



**Speech by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio,
Deputy Secretary General**

**Testimony accompanied by Roma artists: Advocacy Roma
Quilt (presentation) in the framework of the
"Call the Witness, Roma Pavilion"
at La Biennale di Venezia**

1 June 2011, Venice

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We express our emotions in many different ways. Strong emotions of grief and sadness may find expression in tears of an individual, silence or even, in extreme cases, through violence. This moves people, but briefly. Artistic expression however creates a more permanent and universal story around our emotions, particularly suffering. The famous painting, "The Scream", by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, has moved people for decades and will keep moving people for centuries to come.

Artistic expression does not only express an unhappy state. It helps us understand the world around us, explain it, and sometimes escape from it – as Picasso put it: "washing the dust of daily life from our souls."

I am very pleased to see that the Roma Pavilion continues its life for a second year in the Venice Biennale thanks to the endeavour of people who believe that art is a way to learn about the lives of people who have, for much of Europe's history, been invisible, often because they were living on the margins of our societies.

I am particularly pleased to present to you the testimony of 8 Romanian Roma women living in France, just minutes from the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg.

This quilt is a way of rendering the invisible Roma women's lives visible. For centuries quilts have been used, primarily by women, to share stories, values, feelings, and experiences. They pass stories down through generations, often becoming treasured family heirlooms. Quilts reflect a specific cultural outlook and inspire action and contemplation. Some groups produce textiles to protest injustices or to preserve the memories of traditionally excluded communities. When women come together to quilt, they open a space for communication, collaboration, and creativity.

This particular quilt imparts the testimony of 8 Roma women who survive by begging in our wealthy societies. The quilt expresses in vivid colours the injustice to which they are condemned – evictions, expulsions, unemployment, discrimination and the constant struggle for survival.

The idea behind this project was to use Roma women as a positive example of combating negative stereotypes. The project also proves that disadvantaged groups have the potential to produce something positive if they are given the opportunity. Similar work in various countries and experience with Roma communities inspired this particular project. The main challenge was to work with a group of women who never before had the possibility to work or to get involved in a project.

Begging is an activity that contributes negatively to the image that the majority population has of Roma. As an alternative to begging, this project gave these women a purpose, a sense of pride and an involvement in producing a work of art. The choice of Strasbourg – seat of the Council of Europe with its values of human rights and human dignity - was symbolic and also ensured the sustainability of this project as the municipality of Strasbourg was associated with it from the beginning.

Each week the Roma women worked with a local artist to interpret their ideas, memories, and stories. For example, one of the women, Florea Neda, chose to represent her experience with begging in the streets of Strasbourg. We see her outstretched hand and the backs of passer-bys. In addition to expressing the inherent desperation begging evokes, the panel symbolizes the feeling of social invisibility many Roma experience.

This year's Pavilion is inspired by the Roma's informal justice system, the Kris-Romani. Like the Kris-Romani traditional court for conflict resolution, which acknowledges that there is no absolute truth, the quilt imparts myriad experiences without drawing a clear conclusion. Traumatic events like mass expulsions and evictions are exhibited next to happy memories, flowers, and romance. The quilt demonstrates that there isn't a singular "Roma experience" or response to injustice.

The Roma quilt is also an expression of the Roma culture. For centuries, European culture has been inspired by Roma elements but Europe has never fully recognised this contribution. The history of Roma is shaped by exclusion rather than inclusion.

This is the philosophy behind this exhibition, which is not only about Roma people, but by Roma people. This exhibition does not reflect the identity of a country – the Roma have no particular country – but the identity of a people whose suffering and deprivation over the centuries have a universal significance.

The quilt rests squarely at the intersection of art and politics. The project demonstrates art's potential to facilitate real change. At the immediate level this specific artistic endeavour created a link between the local art community and the women and removed the women from the streets. In the long term, the project represents a permanent expression of emotion and a small part of a much larger story of injustice.

Like the Roma cultural route, another project of which the Council of Europe is proud, this quilt tells a European story, and one which is still being written today. Let us all be ready to make our own, positive contribution to this story, and to say “Dosta” – “Enough” to discrimination against Roma.

Thank you.