



European Commission releases EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021-2024) – What’s in it for Europe’s Roma¹?

On 24 March 2021, the European Commission released the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024](#). A proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the **European Child Guarantee** was released at the same time, and ERGO Network also prepared a separate response to that initiative. The Strategy aims at addressing persisting and emerging challenges, as well as proposing concrete actions to **protect, promote and fulfil children’s rights**, so that every child enjoys the same rights and lives free from discrimination and intimidation. ERGO Network has engaged closely in lobbying and advocacy around this initiative, to ensure that Roma children and their specific concerns are taken on board. Read our full input [here](#) (November 2020).

¹ The umbrella term “Roma” encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.), in accordance with terminology used by the [European Commission](#).

ERGO Network warmly welcomes the many references to Roma children throughout the Strategy. The document acknowledges that Roma children are much more exposed to suffering hunger (page 8), poverty (page 6) and school segregation (page 9), that they are overrepresented in the share of early school leavers (page 9) and underrepresented in enrolment rates for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and completion of upper secondary education (page 9), while the shift to distance learning has disproportionately affected them (page 2). It further highlights the need to strengthen child-friendly justice and child protection systems (page 20), as well as the fact that, in the 2021 programming period, Member States must fulfil several enabling conditions, including Roma inclusion and poverty reduction (page 22). There is one reference to Traveller children (page 8). Unfortunately, **no concrete link is made in the Strategy with the EU Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation**, which is a great missed opportunity.

We further welcome that **discrimination is highlighted as an important factor** affecting children's wellbeing and their access to rights, while intersectional discrimination is also mentioned several times, in an effort to better capture and respond to the needs of specific groups of children, including those experiencing compounded disadvantages. Unfortunately, **antigypsyism as such is not referred to**, despite it being the root cause for continued poverty and social exclusion of the Roma, including Roma children. Racial and **ethnic origin, as well as ethnic minorities, are also named several times**, in the context of ensuring better access to rights for these children, including non-segregated education. Sadly, there is no priority as such to combat discrimination.

It is very positive that **the Strategy is firmly anchored in a children's rights – based approach**, and commits to mainstreaming such an approach in all relevant policies. Concrete links are made to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and on Disability Rights, and the **Sustainable Development Goals**. The Strategy will further contribute to the delivery of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and will work in conjunction with the **European Child Guarantee**. Unfortunately, the Investing in Children Recommendation is only mentioned once. While a number of thematic strategies are recalled in the footnotes (including the EU Roma Strategic Framework, and those on LGBTIQ Equality, Gender Equality etc), they are sadly not reprised in the text itself, except the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Strategy **takes stock of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic**, and explicitly mentions the impaired access of Roma children to online education, highlighting also the lack of daily meals, and isolation. Unfortunately, it does not mention the health consequences deriving from **poor quality housing and lack of sanitation, reduced access to healthcare, or racial abuse** which so many Roma communities fell victims of during the pandemic and associated measures.

The Strategy includes **six thematic areas** for intervention:

1. Participation in political and democratic life
2. Socio-economic inclusion, health and education
3. Combating violence against children and ensuring child protection
4. Child-friendly justice
5. Digital and information society
6. The Global Dimension

Regarding **participation in political and democratic life**, the document speaks about unequal access to participation between boys and girls, due to gender stereotypes, but **does not touch upon other forms of discrimination or excluded groups**. Antigypsyism, for example, is a powerful deterrent to social participation. It is mentioned that the Strategy already builds on the views of over 10.000 children – however, no background is provided on what children were consulted, or whether the sample included representatives of all groups, such as ethnic minorities. A future **EU Children’s Participation Platform** is foreseen, together with other child participation initiatives in conjunction with the European Green Deal, the Future of Europe etc. Member States, in turn are encouraged to strengthen local, regional and national participation for children, including through supporting schools and school staff. All this is very positive. However, **nothing is said about ensuring diversity and providing for the voices of marginalized and racialized children** to be heard. Child-friendly language is mentioned, but not minority languages, nor the offering of anti-bias trainings, or **concrete outreach measures to reach vulnerable groups**, including ethnic minority children, such as Roma children.

Regarding **socio-economic inclusion, health, and education**, the plight of Roma children is included consistently in the section. It is also very welcome that the approach includes **social protection and comprehensive, wrap-around support for families**, acknowledging that there are no poor children in rich families. A very positive point is that the Strategy aims to **prevent family separation and loss of parental care** due to poverty and social exclusion experienced by parents.

Roma and Traveller children are highlighted as experiencing higher hunger rates than other children. While the recognition of the problem is positive, the wording “which prevents proper brain development” is highly questionable. Disappointingly, **no other specific health issues that Roma children face are stressed in the text**, such life expectancy being 5-10 years lower than for majority children, significantly worse physical and mental health indicators across the board, and restricted access to health insurance, health coverage, and medicine. **The key role of Roma health mediators is not included**, nor is maternal health. While we welcome references to children from low-income families being at higher risk of severe housing deprivation or overcrowding, as well as more exposed to homelessness, **sadly nothing is said about forced evictions**.

We very much welcome the explicit support of the Strategy to **guaranteeing “access to inclusive, non-segregated, quality education, ... through a non-discriminatory treatment regardless of racial and ethnic origin...”**. The document also highlights Roma children and youth several times, in terms of their poorer educational outcomes and completion rates, as well as for **experiencing segregation in school settings**. While the text notes that only few countries support ethnic minority children and migrant children, sadly language support is only mentioned for migrant children. A new initiative, “Pathways to School Success”, could prove positive in its aim to **decouple educational attainment and achievement from social, economic and cultural status**, if it includes measures specifically targeting Roma children and their needs. However, more could be done to ensure that sensitive issues, such as Roma slavery and Holocaust, are dealt with in the school curriculum, as well as to build positive narratives and tackle ethnic and other stereotypes, while also cultivating a diverse staff and providing anti-bias training. Once again, **Roma educational mediators are not mentioned**.

This thematic area will be **primarily delivered through the European Child Guarantee**, and partly also through the Youth Guarantee, for children over 15. Perhaps for this reason, it does not go into much detail for proposed solutions. A stronger focus on combatting discrimination in access to services and social protection could have been included. Links are also made to the **European Semester and Country-Specific Recommendations**, which are named as instruments for delivery.

Regarding **combating violence against children and ensuring child protection**, the focus on ensuring children's safety is very welcome, including protection from bullying (including cyberbullying) and other forms of violence and abuse (including sexual abuse and online exploitation). While LGBTQI+ children and migrant children are rightly highlighted as experiencing heightened risks of bullying and mistreatment, unfortunately **the opportunity is missed to mention the violence suffered by Roma children on account of antigypsyism**.

Regarding **child friendly justice**, we warmly support the highlighting of intersectional discrimination, but regret that the document only mentions children with disabilities. The Strategy does not mention that **Roma children are particularly exposed to a denial of rights** due to widespread antigypsyism and discrimination, **yet their access to justice is even more limited** than that of other children, for the same reason – and the same is valid for Roma parents when seeking justice for their children. While the text includes provisions for age- and gender-appropriate language, it **does not mention minority languages**. The document equally overlooks the horrendous cases of **ethnic profiling in police actions**, which leads to the disproportionate targeting of Roma children and their families. While universal, free and immediate access to birth registration and certification is mentioned, capacity of front-line officials is to be increased only for migrant children. Many Roma children (and parents) **do not have ID papers**, a situation further complicated by the lack of a fixed address, not knowing how to read or write, not speaking the language, or not knowing their rights. The Fundamental Rights Agency found that only 30% of Roma know that there is a law prohibiting discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin or religion, while 82% are unaware of organisations offering support to victims of discrimination, and **only 12% reported an incident of discrimination** by filing a complaint with the authorities.

Regarding the **digital and information society**, it is very positive that **vulnerability to online hate speech and cyberbullying are explicitly mentioned**, including concerns for minority children, even if the Roma are not referred to as such. Despite this very welcome recognition, insufficient space is dedicated to combatting this situation and to promoting positive counter-narratives that foster diversity and inclusion in society, both on- and off-line. The thematic area **equally highlights the digital divide**, but once again the issue is not explored enough. Particularly in light of the explicit recognition in the Strategy itself of the difficulties around online learning, for instance, more attention could have been dedicated to **promoting measures which ensure access to infrastructure (network coverage, electricity), equipment (PCs, tablets, smartphones) and knowledge (digital skills)**, particularly in remote and sometimes segregated Roma communities.

Regarding the **global dimension**, we very much appreciate the **reference to Roma children and children belonging to minorities in the context of strengthening child justice and child protection** systems. Tackling violence and discrimination are also mentioned several times. However, it seems **strange to see begging on equal footing with forced marriages, trafficking, and female genital mutilation**, without taking into account that, sadly, for many families in need, it is a survival strategy and only source of income. The issue needs to be tackled through comprehensive support and harm reduction, not through punitive measures, in the same line as the much better proposed response to child labour, which is to be **combatted through access to free education for children and providing income support for parents**.

Sadly, intra-EU mobility is not mentioned at all in the Strategy, while a number of children move every year between Member States with their working parents. Many Roma parents from Central and Eastern Europe are **seasonal workers** in the West, who often have to bring their children with them when going to work abroad. These are **some of the least protected workers in Europe**, with poorly regulated contracts, substandard wages, inadequate working and living conditions, as well as restricted access to rights and resources, including child support and benefits. Rights must be ensured across all Member States also for mobile intra-EU seasonal workers, **so that their children do not bear the brunt of these inequalities**.

ERGO Network welcomes the proposed establishment of the EU Network for Children's Rights, and expresses the hope that the specific concerns of Roma children, as well as their direct representatives, will be included in a participatory manner in this structure. This is also valid for the proposed annual **European Forum on the Rights of the Child**, where the Commission will report on progress for implementation, as well as the future **Children's Participation Platform**. While the European Commission invites Member States to develop robust national strategies on the rights of the child, not a lot of detail is given on how the monitoring will take place in practice.

The **anchoring of the Strategy in core EU values such as equality, inclusion, gender equality, anti-racism and pluralism** is also very positive, as well as identifying the fight against poverty, inequalities and discrimination as pre-requisites to enable the active participation of children. We further appreciate the invitation extended by the European Commission to the Fundamental Rights Agency to continue to support Member States in data collection exercises, as well as the commitment to further disaggregate Eurostat and other EU data by age and sex. Unfortunately, **the opportunity is missed to equally promote specific indicators by ethnic background**, which would capture the key specific obstacles faced by ethnic minority children, such as the Roma, in accessing their rights.

Finally, **we salute the explicit reference to Roma inclusion as an enabling condition for accessing Cohesion Funds** in the programming period 2021-2027, highlighting the potential of these funds to further the rights of children, as well as the encouragement to Member States to make full use of these and other EU funds, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to implement the Strategy. **Civil society is explicitly named as partner** and interlocutor in the design and delivery.

ERGO Network and its members will continue to monitor the implementation, at national and EU level, of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. **We aim to ensure that Roma children's voices are being heard**, and that appropriate links will be made, at EU and national level, between children's rights and wellbeing and the objectives of the EU Roma Strategic Framework.