

EveryOne
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Group for International
Cooperation on Human
Rights Culture

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Roma People in Italy

prepared by

EveryOne Group

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Prepared for

To the EU Commissioner for Work, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

Vladimir Spidla

Dear Commissioner,

We are writing to you as the leaders of the EveryOne group (www.everyonegroup.com), an international organisation for human rights based in Italy that has, for some time, been fighting to defend and safeguard the Rom population.

We are writing to you in the hope you can read this quickly, because contrary to stated position of the Italian Government, and the declarations of the Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni, the treatment of the Rom in Italy is assuming the characteristics of a terrible persecution that, if judged by the International Court at the Hague (where, following our report, legal proceedings have begun against Italy) would certainly be classified as a crime against humanity.

140,000 Rom are currently living in Italy, of whom more than 70,000 (among these more than 35,000 children) are homeless, evicted on a daily basis from abandoned buildings, beneath bridges, parks and rubbish dumps. The break-ups of mini-settlements have multiplied compared to last year and we don't see how tens of thousands of Rom men, women and children will be able to survive without food or medicine when temperatures drop below zero next winter.

While the big Rom camps are monitored by charities and human rights groups (and despite this still subject to institutional abuse of every kind) the evictions of settlements made up of single families or small groups are causing a dispersal of tens of thousands of Rom who, after they've been moved away and often deported from the council or region, end up vanishing. The evictions are taking place at a fierce rhythm. A few days ago in the Commune of Sesto Fiorentino in Tuscany, a settlement of over 130 Romanian and Kosovar Rom – mostly pregnant women, children and sick people – was brutally broken up in daylight by the police on the orders of the mayor Gianni Gianasi, without the inhabitants being offered any alternative place to stay. This is a practice, much more common than you might think, that is part of the day-to-day running of all those so-called “illegal” camps where Rom families are forced to live without water, electricity or toilets, in sheds or makeshift tents. The Rom in Italy are stopped and questioned daily and repeatedly

by law-enforcement officers who persecute them until, exasperated, they move on. They are ignored by employers or, worse, terribly exploited, forced to take on the most dangerous jobs without a legal contract and underpaid. Entire families are forced by discrimination and racial prejudice to beg in the cities, on the pavement or outside churches, without any programme of integration or welcome, and no chance of entering the waiting list for council housing. Epidemics, infections, parasites, malnutrition and other illnesses run rampant among these people.

Local, provincial and regional organisations often refuse to speak to human rights activists and, at the same time, block in any way they can – on occasion police chiefs and officers have attempted to intimidate us – the investigations that humanitarian groups like EveryOne try to undertake in order to verify the facts on the numerous occasions when Rom are accused of crimes that are punishable by prison or expulsion from Italy.

On June 20th, Stelian Covaciu, a Rom missionary for the Pentecostal Church, was brutally assaulted by four policemen who got out of a police car whose registration number was passed on to the media and reported to the Milanese prosecutor's office, although no action was taken against the policemen who were on duty at the time. Mr Covaciu was beaten up because he had publicised in interviews with TV news programmes an assault on his 12-year-old daughter Rebecca two days previously. Rebecca, well known for having been awarded the UNICEF 2008 prize for her artistic talents, was attacked by two of the same officers who later attacked and threatened Stelian, the only difference being for the first attack they were out of uniform. Aggression and abuse of this sort on the part of Italian citizens or police officers, motivated by racist and xenophobic beliefs, are the order of the day, and our group has often found itself reporting serious incidents of violence and intolerance to absolute indifference.

From a legal point of view, the position of the Rom is not any better. On June 24th, as you'll be aware, the Italian Senate approved the new security decree that allows for, among other things, the deployment of the army in cities, being an illegal immigrant as an aggravating factor in

sentencing and the “trial-blocking” norm with a view to speeding up the legal system. The power of this last provision that is antidemocratic and damaging to human rights cannot be underestimated: the fast-track trials remove from the accused caught in the act (at least according to those same authorities who are often guilty of the most serious abuses) all rights of defence. We know of many cases where Rom and other immigrants have been condemned with this procedure. Article 11 of the Declaration of Human Rights, point 1, affirms that “everyone should be considered innocent until their guilt has been legally demonstrated in a public trial where they have every opportunity to defend themselves”. This, Commissioner, is not happening in Italy, and the fast-track trial allows police officers to transform themselves into “street judges”, denying citizens the right to a fair trial.

Nico Grancea, a member of our group and a Rom singer-songwriter, knows only too well how severe the Italian law can be with the Rom who are forced to move from beneath a bridge to a public park, from a house to an abandoned factory. “Last year,” he told us, “my mother had a kidney removed. She was operated on in Milan by not very professional doctors and she was very ill when she left hospital. When we were evicted from the Sesto San Giovanni camp, we moved out of Lombardy and went to Pesaro in the Marches, where we found shelter in an industrial building. The alternative was to let my mother die in the street. The owner of the building reported us to the police who came to evict us without offering any alternative. Nobody, neither social work nor religious organisations, helped us. We endured terrible months after the eviction.” However, Nico and his father didn’t just have to face up to the difficulties of poverty, marginalisation and sleeping rough. “When we were evicted,” he told us, “we were charged with the illegal occupation of private property. The verdict is already written because the magistrate will sentence us to jail. But there won’t be a normal trial with a defence lawyer. Since we were caught in the act, our trial will be fast-tracked and we will have no rights. The fast-track trial allows the judge to condemn us, in fact, without even calling us.”

Furthermore, the Italian Supreme Court recently handed down a sentence that goes against the principle of non-discrimination and all

the international conventions of human rights, but which, above all, decriminalises racial discrimination against the Rom. The court absolved the Northern League mayor of Verona, Fabio Tosi, accused by the prosecutor Guido Papalia of “spreading discriminatory ideas”. In 2001, Tosi, leader of the Northern League in Veneto, distributed a petition and flyers against illegal travellers’ camps. During his campaign against the Rom, he stated “the Gypsies have to be sent away because wherever they go thieving takes place”. The reason for his absolution is the following: “Discriminating against someone because they’re different is different from discriminating against someone because they’re a criminal. Someone can legitimately be discriminated against for the way they behave but not for their being different.” According to the Supreme Court, “Discrimination has to be based on the characteristics of the victim (being Black, Gypsy, Jewish, etc) and not on how they behave.” According to the Italian Supreme Court, therefore, the Rom can be accused of being delinquents because this affirmation does not refer to their “blood” but to their “social danger”. In the same way, following this sentence, any other minority can be accused of being filthy, immoral, uncivil, cheating. Or in one word, “asocial”: the same thing the Nazis accused the Rom of to justify their persecution and extermination. In the same way, the persecution and extermination of the Jewish people were often related to stereotypes that weren’t related to their “diversity” but to their assumed behaviour, their “criminality” and their “asociality”. Thus they were accused on numerous occasions throughout history of being sly and diabolical, greedy and lustful, dirty and superstitious, full of envy towards Christians and dedicated to obscure plots to overthrow social values.

Dear Commissioner, Italy is living in a police state, in a sort of regime – the term may seem over-the-top but we assure you it’s not – that is progressively removing from its citizens every constitutional guarantee and that represses antifascism and antiracism with an ever-heavier hand that is inappropriate in a democracy and for justice. Regarding this, we wish to inform you of another unacceptable situation that has been occurring for some time and damaging innocent Rom families: the illegal removal by social work departments of Italian councils of minors from their families, making use of the children’s courts in various cities.

“Over the space of a couple of years all trace has been lost of 12 Rom children who were removed from the parents by the Naples Children’s Court,” revealed Euro MP for the ALDE Group Viktoria Mohacsi, during her recent visit to a number of Rom camps in the South of Italy. “Some of these children were accused of begging, but the parents have heard nothing about them for two years”. Sadly, Commissioner, we can confirm what the Honourable Mohacsi says because we have gathered identical testimony throughout Italy.

In some case, the children are taken into “indefinite foster care” by social workers. Deprived of their children, often in the space of a few hours, following a spurious police check, sometime after being administered powerful sleeping pills or other drugs, rendering them incapable of opposition, the mothers are subject to a further moral and psychological blow that is so traumatic it often leads them to attempt suicide. In Rome, according to testimony, one young mother threw herself in front of a car, killing herself, after realising her child of a few months was not going to be returned to her.

Having been deprived of their children (a few months old, but also four, five, six years or older) the Rom families are subject to every kind of pressure and intimidation until they give up protesting or turning to the legal system for help (that, in Italy anyway, is already deficient when it comes to defending Rom). In many cases, after their children have been taken away, the parents received a written or verbal notification of expulsion.

With a great deal of courage, the young Rom Ionit Ciuraru agreed to be interviewed by us in front of the cameras to testify as to what happened to his little cousin Francesca Stefan Stafanuscu, born in Pesaro on March 6th 2008, and snatched by a social worker from Rimini with police help from the arms of her mother, Lucretia Stanescu, and her father, Decian Stefan. Mrs Stefanescu is a kind and gentle person, a good mother according to the many witnesses who know her. To take her child, social workers accused her of being an unfit mother. “A child should not stay with a Gypsy who would endanger her life every day,” one of the social workers who spoke against her at the Bologna Children’s Court told us.

Unfortunately, we have come across similar cases to this in Florence, Fano, Naples and Milan as well, but there are dozens of Italian towns and cities where this cruel practice that tramples human rights is carried out by local authorities in cahoots with the police and children's courts. The EveryOne group has already begun proceedings to obtain the return of little Francesca to her legitimate parents who have been expelled from Italy and are currently in France. It is necessary, though, that this single case, which is emblematic of thousands of similar abuses that occur throughout Italy, induces the European Commission to assume a clear position with regard to resolutions and admonitions that so far the Italian authorities have gleefully ignored.

While dealing with this and dozens of other serious abuses, we have been informed about the deaths of a number of babies following eviction operations and all sorts of violence against Rom children, woman (often pregnant) and men, especially Romanians. Senator Borghezio of the Northern League commented happily on these actions of ethnic cleansing: "We're having a good clean-out in Padania". Newspapers and television that have now been reduced to propaganda organs pay no attention at all to these crimes against humanity and operate a policy of total censorship with regard to the information supplied by our group, which, when dealing with other issues, receives widespread coverage. So, Commissioner, we feel our letter is essential to inform you about this series of events that have been subject to censorship by the Italian media as well as central and local authorities. These events need to be severely condemned in a European setting and urgent provisions have to be made to look after the tens of thousands of Rom families dispersed throughout Italy in terrible social and health conditions. The onset of winter could cause a humanitarian disaster in the Rom community, an unprecedented genocide, amidst total indifference in our country. We make our sorrowful appeal to you in the hope that Europe will bring Italy back to a proper respect of human rights.

We hope that you will be able to meet with us as soon as possible in your office with a view to further examining – with concrete testimony and appropriate back-up documentation – what we have told you about in this letter. We trust you will want to assume immediately, in the EU

Commission, a clear position against the most serious matters we have informed you about.

Our very best wishes,

For the **EveryOne group**,

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Related links on EveryOneGroup.com

Petition against any ethnic filing of the Rroms in Italy

http://www.everyonegroup.com/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2008/6/29_Europe_must_put_a_stop_to_the_fingerprinting_of_Roma_citizens.html

The Italian institutions are taking hundreds of Roma children away from their parents

<http://www.everyonegroup.com/everyone/ionitc.html>

Dear Europe. By Rebecca Covaciu

http://www.everyonegroup.com/everyone/MainPage/Entries/2008/5/24_Dear_Europe._By_Rebecca_Covaciu.html

Stelian Covaciu was the victim of a violent beating and threats from policemen

http://www.everyonegroup.com/everyone/MainPage/Entries/2008/6/29_Stelian_Covaciu_was_the_victim_of_a_violent_beating_and_threats_from_policemen.html

Report on the situation of the Rrom children and adolescents in Italy

http://www.everyonegroup.com/everyone/MainPage/Entries/2008/1/29_Report_on_the_situation_of_the_Rrom_children_and_adolescents_in_Italy.html

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