

PROJECT ABOUT ROMA IN SLOVENIA AND AUSTRIA

REPORT FROM THE ROUND TABLE ABOUT POSITION OF ROMA IN SLOVENIA AND AUSTRIA

LJUBLJANA, 8 AND 9 APRIL 1999

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The activities included a general overview of the implementation of the conclusions of the 1997 seminar "Improvements of the position of Roma –challenge for minority law" and presentation of the current concrete projects for improvement of the situation of Roma in both countries. During the meeting a great variety of measures and concrete projects was presented so in the written materials and presentations as in the discussion referring to some specific issues.

There was a video presentation about cultural and other achievements, and an exhibition of publications (books, newspapers, etc.) for Roma and about Roma. In the evening of April 9, the society of Roma in Slovenia-"Romani Union" prepared a cultural performance in the Cultural centre.

Reports about the round table were published in the main Slovene newspapers, covered by local and national radio and TV Slovenia.

OUR PROJECT INCLUDES:

1. *exhibition of photos from the Roma every-day life "Stolen images"*: Place Ljubljana, Cultural centre, from 24 March to 9 April 1999. The author is Dušan Frice

2. Presentation of the *publication* "Improvements of the position of Roma –contributions from Slovenia and Austria" and *presentation of the activities of the Council of Europe concerning Roma*. Time: 8 April 1999. Place: Ljubljana, Documentation centre of the Council of Europe.

3. *Round table "Position of Roma in Slovenia and Austria"*. Time: 9 April 1999, place: Cultural centre, Ljubljana, .

4. After this round table at the same place, there was the *open public round table and discussion* about the position of Roma today, and ways for overcoming the problems and prejudices through presentation and implementation of concrete projects of civic society for combating the prejudices towards Roma.

Participants: representative from the European Commission in Slovenia, member of the ECRI from Slovenia, experts on issues relating to the protection of

Roma from both countries, representatives of Roma from both countries, governmental representatives from both countries, representatives of non-governmental organisations engaged in voluntary work for the help to Roma people, students, persons interested in that issue and journalists.

The activities started with the *presentation of the publication "Improvements of the position of Roma - contributions from Slovenia and Austria" on 8 April in the Documentation Centre of the Council of Europe*. The publication "Improvements of the position of Roma - contributions from Slovenia and Austria" contains articles about legal, social, cultural, linguistic, employment and other aspects of the position of Roma in Slovenia and Austria as a base for further developments.

The main purpose of the presentation was not to repeat what was already written in the publication, but to present the existing possibilities for co-operation in the frame of the Council of Europe and other international organisations, and to try to identify the main issues which can lead to the improvement of the position of Roma in both countries.

The meeting was opened by *Mrs. Eva Tomič*, representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, who underlined the importance of the protection of human rights as one of the basic issues of the activities of the Council of Europe, which has a special role also in the activities concerning the 50th celebration of the organisation.

Director of the Documentation Centre of the Council of Europe *Mrs. Liana Kalčina Srhoj* underlined the role of the Centre as the place for information, discussion and exchange of views about different topics from the wide range of activities of the Council of Europe. She especially welcomed representatives of Roma community and invited them to attend also other meetings and presentations about minority protection and non-discrimination.

Mrs. Alenka Puhar, representative of Slovenia in ECRI, presented the activities of ECRI in the field of promotion of the rights of Roma, and of combating the prejudices.

Mrs. Vera Klopčič presented the activities of the Council of Europe concerning Roma, and underlined that also this project *about Roma in Slovenia and Austria* is included among projects which received the support of the Council of Europe in the scope of bilateral projects which improve the mutual understanding as a part of confidence-building measures. During the meeting great interest was expressed in the possible involvement and opportunities for Roma themselves to benefit from existing projects and programmes of international organisations.

The main objection for members of Roma community is the lack of linguistic competence of representatives of Roma, so one of the proposals was to translate documents of the Council of Europe and other international organisations at least in Slovene language and ensure adequate linguistic training for young Roma to enable them to participate on equal footing with the others.

Editors *Mr. Miroslav Polzer and Mrs. Vera Klopčič* gave some introductory remarks about the publication as guidelines for further discussion. *Mr. Miroslav Polzer* presented his article about combating the racism on Internet as a contemporary challenge for improvement of the knowledge of the position of some ethnic groups.

Focus of the discussion was on the presentation of the open issues and actual problems of the status of Roma. The role of the media and the necessity to disseminate a more positive image of Roma through the media, including the Internet, was sought as a very important way of promotion of the better understanding among Roma and the majority.

During the discussion participants received some additional information about recent developments and shortcomings concerning the position of Roma in Slovenia. Representatives of Roma reported about different interpretations of the right of Roma representatives to be elected as members of the Council of the local authorities. Only in one municipality in Slovenia do they have their special representative. In other municipalities where Roma live, they have been denied the right of the "guaranteed seat on local level" in the Council of the local authorities, due to a different interpretation of the legal act about local self-government. Participants supported the proposal of Roma community to ensure such representation on local level in all municipalities where Roma live.

Participants agreed that the implementation of adopted national or international legal and other documents aimed to promote the rights of Roma is closely related with issues of tolerance and pluralism, acceptance, social cohesion and respect for differences. In this sense the role of the Council of Europe is especially important, so in normative and practical activities as in the process of building a common understanding of the notion, contents and scope of human rights declared in adopted documents and strategies.

After the presentation participants were invited to the "*Evening of the Roma poetry*" in the *National Ethnographic Museum*, where two young Roma poets read their poems. For that occasion the Museum prepared an exhibition of drawings by pupils from elementary and secondary schools about the way how they see Roma people.

ROUND TABLE IN THE MAIN CULTURAL CENTRE "CANKARJEV DOM" LJUBLJANA, 9 APRIL 1999

OPENING SESSION AND GENERAL INFORMATION

The meeting was opened by *Mrs. Majda Širca*, the state Secretary in the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, who underlined the importance and influence of the Roma culture as one of the main challenges for rethinking about the prevailing "pure" rational and individualistic approach of the majority in contemporary societies. Her introductory remarks were the guidelines for further discussion.

Mrs. Olga Butinar Čeh, the programme director of the of main Cultural Centre "Cankarjev dom" Ljubljana expressed the support for such activities which contribute to better understanding between majority and minorities and promote universal values of culture and human creativity.

Mr. Martin Panmer welcomed the meeting in the name of the Embassy of the Republic of Austria in Slovenia, and underlined that the whole project could be seen as a contribution to the bilateral co-operation between Slovenia and Austria.

Editors of the publication "Improvements of the position of Roma - contributions from Slovenia and Austria", *Mr. Miroslav Polzer and Mrs. Vera Klopčič*, acted as chairpersons of the round table.

PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION

I. OVERVIEW OF THE POSITION OF ROMA IN BOTH COUNTRIES

Presidents of Roma organisations *Mr. Rudolf Sarközy* from Austria and *Mr. Jožek Horvat* from Slovenia, and governmental representatives, *Mr. Heinz Tichy* on behalf of Austria and *Mr. Peter Winkler* on behalf of Slovenia, gave a brief overview of the position of Roma in both countries concerning the recent developments in different fields of social and political life. Participants from Austria stressed that in Austria members of Roma minority are members of the Advisory councils for minorities, as a part of such a council for Roma in Austria. President of Roma organisation from Austria pointed out the fact that they had to fight for a long time for the recognition of Roma as victims of Nazi regime, but in 1994 they succeeded. So he recommended further united work of all for further promotion of the position of Roma in both countries.

President of Roma organisation from Slovenia underlined that they see the ways for further development in the inclusion of Roma in the decision-making process at all levels. He underlined that very often it happens that after the discussion and adoption of their proposals, nobody really cares for the implementation.

During the presentations and discussion about the issues of the legal position of Roma (both autochthonous or immigrant), education, culture, employment and housing and activities in the field of elimination of prejudices, focus was on the presentation of concrete projects and open issues of general importance for the position of Roma.

II. LEGAL POSITION OF ROMA

During the discussion about the legal position of Roma, the issue of the protection of either autochthonous or immigrant Roma occurred as the most important characteristic of further developments in contemporary societies. That issue is of general importance in the field of the protection of national minorities, so from the aspect of evaluation and interpretation in theory, politics and strategies, as from the practical aspect. For the protection of Roma in contemporary societies it is even more important. Being migrants and travellers, they need adequate legal regulation of their status also in the countries of immigration. The bad economic situation in some countries contributed to their migration towards the rich countries, mostly in Western Europe. Expert *Mr. Heinz Tichy* advocates better treatment of "recent Roma immigrants". During the discussion, the representatives of the societies of Roma immigrants in Slovenia, *Mr. Nezirovič (Velenje)* and *Bečiri (Maribor)*, who represent Roma mostly from the regions of ex-Yugoslavia, and already have citizenship of the Republic of Slovenia, presented the problems they face in everyday life. Although their societies are included in the Union of the Roma societies in Slovenia, they still suffer because of the lack of material sources for their work.

Representative of the "Helsinki monitor" *Mrs. Neva Miklavčič Predan* from Slovenia underlined the importance of regulated status of citizenship. The lack of proper understanding of this issue could lead to the violations of human rights, especially for the immigrants from the territory of ex-Yugoslavia.

III. EDUCATION AND CULTURE

The role of better educational structure of Roma, especially young generation and children, was unanimously declared as a foundation stone for the implementation of the rights of Roma also in other fields, as the problems of low educational structure influence also the low social status and bad self-image of Roma population themselves. Only if states will multiply their financial and general support in that way, Roma children will be able to cope with challenges of the requirements of educational system, otherwise they will continue to live on the margins of society. *Mr. Mladen Tancer* underlined that the education of Roma is the main possibility for development and improvement of the situation of Roma,

and states should therefore invest appropriate means and adapt educational requirements to the special needs of Roma children. Though the process is slow, in Slovenia we can already see some results. The programmes in elementary schools are adapted to special needs of Roma children, and textbooks, syllabus, food and other necessary equipment are provided by the Ministry of Education. When Roma children reach a better educational level, they can solve also other problems, and establish a new quality in relations between Roma and non-Roma. There are already some examples which prove that such partnership and coexistence are possible.

In this field there is a very important contribution through the activities of the non-governmental organisations /institutions as a part of civic society. They start with help for the youngest, pre- and school- Roma children. The most active is the "Society for voluntary work-MOST (the bridge)". Mrs. *Ruža Mlač* and co-operators explained that their work concerning Roma is voluntary and devoted to the improvement of the position of Roma. Mrs. *Aleksandra Libenšek* described the project for the psychological and pedagogical support and help for Roma children in the place Leskovec near Krško.

Representative of the Ministry of Culture Mrs. *Suzana Čurin Radovič* prepared a profound presentation of the programmes of that Ministry for the support of cultural activities of Roma. Their programmes and projects are included in the special programme of the Ministry of Culture for activities of national minorities, Roma and immigrants in Slovenia.

IV. EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING

The destiny of Roma people is that they are mostly living in economically undeveloped areas, on the margins of society. When they try to move in the central parts of villages or towns, they often face hostilities and rejection of other inhabitants. Nowadays the economic crisis and restrictions in some regions multiply the possibilities for Roma to lose their jobs due to their low professional qualifications. Mr. *Frane Smerdu*, director of the Employment Office from Novo mesto, described the way of preparation and adoption of special programmes for employment of Roma. Some of the projects are already going on in the frame of the Employment Office of Novo mesto. The most important measures are: coordination and development of special educational and employment programmes for Roma, improvement of housing (ensuring appropriate land and enabling the building of own houses), and support for current projects of some enterprises, aiming to employ Roma. One of the most effective programmes is the programme of the enterprise *B&Z*. Mrs. *Dora Zagorc* presented the way how they include Roma in their work and employment strategy.

Representative of the Ministry for Labour *Mrs. Danica Ošljaj* presented the activities of the Ministry which support concrete projects on national and local level in the frame of the national strategy of employment policy in Slovenia.

V. OPEN ROUND TABLE - ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD OF ELIMINATION OF PREJUDICES

The message of this round table and all activities was that such improvements as having a round table in the main Cultural institution in Ljubljana were unpredictable not so long ago. It was itself seen as a way to combat expansion of racist prejudices and aggressions towards Roma, and promote better understanding between Roma and non-Roma.

The presented possibilities and concrete projects convinced Roma that society is ready to help them. When *Mrs. Brankica Petkovič*, as a representative of the "Open society institute" in Ljubljana described their work and available programmes to Roma she also offered special help in order to write applications in a proper way.

It was obvious that the combating of prejudices means a common awareness of the importance of the respect for human rights and dignity of every one. Tolerance remains the foundation stone in the building of a common vision of all future developments aiming to achieve social cohesion.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Presentations of the participants and the discussion contributed to the clarification of some main approaches towards protection of Roma in general, and determined the participation of Roma themselves at all levels of decision-making processes as a key issue for further developments. As *Mr. Jožek Horvat*, president of Roma in Slovenia, pointed out, the effective participation in decision-making processes includes also the participation of Roma themselves in the process of the implementation and monitoring of the adopted decisions.

Mr. Rudolf Sarközy, president of Roma organisation in Austria, underlined the importance of the raising of conscience among Roma themselves. Although Roma live in different circumstances, and besides the distinction among Roma who maintained their traditional culture and professions, and Roma who had already integrated in the majority population, the greatest group is the group of socially unprivileged Roma, so they need adequate organisations which could protect their interests and help them to integrate into the majority population, while maintaining their cultural and other characteristics.

The work which was already done, the publication and summaries in three languages (Slovene, English and German), could serve as a base for further activ-

ities as a "follow-up" of the Project, as a contribution of Roma and the "others" to the improvement of the protection of Roma and better understanding between Roma and non-Roma.

Vera Klopčič