



EU RECOVERY PLAN. THE CASE OF ROMA IN MEMBER STATES, ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD COUNTRIES

By ERGO Network 29 April 2020

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This publication has been produced with financial support from the European Union's Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

The case of Roma in Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries

Throughout Europe, Roma have been in living devastating and unsafe living conditions and in deep poverty, without access to running water, sanitation, or other public utilities, and often in a situation of severe overcrowding. Deep poverty and huge unemployment have long kept Roma at the margins of their societies.

During and after the pandemic, Roma will continue to be Europe's most vulnerable community to health risks, social and residential segregation, deeper poverty, social exclusion, antigypsyism and mental health problems, unless they become a priority of the any emergency, mid and long-term recovery plan.

It is critical to recognise that the human rights and socio-economic crisis particularly for vulnerable groups will not be over after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also essential to recognise that Roma have been experiencing a crisis all along, not only now with the pandemic and that short-term patched solutions for vulnerable communities will not resolve the overall long-term consequences of this current crisis.



Only with long-term investments in infrastructure, improved living conditions and smart and flexible economic solutions in employment and entrepreneurship, quality education, a clean environment, and fighting poverty and antigypsyism starting now and throughout mid-term measures we can viably contribute to solving the most stringent problems of the Roma communities.

The Commission should send clear, consistent messages to Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries that the European Union is based on common European values that are non-negotiable and cannot be disregarded under any circumstances, including the respect for human dignity, human rights protection, equality and the rule of law. Human rights obligations (particularly with regard to the right to life and protection from torture and inhuman and degrading treatment) under the Charter for Fundamental Rights cannot be limited or ridiculed by national or local authorities in state of emergency. More so, all governments and other state and non-state actors involved should ensure that all responses to the Covid-19 outbreak comply with EU and international human rights law and standards, take into account the specific needs of marginalized groups and those most at risk, and ensure that security and preventive measures during the pandemic are not disproportionate, illegitimate or discriminatory.

EU and national political leaders and other influential figures should speak out forcefully against any attempts to ethnically profile and scapegoat Roma and other minorities during this crisis and must at all costs avoid fuelling the fire of such discrimination. States should act quickly to counter rhetoric in the public and media discourse that stokes fear and ensure their responses to Covid-19 do not make certain populations more vulnerable to racist violence and discrimination.

The dissemination of accurate, clear and evidence-based information and awareness-raising campaigns are the most effective tools against discrimination and xenophobia. The Commission should invest more into monitoring incidents of discrimination and racist violence at national level.

The Commission should request Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries to conduct, together with civil society, national mapping and needs assessments of vulnerable communities and segments of the population, including according to gender, age and medical needs. The assessments should be coordinated together with national and local crisis response teams, including Roma representatives (e.g., Roma mediators and CSOs).



Hot spots in EU countries that need support, especially when it comes to countries like Bulgaria and Slovakia due to security issues and jobs: Who is in charge of delivering services there and where are they doing so?

Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia are hot spots – see the examples enclosed as to why. Mostly human rights NGOs are monitoring the situation of Roma communities and providing support (food and equipment supplies through donations), but Roma mediators and social workers are also.

Urgent EU recovery plan: policy measures by Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries

Viewed the vulnerability of Roma communities to a continuous cycle of extreme poverty, health risks and social exclusion and marginalisation, it is crucial that urgent recovery measures target all relevant areas where Roma and other vulnerable groups will be affected.



A priority should be to monitor and assess the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on the Roma community during the pandemic itself together with CSOs. This would require collecting disaggregated data (according to gender, age and vulnerability) to ensure viable, effective post-pandemic policy design. Special attention should be paid to the possibility of a growing gap between the Roma communities and society in general.

Humanitarian Response

- An immediate European humanitarian response across the region should focus on the most vulnerable groups, including marginalized Roma communities and all racialized minorities, making sure they are reached in all Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries.
- Supply of food, hygienic and protection articles requires the regular, well-organised distribution of humanitarian assistance (food, masks and hygiene). A regularly scheduled distribution scheme can help to avoid possible conflicts and harm during distribution. (e.g., North Macedonia assists communities with packages to families at risk; however, there is no possibility to know how many recipients of this aid are from the Roma community).
- Organise delivery of essential supplies to socially isolated groups and persons in quarantine.
- Urgent measures must address lack of water, adequate sanitation, electricity and needed infrastructure. This could be done by reconnecting families or settlements cut off from water or electricity supply or by the regular delivery of water by vehicle to the settlements. Roma settlements should be fully included in disinfection measures.
- Prohibit the cancellation of basic utility services during the pandemic. Consider subsidizing consumption costs for the most vulnerable and those who have lost incomes, or freezing payments until the end of the recovery plan period.
- Non-discriminatory, equal access to the health system and supplies of medicine must be ensured for everybody.

Funding

- Make sure that mainstream funding reaches the Roma - give guidelines to governments, including the NRCPs, and managing authorities to make sure allocations are made for the vulnerable and Roma especially.
- Include a special provision for Roma when implementing European instruments for temporary support (SURE and FEAD) and other relevant funds under Corona response in mitigating the economic and social effects of the Covid-19 pandemic with the specific aim of protecting jobs and people in work but also vulnerable groups, such as Roma.
- Use the Emergency Fund for Vulnerable Group Rights and Value Programme to support Roma and pro-Roma civil society and mediators to distribute supplies to people to need.

- Use funds to support small Roma NGOs involved in supportive activities during the pandemic who may be losing staff.

Employment

- Governments can provide immediate financial support for lost employment and income and ensure that this is also available to Roma workers.
- Authorities should urgently develop and secure economic measures during the crisis or provide financial aid to vulnerable groups working in the informal economy, such as market sellers, day labourers, etc.
- Set up specific provisions to ensure that income support is also accessible for vulnerable groups, such as those without the online or transport means to apply, those without a bank account, or those unable to read or write.
- Regularise informal work: make sure seasonal jobs, craftsmen, artists (singers) or small business entrepreneurs and self-employed persons are covered by employment contracts giving access to decent work rights.
- Ensure that previous debt does not limit access by Roma to social benefits rolled out as a response to the pandemic.
- Replicate good practices. For example, in North Macedonia there is already a very good policy response for all, including Roma, by the government, which a) recognised persons who worked in the informal economy and provided them with 4,000 – 10,000 denars per month depending on the number of people in one household (for specific professions); b) Payments on bank loans will be suspended until the end of June; c) Persons in the private sector will receive 14,500 denars for April and May; 4) Persons who became jobless due to the current situation will receive 50% of the salary earned during the last 24 months; d) the Government is spreading messages about prevention, the measures taken, and is informing the public in a timely manner about all developments regarding COVID 19 in the country.

Health

- Authorities should immediately ensure that Roma in the quarantined and poor settlements have access to food, medicine, hygiene products and health care, and that they are supported to comply with public health measures in a manner that respects their human rights.
- Prioritise access to health insurance and access to testing services, user-friendly public health information and future vaccination or immunization against coronavirus for Roma over 45'; this is vital as the life span of Roma across Europe is 10 to 15 years lower than the majority population and therefore earlier delivery of a preventive plan is essential to prevent health complications and deaths among Roma.
- Condemn all forms of discrimination and exclusion from health care services considering the current pandemic situation. Human rights protection must be at the heart of the policy response of Member States and other European countries towards the pandemic. States must establish effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms for countering discriminatory practices in access to education and health services.
- Ensure that Roma community members and vulnerable groups enjoy the same level of safety and protection as non-Roma and have access to affordable, clean water, sanitation, food supplies and information.
- Ensure the adoption of adequate, timely intervention plans that can guarantee equal access to healthcare to Roma people and vulnerable groups living in segregated settlements in case they test positive for Covid-19.
- Ensure that virus testing and medical treatment is available, accessible and affordable for all. Such health and prevention services must be provided without discrimination and must not stigmatize patients.
- Roma health mediators, teaching assistants, coordinators or members of NGOs working with communities should benefit from the necessary protective materials (masks, gloves, disinfectants). These persons should be provided with information on protective measures and assist people as much as security allows.

- Scale up and reinforce the health mediators' scheme and introduce it where it does not yet exist. For example, there are health mediators and Roma doctors in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia (medical scholarship support has been given by REF and PHP).

Education

- Support Roma students by providing supportive remote learning equipment and access to the Internet (computers/tablets). Agreements should be reached with public institutions and companies such as Facebook, Microsoft and Google to provide the equipment needed for remote learning, particularly for poor families.
- Pay particular attention to supporting vulnerable children, who are more likely to drop out of school and to experience a more severe drop in their academic achievement after prolonged school breaks.
- Provide support to Roma children who rely on schools for meals, e.g., through food vouchers.
- Facilitate affordable Internet access in Roma communities to ensure that information and education are accessible.
- Ensure that school authorities do not apply disproportionate or discriminatory measures to Roma students (e.g., justify poor grading or suspension of Roma students because of failure to comply with long distance learning because their families lacked the technology).
- Ensure that EU emergency funds allocated for tackling Covid 19 specifically reflect the needs of Roma and vulnerable children.
- Urge Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries to develop an urgent response to the educational needs of Roma and vulnerable children by allocating funding to improving their access to education, including IT equipment, affordable access to the Internet and digital literacy to prevent their poor educational performance and school dropout. (e.g., in Italy the municipality of Milan started to donate tablets to Roma kids in a camp after they saw their home schooling struggled without equipment. Access to computers, electricity and Internet needs to be ensured. Support to Roma parents should be organized.)
- Ensure that the current situation of physical distancing is not used for further discrimination against and stigmatization of Roma and vulnerable communities.
- Ensure that all children receive financial, social, pedagogical and psychological support during and after the pandemic to handle its effects on education and health regardless of children's school attendance.

Housing

- Find solutions to address inadequate, overcrowded housing conditions and lack of access to basic utilities. Poor housing conditions represent a systemic risk for the impacts of health crises, requiring a longer-term government response to build resilience.
- In the shorter term, people living in overcrowded and/or unsanitary conditions may need to be prioritised for hospitalisation or other forms of out-of-home care in order to protect other vulnerable household members.
- Include temporary suspension of mortgage payments and utility bills, and suspension of forced closing of utility service and evictions for families at risk.
- Ensure access to sanitary infrastructure, affordable water and services in social housing.
- Ensure temporary housing for the homeless.
- Guarantee a moratorium (cancellation) on all (forced) evictions during the pandemic and confinement measures. Find temporary alternative accommodation for those already evicted.

Non-discrimination

- Governments should ensure that Roma are safe from racist violence and intimidation and prevent racist decisions to set-up police checkpoints and walls targeting Roma settlements.
- Rigorously investigate incidents of police abuse to ensure there is no impunity for introducing and/or implementing repressive, violent measures against Roma individuals or communities, as well as for inducing fear and intimidation.

- Monitor and sanction the dissemination of misinformation, hate speech and the scapegoating of Roma by the media, politicians or public figures, including the ethnicising of crimes allegedly committed by Roma in the public discourse.
- Immediate steps should be taken to resolve the issues of lack of identity documents, lack of legal status, or renewal of identity documents in order to ensure access to rights and services.
- Disseminate positive examples for preventing stigmatization: a) Shuto Orizari and all municipalities formed a Crisis Management Body which has already had a meeting with the Roma and CSOs to analyse measures and decide on them; b) Online in Shuto Orizari classes are held through the ZOOM platform and the municipality reports there will be three of them per day from Monday to Friday.

Participation and contribution of civil society

- Awareness-raising: Roma and pro-Roma CSOs should be involved in the mapping of the Covid-19 situation and its impact on Roma communities as well as in awareness-raising.
- Detect fake news and hate speech: Civil society should set up close cooperation with law enforcement institutions and monitor social media in order to detect rumours and fake news to avoid violence against Roma.
- Monitor equal treatment: Human-rights watchdogs will monitor the treatment of Roma, including in the field of freedom of movement and in the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Mid-term EU recovery plan policy measures for Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries

The European Covid-19 Recovery Plan should fully take into account the needs of vulnerable Roma communities and define them as a priority group in all mainstream policies and measures, including in economic aid and recovery, social protection, health care, housing, education and employment.

Education

- The EU Roma Strategy should ask Member States to fully implement, by 2030, UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education for Roma, and implement principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, by adopting inclusive education measures – having at their core desegregation, teacher awareness, and including Roma history and culture in the school curricula.
- Guarantee the right to education of Roma children during and after the pandemic by elaborating sustainable, comprehensive national policies aiming to effectively reduce the educational gap between Roma and non-Roma, including ethnic segregation in schools. Such policies must provide an immediate response to current challenges faced by Roma parents and children and school professionals in continuing formal education, and may include: affordable access to electricity and Internet and adequate equipment for providing and following online classes (PC, laptop, tablets), including TV devices for tele-school.
- The Commission should define its policy on the binding criteria for recipients of funds that take into account the needs of vulnerable groups, such as Roma, and work towards reducing the gap in education. These criteria must include civil society participation and consultations with Roma and other organizations representing vulnerable groups to guarantee the equitable and proportional distribution of funds during and after the pandemic.
- The governments should build explicit desegregation programmes and revise national law on education, where relevant.
- Introduce or further extend free, obligatory preschool and remove financial and non-financial barriers to access.
- Invest in second chance schools and the recognition of non-formal qualifications, to ensure that people, particularly the most vulnerable, have access to lifelong learning opportunities.

Employment

- The EU Roma Strategy should ask Member States to fully implement, by 2030, UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, as well as most principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights dealing with quality employment, by ensuring that the Roma have access to decent jobs, with adequate pay, security, and employment rights.
- The EC could promote public employment schemes as a temporary solution for unemployment, but they should also be used as an opportunity for re-qualification and further training.
- The EC and the governments must put in place concrete strategies to combat antigypsyism in the labour market, both from employers and employment agencies. The EC could encourage governments to use EU funds to initiate antigypsyism training for PES employees to increase their awareness and skills.
- Promote skills training for the Roma population and thus encourage employment in the private, public and third sectors, access to financing, and adequate social protection to promote self-employment and special measures from which Roma-owned businesses could benefit, such as tax incentives.
- Investment in infrastructure and public services such as childcare and healthcare should be promoted so as to stimulate local employment that can benefit Roma.
- The future Roma Strategy could encourage Member States to provide access to financing for Roma entrepreneurs (SMEs) by giving them technical assistance, adapted financial products, and access to market opportunities. This will enable viable, sustainable entrepreneurship projects among the Roma and significantly boost Roma employment.
- The post-2020 MFF needs to include targeted measures for Roma entrepreneurs under the umbrella of the new ESIFs. The post-2020 Entrepreneurship Action Plan could mention Roma as a specific target category and secure civil society involvement through the process.
- The EC should encourage governments to strengthen measures supporting initial work experience or providing on-the-job training, using the full potential of the European Social Fund (ESF). It can promote the use of the Microfinance and Social Entrepreneurship axis of the EaSI programme and thereby target Roma explicitly to improve their access to microfinancing.
- The EC needs to put greater emphasis on youth in the EU Roma Framework 2020-2027, in particular on the transition from education to employment, and ensure that Member States make youth employment a priority in their NRIS.
- The EC and governments need to secure separate employment conditions for young Roma who face severe exclusion and discrimination on the labour market solely due to their ethnicity and combat the ethnic and age pay gap.

Health

- The EU Roma Strategy should ask Member States to fully implement, by 2030, UN Sustainable Development Goal 3 on Good Health and Wellbeing, SDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation, and SDG 7 on Affordable and Clean Energy, as well as principle 20 of the Social Pillar, on Access to Essential Services.
- The EC should ask governments to adopt laws explicitly recognising the human right to water and sanitation and ensure that all people in the country enjoy access to safe drinking water and sanitation; ensure that informal housing conditions do not prevent people from enjoying the right to safe drinking water and sanitation; adopt policies and allocate budgets for connecting Roma settlements to public drinking water and sewerage systems; and ensure that adequate safe drinking water and sanitation facilities are available in Roma neighbourhoods and settlements.
- The EC needs to ensure that EU law is brought in line with the UN legal framework to recognise the human right to water; to propose expanding the applicability of water-related directives to include problems with the accessibility and affordability of water supply and services; to develop indicators and monitoring mechanisms on social equity in access to water and sanitation in Member States and to task the FRA with conducting annual data collection, in accordance with Article 4(1)(c) and/or (d) of Regulation 168/2007; and to earmark funds to

tackle limited access to water and sanitation supply services for socially excluded and ethnically-discriminated groups.

- Ensure access to doctors, to health care systems, to medicine, and to health insurance during and after the pandemic.
- Implement mass vaccination programs, not only for Covid-19 but also for other diseases, as the pandemic measures will likely increase the number of non-vaccinated Roma children.
- Establish internal control systems to monitor the quality of health services for Roma, including emergency assistance, that would include racism audits of health institutions.
- Ensure universal health insurance coverage among Roma, at least 95%, and reduce the disproportionate exposure of Roma to public health and environmental harms.
- Monitor and fight discrimination in access to health care and sensitise health professionals to Roma needs.
- Improve nutrition and fight unhealthy living conditions targeting Roma women and families with minor children.

Housing

- The EU Roma Strategy should ask Member States to fully implement principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, regarding Housing and assistance for homeless, to ensure that quality, affordable housing is accessible also to Roma.
- Prioritize investing for infrastructure development and housing improvement for newly legalized informal settlements. This would be an opportunity to invest in green, sustainable community designs.
- Governments should legalise those informal settlements where Roma live; alternatively, provide permanent, decent, affordable, environmentally safe, desegregated housing for Roma currently living in informal settlements that cannot be legalized for justified reasons.
- Define segregation as illegal in housing, in conformity with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination (ICERD), which “condemns in Article 3 apartheid and racial segregation and obliges parties to ‘prevent, prohibit and eradicate’ these practices in territories under their jurisdiction and includes “an obligation to eradicate the consequences of past policies of segregation, and to prevent racial segregation arising from the actions of private individuals.”
- The EU should continue and further initiate infringement proceedings against Member States in cases where EU law has been breached and follow-up on the proceedings, including in cases of forced evictions.
- Future EU funds should focus on quality housing and better living conditions for Roma.
- The EC should ensure targeted funding for addressing Roma housing exclusion from a dedicated single fund tackling extreme poverty. Alternatively, if such a fund will not be launched in the MFF, then the EU should encourage Member States to ensure that substantial resources are made available in national programming for inclusive housing projects accessible to Roma in the framework of multi-fund programmes combining the ERDF and ESF.
- The EC should strengthen the role of enabling conditions by: 1) requiring that national programming is in compliance with the (updated) National Roma Strategies; 2) ensuring that national mainstream policies support (or at least do not hinder) the integration of Roma; and 3) developing effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms of national and local Roma inclusion action plans.

Poverty

- The EU Roma Strategy should ask Member States to fully implement, by 2030, UN Sustainable Development Goal 1 on No Poverty, as well as the entirety of the European Pillar of Social Rights, as 80% of the Roma in Europe are currently experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
- The EC should annually measure Roma poverty through Eurostat using the combined AROPE indicator – those at risk of poverty, material deprivation, and households with low work

intensity – to be able to keep track of the multifaceted aspects of poverty and social exclusion in Roma communities.

- Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries should put in place measures to ensure better coverage and take-up of social benefits, such as adequate minimum income schemes, by making them automatic, reducing red tape, eliminating conditionalities and sanctions, and tackling stigma and discrimination against Roma or other recipients.
- In order to design an effective social safety net, consider piloting social audits to identify poverty risks that stem from the intersectional vulnerabilities of Roma.
- Make the fight against poverty and social exclusion a transversal dimension through the four key dimensions of the EU Roma Strategy and NRIS, ensuring that quality, sustainable employment opportunities, inclusive education, quality housing, and adequate healthcare contribute to the overall improvement of Roma wellbeing and quality of life.

LONGTERM MEASURES AND THE POST-2020 EU ROMA STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The post-2020 “EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Social and Economic Justice and Combating Antigypsyism” must constitute a top priority in the Covid-19 response of the EU, Member States and Enlargement countries in order to comprehensively address the structural exclusion, inequality and vulnerability of Roma communities that is being dramatically exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The EU Framework and revised national Roma strategies for Member States and Enlargement Countries should prioritize fighting structural inequalities and the lack of access to basic services and infrastructure in Roma communities while building viable solutions in the areas of education, employment, health, social protection, poverty, housing, environment and fighting antigypsyism (in evictions, segregation, homelessness and illegal housing, hate speech and hate crime, police brutality, etc.) in order to guarantee a level playing field in the access to basic rights and services. Viable solutions can be obtained if the Commission sets minimum human rights targets in each field, with common EU indicators and joint monitoring, and if it conditions bigger infrastructure and investment funds to the governments on addressing and resolving long-term needs in Roma communities. The Strategic Framework needs to be implemented through the European Semester, and to be fully integrated with mainstream initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the New Green Deal and others.

For further references and input, ERGO together with the members of the Post-2020 EU Roma Coalition have developed a response to the Commission Roadmap on the future EU Roma Equality and Inclusion Policy that you can find [here](#).

For the time immediate after the crisis we will need an investment package, which should be focusing on small and medium size companies, solo-workers and should contribute to gearing our economy towards a social-ecological transition.

Any emergency or recovery plan must address the specific situation of Roma at both national and local level. Authorities must introduce measures that directly target Roma as marginalized groups, while ensuring that all general measures reach Roma communities.