

Budapest, May 30, 2019

To: **Minister Davor Božinović – Ministry of Interior**

Subject: Roma Education Fund's Statement on the upcoming demonstration in Medjmurje County

Dear Minister, Davor Božinović,

The mission and ultimate goal of the Roma Education Fund (REF) is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. In order to achieve this goal, REF supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems in the countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, and in additional interested countries.

REF expresses its concerns surrounding the planned demonstration on June 1, 2019 in the capital of Medjmurje County, Čakovec - where significant number of Roma reside. It is stated that the demonstration has no anti-Roma specific agenda, however it is alarming that the original purpose of the demonstration has been set against Roma.

In order for the citizens of Croatia to be equally protected and their human rights to be respected, REF asks the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia to prohibit the protest as it is targeting Roma communities. According to the Constitution of Croatia Article 39, "*Any call for incitement to war or use of violence to national, racial or religious hatred or any form of intolerance shall be prohibited and punishable by law.*" Furthermore, the Public Assembly Act in its Article 14 "*stipulates that the Minister of Interior may issue a decision on prohibition of peaceful assembly and public protests if goals of an assembly are focused on calling for and incitement to war or to violence, national, racial or religious hatred or any form of intolerance*". Alongside these legal regulations, the planned demonstration also falls under the category of intolerance against national and racial groups, as there is a potential of severe disturbance of public peace and order which may lead to physical clashes against Roma.

Unfortunately, it is also clear that the demonstration is initiated on the basis of issues related to ethnic tensions between Roma and non-Roma in the county. This refers to the so called "Roma crime"<sup>1</sup>, Roma misuse of social benefit and incapability of Roma to integrate into mainstream society. REF emphasizes, that categorizing criminal acts by ethnicity is a manifestation of racial prejudice. 'Ethnicising' the use of social welfare allowance makes Roma people second class citizens in their own country. Instead, provision of any social state support must be distributed according to policies and measures based on social and economic needs of people as citizens. Furthermore, crimes are committed by individuals and therefore do not and cannot indicate or indict an entire community to share the same practices. Considering the origin,

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<sup>1</sup> Roma Education Fund rejects the expression as crimes has no ethnic profile.

nature and purpose of the planned demonstration, it can be clearly concluded that it falls into the category of potential hate speech against Roma which can lead to hate crime. All these elements are tokens of anti-Roma racism that is a recognized form of discrimination targeting Roma<sup>2</sup>.

REF is deeply concerned that this anti-Roma movement is being legitimized by the local government through their lack of action. Furthermore, since this movement draws growing support from radicalized adults and high-school youth, we are concerned that this movement has created a hostile environment for Roma communities and pupils in general, as well as for those who currently attend Medjmurje high-schools or plan to enroll in them in the future. Such demonstration also leads to intensifying hatred against Roma, prejudices and further deepens the already persisting ethnic tension.

Taking into consideration the well-being and needs of Roma and non-Roma, it is pivotal to equally represent the needs of both sides in a democratic manner, and to create an environment guaranteeing reconciliation and peace within the society. State-driven intervention should seek the protection of interests and safety of both communities by resolving the root causes. In addition, State-driven intervention should focus on common issues that unite communities justifying peaceful, social and economic coexistence.

REF appeals to the Ministry of Interior to take sufficient measures against the consolidation of anti-Roma movements and to prohibit anti-Roma demonstrations, as well as to intervene for the benefit of both Roma and non-Roma communities in Medjmurje county.

Yours sincerely,

Roland Ferkovics, Policy and Advocacy Officer  
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<sup>2</sup> Recognized in 2015 by the European Parliament.