

08 April 2022, Brussels

## 8<sup>th</sup> of April - International Roma Day

### Addressing homelessness and poor housing among Roma communities in the post-2020 national strategies for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation

In 2020, the [EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation](#) was launched by the European Commission, followed in 2021 by a [Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation](#). As FEANTSA noted in previous reactions<sup>1</sup>, the two initiatives give increased attention to **the housing situation and include measures addressing Roma experiences of homelessness**. This is important as the housing situation across Roma communities in the EU continues to be difficult and access to housing is hardened by discrimination – a 2020 study of the European Commission showed that 43% of Roma are discriminated against when trying to buy or rent accommodation. Member States have been mandated by the Commission and the Council to transpose these recommendations, together with other important areas of intervention included in the EU Roma framework, and to submit their national plans under the 2020 - 2030 Roma Strategic Framework by September 2021. As of [March 2022](#), 14 Member States have submitted an updated strategy, while 6 of them requested an extension of the deadline and 6 others have an ongoing strategy.

Together with our members and partners, we have analysed the content of ten national strategies, with a focus on whether measures to support individuals experiencing homelessness have been included by Member States. From this overview, it is possible to conclude that: **a) homelessness is not sufficiently addressed** in most of the national strategies that we have consulted, even if certain types of homelessness (though not explicitly under this term) or the general poor housing conditions among Roma are mentioned; and that **b) similarly, Roma exercising their right to free movement within the EU** (Roma mobile EU citizens) **only appear sporadically in the strategies, if they are mentioned at all**. Only the French strategy targets this group, dedicating it a separate section. We would like to highlight that the lack of these two elements in the national strategies is not in line with the references contained in the 2021 Council Recommendation where homelessness among Roma, including those exercising free movement, is specifically mentioned. Therefore, we strongly encourage Member States to further update the national action plans on Roma inclusion by considering situations of homelessness.

**On International Roma Day, FEANTSA stresses the importance of adopting updated and ambitious national strategies for the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma across EU, who are particularly affected by the existing housing crises in Europe and often risk homelessness when they cannot afford paying rent costs<sup>2</sup> or when travelling to another Member State where they cannot access accommodation.** We also take this opportunity to draw attention to the **Ukrainian nationals of Roma background** fleeing the war who remain exposed to discrimination when looking for protection.<sup>3</sup> Member States must consider these factors affecting Roma across the EU and take action to address such situations.

To all Roma, on International Roma Day, we wish you strength to continue the struggle for realising Roma rights across Europe – **Opre Roma! But Bersh Angle!**

<sup>1</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/2p99dam3> and <https://tinyurl.com/57drhcv5>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ergonetnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/11-Housing-and-assistance-for-the-homeless-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanRomaRightsCentre/videos/279920197649278/>

*I lived in many countries. I worked in the building industry, but I got sick and now I am 65 years old and cannot do anything about it. I have no family and it is hard being homeless. No one will help you. I collect bottles and sell Strada magazines, so that I can make some money for food and for going home in winter. Anyway, it's hard. Wherever I am, when people see the colour of my skin, they look at me awkwardly. Especially when they see you poorly dressed and dirty, as I have only these clothes. I wash them, but when you sleep outside, it's how it is, you get dirty. Some people say hi and help you, others do not even look at you. When you do not even know the language it's even worse. I went to school for 8 years and at least I know how to read and write, but I do not know this language so I cannot communicate.*

*Life on the streets is hard. I come to Denmark with my wife for a few months every year, and we send the money we get from recycling bottles to our 3 children back home. This year we did not manage to buy tickets to the Roskilde festival...there we could have collected lots of bottles. Instead, now we have to walk through the city a lot to look inside every garbage bin, and when you sleep rough that is cold and hard. We are sick, we do not have an education and it is hard back home. We always tried to find a job, but if you are Roma and have no education it is very hard.*

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## **How is homelessness addressed in the national strategies for Roma equality, inclusion and participation?<sup>5</sup>**

### **Spain**

An estimated 725,000 Spanish nationals are Roma, and 50,000 Roma mobile EU citizens currently live in Spain.<sup>6</sup> Within the post-2020 "National strategy for the equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma people 2021-2030" already submitted by Spain to the European Commission, a specific set of measures aiming at improving access to 'Housing and essential services' has been developed (included in section 2.3 on 'Social Inclusion').

Although the term homelessness does not appear directly, some types of homelessness included in the ETHOS typology are addressed in this section, namely inadequate housing and insecure housing.<sup>7</sup> The four objectives under 'Housing and essential services' are: 1) Eradicating shanty towns and 'infra-housing'; 2) Reducing segregation of dwellings; 3) Guaranteeing access to essential services (water, electricity, heating, sewerage, public lighting, garbage collection services, etc.); 4) Reducing discrimination when accessing housing. The strategy sets clear indicators for each of these objectives, with mid-term and long-term goals. Likewise, detailed lists of actions are formulated at all government levels in Spain (national, regional, and local).

Regarding Roma mobile EU citizens, there are only some general mentions related to non-discrimination and intersectional racism against Roma coming from other Member States. Homelessness among this

<sup>4</sup> Roskilde Festival is a large music and arts festival taking place annually in the city of Roskilde, near Copenhagen where recycling of beverage containers in exchange for financial compensation is possible.

<sup>5</sup> This analysis was realised at the beginning of 2022, using information available on the website of the European Commission as well as from the websites of relevant stakeholders at national level. FEANTSA will monitor the way homelessness is included in the national strategies for Roma equality, inclusion and participation and how this is addressed in the implementation of national strategies and action plans continuously, providing updated information.

<sup>6</sup> Fundación Secretariado Gitano. Available at: [https://www.gitanos.org/la\\_comunidad\\_gitana/un\\_pueblo\\_sin\\_fronteras.html.es](https://www.gitanos.org/la_comunidad_gitana/un_pueblo_sin_fronteras.html.es), based on the Council of Europe 2012 estimates. [last accessed 4 April 2022]

<sup>7</sup> FEANTSA's classification 'European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion' (ETHOS), which is widely used in Europe for academia and policy purposes.

population is not addressed and no specific measures concerning housing for this group are formulated, despite many mobile EU citizens finding themselves in homelessness or housing exclusion in Spain.<sup>8</sup>

### Germany

The German federal government has recently published its National strategy "Fight antigypsyism, secure participation!" for the implementation of the EU Roma Strategy 2030 in Germany. There are no official statistics in Germany on the ethnic or racial background of the population. However, civil society organisations estimate that between 70,000 and 150,000 German nationals are of Roma or Sinti origin, while over 100,000 Roma foreign nationals are said to be living in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

The strategy addresses housing in 'Section III. 4. Access to adequate, non-segregated housing and basic services' regarding four actions: a) Housing policy measures, b) Social housing promotion, c) Housing benefit according to the Housing Benefit Act, and d) Integrated urban development programmes for integration and participation. Since data on ethnic origin is not collected, there are no clearly defined indicators or goals for Roma communities, but rather generic measures for vulnerable or low-income families which could benefit people with Roma background. Those include, for example, a €1 billion investment for social housing subsidies from the Immediate Climate Action Programme (action B) or the improvement of the housing benefits (action C), from which 1.5% of all German private households benefit currently. In principle, all EU nationals holding a regularised status in Germany can apply for these support measures. However, the experience from the ground shows that many destitute mobile EU citizens, including Roma arriving from other Member States to Germany, have difficulties in applying for a residence permit and very worryingly end up in destitution and/or homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

Despite some measures aiming at addressing the situation of marginalised and low-income individuals, homelessness is not explicitly mentioned in the German strategy, apart from two local examples of city projects in Frankfurt am Main and Dortmund.

### France

The French government published the Strategy 2020-2030 for the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma in January 2022. As in Germany, France does not record data on people's ethnic or racial background, so there are no official statistics on the number of Roma living in France or how many of them are living in precariousness and/or homelessness. However, estimations show that between 350,000 and 500,000 French citizens are "gens du voyage"<sup>11</sup>, and that 13,000 Roma mobile EU citizens live in 300 informal spaces ("bidonvilles") across France.

This distinction between French nationals who are "gens du voyage" and mobile EU citizens is present all along the text of the French strategy and its objectives, given that the two populations have different rights under French law. For the former group, the law of 5 July 2000, makes it mandatory for certain municipalities to allocate an area of their territory for the "gens du voyage" to reside in when needed. However, the strategy notes that demand is not met due to a shortage of spaces, leaving those in need of such spaces to identify solutions on their own, often where approval to reside is not given. To address this situation, the strategy proposes several measures to reduce the gap between offer and demand.

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<sup>8</sup> Already in 2011 the Ombudsman in the Basque Country advised for specific measures regarding homelessness among mobile EU citizens.

<sup>9</sup> Data available in the website of the Ministry for culture and the media, accessible [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> Bischof-Hermann-Stiftung (2021) Press release: Report reveals challenges of destitute mobile EU citizens in Münster (Germany)

<sup>11</sup> For more information on this term, please see the definition provided by the Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme

Concerning mobile EU citizens, the strategy is ambitious in aiming at the “sustainable disappearance of all informal living spaces currently existing thanks to a humanist, pragmatic and respectful policy of the laws of the Republic”.<sup>12</sup> To this end, social integration and participation of Roma will be privileged against forced evictions from these informal living spaces, which was the main policy response during the last decade.

Homelessness is not specifically mentioned as such, but it is indirectly addressed. For example, in what the strategy calls occupations of land without a contract or tenancy agreement (category 8.3 of ETHOS typology, under insecure housing), or when the strategy discusses living in shanty towns, it unintentionally addresses the category of inadequate housing from ETHOS typology.

## Poland

In late December 2020, the “Programme for Social and Civic Integration of the Roma Community in Poland for 2021-2030” was adopted by the Polish Government. A specific area of intervention of the document focuses on housing (4.3.2), and homelessness is indirectly addressed when the Programme claims that “[it] focuses primarily on rapidly improving housing conditions in those cities where the housing problem threatens the life or health of residents” and, therefore, it is aimed at people living in inadequate housing (the last category of ETHOS typology). Thus, renovation-related tasks are prioritised, especially for those communities from the southern and western regions of Poland, whose conditions are considered the worst. Other measures are foreseen and encouraged, such as building social housing or the purchase of flats or houses by local authorities. At the same time, it is mentioned that these measures should not only apply to the Roma minority, to avoid tensions within the neighbourhood.

The goal for this area of intervention is to support on average 500 people annually, until reaching a total number of 5000 people supported by 2030. This average is a bit higher than the one for the previous period from 2015 to 2019 (458), but no argument is presented for why the average for the upcoming period is approximately kept the same as for the previous one. At the same time, it remains difficult to assess the level of ambition of this objective since statistics in Poland do not collect data on ethnicity. For a general idea, estimations show that between 17,000<sup>13</sup> and 37,500<sup>14</sup> Polish people are Roma.

## Romania

According to the last Romanian census from 2011, a number of 621,600 persons stated to be Roma, while the Council of Europe estimates that approximately 1.85 million Roma live in Romania.<sup>15</sup>

The new Romanian national strategy for Roma inclusion was drafted and made public for open consultations in November 2020 under the name “Public policy recommendation in the field of social inclusion of members of Roma communities in Romania for the period 2021-2027”, with a draft version being available on the website of the Romanian National Roma Agency. The document contains a short chapter on Housing (section 4.1.2) which is accompanied by an annex for “A plan of measures for housing and infrastructure”.

One of the five specific objectives of the draft strategy is “[i]mproving housing conditions and infrastructure in vulnerable communities where Roma live”, but situations of homelessness are not mentioned explicitly.

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<sup>12</sup> Own translation, original version: “L’objectif de cette stratégie à dix ans est la disparition durable de l’ensemble des bidonvilles existants à ce jour grâce à une politique humaniste, pragmatique et respectueuse des lois de la République”

<sup>13</sup> Data from the last National Census of Population and Housing carried out in 2011, where 16,723 people declared their nationality as Roma. Available [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> Data from 2009-10, based on Council of Europe estimates, compiled in the Annex to the Communication 2011/173 from the European Commission.

<sup>15</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-inclusion-eu-country/roma-inclusion-romania\\_en#:~:text=Council%20of%20Europe%20estimates%3A%20approximately,8.32%25%20of%20the%20population\).](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-inclusion-eu-country/roma-inclusion-romania_en#:~:text=Council%20of%20Europe%20estimates%3A%20approximately,8.32%25%20of%20the%20population).)

The strategy follows several objectives in terms of improving the housing situation of Roma in Romania, among which it aims to prioritise cadastral sectors that include disadvantaged areas with vulnerable Roma communities within the National Cadastral Programme. This would mean access to funding for small infrastructure and access to utilities for these communities. It plans to do so through identifying and implementing resettlement solutions for families living in at risk areas or living with the risk of eviction, as well as through implementing local social housing projects in order to benefit members of vulnerable Roma communities. Indicators for monitoring the achievements of the strategy remain vague, described as “number of houses” or “number of communities”. The number of social houses that Roma communities should be able to access by 2027 is prescribed to be 600, clearly not enough considering that in Romania more than 50% of Roma live in overcrowded houses, 16.5% live in buildings considered unsafe for habitation and 30.3% in buildings that are in a visibly deteriorating condition.

### Belgium

As of early April 2022, there is no available information on the progress of the new Belgian strategy. It is unclear whether a draft is being prepared or any document submitted to the European Commission.

Given this lack of information, we asked the homeless service provider DIOGENES about their experience on the ground. Apart from regretting this delay from federal authorities, DIOGENES reports that the living conditions of the Roma mobile EU citizens they work with are very dire. Mobile EU citizens represent a fifth of the total number of people with whom DIOGENES is actively working. Since entering into the labour market is extremely difficult for many, very often they have no other option but to beg and rough sleep. After some time in Belgium, some people go back to their countries of origin for a few days, weeks, or months, and then they start the same process again. Some of them have been doing this for five or ten years already because they do not want to go back to their origin countries permanently, as they would face extreme discrimination and exclusion there.<sup>16</sup>

The main recommendations DIOGENES gives regarding the inclusion of destitute Roma mobile EU citizens in Belgium have to do with granting an address, offering free temporary housing when needed, and providing job support. With these three measures, accessing other basic rights like healthcare or education would be easier which would, in turn, lead to a drastic reduction of destitution. DIOGENES demands politicians at European and national level in Belgium to acknowledge that not all mobile EU citizens have the same skills and opportunities when moving to another EU country. As a result, they should formulate and implement specific policies targeting the destitution and vulnerability faced by many mobile EU citizens, with Roma people as a particularly excluded group.<sup>17</sup>

### Denmark

On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Denmark submitted its '*Danish strategy on Roma equality, inclusion, and participation*' to the European Commission (available only in Danish so far). Denmark's submission for 2021 - 2030 is not a strategy as such, but rather an integrated set of measures within Denmark's social inclusion policies. The policies included in this document (regarding, for example, social inclusion, hate crimes, equality, and access to day care, education, employment, health and housing) pertain to the entire Danish population and, thus, also to citizens who are Roma. Denmark, as several other Member States mentioned above, does not collect data on ethnicity and, as a result, the document does not include interventions specifically targeting

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<sup>16</sup> Written consultation with professionals working in DIOGENES.

<sup>17</sup> For a more complete list, you can read DIOGENES' Stratégie nationale pour l'inclusion des Roms: 45 recommandations politiques (septembre 2021).

Roma.<sup>18</sup> This lack of targeted measures also concerns those Roma mobile EU citizens experiencing destitution and homelessness in Denmark.

The Danish “strategy” does mention homelessness, but in general terms, referring to Housing First as a prioritised approach in Denmark (section on Social Inclusion 3.3). It also highlights the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and how the government plans to spend 3% of the ESF+ funds on fighting homelessness, with a focus on three groups: 1) youth experiencing homelessness (incl. young people in risk of homelessness); 2) hospital discharge to the street and 3) people sleeping rough. Under the section *Sector Specific Objectives 4.3.2.3*, it refers to *The Service Act* and how people with regularised status have the right to temporary accommodation at a hostel including other social services. Section 4.4.2 refers to political initiatives and interventions to secure stable and good quality housing (including emergency housing and prevention of evictions). Finally, section 4.4.3 describes the legislation regarding the risk of prison for those sleeping rough in specific conditions which Danish legislation considers as “Insecurity Creating Camps”.

In conclusion, while homelessness and the improvement of housing are considered in the Danish plan, there are no targeted actions to tackle these issues among Roma specifically as they are not recognised as a national minority, which is one of the reasons that authorities use to explain why there is no data, policy or effort specifically aimed at Roma.

## Ireland

The population census carried out in Ireland in 2011 estimates that the total number of Irish Travellers is 29,573. In addition, between 3,000 and 5,000 Roma coming from other EU countries live in Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

According to Cairde, an Irish non-governmental organisation working to reduce health inequalities among ethnic minorities, there are currently no actions concerning Roma mobile EU citizens in the housing section of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (NTRIS). This is particularly concerning given the discrimination faced by Roma in housing, an issue raised within the NTRIS Steering Group<sup>20</sup> and tackled by Cairde and other organisations. It is therefore advised that the Irish Roma strategy for the following years, which still needs to be updated and submitted to the European Commission, addresses this issue more in depth.

Homelessness significantly impacts the Traveller and Roma community in Ireland<sup>21</sup>, as Cairde notes. In addition, it is also challenging to address homelessness among Roma without including specific support measures in the NTRIS strategy. This issue particularly concerns people coming from other EU countries, given that the majority of Roma living in Ireland are mobile EU citizens. Reports from the National Roma Infoline, which Cairde has been running since March 2020, confirm the high prevalence of homelessness among Roma. In January 2022 alone, 53% of Roma callers out of 278 callers overall were living in emergency accommodation, 13% were living in overcrowded private rented accommodation, and 4% were sleeping rough. In 2020, from a total of 2,501 calls, 1,551 (62%) were regarding Roma who were homeless. This included Roma who were sleeping rough, living in overcrowded or unsafe accommodation, in emergency accommodation, and self-isolation facilities.

<sup>18</sup> Danish legislation concerning personal data collection available at: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/forms/r0710.aspx?id=828>)

<sup>19</sup>Government of Ireland, Traveller and Roma Inclusion Unit. Available at <http://www.travellerinclusion.ie/website/TravPolicy/travinclusionweb.nsf/page/index-en> [last accessed 4 April 2022]

<sup>20</sup>The Steering Group is made of organisations working with Travellers and Roma in Ireland and representatives of government departments. They regularly meet to supervise the implementation of NTRIS.

<sup>21</sup> Pavee Point (2021) The Traveller Community and Homelessness

## Hungary

According to FEANTSA member Budapesti Módszertani Szociális Központ és Intézményei (BMSZKI), homelessness is not sufficiently addressed in [the Hungarian national Roma strategy for the next decade](#). Even though the strategy mentions the poor and over-crowded housing circumstances of Roma, there is not a connection between these conditions and homelessness. This absence is particularly concerning when considering that homelessness among Roma is estimated to be five times higher than among the average population, according to data from February 2016 (provided by BMSZKI).

The same organisation considers that the strategy applies rather a narrow perspective, focusing on poor and Roma people, and it does not establish connections to other policy areas, such as mental health, disabilities, the elderly or homelessness. In addition, it is even more challenging to address homelessness among Roma in Hungary since there has been no strategic framework to fight against homelessness in the country for many years.

## Greece

The new draft national Roma strategy of Greece addresses homelessness among Roma as advised in the Recommendation of the Council of the EU. The strategy recognises the barriers Roma face in accessing quality and safe housing, while under its second pillar – “reinforcing access to basic services and goods” – the strategic goals include access to basic services of housing (access to water and electricity), as well as equal access to safe and sustainable housing through social housing policies. The specific measure (2.14) to achieve access to housing is described as “access to not segregated housing and relevant facilities for Roma”.

The operational goals under this measure include targeted and mainstream actions. However, the targeted policies are the same as in the previous strategy: temporary relocation, rent subsidy and infrastructure. The draft of the new strategy does not contain any new actions, plans, measures, or initiatives related to housing policies compared to the strategy of the previous decade (2011-2020). Although during the previous decade it became clear that the projects of temporary relocation, rent subsidy and infrastructure are not easy to be implemented due to increased bureaucracy and reluctance of the local governments, the new document does not take any measure to address these barriers. Moreover, the above housing policies are not the result of public consultation with the Roma communities and potential beneficiaries, though they will be called to participate in the projects during the implementation stage. Another element is that the strategy refers to terms such as “not segregated housing” and “sustainable housing” without specifying the meaning of these terms and how these goals will be achieved. Therefore, it seems that the document addresses the issue of housing superficially by simply incorporating terms and standards previously established by international organisations and the EU, instead of being the result of real evidence-based policy, consultations with the involved communities, research, and strong political commitment.

What is also very worrying is that in the new strategy, Roma living in cars or moving from one place to another are not considered at all as homeless, indicating that only Roma who live in camps, settlements or in degraded areas and neighbourhoods will be able to benefit from the housing policies described in the strategy. Roma mobile EU citizens are recognised as beneficiaries of the Greek Roma strategy for the first time, but despite this, there is no other provision, measure, or action referring to their specific needs and explaining how they can benefit from the strategy.

A concrete description of mainstream policies for combatting homelessness, such as shelters for people experiencing homelessness or the project “Housing and Employment”, from which Roma can also benefit, are included in the strategy. However, it is known that Roma in Greece are not considered by the authorities to experience homelessness and they are de facto excluded from shelters. Therefore, they are automatically excluded from all the above mainstream policies for combatting homelessness. Furthermore, racial

discrimination should also be considered an important factor that excludes Roma from access to quality and safe housing, and specific measures to combat this barrier should be designed under the national strategy. Provisions for stateless Roma who are excluded from all spheres of social and economic life are also missing.

Last but not least, the strategy does not foresee any independent monitoring mechanism or specific indicators based on which it could be evaluated. Therefore, beyond the question of whether it includes certain provisions or not, its implementation is uncertain. What is more, for many of its provisions (especially those related to housing) there is currently limited budget secured.

*“The new Roma strategy contains many measures and policies aimed at improving Roma lives, who face increased discrimination and antigypsyism in all spheres of public life. While Greek housing policies are being designed for the next decade, our country is already under supervision by the European Court of Human Rights for illegal evictions in two recent cases involving Roma. Nothing is being done to improve the situation these people face, being threatened and frightened everyday by local authorities and not knowing where they will wake up the very next day.”*



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At FEANTSA, we aim to include the voices of people experiencing homelessness in our outputs and activities. Following this principle, two Roma mobile EU citizens experiencing homelessness were consulted on this occasion. The testimonials were provided courtesy of Fedtekælderer Kirkens Korshaer, a service for people experiencing homelessness in Copenhagen, for which we are thankful to Cultural Counsellor Anca-Octavia Koti-Nan for her commitment to making people's voices heard. Finally, we are extremely grateful to Roma who shared their thoughts and difficult experiences.