



Protecting minorities in these difficult times: the situation of the Roma community

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Statement by

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and its study group on the inclusion of the Roma join the call of Members from EU institutions as well as civil society organisations to raise concern over the worsening situation of marginalized communities, amongst them the Roma, during this difficult and uncertain period. We praise the volunteers and employees of Roma organisations for the invaluable work they are carrying out to continue assisting the Roma community in this challenging time,

during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Yet their efforts cannot replace the governments' responsibilities for taking care of the whole population of their countries, including the Roma community. Nor should they replace the EU's duty to strive towards inclusion and equality for the Roma.

Many Roma in Europe have been living in destitution for far too long, and their situation now risks spiralling out of control with dire consequences for the members of this community. Many live in overcrowded camps with no access to running water, making it extremely hard to maintain the social distance and the hygiene necessary to suppress contagion. Lacking internet connections and the necessary hardware, Roma children cannot participate in any of the online educational activities organized by schools during their closure. Besides losing out on their education, Roma children are now also facing a lack of food, since school attendance often represented their only means to get a warm daily meal.

Many Roma work in the informal economy, not out of choice, but because they have no other way of feeding their family given the discrimination they face when applying for regular work. In view of restrictions on movements, they can no longer carry out these tasks. Not eligible to apply for unemployment benefits or other schemes set up by governments to sustain workers who have lost their jobs, they are being pushed into an even deeper poverty level. At the same time, antigypsyism is on the rise as the Roma are getting blamed for the spread of the virus in some regions, facing even more hostility than before.

In the light of the numerous reports that are emerging from various organisations concerning the dire situation of the Roma communities during this pandemic, we call on the Commission to monitor more than ever the Roma situation in the Member States. We urgently call on Member States to live up to their responsibility of protecting the Roma's right to health and to take into account the specificity of the living situation of the Roma community when applying emergency measures. We call for access to clean and safe water supplies, so that the rules on hygiene and sanitation can be adhered to. Temporary access to accommodation should be given to Roma communities residing in camps amidst dismal conditions, to allow them to properly follow the rules on social distancing. The Roma should be given access to medical care, medical tests, masks and treatments as all other citizens in the Member States where they reside. The protection of fundamental rights should be universal, and should not differentiate on the basis of one's ethnicity or residential address.

We call on the European Commission to ascertain that the EU actions and programmes designed towards assisting citizens during this pandemic and offering much needed recovery thereafter, take into account the realities and difficulties faced by the Roma. We consider in this regard the importance of continuous dialogue with representatives of the Roma communities and Roma organisations, who can offer key recommendations so that the actions developed truly address the difficulties faced by the Roma community. As the voice of civil society, the EESC is committed to facilitate this dialogue to reach out to the most vulnerable in the current crisis.