

The importance of Roma law enforcement integration

The Roma ethnic group represents the largest minority in Europe. Prejudice against them is high and many of them live in deep, long-term poverty. For the complete integration of the Roma community, they should be represented in all levels of the society, especially in the state administration, law enforcement organisations, media and other areas requiring higher education.

For complete integration of the Roma community, Roma should be represented in all levels of society. We need to show Roma youth and children the paths they can choose if they study, including professional police work.

The radical extremist movements that these days are growing in strength are constantly stressing that Gypsies are genetically criminals and that criminality is an organic part of them. Naturally, this is not true. In order for this viewpoint to change, it is necessary for more and more young Roma to demonstrate that they can graduate from any of the law enforcement and defense training institutions, be competent in their workplaces and become professionals. The African-Americans once did this. In the 1960s the situation was the same for them, and by today they have achieved enormous results. Now they are in a position where they have leaders in the police, in the navy, in the army.

I think that if there are noticeably more Roma police officers people will see that it's not true that most of the Roma are bad, because they are also out there and they are also taking part in maintaining order. On the other hand, the mentality of police officers can also change a lot, because—beside their training—there's no more efficient method than Roma and non-Roma colleagues working together—I can say this from my own experience. This is because if the non-Roma colleagues hold prejudices, willingly or unwillingly, it will change. This could have great significance. I think we will achieve success when it won't be a curiosity or something unique that there are Roma police officers.

It's very important that inside every Roma person should be enough desire to prove himself and personally disprove the stereotypes. We must show that we are capable of studying, being competent and serving as examples to be followed by the upcoming generation — in such a way that we don't forget who we really are.

In addition to the symbolic power, being a policeman also presents a viable career path: You have job security, health insurance, and the ability to obtain credit to buy a house—all things that are out of the reach of most Roma. But mainly, for a non-Roma citizen to see a Roma patrolling or responding to a crime, it sends a powerful message that not all Roma are unintegrated. We too want to be safe and to help protect the safety of all people.

However at European level there are still only very few initiatives that highlight how important it is to support cooperation between the police and the Roma communities, to support law enforcement professionals of Roma origin and to increase their headcount.

Another serious problem is that there is no a centralised coordination the different 'Roma law enforcement' initiatives of European countries.

Therefore the Fraternal Association of European Roma Law Enforcement Officers (FAERLEO) recommends the establishment of a Roma law enforcement adviser position in OSCE Strategic Police Matters Unit which expert has Roma origin background and law enforcement proficiency. This person should be able to coordinate and catalyze European Roma law enforcement issues cooperating with OSCE ODIHR- Contact Point for Roma and Sinti.

With Hungary taking the lead, the Fraternal Association of European Roma Law Enforcement Officers was set up with the participation of 6 European countries / Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, United Kingdom of Great Britain, Romania, Slovakia / in Budapest on 24 November 2006. The establishment of the association was initiated by Hungarian police officers of Roma and non-Roma origin, however its actual foundation was actively supported by many Hungarian and foreign cooperating partner organisations.

As a chairman of this organization I would like to give you a brief summary about our main activities.

The Association aims to implement national and European level objectives, including the following major ones: promotion of equal opportunities in the law enforcement agencies of Hungary and other EU member states; reduction of mutual prejudices between the law enforcement agencies and the Roma communities; increasing the number of staff of Roma origin at the law enforcement agencies; improvement of the life and service conditions of the current Roma staff members. The following objectives are of equal weight for the association: provision of assistance in overcoming the identity problems of Roma staff members; mediation in Roma-police conflicts; reduction of prejudice against the Roma in majority societies, and thereby fostering the national and European integration of the Roma minority, supporting the participation of the Roma in national and international law enforcement training courses; and cooperation with national and international partner organisations.

We have international, national and regional level initiatives. All of them are connected to Roma people and law enforcements issues like prejudice or ethnic profiling or recruitment of Roma youth.

We have an excellent project now where we have created a “Roma Law Enforcement Campaign” – which have been supported by Norwegian Civil Fund and Open Society Institute – for calling public attention for importance of Roma law enforcement integration.

The initiative has been highlighted as a good example by the EEA and Norway Grants Financial Mechanism Office.