

Roma Minority in Albania, Difficulties and the Role of People's Advocate

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Abstract

The Roma minority in Albania has always encountered difficulties of various natures, be it economic, social or even violations of basic human rights and freedoms. In this article, we will briefly present the origin of Roma people, their appearance in Albania, as well as the main cultural characteristics that distinguish them from other minorities and the rest of society. The article continues with an analysis of the legal framework that guarantees the protection Roma minority rights, including different historical periods but also the present. An important part of this article is the role of the People's Advocate in addressing the problems faced by the Roma minority. In this study, emphasis is placed on the need for stronger state institutions, a more successful implementation of laws, as well as a greater political will to achieve the full integration and protection of the Roma minority in Albania.

Keywords: Roma Minority, Republic of Albania, People's Advocate, Protection, Discrimination, Social Integration

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1. Introduction

The Roma minority in Albania, as well as in many other European countries where this community is located, faces difficulties of various natures. These difficulties are related to education, employment, health, housing, prejudices encountered in daily life, etc., directly affecting the realization of human rights and basic freedom as well as the quality of their lives.

The Roma is the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with a substantial 10-12 million population (Várhelyi 2023), as well as one of the most deprived and socially excluded groups; they typically have only limited access to basic services and economic opportunities (Abril & Natalia Millán 2019).

Looking back in history, in the first 10 years after the political system changed in Albania, in 1992, we can easily understand that the life of the Roma minority in Albania has changed in a positive way, but there is still a big gap between the legal protection of the rights of this minority through various legal documents, whether domestic or regional and international ratified by the Republic of Albanian, and the realization of these rights in practice. It is paradoxical when you compare theory and practice or the reality that this minority faces every day. If the laws and conventions ratified by the Albanian state related to the issue of minority rights had been successfully implemented, then their situation would be completely different today.

The origin of Roma people is unclear. However, based on linguistic evidence, scholars believe that Roma began migrating westward from India beginning in the ninth century C.E. The time of their arrival in the Balkans is also uncertain, but present-day Croatian sources point to a Roma presence there as early as the fourteenth century (De Soto & Beddies & Gedeshi 2005). Various theories mention two groups of Roma people, following different itineraries, one penetrating the European territory from the steppes of Central Asia, the other crossing Northern Africa through the Iberian Peninsula. The first documentation of a Roma community dates back to 1068, during the time of the Byzantine Empire (Jitariu 2007).

The Roma have been living in Albania for more than 600 years (Kolsti 1991). For the arrival of Roma people in Albania exist some data by an Ottoman census of the year 1523 there were about 374 families, but it is thought that they have been 200 - 300 years before this census (Osmanaj 2013). For the first time, Roma was recorded in Albania in the years 1522-23. Their numbers were recorded at 1270 people. Roma names started to appear in the old Albanian manuscripts from the year 1635 (OSCE 2003).

Margaret Hasluck suggested another version of the origins of the Albanian nomad Roma -- they came from Spain. Without citing any specific date, she wrote that they lived in Spain where "they followed the King of that

country to wars with Italy. There they behaved so badly that the king forbade them to return to Spain and also cursed them saying: “May you never take root anywhere” (Harluck 1938).

April 8 was declared International Roma Day at the first World Romani Congress, organized by the Committee International Rom (CIR) in London in 1971. The 1971 congress, which was the first Roma attempt at international cooperation, also established the Roma flag and anthem. The latter was only officially recognized in 1990, during the fourth World Romani Congress in Warsaw, when it was accepted by Czech and Slovak Roma who already had their own anthem, composed in Auschwitz where many were exterminated. The congress participants also decided to replace some terms, such as “gypsy”, which were being widely used in Europe despite their negative connotation, with the term “Roma” (Pasikowska-Schnass 2018).

Roma culture is distinct from the culture of the majority Albanian community. Roma culture has a larger number of easily distinguishable elements. From a study conducted by the World Bank, Roma people described the major cultural elements that distinguish them from Albanians. Most Roma listed language, music, community celebrations, family ceremonies, wickerwork, and women’s dress as distinguishing their own culture from Albanian (De Soto & Beddies & Gedeshi 2005).

2. Legal Protection of Roma Minority and the Gap in Implementation

Albania’s commitments to the protection of national minorities started after World War One, with its admission in the League of Nations in December 1920 (Kalaja 2016). On October 2, 1921, Albania made a special declaration before the League Council, through which it pledged to respect the rights of the national minorities within its territory in conformity with the provisions of the peace treaties reached after World War One.

Lack of education and illiteracy were the dominant feature among Roma and Egyptians communities before the Second World War. Access to schools was seldom because of the nomadic traditions and lack of coverage of schools in Albania then (Simon & Galanxhi & Dhono 2015).

In the socialist period (1945-1990). It worth mentioning that during the communist regime, the Roma have obtained employment, agrarian land reform, security for tomorrow, compulsory schooling, housing, etc., what has caused them to integrate the same as the entire population majority. During the period of communism, the state didn’t make differences, there was no separation between the Roma and the majority. This equality was enshrined in the constitution, then, every citizen enjoyed equal rights, all rights involving culture, education, equal treatment of all persons before the law, employment, housing, etc. Also, in that period education was obligatory for the entire population without discrimination, and during this period the number of Roma population attending obligatory education was almost the same as the rest of the population and the number of illiterates among Roma were low, those who arrived had high scores and wanted to be educated, encouraged to pursue higher studies. The Roma minority have graduated during that period teacher, officer, agronomists, doctors etc (Osmanaj 2013).

After the change of the political system in Albania in 1990, the Roma minority as well as the entire Albanian society in that period faced difficulties of various natures, they experienced a very long transition that we can say that its effects are still felt even today, and the Roma minority is one of the minorities in Albania that feels these effects even more.

The Albanian legal framework for the protection of human rights is broadly in line with European standards. However, implementation is limited and enforcement of human rights remains insufficient. Roma and Egyptians face very difficult living conditions and frequent social exclusion and discrimination due to ineffective policy implementation and poor inter-institutional cooperation; a solid anti-discrimination case law has yet to be built up (European Commission 2015).

Roma people for the last decade have been at the centre of public policy at national and international level. The Parliament and the Government have invested to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion of Roma people from the social and economic life of the country. Yet, very few Roma children finish their mandatory education, while many families continue to live in poverty and not being able to benefit from the development of the country compared to the rest of the population (Hazizaj 2017).

To have a clearer idea about the number of the Albanian population as well as the number of members of the Roma minority, we will refer to the census of 2023.

According to the population data in the Republic of Albania, as of September 18, 2023, the population was 2,402,113. In the 2023 Census, 91.0% of the population declared Albanian ethnicity, while 2.8% declared

another ethnicity, and 0.6% responded with 'Prefer not to answer.' A small percentage of the population (0.05%) declared 'None' for ethnicity. For the remaining 5.6% of the population, data on ethnicity is not available, as the question could not be asked to family members. According to the 2023 Census, the population of Albania includes the following numbers of people belonging to national minorities: 9,813 to the Romani national minority (Republic of Albania, Institute of Statistics, Population and Housing Census in Albania 2023).

According to First Report under Article 25, paragraph 1, of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities it is said that Albania places special emphasis on fostering good relations, tolerance, cooperation, coexistence, and mutual understanding between the Albanian population and the national minorities living within its territory. Throughout its history, both in the past and present, Albanian society has not experienced ethnic, racial, or religious conflicts or issues. This fact has been recognized by international organizations as well.

In the first chapter of the Constitution of Albania, the general principles, a specific article is dedicated to national minorities. According to Article 20: 1. "Persons belonging to national minorities exercise their rights and freedoms in full equality before the law." 2. "They have the right to freely express, without restriction or compulsion, their ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic affiliation. They have the right to preserve and develop these aspects, to learn and be taught in their mother tongue, as well as to unite in organizations and associations for the protection of their interests and identity.

Certainly, one or several articles in the Constitution alone would not be sufficient to fully guarantee the rights of national minorities. Therefore, for more detailed protection of their rights, we turn to Law No. 96/2017, "On the Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Albania," which was adopted on October 13, 2017.

This law regulates the exercise of the rights of individuals belonging to national minorities in the Republic of Albania. It aligns with the Constitution, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe, and international human rights agreements to which the Republic of Albania is a party. The Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities was signed by the Republic of Albania on June 29, 1995. It was ratified by the Assembly of the Republic of Albania through Law No. 8496 on June 3, 1999, and, after the deposit of the instruments of ratification on September 28, 1999, it entered into force on January 1, 2000.

The specificity and importance of this law lie in the fact that it ensures the exercise of specific rights for individuals belonging to national minorities, which are necessary for the protection of the distinctive identity of these minorities. It guarantees non-discrimination and full equality before the law, thus safeguarding the unique characteristics and cultural heritage of national minorities. According to paragraph 2 of Article 3 of this law, the national minorities recognized in the Republic of Albania are: the Greek, Macedonian, Aromanian, Roma, Egyptian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, Serbian, and Bulgarian minorities.

In the second chapter of Law No. 96/2017 "On the Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Albania," Articles 5 to 17 outline the rights and freedoms of national minorities. These rights and freedoms include: the exercise of rights; the right to self-identification; data collection; the prohibition of discrimination; freedom of association and the right to representation; freedom of conscience and religion; participation in public, cultural, social, and economic life; the preservation of cultural identity of national minorities; the right to education in the minority language; freedom of expression, opinion, and the right to information; the use of language; the prohibition of limitations on rights; and international agreements.

In addition to the internal legal basis, Albania has also ratified many other legal documents, whether regional or international, making them part of the internal Albanian system, which constitute a guarantee for the respect of the fundamental rights and freedoms of minorities in Albania. We can mention, the European Convention on Human Rights; Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; Copenhagen Criteria; EU-Albania Stabilization and Association Agreement Regional; The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; etc.

However, regardless of all these legal guarantees and responsibilities assumed by the Albanian state, we noticed that their implementation in practice leaves much to be desired. We often see discriminatory behaviour, we hear discriminatory words addressed to members of the Roma community, both by ordinary citizens and by public officials, leading to the violation of basic human rights and freedoms. Albania has been in the news several times in the regional and international media regarding this matter.

In 2012, an article by Amnesty International drew attention to the expulsion of Roma families from their homes. According to the script, nine homeless Romani families temporarily settled by the Albanian authorities in tents on private land have been threatened with imminent forced eviction (Amnesty International 2012).

In 2016, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner Nils Muiznieks has three Balkan governments for evicting Roma families from camps while not offering them any alternative accommodation. Muiznieks sent letters to three Balkan countries, Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia, along with France, Hungary, Italy and Sweden. The letter sent to Albania's Minister for Urban Development, Eglantina Gjermeni, complains about the eviction of about 48 Roma families from a site near the lake in Tirana city park on October 2015 (Balkan Insight 2016).

In 2018, a Romani community in Fushe-Kruje, Albania have won a case before the Commissioner for the Protection from Discrimination, after taking on the local municipality for refusing to provide them with clean drinking water and sanitation. The Commissioner found that the municipality of Kruje discriminated against Romani families living in the "Kastriot" neighbourhood based on their ethnicity and socio-economic status, and has ordered the municipality to take immediate measures to correct the situation within 30 days or face a fine (ERRC Press Release 2018).

Hateful discourse in the media environment, but even crimes against certain groups and minorities, namely against the Roma and Egyptian communities in Albania, go unreported due to public disinterest and due to the alienation of these communities from society (Hysa & Lani 2022). Marginalized Roma continues to live in more overcrowded households. Access to electricity actually decreased between 2011 and 2017; and while an increase in access to piped water was registered since 2011, on both counts, coverage for Roma is the lowest in the region (World Bank & United Nations Development Program 2018).

Not wanting to dwell on the opinions of previous years that the advisory committee has held on Albania, in this article we will refer only to the findings of fifth opinion on Albania, advisory committee on the framework convention for the protection of national minorities (Advisory Committee on the FCPNM 2023).

The atmosphere for persons belonging to national minorities in Albania is characterized by mutual respect and intercultural dialogue, especially inter-religious tolerance. However, an overall lack of almost any reliable or disaggregated data relating to the situation of national minorities – from census to hate speech or hate crime – makes it difficult to assess this with any certainty, and for the authorities to design targeted measures to address the needs and interests of persons belonging to national minorities. The legal framework in place is solid, but general in nature (Advisory Committee on the FCPNM 2023).

Among the main concerns referred to in this report in summary mention: school segregation is a systemic problem across Albania, and one case of discrimination at a school has been the subject of a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights; the housing situation of Roma and Egyptian minorities is concerning, including in its segregated nature which contributes to the issues in segregated schools; discrimination on the job market also negatively affects persons belonging to Roma and Egyptian minorities; access to healthcare for persons, in particular women, belonging to Roma and Egyptian minorities is also concerning; persons belonging to Roma and Egyptian minorities are absent from the national level of decision-making, although there are some representatives at local levels; etc.

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted on 21 December 1965, by UN General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX). International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, was ratified by Albania in 1994.

While the Committee takes note of the progress made by the State party to adopt the bylaws of Law No. 96/2017 on the Protection of National Minorities, it is still concerned that three bylaws are still under consideration, which continues to limit the full and effective implementation of the Law. The Committee is concerned about the slowness in adopting bylaws for the implementation of legislation that are particularly relevant for the protection of ethnic minorities, especially Roma and Egyptians. The Committee is also concerned at the lack of information on the legal scope of the decisions of the Council of Ministers relating to the implementation of legislation and the progress made in applying those decisions (United Nations, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 2014).

The report also expressed concern about racist hate speech, particularly in the media and on the internet; persistent and widespread structural discrimination against Roma and Egyptians, who continue to face social exclusion and marginalization that prevent them from fully enjoying all rights under the Convention; despite the measures taken to prevent discrimination against Roma and Egyptian children in schools and to promote their enrolment in preschool and compulsory education, the Committee remains concerned about the low attendance

rates, low levels of achievement and high rate of school dropout among Roma and Egyptian children. The Committee remains concerned about reports of discrimination against and de facto segregation of Roma and Egyptian children in some schools; some Roma and Egyptians continue to live in informal settlements in precarious conditions, with no access to basic services, including safe drinking water, sanitation and electricity. Despite the measures adopted by the State party, the Committee is concerned about reports that Roma and Egyptians often lack security of tenure, which exposes them to forced evictions; despite the efforts made by the State party to improve access to health for Roma and Egyptians, including by providing cards to access free-of-charge health care, the Committee remains concerned about challenges that Roma and Egyptians continue to face in accessing adequate health-care services without discrimination; the Committee is also concerned about the information regarding the lack of digital skills among Roma and Egyptians, which prevents them from gaining access to public services; the Committee is concerned about the limited participation of Roma and Egyptians in public affairs at the national and local levels, including in representative institutions and decision-making positions; while the Committee notes the information provided by the State party on activities carried out to combat racial discrimination, it is concerned that racial prejudice against and stereotypes regarding ethnic minorities, such as Roma and Egyptians, are still prevalent in the country.

3. The Role of People's Advocate regarding to Roma Minority Rights

The institution of the People's Advocate was first established in the Albanian Constitution adopted in November 1998, and the law 'On the People's Advocate' was passed by the Albanian Parliament in February 1999. This law was drafted with consideration of the legislation of other European countries that had previously established such an institution. The direction of the People's Advocate institution is monocratic.

During the debates on the drafting of the Constitution, this institution was presented as a fundamental institution for the country that should be included in the Constitution. This body was created with the purpose of protecting 'the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of individuals from illegal or irregular actions or omissions of public administration bodies (Zaganjori & Anastasi & Çani 2011).

Referring to the constitutional articles, specifically Articles 60, 61, 62, and 63, we can conclude the duties, competences, functions, and characteristics of this institution, which is so important for the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals.

The People's Advocate was established as an institution that complements the system of guarantees for the protection of human rights, and as a challenge against situations that create arbitrariness in public administration (Omari 2002).

From the moment of its establishment in 1999 until today, Peoples Advocate has done intensive work in the protection of basic human rights and freedoms, in their promotion as well as in raising the awareness of people and public officials through reports, recommendations, opinions, conferences, seminars or awareness campaigns.

In this regard, the contribution of People's Advocate towards the Roma minority in Albania can't be left without mentioning, where there have been quite a few cases where, even on his own initiative, without complaints from members of this minority, cases have been pursued where members of the Roma minority have been violated or restricted in their freedom and basic human rights.

In the first years of the establishment of this institution, in the reports drawn up by People's Advocate regarding the situation of basic human rights and freedoms in Albania, it is impossible to find cases or denunciations from the Roma minority, and this is not due to the fact that their situation was the best possible, but due to the fact that the Albanian people in general and the Roma minority in particular were not yet aware of the role of Peoples Advocate.

The year 2002 marks for the first time a complaint addressed to the People's Advocate from Union of Roma of Albania regarding the death of a Roma woman at the maternity hospital in Fier. In connection with this case, the People's Advocate made a corresponding recommendation to the Prosecutor's Office of Fier for the initiation of an investigation into the criminal act of negligent medical treatment (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2002).

In 2003, the People's Advocate became involved in a case presented by a complaint from the Union of Roma in Albania, 'Amaro Drom,' which affected 120 Roma families. As part of the rehabilitation of the Lana River, they were asked to leave their tents or shacks, leaving them homeless. In addition to the housing problem, other issues were raised regarding registration in the civil registry offices and the education of members of this community. The People's Advocate addressed this matter to the relevant institutions and suggested that unused military barracks, factories, or other spaces no longer in use could be temporarily repurposed until a permanent solution

could be found.

Regarding children, the People's Advocate stated in his report that street children, most of whom are Roma and Egyptians, represent the most vulnerable, unprotected, and exposed group, facing many risks such as abuse, insecurity, illiteracy, malnutrition, and more. These children often engage in activities such as begging, street vending, etc (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2003).

In the report of the year 2006, the People's Advocate expressed his concern about the phenomenon of non-registration of children's births and deaths are widespread within the Roma minority and among families that have migrated to Tirana over the last 15 years. In the case of migrants, the primary reason for the failure to register in time is that, since these families are still registered in the civil registry offices of their previous places of residence, parents of newborns or relatives of the deceased have to go specifically to those offices to report births or deaths. This requires travel expenses and time. Therefore, in most cases, the failure to register for this part of the population has resulted from the lack of transfer of civil status documents to the civil registry offices of their new place of residence (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2006)

However, in 2008 it is worth mentioning the progress made concerning the amendments to the "Civil Status Law". These changes are expected to minimize the phenomenon of non-registration of children in rural areas, as well as those from the Roma minority, both of which are vulnerable to traffickers.

One of the most important issues in the annual report 2007 was presented by the 'Amaro Drom' association, which reported that in the city of Elbasan, 4 Roma families had their homes demolished and were living in very difficult conditions. Their homes, built without permission, were on public land within an area where a building for the homeless was being constructed. After the demolition of the homes, these families lived in extreme conditions in makeshift shacks, some of which housed young children. The decision to demolish these homes was made in accordance with the law, but the People's Advocate, during meetings with local institutions in the Municipality of Elbasan, clarified that the Council of Ministers, through Decision No. 633 dated 18.09.2003, had approved the 'Strategy for Improving the Living Conditions of the Roma Minority.' The People's Advocate recommended that the responsible institutions temporarily accommodate these families and then work to place them on the list of homeless people to benefit from the building under construction. The People's Advocate stated that the Municipality of Elbasan took measures to resolve this issue (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2007).

According to People's Advocate Annual Report, in 2009, the People's Advocate prepared a special report, which was submitted to the Parliament. This report is related to the protection and respect of the rights of the Roma minority in Albania. From a comprehensive reading of this special report, it can be briefly summarized as follows.

Between 2000 and 2008, the People's Advocate Institution received very few complaints from the Roma minority. This is primarily due to a lack of awareness about the status and activities of the People's Advocate. For this reason, in June–September 2009, the People's Advocate initiated the organization of Open Days in all areas with significant Roma communities. As a result, 230 complaints were gathered from individuals or from Roma groups. In addition, 72 complaints or requests were addressed or counselled on-site.

The economic and social situation of the Roma minority in Albania is very difficult. The principle of equality and dignified treatment is not applied, and most Roma families live below the poverty line. The community experiences high unemployment, low education levels, and homelessness. Around 50% of Roma children remain illiterate.

In 2010, the People's Advocate addressed numerous issues related to the Roma minority, such as: educational situation of Roma children; more inclusive legislation for Roma education and eliminating exclusionary attitudes in schools; Increasing Roma access to social protection benefits, housing, and infrastructure in line with state standards; child labour among Roma; social insurance system; access to healthcare, hygiene conditions in Roma settlements, and promoting the preservation of Roma cultural heritage etc (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2010).

The same concerns were presented in the 2011 report, which makes us understand that all those that were presented in 2010 were not resolved or had easy permissions, which did not have any great impact on allowing the lives of members of the Roma minority.

According to People's Advocate Annual Report, during 2012 People's Advocate sent a series of recommendations to the ministries, including measures to register Roma members in civil registries and facilitate the transfer of civil status data to local units where they reside; measures to establish preparatory classes for

preschool education and teach the Albanian language, ensuring Roma children's participation in all education levels, and raising awareness among Roma families about the importance of schooling; and measures to prioritize the inclusion of Roma members in vocational training programs and employment, aiming at their social integration and improving their socio-economic conditions to prevent discrimination.

Even throughout the years 2013 and 2014, the concerns and complaints of the Roma minority remain the same, however, it should be mentioned that the number of complaints steadily increasing. The increase in complaints from these communities, on one hand, is positive, as it shows greater awareness among the members of these communities regarding their rights, as well as how they should act when these rights are violated.

In the 2015 report, one of the most important issues was the one raised by The European Roma Rights Centre, an issue related to the education system. The situation they present is a unique case of school segregation, with Roma children attending the public 9-year school 'Naim Frashëri' in Korça, with 100% of the students from the Egyptian and Roma minorities in the city of Korça (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2015). Another case at the same year was displacement of these minorities who lived in the area of the Artificial Lake in Tirana, round 50 Roma/Egyptian families, almost 200 people. The forced displacement of this minority was not being carried out in accordance with international principles and standards regarding forced evictions. In this context, the People's Advocate recommended to the Mayor of Tirana and the Chairman of the Municipal Council of Tirana to find a solution to the situation in accordance with the applicable national and international legal standards, with the aim of providing this community with sustainable and long-term solutions that would clearly improve their living conditions.

Even in the previous years, such as in 2016, 2017, 2018 or 2019, the Roma minority continued to face various difficulties which are addressed in the reports of the People's Advocate and which are related to housing, education, health, employment, prejudices, limited access to drinking water, etc. As for 2020, it was the year of lockdown and social distancing due to the pandemic that affected our country as well as the rest of the world. Although the People's Advocate found it difficult to carry out many activities on the ground, it kept the public informed through its official page and other communication channels (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2020).

According to People's Advocate Annual Report, in 2021, the General Section of the People's Advocate institution continued its work to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Roma and Egyptian minorities in Albania. The right to housing remained a significant issue, closely linked to other rights such as the right to life and health. It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing in 2021, and many activities were carried out online. A positive development for both the Roma and Egyptian minorities was the adoption of the National Action Plan for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of Roma and Egyptians for 2021-2025.

The challenges and issues that the Roma and Egyptian minorities continue to face in Albania are closely related to the need for comprehensive improvement of living conditions, enhancement of legal provisions to ensure easier access for Roma and Egyptian individuals and families to the social protection and inclusion system, encouragement of participation and inclusive standards in the educational process for Roma and Egyptian children and youth, and progress in the legalization process for the homes of Roma and Egyptian families, among other issues (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2022).

In 2023, the issues faced by the Roma and Egyptian minorities in Albania remained largely the same as those identified in the 2022 report. The People's Advocate has continued to work on defending their rights, in collaboration with numerous national and international organizations focused on fundamental human rights. Many cases were addressed through complaints or the initiative of the People's Advocate, and several recommendations and proposals have been made to relevant institutions to resolve the challenges faced by these minorities. The report emphasizes the urgent need to complete the drafting of secondary legislation that would ensure the protection of the rights of national minorities in accordance with the existing legal framework.

Equality, inclusion, and the integration of national minorities into all aspects of society and in the face of various challenges must remain a priority for public administration bodies. These bodies need to adopt a more proactive, cooperative approach, demonstrating heightened sensitivity and professionalism when addressing these issues. The manifestation of individual acts and institutional policies that promote marginalization, exclusion, physical violence, hate speech, and the devaluation of the culture and way of life of the Roma remains a concerning issue for a democratic society. This phenomenon perpetuates negative stereotypes and distorted images, representing a specific form of racism not only against Roma individuals and communities but, in some cases, also against Egyptians. Not only should the strategic and legal frameworks for equality, inclusion, and participation project concrete policies for the integration and real inclusion of Roma and Egyptians, but government bodies at both the central and local levels must take action to include these marginalized groups as part of a diverse, inclusive,

and democratic society (People's Advocate, Annual Report 2023).

4. Conclusion

Regardless of the presence of laws that serve as a guarantor for the protection of the rights of the Roma minority in Albania, members of this minority continue to face direct or indirect discrimination, poverty, unemployment, various problems in the field of education, health, housing, etc. Regardless of the existence of the legal framework, their implementation is not completely successful and this is due to various reasons, including weak public institutions, political will, limited funds, as well as the existence of the discriminatory mentality and stereotyping that society has for this minority. The active and positive role of the People's Advocate in helping the Roma minority is indisputable. He has continuously addressed their problems, made numerous recommendations to state institutions, published annual reports where violations of their rights are evident, conducted awareness campaigns, seminars, conferences, etc. However, the effectiveness of this institution is limited, as its recommendations do not have binding force and are often not given due importance by state institutions. In order to succeed in the integration of the Roma minority, coordination between state institutions, civil society and international organizations is definitely needed; sufficient funds for the implementation of integration policies; strict monitoring of state institutions as well as active involvement of the Roma community itself in the drafting and policies related to them. Albania has made progress in protecting the rights of the Roma minority; however, the challenges remain great and more commitment is required.

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