REPÚBLICA PORTUGUESA

GABINETE DA SECRETÁRIA DE ESTADO PARA A INTEGRAÇÃO E AS MIGRAÇÕES

14th European Platform for Roma Inclusion

Political panel 2:

Let's take it forward! Mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities: tackling unequal access to education

September 21st, 2021

Good morning! I would like to greet the Commissioner for Equality, Helena DALLI, whom I thank for the invitation as well as the opportunity of this event.

I would also like to greet

- Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission
- And my panel colleagues: Katarína Mathernová, our Moderator, Peter Pollák, and Katarina Ivanković Knežević

Let me also extend a special greeting to all speakers and participants.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will present 5 points.

1. As we all know, the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (held last semester), has been committed since the very beginning to strengthening Europe's resilience and citizens' confidence in the European social model.

   These are the priorities for the development and cohesion of an entire European Union in all its *diversity* and *plurality*, so no citizen can be left out of our common political and economic programme.

2. In this context, let me highlight how pleased we were of the unanimous adoption last March (during the Portuguese Presidency) of the *Council Recommendation on the European Union Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation*, launched on 7 October 2020. This is very important for all Member States, to be harmonized and focused in reducing inequalities experienced by disadvantaged Roma people. This Framework provides the tools for it.

In fact, European Roma people are among the most vulnerable and discriminated against in our common area.

Truly worrying are some data that shows Roma children presenting, comparatively and from a very early age, low values in educational indicators.

In Portugal, there is political and financial investment for all people with economic and social inequalities, added with specific policies for Roma people inclusion and participation, which have been growing in recent decades. Among other fields, investment in access to quality education for Roma children and young people is being reached with specific policies, such as:

- National Program "Escolhas" ("Choices" Program), with more than 100 local projects of non-formal education activities across the country; and
- 2 scholarship National Programs: Roma Educa (for upper secondary and secondary education) and OPRE (for higher education).

And we are already beginning to see positive results, as reflected in the biennial evaluations we carry on at this level. For instance, the latest data for 2018/2019 school year shows that, although there is still high school failure, school success has grown steadily: from 56% to 76% primary to secondary education, and from 64% to 75% in upper secondary.

3. But COVID-19 has changed it all… And we still don't know the scope of its impact at all levels.

As we all know, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and the subsequent economic and social crisis, hit people belonging to certain groups in a particularly hard way throughout Europe.

Suddenly, we had to deal with public health crises, but also provide equal important measures for upholding equality and protecting against discrimination of most vulnerable groups, such as ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious minorities including Roma and Travellers.

Let me share some of our responses to this crisis in this context, mainly focusing on four type of policy strategies:

First – Information and reach out, at national and local level.

We have ensured that especially vulnerable groups, Roma citizens included, were permanently informed and continued to have access to public services (in person or online), through *social media campaigns*, *online information* and *local support networks* to identify and overcome situations of isolation and special vulnerability.

Second - Local actors have been highly mobilized.

In addition to local public services, especially health and local authorities, the proximity tracking of vulnerable communities (via telephone or email) was also reinforced through, for example:

- All our partner Roma associations and other civil society organizations;
- The intercultural mediators' teams in 12 municipalities in the North, Centre and South; and
- The National Program "Escolhas" ("Choices") and all its local projects.

These local actors mapped, for instance, food needs of vulnerable children, young people and families. This information made it possible to adjust school food distribution, as well as the implementation of the National Programme to Support the Most Deprived People.

Third – special support to students and parents.

During lockdown periods, with closed schools, Escolhas projects had a key role on education activities attendance and school success, assuring telephone contacts and some home visits. Roma children and young people without available PC devices and internet were personally reached to access school homework and non-formal education activities, as well as access to food provided by schools. During 2020, Escolhas projects reached weekly an average of more than 4.000 students and families from vulnerable groups, being the most effective way of breaking social isolation.

(and I don't resist to tell a small real story about this: imagine the impact, astonishment and amazement of a Roma student of a poor neighbourhood that, suddenly, receives in her own hands her first mail delivery: an envelope with school homework! It is a simple citizenship experience that she had never have before. Access to Education is also participation and inclusion at all levels of citizenship)

Fourth – additional support to Roma civil society organizations

Roma Associations had the annual funding support as well as an added support of Gulbenkian Foundation for specific interventions to prevent COVID-19 among vulnerable Roma people and to support food access.

Roma civil society organizations were also funded to prepare and spread a Covid-19 Awareness and Prevention Campaign through social media.

And now, already in 2021, we strengthened all means of awareness-raising and reaching out for vaccination for all the population, with a special attention on specific groups – and we are proud of having today almost reached 82% of the total resident population in Portugal vaccinated!

4. A crisis often makes more visible longstanding inequalities that existed already before this outbreak.

And going beyond this period, we believe we must continue to implement those national and local policies that have been required by this crisis, especially towards specific groups.

But now is the moment to show it steadily with the adoption of good temporary measures making them permanent public policy. With these new measures we don´t mean only targeted policies to specific groups like Roma but assuring them the best access to services and mainstreaming policy, through better information and the removal of barriers to access it. I believe this is one of the most important challenges all Member States must currently face!

5. Let me conclude by stressing that, in this year where we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the organisation of the first International Romani Congress, we are fully committed to the design, and implement of effective public policies to reduce Roma population inequalities and promote participation of all.

Therefore, and also in this context, we are still engaged with the Portuguese Presidency moto:

It's time to Act!

Thank you.