

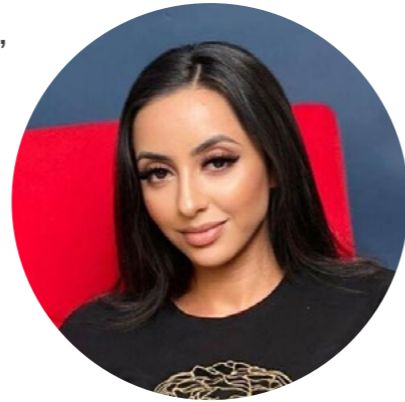
The discrimination suffered by Roma also occurs in times of war. Isaura Dhrima is in a unique position to address this issue as a young Roma refugee in Bucharest, working with the Aresel team to support other Roma refugees who have fled their homes from Ukraine.

INTERVIEW WITH ISAURA DHRIMA: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMA IN TIMES OF WAR



Interview conducted by **Simona Barbu**, Policy Officer at FEANTSA, with support from **Lucian Gheorghiu**, Programme Coordinator at the [Roma Education Fund](#) Bucharest, and **Alin Banu**, Community Organiser at [Aresel](#).

Isaura is a young Roma activist from Ukraine, previously a Roma Education Fund (REF) grantee who has settled in Bucharest, Romania, as a refugee after having to leave her hometown Mykolayiv. Isaura is currently part of the [Aresel](#) team, where she works together with her colleagues to provide support to Roma refugees from Ukraine and to fight the racism they face in Romania.



FEANTSA: *When did you decide to leave Ukraine and how was the journey to Romania? How was the situation at the border?*

Isaura Dhrima: When the war in Ukraine started, the town where I was living was attacked because they [the Russian Army] wanted to occupy our town. My family thought it would last a few days and then it would be over, we thought that an agreement would be reached, because we couldn't imagine that we still lived in those times when people go to war. After a month, we understood that we couldn't stay there anymore, because we couldn't walk in the street, we couldn't be in our house, we were afraid everywhere we went. I talked to my family, and we decided it was better to leave Ukraine and flee to another country until the war was over. We knew we wanted to go to Romania, we didn't think of going to another country. Why? Because we know the language and that can help us to get a job and start a new life, because we don't know if after the war we will even have something to go back to. Our family is Roma and our grandparents lived on the border with Moldova, so we learned Moldovan.¹ And the Roma usually know several foreign languages, so that is helpful.

¹ Moldovan language is very similar to Romanian, therefore Isaura can speak and understand Romanian.

When we left Ukraine, we took the bus to Moldova and from there we kept going until we reached Romania. The journey was very hard, we were very scared on the bus because they were shooting at the buses even if there were children inside, and the buses were from the Red Cross. Finally, we arrived in Romania with our family and some of us stayed here, some of us went on to other countries, like Germany.

FEANTSA: *How is your situation in Romania? Where do you live now and what support can you get from the Romanian state?*

Isaura Dhrima: In Romania we arrived directly in Bucharest by bus, and we were met by volunteers who helped us to settle at the refugee centre where we are staying now. We feel good here, we were welcomed by the people who work here. But those who came here as refugees from Ukraine look at us differently because we are Roma. Besides my family there are some other Roma families here. A few days ago, there were some arguments, some guys who are Roma stayed up late talking and making some noise. Some Ukrainian mothers came out and told them to stop because they couldn't get their children to sleep. Everything stopped after a while and things calmed down. After that, in our chat where we keep in touch between refugees, some people started writing that *"this shows that Roma are bad, that they don't want to work, they only do bad things and that this is the worst nation"*. They wanted to kick the Roma out of the refugee centre after this incident. So today I replied to them and told them that they shouldn't talk like that about all Roma because not all people are bad in a nation and that some Roma are employed to help Ukrainian refugees, like I do at my job. Everybody is suffering in this period, also mentally, and all people may fight, not only Roma. We must look at things differently, there are arguments and fights everywhere. We were devastated that this happened and that they said such things about us Roma in general.

FEANTSA: Roma refugees from Ukraine were discriminated against upon arrival in Bucharest by the people who were supposed to help them - can you tell me about this and other examples of discrimination against Roma in Ukraine?

Isaura Dhrima: Yes, this happened in the North Railway Station in Bucharest. Roma arriving from Ukraine were not given food, they were chased away, and the employees there said that the Roma were making too much noise. But if there were women with children, 20 people, how could there not be noise? So, they were chased away, told to stand in a different queue and sent to stand separately from the other refugees in Ukraine, where there were only Roma. Together with my colleagues from Aresel, we went there and explained to those in charge that they should not create separation between refugees and send Roma to a different waiting room. We are all people. If the employees there can help, they should help everyone, otherwise why are they there? When they see us, they don't know what to do, they are happy that we came to help the Roma, but they chase people away and then we have to go and explain what happened. We speak in Ukrainian and Russian, sometimes also in Romani, but there are different dialects.

There are problems in other countries too. In Romania, the state doesn't support refugees with money. In other countries they get social benefits and cash aid. The Roma are joining waiting lists and waiting for months to receive help. We [the Aresel team] here in Bucharest help people who arrive at the train station with finding accommodation, among other things. We have a colleague who goes to stay at the train station and welcomes people, and then together we help them to settle somewhere. I work with Aresel now and together, when we find out that there are Roma arriving at the train station, we go to welcome them. We also help them to get a residence permit to stay in Romania for a year. But most of them want to go on to other countries. Those who stay here arrive at the refugee centre (supported by the state),

but there are also families who want to go to other cities because living in Bucharest is expensive. We can help them to identify private families who want to house refugees or who can provide food and everything they need. We support the families with communication and we accompany them.

FEANTSA: What help can people get from the Romanian state?

Isaura Dhrima: The refugee centre where I live now, together with my mother, is run by the Romanian state. But we don't get any money from the state, only from non-governmental organisations. The children can go to school here and all children who live in the centre are enrolled. There are buses that come to pick them up in the morning and bring them back when they finish the programme. The people who work here are very helpful. The problem at the centre was between refugees, that's why I explained to them that they shouldn't discriminate, that this is racism, because we all came here to run from the war, we all have problems. We are all in the same situation and are waiting to go back home. But they behave the same as they did at home, in Ukraine, where we were discriminated, they don't try to be better. People don't see that there are a lot of Roma who have good jobs, are eager to learn and are good people; they only talk about the negative examples and think that everybody is the same. Before I came to Romania, I studied all my life. I received a scholarship from the Roma Education Fund [REF] and I was going to school. When I came here, I contacted REF directly because I knew they had an office in Romania, and I asked them for a job because I knew I could help. In Ukraine I was also working in this field, participating in projects and activities to fight discrimination, organising activities with young people, writing projects to engage youth in sports activities and to increase Roma girls' access to education and work.

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FEANTSA: To which countries did the Roma refugees go who left Romania?

Isaura Dhrima: To Belgium, Germany, elsewhere. I don't even know when we'll meet again, how many kilometres each of us has walked; when I think about it, it makes my heart ache. In Ukraine we couldn't see our cousins and relatives very often because we were in different cities, but now I don't know what will happen when we are so far apart. We talk to them all the time because we care about them, especially as they are in countries where they don't speak the language. That's

why we decided to stay here, because if we speak the language we feel at home, I can go out wherever I want, I can do anything. But in other countries, if you don't speak the language, it's a different world, different people. Even among Ukrainians it's hard, no matter how many diplomas you have, they will still think less of you. To them you will always remain Roma and even if we are facing the same problems now during the war, they still look at us differently. They see that I work and there are many Roma working here, and they keep saying that “this is how all Roma are, they don't want to work”.

FEANTSA: Do you still have friends or family in Ukraine? How is their situation now?

Isaura Dhrima: Yes, there are a lot of friends and family members who stayed at home because they don't want to leave Ukraine. Many men are stuck there because they are not allowed to leave, they have to stay and fight. We talk to them because we are afraid for them when we see what is happening, but we can't talk to them every day because they can't always respond. Our whole town is in ruins, it's dirt, they don't even have food.

FEANTSA: Were there cases when refugees returned to Ukraine and why?

Isaura Dhrima: There were requests from refugees, especially women, who wanted to go and see their family members who were back home, to see if they were all right. There were also people who wanted us to help them return to Ukraine because they could not stand the living conditions they were staying in here anymore, sometimes in gym rooms with many others, or because they faced discrimination from the state and asked us to help them return to Ukraine; and they left.

FEANTSA: *You organised a protest on 8 April with your colleagues at Aresel. Can you tell us what it was about?*

Isaura Dhrima: The protest was connected to the fake news that discriminated against Roma in Ukraine. I was still at home when a Russian tank disappeared. Nobody knows where the tank is even now, what happened to it, but everyone said that the Roma stole it. For them this was a joke: “Roma stole the tank, you should steal Putin too”. Maybe they thought it was good that the Roma did it and even applauded such a thing. But I felt bad, because I didn’t understand why, if we don’t know who stole the tank, they said the Roma stole it. How could the Roma steal a tank from the Russians? Then they started a whole discussion about it, they put this video on Tik Tok, on Instagram, on Facebook and on Youtube and they laughed at us and they labelled us as thieves again. On 8 April, International Roma Day, we organised this protest to show that we didn’t steal the tank and that such jokes are not okay. We wanted to show that discrimination against Roma continues even in times of war.

FEANTSA: *What kind of support do you think is important? What do refugees in Ukraine need and how should Member States and the European Union better support them?*

Isaura Dhrima: I think people should be supported to settle in the country where they feel the best. Then if they want, people can return to Ukraine, but as long as there is war, they should be helped by the countries in which they arrive. At the moment you can’t go back there, there is war, you can’t go out on the street, there is a lot of dust, everything is black and dark, I don’t know how to explain it...it’s like Auschwitz Birkenau. I don’t know how people stayed behind and how they live there. When we were there at the beginning of the war, we couldn’t breathe even when we were outside, we had no air. When we went to the shop there were shootings everywhere, we walked in fear and prayed that we could get back home.

People need to have accommodation to stay in; if possible every family should have a place of their own. That way incidents like the one here in the centre where I live can be avoided. If each family had somewhere to stay and a sum of money to support themselves, confrontational situations would be avoided.

We don’t know how long we can stay here, the staff don’t know either, they told us: “You can stay here, but we don’t know for how long”. We have to start looking for accommodation because this centre is normally for students, we may have to leave at any time. That’s the biggest fear because we know that anytime they can tell us that we have to leave. For the moment, I want to stay in Romania. When the war is over, I will go to see how our relatives in Ukraine are, but for now we have to start life again.

We wanted to show that discrimination against Roma continues even in times of war.”