

OPEN LETTER - PRONOUNCEMENT

On European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF)

I Miranda Vuolasranta, the former vice-president and founder member of European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF), hereby announce that I am withdrawing myself from the current affairs of ERTF policies. This announcement is personal and does not affect the membership of National Roma Forum of Finland in ERTF.

I have personally been involved in European wide Roma and Travellers movement and policy making since the end of 1970s and also to the preparation and establishment process of ERTF. The human rights situation of Roma/Travellers seem to worsen day by day and we are met with growing intolerance and violent attacks, which should be an alarming signal for all human rights activists and institutions in Europe. Now more than ever, Roma/Travellers should work together.

My vision and goal has been to unify the pan-European Roma/Traveller groups to work for a common voice. The guiding principles of my work has been to brake down the vicious circle of social exclusion and marginalization of my people, work for equal human rights and equal possibilities for us in all levels of our societies. Combating anti-gypsism and raising awareness of human diversity through education. Mutual cultural appreciation between Roma and non-Roma is to be seen as one of the main goals for Roma/Traveller integration.

My reasons to withdraw myself from ERTF work are related to the lack of democracy, transparency and diminishing of representativeness in the Forum work, during the past two years and in its current work. The Forum was established for both national Roma/Traveller umbrella organizations and also international Roma organizations.

During the first transitional period of ERTF functioning years 2005-2009, the foundation of ERTF was laid down and the physical secretariat was established in Strasbourg. Roma and Travellers from approximately 40 European countries and 7 international organizations took part into this work.

After the first two years, it became evident, that the challenge of democratic cooperation, transparency, fair sharing of information and equal participation between the Forum leadership, nominated delegates and Forums secretariat was not true. The cooperation between different actors was limping badly.

During the last transitional functioning year of the Forum, year 2009, a call for Express of Interest Application campaign, for ERTF permanent membership, was launched by the ERTF secretariat. There seem to be no interest or rush for applying the ERTF membership from the national Roma/Traveller constituencies any more. The credibility of ERTF policy making had been affected, because of the lacking dialogue and collaboration abilities from its leadership side. Autocratic and centralized leading model took over more and more, not to even talk about the practiced nepotism and favoring of friends. Until the end of year 2009, only two countries had applied permanent membership of ERTF, namely Finland and Romania.

The annual Plenary Assembly (PA) of the Forum was postponed until February 2010. After the PA many questions are remaining open and unclear, such as, are all those national and international Roma/Traveller umbrella organizations, who where invited to this PA 24-26. February 2010,

registered or not until the day, when the voting took place? Where the delegates, who voted in the PA mandated or not. These issues should be clarified by an external independent party.

I invite the national Roma/Traveller NGOs to react and find out the truth in this issue.

Two weeks before the PA, some 18 countries out of 40 had applied membership and several out of these had send either oral or written complaints to the Executive Committee blaming, that the nominated working group of Forum foreseen to assist and guide the national processes had intervened and influenced in a manipulative way to the national processes.

Letters of concern and complaints where sent to ERTF secretariat, the Permanent Representations of Council of Europe and the Secretary General of Council of Europe from the national Roma NGOs, blaming the ERTF leadership of selective and manipulative processes, where the voice of national Roma NGOs had not been listened. The two vice-presidents of the Forum had been by-passed from all decision making during the past year, including the examination of national membership applications. I personally, as the vice-president of the ERTF at that time, was strongly criticized when raising up and pointing out these issues in the Executive Committee. Constructive criticism, on how to develop the level of democracy in ERTF, and objective analyses drawn up by external specialists, where not well come.

Out of 47 Council of Europe member countries 27 countries where invited to the Plenary Assembly, 22 countries participated and 19 countries had been given voting rights upon 7 international organizations. Some of the international organizations had been accused, that they were not registered during the entire first functioning period of ERTF and this issue was not reviewed or allowed to be discussed in the Executive Committee at all.

All these before mentioned issues affected to my decision to raise up a candidacy of presidency in the fifth ERTF Plenary Assembly. My candidacy was not successful, but this is not the reason, why I am publicly withdrawing myself from the current ERTF policy making. The reason is, that the new leadership of ERTF nominated on 25 February 2010 is not balanced, neither regionally nor organizationally. The re-elected sitting President Mr Kawzchynski has declared in the resent PA publicly, that he is for extremist policies and that he does not want to cooperate with people who are not thinking similarly with him and that all the European and American parties are more or less in conspiracy against him. There seem to not be space for opposition and therefore for democracy, in the Forum at the moment.

My perception of the ERTF policy making is to further comprehensive democratic participation of all different Roma/Traveller groups. This cooperation has to be transparent and involve all concerned parties. I am willing to further collaboration with an open attitude with both Roma/Travellers, international parties such as CoE, EU, OSCE, UN and national states who are interested and committed to work for Roma/Traveller rights.

Making rights reality for all, even the weakest in our societies, demands democratic right to take part for everybody. I am looking forward of a time, when this can be reached and realized in ERTF.

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Miranda Vuolasranta

