



**Chachipe's contribution to the "Hearing on Human Rights in the Western Balkans",
Sub-Committee on Human Rights, European Parliament, Brussels (10.11.11)**

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this hearing. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to highlight the human rights situation of the Roma in the countries of the so-called Western Balkans, though I must admit that I spent quite some time considering exactly how to go about addressing the main concerns in six different countries within a time frame of just ten minutes.

So let me just start with the Commission reports: If we look at these reports, we notice that there has been very little change over the past few years. Discrimination and human rights violations continue to be an overarching problem in all six countries. Yet, the Commission's reports are only a poor reflection of the realities faced by Roma as I will show on the basis of a few examples.

In **Kosovo**, the Commission's report focuses on the successful relocation of some 700 Roma IDPs, living in two lead-contaminated camps in Kosovska Mitrovica, to the ancient Roma Mahala. Their situation has indeed been a major human rights concern for at least six years, when the issue became internationally public. It continues to be a real concern for us, since neither the long-term sustainability of this settlement, nor the sanitary rehabilitation of its inhabitants have been secured.

Yet, the situation of the Roma IDPs in Kosovska Mitrovica is only one of many in the entirety of Kosovo. In **Plemetina**, a village, approximately 15 kilometers northwest from Pristina, some 40 Roma and Ashkali families had to move back to tents after water and a fire destroyed the poorly built apartment building where they had been relocated, after seven years of life in a collective centre for IDPs.

In **Leposavic**, Kosovo's most Northern municipality, 42 Roma families continue to live in most dreadful, unhygienic conditions in a disaffected army hangar, where they moved to after their forced displacement in 1999. In an email to us, their leader described his desperate attempts to



have these families relocated. “The donors tell us, that we are on the Serbian side and that, besides, we are not poisoned. ... And the Serbs tell us, that they have no money and no place.”

Housing is also an issue in Serbia. In its analytical report, the EU Commission refers to the unacceptable living conditions and the practice of forced evictions, which are (quote) “often conducted inappropriately, resulting in serious violations and breaches of basic human rights.” According to Amnesty International, 27 Roma families including 20 IDP families from Kosovo are currently under threat of being forcibly evicted from an informal settlement in **Novi Beograd**, referred to as Blok 61.

As past experiences have shown, those who are evicted are frequently left without a real alternative. At best, they can hope to be relocated to container settlements, to the outskirts of Belgrade, but if they are not registered in Belgrade, they are forced to return to their home towns or villages.

The Roma are today the losers of the economic development within the Serbian capital. The largest eviction to date, involving some 300 Roma families, took place in the context of the rehabilitation of two bridges, a project which was financially supported by the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

I will now turn to the **Macedonia** report, to address an issue, which is also recurrent in other countries, in particular, in Serbia and in Montenegro: The situation of Kosovo Roma refugees and IDPs. In its report, the European Commission refers to the still unresolved situation of these people, who have been in Macedonia since September 1999. The Commission points out to the problem of the absence of a legal status, since only some 24 persons (out of some 2,300 applicants) have been granted a refugee status in accordance with the Geneva refugee convention. The Commission also mentions, - and I quote -, that the government provides “some financial assistance” to the refugees.

The reality is, that since last year, when the Macedonian authorities finally took over the responsibility to provide financial assistance to the refugees, the refugees had to face permanent



payment delays, causing some of them to become homeless and prompting others to leave the country. On paper this is presented as a return to Kosovo. In reality, however, many of these refugees have gone to Serbia, or tried to make their way to the European Union.

I am now coming to my final point, the recent row over the increase of asylum seekers from the countries of the Western Balkans subsequent to the visa liberalisation. In Western Europe, these asylum seekers were immediately qualified as economic refugees or **worse**. In the Balkan countries, they were called *lažni* or *lažnite azilante*, bogus asylum seekers, who are placing the newly acquired visa freedom under threat.

Under the pressure of the European Commission and individual EU member states, the countries of the Western Balkans have introduced a series of measures aimed at decreasing the number of asylum seekers. They include targeted controls of travelers, who are asked to justify the purpose of their travel abroad and the availability of means of subsistence. Otherwise, they are not allowed to cross the border and sent back home.

This is what happened to several thousand citizens of the countries of the Western Balkans, who have been deprived of their right to leave their country, under the pretence that they might try to seek asylum in the EU.

This and other measures are targeting primarily the members of ethnic minorities, of whom the Roma are the most concerned.

The EU Commission and individual EU member states have openly encouraged these restrictive measures and even asked for more. Doing so the EU has contributed to the widening of the rift between the Roma and the majority population.

In May, the Serbian Minister of Interior, Ivica Dacic, warned the Roma not to seek asylum abroad as this would damage Serbia's national and state interest. Commenting on the announcement, *by the head of the EU delegation in Belgrade*, of the possible reintroduction of the visa-obligation for Serbian citizens, an internet user wrote on the website of the Serbian newspaper



Politika: “The EU wants to create a reservation for Roma and Shiptari [a pejorative exonym used in Serbia for ethnic Albanians] in Serbia.”¹

If the European Union does nothing to correct the impression, that its main concern is today **to prevent** the poor and impoverished Roma from the Balkans from seeking a better future by migrating to EU member states, the consequences for the human rights of Roma will be dire.

¹ vlada top | 06/05/2011 19:56 : « Nama vise nemoze ni Arsenije Carnojevic da pomogne.Znaci nema vise iz ove opljackane Srbije. Hoce EU da napravi rezervat za Rome i Siptare u Srbiji.Mozda NATO pokusava da poistoveti Srbe i Indijance. », comment on : Mere vlade za smanjenje broja lažnih azilanata u zemlje EU, *Politika*, 6.05.2011, available at : <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Politika/Mere-vlade-za-smanjenje-broja-laznih-azilanata-u-zemlje-EU.lt.html>