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*Statement by Alen Umer (working session 17)
President of the Local Youth Council of Shuto Orizari, North Macedonia*

There are various laws in North Macedonia which regulate housing and which are especially relevant for Roma, like the Law on Housing and the Law on the procedure of illegally built objects.

Roma face some of the worst housing conditions in the country.

In North Macedonia, 28 per cent of Roma live in poor neighbourhoods, in badly constructed housing that often lacks formal registration. Overcrowding is also widespread: many Roma families live in houses with less than 5 square metres per person. This situation is made worse by the precariousness of these arrangements, with some 80,000 Roma households lacking long-term housing solutions. The frequent absence of adequate drinking water, electricity, heating or sanitation also contributes to widespread ill health.

Local government agencies play an important role as they have the mandate to closely regulate housing. They are also responsible for infrastructure development, urban planning and land registries and in this case, many Roma are not familiar with the complex institutional structures that shape these policies and so are largely dependent on the goodwill of decision makers.

In this context it is difficult for citizens, particularly Roma, to get a clear picture of the regulations and how these can be successfully navigated. CSOs further argue that the national social housing programme fails to reach those areas where the Roma population need these measures most, and that there is not enough social housing to cater for all of those in need. Even in regions where the volume of available social housing is proportionate to the number of Roma, they are often unaware of these options and the procedures involved in applying for them. Nor have all local authorities developed detailed urban plans, further hindering the implementation of social housing programme.

Shuto Orizari Municipality works on undertaking needs assessments and data collection on the housing situation of the Roma population and strives to accelerate the legalization procedures for illegal buildings that are occupied by Roma, in line with the Law on the procedure of illegally built objects, already started to design detailed urban plans and will start to provide funds for the improvement of the utility infrastructure in Roma settlements and municipalities as well as to identify the most vulnerable Roma families and ensure the provision of social housing to them in the near future.

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In times where nationalism and racism in general are on the rise antigypsyism and related issues are what we need to focus on more than ever.

Sinti and Roma have always been one of the most discriminated and persecuted groups in history which means the consequences of nationalist parties rising everywhere will affect our people especially and have a massive impact on their security, social status, access to resources and mental health. Societies everywhere need to take responsibility by acknowledging the situation of Sinti and Roma and finally take action to secure the implementation of human as well as civil rights everywhere. We need empowerment programs focusing on emancipation of the minority especially in the aspects of education and self-representation. We need solidarity from political parties, institutions and ngos everywhere and by this we should mean to stand together against and apply condemnent to actions and statements in which hatred and racism against sinti and roma is shown. This means when politicians like Salvini are talking about eviction of Sinti and Roma in Italy, Italy should have to face serious consequences and be punished by the EU. The European Union has the responsibility to secure the integrity of all of its citizens, but Sinti and Roma are up to today treated not only as second, but third class citizens and subhuman beings. Their suffering is not only simply not recognized, but willfully ignored by the majority. Good examples could be politicians who participate eg in the European Parliament or examples where the voice of Sinti and Roma is heard and where we not only have access to resources equally.