

*Third session of the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues*

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Regional Office for Europe of the United Nations High Commissioner for Europe has identified the Roma issue as one of the most important human rights challenges in Europe today.

The people who are commonly identified as Roma represent a group of minorities (or, according to some views, one large minority) in a number of European States, with the greatest numbers being in Central and Eastern Europe. Unfortunately there is a lack of data on how many Roma there actually are: some widely circulated estimates might be found exaggerated, but they certainly number in the millions, in other words more than the population of quite a few European States.

The Roma are a heterogeneous group of people - in terms of self-identification, descent, language and way of life. In fact, both in policy documents and in the rhetoric of the Roma movement, the term "Roma" is used as having the same scope as the initially broader terms "Gypsy" or "tsigane". These broader terms, or else their equivalents in national languages, are now increasingly (though not universally) perceived as pejorative, and they include peoples such as the Spanish Gitanos, the Sinti, Ashkali and so-called "Egyptians", as well as the Irish Travellers, French Gens de Voyage and other groups. A note of caution is necessary, however, because most of these people do not self-identify as Roma.

Contrary to widespread perceptions, most of today's Roma have long been sedentary, although their ancestors may have been nomadic. In Western Europe, there are relatively small populations of "travelling" peoples who are culturally related to the Roma – Gens de Voyage, Irish Travellers etc., while far larger numbers of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are sedentary, either rural or urban dwellers. Recent appearances of larger groups of East European Roma in Western Europe should not be ascribed to alleged "nomadism": most of them are previously sedentary people who have become migrants for similar reasons as migrants from non-European countries (being driven out by poverty, lack of opportunities, discrimination).

Particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, the Roma were on the one hand recognized as national minorities in 1989, but in socio-economic terms, they experienced a dramatic downfall over the last 20 years, during the post-Communist period, due to several factors, including (1) structural changes in the economies, with large closures of industries and consequent losses of low-skilled jobs; (2) replacement in many jobs (for example in the building industry) by better-skilled immigrants from the territory of the former Soviet Union; (3) overall growing socio-economic differences (a dramatic rise in income differences between low-skilled and high-skilled occupations).

After the disappearance of the coercive egalitarianism of the Communist system discrimination became more widespread (“the freedom to discriminate, to exclude”), with the emergence of far-right wing groupings, racist attacks by extremists, but also deliberate scapegoating by mainstream politicians.

As a result there is a high unemployment rate among the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe have very high unemployment (whereas 20 years ago unemployment was practically non-existent). Increasingly they have been subject to evictions based on incapacity to pay rent, and group evictions – often organized by populist mayors themselves. These have often led to the creation of socially excluded, marginalized, segregated communities with no economic opportunities, often outside the limits of the city with little or no public transport connections.

Roma women often face double discrimination and Roma children, who are often segregated in schools for children with intellectual disabilities, now have (at least in some countries) worse results than 20 years ago. Interestingly, Roma who emigrated to Canada or other non-European countries seem to have had much better educational results, which indicates to what extent their difficulties in their home countries are caused by pervasive discrimination. Similarly, it is remarkable how many Roma find jobs in multinational companies run by foreigners, for instance Koreans, who do not distinguish the Roma from the mainstream populations. Falling into absolute poverty, Roma families often lose their children, who are being taken into institutional care, sometimes due to abandonment, but often against the will of the parents.

The EU-MIDIS study, carried out by FRA, demonstrated a very high incidence of discrimination experiences on the part of the Roma in most of the surveyed EU Member States.

But what is being done?

At the European Union level, non-discrimination legislation (Directive 2000/43) was introduced in 2000, banning discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity in the areas of employment, access to goods and services, health care, education and social protection.

A policy instrument, the 10 Common Basic Principles of Roma Inclusion, was introduced by the first meeting of the European Platform for Roma Inclusion in 2009 with an emphasis on constructive, not repressive policies; on “explicit but not exclusive targeting” of such policies; and using culturally sensitive instruments to provide for Roma access to mainstream housing, mainstream jobs and mainstream education: in other words, neither a “one-size-fits-all” approach which would overlook their specific culture and experiences, nor something that would be entirely separate and thus continue their segregation.

As far as financial instruments are concerned, following an amendment to the Regulation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2010, there is a potential for using the EU’s Structural Funds to fund the housing of vulnerable groups such as Roma.

The EU enlargement process offers the EU the opportunity to review the progress of current and potential candidate countries and during this process it has more leverage than towards current Member States.

Responsibilities for education, employment and housing policies remain at the national level among EU Member States. The most consistent development towards a gradual improvement of socio-economic conditions of the Roma over the last two decades at a national level has been in Spain with the introduction of instruments such as targeted re-qualification courses and community-based social work. Elsewhere, however, we have recently seen the problems of the Roma formulated as a security issue rather than one of social inclusion or minority rights by the Governments of Italy and France. At the same time most CEE countries have done relatively little to counteract the disastrous effects of the Roma’s economic downfall.

At the local level, the repressive and punitive approach has been most visible, though a “laissez-faire” approach may actually be the dominant one in terms of numbers.

What then should be done?

States should take their obligations under international instruments seriously. They should take into account the concluding observations of the Treaty bodies, above all those of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights on segregated education etc.

The European Union should use its existing instruments more effectively. It should encourage its Member States to use the European Regional Development Fund for housing of Roma, now that the Regulation allows it. It should also require from them concrete commitments to the well-being of the Roma in their National Reform Plans, insisting that they be in line with the Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion.

National politicians – and EU representatives – who recognize the need for Roma inclusion should be more vocal. They should clearly reject the increasingly repressive discourse of some national governments. They should also emphasize the economic rationale for Roma inclusion (rather than further deepening the vicious circle of social exclusion) and provide more clear leadership.

I would like to thank you for your kind attention and wish you very fruitful discussions.