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It is our duty to fight discrimination wherever we see it

When crowds shout out, cries of a few are often outshouted. It is not a secret - bringing change is hard. We live in a democracy, where changes happen only through the support of many.

The discrimination of minorities is a pandemic worse than the coronavirus, as it has managed to rule the world for a lot longer. As well as the virus, it mutates, takes on new forms, and finds many different ways to inhibit the population.

Dehumanisation, degradation, segregation, humiliation – these are the experiences that Roma in Western Balkans face almost every day. Their rights have been denied for years, and the acknowledgment of the problem and serious actions have been to a great extent absent.

A clear example is being evicted from your home under unclear circumstances. Roma have been too busy looking for different ways of fulfilling their basic needs, and often ignored their civil and political rights, making them unwilling to engage politically and not to mention the inability to hire lawyers to defend their rights. Lack of education or access to education makes them unable to seek better jobs. This isn't by their choice – it is because this is their only option. As Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* states, it is only when you fulfil basic needs like food and shelter, you can think about your other needs. As a result of the constant fight to earn for basic living, Roma put collectivisation, which is the first step to fight better for their rights, on the side.

When John F. Kennedy said, “The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all” he meant to encourage everyone to have a voice, as a basic principle of democracy. However, when crowds shout out, cries of a few are often outshouted. It is not a secret - bringing change is hard. We live in a democracy, where changes happen only through the support of the many.

It's time we started working together

For all those reasons, it was very important that the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) brought back the topic of Roma Integration very high on the political agenda of the Western Balkans leaders. In 2019, in Poznan, Poland in the framework of the Berlin Process, the Prime Ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia, committed towards ensuring that the economic development of the region goes hand-in-hand with social inclusion of the most vulnerable Roma. They linked their ongoing efforts towards integration of Roma with the EU enlargement process. This was the first time that Prime Ministers from six Western Balkan economies adopted a declaration like this. And it is a big deal.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Although Roma Integration is still far away, with the Poznan Declaration we are one step closer. Marking the anniversary since the Poznan Declaration was adopted, I want to look back on what Prime Ministers have agreed a year ago.

In the area of **employment** they obliged to **increase the employment rate among Roma to at least 25 percent** in each economy and ensure that Roma are proportionally represented in the public sector.

In **housing** they **pledged to legalise**, wherever possible, all **informal settlements** where Roma live; or provide permanent, decent, affordable, and desegregated housing for Roma currently living in informal settlements that cannot be legalised for justified reasons.

They promised to **increase the enrolment and completion rate** of Roma in **primary education to 90 percent** and the enrolment and completion rate of Roma in **secondary education to at least 50 percent**.

It was agreed that **universal health insurance** coverage among Roma **should be of at least 95 percent** or to the rate equal to the rest of the population.

Next, they agreed that **all Roma will be registered in the civil registries**.

Last, but not the least, it was agreed that **discrimination towards Roma will be prevented** by strengthening the government structures and establishing the right bodies that will process complaints by Roma in a fair way.

What have we done so far, and what coronavirus crisis means for us?

Many things have been done since then. With the governments in the region we have started to map settlements populated by Roma in order to ensure a comprehensive overview of settlements which can and those which cannot be legalised. We have also developed Roma responsive budgeting guidelines that will assist in the programming process of public funds and ensure the right amount of funds is secured for Roma integration measures. We are also working on adjusting the current legislation so that no Roma is left without any identity documents. Finally, we are working on piloting a specific Roma survey that will measure the progress towards the Declaration commitments. We work tirelessly to help the governments achieve goals that have been set.

But the coronavirus proved to be a game-changer for everyone. And now, before we continue with improvements, there is some serious mending to be done. This crisis has hit Roma communities more than the rest of the population. But it also fuelled the spread of negative narratives towards Roma in public and on the Internet. And according to RCC Balkan Barometer 2020, the situation is already hard.

9% of Western Balkan's businesses would not hire Roma. 33 out of 100 persons would not work for a Roma employer. 26% of Western Balkans citizens do not want their children to share their classrooms with Roma. More than a third of respondents would not host Roma in her home.

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This must be dealt with and stopped through joint regional efforts focused on fulfilling the Declaration targets one by one. We all deserve the same possibilities. We are all different, but we are also equal.

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