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The rhetoric and reality of Roma rights

“It’s about Europe. It’s about you.” So goes the official slogan marking 2013 as the European Year of Citizens. But, if you happen to be one the European Union’s six million Roma, you might well be forgiven for doubting the inclusiveness of such rhetoric.

As we celebrate “International Roma Day”, one of Europe’s largest ethnic minorities faces increasingly widespread discrimination, racially-motivated violence, forced evictions and segregation. More than a decade after EU anti-discrimination laws were adopted, EU member states are failing to enforce these laws to combat this discrimination.

The 2000 EU Race Equality Directive clearly prohibits discrimination on grounds of race and ethnicity in a variety of areas including access to goods and services, social protection, health, housing, employment and education. Nevertheless, as our new briefing - *Human rights here. Roma rights now* - points out, discriminatory policies and practices against the Roma in precisely these areas are still common in EU member states, and, to date, the European Commission has failed to challenge them effectively.

In the area of housing, Amnesty International and other organizations have documented forced evictions of Roma communities in several EU countries, including Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy, Romania and Slovenia. Forcibly evicted Romani communities and individuals are often relocated in segregated residential areas, in some cases close to polluted sites or in houses that do not comply with basic habitability standards.

Often unable to afford rents in the private housing markets, hundreds of thousands of Roma in Europe are nonetheless denied other options including social housing. In recent weeks, for example, the municipal authorities in Rome have clarified that Romani people living in informal settlements will not be considered for priority access to social housing claiming they live already in “permanent structures”.

In terms of education, tens of thousands of Romani pupils in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Greece attend segregated Roma-only schools and classes or institutions for students with “mild-mental disability” where they are taught a reduced curriculum. When Romi, a Romani child in Ostrava, Czech republic, was asked why he was not studying a foreign language as he would do in a mainstream school, his answer was as simple as it was poignant: “We are not primary school children, we are practical school children.”

Faced with such serious human rights violations by EU member states, it is difficult to understand why the European Commission has not yet acted more swiftly and strongly

The EU’s executive body certainly has considerable powers to do so. It can initiate *infringement proceedings* against any of the 27 member states whose policies or practices are contrary to EU law, including the Race Equality Directive.

In other fields of EU law, the Commission is not so reluctant to use these powers. In fact, it opens hundreds of *infringement proceedings* every year ranging from environmental issues and taxation to the internal market and transport. Some proceedings even concern failures to transpose the Race Equality Directive into national laws. Nevertheless, not a single proceeding has been carried out to date against

member states whose policies or practices are discriminatory against the Roma, or indeed any other ethnic group.

By refraining from taking strong action the EU institutions are failing to hold Member States accountable for how they treat Roma people. In 2010, for instance, the Commission backed off from an initial threat to open an infringement proceeding against France for its policy of specifically targeting Roma with forced evictions and of returning them to their countries of origin. On 14 March 2013, the French Minister of Interior, Manuel Valls, publicly confirmed that the policy of evicting informal Romani settlements will be pursued without clarifying how safeguards against forced evictions will be implemented.

The Commission must start using all the instruments at its disposal to tackle the multiple forms of discrimination, racism and other human rights violations experienced by the Roma in Europe, including by firmly holding EU Member States accountable for violating EU anti-discrimination law.

The EU prides itself on being “founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”, but daily experiences of discrimination against Roma starkly show that the EU has yet to translate these principles into reality for one of Europe’s largest ethnic minorities. “It’s about Europe. It’s about you” must hold true for all in Europe - including Roma.