

THE EU ROMA INCLUSION PROCESS

June 2020



Introduction

Roma¹ have been living in Europe for almost a millennium. These communities have contributed to the rich fabric of our lives and have influenced European identity and culture. They constitute Europe's largest minority. Out of an estimated 10-12 million Roma and Sinti living across Europe, some 6 million live in the EU and hold EU citizenship.

A substantial number of Roma are well integrated into our societies. They work, raise children, pay bills and taxes, and contribute to the well-being of the societies they are a part of. However, there are also those who are born into extreme generational poverty. They live in precarious living conditions without access to drinking water and basic infrastructure. Many of them do not have proper identity papers. They struggle to find stable employment as they do not fit many job requirements and have limited chances of developing their skills and competences. They continue to face inequality, widespread discrimination and growing exclusion from their non-Roma fellows in key areas of daily life, such as access to quality education, employment, healthcare and housing. This situation not only hampers their empowerment but also negatively affects the European Union's cohesion.

Over previous years, such conclusions have been voiced repeatedly in many reports by various stakeholders, including, amongst others, European Parliament Resolutions² as well as the European Commission's annual Communications on progress made by the Member States in advancing Roma integration based on the evidence of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA).

Despite previous years' efforts across the EU to improve the situation of millions of Roma, according to selected findings from the FRA's survey EU-MIDIS II³, some 80% of Roma

surveyed live below their country's at-risk-of-poverty threshold; every third Roma lives in housing without tap water; every third Roma child lives in a household where someone went to bed hungry at least once in the previous month; and 50% of Roma between the ages of six and twenty-four do not attend school. In times when the EU has created unprecedented wealth, high social standards and great opportunities for its citizens, these facts are shocking and unacceptable.

While the EU is taking the global lead on the major challenges of our times, such as climate change and the digital agenda, it should not forget about the persisting precarious situation faced by Roma. There is not only a moral and a political, but also an economic imperative behind it. The EU must ensure that all EU citizens enjoy equal opportunities.

The EU and Member States, each within their respective competences, share responsibility for Roma inclusion. However, action for the real change for Roma remains in the hands of Member States. Since 2011, the efforts of Member States have been guided by and monitored under the 'EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020' as part of the wider EU agenda and

¹ The term "Roma" is used – similarly to other political documents of the European Parliament and the European Council – as an umbrella which includes groups of people who have more or less similar cultural characteristics, such as Sinti, Travellers, Kalé, Gens du voyage, etc. Whether sedentary or not; around 80% of Roma are estimated to be sedentary (SEC(2010)400).

² 2019 EP resolution on the need for a strengthened post-2020 Strategic EU Framework for National Roma Inclusion Strategies and stepping up the fight against anti-Gypsyism and 2017 EP resolution on 'Fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration in the EU: fighting anti-Gypsyism

³ Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey-selected findings on Roma

the European Semester, among others⁴. Although, a wide range of policy, legal and financial instruments have been put in place on both EU and national levels, only limited progress has been achieved.

The institutional changes and measures dedicated to Roma on both EU and Member State levels that have proven to be useful should be recognised. However, regrettably, after nearly one decade of the implementation phase of the above-mentioned EU framework, little has changed in the day-to-day reality of vulnerable Roma.

It is clear that without the EU and Member States' enhanced engagement, the social division in our societies will increase further, regional disparities will deepen and the gap between Roma and non-Roma will continue to widen.

The EU needs a fresh start and needs to put a stronger focus on delivery

The adoption of the 'EU initiative on Roma equality and inclusion up to 2030' by the European Commission foreseen by the end of this year creates a unique opportunity for giving a new impetus for boosting the ongoing EU Roma inclusion process that takes place under the 'EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020'.

Over the past few years, many problems have been identified. As a result, policies were designed, and policy, financial and legal instruments were put into place. However, their effective, results-oriented implementation underpinned by a strong political leadership and persisting commitment at all levels (EU, national regional and local) has been slow. Actually, the absence of these crucial components has led to the failure of the process undertaken so far.

To make the process of Roma inclusion up to 2030 credible and successful, a fundamental change in approach is needed

It is clear that the situation is a cause for concern in a number of EU Member States. National efforts towards Roma inclusion should be accelerated in all EU Member States. Even more emphasis should be

placed on those Member States where an ineffective process of Roma inclusion poses macroeconomic challenges, deepens regional disparities and thus hampers EU social cohesion. This concerns, in particular, EU Member States with a sizeable Roma population. The EU support to those countries should be measured up to the challenges. In these countries, greater attention should be devoted to the effectiveness of policies and measures.

In relation to this, the implementation of robust and thorough monitoring and evaluation systems should play a role of vital importance.

Positive, sustainable and lasting change should be achievable through mainstream reforms, while targeted measures should complement them. As experienced, limiting the Roma inclusion process to Roma inclusion oriented/dedicated projects bears limited results, especially when there is no continuity for such projects. Often they are costly, ineffective, raise many expectations and when finished, bring a lot of frustration as there is no continuity.

Greater investment into basic infrastructure to improve access of vulnerable Roma to drinking water and sanitary services should be prioritised as a matter of urgency. The outbreak of COVID-19 has exposed the failure of some EU Member States to address this situation although a considerable amount of EU funds has been made available for this purpose.

The COVID-19 pandemic should serve as a wake-up call for many European states, especially those with a sizeable Roma population without access to basic services. It is clear that for Roma communities living in overcrowded housing areas or shelters without access to tap water and basic sanitary services, it is nearly impossible to follow social distancing rules or comply with strict hygiene measures so that the spread of the Coronavirus or other viruses can be prevented. Roma people have been exposed to higher health risks than the rest of the population because of the aforementioned reasons. At the same time, blaming Roma for endangering public health by spreading the Coronavirus, which we have seen in certain countries, should not be tolerated. Viruses do not differentiate between race or ethnicity.

In these countries, the EU urgently has to aim to achieve better results for future Roma

⁴ 2013 Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures (from 10 December 2013)
2016 Council Conclusions on accelerating the process of Roma integration (from 8 December 2016)

integration efforts. During the 2014-2020 programming period, the EU earmarked €1.5 billion to support Roma integration. Under the ESI Funds, an ex ante conditionality was introduced in the sense of the obligation to put in place a national Roma inclusion strategic policy framework, identifying the relevant disadvantaged micro-regions or segregated neighbourhoods and implementing measures aimed at bridging the integration gap. However, in several situations, a lack of political will and determination, problems with absorption capacity, a lack of interest from local authorities, the fragmentation of Roma dedicated projects/programmes, a lack of a comprehensive and holistic approach, the absence of effective governance coordination and continuous discrimination are only some of the reasons behind their ineffective use and under-spending in several Member States. These issues have to be properly taken into account during the next programming period. Lack of oversight and accountability also opens the door to the misuse of funds and corruption. Omitting these challenges will contribute to an increase in anti-Roma attitudes, populism, and extremism in our societies.

Roma inclusion is a two-way process

As observed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)⁵, persisting phenomena such as widespread discrimination and anti-Gypsyism have proven to be a barrier to efforts to improve the life chances and living standards of Roma. Effective measures to combat anti-Roma rhetoric and hate speech, addressing racist, stereotypical or otherwise stigmatising language or behaviours that could constitute incitement to discrimination against Roma should be thoroughly penalised. To this end, Member States' enforcement of existing anti-discrimination legislation is vital.

However, the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation is not enough. It should be accompanied by good communication and awareness-raising activities, sensitising measures aimed at the mainstream population for them to better understand the benefits of Roma inclusion for society as a whole as well as the complexity of the process. The media, including social media, plays a crucial role in this regard.

Roma inclusion is a two-way process which requires a change of mindset from both Roma and non-Roma. Inclusion should also be addressed through promoting role

models as well as through education curricula and teaching materials which will deepen the knowledge of Roma and their history and culture. This is particularly important for a mutual peaceful coexistence in ethnically mixed communities and regions.

The social exclusion and deep poverty that vulnerable Roma communities face are often the roots that cause illegal behaviour. In some Member States, Roma fall victim to organised forced begging. In many instances, children are involved; their well-being and future are damaged as a consequence. This negative phenomenon needs to be addressed systematically and in a coordinated manner. If not, it could create frustration and anxiety amongst citizens in the Member States. In addition, it risks fuelling anti-Roma attitudes even further. Therefore, a systematic approach to provide sustainable long-term solutions to this social phenomenon is needed.

The discrimination faced by Roma women and girls not only outside but also inside Roma communities also deserves greater attention, including domestic violence or early pregnancies, etc. These are complex issues which should be addressed under mainstream policies as well as targeted interventions in which building trust is the key. To this end, police officers, social workers and healthcare professionals should be trained on how to sensitively approach Roma women and girls and build trust within the community. Member States should ensure that victims are treated in a non-discriminatory manner.

Education is the best investment for Roma as well as for Europe's future growth and prosperity

The vicious cycle of Roma marginalisation and poverty can only be broken through comprehensive, committed and well-funded long-term mainstream education strategies that fully address all the main factors and conditions that define the precarious situation of Roma. These comprise educational, economic, social and cultural aspects, including racism and discrimination. These education strategies should be based on broad involvement of education professionals, central and local government authorities, civil society, Roma communities and all interested citizens.

⁵ EU MIDIS II: A persisting concern: anti-Gypsyism as a barrier to Roma inclusion

The aim of inclusive measures in education should be to integrate Roma children and all other disadvantaged groups as much as possible into the education system from early childhood education until upper secondary education, a condition for personal development and career.

To this end, major improvement and innovation of education and training systems in several EU Member States are necessary. These systems should be reformed in such a way that Roma children benefit from the same educational opportunities as their non-Roma peers.

This must involve full recognition of the fact that Roma children do not have the same learning possibilities at home as their peers. As such, additional active measures and supportive tutoring should be available to Roma children in order to break out of the self-perpetuating cycle of low education and related school early drop out. Governments should allocate sufficient funds and expert human resources in order to assure all the above-mentioned factors are put into place. More attention has to be paid to the involvement of parents to support their children's education and to give these parents the support they need.

It is essential to facilitate an exchange of best practices between Member States and to monitor the situation in order to provide regular assessment to the European Commission. The European Union should provide a platform for the sharing of good practices while the recommendations of the Council of Europe could also provide reference tools. No Roma child should be penalised just because he or she was born into poverty. Some EU Member States place these children in special schools for the mentally disabled, even if they do not have any disabilities, or they segregate them from their non-Roma peers in mainstream schools or classes. Their education should start as early as possible in early childhood education and care facilities to improve their participation and readiness for future learning. It should continue until upper secondary education. No Roma child should graduate from school without the qualifications needed for him/her to succeed in the labour market and to prosper in life. Vocational education policies as well as active adult education targeted towards adults with low skills should also be prioritised. To this end, greater emphasis needs to be paid to the transition between various educational pathways by providing adequate educational and career guidance.

It is of crucial importance that Roma pupils are also equipped with digital skills and competences enabling them to grasp opportunities and become valuable citizens

shaping Europe's future. This includes ensuring their access to digital education. The current COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the inequalities in Europe; the marginalised Roma children have had no access to remote or online schooling that their non-Roma peers have had. To achieve this, Roma children should be placed at the centre of schools' functioning agendas, in which greater attention should be paid to their physical and emotional well-being.

Shift the paradigm about Roma by unblocking Roma potential

Roma should not be perceived as a burden but as an opportunity, especially in times of demographic challenges. An ageing Europe faces shortages of skilled labour and therefore imports some of its labour force from third countries. The Roma population represents a significant and growing proportion of the population and of a future workforce. There is enormous potential which has still not been exploited. For countries with a sizeable Roma population, economic inclusion can bring benefits estimated to be around €500 million annually. Economic productivity would improve and as a consequence, government costs for social assistance would diminish whereas revenue from income taxes would increase. Roma could be seen in different ways as future workers, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, consumers, investors, etc.

To achieve the full inclusion of Roma, also in the labour market, the structural discrimination, spatial segregation and inadequate policy efforts, as the key factors precluding progress towards social and labour market integration of Roma, need to be properly addressed. Especially in these times, when Europe is moving towards a digital era, Roma should be able to grasp new opportunities related to this transformation. Employment of Roma should not be limited to Roma participation in public works schemes as we have been witnessing in some Member States. These programmes do not improve relevant skills for the participants. Thus, Roma remain unable to escape the unemployment trap or to find a job in the open labour market. A large number of Roma thus become a part of the grey economy, which is detrimental for them and the economy as a whole. The Member State authorities should actively fight such practices and should transform such work into legal work contracts, protecting Roma workers on one side and ensuring tax revenues for the state on the other side.

Member States should improve the economic empowerment of Roma. This could be done through stronger engagement of businesses, particularly at local level, including by incentivising the hiring of long-term unemployed people, but also through supporting Roma entrepreneurship, social enterprises and boosting job opportunities, with a focus on Roma youth and women.

Roma shaping their future and Europe's future

Being European today means having the opportunity to succeed and having the right to a decent living, preferably in the place or region where one originates from. Greater economic inclusion of Roma would improve social cohesion and reduce regional disparities, not only within the EU but also in enlargement countries, as the least developed regions of Europe have a high concentration of marginalised Roma communities. The smart use of a new generation of funds under the multiannual programming period 2021-2027 (InvestEU and ESI Funds) would play a crucial role through eliminating poverty, housing exclusion and the deprivation that Roma people experience. A National Roma Integration Strategy is again a pre-requisite for channelling the funds, aiming to accelerate Roma integration and preventing and/or eliminating their segregation.

When the EU and Member States strive to create socially just, fair and equal societies, they should not forget the aspirations of Roma people. The continuous support and enhancement of their political representation and civic and cultural participation on EU and national levels would play an important part.

Roma should be encouraged to take an active part in local, national and European decision-making to be able to play a greater role in shaping the mainstream policies that affect them. Roma youth in particular should become a driving force of Roma integration in the EU. They should be the change makers rather than recipients of change. Roma voters should not be remembered only in election times. Hence, increased attention should be paid to the allegations of electoral fraud exploiting vulnerable Roma communities. Member State Electoral Authorities are urged to play an active role in addressing these allegations. The education of Roma voters plays an important part in this regard.

As disinformation spread through the digital media undermines the trust of all citizens in democratic institutions, exacerbates social polarisation and hampers the capacity of citizens to take informed decisions, more action supporting news literacy of the Roma population should be encouraged. News literacy, distinguishing fake from real news and learning how to evaluate news sources is crucial as we move towards further digitalisation, especially within vulnerable communities.

On the EU level, existing Roma support platforms that engage Roma in social, economic and political issues that affect them should be strengthened. One particular area where Roma involvement would be important concerns the participatory process on the Future of Europe in which Europeans can have a say on what the EU does and how it works for them. Stronger Roma engagement in shaping their own and Europe's future could contribute to changing mindsets and fighting deeply rooted prejudice and stereotypes, widespread discrimination and anti-Gypsyism across Europe.

In these challenging times and for the upcoming decades, the EU cannot afford to continue the process of Roma inclusion without achieving any substantial changes and to ignore the troubling reality of too many of its citizens. It affects the social atmosphere and well-being of all of us. Without true inclusion of Roma, the EU risks losing its credibility.