

Príhovor verejného ochrancu práv
Forum on national minorities of Ukraine
27 September 2023 - Krakow

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Dear Dmytro Lubients, my colleague – ombudsman from Ukraine,

Dear Mykhailo Spasov,

Dear representatives of national minorities in Ukraine,

Dear representatives of the Council of Europe and the European Commission,

Dear Jana Dudash, representative of the Slovak minority in Ukraine,

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

War has a profound impact on individuals and communities, often leaving a path of destruction and suffering in its wake. During these turbulent times, the human rights of **national minorities are at their most vulnerable**. These minorities encompass ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural groups, often caught in the crossfire, enduring discrimination, displacement, violence, and systemic injustices.

Furthermore, war can magnify **existing inequalities and discrimination faced by national minorities**, and these disparities often linger into the post-conflict era, impeding reconciliation and long-term stability. This is where the **pivotal role of equality bodies and ombudspersons** comes into play.

- Firstly, these institutions act as vigilant overseers, diligently monitoring and documenting human rights violations against national minorities.
- Secondly, these bodies **foster dialogue and reconciliation among diverse ethnic and national groups**.
- Thirdly, these institutions recommend and implement policies promoting **social cohesion and equal opportunities** for all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality. They play a pivotal role in dismantling structural discrimination, thereby creating more inclusive societies.

As Ombudsman, I am dedicated to addressing violations of minority rights, whether proactively initiated or brought to our attention through complaints. At the same time, **the Ombudsman's Office has been closely monitoring the human rights situation of refugees coming to Slovakia from Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian aggression.**

In March 2022, my predecessor, Professor Patakyova, launched an independent procedure with a clear objective: to monitor the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of refugees crossing the Slovak State borders. This initiative laid the foundation for our ongoing work in this important area.

Our attention was focused on various critical aspects, **especially those affecting the most vulnerable among us, such as persons belonging to national minorities.**

We conducted on-site monitoring missions at border crossings, actively engaged in personal meetings with representatives of key state institutions, and acknowledged the invaluable contributions of non-governmental organizations operating on the eastern borders.

Additionally, we actively sought dialogue with their representatives, fostering partnerships with international organizations to better serve those in need.

War significantly impacts the most vulnerable groups, particularly socially excluded Roma communities. It's estimated that **approximately 100,000 Roma have sought refuge in the EU since the onset of Russian aggression in Ukraine.**

Official data on the number of Roma from Ukraine who have stayed in Slovakia **is lacking due to the border police not collecting this information.** However, based on our monitoring, I can conclude that Slovakia has primarily served as a transit country for them.

I would like to highlight a heartening example of solidarity, **where in eastern Slovakia, Slovak Roma communities** actively engaged in assisting Roma refugees from Ukraine.

When we discuss the critical issue of protecting the human rights of minorities during and after conflict, it is important to look closely at the particular challenges these communities face right now. We need to keep these issues in mind not only during conflict, but also after. Let me point out **some urgent human rights issues that particularly affect the Roma population in Slovakia.**

- **Equal access to education is a vital concern.** Roma children often face unjustified enrollment in schools for children with mild mental disabilities or are placed in ethnically homogeneous classes, limiting their future prospects. Moreover, persistent issues include housing, access to clean water, and forced evictions. Additionally, forced sterilizations of Roma women represent a distressing historical injustice.
- **Just recently,** I issued a statement related to the upcoming elections in Slovakia, addressed to political parties and movements. In it, I urged them **not to engage in direct or indirect attacks on the fundamental human rights and freedoms of any group of inhabitants of Slovakia during the pre-election campaign and political struggle.**

As we strive to safeguard the human rights of national minorities, it becomes even more critical that we continue these efforts during and after conflicts. It is critical that we recognize and address the unique challenges faced by these communities.

Thank you.

Róbert Dobrovodský
Public Defender of Rights

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