

Organization: Bernard Rorke, Advocacy Officer, European Roma Rights Centre

Working session 14: Tolerance and non-discrimination II, including Roma and Sinti issues, including implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti

Title: Forced evictions and access to clean water

The 2016 communication on the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies is the most explicit declaration from the European Commission that human rights must come first. The Commission reported that it had “stepped up action” to fight discrimination, segregation, anti-Gypsyism, hate speech and hate crime.

We are pleased to observe that this stance strongly accords with the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point Action Plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti.

And hope that this accord will lead to even closer coordination - with the Commission taking full advantage of the long-standing expertise, and invaluable insights of the OSCE, rooted in its deep commitment to empowering Roma to participate in public and political life.

However, for such participation to have meaning and substance, Roma must be able to exercise their fundamental rights in secure and safe living conditions, consistent with human dignity.

At the mid-point of the EU Roma Framework, the Commission is concerned that when it comes to combating anti-Gypsyism “no real improvements can be seen on the ground”; it urged public authorities to distance themselves from racist and xenophobic discourse that targets Roma; and highlighted the failures of Member States to address the most important housing challenges, namely fighting segregation and preventing forced evictions.

The Council of Europe called for a halt to forced evictions of Roma in Italy, to end homelessness, close Roma-only camps and segregated emergency facilities “by offering genuinely integrated ordinary housing alternatives to the families concerned.”

Its clear from the evidence in recent months that this call went unheeded, evictions continue unabated, and actions taken by many local authorities constitute a clear breach of the Racial Equality Directive.

We would repeat our recommendation that Italy gets beyond the legacy of the ‘Nomad Emergency’ and meets its commitments made in its National Roma Integration Strategy.

When it comes to access to water we appreciate that the Slovak Presidency of the EU lists the efficient use of water as a natural resource as a priority,

with a view to having Council Conclusions adapted “to ensure and protect sustainable water resources.”

There is one clear finding from the research ERRC has conducted in seven countries, on access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation in Romani neighbourhoods:

That the very acute water scarcity in Roma communities is not due to droughts or other acts of nature, but a direct consequence of policy processes and decision-making by local authorities. The result is that hugely disproportionate numbers of Roma in 21st Century Europe are denied access to clean drinking water and sanitation.

We recommend that the Slovak Presidency, in its endeavours to have Council Conclusions adapted on this theme, directly addresses the issue of deliberate denial of access to clean water and sanitation to socially excluded Romani communities across the continent.

Recommendations

And that participating states

-) Adopt laws explicitly recognising the human right to water and sanitation and ensure that all people in the country enjoy access to safe drinking water and sanitation
-) Make sure that conditions of housing informality do not inhibit this right
-) Adopt policies and allocate budgets to connect Roma settlements to public drinking water and sewage systems, and ensure the quality of water is guaranteed.