



Ministerial Meeting on Roma Integration

Tirana, 27 October 2020

Introductory remarks by the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) *Majlinda Bregu*

Dear Minister Manesterliu, SACHEVA and Osmani

Distinguished guests,

We are glad that our initiative to boost human capital development within Connectivity Agenda of the Berlin Process, concretely enhancing its social dimension, is a reality.

Last year, we proposed the Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process, and shortly it became a flagship of the Roma integration in the region. Despite the long-term efforts of governments, local governments and civil society, the challenges of around half a million Roma community still remain high:

- a. 88% of Roma live in severe material deprivation, and 1 in 2 Roma persons are not able to secure food on the table every day.
- b. Only about half of Roma complete compulsory education, compared to 95% of the total population.
- c. Only 16% of Roma are employed, compared to the national average of 47%.
- d. Almost 10% of Roma do not possess an ID card.



- e. 33% of people in the Western Balkans would not work for a Roma employer,
- f. 26% do not want their children in classrooms with Roma, and 34% would not invite Roma to their home.
- g. The situation on social housing is even worse though. 74% of citizens in WB do not support government efforts on social housing for Roma.

Said that, I would like to take the opportunity of this ministerial to confirm that, even though we have all been living on the edge this year, Roma integration is **one of the few positive cases of region's own initiatives. This year brought a particular stress on our economies, public health and social inclusion. Identifying who is vulnerable is tough in itself and fraught with difficulties in normal times, let alone during crisis.**

When we launched it last year in Poznan and EU fully committed to support this initiative no one was aware of the pandemic approaching. And as we know, during a crisis, whether political, personal or a global health one like Covid-19, the vulnerable ones are hit the hardest, contributing to further inequalities. Hand washing with tap water proved a challenge this year for 30% of Roma community living in EU MS!

Roma usually live in cramped, overcrowded Roma neighbourhoods, which makes physical distancing next to impossible.

Because of poor health and increased chronic illnesses, such as asthma or chronic bronchitis, Roma can be more susceptible to COVID-19 and other serious complications in the long run.

Here is where the adversity comes in use. Yesterday WB Digital Summit was opened here in Tirana and we all agreed that the life we are to lead now on will be heavily dependent on digital skills. But starting from the easiest one: is remote learning through digital education accessible and/or affordable for marginalised Roma children, lacking any/adequate IT equipment, and/or internet connection, or sometimes even electricity? Next days we will

have another ministerial on environment. And I am pondering a question on air pollution effect on Roma community health while for some burning coal and tires equals to heating?!



These are burning challenges for all and should be so for Roma community too. Because a Roma life is not the life of others!

WB is not a precise parallel for rich and prosperous. We do need help and support to record active engagement and take measures to ensure full social inclusion of all communities.

We were glad that EU effectively responded to the call by the Western Balkans to envisage a stronger role for the Western Balkan partners in its post-2020 strategy on Roma and to continue the support to the Western Balkans in implementing the Declaration.

The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans launched few weeks ago reinforces its commitment to support the Western Balkans efforts on improving labour market and digital education of disadvantaged groups including Roma.

We at the Regional Cooperation Council have been instrumental in providing support to the governments in the Western Balkans to have some concrete deliverables on sensitive longstanding problems such as:

1. **Social housing:** legalising Roma dwellings has been a persistent issue during the last 30 years. As the first step, the governments need to know how big this problem of illegal dwellings is, where the illegal dwellings are, what is the status of housing and infrastructure of those dwellings and how many people are affected by the situation. The RCC's Roma Integration action worked on preparing a Methodology for geographic mapping of the situation of housing of Roma. **I encourage the governments to collect the necessary data from the whole territory of their economy and use the regional information system to legalise all possible dwellings of Roma.**
2. **Civil registration** is a precondition to access virtually any of the rights guaranteed by law and any of the public services provided by the central and local governments. We have assisted WB to develop Roadmaps for full civil registration. We need to walk the talk and come to an end of statelessness of Roma community in line with the obligations undertaken under the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness by 2024.



3. **Data collection:** After 15 years of work on Roma integration, it is really about time that the governments establish internal systems to produce their own official data on the indicators relevant to show progress in Roma Integration. There are some positive steps on this, **and I compliment North Macedonia on their pilot process to have Roma Survey implemented by the Statistical Office. I hope that by the end of 2021 all the economies in the region will finally have designed and adopted a mechanism to collect relevant statistical data.**
4. Last but not the least, Roma Sensitive Budget: there has been, there is and there will be generous support provided by the EU to our region to work effectively on the integration of Roma. However, the political will of the region must be expressed also by allocating sufficient and well planned public funds for the integration of Roma. To this end, we have worked closely with the WB 6 to develop Guidelines for Roma Responsive Budgeting and we compliment Albania for including it in the budget planning of 2021.

Roma integration should not be a matter of empathy for a vulnerable group, but it's a matter of principle of treating equally all the citizens in WB irrespective of their origin.

Let me conclude by complimenting all the National Roma Contact Points for tremendous efforts to keep this sensitive human rights on top of your respective minister's agenda - it has not been an easy task for you.

Finally I hope media can write and communicate properly on this disadvantaged community and on social inclusion of all minorities. I know there is always a tension between events worth a headline and real problems. If it is not politics then as Orwell said: not much news. Only events of worldwide importance.