Roma children: Child poverty and the prevention of family separation in Bulgaria
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Introduction

✓ Brief overview of Integro Association and its Roma work

Integro Association is a civil society organization led by representatives of the Roma community in Bulgaria. It brings together 10 local Roma civil society organizations from different parts of the country, united by a common cause: to achieve an equal and respected position for the Roma community among the other members of Bulgarian society. Integro Association strives to make visible the problems and needs of Roma people living in remote settlements across Bulgaria. Its work focuses on community mobilization and on building active Roma leadership capable of overcoming the passivity of both Roma communities and public authorities. The aim is to encourage shared responsibility for addressing inequality, social exclusion and poverty among Roma, and for achieving cohesion and prosperity at local level and in society as a whole. The Association's guiding principles are the promotion and protection of human rights, democratic procedures, transparency, partnership, and trust within the community and society.

✓ Research methodology and the geographical scope

This case study examines the situation of Roma children in Bulgaria through the lens of child poverty, social exclusion, and the risk of children being separated from their families. The methodology is based on a desk review of national and international research, strategic documents, statistical data, reports by international organizations, and analyses produced by civil society organizations. The case study also draws on information collected through Integro Association's own research, observations, fieldwork, and analyses, grounded in its long-standing work with Roma communities across different regions of Bulgaria. Particular attention is given to child poverty, its intergenerational transmission, and the need for integrated support for Roma children and their families in areas such as employment, social services, education, early childhood education and care, healthcare, housing, nutrition, and leisure.

✓ Overview of the socio-economic situation of the Roma in Bulgaria

The Roma community in Bulgaria remains one of the most socio-economically vulnerable groups in the country. Its situation continues to be marked by high levels of poverty, material deprivation, low employment, housing insecurity, educational segregation, and limited access to quality services. According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions, NSI, BG-SILC, in 2022 the share of Roma at risk of poverty was 63.2%, while 81.6% were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to 25% among people from the Bulgarian ethnic group.

Roma children are particularly affected, as poverty in childhood is not merely a lack of income. It means growing up in insecure and often overcrowded housing, limited access to healthy food, restricted participation in early childhood education and care, a higher risk of dropping out of school, weaker access to healthcare, and a greater likelihood that the family will face a crisis situation. When poverty is combined with anti-Roma attitudes and institutional stereotypes, it may be interpreted not as a social problem requiring support, but as parental failure. This increases the risk of intervention by the child protection system and, in some cases, of family separation.

Investment in the well-being and social inclusion of Roma children is at the same time a matter of children's rights, social justice, and long-term societal development. The European Child Guarantee aims to ensure that every child at risk of poverty or social exclusion has effective access to key services: free early childhood education and care, free education, including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day, free healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing. These areas are crucial for Roma children, as they are precisely where the deepest inequalities accumulate. Therefore, early, integrated, and non-discriminatory support for Roma children and their parents is key to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and preventing unnecessary family separation.

Child poverty and the prevention of family separation in Bulgaria

✓ Demographic considerations

Official statistics on Roma children in Bulgaria should be interpreted with the understanding that data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) are based on voluntary ethnic self-identification. This means that they show the number of children in families that have self-identified as Roma, but not necessarily all children who live in Roma communities or are perceived as Roma.

According to the 2021 Census, 266,720 people self-identified as Roma, representing 4.4% of those who answered the question on ethnic affiliation. Of these, 26.6% are children aged 0-14. This means that, according to official NSI data, there are approximately 70,950 Roma children under the age of 15. The actual number is likely higher, as international sources, including the Council of Europe, estimate the Roma population in Bulgaria at around 750,000, significantly above the number of people who self-identified as Roma in the census. This, in turn, could increase the estimate of the number of Roma children by two to three times.

The Roma population is the youngest among the three main ethnic groups in the country. The share of children aged 0-14 is 26.6% among Roma, compared to 13.8% among the Turkish ethnic group and 12.0% among the Bulgarian ethnic group. At the same time, the share of people aged 65 and over is only 7.3% among Roma, compared to 19.8% among the Turkish ethnic group and 25.0% among the Bulgarian ethnic group. Against the broader demographic picture in Bulgaria, this is a significant difference: in 2025, children under the age of 15 accounted for 13.9% of the population, while people aged 65 and over accounted for 24.3%.

Roma live in all regions of the country, but their share is higher in Sliven, 15.3%, Montana, 11.5%, Shumen, 8.0%, Dobrich, 7.2%, and Yambol, 7.1%. In terms of place of residence, 51.0% of those who self-identified as Roma live in urban areas, which means that almost half live in rural areas. This is important because access to kindergartens, schools, health services, transport, and social support is often more limited in smaller settlements.

The main characteristics of the Roma community, and of Roma children in particular, are related to a young age structure, territorial dispersion, and high vulnerability in terms of education and social inclusion. Educational indicators reveal risks from early childhood. Among children of compulsory school age, the NSI reports that 8.0% of Roma children aged 7-15 are outside the education system, compared to 4.4% among the Turkish ethnic group and 1.3% among the Bulgarian ethnic group. Among people who self-identified as Roma aged 9 and over, 11.8% are illiterate, indicating the accumulation of educational risks from childhood onwards.

This shows that the demographic youth of the Roma community represents significant potential, but this potential can only be realized through early support, access to quality education, social services, and policies to combat poverty and discrimination.

✓ Roma child poverty

The available data do not allow for determining the absolute number of Roma children living in poverty, as official statistics usually present relative shares by ethnicity, age, and household type. Nevertheless, the data clearly show that Roma children are among those most severely affected by poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria. According to the National Statistical Institute, NSI, SILC 2025, in 2025, 27.0% of all children aged 0-17 in Bulgaria were at risk of poverty. Among people who self-identified as Roma, the poverty rate was the highest, 65.5%, compared to 15.1% among the Bulgarian ethnic group. UNICEF's analysis further shows that Roma children account for 46.5% of all poor children in Bulgaria and 56.7% of children living in severe housing deprivation, although Roma represent a significantly smaller share of the child population.

Poverty among Roma children is not only a lack of income. It means an accumulation of deprivations in everyday life: inability to have regular and nutritious meals, lack of appropriate clothes and shoes, living in overcrowded or insecure housing, inability to keep the home warm, overdue bills, lack of quiet conditions for studying, and limited access to health, education, and social services.

In 2025, 73.5% of children from the Roma ethnic group experienced material deprivation, meaning that they were deprived of at least one of 13 basic needs. For 4.6% of Roma children, none of these needs could be met. Among Roma households, 78.9% could not meet an unexpected expense, 82.6% could not afford a one-week holiday, 43.7% could not afford meat, chicken, fish, or a vegetarian equivalent every other day, and 45.6% could not keep their home adequately warm.

The causes of child poverty are structural and interconnected. They include low parental education, unemployment or unstable and low-paid work, large households, living in poor neighbourhoods or rural areas, poor housing conditions, limited access to services, and discrimination. UNICEF underlines that poverty is both a result and a driver of social exclusion. For Roma children, this means lower participation in early childhood education, a higher risk of early school leaving, living in overcrowded and poor housing conditions, and ineffective access to healthcare.

The intergenerational transmission of poverty is most clearly visible through education. In 2025, 73.3% of children whose parents had primary or no education lived in poverty, compared to 6.7% of children whose parents had higher education. This means that the low educational level of parents limits their access to stable employment and income, while poverty within the family limits the child's chances for good education, health, and development.

These data outline a typical situation for a significant share of Roma children: growing up in a poor household, often in overcrowded housing, with limited access to quality food, kindergarten, school support, healthcare, and social services. In this way, poverty is not a temporary condition, but becomes a long-term cycle affecting children's health, educational achievement, future employment, income, and social participation as adults.

✓ Roma children and housing

Housing conditions are one of the strongest factors contributing to poverty and social exclusion among Roma children. The problem is not only the quality of individual dwellings, but also spatial segregation, life in isolated neighbourhoods, lack of infrastructure, insecure legal status of homes, and the risk of forced eviction. UNICEF notes that the Roma population in Bulgaria faces serious inequalities in access to adequate housing, both in terms of basic living conditions and housing security, with a large share of dwellings located outside regulated areas or lacking construction documents.

Segregation leads to the accumulation of risks. Data from the FRA Roma Survey 2024 show that Roma living in neighbourhoods where all or most residents are Roma are more likely to experience housing deprivation. On average, 54% of Roma in such neighbourhoods live in dwellings with problems such as dampness, dark rooms, or lack of an indoor toilet or bathroom, compared to 34% of Roma living in areas with a lower concentration of Roma. In Bulgaria, overcrowding is also higher in predominantly Roma neighbourhoods, 80%, compared to 69% in non-segregated areas.

Informal settlements and illegal or undocumented housing create constant insecurity for families. The World Bank notes that the number of informal and illegal settlements in Bulgaria is increasing, with people living in low-quality housing and with insufficient infrastructure, and that the situation is particularly insecure for Roma.

For children, this means living in overcrowded spaces, cold and damp homes, lack of space for studying, hygiene problems, a higher risk of illness, and poorer educational outcomes. According to NSI data for 2025, 49.7% of Roma households have difficulties paying housing costs, 45.6% cannot keep their home adequately warm, and 69.0% cannot afford to replace worn-out furniture.

Forced evictions pose a particularly serious risk for children, as they can disrupt their access to school, health services, and social support. Although the European Court of Human Rights has held that the planned eviction of Roma from an established settlement without the provision of alternative accommodation would constitute a violation, the practice of demolishing illegal dwellings when they are the family's only home has still not been discontinued, and there is no mechanism to protect the rights of children in the affected families.

The cases of Zaharna Fabrika in Sofia and Lozenets in Stara Zagora can be used as concrete examples showing how the demolition of informal or illegal dwellings, when they are the only home of the family, can create serious risks for children and expose the absence of an effective mechanism for preventing homelessness and protecting children's rights.

In **Zaharna Fabrika**, the eviction took place on 15 April 2025, when the Ilinden district administration in Sofia demolished dozens of Roma homes. Amnesty International reported that around 200 Roma people, including children, elderly people, pregnant women and persons with disabilities, were left homeless after the demolition, and considered the case a forced eviction because of the lack of procedural safeguards, adequate prior notice and exploration of alternative solutions. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee reported that the demolition affected more than 200 permanent residents, all of Roma origin, and that all structures in the area were removed. ATD Fourth World reported that two weeks after the demolition more than 170 people, including children, were still living without shelter and without access to water, food, electricity and basic sanitation.

The actions of the authorities in Zaharna Fabrika were formally presented as the enforcement of orders for the removal of illegal constructions. Sofia Municipality stated that, after the demolition, it mobilised teams on the ground and offered temporary accommodation, medical assistance, social services, work opportunities and access to food and water, and that 53 people accepted the proposed support and were accommodated in social services in Sofia. The Social Assistance Agency also reported that social workers carried out consultations and preliminary needs assessments for eight families with children and three individuals for the use of temporary accommodation in the "St. Sofia" centre.

However, the Ombudsman's institution stated that the demolition was carried out without accommodation being secured for all displaced persons and despite interim measures of the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Ilieva and Others v. Bulgaria*. From the perspective of ROMACT, the key problem was that the individual assessment started after the homes had already been destroyed and the families were already in crisis.

According to feedback from the affected families, the proposed measures were mainly temporary and social in nature, such as shelter, registration with the Labour Office, information about services or access to a social centre, while what families expected was a discussion about how they would continue living as families and what sustainable housing solution would be offered.

The consequences for children in Zaharna Fabrika were particularly serious. According to ATD Fourth World, by June 2025 most families were still living with relatives or in tents near the ruins of their homes, because only two families had been accommodated in new housing by that time. One year later, seven affected families had been accommodated in social housing, but most of the housing offered was reportedly in very poor condition and required substantial repairs, forcing some families to take loans. The same source reported that two families were still living in tents among the ruins until the autumn, and that one father with his two children remained on the street until December before a place in temporary accommodation was secured.

Conditions in temporary accommodation were also described as inadequate for families with children: small rooms, children sleeping in the same bed or together with parents, some large families being separated because of lack of space, shared bathrooms and toilets that did not lock, lack of privacy, constant insecurity about the duration of stay, and fear among parents for the safety and well-being of their children. These facts show that the loss of home affected not only shelter, but also children's safety, emotional stability, access to services, family unity and their ability to live in conditions compatible with dignity.

In Stara Zagora, the case concerns the long-standing demolition of homes in the Roma neighbourhood of Lozenets. According to the ROMACT report, more than 450 structures had been removed in the neighbourhood since 2015, and 101 structures were affected in 2025. In August 2026, ROMACT's field research identified 15 affected households, of which 14 were covered by the assessment. These 14 households included 76 affected persons, among them 31 children, as well as six persons over 65, eight persons with chronic illnesses and eight persons with certified disabilities. The report also found that 13 of the 15 households stated that the dwelling concerned was their only home, and that 13 applications for municipal housing were prepared, of which 12 were submitted to the municipality by 18 August 2026. Public sources reported that on 19 August 2026, 20 illegal structures were to be removed in Lozenets; the municipality also stated that social workers had identified 18 households with 21 children, which shows a difference between the official/social-service count and the broader ROMACT field assessment.

The procedure in Stara Zagora was also presented by the authorities as the enforcement of orders for the removal of illegal construction. The demolition was linked to Order No. 10-00-203/31.01.2025 of the Mayor of Stara Zagora. At the same time, the Ombudsman called on the mayor to postpone the demolition until an up-to-date individual assessment of each affected household had been carried out, including the risk of homelessness, the consequences for each affected child and the specific needs of persons with disabilities, elderly persons and people with serious health problems.

The situation of children in Stara Zagora illustrates the same risk in a more preventive way. ROMACT found that all children of preschool and school age in the surveyed households were attending educational institutions, but parents expressed concrete fears that the demolition could force children to interrupt the school year, change schools or lose their established social environment. Some parents also feared that homelessness could trigger child protection interventions and possible separation of children from their parents. The legal analysis stresses that the question of children has independent significance: before the demolition, it must be clear where the children will live, how they will continue attending school or kindergarten, how transport will be ensured, how access to health services will be preserved and how their family environment will be protected. It also emphasises that a formally available alternative is not necessarily a suitable one. If relocation to another place makes it difficult or impossible for children to continue attending their current schools and kindergartens, or disrupts access to health and social services, this must be assessed as part of the child's best interests.

The legal analysis from Stara Zagora gives a concrete example of what may happen when a home is removed without a functioning housing alternative. In the case of Mitko's family, whose home had been removed in 2025, the family reportedly had no other housing. According to field information, the grandmother and the children were left without normal shelter and slept outdoors, in a field, for a period of time. Later, another woman from the community temporarily sheltered them during the winter, and afterwards the family built a small improvised room or shack in order to have minimal physical shelter. The analysis presents this sequence as highly indicative: demolition of the home, loss of shelter, sleeping outdoors, temporary informal accommodation by a third person, and construction of an improvised shelter. It concludes that the removal of the illegal structure did not resolve the housing problem, but produced deeper housing insecurity.

Taken together, the findings of human rights organisations and the ROMACT legal analysis point to the same conclusion. The central issue is not only whether the buildings were illegal, but whether the authorities assessed the actual consequences of demolition for each family before enforcement. For children, this means assessing the risk of homelessness, disruption of schooling, loss of access to health care and social support, damage to family unity, psychological stress and exposure to unsafe living conditions.

In both Zaharna Fabrika and Stara Zagora, the evidence shows that the absence of a prior, individualised and child-sensitive assessment can transform the demolition of a dwelling into a wider social and family crisis. Therefore, these cases strongly support the argument that Bulgaria needs a clear mechanism to ensure that, before the removal of an inhabited dwelling, the authorities identify all affected children, assess their best interests, verify whether the proposed housing alternative is real, accessible and suitable, and prevent outcomes such as homelessness, interruption of education, loss of health care and family separation.

Environmental risks further aggravate the situation. In many segregated Roma neighbourhoods, a significant share of Roma households are cut off from services such as clean water, sewage systems, and waste collection, or are forced to live near polluted sites and landfills. This turns housing poverty into a direct risk to children's health and development.

✓ **Roma children and healthcare**

Health risks for Roma children begin even before birth. Despite the existing legal framework, which provides access to healthcare for uninsured pregnant women, some Roma women are deprived of adequate prenatal and postnatal care. A UNICEF report on child poverty in Bulgaria points to increased health risks for mothers and newborns from vulnerable groups, particularly among Roma women.

With regard to immunization, the problem is linked less to refusal and more to poverty, lack of information, mistrust, administrative barriers, and difficult access to a general practitioner. The European report on Roma health notes that, according to Bulgaria's National Health Strategy, around 15% of Roma children do not have the full set of mandatory vaccinations, with the share likely to be higher in isolated communities. UNICEF also notes that MMR vaccine coverage among Roma children in Bulgaria and Romania may be 20 to 30 percentage points lower than among the general population.

Healthy nutrition is one of the most serious problems. UNICEF points out that malnutrition and poor-quality food are concentrated in poor households, and that 52.3% of Roma children cannot afford to eat meat, chicken, or fish every other day for financial reasons, compared to 9.7% among children from the Bulgarian ethnic group. This implies a risk of nutritional deficiencies, weaker development, and greater vulnerability to illness.

With regard to infectious diseases, the main risk stems from the combination of incomplete immunization coverage, poverty, overcrowded housing, poor infrastructure, limited access to preventive care, and environmental risks, including the presence of pests, contaminated or unsafe water, lack of regular waste collection, poor sanitation, and a polluted environment in and around residential areas. This is why the role of health mediators is crucial, especially in identifying children with missed vaccinations, informing parents, and linking communities with the healthcare system.

There is a lack of sufficiently ethnically disaggregated data on disabilities and neurodiversity. UNICEF notes that in 2021 there were 27,500 children with permanent disabilities in Bulgaria, but the actual number is higher because there are no accurate data on children with developmental difficulties. Children aged 0 to 3 are particularly vulnerable, as delayed referral to specialists leads to late diagnosis and missed opportunities for early intervention.

Mental health is also insufficiently covered by policies. UNICEF notes that around 73,808 children aged 10 to 19 in Bulgaria, 11.2% of this age group, have some form of mental disorder, but the system does not collect sufficient data by region and type of problem. Stigma remains an important barrier to seeking help.

Sexual and reproductive health is linked to early marriages, early pregnancy, low levels of information, and lack of access to appropriate education and services. UNICEF reports that in communities where child marriage occurs, girls often do not receive sufficient information on issues related to sexuality, pregnancy, and reproductive health.

The use of contraception in these communities is very limited, both because the cost of contraceptives is unaffordable for girls and young women living in poverty, and because of the stigma surrounding the use of contraception, which often discourages girls and young women from seeking information and services, as they fear being judged by their family, community, or healthcare professionals.

✓Roma children and education

Roma children in Bulgaria face barriers from the very first stage of access to early childhood education. Although fees for kindergartens and nurseries have been abolished, access remains limited due to poverty, additional costs, lack of transport, distance from services, language barriers, and insufficient preparation of professionals to work in multicultural environments. According to data cited by UNICEF, in 2019, 42.7% of Roma children aged 4-7 did not attend kindergarten. Other data indicate that only around two thirds of Roma children aged 4-6 are enrolled in early childhood education and care, while coverage among children under the age of 3 is below 20%.

Segregation remains one of the most serious challenges. It takes the form of schools with predominantly or exclusively Roma pupils, separate Roma classes in otherwise mixed schools, referral of Roma children to schools for children with special needs, and secondary segregation, whereby non-Roma parents withdraw their children from schools attended by Roma pupils. A report on the state of the education system indicates that 930 general education schools and 150 vocational high schools have a high concentration of students from vulnerable groups.

Early school leaving is linked to poverty, migration, the need to work, early marriages, discrimination, and low motivation. Estimates suggest that around 60% of Roma children leave school before completing secondary education, while the share of Roma who complete secondary education remains below 20%. More than 65% of Roma youth aged 18-24 are not in employment, education, or training. Low educational outcomes are the result of accumulated inequalities, segregated learning environments, language difficulties, and insufficient support. Without desegregation, early support, mediators, and work with parents, the school system tends to reproduce poverty rather than break the cycle.

✓Roma children and other services

Services beyond education and healthcare are undoubtedly very important for children's normal development, yet many Roma children often lack adequate access to such services. One of the main reasons is that the specific living conditions of many Roma children are not sufficiently taken into account. As a result, they are usually reached through general measures for "children in need", rather than through clearly defined indicators and targeted services for Roma children.

In recent years, the state has provided school transport for pupils in primary and lower secondary education. However, this measure is often not adapted to the specific needs of Roma children from marginalized neighbourhoods. As a result, transport support is not always effective for children living in Roma neighbourhoods, villages and segregated areas who need to travel to kindergarten, school, or to access social or health services.

The National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee includes measures to provide free children's kitchen services for children aged 10 months to 3 years from vulnerable groups, as well as mechanisms to ensure free lunches for children from poor and vulnerable families. At present, however, these measures are still not sufficiently effective and do not reach all children and families in need.

Consultative services are mainly linked to social support for children and parents. The legislative framework described in the National Action Plan provides for free social services for children, including support for parenting skills, counselling on early childhood development, prevention of child abandonment, reintegration, and early intervention for disabilities. Counselling services are understood in a broader sense, not only as psychological counselling and the provision of information, but also as part of social support directed not only at the child, but also at the parents. This may include, for example, work with a social worker, psychologist, early childhood development specialist, family counsellor, or another professional who supports the child and the family.

The Plan also envisages expanding the network of accessible social services for children and families at municipal, regional and national level. The official government report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee for the period March 2024 – February 2026 reports an expansion of services for children and families, including early childhood development services. However, this remains within the framework of the implementation of various national programmes and projects. At the same time, the report acknowledges that access to basic services is limited in rural, remote and economically weak municipalities, especially for children in disadvantaged situations, including children of Roma origin. In addition, it notes the lack or fragmentation of official statistics for specific groups of children, including children living in extreme poverty. In practice, the expanded network of services has a very limited effect on the situation of Roma children in vulnerable situations.

Extracurricular activities are seen as a tool for the inclusion of children from vulnerable groups. For Roma children, this is particularly important, as such activities can reduce isolation, build trust in the school environment, and support linguistic, social and cultural inclusion. Unfortunately, these activities have not yet achieved the necessary effectiveness. Like a number of other existing services, including social work with families, material support for newborns and young children at risk, they often exist more formally than in practice and frequently fail to reach the most excluded Roma communities.

The main problem is not so much the absence of appropriate measures and approaches, but rather the uneven and fragmented implementation of the planned actions. The majority of activities depend on temporary projects and on insufficient targeted funding outside project-based support.

In addition, the effectiveness of these measures is reduced by the lack of sufficiently qualified specialists, formalistic implementation of the measures, incomplete coverage of all educational institutions, especially in small and remote settlements, administrative barriers, and insufficient or entirely absent work with families. Furthermore, the existing negative stereotypes towards the Roma community and the presence of discriminatory practices create distrust among Roma children towards educational institutions and the extracurricular forms and measures they implement.

✓Support for Roma parents

Support for Roma parents should be considered at the same time as a social, economic and educational measure, because child poverty is directly linked to parents' income, employment and access to services. In Bulgaria, the measures under the European Child Guarantee include financial relief for families through free kindergartens and nurseries since April 2022, free meals, support for vulnerable families with children, health services, social services and measures for inclusion in education. In addition, the National Roma Inclusion Strategy provides for a significant number of measures to promote employment.

However, monitoring of the implementation of the planned measures related to support for Roma parents identifies serious structural problems. Formally, measures are available, but access to them is often hindered by lack of information, lack of documents, transport barriers, mistrust of institutions, discrimination and weak coordination between systems.

Employment measures in most cases remain too formal and insufficiently resourced, although parental employment is key to reducing child poverty. Social assistance and child benefits are important, but their amount often covers only minimum needs and is not sufficient to genuinely overcome poverty. Linking benefits to school attendance, without a serious analysis of the reasons for children's absences from school, can have the opposite effect and further deepen the problem.

There is a lack of genuine social work to analyse the causes of difficulties within the family and to develop an integrated support plan. Such support should include counselling, development of parenting skills, mediation towards services, access to healthcare, real assistance for labour market inclusion and ensuring adequate income support where needed.

The main conclusion is that the accessibility of measures for Roma families remains uneven. Support for Roma parents needs to be close to the community, with the involvement of mediators, social workers, municipal services and clear, non-bureaucratic procedures. Otherwise, the planned general policies will continue to fail to reach families living in the deepest poverty.

✓Roma children and antigypsyism

Antigypsyism against Roma children, as well as against Roma as a whole, is not expressed only through an open refusal to provide a service, offensive treatment, or direct discrimination.

It represents a deeply rooted pattern of social relations, institutional practices, and public attitudes that affects almost all spheres of life. Its manifestations can be seen in the way poverty, spatial segregation, housing insecurity, limited access to quality education, healthcare, social services, and child protection accumulate precisely around Roma children and their families.

This type of racism often remains invisible because it does not always take the form of an openly racist act. It may be expressed through lower expectations of Roma children at school, neglect of their needs, acceptance of poor housing conditions as “normal”, interpretation of poverty as parental failure, lack of adequate support in accessing services, or through policies that formally exist but in practice do not reach the most excluded Roma communities.

Therefore, antigypsyism should be understood as a comprehensive factor that not only accompanies poverty and social exclusion, but also produces and reproduces them. UNICEF emphasizes that the lack of systematic measures against anti-Roma attitudes undermines the effectiveness of state efforts to combat poverty and the social exclusion of Roma. In this sense, policies targeting Roma children cannot be effective unless they address, at the same time, material deprivation, institutional barriers, and discriminatory attitudes that restrict their access to rights, services, and opportunities for development.

In education, the most visible manifestation is segregation. UNICEF identifies segregated education of Roma children, as well as public prejudice, as specific barriers preventing their full inclusion. Educational inequality is deepened by the concentration of vulnerable children in separate schools or classes, the lack of social and cultural diversity, and the insufficient preparation of teachers to work in multicultural environments. At the same time, many Roma children attending mixed schools are subjected to verbal, and often also physical, bullying by their peers. Manifestations of discrimination by teachers are also not uncommon. These are expressed primarily through neglecting or disregarding the abilities of Roma children and, consequently, through significantly lowered expectations regarding their academic achievement. This, in turn, strongly demotivates Roma pupils and limits their opportunities for full and meaningful participation in school life.

In healthcare, antigypsyism is manifested through limited access, mistrust, and institutional insensitivity to poverty and discrimination. Roma children often lack effective access to healthcare and preventive services, and some remain without the necessary immunizations due to poverty, administrative barriers, lack of information, or difficult access to a general practitioner.

Housing discrimination and spatial segregation also remain serious problems. The risk of forced evictions without a secure alternative is significantly higher for Roma families. In a number of cases, housing demolitions are carried out without any prior assessment of the consequences for children, including the risk of losing access to school, health services, social support, and a stable family environment.

In social services and the child protection system, antigypsyism is reflected in the tendency to treat poverty as “parental failure” rather than as a result of structural exclusion.

UNICEF documents warn that professionals often place emphasis on parents' "lack of interest", while stigma and discriminatory practices remain insufficiently recognized by the systems of social assistance, education, and healthcare. Eurochild notes that Roma children often face the risk of being separated from their families due to poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, school absences, or migration, that is, for reasons related to social exclusion rather than necessarily to a lack of parental care.

✓Prevention of Roma family separation

It is not possible to give a definitive answer to the question of whether Roma children are "officially" removed from their families because of poverty or antigypsyism, as the state does not collect public data on the ethnic background of children in alternative care. The absence of such data makes it impossible to confirm or reject whether Roma children are disproportionately represented in the care system. At the same time, research cited by Eurochild shows that poverty is the strongest risk factor for the separation of children from their families, especially when combined with parental illness, loss of housing, family conflict, violence, or social exclusion. For many Roma families, poverty is often intertwined with marginalization, discrimination, housing insecurity, low income, and difficult access to services, which can easily turn family difficulties into crises.

It is precisely at this point that the social system in Bulgaria intervenes, often by resorting to emergency placement outside the family, instead of addressing the systemic causes of the crisis in a timely manner. Around 8,500 children live outside their biological families under child protection measures, while the system receives approximately 32,000 reports of children at risk each year, with risk confirmed in around 22% of cases. Nearly 2,000 children continue to be placed in alternative care every year.

Measures to preserve the family do exist, and Bulgarian legislation formally gives priority to protection within a family environment. Alternative care should be applied in a specific order: care by relatives, foster care, and only then residential care, except in cases of immediate risk to the child's life or health. The problem is that, according to Eurochild, the emergency procedure is often used as a routine response to accumulated crises, without sufficient data on whether family-based support measures were applied before the separation took place.

The framework of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria offers a more appropriate prevention model. It includes home visits by nurses, midwives, health mediators, and social assistants for pregnant women and families with children aged 0-3; counselling on nutrition, breastfeeding, safety, parental care, and early childhood development; referral to health and social services; and adaptation of support to the needs of vulnerable communities.

In the official report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee for the period March 2024 – February 2026, the implementation of the European Child Guarantee Pilot Project in 10 municipalities in Bulgaria and the operation "Future for Children" under the Human Resources Development Programme are indicated as evidence of the application of the model.

At the same time, the report acknowledges that access to basic services remains limited in rural, remote and economically weak municipalities, especially for children in disadvantaged situations, including children of Roma origin. The report also acknowledges that the available data are often aggregated at regional or district level, which makes it difficult to identify vulnerable children at municipal or settlement level and leads to situations in which real needs remain hidden and interventions do not reach those most in need. The overall conclusion is that the model is being implemented partially and that there is insufficient evidence that it systematically reaches the poorest and most isolated Roma families.

Mobile and family-centred services are particularly important. The framework envisages preventive services in the community, counselling, referral to benefits and services, measures to prevent school dropout, prevention of early marriages, family planning, and prevention of child-family separation. The "one family, one plan, one coordinator" approach is key, as it enables the different systems, health, education, social services, and child protection, to work in a coordinated way, instead of leaving the family to navigate institutions on its own.

Within the framework of the European Child Guarantee, children in institutions, children with disabilities and special needs, children of recent migrants and refugees, and children in precarious family situations, including Roma children from vulnerable communities, are identified as being particularly exposed to poverty and risk.

✓Participation and justice for Roma children

In Bulgaria, almost no public data are collected by ethnicity on child participation, involvement in student councils, or children's access to justice. At the political and institutional level, there is a declared commitment to the informed and voluntary participation of children, including children from marginalized groups, in all matters that affect them. In practice, however, the participation of Roma children is often limited by discrimination, segregation, low expectations of them, and weaker access to quality education.

With regard to student councils, Bulgaria has laws, policies, and strategies that promote democratic governance in schools and student participation in school life. However, there are no reliable public data on how many Roma children participate in such councils, whether they are represented in leadership positions, and whether their voices have a real impact on decision-making in schools. In segregated schools, student participation often remains formal and does not lead to meaningful empowerment of children.

Diversity among pupils is reflected mainly through policies on intercultural education, civic education, tolerance, respect for difference, and overcoming stereotypes and prejudices. The Pre-school and School Education Act provides for the development of tolerance and respect for ethnic, national, cultural, linguistic and religious identity. Ordinance No. 13 of the Ministry of Education on civic, health, environmental and intercultural education sets as an objective that pupils should respect the importance of every human being in the diversity of their identities, recognise the right to and value of difference, and accept the equality of all in the shared social space.

The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning 2021–2030 also recognises the importance of intercultural dialogue and appreciation of cultural diversity as part of educational competences. It states that measures for educational desegregation, combined with the development of tolerance and intercultural dialogue skills, are important for equal access to quality education.

However, the reflection of diversity remains more strongly present at the level of principles, educational standards and project-based activities than as a sustainable practice across all schools. The main challenges are related to uneven implementation, dependence on projects, insufficient preparation of teachers to work in a multicultural environment, formalistic implementation of some activities, and the weak inclusion of Roma history, culture and contemporary lived experience in everyday teaching content and the school environment.

In relation to access to justice for all children in Bulgaria, efforts are being made to introduce more child-friendly procedures. The country has developed the practice of so-called “blue rooms”, spaces for hearing child victims or witnesses of violence, which began in 2008. However, their existence does not mean that the system is fully accessible, sensitive, and adapted to children’s needs. Analyses in the field of child justice indicate that Bulgaria does not have specialized juvenile courts, and that the system is still not sufficiently prepared to work in a way that takes into account children’s age, trauma, and vulnerability.

For Roma children, the barriers are even more significant. These include poverty, lack of legal literacy, mistrust of institutions, fear of sanctions, language and administrative difficulties, as well as discriminatory treatment. The Roma Civil Monitoring report for Bulgaria notes that access to justice for children remains a serious problem, including due to the insufficient number of specialized investigative bodies, prosecutors, and judges trained to work with children.

It is necessary to work towards the real, not merely formal, inclusion of Roma children in student councils and child and youth consultative bodies. Training is also needed for teachers, social workers, police officers, prosecutors, and judges to work without stereotypes; free legal aid and mediator support should be available close to the community; more “blue rooms” and child-friendly procedures are needed; and accessible mechanisms should be established through which children can safely report concerns and receive feedback.

✓Roma children in the National Roma Strategic Framework

The National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma 2021-2030 addresses the situation of Roma children mainly through the priorities of education, healthcare, poverty, social inclusion and anti-discrimination. The focus is placed on early childhood development, pre-school education, enrolment and retention in school, educational integration, intercultural education and work with parents, especially in low-income families. Child poverty is addressed, but rather as part of the overall poverty of the Roma community, not as a separate and specific problem affecting Roma children.

The Strategy recognizes the significant gap between pupils of Roma and Turkish origin and children from the Bulgarian ethnic group, amounting to approximately three school years in reading and two years in mathematics and science.

The document acknowledges that, despite the reduction in early school leaving and the increased participation of Roma children in compulsory education, barriers to equal access to early childhood education and other services persist. These include the lack of accessible kindergartens in rural and remote areas, the absence of services close to Roma neighbourhoods, the shortage of specialists, and the insufficient preparation of staff to work in multicultural environments.

However, the planned measures do not appear sufficient. Eurochild's 2022 report notes that child policies in Bulgaria remain fragmented, with sectoral measures for specific risk groups rather than a comprehensive systemic approach to child well-being. The report states that Roma children's access to education and the issue of school dropout are mentioned, but that clear and effective mechanisms for including children at risk of dropping out, as well as sufficient support for families, are lacking.

A stronger link is needed between the Roma strategic framework and policies on child poverty, child protection, health, housing and early childhood development. There is also a lack of sufficiently specific indicators for Roma children, sustainable local funding, effective mechanisms for monitoring results, real desegregation, and meaningful participation of Roma parents, children and organizations in the planning and implementation of policies.

The National Roma Framework does not directly address the reduction of poverty among the Roma community. Overall, it relies on an integrated approach that includes ensuring access to education, employment, social and healthcare services, and improving housing conditions and infrastructure. In this way, it is expected that the number of Roma people living in poverty will decrease and that their overall standard of living will improve.

However, the planned measures within this approach are predominantly general and sectoral, and their implementation is expected to be carried out by individual ministries and institutions. There is a lack of specificity as to where and for which communities these measures will be implemented. At the same time, they are only to a very limited extent targeted at the specific situation of Roma children living in poverty. There is also insufficient linkage between the planned activities and concrete indicators for improving the situation of the Roma community, and Roma children in particular. It is evident that child policies in Bulgaria need a more targeted approach, with a real focus on child poverty, clear funding, and stronger monitoring.

Ultimately, the conclusion is that the National Roma Framework includes measures that are relevant to combating poverty, but they are mainly indirect. In their current form, they do not provide sufficient guarantees that they will systematically reach Roma children in the most vulnerable situations, including those living in segregated neighbourhoods, remote villages, and families experiencing extreme poverty.

This is because even when Roma children are identified as a target group in national plans, they often remain neglected in practice due to limited targeted measures, data gaps, and unclear funding. The planned measures can have a positive effect only if they are accompanied by targeted outreach work, disaggregated data, specific budgets, active work with families, and the participation of Roma organisations and mediators in implementation and monitoring.

✓Roma children in the Child Guarantee – National Action Plan

Roma children are recognized as a priority vulnerable group in the National Action Plan for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The Plan states that it targets children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including children from minority ethnic backgrounds, "especially Roma", children experiencing severe housing deprivation, children with disabilities, children in alternative care, and children in precarious family situations. The document describes Roma children as affected by poor housing conditions, overcrowding, limited access to services, sanitation infrastructure, healthcare, and lower educational attainment.

The measures cover the main areas of the European Child Guarantee: early childhood education and care, inclusive school education, healthcare, healthy nutrition, housing, social services, and family support. The Plan includes measures for working with parents, support through health mediators, additional support for children at risk, including Roma children, educational mediators, desegregation, intercultural education, and social services for prevention, early intervention, and counselling.

Nevertheless, the measures do not appear to be fully sufficient. The joint report by EURoma and Eurochild concludes that, in Bulgaria, Roma children are more likely to benefit indirectly from general measures for "children in need" than from clearly targeted interventions for Roma children. The report notes that Roma children are mentioned under different categories, but that there are no specific Roma indicators, while the available data are largely limited to material deprivation.

The main gap is the absence of a clear mechanism to monitor whether the measures actually reach Roma children in the poorest and most segregated communities. There is a lack of sufficiently disaggregated data, dedicated budget lines, sustainable local funding, specific indicators on desegregation, housing security, and access to healthcare, as well as continuous participation of Roma parents, children, mediators, and organizations in the governance of the Plan. Eurochild even identifies the establishment of a Roma consultative body to guide the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria as a possible next step.

The Action Plan for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee contains references to existing discrimination, stigmatisation, intolerance, bullying and violence. However, it does not include a clearly defined section addressing antigypsyism as a specific form of racism against Roma children. The Plan acknowledges that "stigmatisation and discriminatory practices" are among the key barriers preventing children from vulnerable groups from accessing essential services.

These barriers are mentioned alongside financial difficulties, the uneven territorial distribution of services, the lack of mobile services and the need for better training of professionals. The Plan also refers to linguistic and cultural barriers, particularly in relation to children of Roma origin.

The Plan also refers to consultations held with children and young people, which identified the need to address discrimination against children from vulnerable groups, as well as to increase parental awareness and empowerment. However, the measures planned in this area remain very general. They include information campaigns, the promotion of a culture of tolerance and empathy, strengthening public intolerance towards violations of children's rights, changing attitudes towards children in disadvantaged situations, and encouraging mutual respect among children.

In the education section, there is a measure aimed at preventing bullying and violence and reducing aggression in schools. This includes tolerance campaigns, psychological support and strengthening teachers' competences to address bullying, violence and aggression. However, this measure is also formulated in very general terms and cannot be regarded as a specific anti-discrimination or anti-racist measure addressing antigypsyism.

Overall, the Plan lacks a targeted approach to antigypsyism as a specific form of racism and structural discrimination affecting Roma children in education, healthcare, housing, social services and access to protection. Discrimination is treated mainly as a general barrier affecting vulnerable groups, rather than as a systemic factor that reproduces poverty, segregation, low expectations and limited access to rights for Roma children. As a result, the Plan does not include sufficiently concrete measures, indicators, monitoring mechanisms or clearly assigned responsibilities for preventing and addressing antigypsyism, including antigypsyism directed specifically against Roma children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study shows that the situation of Roma children in Bulgaria cannot be examined through separate sectoral problems alone. Child poverty, housing insecurity, educational segregation, limited access to healthcare and social services, and the risk of family separation are interconnected and accumulate simultaneously.

The first conclusion is that poverty among Roma children is multidimensional. It is not limited to low income, but includes lack of sufficient food, adequate housing, heating, clothes, shoes, transport, access to kindergarten, quality schooling, healthcare, and support services.

The second conclusion is that poverty and social exclusion increase the risk of family crises and the separation of children from their parents. When timely social work, housing support, access to services, and understanding of the structural causes of poverty are lacking, family difficulties may be interpreted as parental neglect.

The third conclusion is that existing policies recognize Roma children as a vulnerable group, but often reach them only indirectly through general measures for “children in need”. There is a lack of sufficiently specific indicators, targeted budgets, sustainable local funding, mechanisms to monitor real access to services, and active participation of Roma children, parents, and organizations in planning and monitoring.

Recommendations

• Introduce specific national and local indicators for Roma children in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee and the Roma Strategic Framework, while respecting personal data protection standards.
• Ensure that poverty, homelessness, or poor living conditions are not used in themselves as grounds for separating a child from their family.
• Introduce a mandatory early prevention model: “one family, one plan, one coordinator”, with the involvement of social workers, health and educational mediators, schools, kindergartens, and health services.
• Expand mobile and home-based services for pregnant women, families with children aged 0 to 3, and families in extreme poverty, including prenatal care, early childhood development, nutrition, parenting support, and referral to services.
• Ensure real access of Roma children to early childhood education through free services, transport, work with parents, mediators, and support for children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian.
• Take concrete measures for educational desegregation, including monitoring segregated classes, supporting mixed schools, providing additional learning support, and working with non-Roma parents.
• Establish municipal housing programmes for families with children, including legalization, infrastructure, social housing, and a ban on forced evictions without alternative accommodation.
• Strengthen income and employment support for parents by linking social assistance, training, employment mediation, childcare, and accessible services.
• Introduce training for professionals in the social, education, health, and justice systems to recognize and overcome anti-Roma attitudes.
• Create sustainable mechanisms for the participation of Roma children and parents in student councils, local consultative bodies, and the monitoring of policies that affect them.

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