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Roma access to quality and affordable housing in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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✓ *Where do most Roma live?*

The Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina is predominantly concentrated in suburban and peri-urban areas, with a smaller portion residing in urban environments. In most cases, the Roma population lives in formal settlements that often exhibit signs of segregation. For instance, in Bijeljina, there are seven Romani communities or settlements located in peri-urban areas, while some Romani families live within the city itself. The latter case includes Romani families who have often migrated abroad and, upon their return, have separated from the Romani communities in the city of Bijeljina.

According to data from a special report on the situation of Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina prepared by the Ombudsman for Human Rights Institution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, some Roma live in collective centers, as is the case in Špionica. Additionally, there is a concept of "Roma houses" in Banja Luka, which consists of residential units.

The majority of the Roma population now lives in houses following the adoption of strategies to address the Roma issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of the commitments of the Roma Inclusion Decade (2005-2015) and the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020. Under these strategies, housing projects for Roma were implemented, including the reconstruction of old and construction of new residential units for the Roma population. It is important to note that funding from the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MHRR), IPA funds, as well as financial support from international non-governmental organizations such as Caritas Switzerland, Hilfswerk Austria, World Vision, Care International, and others, were used for the implementation of these Roma housing projects. Through these projects, Romani families were accommodated in social housing units, where each family has a separate entrance and garage.

However, there is an issue of ownership of residential properties caused by unclear property ownership relations. This problem further complicates the process of legalizing residential buildings in which Roma families reside. A smaller number of families live in rented residential units.

✓ *Roma homelessness*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, significant and visible progress has been made in addressing the issue of housing for the Roma population. However, it is important to emphasize that there is still a certain number of homeless individuals within the Roma community. These are primarily families who are residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina and not from other countries. According to the Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for addressing the issues of Roma in the areas of employment, housing, and healthcare for the period from 2017 to 2020, there is a recognized need for further activities aimed at identifying Roma households that are without adequate housing. Special attention is given to homeless Roma individuals, and there are plans to create a list of potential beneficiaries of social housing programs.

✓ *Living conditions of the Roma*

During the implementation of the previous Action Plan and the Revised Action Plan in the field of housing, numerous projects have been carried out that have significantly improved the living conditions of the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These projects have included the reconstruction of existing residential buildings, the construction of new homes, and the improvement of infrastructure in the settlements where Roma people live.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the construction of roads that provide access to Roma houses in cities such as Trebinje, Lopare, Čapljina, Ključ, Zenica, and Srpska. These access roads have proven to be of vital importance to the Roma population as they have facilitated easier access to their homes. In addition, access roads have been built to Roma settlements in cities such as Bugojno, Mostar, Kakaj, and Visoko. This has significantly improved the quality of life for the Roma, enabling them to have better access to basic municipal services.

Although significant progress has been made, it is important to note that there are still a small number of settlements where the issue of access to municipal services has not been fully resolved. In this regard, further efforts should be directed towards addressing these remaining challenges to ensure adequate housing conditions for the entire Roma population.

These projects represent a positive step towards improving the housing conditions of Roma people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and demonstrate the commitment of the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees to addressing the issues faced by this community.

✓ ***Segregation and informal settlements***

As previously highlighted, the majority of Roma families in Bosnia and Herzegovina reside in formal and segregated Roma settlements. There is also a small number of Roma families settling in informal settlements, typically those who frequently travel abroad and upon their return, separate from Roma communities.

It should be noted that the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina have made significant efforts to address the housing issues of Roma in the country. This has been achieved through the implementation of the Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for addressing Roma issues in the areas of employment, housing, and healthcare for the period from 2017 to 2020. This action plan defined key areas of action aimed at integrating and improving the living conditions of the Roma population in the country.

✓ ***Affordability of housing***

According to data from the "Otaharin" Association, only 1% of the Roma population is employed. This alarming statistic clearly points to the severe economic situation that the Roma population is facing. The low employment rate results in the majority of Roma being unable to afford the purchase of residential properties.

Roma are often forced to take on seasonal jobs with very limited income, which prevents them from qualifying for loans or decent housing conditions. As a result, most of the residential buildings where Roma live are in extremely poor condition, or they are compelled to rent lower-quality accommodations.

Furthermore, the poor economic situation also leads to adult members of Roma families often having to live together with their parents and other household members to reduce the cost of living and provide support to each other. This forced communal living situation further exacerbates the situation of Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

✓ ***Housing-associated bureaucracy***

One of the biggest obstacles and challenges that the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina faces in the area of housing is resolving property ownership issues and the legalization of residential buildings. Unresolved ownership issues significantly complicate the process of legalizing residential structures.

Furthermore, according to the program of the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the use of grant funds for Roma housing, the primary criterion and prerequisite for receiving funds is the legalization of the building and the submission of proof of ownership of that structure. Additionally, the high costs associated with the legalization of residential buildings in Bosnia and Herzegovina require a large amount of documentation. This means that Roma households applying for housing programs must prove land ownership and ownership of construction objects, which can be challenging.

It is important to note that nearly all municipalities provide free legal assistance to help address issues related to Roma housing. This initiative represents a significant step towards easing these problems and enables the Roma population to exercise their rights to adequate housing and living conditions.

Confronting these challenges requires a broader partnership between civil society organizations, authorities, and ministries to find sustainable solutions for the housing of the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only through joint efforts can we create positive changes and improve the quality of life for the Roma community.

✓ ***Antigypsyism in housing***

It is impossible to ignore the fact that there still exists a serious issue of discrimination against the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina in various aspects of life, including education, access to healthcare, and housing. Unfortunately, we must emphasize that we are facing significant resistance from the majority population towards the idea of housing the Roma community and their inclusion in other geographical areas where the majority population resides.

One such case occurred in the city of Bijeljina during the implementation of housing projects for families in social need, especially in the Amajlije settlement near Bijeljina. Unfortunately, the Roma population has never utilized the housing units in that settlement. Information obtained from some sources indicates serious resistance from the majority population to the inclusion of the Roma population in that geographical area.

This resistance represents a significant obstacle to achieving an inclusive society in which all citizens have equal opportunities and access to resources. Overcoming these barriers and promoting equality for the Roma community requires a collective effort from all relevant institutions and organizations, including the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is important that such challenges are recognized and actively worked on to ensure a better future for all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

✓ ***Forced evictions***

The "Otaharin" Association would like to emphasize that there have been no recorded cases of eviction of the Roma population from urban or other areas through forced measures to date. Specifically, regarding the city of Bijeljina, we want to highlight that there has never been a case of forced relocation of Roma communities. This data certainly represents a positive indication and a sign that the city of Bijeljina has successfully avoided such situations so far, providing stability and security to the Roma community in its area.

✓ *Environmental implications*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we can say that there are several Roma communities located relatively close to landfills, although not directly adjacent to them. This geographical position can pose a potential threat to the quality of life of the Roma population in this area. However, it is important to note that certain preventive measures have been taken to reduce the risks and negative effects of this situation. These measures include regular monitoring of conditions at landfills, waste control and management, as well as the cleaning and maintenance of the environment to prevent the spread of impurities and pollution. These initiatives are crucial for preserving the health and safety of the Roma community and represent a positive step towards improving their living conditions.

✓ *Nomadic lifestyle and Travellers*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no data on the presence of nomadic Roma communities and Roma travelers.

✓ *Implications of lacking a legal address*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Roma population, along with the majority population, faces serious challenges related to the lack of a legal address and personal documents. This problem has significant consequences as it hinders access to various essential services, including social and healthcare, the education system, housing, banking services, and the issuance of basic documents such as passports and certificates.

One of the most critical areas where the lack of a legal address and personal documents has a profound impact is healthcare. While some Roma individuals may use private healthcare facilities, many do not have access to basic healthcare services that are essential if they do not possess an ID card.

Without documents, they can access free legal aid services available in most cities and municipalities, as well as support from public security centers.

✓ *Housing market – what can be done?*

While it is extremely challenging to address all the areas and issues that Roma people face in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including healthcare, employment, education, and housing, it is undeniable that housing, providing a roof over their heads, forms the foundation for all other aspects of their lives. In this context, Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved significant and visible results in recent years.

According to the data provided in the Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for addressing the issues of Roma in the areas of employment, housing, and healthcare for the period from 2017 to 2020, a total of 782 residential buildings for Roma have been constructed or reconstructed. This means that when we multiply the number of built and reconstructed

residential buildings by the average number of members in a Roma family (5), we obtain the information that during this period, approximately 4,000 members of the Roma population have gained decent housing. This number represents a significant step forward and constitutes 15% of the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is worth noting that the funds used to realize these construction projects for Roma came from the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees, IPA funds, and financial contributions from international non-governmental organizations such as CARITAS Switzerland, Hilfswerk Austria, World Vision, Care International, and others. Given this data, it is clear that continued financial support is necessary to meet the crucial housing needs of the Roma population on a larger scale and reduce the number of Roma families without housing to a minimum.

All of this confirms that Bosnia and Herzegovina has invested significant efforts in improving housing conditions for Roma. However, there is still a real need for further housing provision for this community.

While there is a significant level of private sector residential unit construction in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it does not currently pose a threat to Roma settlements in the country.

✓ ***National Roma Frameworks***

An exceptionally positive fact is that Bosnia and Herzegovina is actively addressing the issue of housing for the Roma population through key documents, including the Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Roma Inclusion in the areas of employment, housing, and healthcare for the period from 2017 to 2020, as well as the Current Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women for the period from 2021 to 2025.

These documents not only confirm the commitment of the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to addressing the issue of housing for the Roma population but also clearly define chapters and objectives aimed at this challenging issue. This is extremely important as it provides a framework and direction for action to improve the living conditions of Roma people in the country.

Additionally, the significant financial resources allocated to housing for Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina should not be overlooked. These investments play a crucial role in achieving the goals set out in the aforementioned plans, ensuring that the housing situation of the Roma community is improved. This financial commitment represents a significant step toward enhancing the quality of life for the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

All in all, such documents and financial support represent a positive step toward achieving housing inclusion and improving living conditions for the Roma community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is certainly worth highlighting and supporting in efforts to achieve these important goals.

✓ **Conclusion and recommendations**

Housing in Bosnia and Herzegovina for Roma population represents a complex challenge influenced by various factors. Primarily, it is crucial for local communities to conduct a proper assessment of the housing needs of Roma men and women. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach and partnerships among all relevant stakeholders to ensure adequate housing solutions for this population in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One of the key challenges faced by Roma men and women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the unresolved issue of property rights, especially in many communities where illegally constructed housing units exist. This problem becomes even more severe due to the fact that many families engage in seasonal migration and attempt to claim asylum rights. Unfortunately, after failed attempts, they are often forced to return to local communities where they no longer possess property, as they had to sell it to raise funds for their journey.

Furthermore, it is essential to secure additional financial resources to effectively address the housing issue within the Roma population. Establishing a monitoring and tracking system is also crucial to ensure that allocated housing units are not destroyed or misused and to provide proper care to the beneficiaries.

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