

International Roma Day: UN expert urges full inclusion of Roma in decision-making in Europe

GENEVA – On International Roma Day, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Rita Izsák, calls on all European States and institutions to fully include Roma people in the decision-making process in Europe at all levels.

“Europe cannot stand for exclusion. With national elections taking place or due in several European countries and with the European Parliament elections taking place in 2014, it is timely on this International Roma day to call on governments and international organisations to step-up their efforts and attention to ensuring the full integration of their Roma populations, including in decision making bodies at all levels.

Political parties in democratic societies have a responsibility to reinforce the basic foundations of that democracy and the rule of law and promote the importance of minority rights protection in line with international standards, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and European human rights standards.

With a rising tide of anti-Roma sentiment and hostility against Roma throughout Europe, it is a primary duty of politicians from across the political spectrum to ensure the inclusion of Roma as well as promoting understanding and tolerant societies. Political actors must use their significant influence to clearly condemn anti-minority propaganda and hate speech and protect Roma and other excluded groups from being negatively stereotyped and treated as scapegoats.

In many countries there is a rapidly rising number of Roma intellectuals and leaders both in governments and civil society, including young people and women – Roma role models who are passionate and talented advocates not only for the rights of Roma, but about ensuring fair and just societies for all. It is high time for Roma to be considered as full partners in society, with much of value to contribute, and not only as beneficiaries or as a problem to be solved.

I have been saddened by recent reports about the limited number of Roma speakers in high-level meetings discussing Roma inclusion. This is unacceptable and demonstrates that, even after decades of advocacy for Roma inclusion, in some respects very little has changed in reality. Roma must be given real opportunities to discuss and influence not only their own futures and Roma integration policies and practice, but also the futures of the wider societies to which they belong.

There should be stronger outreach to encourage Roma to get more involved in

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politics and engage in active citizenship, through which their feeling of belonging will be strengthened and their responsibility as full stakeholders in society will increase. Electoral systems should be reformed and positive measures taken so that Roma have a real possibility for meaningful representation. The specific challenges facing Roma women must be tackled, especially limitations arising from patriarchal systems that discourage Roma women from taking leadership roles.

Newly formed governments and parliaments must recall that they are accountable not only to some or the majority in society, but also to minorities. They should establish or strengthen mechanisms and structures for the protection of Roma with the inclusion of Roma. The European Union-led framework for Roma integration strategies, have to be strengthened and closely monitored at the national level. The 2014-2020 EU budgetary framework must ensure that long-term programs for Roma inclusion can be planned and implemented in practice from national to local levels.

Europe must stand against exclusion.”

ENDS

Ms. Rita Izsák (Hungary) was appointed as Independent Expert on minority issues by the Human Rights Council in June 2011 and subsequently her mandate was renewed as Special Rapporteur on minority issues in March 2014. She is tasked by the UN Human Rights Council, to promote the implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, among other things. As Special Rapporteur she is independent from any government or organization and serves in her individual capacity. Learn more: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Minorities/IEExpert/Pages/IEminorityissuesIndex.aspx>

Check the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Minorities.aspx>

For further information and media inquiries, please contact Graham Fox (+41 22 917 9640 / gfox@ohchr.org) or Margarita Lema (+41 22 917 9248 / mlematome@ohchr.org) or write to minorityissues@ohchr.org

For media inquiries related to other UN mandate holders:

Xabier Celaya, UN Human Rights – Media Unit (+ 41 22 917 9383 / xcelaya@ohchr.org)

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Watch Navi Pillay's Human Rights Day message: <http://youtu.be/dhX-KbVbEQ0>

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