

# CONGRESS OF MEDIATORS ROMED

Brussels, 17-18 January 2013

## SPEECH OF COMMISSIONER FOR EDUCATION, CULTURE, MULTILINGUISM AND YOUTH, MS. ANDROULLA VASSILIOU

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure, and a true honour, to welcome you to this first ROMED Congress of Mediators. This meeting is an excellent opportunity to review the achievements, to look at the challenges that remain, and to consider the way forward. I am happy to see that many of those directly involved in the ROMED mediation projects are here today: mediators, trainers, managers of the programme and experts – you are very, very welcome.

Also with us today are representatives of major Roma organisations, NGO's and other stakeholders, including coordinators of Roma projects supported by our Lifelong Learning programmes - as well as the Roma National Contact Points from the EU Member States. I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you.

Eighteen months ago in Strasbourg I had the pleasure to sign, together with Mr Jagland, an agreement between our two institutions to support the ROMED project. On that occasion I expressed my personal support for this initiative, and underlined my confidence that it would bring a valuable contribution to Roma inclusion in Europe.

I am happy to say that, thanks to the work of the people who are with us today, events have proved me right. ROMED has been an unqualified success, and it richly deserves to be followed up by a second initiative which will pursue and

intensify mediation efforts between Roma communities and the environment in which they live.

But before I go into more detail about future action, let me say a few words about what has been achieved by ROMED so far.

In fact, I'll do it with an example: in Romania a young Roma girl was on the point of dropping out of school because she could no longer cope with her schoolmates' bullying. Luckily, ROMED-trained mediator Elena Radu was there for her. Elena managed to get this girl a place on an innovative programme aimed at building self-esteem. And this young girl went on to take part in the Romany Language and Literature Olympiad. She overcame others' prejudice and her own fears and entered one of the most prestigious high schools in Bucharest.

To me, this poignant example encapsulates what mediation is all about, and why it is so important.

The Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority – and the least understood. Roma people are regularly denied equal access to housing and employment, shunted into segregated or "special" schools, and face barriers to health care. In every country where the Roma live, they are surrounded by an atmosphere of cold isolation, sometimes by outright hostility.

This situation is simply not acceptable in today's Europe. It goes against everything that Europe stands for – our values, our vision, and our goal of a fair and inclusive society, free of discrimination, where every citizen can play a full part in social and economic life. This goal is simply incompatible with what is happening to Roma people every day.

And that is why mediation is essential. We need well-trained cultural mediators to help reach out to Roma communities. We need them to inform and advise parents on the workings of the local education system, and to help ensure that children successfully make the transition between each stage of their school career.

We need mediators to bridge the gaps that exist between Roma children, families and communities, and the schools and other services which are meant to serve their needs. And we need them to help forge links between Roma communities and civil society.

The ROMED project has helped train more than 1,000 such mediators, men and women, many of them of Roma origin themselves. Their mission is clear and precise - to restore and enhance dialogue and trust between the Roma communities and the societies in which they live. Their tireless commitment and diligent work is invaluable, not only for the Roma communities they help to integrate into mainstream society, but to European society as a whole.

In fact, let me take a moment to commend the Council of Europe, and the Secretary General Mr Thorbjørn Jagland in particular, for having taken this initiative of setting up training opportunities for mediators in the areas of education, culture and health for Roma communities. And let me congratulate you, the mediators, for all that your efforts have achieved in integrating Roma children in preschools and primary schools across Europe. Each of you has contributed to securing a better future for these children, for their families and for their communities.

As you all know, educational achievement within the Roma population is much lower than the European average. Roma children participate less in early childhood education and care. They are more likely to drop out of school – or to be taken out, often without completing primary education. Roma children tend to be over-represented in special education and segregated schools. Sadly, we all know what that means in terms of their future prospects.

That is why I firmly believe that education – getting children in school, and getting them to stay and complete their studies – holds the key to breaking the vicious circle of disadvantage and social exclusion which keeps millions of Roma at the margins of European society.

And it is for this reason that the European Commission actively supports Roma inclusion in the field of education through the Lifelong Learning Programme. We fund many projects which are directly relevant for Roma communities. And in 2011 we launched for the first time dedicated calls targeting the Roma communities explicitly. In the first year we funded six projects and two networks for a total amount of nearly 1 Mio €. In 2012 we doubled that amount. These projects and networks are reported to be very successful and they give us precious indications on how to structure our future activities.

But we will of course also continue to support the ROMED training initiative.

As I said earlier, mediation is an indispensable tool in helping to break through the barriers built by centuries of mistrust, discrimination and downright hostility that have kept Roma people on the outside of mainstream society.

Mediators are the best placed for helping to breach this divide. They understand both the culture and way of life of Roma communities and the way mainstream society and local administrations operate - and they know how to communicate with both.

We have seen that mediation works. Therefore I am particularly pleased that this congress of mediators is taking place today. It will allow to share ideas, thoughts, and experiences. This will help us to better understand the potential mediation can have in further including Roma children and students in the national education and training systems. It is an opportunity to reflect on Roma mediation efforts to date and to consider the direction we can take in the future.

This brings me to the next phase of the ROMED programme, which starts in 2013 and will last until 2014.

The second phase of the programme will build on the considerable achievements of the first. It will seek to widen mediation activities, and also to deepen them.

Firstly, mediation will help intensify contacts between Roma communities and mainstream society. We will encourage the intensification and extension of mediation to involve local municipalities, school staff, headmasters and other stakeholders involved in the day-to-day management of pre-school and primary schools.

Secondly, mediation will reach deeper into the Roma communities themselves so as to involve families, and in particular mothers. We will also pay special attention to the gender dimension, particularly when it comes to phenomena such as early school leaving.

In order to achieve this we will extend the mediating dialogue inside Roma communities so that mothers, women and young girls can let their voices be heard. Mothers are the natural vector, I should say "mediators", when it comes to the first years of education for their children. We need to better understand what mothers want for their children, and to enter into a dialogue with them to ensure that they are well aware of their rights and those of their children, and how their children's potential may be nurtured and allowed to blossom.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The ROMED project has been an important step forward on the path towards the Europe we want for us and for our children, a Europe that is fair, just and inclusive. A Europe where everybody is granted a fair chance in life, starting with the right to an education, irrespective of his or her ethnic origin.

You have been and continue to be instrumental in helping to achieve this objective and I am confident that this congress will prove extremely valuable in helping us to determine the best way forward for the next two years.

I wish you fruitful discussions.