

Solidarity with the Roma!

1. Europe's biggest national minority: oppressed, despised, discriminated against, persecuted

The great majority of the ten to twelve million Roma in Europe live in bitter poverty. To this very day, they have been oppressed, despised and discriminated against, and in some regions they have been victims of racial violence. The population of this ethnic group is greater than the population of 14 of the member states of the European Union.

In eastern and south eastern Europe most Roma families live in slums or ghettos, often in dilapidated buildings or barracks without any sanitary facilities. Most of their accommodation is not connected to the central sewage system. In many cases, neither the people nor their settlements are registered with the authorities. This is another reason why the great majority of the Roma have neither regular work nor enjoy a regular income, nor do they receive state social aid or free medical care.

Child labour is very common, and is often essential for the survival of the family. Up to two-thirds of all Roma households do not have enough to eat. Many children suffer from malnutrition. A fifth of them are ill. Child mortality among the Roma in Romania is four times as high as the national average. It is estimated that the life expectancy of southeast European Roma is about ten years less than the average life expectancy of the majority population. In many countries up to 50% of Roma children attend special schools.

2. The right to general services and participation

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) would like to explicitly remind all the European states in which Roma live, of their obligation to provide them with the state services that all citizens have a right to. This especially goes for the large Roma settlements, which are often not even furnished with the most essential utilities and services.

FUEN has identified the following prime areas where the appropriate immediate and comprehensive action must be taken:

Education

It must be possible for all children to attend primary school attendance. Where necessary, mediator programmes should be established, aimed at achieving regular school attendance. Roma should have the same level of secondary school provision as the majority population. Adult education is also desirable and necessary.

Health

The Roma population must be given the same level of local ambulant and hospital care as the majority population. Here special attention should be paid to the needs of women and children.

Employment

Regional structural policy should ensure that jobs are provided in Roma settlement areas, which will enable the Roma to participate in working life. This should be flanked with vocational training and job placement.

Local and regional infrastructure

The districts that Roma live in should be provided with the same standard of electricity and drinking water supply, waste water and refuse disposal systems that the rest of the country enjoy, whereby it should be guaranteed that these have the same standard of hygiene. Roma settlements must be appropriately connected to the public transport network.

Housing

Housing programmes should be introduced to support Roma to erect housing fit for humans.

Participation in local administration

Roma, like all citizens, have the right to be involved in local administrative matters that affect them. It will also be necessary to expand or strengthen local administration in which the Roma can participate through democratically constituted representation.

Responsibility of the states

All the necessary financial, organisational and personal expense involved in providing the comprehensive provision of social services massively exceed the budgets of domestic and international NGO's. The affected states must do their utmost to provide this funding themselves.

3. Improvement of public acceptance

FUEN firmly believes that in the 21st century it is not acceptable that the largest autochthonous minority within the European Union and the Council of Europe is virtually excluded from participating in the economic and social development in Europe.

Recent statements made at both European and national levels show that the social marginalisation of the Roma in Europe has been recognised as one of the most important issues that have to be resolved. There is however a lack of broad-based strategy and definitive action at all levels which would sustainably improve the position of the Roma. All in all, as far as its largest minority is concerned, Europe has not so much a problem with recognising the issue, but more an implementation problem. Primarily, the member states of the EU and the Council of Europe are called upon to take definitive action to improve the situation of the Roma. In addition, the social integration of the Roma is a two-way process, which calls for rethinking among the majority population as well as in Roma society.

With regard to their current position, the Roma require first and foremost recognition and social acceptance as a prerequisite for their social and economic integration. This cannot be decreed by any state, but requires rapprochement achieved through confidence-building measures.

The states are called upon to take tangible action as far as public relations work is concerned in order to combat racist ideas, and any opinions and actions that violate human dignity in parts of the majority population.

Now that the situation of the Roma has been sufficiently documented at European and national level, it is time that words are followed by deeds.

4. De facto solidarity: minorities as bridge-builders

FUEN is committed to solidarity with the Roma. As the largest umbrella organisation for minorities in Europe, the experiences of our member organisations make us very suitably qualified to be called upon to help in improving integration of the Roma in all areas of public and political life, strengthening their representation in institutions and elected bodies at local, national and European levels. The heterogeneity of the individual minorities represented in FUEN is a good prerequisite for implementing complex programmes and projects specially designed to meet the special needs of all the very different Roma communities.

Our member organisations are especially well qualified in helping others to help themselves, in line with the principle of subsidiarity. FUEN sees the conscious and consistent integration of the Roma in cooperation between all minorities to combat prejudice and discrimination. Minorities possess very special social and intercultural expertise, associated with a very strong awareness of right and justice. The solidarity of members of minorities among themselves should be strengthened, and used to help the Roma find more understanding and acceptance for their social situation among the majority population.

We aim to establish bonds of solidarity between Roma and other minority organisations. When representatives of the Roma can be brought together with members of other minorities outside their normal living environment so that they can get to know them personally and establish a dialog with them, such exchange of experiences and best practice examples at regional and local level can encourage Roma to participate in civil and political life. It must be our aim to improve the degree of participation by Roma in all areas of public and political life, and to achieve an increase in their participation in institutions and bodies within the European system of multilevel governance, without neglecting the specific needs of the Roma communities.

Getting to know each other can result in respect and mutual understanding that will create bonds of solidarity between representatives of the Roma and those of the other minorities. Joint cooperation and joint articulation of interests will reduce the hostile attitude that the Roma so often experience when they appear alone. This is where the minorities of Europe organised within FUEN can act as bridge-builders: with their special experience they are the born mediators between Roma communities and the majority population.

5. Effectively implement the EU integration programme for the Roma – provide financial support for NGO work

FUEN welcomes the communication from the Commission with regard to a “EU framework for national strategies for integration of the Roma by 2020” of 5th April 2011 (COM (2011) 173) and also the report of the European Parliament about the EU strategy for the integration of the Roma of 18th February 2011 (2010/2276(INI)).

The Commission’s framework strategy is a suitable guide for national concepts for improving the life situation of the Roma throughout Europe. As well as assuring education, employment, health care and the provision of accommodation the European and state programmes should also fund NGO activities aimed at improving the living conditions of

the Roma. These particularly include confidence-building measures that promote getting to know and understand one another.

Knowing more about each other, understanding and accepting the different traditions, origins and cultural heritage not only enables more social participation and integration. It is also an essential prerequisite for ensuring that the contribution that the Roma can make to a European culture of diversity of minority and majority is seen and understood to be both enrichment and added value.

Adopted as the *Eisenstadt Declaration* by the participants of the FUEN-Congress on 4 June 2011 in Eisenstadt/Željezno.