

Olivér Várhelyi
European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

CC:
Josep Borrell Fontelles
High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Helena Dalli
EU Commissioner for Equality

**Civil society letter addressing Roma equality as part of the
EU accession process and the EU response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

May 5, 2020

Honorable European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement,

On behalf of a European coalition of Roma and pro-Roma organizations, we call upon you and the European Commission to prioritise the fundamental rights and equality of Roma and the protection of the most vulnerable when redefining the EU priorities and investment regarding the Enlargement and Neighbourhood policy in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically exposed the structural exclusion, inequality and vulnerability of Roma communities.

The EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit on May 6, 2020 represents an important occasion to reaffirm the commitment with a strong political signal of the European Commission that Roma equality and inclusion constitutes an integral and unegotiationable part of the EU accession process.

We urge the European Commission and all leaders of EU Member States and Enlargement and Neighbourhood countries to address the following three priorities in order to ensure the equal treatment, safety, well-being and equality of Roma communities – taking into account also their diversity - and thereby contribute to ameliorating the pandemic situation for all Europeans:

1. An immediate European humanitarian response should coordinate and allocate sufficient resources to all vulnerable groups, in particular marginalized Roma communities and all racialized minorities, making sure they are reached in the enlargement and neighbourhood countries.
2. The mid- and long-term EU Covid-19 response in the Western Balkans, Turkey and Neighbourhood countries should fully take into account the needs of vulnerable Roma communities, and define them as a priority group in all mainstream policies and measures, including in economic aid and recovery, housing and infrastructure, social protection, health care, education and employment.
3. A post-2020 “EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality and Inclusion” – to be finalized and launched during the German EU Presidency - must constitute a top priority in the Covid-19 response. This EU Strategic Framework should fully involve the Enlargement and Neighbourhood countries, and it should be established on an anti-racism approach, by recognising the impact of antigypsyism as a decisive barrier for Roma inclusion. The fight against antigypsyism shall complement and not replace the inclusion approach.

Mr. Commissioner Várhelyi, your leadership is important to address the increased inequalities and the widening gap between Roma and non-Roma in the Enlargement and Neighbourhood countries, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are currently witnessing a growing humanitarian crisis that affects Roma and other vulnerable minority communities. We recognize the current efforts of municipalities, national governments and international stakeholders to provide humanitarian assistance, and underline especially the important role and contribution of the Romani civil society in these countries; but much more remains to be done.

As such, the short-term humanitarian assistance will not be enough to overcome the deep structural problems. The Covid-19 pandemic especially exposed the structural manifestations of antigypsyism regarding the basic living conditions: the residential segregation, forced evictions, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, and the denial of basic services. The strong dependency of many Roma on insecure, precarious work, and the lack of access to the qualified labour market contributed profoundly to the current humanitarian crisis.

Therefore, we underline the urgency for an increased investment and political commitment to Roma equality, economic and social justice, and combating antigypsyism. Only with long-term investments in infrastructure, improved living conditions and smart and flexible economic solutions in employment and entrepreneurship, quality education, a clean environment, and fighting poverty and antigypsyism starting now and throughout mid-term measures we can viably contribute to solving the most stringent problems of the Roma communities.

The European Union has to ensure that both short-term as well as long-term measures include and specifically address the situation and position of Roma in the Enlargement and Neighbourhood countries and bring positive benefits to them.

Joint statement on behalf of

Roma Active Albania, Otaharin (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (Kosovo), Advancing Together (Kosovo), Phiren Amenca (Montenegro), RROMA (North Macedonia), Romalítico (North Macedonia), Romaversitas (North Macedonia), Forum Roma Serbia (Serbia), Association of Coordinators for Roma Issues (Serbia), Zero Discrimination Association (Turkey), Central Council of German Sinti and Roma (Germany), ERGO Network (Belgium).

Further information and specific recommendations:

[Joint CSO statement of March 31, 2020](#): Alarming situation of Roma communities in the Western Balkans and Turkey through the COVID-19 pandemic

[ERGO Network policy recommendations of April 30, 2020](#): The effects of Covid-19 on Roma communities in EU Member States and Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries

[Post-2020 Roma Policy Coalition statement of March 16, 2020](#): Towards a EU post-2020 Roma equality and inclusion policy; Civil Society response on the Roadmap of the European Commission