

As North Macedonia still awaits the adoption of the new National Strategy for Roma Inclusion, we spoke with Mr. Orhan Usein, Head of Office of the Regional Cooperation Council's Roma Integration Project

Antrefile: The Roma Integration Project has been launched by the Regional Cooperation Council, and is financed by the European Union and the Open Society Foundations. The project aims to speed up Roma inclusion in the Western Balkans region by fulfilling goals set in the Poznan Declaration. Poznan Declaration represents a set of basic questions that many take for granted, but for the Roma, they represent a great challenge: employment opportunities, access to education, health care, housing in decent conditions and legal settlements, possession of identity documents, non-discrimination. The Declaration was also adopted by North Macedonia.

1. [The Government of North Macedonia recently adopted the new work programme for the period 2022-2024. Did Roma get the deserved attention in this document?](#)

The new work programme that the Government of North Macedonia presented has a special part dedicated to Roma. That is, of course, very commendable. It is unfortunate that the programme does not contain concrete, quantifiable targets that would show us to which extent the Government plans to achieve the targets it undertook with the Poznan Declaration, but it reaffirms the commitment to this Declaration and to intensifying the process of adoption of the new National Roma Strategy up to 2030. The Roma Integration action provided technical and expert support to this process, including gathering public institutions and civil societies to discuss the strategic priorities: antigypsyism, education, employment, housing, civil registration, health, and culture.

The Government was also open to adjusting the new Strategy to the objectives of the Roma Framework for equality, inclusion, and participation, presented by the European Commission in October 2020 and to the Poznan Declaration. This means one step closer to the EU accession, at least when it comes to fulfilling the goals related to Roma Integration.

The public officials did their work, but the drafted version still awaits its adoption, which we urgently need. With the announcement by the Government that it will improve the institutional framework by establishing a new sector in charge of the implementation, as well as with the appointment of responsible persons and teams within the line ministries, there is hope that North Macedonia will speed up the process of Roma integration.

2. [Housing is an important part of the Poznan Declaration. Many Roma in North Macedonia still live in conditions that are below the standard for decent living, but a recent housing feasibility study for Kumanovo and Stip provides some solutions.](#)

In North Macedonia, 61% of Roma live in overcrowded housing units, compared to 27 per cent of non-Roma. Most housing units inhabited by Roma are in very poor conditions, built from inadequate materials, with high humidity, no windows or doors, no basic furniture, electricity, water, or sewage system. 10% of Roma households are not connected to water supply networks, 26% do not have a toilet and 7% do not have electricity.¹ Although we do not have exact data, it is estimated that around 30% of

¹ Source: WB and UNDP estimates based on 2017 UNDP-WB-EC Regional *Roma Survey* data

Roma do not own or legally use their dwellings, which is perhaps the key problem, because of the security of tenure. Namely, all these Roma can be forcefully evicted at any time and left without a roof over their head. We speak about children, women, elderly, whole families.

We have recently produced an excellent housing feasibility study for the housing of Roma in Stip and Kumanovo. If similar studies would be done for entire North Macedonia, and the solutions proposed in them would be implemented, many issues would be solved, from infrastructure, dirt roads, to social housing and legalisation. We have recently had a great experience in Serbia, where we, together with the Yurom Centre, supported legalisation of 50 Roma houses in Nis and Leskovac. The interest from Roma wanting to legalise their homes was huge, and the quota was filled on the very first day. We plan to expand this activity to North Macedonia in the first half of this year.

Adequate housing is a basic human right, and a starting point to improving all other aspects of life, increasing chances to access better education and later on labour market. Living in poorly developed settlements with badly constructed houses, no access to water, sewage system, without paved roads, and no electricity available contributes to the unequal starting point and life opportunities in comparison with other individuals living in developed areas.

We should also highlight that during the Covid-19 pandemic, when quarantines, isolations and lock-downs were the key measures, Roma were forced to stay at their homes that often do not fulfil basic standards such as access to clean water. Which itself was a challenge during the pandemic, not only because people suffered without water, but because they were expected to elevate their hygiene efforts without water. The crisis opened our eyes wider for the need to improve the housing of Roma as soon as possible.

This is why housing was an important part of the Poznan Declaration. It sets the goal of legalising all settlements where Roma lives, if possible, or providing decent housing for Roma currently living in substandard settlements. Leaders of North Macedonia also adopted the Declaration and committed to working towards fulfilling the goals.

3. Working in the informal sector is also one of the big problems Roma in North Macedonia face. Do you think that enough is being done to improve the working conditions of Roma?

Only 22% of Roma in North Macedonia are employed, and mostly in low-profit occupations such as cleaners or physical workers. Of course, a higher percentage of Roma generate income, but they work in a shadow economy. A significant proportion of Roma relies on social benefits combined with informal work to provide a living. Many of them support whole families with only one salary, which is often not enough even for one person. Working in an informal economy brings new problems for Roma. Informal workers do not have health insurance, social benefits, and pension. They are not protected in any way, and cannot claim any rights arising from the labour laws.

With our assistance, the Government of North Macedonia adopted the National Programme for transforming undeclared work among Roma. The goal is to decrease the undeclared work among Roma from 39% to 25% by 2025. It includes several components, such as creating a legal environment suitable for transforming undeclared to declared work, direct institutional support to undeclared Roma workers through usage of existing and new unemployment measures, and tracking the achieved results. North Macedonia sets an ambitious goal for the Roma employment rate of 35% before the economy joins the European Union. Transforming undeclared work into declared can help achieve this goal faster. We are very much satisfied that the Government of North Macedonia agreed to adopt this important Programme with our support, and we are ready to support its implementation.

One of the important reasons why Roma face such a high unemployment rate is antigypsyism. According to the latest data from the Balkan Barometer, a public and business opinion survey conducted annually by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), 26% of employers in North Macedonia said they would not hire Roma, regardless of their qualifications, and 8% believe that hiring Roma in their company would have a negative impact on the working environment. In an economy where finding a job is already hard, if you are a Roma, it is even more challenging. That is why we are committed to combating antigypsyism, as a root cause of the problems Roma face.

4. [Hate speech, antigypsyism, police brutality, institutional discrimination. Those are all problems Roma face, I would say even on a daily basis.](#)

Antigypsyism and discrimination for Roma start from an early age, when Roma kids are enrolled in school and often put into special or segregated schools or classes. And it is happening in the entire region, and wider. In the 21 century, in the middle of democratic societies, in Europe, we are dividing kids based on their ethnicity – isn't that disturbing? It continues with forced evictions of Roma families without offering them a proper solution and alternative housing, discrimination at work and in health and public institutions. We recently had police brutality over Roma, as well as ethnic profiling at the borders. All of this should be brought to an end.

Antigypsyism is put very high on the agenda of the European Union for a reason. We will soon publish our research on combating institutional antigypsyism. Clear data give us a bigger picture and can serve as guidelines in fighting antigypsyism and can also help in creating new policies related to combating antigypsyism. According to the research, hate speech and hate crimes are considered major issues. Over 87% of respondents agreed or partially agreed with the statement that Roma are the target of hate speech and hate crimes. Discrimination in the labor market is also a major issue, as well as the access to basic infrastructure. Environmental issues are also a concern, as over 83% of the respondents believe that Roma are exposed to major pollution.

As I said, antigypsyism is a root cause of all problems Roma face, and dealing with it requires political will, an effective legal framework, inclusive policies and long-term commitment to integration, participation and equality. The economies in the region have anti-discrimination legal frameworks, but they need to be strengthened and adjusted to the EU standards, and legislation properly implemented. Antigypsyism should be included in those frameworks, and public officials should be trained to recognise

it. Roma should be included in decision-making on everything related to them. Romani language should be preserved and nurtured. Institutions should recognise Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, which we mark on 2 August. All cases of police brutality should be prosecuted.

Antigypsyism and exclusion of Roma are not only problems of Roma communities, but the whole society. Increasing Roma employment rate and productivity would increase the overall GDP in the region. More employed Roma means less of them relying on social assistance. Higher wages and transforming undeclared to declared work would have a long-term positive effect of bringing additional fiscal revenues. The exclusion of Roma citizens costs us all and therefore, we should all work harder on the common goal to support Roma into breaking a vicious circle of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination.