



BACKGROUND

The situation of minorities/vulnerable groups is particularly difficult in the Western Balkans, a region that has witnessed armed conflicts, political transformations and economic transition in the last twenty years. The legacy of war - the fact that some vulnerable groups are still in displacement - coupled with a recent growth of social inequalities and new forms of social exclusion pose serious challenges to be addressed, not least also as an integral part of the EU's enlargement policy, including for reconciliation.

The European Commission has been strongly committed to helping the Western Balkans improve conditions for minorities/vulnerable groups. Over the past years the accession process, notably the policy dialogue and significant IPA support, have helped on compliance with the Copenhagen political criteria.

The Roma seminars conducted by DG Enlargement in most of the enlargement countries in 2011 are a successful example of all donors working together. In their specific format of direct and targeted consultation process joint recommendations were agreed by all stakeholders, including Roma communities, local stakeholders, national authorities and relevant international organisations. These recommendations form a solid basis for monitoring progress in an institutional setting (notably through the sectoral meetings and subcommittees) and for providing support under national IPA programmes in 2012 and beyond.

A regional approach to complement efforts at the national level is well justified due to the similarity of the social, political and economic contexts and problems shared in the Western Balkans, as well as in the light of the common challenges and objectives the countries share in the accession process. Exchange of concrete best practice would also help more efficient implementation at national level. Moreover, regional co-operation could serve as a catalyst for enhanced performance in boosting the necessary reforms, and additional strategic and systematic approaches may emerge at this level to feed processes steered by local stakeholders.

A similar reasoning is valid as concerns the protection and promotion of the other minorities in the region as well as the endeavour to foster inclusive education there. While a number of the recommendations made in the Roma context are transposable, there are also more specific recommendations authored by the monitoring bodies established under relevant Council of Europe conventions such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) as well as the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights. Another very important source of recommendation and guidelines is the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.