

Treatment of Roma is an exam for us in the Western Balkans - are we fit for the EU?

The everyday life of Roma on the Western Balkans (WB), unfortunately, is not a St. George holiday on the river, girls with flower wreaths in the hair, and the melancholic music we all recognize and love. Data show a severe material deprivation among 83-94 percent of vulnerable Roma families across the EU enlargement region.

Roma are one of the most deprived and excluded groups in the WB. Latest reports disclosed that the number of Roma girls and boys attending compulsory primary education increased in the past ten years, but still, attendance in secondary school is much lower. Percentages of youth (ages 18-24) not in employment, education or training are high, range from 73 in Serbia to 86 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among young women, it ranges between 81 (Republic of North Macedonia) and 93 percent (Montenegro). The figures revealed that Roma are less likely to have access to health care in comparison to non-Roma neighbours. Many Roma dwellings do not have access to running water, ranging from 10 percent in Republic of North Macedonia to more than half of the Roma population in Albania. All these data suggest that new and effective policy measures in all societies of the Western Balkans are required to ensure that the Roma are recognized and involved as productive members of the society, fully integrated and equal in all segments of everyday life.

The Declaration of WB Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process, endorsed during the WB Summit in Poznan, specifies that the WB economies strive to achieve increased employment, housing legalisation wherever possible, increased rate of primary and secondary school completion, health insurance coverage rate, civil registration for all Roma and to continue fight against discrimination towards Roma. Their ambitious and motivating commitment to continue and enhance efforts for full equality and integration of Roma in their societies is an important step towards Roma integration.

Without any doubt, one document cannot solve the status of almost 600 informal Roma settlements in Serbia or ensure full immunization of Roma children in Republic of North Macedonia. In order to increase the employment rate of Roma or young Roma who have completed secondary education, the governments itself will have to adopt policies, to have Roma responsive budgets, to take measures and monitor closely, at all levels, if these policies and measures reach every Roma every day. Otherwise, this Declaration will remain just a piece of paper.

The RCC Roma Integration project, funded by the European Union and Open Society Foundations, facilitated the process of endorsing this Declaration, which was initiated by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. The present Declaration has the potential to guide the individual governments, the regional cooperation and the efforts for EU integration on the issue of Roma integration. The Declaration is certainly a process. It becomes important now, more than ever, to recognize how far we have come and more importantly, how much further we still have to go in Roma integration as a part of the EU enlargement process and regional cooperation as well.