approved strategic guidelines for the "Alliance".

Co-operation with Roma communities

25. The involvement of Roma communities, at every level of policy formulation and implementation, is an essential component of the Council of Europe's policy regarding Roma.²⁵ In order to facilitate such co-operation, the Council of Europe actively assisted in the setting-up of the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) as an independent consultative international association in 2004. Outside the partnership with the ERTF, co-operation with a growing number of Roma civil society organisations has been developed, both in a systematic form in the context of longer-running programmes (for instance ROMED and ROMACT) and *ad hoc* in the context of specific one-off activities such as national hearings, during monitoring missions or expert meetings. Contact with Roma organisations, in any activity relating to Roma, is now a constant practice of the Council of Europe.

²⁵ Cf. "Strasbourg Declaration on Roma", CM(2010)133, § 42

