

ex-officio Report regarding the living conditions of the Roma community in Cyprus.

AYT 3/2020, dated 22 December 2020, Own-initiated Position of the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights as the National Independent Human Rights Institution (NHRI), regarding the living conditions of the Roma community in Cyprus.

The purpose of the Position was to record the real daily life of the Roma community in Cyprus, the challenges it has to face, the obstacles it has to overcome, but also the needs it has to meet, in order to reach adequate standard of living. Therefore, for the purpose of drafting this Position, the views and opinions of the competent authorities were obtained (specifically: Social Welfare Services, the Ministry of Education, the Turkish Cypriot Property Management Service), as well as of the views of the non-governmental organization CypROM. An on-site visit was also made to areas where Roma live, while the relevant legal framework was studied.

The main issues, which the Commissioner examined, are those of housing conditions, education, employment opportunities and access to health and welfare services – which were considered inter-related and interdependent factors for the purpose of ensuring decent living conditions. As the Commissioner noted, without the basic education, and the consequent knowledge of the Greek language, the chances of Roma people to access to the labor market are negligible, while without the possibility of employment, their economic dependence on the state is continued. At the same time, it was noted that the housing of Roma in or unsuitable premises/houses, in conjunction with difficulties in accessing adequate health services, exacerbate social marginalization and widen the gap between Roma and the rest of the society.

On the issue of housing, the Commissioner noted that, especially the Roma who live in the District of Limassol, reside in houses with many and serious functional and construction problems, which need immediate repairs, while in many houses, there is not even supply of electricity or hot water. The Commissioner acknowledged the fact that, for housing purposes, the frequent movement of Roma may lead to difficulties in handling their housing issues. However, she commented that these problems can be solved by adopting more flexible procedures and by frequent communication with the respective residents in the premises.

In addition, the Commissioner expressed the view that the remote Roma settlements in the countryside should be closed and residents should be relocated to urban centers, where they can be more easily integrated into the wider Cypriot society.

With regard to education, the Commissioner acknowledged the commendable actions and initiatives taken so far – such as the provision of additional classes for

learning Greek, the provision of free meals to children, the provision of Turkish language courses by Turkish Cypriot teachers and courses for the Kurbetcha dialect – with the aim of securing the right to education of Roma children. However, it was noted that challenges still remain, mainly in terms of ensuring the enrollment of all children in schools and further reducing the dropout rate, before completing compulsory education, as well as providing these children with an adequate and satisfactory level of education, which will give them the basic knowledge and skills that will enable them to break the vicious circle of marginalization and poverty.

The Commissioner pointed out that the issue of Roma access to employment is directly linked to education, as many Roma do not speak or have limited knowledge of Greek or English, which reduces their chances of employment. As a result, most Roma remain unemployed and depend entirely on public benefits/ aids, while their chances of becoming independent of the socio-economic support system are reduced.

Problems were also identified in relation to the access of Roma to public health services, as many have not been informed and/or instructed to register with the General Health System and enjoy the medical care that is available to all Cypriot citizens without discrimination.

With regard to the support of Roma people with social welfare services , the Commissioner noted that this is limited to the horizontal measures taken by the Social Welfare Services to support all vulnerable groups, without any targeted measures that takes into account the specificities of the culture and their way of life. The Commissioner, therefore, pointed out that the ten-year Action Plan (2021-2030), which the Social Welfare Services were called upon to draw up, following a relevant Communication from the European Commission, is an opportunity to develop a holistic approach to Roma issues, which should focus on respect for and protection of fundamental rights, with a view to safeguarding dignified living to all Roma people.

The Commissioner submitted a series of Recommendations to all competent services, to adopt measures which improve and correct the current situation and will ensure decent living conditions for the Roma community.