

Eliminating Gypsophobia and the risk of “communautarisme” in France

**Contribution of the Centre AVER of Research and Action
against all forms of Racism**

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For five years, the Centre AVER of Research and Action against all forms of Racism, a Rromani NGO based in France, works for tackling, evidencing and analyzing diverse forms of racism, with a special focus on the new forms of this plague. Given the fact that the vast majority of its members are of Rromani background, AVER puts a substantial part of its efforts on Gypsophobia while the tools elaborated as a result of its experience in this specific field are relevant for combating racism against any other population.

The Rromani minority in France has recently increased in number, and is presently around 500,000 – among whom 25.000 to 40.000 lead a partially or totally mobile way of life. Yet to date hardly any member of the Rromani community in France is on an academic or advisory level, and no one is involved in the mass-media or has reached a significantly high administrative level. Yet to date there is no real programme for schooling Rromani children in spite of their strong wish for attending school. Yet to date there is no campaign for familiarising the mainstream population with real Rromani culture (beyond "nomadic stereotypes") and their contribution to French society. Yet to date there is no mention of Rromani history and heritage in French school books. Yet to date there is no acceptance of the mobile way of life of the less than 10% of Rroms who prefer mobile to sedentary life. Yet to date there is no fund dedicated to the promotion of Rromani heritage and the support of schooling for Rromani pupils by means of stipends. Yet to date there is no programme of training Rromani representatives to commit them to the life of the city, on equal footing with all other citizens. As a result, there is a severe under-representation of members of the Rroms in France on a journalistic, governmental, academic, advisory or administrative level. This is an alarming observation considering that the Rromani minority is one of the oldest non-indigenous minorities in France, and has been present for some 600 years on a continual basis in France. With the existence of four Rromani organisations, whose members include several Rromani academics and professionals, all of whom are multi-lingual as well, the blatantly racist argument has nevertheless been put forward by individuals in prominent positions that the Rroms lack suitable candidates for such representative bodies or institutions. When asked to consult Rromani experts in order to prepare a Rromani-addressed programme, a French high civil servant replied: "But, are the Rroms ready for that? ». It is clear that **HE** was not ready for that, not the Rroms. In fact, there are numerous highly qualified (if not over-qualified) Rroms in their respective fields in France who are at the same time easily accessible, for example, through the very active Rromani NGOs mentioned above. It is true, however, as well that there are also NGOs, not necessarily run by Rroms, which benefit in maintaining the folkloric and obsolete picture of "wild Gypsies" – who can also be "good savages", a concept also called "Operetta Gypsies"). In this respect, the Rromani NGOs of France see an urgent need to promote Rromani participation in public life, representative bodies and institutions in France.

The Rromani NGOs of France await a more consistent and thorough implementation of the OSCE's Decision N° 566, namely the Action Plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE area. One should repeat: no single Rromani NGO, no Rromani activist and no Rromani group has been contacted in regards to Section III of the OSCE Decision N° 566 entitled "Combating racism and discrimination" in relation to the Rrom and Sinti community as a whole in France. To the best of our knowledge, no Rromani NGO has been contacted or consulted, or asked to work in tandem with government, administrative or non-Rromani NGOs in relation to paragraphs 11 to 15 of the Action Plan which call specifically on the need to encourage the participation of Rroma and Sinti members in governmental institutions (§11); in the adoption of specific measures (§12); in local level planning and communication (§13), in general dialogue or consultation (§14), in the need for documentation of discrimination and racism against the Rromani minority (§15). Paragraphs 7-8, of the OSCE "Action Plan" stipulates the need to [quote] *"adopt and implement effective anti-discrimination legislation to combat racial and ethnic discrimination in all fields, including, inter alia, access to housing, citizenship and education, employment, health and social services. Involve Roma and Sinti representatives in the design, implementation and evaluation processes."* To date no Rromani NGO has been consulted or even contacted in these OSCE decisions. Even more indicative of the situation, when two Rromani NGOs attempted to implement the OSCE decision in relation to education of Rromani children in France, presenting a leading French NGO, purporting to help and work with the Rromani community in France, a project reflecting OSCE aims, this project was simply shelved, without any further comment from the French NGO to the Rromani NGOs.

If we have overlooked a substantial case of cooperation, this means that the lack of transparency was total. Clearly any Rromani involvement has therefore supposedly gone on behind the scenes. But we doubt it.

To date, no communication, no co-operation on any projects, no planning, no consultation process, no official dialogue (as set out in the OSCE Decision N° 566 under the title "Combating racism and discrimination") has been initiated on the part of any governmental or administrative body in France in tandem with any Rromani NGO. We risk facing one day the Czech position *"there can not be discrimination against the Rromani minority in our country, since our Constitution does not recognize the existence of any minority"*. [end of quote]

In conclusion, the Centre AVER of Research and Action against all forms of racism:

- Calls on a constructive working together with governmental and administrative bodies, French NGOs and other organisations in France, within the framework of the OSCE's Decision N° 566, and, in particular, in relation to "Combating Racism and discrimination".
- Calls for representation on government advisory, administrative and other councils in order to understand better and to meet more adequately the needs of the Rroms in France.
- Calls for the creation of awareness programs within the educational system as well as those geared to mainstream society as a whole

- Asks for the creation of documentation centres and databases on the positive values of the Rromani people in Europe, but which also speaks out against discrimination of Rromani individuals and groups in France and elsewhere
- Calls on supporting the promotion of Rromani cultural events in order to reduce intolerance, hostility and overt racism towards the Rromani community.
- Stresses the need for a special support to be addressed to young Rroms wishing to graduate from middle and high school in order to get involved in all levels of public life, as a means of assuring for more participation and representation of the Rroms on governmental, administrative, academic and institutional levels.
- Calls for a better integration of the Rroms from Central and Eastern Europe who have been living in France, often already for a good number of years. A better account should be taken of their professional skills. Due to the fact that their children have been taught exclusively in the French education system, a significant effort has to be developed to provide them with teaching in Rromani and possibly in the majority language of their country of origin, in order to help them grow up as perfectly trilingual speakers, which represents a valuable asset for further relations between countries.
- France has a crucial shortage of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, rural workers, and unskilled health-care personnel (especially to assist third age elders), which could be reduced by employing the Rroms from central and Eastern Europe (some of whom are in a vulnerable situation in France but who have kept a very strong traditional feeling of sympathy for physically impeded persons). They would be able to carry out the unskilled or semi-skilled labour required either in the city or in rural areas. A good organisation for settling such families (often themselves of rural background) in villages could contribute in combating desertification, an evil so much fought against by rural mayors. This initiative would improve the precarious situation of a certain number of Rroms in France, provide for an optimal integration into French society, greatly help to reduce hostility and racism toward the Rromani community, as well as to resolve the critical shortage of necessary workers in France and French agriculture.

The Rromani NGOs of France await the support, contact and good will of the French government, administrative and advisory bodies, as well as French NGOs in order to combat effectively intolerance and racism toward the Rromani population in France. In the light of recent events in France in relation to the Rromani minority, there is still a great deal to be done before it is too late and old racist ghosts again intoxicate public opinion for the interest of defined political circles.

Thank you.