



European Commission releases Winter Package – What’s in it for Europe’s Roma?

On 26 February 2020, the European Commission published the so-called *Winter Package*, comprising the 28 [Country Reports 2020](#) (including the United Kingdom), and the usual [Communication on Country Reports](#), in the framework of the 2020 European Semester.

Key Messages

1. Only 6 Country Reports explicitly refer to the Roma, despite most of them across Europe experiencing severe discrimination, marginalisation and segregation, poverty, poor living conditions, and very low employment, education, and health outcomes.
2. The National Roma Integration Strategies are not given enough prominence and support in the vast majority of Country Reports, evidencing a lack of effective integration of the EU Roma Framework in the European Semester and its processes.
3. The national approach to Roma rights and inclusion continues to be piecemeal in most countries, while a comprehensive, integrated policy response, rooted in realities across all social areas and equally tackling antigypsyism, is lacking.
4. The approach to Roma communities is consistent with an unfortunate lack of prioritizing of issues related to ethnic minorities and discrimination throughout the Country Reports.
5. Civil society organisations are only rarely mentioned as key partners in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public policies, thus weakening the effectiveness of interventions, as well as undermining ownership and democratic decision-making processes.

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** warmly welcomes the explicit mention of the European Roma the **Communication on the Country Reports**, which states “Equal access to high-quality education and training from an early age is also essential to promote equality of opportunities and to foster inclusion, including of underrepresented groups such as Roma...”. However, we are disappointed that the Roma are again mentioned exclusively under education and training. There are no references this year either to the fact that Roma people in Europe face poverty and social exclusion at rates of over 80% in most Member States, that their employment, health, housing and other indicators are extremely low compared to the majority of the population, and that antigypsyism and discrimination continue to be rampant.

This approach is mirrored by the very vast majority of the individual Country Reports included in the Package, according to the review performed by the ERGO Network and its national members. Read below a synthesis of this analysis, which also informed the Key Messages of this Report, and which is based on data collection according to the following key questions:

- *Are the Roma mentioned anywhere in the Country Report? If yes, are all four dimensions of the National Integration Strategies mentioned in connection to the Roma – education, employment, housing, health?*
- *Do you agree with the challenges identified? What is missing?*
- *Are other relevant issues mentioned – ethnic minorities, discrimination, racism, antigypsyism etc?*
- *Is civil society mentioned as a key partner?*

Are the Roma mentioned in the Country Reports?

Are all four dimensions of the National Integration Strategies covered?

Unfortunately, it appears that the **Roma in Europe are mentioned in very few of the Country Reports**. According to the feedback received, Roma are only referred to in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. There is one reference to Travellers in Ireland.

In **Bulgaria**, encouragingly, the Roma are consistently mentioned throughout the Country Report, including the progress made for the Country-Specific Recommendations in 2019. The main emphasis is placed on the inclusion of the Roma in the labour market (where 65% of young Roma and 55% of all Roma are inactive, and the proportion of Roma among NEETs aged 15-34 is 38%). The Report equally states that the inclusion of Roma in education remains a challenge due to several factors, including school segregation and barriers posed by extreme poverty (34% of Roma completed only the initial stage of primary education, and 44% - lower secondary, as 67% of Roma have left school early). Finally, the text also mentions that 86% of the Roma are still at high risk of poverty, 65% of Roma still live in homes without basic sanitary conditions, and over 83% of Roma live in segregated neighbourhoods. The proportion of Roma without health insurance is much higher than the national average.

In the **Czech Republic**, the Roma are only mentioned in relation with education, concerning early school leaving, the Action Plan for Inclusive Education (with the aim to curb segregation and bullying, but this has not managed to diminish the share of Roma children in special schools), and participation in early childhood education and care. There is also a brief mention in the section dedicated to Social Policies, about the number of excluded localities which continues to grow. However, nothing is said about access to quality employment, housing, or healthcare services.

In **Hungary**, our members are pleased to see more references to the Roma than in previous Reports, which is encouraging, including in the context of monitoring performance in light of the European Pillar of the Social Rights, as well as in what concerns the implementation of the Country-Specific Recommendations of 2019. The Country Report covers the poverty and material deprivation of Roma (including of children), several education aspects (segregation, early school leaving, low participation in higher education), labour market outcomes (slightly improved, but issues persist), poor living conditions, and residential isolation. Regrettably, however, while three dimensions of the National Roma Integration Strategies are mentioned, nothing is said about the state of health of the Roma population, or their access to quality healthcare services.

In **Ireland**, Travellers are mentioned under education, but only in relation to the issue of early school leaving. Neither Travellers nor Roma are specifically mentioned in any employment section, which is concerning considering as data from the 2016 Census shows an 80% unemployment rate for Travellers. A National Needs Assessment (2018) reported that 79% of Roma reported feeling discriminated against when attempting to access employment.

In **Romania**, the Roma are included in several sections of the Report, covering a large range of issues, including low enrolment in pre-school education (only 37%) and in education in general, high rates of early school leaving, lower quality of education and school performance, school segregation, child poverty, obstacles in accessing health services (not least due to lack of identification documents and health insurance), low coverage of social security, poor housing conditions, discrimination in access to housing, illegal evictions, long-term unemployment & limited access to labour market. Fortunately, all four dimensions of the National Roma Integration Strategy appear well covered by the Country Report. Less encouragingly, the implementation of the Strategy is lagging behind, due to lack of coordination among stakeholders.

Also positively, in **Slovakia**, there are extensive references to the situation of the Roma in the Country Report, namely concerning critical labour market outcomes, poverty and material deprivation (including for children), marginalised communities and poor housing and living conditions, poor access to services (including childcare), segregation in education, low enrolment in early childhood education and care, the role of social entrepreneurship in Roma integration, missing infrastructure. The updated Roma Integration Action Plan, approved by the Government in 2019, with an allocation of €55.7 million, is also mentioned, as well as the need for a systemic approach in addressing the disproportionate placement of Roma children in special schools – however, the Report notes that a strategy for inclusive education, with concrete desegregation measures, is still lacking. All four dimensions of the National Roma Integration Strategy are mentioned, but inadequately, without links being drawn and a comprehensive approach applied.

In **Spain**, the Report mentions the high social vulnerability of the Roma community, and the fact that they continue to face integration challenges, where only 17% of Roma complete lower secondary education and 63% of young Roma are neither in employment, nor in education or training, and which results in low employment rate (30%), very high unemployment (52%) and extremely high risk of poverty or social exclusion (92%). While the National Roma Integration Strategy is mentioned, alongside regional strategies (e.g. Andalusia, Catalonia), nothing is said about the other two important dimensions, housing and health.

Are the challenges identified for the European Roma the right ones? What is missing?

In **Bulgaria**, our members feel that the Country Report addresses all the important priorities of the National Roma Integration Strategy, and the findings are correct and adequately reflect the current situation. What is missing, however, is a more in-depth analysis of the reasons for the problems and challenges that prevent the planning of adequate measures to address them. What is equally missing are findings related to the rise of antigypsyism and discrimination at all levels in society, including the increase in hate speech in the media and in political and public life. Finally, there is no analysis of the overall involvement of the civil sector in the creation, implementation and monitoring of the overall policy of the state.

In the **Czech Republic**, our members agree with the objectives of the future Strategy of Education 2030: develop key competences and reduce inequalities, support teachers and school heads and transform the content and methods of education, though they feel the scope could be broadened. However, they point out that there is no mention of the case called D. H. – based on which new support measures (such as Opatření D. H. 27/2016 z 1. 9. 2017, platná od 1.1.2018), which was ordered by the European Commission, brought about support measures within education of pupils with special needs. Also, the information quoted in the Report for early childhood education is from 2016 and from 2017, even though there is new law decree applied from 2018.

In **Hungary**, members think that all challenges identified correspond to the real situation Roma people in the country, which continues without any real or even any improvement. Only one aspect can be seen as a partly positive development, namely the improved labour market outcome for vulnerable groups – however, this is still well below the average Hungarian level. All the other references are related to explicitly deteriorating situation, namely gender employment gap, available and accessible Public Employment Services, material deprivation of Roma children, residential isolation of Roma people, concentration of Roma pupils in certain schools, their low participation in higher education, their higher rate of early school leaving. This latter aspect, together with relatively weak labour market outcome to Roma, is outlined in the context of the performance in the field of the European Pillar of Social Rights, similarly to the last Country Specific Recommendations, with respect to which limited progress was observed.

In **Ireland**, the impact of the homelessness and housing crisis on both Travellers and Roma is missing, in the view of our members, as is any acknowledgement of the health inequalities both communities face. While Travellers are mentioned under the Education section, this is solely in relation to early school leaving and does not consider other issues, such as access to third level education, or other education and training options.

In the **Netherlands**, while the Roma are not mentioned, it is detected by our members through their field work that the National Roma Integration Strategy is used to target Roma families from the starting point of ethnic repression, instead of inclusion. Only the city of Utrecht involves positive measures, thanks to strong Roma local advocacy. Thus, the Country Report ignores the severe antigypsism rooted in society and imbedded in institutions, disregarding it also as the main reasons for the exclusion of Roma on the labour market.

In **Romania**, our members feel that the main issues that Roma face are mentioned by the Country Report. However, what is lacking is a better description of mechanisms and causes that led to Roma exclusion, and phenomena like racism, and direct or indirect discrimination. Other missing dimensions include:

- The extreme poverty in which many Roma live, including issues such as access to water, sewage, basic living conditions and basic income.
- The scarcity (lack or high state of degradation) of social infrastructure in Roma communities, which causes many problems in health, education, and employment.
- The fact that stakeholders do not cooperate at central level for the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy – many of the interventions are window-dressing.
- The poor results of EU Funds in addressing the problems that were described.
- The fact that sensitive issues like segregation are not at all tackled adequately.

In **Slovakia**, according to our members, the situation of Romani people from marginalized communities is much more problematic and should be more elaborated and integrated as a horizontal priority, also taking into account the availability of EU funds. It is inadequate to be satisfied with employment only in social enterprises. There is no mention of the environmental burden. Inclusive education is insufficient, Roma children from a poor environment do not have a chance to receive quality education. In EU projects, only the fulfilment of quantitative indicators is evaluated, but not the quality of provided services and their impact on the target group. There is nothing in the document about segregation in secondary education, there is no mention of segregation in the labour market or the creation of special programs for the Roma only. The Roma are still perceived only as a social problem.

In the **United Kingdom**, our members are equally disappointed that there is no reference to Roma or Travellers whatsoever in their country's Report. While a UK version of a National Roma Integration Strategy was promised by the Government, the current Covid-19 crisis will likely lead to delays in its production. Hopefully, it will also delay Government plans to criminalise trespassing, which members deem very damaging.

Are other relevant issues mentioned – ethnic minorities, discrimination, racism, antigypsyism?

Ethnic minorities are a staggering absent dimension in most Country Reports. In the Report for the Czech Republic, there are references to ethnic minorities in what concerns indebtedness, and increasing their labour market participation. France, Latvia, Sweden and the United Kingdom are the only other countries whose Reports refer to minorities, although the phrasing is vague. In France, there is a reference to the European Social Fund supporting their participation in employment. In Latvia, it is mentioned that ethnic minorities, compared to other groups, face higher unemployment and have an employment rate of 12 percentage points lower than the majority. In Sweden, only a footnote informs that the labour quality indicator used includes average income, age, education, and ethnicity. There is a reference to “ethnic minority background” regarding ESF-related training in the Report for the United Kingdom, as well as “Children with a minority background are more likely to be in relative poverty, with 45% currently living in relative poverty”.

The situation is slightly better in what concerns **vulnerable groups**, who are indeed mentioned in an overwhelming majority of Country Reports. However, they are oftentimes just mentioned once or twice in the text, without further elaborating on who this term covers. When it is specified which groups are meant, the term regularly applies to the low-skilled, the long-term unemployed, migrants, lone parents, people with disabilities etc, with no mention of ethnic background or discrimination. Only in the Reports for Hungary and Romania does the term “vulnerable group” explicitly include the Roma.

Antigypsyism as such is not mentioned in any of the Country Reports, nor is **racism**. While the concept of **equality** is present in many Reports, it almost exclusively refers to gender equality, with only a handful of exceptions talking about equality of opportunity, or income inequality.

Discrimination, as a broad concept, is shockingly absent from the vast majority of Country Reports, with only a few texts mentioning it. The Romanian report explicitly refers to the stigma and discrimination that the Roma face, particularly in what concerns accessing housing and health services. In Belgium, there are references to fighting discriminatory practices in employment, based on a ‘diversity plan’, an anti-discrimination desk, supporting jobseekers facing discriminatory practices, raising awareness among businesses about diversity. In Germany, it is only mentioned that the European Social Fund supported “quality and sustainable employment, combatting social exclusion and discrimination”. Discrimination is mentioned in the Netherlands, but not as ethnic discrimination, and not taken into account when discussing social and economic inequalities – rather, the discourse seems to be more one of placing sole responsibility on the individual to integrate, with no support provided. Finally, an initiative of self-reported discriminations by trade unions’ representatives in the workplace is referred to in France.

Is civil society mentioned as a key partner?

Our Network equally tried to map what is the situation of civil dialogue in Member States, and whether civil society organisations, and the stakeholders they represent, are mentioned in the Country Reports as key partners in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public policies. Unfortunately, the situation is not encouraging, as evidenced by the texts. Civil society is mentioned infrequently, while only the vague term of “stakeholders” features in some Reports. Our members lament this, deeming Roma advocacy and activism in dire need to be strengthened and supported, as it is essential in tackling antigypsyism and informing policy decisions.

Only a few Reports explicitly speak of the broad, core role of civil society as key stakeholder in policymaking. In the Czech Republic, greater involvement and more stable funding for civil society organisations is mentioned, for monitoring the performance of the European Pillar of Social Rights, while the development of civil society was included as a priority area in the Anti-Corruption Strategy. In Romania, it is noted that the involvement of social partners, civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders in public policy developments remains limited. The Report for Greece contains a section dedicated to improving the dialogue with civil society and their capacity to provide input, including through an appropriate regulatory framework. The text for Cyprus refers to the need for further financing for civil society, similar to the one received by social partners, for better participation in policy-making. Similar calls for bettering the capacity of civil society organization to provide input to policies are present in the Latvian Report.

A handful of Reports do mention civil society, but only once, in relation to very specific subpoints, rather than as an equal partner in the overall design and delivery of reforms. In Bulgaria, only the participation of civil society organizations in the discussions on some social legal initiatives is referred to. In Slovakia, NGOs are mentioned only as a substitute body for the state in implementing instruments to improve the living conditions of excluded Roma. In Luxembourg, input from civil society actors on the impact of poverty is mentioned. In Belgium and Austria, civil society organisations are referred to only as possible partners for public employment services to promote better integration of third country nationals, including refugees. A “broad political consensus... involving different stakeholders including civil society” is mentioned in Croatia, but only in what concerns environmental sustainability. In Poland, citizens’ associations and NGOs are referred to in the context of the low carbon transition, as well as regarding service provision.

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