



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

On 20 May 2020, the European Commission published the so-called *Spring Package*, comprising the 28 [Country-Specific Recommendations 2020](#) (including the United Kingdom), and the accompanying [Communication on Country-Specific Recommendations](#), in the framework of the **2020 European Semester**. Together with its national members, ERGO Network has reviewed the Package, to see to which extent it explicitly mentions Roma rights and inclusion, as well as other key issues, such as ethnic minorities, discrimination, racism, and the role of civil dialogue.

### Key Findings

1. **The Communication accompanying the Country-Specific Recommendations highlights the Roma** as one of the most affected groups by poverty, inequality, and social exclusion.
2. **In contrast, for the first time since 2012, not a single Country-Specific Recommendation 2020 mentions the Roma**, while there were 4 in 2019 (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia).
3. **The Roma are only mentioned in the Preamble for 4 Member States (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia)**, the same ones as the 2019 Preambles, minus the Czech Republic.
4. **Ethnic minorities, discrimination, and racism are completely absent from all 28 documents**, while only the blanket, vague term of “vulnerable groups” is typically used.
5. **Civil society is only mentioned in 4 Preambles (Finland, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia)**, while in contrast social partners are referred to in 3 CSRs and 16 Preambles.

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** warmly welcomes the explicit mention of the European Roma in the *Communication on the Country-Specific Recommendations*, which states that “*Some groups in particular families with children, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants and persons with a migrant background and Roma are relatively more exposed*”, in the context of prolonged income losses, poverty risks, as well as increasing inequalities in access to healthcare, essential social services and support, and distance learning. This is a positive step compared to last year’s communication, where the Roma were not mentioned at all. The Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the associated security measures, have hit Roma communities particularly hard, while they were already experiencing poverty, low living standards, poor access to education and health, as well as discrimination and antigypsyism.

The document says that the 2020 Recommendations reflect the need to focus on both immediate measures – to deal with the consequences of the Covid-19 public health crisis and associated socio-economic impact, as well as longer-term measures – to achieve the EU’s economic, social, and environmental objectives. Encouragingly, the interconnectedness of these three dimensions is underlined, while the Sustainable Development Goals are deemed “more important than before”, and the European Pillar of Social Rights is named as “the compass for policy action at the EU and Member State level”. Regrettably, however, the SDGs are only mentioned twice, and the Social Pillar once, rather than being mainstreamed as guiding principles across the document.

ERGO Network further salutes explicit references in the Communication to vulnerable groups, which “must not be left behind in a context where inequalities are starkly revealed and even exacerbated.” Positive elements include the need to provide adequate income replacement to all workers, supporting those furthest from the labour market to access appropriate jobs, improving coverage and adequacy of social protection (including by relaxing eligibility), deferring rent and suspending evictions, and increasing the efficiency of social spending so that it reaches those most in need – including access for all to water, sanitation, energy, and digital communication. The role and potential of social economy are also highlighted.

Despite this positive wording in the accompanying Communication, **for the first time in eight years (since 2012), not a single Country-Specific Recommendation mentions the Roma**. This is a very negative development, which is tremendously inconsistent with both the de facto failure of the National Roma Integration Strategies to meaningfully support Roma inclusion, as well as with the disproportionate impact that the Covid-19 pandemic and associated measures are having on Roma communities. For contrast, 4 Member States (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia) received a CSR dealing with Roma in 2019, targeting chiefly education (improving inclusiveness, quality and relevance) as well as overall integration. Given the very limited improvement of the situation in these areas, we would have expected at least for these CSRs to be repeated in 2020.

**The Roma are only mentioned in the Preamble for 4 Member States – Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia**, which are the same ones as it was the case for the Preambles of the 2019 Country-Specific Recommendation, minus the Czech Republic. However, given the ongoing crisis, we would have expected an increase, rather than a decrease, in the number of countries whose Preamble specifically speak of the significant inclusion challenges faced by the Roma.

In **Bulgaria**, the high share of poverty among Roma is referenced in the Preamble, as well as the limited impact of social transfers in reducing it. The text also highlights the need for essential services and support to Roma households. Further, it stresses the importance of Roma inclusion in education, as they are already facing a high level of inequalities, which was worsened by the current remote learning situation.

In **Hungary**, it is stressed in the Preamble that marginalised communities such as the Roma have a hard time accessing healthcare services, a situation worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic, while both severe material deprivation and material and social deprivation remain high, as do early school leaving rates.

In **Romania**, the Preamble indicates that the Roma and other vulnerable groups are expected to see an increase in inequalities, social exclusion, and poverty, including child poverty and in-work poverty, and also that the lack of adequate digital infrastructure, teaching materials and insufficient digital skills has made distance learning challenging for Roma pupils.

Finally, in **Slovakia**, the Roma are named in the Preamble among are groups who are particularly vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis – due also to pre-existing social challenges and limited access to social protection, care and essential services – as well as who lack the pre-conditions to access home learning.

While our members agree with the challenges identified for their countries, they would have liked to see a more comprehensive, integrated approach across the four pillars of the National Roma Integration Strategies, with notably housing being conspicuously missing from the analysis.

Other important concepts for Roma rights and inclusion, such as **ethnic minorities, discrimination, and racism are completely absent from all 28 documents**. Antigypsyism specifically is equally not mentioned. This trend is, unfortunately, consistent with the Spring Package of 2019, where only the text for Belgium referred to tackling discrimination of new arrivals, and the one for France called (in the Preamble) for firmer action on discriminatory practices. These are strikingly absent dimensions in the current climate, where discrimination is on the rise all across Europe, with racialised communities being particularly hard hit not just by Covid-19 and its effects, but also by a marked increase in hate speech and even scapegoating for the pandemic, as well as police brutality.

There is some slight improvement in what concerns references to the role of non-governmental organisations, which were not mentioned a single time in the Country Specific Recommendations of 2019. Slightly more encouragingly, this year, **civil society is mentioned in 4 Preambles (Finland, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia)**. In Hungary, it is noted that dissuasive practices for accessing public information can deter citizens and non-governmental organisations from exercising their constitutional rights. In Finland and Portugal, civil society organisations are named as actors in addressing the health, social, and economic impact of the crisis. In Slovenia, however, instead of being seen as key partners and interlocutors in policy-making, non-governmental organisations are only praised for their direct intervention in affected communities.

Conversely, social partners are referred to in 16 Preambles (CY, CZ, EE, FI, GR, HU, IE, LV, LT, MT, PL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES), with a whole paragraph dedicated to strengthening social dialogue in Poland, while three Country-Specific Recommendations in Hungary, Poland, and Romania refer to ensuring the effective involvement of social partners and stakeholders in the policy-making process and in public administration. Stakeholders are also mentioned in the Preambles for Cyprus, Hungary, and Poland.

Equally, civil society is only mentioned once in the accompanying Communication, in a pro-forma closing sentence which is near-identical to last year's, whereas the role of social partners and the need to work together with them is highlighted multiple times throughout the text.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, while our members welcome references to Roma communities in some countries, they lament that most documents don't explicitly mention them, where the Roma are present in all Member States except Malta, and experience rates of poverty and social exclusion of over 80% in all of them except the Czech Republic. This situation was exacerbated by the current public health, social, and economic crisis and associated containment measures, as highlighted also by the Package, hence it would have warranted more attention paid to one of Europe's most left-behind communities. This is particularly important in the context of the upcoming renewal of the EU Strategic Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, scheduled for later this year.

While the recurrent focus on mitigating the consequences for vulnerable groups is very positive, it is our members' experience that, unless the Roma are explicitly named as key target beneficiaries of support measures, mainstream initiatives and dedicated national and EU funds end up not reaching them. Europe's Roma must be specifically prioritised in the EU's Recovery Package and associated funds, if the EU is serious about delivering on its commitments for Roma inclusion. Our members equally express disappointment that issues of discrimination and antigypsyism are not present in the Package, as these have increased in recent years, and even more so during the pandemic. Finally, they deplore the lack of recognition and support given to civil society organisations in the documents, given that most of them were not only on the frontlines during the pandemic, providing essential support to communities in need, but they equally possess the knowledge, expertise, and direct links to beneficiaries which are needed to inform the design of public policies and ensure both ownership and effectiveness of interventions.

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