

# ROMA STRATEGY VS REALITY: AN OVERVIEW OF ROMA HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING EXCLUSION IN EUROPE

While European policy has been progressing (if unambitiously at times) both on Roma and homelessness fronts, there has been little attention paid to the intersectional way in which Roma people, as Europe's largest ethnic minority, experience homelessness and housing issues. Roma people are consistently pushed to the fringes of society, denied even the basic right to housing. Amana Ferro and Isabela Mihalache analyse the European policy instruments that advocate for the social inclusion of Roma and what measures are needed to ensure their situation in European society improves.



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## INTRODUCTION

On 19 February 2020, the UN Commission for Social Development adopted, at the end of the 58<sup>th</sup> session, a historical first United Nations resolution on homelessness. Serious violations of human dignity, homelessness and housing deprivation are affecting people all over the globe, of all ages and from all walks of life. Europe is no exception, as for many Roma<sup>1</sup> - Europe's largest ethnic minority - face severe obstacles in accessing quality, affordable housing, and live in substandard conditions, in squalid shantytowns and illegal settlements, often in environmentally hazardous areas, while constantly being evicted from these settlements. Segregation is strikingly evident in many Member States and Western Balkans countries, sometimes because of deliberate government policy.

The lack of security of tenure is a significant issue for many Roma living in houses without municipal authorisation or lease contracts or in informal settlements. They are particularly vulnerable to forced evictions. There are often instances of forced mass evictions of Roma without prior notice and involving police violence and destruction of personal property. When evictions happen, oftentimes authorities fail to provide the evicted families with alternative housing, and many end up living in camps or homeless. In the case of Traveller communities, the scarcity of adequate temporary halting sites and intolerant attitudes of municipalities affect Travellers from freely exercising their freedom to move.

According to EU reports, antigypsyism acts as a powerful barrier to accessing suitable accommodation, with 41% of Roma feeling discriminated against when looking for housing ([FRA 2017](#)) by both the majority population as well as local authorities. Travellers in Ireland are significantly overrepresented in the homeless population,

yet one third of local authorities failed to utilise their ring-fenced Traveller accommodation budgets in 2018<sup>2</sup>, due to opposition by the public and local and national representatives.<sup>3</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has evidenced that poor housing conditions represent a systemic risk for public health, placing an undue burden on Roma people. During national lockdowns, several Roma communities were cut off from the wider community, including through military presence, as it was deemed that the residents did not have access to water or sanitation facilities to observe hygiene protocols. While people were left to starve in their homes, no effort was made to tackle the underlying causes of Roma people's limited access to hygiene facilities or to guarantee access to services.

## SHORT ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN POLICY INSTRUMENTS ON ROMA HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Encouragingly, at European policy level, increasing effective equal access to adequate desegregated housing is taken up by the European Commission. On 7 October 2020, the Commission published a Communication for a new EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation. The document acknowledges that Roma people's housing situation remains difficult, especially due to inadequate and segregated housing. It calls on national governments to fight spatial segregation, prevent forced evictions without alternative housing, and regularly collect equality data on experiences of discrimination in their national strategic frameworks. In addition, it calls on Governments to support the cultivation of outcome-oriented projects addressing access to housing, utilities,

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basic public infrastructure and services, as well as include a target to halve overcrowding in Roma dwellings in their National Strategic Roma Frameworks.

Government response and measures should be rooted in the implementation of the concept of “adequate housing” for all citizens including Roma, as defined by the United Nations<sup>4</sup>, the rule of law and human rights. A systematic review of housing legislation, policies and practices at national and EU level could remove all provisions and procedures that result in direct or indirect antigypsyism. Such a review would also include setting up adequate mechanisms to ensure compliance with anti-discrimination laws, with the full involvement of Roma representatives.

While the new EU Roma Strategic Framework includes a target to reduce housing deprivation by a third from 61% baseline, this seems very unambitious. Substantial resources should be made available for investment in sustainable solutions to provide affordable, quality, desegregated social housing that is also accessible to the Roma. This can be achieved by increasing supply and capping rents and property prices. Governments should also fully implement Principle 19 of the

European Pillar of Social Rights regarding *Housing and assistance for homeless*.

Housing is also a key dimension under Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), which states one objective is to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. Under Article 13 of the European Social Charter and Articles 30 and 31 of the revised Social Charter, governments have an obligation to promote effective access to a range of services, including housing, and to promote access to housing of an adequate standard, to prevent and reduce homelessness with a view to eliminate it gradually, and to make the price of housing accessible to those without adequate resources. Europe should honour its commitments and deliver on adequate housing for all, including the Roma.

Unfortunately, the new EU Roma Strategic Framework does not mention housing segregation or forced evictions, two key manifestations of antigypsyism in housing. At the municipal level, urban planning and targeted investment in neighbourhoods can be employed to reconvert slums and informal settlements, so that both urban and rural spatial segregation are addressed. Segregated

communities give rise to a divided society and contribute to Roma marginalisation, while also impeding their access to services, resources, and social participation. Segregation in housing must be made illegal, as per the International Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination (Article 3), which obliges parties to “prevent, prohibit and eradicate” apartheid and racial segregation, including “an obligation to eradicate the consequences of past policies of segregation, and to prevent racial segregation arising from the actions of private individuals.”

## **PROACTIVE ACTIONS TO ACHIEVE BETTER HOUSING AND TO END HOMELESSNESS AMONG ROMA COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE EU**

What is needed is a rights-based legal framework to provide effective protection against unlawful mass evictions and homelessness, as well as investment in legalisation surrounding informal settlements and property rights. Moreover, the EU should continue to pursue infringement proceedings against Member States in cases of forced evictions.

Legislation must enshrine the right of people to pursue a nomadic lifestyle, as well as provide the necessary quality infrastructure (camping sites etc.) for such lifestyles. Settled Roma often cannot legally prove ownership of the family abode that has been used for generations, and also struggle to meet housing and utility costs. In blatant displays of antigypsyism, local authorities move the Roma to unsuitable encampments out of sight.

Europe’s commitment to a socially just green transition must also include tackling the environmental hazards that Roma face. Roma communities across Europe live close to waste dumps, and many Roma settlements face pollution and environmental degradation stemming from landfills, contaminated sites, or dirty industries. The Sustainable Development Goals provide an excellent opportunity to reconsider transport systems and participatory planning and urban regeneration, as well as air quality and waste management. At municipal level, this can include desegregation, retrofitting houses for better energy efficiency and sanitation, and upgrading public spaces. A new policy focus on environmental justice must include the disproportional exposure of Roma to environmental degradation, pollution and natural hazards, the denial of environmental services, as well as the relationship between environmental degradation in segregated settlements and poor health outcomes.

## **PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND ONWARDS**

In relation to the ongoing pandemic, recovery efforts must include temporary suspension of mortgage payments and utility bills, as well as a moratorium on shutting off utilities and evictions for families at risk as a result of the pandemic, particularly those already experiencing difficulties, such as the Roma. In the medium-term, access to sanitary infrastructure and free water as a public good must be ensured for all.

Decent and affordable housing is a right in itself, and a precondition for the fulfilment of other rights in fields such as education, health and employment. Pro-active action is needed now more than ever, to ensure the implementation of housing policies and practices for Roma, involving Roma representatives throughout the process. Investing in adequate housing is investing in people, their wellbeing, and their potential. Ringfenced EU and national funds can play a key role in addressing Roma housing exclusion by providing better quality housing and living conditions. Otherwise, millions of people in the richest continent of the world will continue to be banished to the margins and to experience hardship and exclusion.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 The umbrella term “Roma” encompasses the 10-12 million people living in Europe (of which roughly 6 million in the EU) and it covers diverse groups such as Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.), in accordance with terminology used by the [European Commission](#).
- 2 Input by Deputy Eoin O’Broin, Sinn Fein, to [Dáil Eireann debate, 20 February, 2019](#).
- 3 Department of Housing Planning and Local Government (July 2019). Op cit. and RSM (June 2017). [Review of Funding for Traveller Specific Accommodation Programmes](#). The Housing Agency, Dublin.
- 4 Paragraph 60 of the United Nations Habitat Agenda, and General Comments Nos. 4 and 7 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).

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