

**Address by Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector of the University of
Iceland, at the opening of the Romani Studies Conference 2019.**

Veröld – House of Vigdís on Thursday 15 August 2019.

Former President of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, Ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome you on behalf of the University of Iceland to this Romani Studies Conference, held by the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages at the University of Iceland.

A decade ago, a Romani Studies conference held here at the University of Iceland might have sounded as exotic as the stereotypical image of *sígaunar* in Icelandic (or Gypsies in English) – the travelling people with colourful clothes and carefree spirit. Today, however, the influence of various aspects of globalization has become more evident in Iceland, including a growing number of migrants. Although small in numbers, Roma families have been part of the Eastern European communities' migration to Iceland. Since 2016, and possibly as an effect of the situation in post-Brexit Europe, a growing number of Romanian Roma migrants - amounting to couple of hundreds - have arrived in Iceland, according to the Social Service Department of the City of Reykjavík.

Thus, we can state that this is the right time for the University of Iceland to host the Annual Gypsy Lore Society Meeting and Conference; the biggest annual event in the world on Romani Studies.

Here, academics and practitioners from around the world have gathered to discuss cutting-edge research and present new findings in the field.

When considering the small size of Iceland's Roma population, and the lack of historical traditions in this field in the country, during the past decade, the development at the University of Iceland in the subject of Romani Studies and Roma-related initiatives has been remarkably vigorous. The University has been a partner in a Romanian led project *The Untold Stories. An oral history of the Roma people in Romania*, and we have co-organized the first ever Romani exhibition in Iceland, *Roma Culture in Past and Present*, curated by Studii Romani, that was opened in 2015 on the Roma International Day, April 8.

The university has also hosted three international academic seminars devoted exclusively to Romani Studies. The most recent one that took place in June this year, titled *Roma Narratives in Oral and Written Culture*, had 24 participants. There both researchers and practitioners of Romani background, gathered for the first ever academic event here in Iceland. The workshop coincided with the launch of a larger *Roma in the Centre* initiative that unites the Romani Studies projects and activities under the auspices of the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages. Within the context of a research project that is supported by the Joint Committee for Nordic research councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the aim is to establish a platform for a common Romani Studies research agenda in a Nordic context.

Apart from several MA theses, two PhD theses have already been written in the field of Romani Studies - both supervised by professor Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, Dean of the School of Humanities at the University of Iceland. Additionally, two post-doctoral researchers are working both individually and within international teams and networks, and a Romani Studies undergraduate course is in preparation for the next academic year.

For the University of Iceland, it is a privilege and an honour to host the Annual Gypsy Lore Society Meeting and Conference on Romani Studies. This enterprise will hopefully strengthen international collaboration and academic exchange in a field of great importance for the European academic community and the world at large.

In closing, and on behalf of the University of Iceland, I would like to thank the organizers for their excellent work. There is an exciting programme ahead and I hope you will find it enlightening, enjoyable and useful.