

Roma – full citizens?

A large number of Roma living in Serbia and other parts of South Eastern Europe lack personal documents, including personal ID cards, birth certificates and passports. The OSCE, together with the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, is organising a conference in Belgrade today, bringing together experts from many neighbouring countries to exchange ideas and experience in solving this issue.

The lack of identity documents affects the ability of Romani citizens to find employment, get health care, vote, go to school, all basic rights and duties that any citizen enjoys. Just imagine you do not have an ID document: you can not rent an apartment, you can not get a driver's license, you can not go to the doctor, you can not vote. So many things we take for granted comes from having an identity, a document that says who we are. Without it, one in fact does not legally exist. And those who do not exist can not get medical treatment, go to school, find a place to live. It means exclusion from society.

This is the fate of thousands of Roma who live in Serbia. Some of those are persons who are either not registered or do not possess basic documents though they are actually citizens of the country they live in. Often their actual place of residence is an informal settlement, which, in general, does not allow for registration of residence though their families might live there already for a long time. There may be many reasons for them not having any form of identity document, but it is now stretching across generations. As many parents do not have proper identification, they find it difficult to send their children to school or get medical treatment. It is one factor that contributes to the "poverty trap" in which many Roma find themselves.

If this situation is not changed, these Romani citizens of Serbia will remain at the margins of the society.

In order to promote the solution of this issue, representatives of governments, civil society and international organizations working in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, FYROM, and Serbia and Montenegro are gathering today in Belgrade to discuss the best ways to solve this issue.

The Conference will open a regional debate and highlight the importance of systemic reform of the legislative framework and administrative procedures at all levels of government. South East European Governments, such as Serbia, need to take urgent action by providing innovative approaches to the unique challenges Roma encounter with regards to accessing the civil registration process in their country.

As one of the signatories, the State Union Serbia and Montenegro should take the obligations and recommendations stemming from international treaties into account when looking for solutions. In particular, the civil registration is a crucial issue not only for Roma as one of the most vulnerable minorities lacking access to rights. It is also important in Serbia's EU accession process negotiations which, emphasizes reforms in this field. Moreover, within other international frameworks, such as the *OSCE Action Plan on Improvement of the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area* and the *Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015)*, the Government has committed to provide new and efficient models of civil registration.

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