

## **Antigypsyism in Western Balkans**

### **I**

I was asked to present some deliberations on antigypsyism in the Western Balkans, how antigypsyism is expressed in the Western Balkans, what are specific features of the antigypsyism in the Western Balkans.

My intention is neither to come up now with a scientific presentation nor with a remuneration of incidents of antigypsyism. Taking into account that all of us work with the intention to improve the integration of Roma or to improve the participation of Roma, I was hoping that with providing you some food for thought I could initiate a follow-up discussion which would allow us to reflect upon what you could take home from this workshop and what you would or could need in future to work on combating antigypsyism.

### **II**

#### **WHAT IS ANTIGYPSYISM?**

Antigypsyism is the “historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism against social groups identified under the stigma "gypsy" or other related terms”. This definition is important in our context, since it also includes Ashkali and Egyptians, meaning persons who are perceived as belonging to or related to Roma.

Mr. Rose emphasised this already yesterday: antigypsyism is a phenomenon of and among the majority populations and not among Roma. Consequently, the added value of the concept of antigypsyism “lies in the change of focus from the Roma communities’ obligation to ‘integrate’, to the state institutions’ responsibility to effectively deliver equality, non-discrimination and fundamental rights to Roma individuals”.

This is nothing new under the sun. This added value reflects the Rights-Based Approach with the people, in our case the Roma as rights holders and the state institutions as duty bearers.

When we acknowledge that antigypsyism as a specific form of racism exists and that it constitutes the root cause for the discrimination and exclusion and therefore, for the socio-

economic situation of Roma, we have to combat antigypsyism in order to improve their socio-economic situation and to achieve a systemic and sustainable change and cannot only focus on projects in education, employment or other sectors.

### III

We face in the Western Balkans often the situation that politicians or the society-at-large as well as external actors such as the European Commission, individual Member States of the EU or even Western European “think tanks” deny that antigypsyism exists in Western Balkans or just ignore it when talking about challenges for the countries in the Western Balkans.

Some might agree that discrimination exists – often reduced to discrimination within the society which implicitly excludes the existence of a political or structural discrimination.

A good example of the ignorance or the denial of the existence of antigypsyism was the political and public discourse about the migration of Roma from the Western Balkans to Western Europe. Between 2009 and 2016 according to reliable sources, more than 200.000 Roma asked for asylum in the European Union. This would reflect 20% of the assessed overall Romani population in the Western Balkans.

Antigypsyism and the discrimination and exclusion of Roma as a consequence of the antigypsyism were hardly identified as reasons why people left their home countries or as obstacles for the reintegration of repatriated persons. Though researches clearly point at antigypsyism and discrimination as reasons for the migration. (SOME COUNTRIES USED ANTIGYPSY MEASURES EVEN TO PREVENT OR TO PUNISH MIGRATION)

With the example of migration and reintegration policy I wanted to illustrate that the denial of the existence of antigypsyism and of its impact on the daily life of the Roma does not only constitute a serious obstacle for improving the situation of the Roma, but that this is already an expression of the antigypsyism in the political sphere.

### IV

In the political sphere, antigypsyism is also expressed in the form of not applying laws to Roma and of not implementing policies, developed for Roma. This situation is further compounded that we have laws and policies which are directed against Roma or which affect Roma negatively in a non-proportionate way.

The best example is the situation on the labour market, in particular when it comes to the participation of Roma in the public sector from the national level to the local level. In most countries exist laws which require the equal participation of ethnic communities within the public service. However, all countries don't adhere to these legal obligations and the employment rate of Roma in the public sector is ridiculously low.

This means that since years state institutions refuse to fulfil their legal obligations – or to put it bluntly: they break the law and discriminate Roma. Even, if we have other state institutions which clear point at the refusal to adhere to the law.

This attitude is reflected in the private sector where we find situations that employers bluntly refuse to employ Roma, even if they are offered wage subsidies or tax incentives. So when we want to improve the economic or employment situation, we have to fight the antigypsyism too and not only doing some non-sustainable projects.

The employment sector is not the only sector where we can find antigypsyism at an institutional level or in a systematic manner. We could also find examples in the housing sector, in education or health sector.

## V

And we even see another phenomenon: that all of us – politicians in the region, politicians in Western Europe, civil society – if Roma or non-Roma, donors – have accepted it as given, if not to say as normal that laws and policies are not implemented or only partially implemented when it comes to Roma.

Remember what I said about the labour market. What is the dominating reaction of the international community? A) They ignore the discrimination of Roma by state institutions (and in the private sector). And B) they focus on self-employment schemes for Roma – a great support for a few individual families which on the other hand is in most cases not sustainable and does in particular not address the systemic discrimination beyond.

## VI

### **Public and political discourse**

I referred already indirectly to the public and political discourse, since the refusal of state institutions and private companies to adhere to the laws (including anti-discrimination legislation) is not an issue of the discourse with and about Roma.

The public discourse assigns the responsibility for the difficult socio-economic situation and for the exclusion of the Roma to the Roma themselves as in general the public and political discourse is dominated by stereotypes and prejudices.

With regard to the migration of Roma in the last years, we could observe the attitude of politicians, media and public to ignore the root causes for the large-scale migration and to point at the symptoms of the socio-economic situation or to the attractiveness of the asylum system in Western Europe.

However, also in general, please think about the discourse in your countries why the socio-economic situation of Roma is difficult? Do politics and society discuss as reasons for their difficult socio-economic situation the low level of education and training, the impossibility for Roma to fit into needed working attitudes or any other reasons among the Roma or do they discuss discrimination by employers or the reasons why many Roma have a lower level of education?

## VIII

Thus, if discrimination or the overall difficult socio-economic situation derives from the antigypsyism, we have to recognise and combat it. In order to combat antigypsyism you need state institutions doing so, you need a legal framework and a functioning judiciary, and a civil society acting as watchdogs.

However, in my understanding, you need first of all a change of the mind-set of the society and of politics. In each country, societies have to conduct public discussions about the situation of the Roma and how politics and society are obliged to change their attitude. This is a long-term, complex process which has to involve a lot of actors and requires many different activities. And I am aware how difficult this is.

In countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, it would be further of utmost importance to initiate a public discussion on the role, position or situation of Roma during and after the wars. Since it is also the yet prevailing public discourse in both countries which reflects the antigypsyism and puts up obstacles for the equal participation of Roma.

In Kosovo they are still perceived as collaborators of the Serbs and the expulsion of 100.000 of them after the war is therefore, justified; not talking about the killing of many and the destruction of around 80 settlements.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Roma are not recognised or even realised as people who were affected by the war in 1992-1995, but they were ethnically cleansed, killed and deported as others too and they fought for the protection of their towns and villages.

And we all know how important myths and legends are in the creation of new nations or states and with such a public discourse as outlined here, Roma are not seen as being part of the states and of the societies of these states. And this we have to change.

## **VIII**

This would be my food for thought not only for the remaining time of your session but also for consideration what would be possible and necessary on order to address and combat antigypsyism in your countries.

I thank for your attention and would like to give the floor for questions or comments to the presentation and hope that we will find the time also to reflect upon what you could take home from the workshop in general and what you would or could need in future to work on combating antigypsyism.

### **Questions?**

**What would be priorities in your country in order to combat AG?**

**Which mechanisms could be used?**

## Reports

[The Wall of Anti-Gypsyism – Roma in Western Balkans](#) (Regional report)

[The Wall of Anti-Gypsyism – Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

[The Wall of Anti-Gypsyism – Roma in Kosovo](#)

[The Wall of Anti-Gypsyism – Roma in Macedonia](#)

[The Wall of Anti-Gypsyism – Roma in Serbia](#)