

The EU faces an unprecedented opportunity to ensure Roma people can access their right to housing, however, argues Marius Tudor, if they continue to rely on soft policy rather than legislative tools it is doubtful real progress will be made toward Roma inclusion.

# ROMANI PEOPLE AND THEIR RIGHT TO HOUSING: FROM RHETORIC TO REALITY!



By **Marius Tudor**, Senior Advisor, European Parliament

I was 8 years old when I had to sleep, for one single night and the only one, on the street. The darkness was my friend and at the same time my worst enemy, as I had to keep my sister, who was 6, safe from something that could harm her and existed only in my mind, the mind of a child. It was cold outside; it was winter and I did my best to keep my sister safe from freezing.

I did not sleep on the street because I did not have a house! No, I had a house, a warm one. However, my parents worked a lot, my father, as an engineer and my mother, a French teacher. On that particular day it happened that my dad had to work during the night and my mom was in the city, 30 km away, having an examination and had to wait until late-morning the next day for the result. They gave our house-key to our grandmother but something happened, and she never came to clean us, to warm the house, and to feed us. My sister and I played with our friends all day, but as night fell we were faced with the sadness of being alone, without the warmth of the oven and the security of our house. We could not enter our house, we did not have the key and though I tried to enter by squeezing through the protective metal bars in front of the window, I only got stuck there. Having released myself, I went outside to the yard. We had a pillar just in front of our fence and we sat there. We laid down on the ground and we hugged each other. We were so hungry and cold. I remember how I put my arms around my sisters' body to keep her warm and safe, She was crying, I was crying. She fell asleep but I did not, I was awake until 5 o'clock in the morning. I was so afraid and shaking, until a neighbour came from work and she saw us. She started to cry, then she took us into her home, she cleaned us and made food for us, and then we went to bed, a warm one. My parents came back, the at midday the next day. They did not find us and they got scared as they thought my grandmother was taking care of us. They started to call our names and then our neighbour called them into her house. We were there, safe. Since then, that neighbour is like a grandmother to me.

Having experienced that one night on the street, without food or water, being cold and afraid, I can hardly begin to understand, nowadays, how millions of my people feel and struggle, faced with a lack of adequate housing. For I am Roma, the son of an engineer who was raised on the money made from begging.



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In the EU there are more than 6.5 million Romani people, 80% of whom are living in extreme poverty. The housing disparities continue to be significant, with about 30% of Roma still living without water within their dwellings, 36% without a toilet, shower, or bathroom. I could continue speaking about data, but anyone can look these up and I prefer to share the reality of my experience as a member of the Roma community. I am from Romania, a country in which more than one third of the population live in extreme poverty. In Romania, there are more than 2 million Romani people and many of these people must face the feeling that I had, 25 years ago, daily. They grow up in small adobe houses, by candlelight, their window is a sheet of nylon, and pieces of plastic or wood are the rooves over their heads, they sleep, three or four, in an old, shabby bed and share a piece of bread, when they have it. There are many Romani people and they belong to Romania and the EU.

EU has strategic documents for the inclusion of Romani people and for improving their housing situation. However, as a soft policy tool, it provides only a skeleton for policy coordination, consultation and monitoring, and targeted policy recommendations for National Romani Integration Strategies. It is at the discretion of national, regional, and local governments to translate the recommendations into administrative capacities and concrete policy actions and, as a consequence, the evaluation of the EU Roma Framework up to 2020 shows that the housing situation remains difficult.

The [new framework](#) proposal has ambitious targets on housing such as to make sure that by 2030 the majority of Roma do not face housing deprivation. I dream that this target be realised, but the soft character of this framework tells me this is unlikely. So, what do we need to make sure Romani people will enjoy their right to housing? The main strategic documents for the Inclusion of Romani people must have a binding character for the Members States in

terms of Implementation, adequate budget, progress and success indicators and monitoring mechanism. This would be possible through a Directive. The first step was already done through the [resolution](#) developed by the MEP Romeo Franz and adopted on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020, which asks, for the first time in the history of the European Parliament, for an EU Law to uphold Equality, Inclusion and Participation for Romani people and to Combat Anti-gypsyism .I am pleased to have been part of this process.

Among the housing priorities, we called on the Member States to: invest in social and affordable housing and to ensure that Romani people are duly registered with ID papers and birth certificates, that their properties (land and house) are equally registered and to ensure more flexible legal and administrative procedures for the future; to adopt a comprehensive mechanism to ensure that discrimination and abuse against Romani people in the field of housing is prevented and sanctioned, to address the issue of homelessness and to prevent further forced evictions of Romani people by ensuring that such practices always take place in full compliance with International, European and national law, and point out that no evictions should take place without the provision of substitute standard, affordable and quality housing in a desegregated setting, which has access to public services; to overcome segregation and to promote spatial desegregation, to adopt urgent measures to address the lack of water, adequate sanitation, electricity and needed infrastructure in poor Romani communities.

The next step must be taken by the Commission. The Commission must be more ambitious and courageous to develop a legislative text proposal. If there is no legal obligation for implementation, in a world in which extreme right and racism against Romani people is on rise, changes will remain only on paper. It remains to be seen if the Commission will step up to ensure Romani people no longer face

housing deprivation. In the meantime, we will continue in the European Parliament to make the Directive a reality, and in 2021 we will develop a legislative report. The only way to ensure access to quality housing for Romani people, for my people, is through the political will of the national governments, and if this was not possible until now through soft policies, we hope it will be possible through law, especially given that the EU has this historical opportunity for recovery: to leave no one behind.

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