

Unlocking the Potential of Young Roma Children in Europe

Thursday, 27th April 2023, 14:00

Dear organising team, dear participants of this outstanding event, good afternoon!

It is my honour to welcome you in the European Parliament, among many friends and allies of children and in the institution representing their voices. As a Vice-Chair of the Intergroup on children's rights and member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, I am pleased to have the opportunity to host in the framework of the Romani week the event focused specifically on Young Roma children.

Allow me to borrow the words of Maria Montessori that fit the occasion so well: "Free the child's potential and you will transform him into the world". Indeed, every day, from their demands to step up our response to climate change to better involve them in decision-making on the future of Europe, children prove that they can be today's and tomorrow's change-makers. As a father, pedagogue and a politician I can confirm that there is no greater satisfaction than helping children and young people to thrive, recognise and realise their potential in the world full of challenges.

Illustrated also by title of today's event, the potential of Roma children, however, remains largely concealed and unrealised. Unequal opportunities for Roma children to take full advantage of their potential are not only unjust and in violation of their fundamental rights, but also to the detriment of the Roma community and society as a whole as they perpetuate the intergenerational social hardship and exclusion. Unlocking this potential and breaking the vicious circle of inequality, we must first understand and raise awareness about the conundrum of structural determinants and obstacles coupled with antigypsyism and intersectional discrimination that negatively affect the lives of Roma

from the earliest childhood. The latter does not come without its own obstacles, which are to be addressed also in this event.

The absence of reliable, disaggregated and comparable data at the EU level on the gravity of the situation for Roma is an impediment for both human rights defenders and policy-makers. Without data on the reality of Roma and diversity within the Roma communities in different Member States and regions of the EU, without scientifically backed and child-centred approaches, the policy measures, adopted also in this House, risk being ineffective or even counterproductive. The latter makes today's event as well as other partnerships and joint initiatives, aiming to unveil the scale of problem for Roma children in education, health, leisure and other areas of life, and carving out possible solutions, even more indispensable in achieving significant progress in the lives of today's and future generations of children.

Searching the avenues for change, we should first and foremost focus on tackling the root causes of the gravest and most pressing forms of inequality. Educational segregation and institutionalisation of Roma children are the most blatant violations of their rights and harmful manifestations of discrimination, that were deplored as such on several occasions also by the Commission in its legal action against the respective Member States. The infringement procedures unfortunately prove to be often too lengthy to remedy the individual injustices, so the European Union should do everything in its power to prevent such violations of the European law and its fundamental values from happening in the first place.

The European Union with its policies, programmes and funding opportunities, has the possibility to instigate and accelerate positive change in guaranteeing equal access of all children, especially those in vulnerable situation, to early education and other key services for them. The European Child Guarantee, in particular, is designed to reach and

to empower children in the most vulnerable situation. We must ensure that the national action plans for the implementation of the Child guarantee include targeted measures and indicators for combatting poverty and social exclusion of Roma children. What is more, the new crises that exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities and result in the growing numbers of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion require renewed financial and general commitment of the EU for investment in the disadvantaged children.

I am proud that the European Parliament remains the most progressive European institution with its resolutions calling on the Commission to significantly increase the budget allocated to the implementation of the European Child Guarantee as well as the position on the content and the follow up to the European Care Strategy, with the rights and the needs of Roma children at the heart of its demands. There is a clear agreement across the political spectrum on the need to address the disproportionately lower enrolment rates of Roma children in the early education and care as well as the necessity to monitor and improve not only the quantity but also the quality of available education.

As we are approaching the 2024 European elections and drafting the priorities for the coming period, I look forward to hearing your views and ideas on how to best build on the successes of this mandate, raising the level of ambition regarding the implementation of the new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation, especially the measures pertaining to ensuring the rights of Roma children.

Without further ado, I would like to pass the floor to the experts, you dear panellists, for your insightful presentations. I hope that all the participants will enjoy this fruitful exchange of knowledge and experience and remain at your disposal for any questions or initiatives that you may have in the follow up to this event.