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Presence in Albania

HEAD OF PRESENCE'S OP-ED ON HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

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Let's go far, together

By Ambassador Florian Raunig

One of the striking and wonderful things foreigners often notice about Albania is the pride people take in their country. Albanians share a patriotism that is rare in today's world because it is not based on conflict with or rejection of other nations.

As Albania makes strides forward, the country must advance as a whole. But what about those who do not walk so well? Those who have been held back for reasons outside of their control, such as a disability, their individual or family history, or their personal or ethnic identity? If some are left behind, the progress of the rest is in jeopardy.

In 1950, the United Nations declared 10 December as international Human Rights Day, a day for us to celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and highlight its importance as a standard of achievement for all nations. When we talk of human rights, the talk can quickly become abstract, theoretical. But there is a simple core to every human right that resonates with all of us. The right to freedom from discrimination is, at its core, the right of each and every one of us to have an equal opportunity to participate in our society, to contribute to it, and to advance with it. To not be left behind.

Discrimination affects many people in Albania, and yet much of the discussion centres on Roma and Egyptian people. Why, some might ask, this special focus? Unfortunately, all the available data shows that Roma and Egyptians across the country face social exclusion to a greater degree than other Albanians. They face disadvantages and discrimination in all areas of life, from participation in decision-making to lack of services like healthcare and education. They are being left behind.

On the occasion of Human Rights Day, I would like to celebrate Albania's strides forward, and build on recent momentum to develop long-term solutions to make sure that all people have equal opportunities. This is not the sole responsibility of the Government; the people have to take action as well. It is not an act of charity. When someone else's rights are violated, your rights could very well be next. Addressing discrimination is an important duty for every citizen. Despite our differences, we must walk forward together.

The OSCE participating States, including Albania, have made a commitment to combating discrimination. This means that minority and disadvantaged groups should be given the opportunity to participate equally in the civic, economic and cultural life of all OSCE countries.

An October 2013 status report of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights on improving the situation of Roma concludes that they continue to face

discrimination and remain divided from mainstream society across the OSCE region. The report notes that while progress has been made by governments, significant gaps remain in areas such as housing, education and health. In 2012, Albania's Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination reported 90 discrimination complaints submitted, 35% of which were related to race and ethnicity. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

When we look at the current situation in the country, it is clear that not all groups have had an equal opportunity to participate. Albania is among the few countries in the Western Balkans that does not explicitly provide for participation of minorities in governmental decision-making processes. While Roma and Egyptians do serve as elected councillors in several local government units, their participation in decision-making at the central level is limited to the appointment of a Roma person to the State Committee on Minorities, an advisory body to the Government. Roma and Egyptians have neither been represented in Albania's parliament nor been given electable places on the electoral lists of the country's political parties.

Another indicator of social inclusion is housing. Despite the ongoing legalization programmes in Albania, most Roma and Egyptian communities still lack clear legal title. This problem affects non-Roma as well, but the Roma are disproportionately affected as they lack the connections and knowledge to assert their rights effectively.

Education is a crucial part of any effort to eliminate discrimination. This not only means that disadvantaged groups must have equal access to education, but also that educational curricula must be reviewed to teach all children about tolerance and equal opportunities from a young age. Also, while more and more Roma and Egyptians in Albania are receiving quality education, including university education, there is a gap between this success and finding employment. The Presence is committed to supporting the Government in opening positions and increasing the professional skills of young Roma. This, in turn, will also support the authorities in improving access of Roma and Egyptian communities to services and increase the communities' feeling of being heard and represented.

Albania has taken many positive steps to address discrimination. The 'Law for Protection from Discrimination,' drafted with the assistance of the OSCE Presence, established important human rights protections. Institutions like the People's Advocate and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination fulfil a crucial role in assuring its implementation and protecting human rights. Albania has also taken steps to be a regional leader, hosting together with the OSCE a high-level conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination to discuss combating discrimination, preventing and responding to hate crimes in May 2013. In addition, the Albanian section of the OSCE's regional 'Best Practices for Roma Integration' project has contributed to the integration of Roma by bringing together governments and civil society groups to discuss good practices and lessons learned in the fields of anti-discrimination, housing, and participation in public life.

On this Human Rights Day let's take the time to think about discrimination, which affects not only Albania, but the entire world. We need to discuss successes and find ways to overcome the barriers that block the path to an equal and just society. It is a long road, as we have to change mentalities so that people are judged on their character, and not on superficial characteristics. Walking this road together is not always easy. But as the proverb says, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'

Let's go far.