

Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic and national minorities, adopted on 28 May 2020

The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities welcomes the efforts made by the authorities in several Council of Europe member states during the COVID-19 pandemic to reach out to persons belonging to national minorities and to respond to the specific needs of certain minority groups. It highly appreciates the expressions of solidarity and empathy both from persons belonging to minorities and from those belonging to the majority population.

It notes, however, with deep concern that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of certain national minorities in many countries and has deepened the already existing inequalities in many Council of Europe member states. Persons belonging to national minorities have often faced discrimination, hate speech and stigma, as well as a lack of relevant information in minority languages. Anti-pandemic measures may, in case of abuse, endanger the enjoyment of some rights and freedoms of national minorities such as the freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of religion.

The suspension of classes in schools and pre-school education during the COVID-19 pandemic has regrettably often resulted in the unequal access to education and discrimination of children belonging to national minorities, particularly those who were not proficient enough in the official languages to be provided with appropriate educational content. As a result, children of national minorities may be at risk of learning delays and dropping out.

Roma and Travellers¹ communities have been disproportionately hit by the COVID-19 pandemic with many being confronted with limited access to sanitary necessities and services such as clean water and sewage and significant losses of income for the most vulnerable groups.

The Advisory Committee firmly believes that a genuinely democratic society is an inclusive one and that protecting and respecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities is a prerequisite for ensuring democracy, peace and security. The provisions of the Framework Convention and relevant recommendations developed by the Advisory Committee, along with other Council of Europe standards on human rights and non-discrimination, should be seen by member states as guides on how to effectively address a variety of challenges faced during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Advisory Committee will continue to follow closely the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the respect of rights of persons belonging to national minorities and to ensure that states responses are in compliance with their human rights obligations. It remains ready to contribute actively to the work of the Council of Europe in this matter and open to dialogue with the states parties to the Framework Convention.

¹ The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.