

To  
Mr Thorbjørn Jagland  
Secretary General  
Council of Europe  
Strasbourg

March 2016

### **Thematic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion**

Dear Sir,

The Council of Europe has recently announced its new four-year thematic plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (<http://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/roma-latest-news>). At the very top of the list of planned activities the statement mentions “awareness raising activities at a local level to help curb early or forced marriages, domestic violence, trafficking and forced begging in Roma communities by addressing negative consequences of such activities.”

We are members of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies, and are writing in individual capacity to express our concern over this communication. For many centuries Roma have been the subject of suspicion, hostile depiction, and criminalisation. Your statement can be interpreted as suggesting that Roma have a pre-disposition to early marriage, violence, organised crime, and begging. While there is no doubt that many Roma in Europe suffer from various consequences of marginalisation, we believe that generalisations of the kind made in your statement risk strengthening prejudice rather than alleviating it. We are also concerned that the phrase in your statement that alludes to “addressing the consequences” might be interpreted not just as patronising but as placing the blame for the effects of marginalisation on the Roma themselves.

We therefore write to you to request that you issue a correction, clarifying that the causes of exploitation and victimisation are universal and not inherently linked to Romani society or culture, and that they should therefore be addressed globally rather than with specific reference to Roma. We also ask that you instruct Council of Europe officials to avoid wordings in the future that may contribute to, rather than confront stigmatisation and prejudice.

The Council of Europe has been at the forefront of advocacy in support of Romani rights for many years, and we would not like to see its reputation tarnished as a result of ambiguous public communications.

Yours sincerely,

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