

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
Forum on Minority Issues
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Agenda Item: Equal Access to Quality Education for Minorities

Thank you Ms. Chair for the given opportunity to address the Forum,

As a Board member of Roma Education Fund I would like to brief you on the main goals and interventions that REF supports on Roma education. The goal of the Roma Education Fund is to contribute to closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma, through policies and programs with aim to support quality education for Roma, including desegregation of educational systems. Since September 2005 REF has supported 127 projects and operates in 15 states. As the Roma people are non-territorial minority and one of the poorest populations in Europe, REF's efforts are of various characters, mainly with objective to produce institutional changes within educational systems in order to improve the access to quality education for Roma pupils. What are the challenges and knowledge we gained in last 3 years? When it comes to address the enrollment and dropout rates in primary education, the conclusions are that states and institutions do not fully respects their own laws on obligatory primary education when the Roma are taken into consideration. The transition countries of CE and SEE region are often lacking social components in their educational services, meaning that poor and marginalized groups do not have free textbooks, meals and transportation. Most of REF's projects are covering the lack of social services within the schools, mostly through scholarships, mentoring, and additional classes in order to ensure confidence among Roma in order to continue with obligatory schooling. Since 2005, the results are obvious and school attendance is increasing. At the same time some of the states started to address the enrollment and language barriers mainly due to the implementation of REF supported pilot projects.

In this regards, the language barrier still remains to be one of the biggest obstacles for having equal access to quality education for Roma. The problem in many countries is ignored or invisible for the majority, such is the case with Macedonia, where according to the Constitution, all citizens have a right to be educated in their mother language. In Macedonia, country where I come from, Romani language is optional subject for Roma pupils in the last 17 years, but still there are no systematic efforts to ensure full primary education in Romani language.

Many Romani and non-Romani linguists in the last 30 years have developed the standards of Romani language. Today, there are many efforts to push governments to officially recognize Romani language, which is not an official or recognized language within UN and EU. It is however, recognized among European minority languages relating to regional and minority languages in use. There are also a few countries which individually recognized Romani language and some of them use the Romani in education or media.

Romani language has a recognized status deriving directly, through explicit reference or indirectly, through general reference to minority languages, from the constitutions of several European countries, including Macedonia, Austria, Finland, and Hungary. In the European Charter for Minority and Regional

Languages, Romani language is mentioned explicitly as an example of a non-territorial language. From the states that have ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, ten apply it to Romani language: Austria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and Sweden. In many of these countries, however, concrete implementation of the Charter in respect of Romani language is yet to be achieved. In some countries, concrete measures have been implemented, in collaboration with community representatives and experts. On the whole, most initiatives to support Romani language in education, still originate in, and are run by, NGOs. Romani language is still largely absent from the state-run education system. Initiatives to introduce a centralized curriculum are underway in a number of countries but this seems to progress very slow and without meaningful participation of Roma.

My message to state authorities is to initiate official recognition of Romani language and introduce curriculum in Romani language wherever relevant to the context in the country. Voluntary fund could comprise effective tool to accomplish this. In long term, this should remove most of the barriers and discrimination in the education process of Roma.

Thank you, Ms. Chair.