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2004 REPORT
ON ACTIVITIES RELATING
TO ROMA AND TRAVELLERS

Implemented by

Directorate General III - Social Cohesion
Migration and Roma Department
Roma and Travellers Division and the
Co-ordinator for activities concerning Roma and Travellers

1. The Group of Specialists on Roma, Gypsies and Travellers (MG-S-ROM)

Historical background

When it was set up in September 1995, the Group of Specialists on Roma/Gypsies was the first Council of Europe body existing on a long-term basis to monitor the situation of Roma/Gypsies in Europe. Made up of permanent and non-permanent members appointed by the member states, it advises the Committee of Ministers, through the European Committee on Migration (CDMG), about issues relating to Roma/Gypsies. In 2002, the MG-S-ROM expanded its areas of responsibility to include Travellers and was given a new name, the Group of Specialists on Roma, Gypsies and Travellers.

Committee of Ministers Recommendations on Roma and Travellers drafted by the Group

The Group took the initiative that led to Committee of Ministers Recommendation (2000) 4 on the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe and Recommendation (2001) 17 on improving the economic and employment situation of Roma/Gypsies and Travellers in Europe, as well as the new Recommendation (2004) 14 on the Movement and Encampment of Travellers in Europe, which was adopted by the Ministers' Deputies at their 907th meeting on 1 December 2004. A Recommendation on Improving Housing Conditions for Roma and Travellers in Europe should be adopted by the Ministers' Deputies in early 2005.

Two additional draft recommendations are being discussed at the level of the Group of Specialists: a draft recommendation on appropriate access of Roma and Travellers to public health care and a draft recommendation on policies for Roma and Travellers that should include a chapter on monitoring the implementation of national strategies/programmes for Roma and/or Travellers. This chapter will also be included as an appendix in all previous

recommendations (on education, employment, housing, and health). The Group decided to organise ad hoc working groups in early 2005 to finalise these draft recommendations.

Composition in the Group

The group comprises 14 permanent members (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Ukraine), as well as a number of countries which pay their own expenses to participate in the work of the group. In 2004 France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom fell under this category. Expenses are also met for eight Roma representatives or experts appointed in the light of meeting agendas. A number of international organisations/institutions (European Commission, OSCE-ODIHR, UNHCR, UNDP, World Bank) take part in the group's activities, as do some international NGOs which hold observer status with the Council of Europe (ERRC, PER, etc).

At its 18th MG-S-ROM held in Prešov, Slovakia, on 21-24 November 2004, the MG-S-ROM has decided to grant the European Roma and Travellers Forum with a status of observer. It also decided to systematically invite a member of the Forum in this capacity among the abovementioned eight seats reserved for Roma and consultants.

The Group re-elected for one year its Chair (Mr. Andrzej Mirga from Poland) and Vice-Chair (Mr. Claudio Marta from Italy).

Decisions or actions taken by the Group in 2004

The two most recent statutory meetings of the MG-S-ROM took place in Strasbourg on 29 and 30 March 2004 and in Prešov, Slovak Republic, on 21-24 November. The latter included field visits to a Romani settlement and a housing estate for Roma, as well as a public hearing with state and local authorities and non-governmental Roma organisations, as this is usually the case for meetings taking place in member states. During the public hearing in Slovakia, issues such as the segregation of Roma children in schools and forced sterilisation of Romani women were addressed, as well as discrimination in practice and lack of access of Roma to housing, employment and justice.

Forced return of Roma to Serbia and Montenegro, including Kosovo

At its 17th meeting in March 2004 the Group of Specialists adopted an opinion regarding Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1633 (2003) on Forced returns of Roma from the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including Kosovo, to Serbia and Montenegro from Council of Europe member states. The Group considers this issue as a priority and will establish further contacts with the recently created working group on internally displaced persons under the Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Legal Aspects of Territorial Asylum, Refugees and Stateless Persons (CAHAR).

Access of nomadic populations to social rights

The Group pursued in 2004 its discussion on access of nomadic populations (i.e. Travellers, Yenish and nomadic Roma and Sinti) to social rights based on the study carried out by consultants. Currently, the study focuses on six countries: France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Cultural identity and Romani language

The Group decided at its last meeting in Prešov to pursue its discussion initiated at the Seminar on Cultural Identities of Roma, Travellers and related groups held in Strasbourg in September 2003, focusing particularly on the meaning of “Travellers” and “nomadic populations”. Pending the results of the abovementioned study on nomadic populations, a new seminar on cultural identity may be organised in the course of 2005. The Group may also address the issues of standardisation of the Romani language (in partnership with the Secretariat of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) and of harmonisation of teaching materials in Romani (in partnership with DG IV Education).

Roma migration and the image of Roma migrants in the media

The Group relaunched its discussion on Roma migrants thanks to an activity “Roma Youth and Alternatives to Migration” organised by the Forum for European Young Roma Persons (FERYP) and financed by the Norwegian government under its Council of Europe presidency. Further discussion on this topic is expected in 2005 in co-operation with the European Committee on Migration (CDMG) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe which initiated the debate about the image of (Roma) migrants in the media.

European solidarity fund

The discussion around the creation of a European solidarity fund was postponed to 2005 but the idea to have such a fund to support local authorities that wish to effectively improve the living conditions of Roma or Traveller communities is on the agenda. The Congress for Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe will be invited to take part in future discussion on this proposal.

Co-operation with other Council of Europe sectors and other international organisations

The Group of Specialists keeps itself regularly informed of the activities and visits carried out by other Council of Europe sectors, such as the ECRI, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Council of Europe Development Bank, as well as about initiatives launched by international organisations (for instance the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 initiated by the World Bank and OSI or the implementation of the OSCE Plan of Action on Roma and Sinti).

Future meetings of the Group

The 19th meeting of the Group will take place in Strasbourg, probably early April 2005. The 20th meeting of the Group will be held in a member state. Two countries – Romania and Ukraine – already proposed to hold one of the next MG-S-ROM meetings.

2. The Programme on Roma and Travellers in Europe

The “Project on Roma/Gypsies in Central and Eastern Europe” was started in 1996, thanks to voluntary contributions by various member states. Late in 2002, it was renamed the “Project for policies toward Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in Europe”. It is intended to help and provide support to governments in the development and implementation of policies *vis-a-vis*

Roma and Travellers. Bilateral and multilateral activities are carried out under this programme, often in co-operation with other organisations. It also provides financial support for Roma and Traveller representatives to attend international events.

In 2004 the Programme was financed thanks to voluntary contributions from Finland of approximately 304,500 euros in total. Four main priorities have been set up within this project in 2004: assistance activities to develop and implement national programmes for Roma, meetings to set up the European Roma and Travellers Forum, trainings of Roma NGOs, Roma education and health related activities, as well as coordination with other international institutions and initiatives.

The programme has been prolonged for another three-year period under the name "Programme for Roma and Travellers in Europe". A new contribution of 60,000 was received from Finland for 2005.

3. Work relating to the setting up of a European Roma and Travellers Forum

In January 2001, the President of Finland, Ms Tarja Halonen, suggested in an address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that serious consideration should be given to creating for the Roma some kind of consultative assembly to give them a voice at international level.

Following a joint French/Finnish proposal of July 2003, the idea of a non-governmental association with a special link with the Council of Europe was adopted.

After a four-year consultation process with all the actors involved and elaboration of the relevant texts (including its statutes), the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) was registered in Strasbourg as a non-governmental organisation in September 2004. A Partnership Agreement was signed between the ERTF and the Council of Europe on 15 December 2004. This Agreement provides for a Council of Europe contribution in terms of funds and human resources and enables the Forum to have a privileged relationship with sectors of the organisation which deal with issues relevant to Roma and Travellers.

The first meeting of the Forum is expected to take place by the end of Spring 2005 once the selection process of members of the Forum (i.e. national delegates from Council of Europe member states, as well as representatives of the five existing international Romani non-governmental organisations - RNC, IRU, GATIEF, FERYP and IRWN) is completed.

4. The joint Stability Pact Project with the European Commission on Roma in South-Eastern Europe

A second joint Council of Europe/European Commission project on Roma in South East Europe was agreed in February 2003. As under the first programme, close co-operation has been established with the OSCE-ODIHR, another partner in this project.

This new project aims to consolidate the efforts made during the first project, i.e. to promote the devising and adoption of comprehensive national strategies (Albania, Moldova and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia") covering areas such as education, housing, employment, social issues, health, citizenship and participation in public life. Activities of the project also include assistance activities for the implementation of national programmes for Roma, as well as trainings of Roma to help them participating more effectively in the implementation process or to become Roma health mediators. A network of twenty Roma organisations was set up in Moldova, and a dozen of Roma health mediators were trained. A regional and four national surveys on Roma access to employment were carried in 2004 by international and local consultants, most of them being Roma. Local round tables to discuss the results of these surveys were organised with relevant ministries and Roma NGOs

representatives. A partnership with UNDP and Gallup to use the conclusions of their statistical survey in access to employment was signed. A regional conference on Access of Roma to Employment should be organised in Skopje on 25-26 April 2005.

5. Assistance programme on issues relating to Roma refugees and displaced persons

Following the success of the co-operation programme of 2003 between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Council of Europe, the latter has decided to continue carrying out joint activities in Serbia and Montenegro, in Kosovo and in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". These relate, depending on the country concerned, to the integration of refugees, the voluntary return of Roma to their places of origin or the obtaining of identity papers and other personal documents.

A Seminar with UNHCR on the situation of Roma refugees, IDPs and returnees in the Balkans was organised in December. It addressed *inter alia* perspectives for return to Kosovo, integration of returnees from Western Europe, housing conditions and evictions of returnees and internally displaced persons. The Council of Europe draft Recommendation on Improving Housing Conditions for Roma was used as a reference document. A field visit to a returnees' settlement was organised with the participation of ambassadors from countries, which signed bilateral agreements on return with Serbia and Montenegro. Conclusions show that there is a need to clarify the situation (the OSCE-ODIHR has commissioned a report) and to solve outstanding issues, such as identification papers, schooling of children, evictions from temporary housing or reception of returnees at the airport. The two other joint activities with UNHCR have been postponed to 2005.

6. The Council of Europe project on the "Education of Roma/Gypsy children"

Within the framework of a project on the "Education of Roma/Gypsy children" being run over a number of years by the Council of Europe Directorate of Education, the Migration and Roma Department organised in Strasbourg in December 2004 a follow-up meeting on the harmonisation of teaching materials in the Romani language. Representatives from Ministries of Education from Finland, Romania and Bulgaria, School Directors and Professors in Linguistics attended the meeting. This related *inter alia* to the identification of existing mother-tongue (Romani) teaching materials and the pooling of these in order to reduce production costs, as well as to the translation and adaptation of these materials in the light of each member state's situation.

7. The Co-ordinator for activities concerning Roma and Travellers

In 2004 the Coordinator has focussed on coordination between the major inter-governmental organisations and institutions. For this purpose he has given top priority to reviving and strengthening the Informal Contact Group on Roma, Sinti and Travellers, which had failed to meet under three successive European Union presidencies: Greek, Italian and Irish.

Thanks to an excellent cooperation with OSCE-ODIHR, a recommendation on strengthening the Informal Contact Group was inserted into the OSCE Action Plan. This recommendation helped to relaunch the process under the Netherlands presidency which has organised three meetings of the Informal Group. These meetings have proved extremely useful not only in strengthening the relations between the major players in this area, but also in developing a spirit of multilateralism in the conception and implementation of activities.

The Informal Contact Group has taken up education, and more particularly, the desegregation of schools as the priority issue for joint action.

Measures are now being taken to ensure that the Contact Group meets under the Luxembourg and United Kingdom presidency of the European Union.

The Coordinator is trying to establish close contacts with the European Union, through the Commission and the European Parliament.

The Commission is moving towards the elaboration of a Community Programme on Roma and Travellers and has already set up an inter-departmental commission on Roma issues. The Coordinator wants to ensure that this commission work closely with the Council of Europe and is seeking to have some form of participation in it.

A project for the establishment of mediators in health, education and social assistance has been submitted to the European Commission for a possible joint project in 2005.

With regard to the European Parliament the Coordinator has established very good contact with Mrs Lydia Jarka, a Hungarian Roma who is a European member of parliament and who intends to work with the Council of Europe in promoting the interests of the Roma.

The Coordinator has dedicated a considerable amount of time for the establishment of the European Roma and Travellers Forum and has been responsible for chairing the meetings of Roma experts preparing the statute of the Forum. The Committee of Ministers agreed to a partnership agreement between the Council of Europe and the Forum on 3 November 2004 and the agreement was signed by both parties on 15 December 2004. The Forum will then start functioning as proposed. In preparation of its future work the Coordinator has requested all interested steering committees or other bodies involved directly or indirectly in Roma and Travellers issues to discuss the relations which they would like to establish with the Forum. Most bodies have manifested a deep interest in the future work of the Forum and the acting chairman of the Forum was invited to address the plenary meeting of the Minorities Commission in early December. The Coordinator addressed the plenary of the ECRI also on 17 December 2004.

The Coordinator intends to liaise between the Forum and the Council of Europe bodies and ensure that the relations which the Forum will have with the various Council of Europe bodies are of mutual interest. In this respect the Coordinator wants to stress the special relationship which the Forum should entertain with the Group of Specialists on Roma, Gypsies and Travellers (MG-S-ROM), which is the only body in the Organisation which deals exclusively with Roma issues.

8. The programme of training courses for young Roma

Following the success of an initial series of 10 courses offered to young Roma from central and eastern Europe at the Council of Europe's Roma and Travellers Division, this programme, financed by the Open Society Institute, has been renewed for a further period of two years. In April 2004, Ms Lina Kondur from Ukraine and Ms Sakibe Jashari from Kosovo (Serbia and Montenegro) started their internship, followed in September by Ms. Iliana Tsankova, Bulgaria, and Martina Pokutova from the Czech Republic.

They helped the Secretariat to carry out activities in south-eastern Europe, to prepare for a multilateral meeting on the evaluation of policies vis-a-vis Roma, to compile a list of existing government strategies and to publish newsletters of the Roma internship programme, which

gave an opportunity for all Roma trainees to express their views and report about their career after the internship.

Information about Council of Europe activities relating to Roma and Travellers is available on the Internet, at: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Social_Cohesion/Roma_Travellers

The Roma and Travellers Division publishes a regular newsletter (if you would like to receive this or request information related to the situation of Roma and Travellers in Europe, contact Mrs Karmélé Gangloff, DG.Roma@coe.int).

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