

# **National Roma Integration Strategy**

**February 2012**

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## **A. OVERALL VISION AND OBJECTIVES**

Belgium recognises that the Roma are a disadvantaged group who are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, poverty and discrimination. The group is the victim of discrimination (and sometimes even segregation) in respect of access to education, vocational training, the labour market, healthcare and housing. Roma also suffer from a negative image.

Like the European Union (the EU Roma Integration Strategy and the 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion), the Belgian authorities are keen to take decisive action to improve the socio-economic integration of the Roma communities living on Belgian territory, liaising closely with the Roma. The successful integration of the Roma requires a joint effort by the different policy-making levels and policy areas (across all policy areas), the indigenous population and the Roma themselves.

As stated in the EU Roma Integration Strategy, action is needed in all EU Member States. The Belgian authorities wish to point out that, in the first instance, the countries of origin, both within the EU and outside the EU, must respect the rights of the Roma community, and must comply with European and international treaties in this regard. The exertion of diplomatic pressure is crucial in this respect.

The European Union and other international organisations have an important role to play in this regard. Belgium therefore advocates the use of European financial and/or legislative instruments to improve the living conditions of the Roma in the countries of origin. The Belgian authorities themselves also undertake to address this matter in their dealings with the countries of origin and to point out to the authorities in these countries their obligations with regard to the Roma community.

In order to meet the specific needs of the Roma and to redress the inequalities to which they are subjected, explicit (but not exclusive) measures are required. These explicit measures in no way preclude the provision of assistance to other vulnerable and deprived individuals. The objective must be that Roma integration in Belgium is so successful that specific actions and measures are no longer necessary.

The Belgian national strategy will be based on the various policy areas that enable the socio-economic integration of the Roma, such as the combating of discrimination in employment, education, housing and access to healthcare. This is in line with the priorities of the EU Roma Integration Strategy. As well as these four key areas, particular attention will also be paid to more horizontal objectives, such as the involvement of the Roma in society and the social inclusion of the Roma. Consideration will also be given to coordination of the actions concerned and to the need to gather reliable data, both of which are essential if policies are to be implemented effectively.

The national strategy takes an integrated approach, both horizontally (between policy areas) and vertically (between levels of authority): from local level, which also plays a key role in integration, to European level and regional, Community and national policy-making levels.

The Belgian national Roma integration strategy will help achieve the target of taking 380 000 people out of poverty by 2020, as stated in the National Reform Programme<sup>1</sup> and the Federal Government Agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/nrp/nrp\\_belgium\\_nl.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/nrp/nrp_belgium_nl.pdf).

## **B. GENERAL CONTEXT**

### **At European level:**

There are around 10-12 million Roma living in Europe. Many of them are victims of (socio-economic) discrimination and are excluded from European society. They often live in abject poverty.

On 9 March 2011, the European Parliament urged the EU Member States and the European Commission in a resolution to tackle the economic and social problems of the Roma and to ensure better protection of the Roma's fundamental rights. By laying the foundations for the achievement of binding minimum standards, the resolution delivered the input required for the communication that was published by the European Commission on 5 April 2011: 'EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020' (COM(2011)173/4).

This communication gives guidance on Roma policies in the Member States and on the use of EU funds to promote Roma integration. The communication focuses on four key areas: education, employment, healthcare and housing.

At the Council meeting of 24 June 2011, the European heads of state and government leaders endorsed the European Roma Integration Strategy, and the Member States undertook to develop national strategies or integration measures by the end of 2011. In accordance with the National Reform Programmes that they had drawn up in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy, they were called upon, more specifically, to ensure better socio-economic integration of the Roma, to work together with local authorities and to establish National Contact Points.

In the spring of 2012 the European Commission will present a report to the European Parliament and the Council on the progress of these strategies.

### **At national level:**

Belgium is one of a number of EU Member States that have a significant Roma population.

In order to foster the socio-economic integration of the Roma, on 21 March 2011, the Inter-Ministerial Conference on Social Integration [Interministeriële Conferentie Integratie in de Maatschappij], which includes representatives from the Federal Government, the Regions and the Communities, set up a working group on Roma. This working group was tasked with devising an integrated action plan containing proposals for improving support for Roma integration in Belgium, coordinating the initiatives of the various policy-making levels and monitoring developments within Europe.

In this context, the working group was commissioned to devise Belgium's national Roma integration strategy.

The current strategy is the result of a partnership between the Federal entities, the Federal Government and representatives from civil society, and encompasses an action plan which is based on a shared vision and common goals but within which each policy-making level devises measures within the framework of the powers conferred upon it.

## C. DEFINITION

In accordance with the terminology used by the European Commission,<sup>2</sup> the term Roma will be used in this action plan to refer to various groups of individuals who describe themselves as Roma, Gypsies, Voyageurs, Manouches, Ashkali, Sinti etc. Use of the term Roma in no way detracts from the wide diversity within the various Roma groups and associated communities, nor is its aim to stereotype.

There are several groups of 'Roma' in Belgium, which can be subdivided on the basis of the various waves of immigration. The descendents of the oldest influxes of Roma immigrants are mainly Travellers. A distinction is therefore made between Travellers (Manouches, Romani and Sinti) and more recent arrivals, who are mainly sedentary (Eastern European) Roma.

### Travellers:

- **Manouches:** the Belgian Sinti (as in France, Switzerland and certain areas of Germany) refer to themselves as Manouches. They are thought to be the descendents of the first Roma who arrived in Belgium in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> They are also referred to as 'the original migrants'. Most Manouches live in caravans and their first language is Sinti Romani; their second language is the language of the area in which they are living. There are around 1 500 Manouches living in Belgium.
- **Romani:** descendents of Roma who arrived in Belgium with the second wave of immigrants, which was triggered by the abolition of slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia in 1856. Their first language is Vlax Romani and their second language is French. The Romani, as they call themselves, are semi-nomadic: in the summer they travel around and in the winter they stay on private or public caravan sites. There are around 750 Romani living in Belgium.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/index\\_en.htm#](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/roma/index_en.htm#).

<sup>3</sup> Alain Reyniers, 'Roms Gens du Voyage ? Une question de vocabulaire' [Roma or Travellers? A question of vocabulary].

- **Voyageurs:** indigenous Belgians, descendants of the former itinerant craftsmen. Ethnically they are not linked to the Roma but they share certain cultural characteristics associated with their nomadic lifestyle (housing, mobility, trades). They currently live in caravans or houses. Their first language is Dutch (in Flanders) or French (in Wallonia) but they still use a lot of words that have been borrowed from their own language, Bargoens. It is estimated that there are around 7 000 Voyageurs living in Belgium.

Most (but not all) Voyageurs, Manouches and Romani are Belgian citizens.

**Roma:** The first Eastern European Roma came to Belgium after World War Two (among others, Yugoslavian Roma looking for work) but the third major influx of immigrants was triggered by the fall of the Iron Curtain. It is estimated that there are around 30 000 Roma living in Belgium. The majority of these Roma have kept their original nationality. The immigration status of many of these Roma is precarious. However, an increasing number of Roma have been granted a Belgian residence permit. The majority of these Roma live a sedentary lifestyle in houses or apartments.



## D. ROMA IN BELGIUM

### 1. Statistics

It is currently impossible to determine exactly how many Roma are living in Belgium since the term ‘Roma’ refers not to nationality but to ethnicity. Consequently, Roma do not feature in the population register, the aliens register or the provisional register of asylum seekers, as registration is based on country of origin, not ethnic origin.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Article 6 of the Law of 8 December 1992<sup>5</sup> on privacy when processing personal data states that ‘the processing of personal data that contain information on racial or ethnic origin ... is forbidden’. Consequently, there are no official statistics for the various ethnic groups living on Belgian territory.

Furthermore, some Roma have no legal place of residence; a minority of Roma are non-sedentary and are therefore not (systematically) registered. Non-sedentary Roma families also frequently move around within municipalities and from one municipality/country to another.

Finally, not all Roma are identified as Roma. Some Roma prefer not to reveal their Roma origins through fear of negative reactions and prejudice.

According to Council of Europe estimates, there are some 30 000 Roma living in Belgium.<sup>6</sup> This corresponds to 0.29% of the total population.

The Flemish Action Plan on Central and Eastern European Migrants 2012<sup>7</sup> contains the following estimates of the number of Roma living in various towns/cities in the Flanders and Brussels regions:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> KRUIPUNT MIGRATIE-INTEGRATIE, Werknota: Roma in Vlaanderen, knelpunten en aanbevelingen [Document published by the migration/integration information centre Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie entitled ‘Roma in Flanders, issues and recommendations’].

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.privacycommission.be/nl/static/pdf/wetgeving/wet\\_privacy\\_08\\_12\\_1992.pdf](http://www.privacycommission.be/nl/static/pdf/wetgeving/wet_privacy_08_12_1992.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/Source/documents/stats.xls>.

<sup>7</sup> Flemish Action Plan on Central and Eastern European (Roma) Migrants 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The influx of Central and Eastern European migrants refers to the influx in 2010; the estimated number of Roma is the total number of Roma (i.e. not just those who arrived in 2010).

	Influx of Central and Eastern European migrants in 2010	Estimated number of Roma in 2010
Antwerp	3 600	4 000
Ghent	1 935	4 300
Sint-Niklaas	234	800
Heusden-Zolder	148	75
Diest	73	230-250
Temse	58	400
Brussels Capital Region		6 500-7 000

There are no statistics for the Walloon Region.

## 2. Situation in key areas

A number of studies carried out in Belgium and by experts in the field (see Bibliography) confirm the European Commission's assessment of the socio-economic circumstances of the Roma in Belgium, many of whom live in poverty and suffer from social exclusion. Access to basic services such as education, decent housing, healthcare and the labour market is hampered by a number of different obstacles. However, there is no evidence to substantiate these claims as there are no relevant statistics.

- Education

In Belgium, education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 18, whatever their status.

The majority of Roma children are registered with a primary school. Truancy is an issue for quite a few of these children. Although an increasing number of Roma children are now attending secondary school, the obstacles with which the Roma are faced mean that the number of Roma children who do not continue on to secondary education is still too large.

There are a number of obstacles to Roma children's education: a precarious immigration status that gives rise to financial and social problems, an often unsatisfactory or negative

experience of education within the family, the fact that children have fallen behind at school, and cultural and linguistic barriers between the Roma and the school environment.

- Employment

The unemployment rate among Roma is generally high, partly on account of their immigration status and partly because of their low level of education and limited professional experience.

Clearly, only a very limited number of Roma in Belgium are employed under a standard contract of employment, although this type of contract is a prerequisite for access to social assistance. Many Roma are self employed, working in both official and unofficial occupations.<sup>9</sup> These self-employment activities often do not allow them to generate an adequate income (newspaper deliveries, scrap metal collection etc.).

- Housing

In Belgium, the main problem seems to be facilities for Travellers and itinerant ethnic groups. There are not enough permanent and transient sites to meet the latter's requirements.

Moreover, in Belgium a mobile dwelling (caravan) is recognised as a dwelling in the sense that the law contains explicit provisions relating to caravan dwellers, but a mobile dwelling is not universally recognised as a principal place of residence.

And in urban areas there is another problem: like other disadvantaged groups, the Roma have to contend with poor quality housing or homelessness. 'Slumlords' are also a problem.

- Healthcare

There is also a significant gap between the health of Roma and the health of the Belgian population as a whole. This gap is primarily caused by the precarious conditions in which the Roma live, as well as by their limited access to healthcare.

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<sup>9</sup> Ides Ramon ...

- Access to public services

Roma, particularly Roma women, have to contend with two types of discrimination: not only are they the victims of stereotyping by their own community but they also have to contend with pigeonholing by the society in the country in which they are living. There are a great many obstacles that hamper the social integration of the Roma:

- They are often not aware of the services that are available to them because they do not have sufficient information and/or because they are excluded from the social networks that supply the information that they require.
- Culture and involvement in society are of secondary importance to the Roma; their priority is their day-to-day survival.
- The history of the Roma is one of expulsion, exclusion and discrimination. This has led to a mistrust of the authorities.
- The cultural services and support mechanisms that allow them to involve themselves fully in society do not exist. Also, there is a lack of services that support their indigenous culture. These factors lead to a fear and mistrust of public services, intimidation and a lack of interest in or engagement with socio-cultural services and initiatives. This may explain the limited involvement of the Roma in socio-cultural activities.

Those who do use the services that are available to them also have to contend with other obstacles: linguistic and cultural barriers which prevent proper dialogue, an inadequate knowledge and understanding of administration and procedures and false expectations (on both sides), which lead to frustration, abusive behaviour and 'benefit shopping'.

Even service providers who work with the Roma often find things difficult on account of the aforementioned obstacles and the often complex and systemic problems experienced by Roma families. Consequently, relations with the Roma are very often extremely tense and difficult.

- Negative image

The Roma suffer from a negative image. The unlawful conduct of a minority of Roma has found its way into the media and influenced public opinion, which has reinforced certain stereotypes and prejudices. There is no denying that a lack of understanding of the background and culture of the Roma, caused in part by the tendency of the Roma communities to keep themselves to themselves, has influenced public opinion. As well as tackling discrimination and social exclusion, attention must therefore be paid to improving the Roma's image through specific actions which are borne out and endorsed by the Roma themselves.

### 3. Status

The issue of the right of residence of non-Belgian Roma must have as its starting point the social integration of this group.

**The Roma's ability to integrate is closely linked to their residence status.** 'Interim phases' (during ongoing proceedings) are not particularly conducive to the Roma's involvement in society, since they do not know what rights they will have in the near future. In other words, any integration measures must be based on a long-term approach. Clearly, people whose residence status is uncertain will not be very keen to look for work.

In the case of around half of the people to whom this Action Plan relates ('Non-Belgian Roma'), account must be taken of their residence status (and the associated social entitlements) when defining integration policies:

- **Roma who have EU citizenship** because they come from one of the new EU Member States that acceded in 2004 or 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria) are entitled to move and reside freely within a Member State in the same way as all other EU citizens in accordance with Directive 2004/38/EC, which was transposed into national law by the Aliens Act (Vreemdelingwet) of 15 December 1980.
- However, the free movement of EU citizens is not an unconditional right: the requirements that must be met before an EU residence permit can be obtained are

extremely difficult to fulfil, particularly for the most disadvantaged families. Discrimination in the countries of origin and the desire for better living conditions are important reasons for migrating. Given their lack of professional qualifications, the Roma who come to Belgium are not generally the most attractive candidates when it comes to applying for a job, they do not have sufficient income to obtain a residence permit on that basis and they are not students (or undertaking vocational training).

- **Moreover, access to the labour market** by Romanian and Bulgarian workers is restricted by transitional arrangements, which have been extended until 31 December 2013. A Work Permit B is still issued following a search of the labour market (to determine whether the vacancy can be filled by a worker from Belgium or the EU), but shortage areas (as specified on regional shortage lists) are exempt from this search.
- Quite apart from the fact that some people are still subject to these transitional arrangements (a work permit is still a requirement), access to the labour market is still difficult on account of the language, the lack of training and professional qualifications and cultural differences.<sup>10</sup>
- For these EU citizens, obtaining a residence permit is difficult. Given the socio-economic circumstances of the Roma, the most common type of residence permit applied for is permit for self-employment. They generally obtain residence status by this means, although this self-employment is often very limited and precarious and frequently culminates in an application for social assistance.
- **Non-EU citizens**, particularly Roma from the Balkan states and the former Yugoslavia, should apply for a residence permit from the Belgian diplomatic representation in their country of origin, unless there are exceptional circumstances, in which case they may submit an application in Belgium to the mayor of the municipality in which they plan to reside. This requirement is also difficult for the Roma, both in terms of the admissibility of the application (exceptional

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<sup>10</sup> GEURTS, K., 'Les Romas de Bruxelles' [Roma in Brussels], Le Foyer, 2004.

circumstances) and in terms of content (integration, work, knowledge of the language, school-age children).

- The relaxation of admission criteria for asylum seekers in 2009 (in accordance with the ordinance of 19 July 2009) undoubtedly allowed a number of Roma to obtain a residence permit.

In Belgium, two different laws govern the **right to social integration and the right to social services**: the Law of 26 May 2002 on the right to social integration and the Law on Social Welfare Offices (OCMWs) of 8 July 1976. The right to social services and the right to social integration are closely linked to the right of the party in question to remain on Belgian territory.

The right to social services or to a living wage for an individual from the Roma community is determined by whether or not the person concerned is entitled to reside in Belgium. Nationality is a deciding factor here: the person concerned is either a citizen of an EU Member State and, as a result, has a right to social services or a living wage in the same way as other EU citizens, or the person concerned is not a citizen of an EU Member State and, as a result, comes under the category ‘third-country national’. In addition to this distinction, Belgium recognises a number of other residence statuses: potential refugees, recognised refugees, leave to remain on medical grounds [regularisatie 9ter], leave to remain for exceptional reasons [regularisatie 9bis], family reconciliation etc.

An EU citizen is entitled to social services and to a living wage under certain conditions.

- 1) A person residing in Belgium for a period of less than three months has tourist status and is not entitled to social services.
- 2) A person who claims that he is entitled to remain in Belgium for longer than three months but who has not yet provided evidence that he has fulfilled the requirements for such an entitlement can only be granted the right to social services once he has resided on Belgian territory for more than three months, provided that this residence is lawful.

- 3) If he can prove that he has fulfilled the requirements that enable him to reside in Belgium for more than three months, he will fall within the scope of the Law of 26 May 2002. This Law relates specifically to EU citizens and their families who are entitled to reside in Belgium for more than three months.

It should be noted that EU citizens who enter Belgian territory in order to look for work are not entitled to social services while they are looking for work.

The right to social services and the right to social integration of third-country nationals are dependent on their right to reside in Belgium.

**In conclusion, it can be stated that the Roma do not have a specific right to social services or social integration. Under Belgian law, the right to remain on Belgian territory determines whether or not a person is entitled to social assistance from their Social Welfare Office (OCMW).**

The new Article 57d [of the Law on Social Welfare Offices] transposes Article 24(2) of Directive 2004/38/EC into Belgian law. This Article permits Member States not to confer entitlement to social assistance upon EU citizens and members of their families in specific circumstances.

- **Right of asylum**

**Refugee status** is mandatory for Belgium, in accordance with the terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention.

Unlike other EU Member States, **EU citizens** can apply for asylum or subsidiary protection in Belgium.

Asylum applications submitted by EU citizens are subject to the fast-track procedure (for which the law stipulates that the Commissariat-General for Refugees and Stateless Persons must reach a decision within five days).

All too often the evidence submitted by the Roma is insufficient to allow their asylum applications to be considered. It seems that many Roma are oppressed in their countries of



origin by discriminatory policies and the rise of anti-Roma racism but, because they find it hard to believe that a country could be in a position to protect them, more often than not their fear is not apparent. The result: years of discrimination and segregation.

Asylum applications from the **Balkan states** (Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro) currently have priority (within two months) due to the large number of unjustified asylum applications from these countries following the lifting of the visa requirement for these nationalities on 19 December 2009.

In 2010, 74 Serbs, 83 Kosovans and 13 Macedonians were granted refugee status in Belgium. On 1 November 2011, the figures were 49, 128 and 3 respectively. It is difficult to ascertain precisely how many, but quite a few of these asylum seekers are Roma; refugee status is generally granted to members of a specific ethnic or social group (particularly the Roma) who are still being oppressed in one of these regions.

The Belgian and European authorities have given these countries a powerful signal by requiring them to penalise anyone who is suspected of applying for asylum in Europe as a result of the lifting of the visa requirement. In this context, Macedonia has made 'abuse of the visa waiver' a criminal offence under national legislation, with the option of withdrawing the passport of anyone who is forcibly returned from an EU Member State.

For Balkan Roma who are granted protection in Belgium, it is important to bear in mind that the restrictions on leaving the territory may breach the right of asylum.

In accordance with Directive 2005/85/EC on asylum procedures, Belgium is drawing up a list of safe countries of origin which will be incorporated into national legislation. Asylum seekers from these countries will benefit from a fast-track procedure (their application will be processed within 15 days), the burden of proof will be increased and reversed and a decision can be contested only by submitting an action for annulment to the Council of State.

## E. GOOD PRACTICE

Belgium is already doing a fair amount to integrate the Roma. There is a great deal of good practice in this field, some of it by government, some of it by NGOs or other organisations. Three examples of this good practice, from Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, are described below.

### Flanders: Ghent Social Welfare Office (OCMW)

The immigration department of Ghent Social Welfare Office has never had a specific policy on the Roma. Ghent Social Welfare Office strives to treat all indigenous citizens who approach it for help (which includes a significant number of Roma) in the same way and to offer them the same degree of support. It is a matter of rights and obligations.

Every new application from an immigrant is initially dealt with by the immigrant welcome team. During the initial interviews particular attention is paid to the conditions of residence (for EU citizens and sponsors) and the efforts that the person asking for assistance has already made to comply with these conditions of residence; the risks associated with long-term reliance on the social welfare system are also made clear.

Every newcomer must attend an information session (organised on a fortnightly basis in 2010 with an attendance rate of >70%). The aim of these information sessions is to give a clear indication of what is expected of each of the parties. Here too, particular attention is paid to the conditions of residence of EU citizens.

Language and citizenship are the main focus of the initial phase of the assistance process. This is the best possible way of ensuring integration of the target group. There is close cooperation between language providers, Kom-pas (Inburgering Gent [Ghent immigrant welcome bureau]) and teachers in terms of follow-up and highlighting any matters of concern. Information is exchanged electronically between the language providers and staff working for the Social Welfare Office. The aim is to give the language process the best possible chance of success.

Although EU citizens are not required to go through the integration process, Ghent Social Welfare Office expects the majority of new arrivals to sign an integration contract with a view to fulfilling the 'willingness to work' requirement. This is strictly monitored by the welfare officer and the integration support officer.

As well as attending and showing commitment to language lessons, those seeking assistance are also given help with finding a job (amongst other things, through cooperation with the temporary work sector) and are encouraged to go on courses that increase their chances of obtaining employment. Here too the principle of reciprocity applies: it is not only the Social Welfare Office that has to make an effort, the person asking for assistance is also expected to be proactive in looking for work. A person's willingness to work must be more than a simple statement to that effect.

Finally, a great deal of attention is also paid to ensuring that the children of new arrivals attend school, in order to be proactive in preventing a situation whereby subsequent generations also rely on welfare benefits in the long term.

#### Brussels: Foyer regional integration centre

In the Brussels Capital Region, the regional integration centre Foyer has implemented three examples of good practice over the past eight years with funding from the Flemish Community and the Flemish Community Commission:

##### *1) Roma & Travellers Support Centre:*

In its capacity as a Support Centre for Roma & Travellers, Foyer offers personalised support on Roma & Traveller related issues, in an effort to reinforce the empowerment and integration process through education and training, to social service providers, official bodies, schools and local authorities on the one hand (information, advice, mediation, training, development of links) and to Roma & Travellers on the other (mediation, information, awareness raising, support).

##### *2) Team of mediators:*

Since 2007, a team of (Roma) mediators has been deployed to strengthen the relationship between Roma families and schools (or other institutions) and to improve communication and cooperation, primarily with a view to improving the standard of education among the Roma (school visits, registration with a school and continuing in education, mediation, encouraging parental involvement, family support etc.). Actions generally take place in consultation with the various partners (schools, local authorities and judicial authorities, the police, social partners etc.) but can also be requested by the Roma themselves.

### *3) Foyer training centre*

Based on personal development profiles and transition-to-work projects, socially vulnerable young people (16-18 year olds, the majority of whom are Roma) are given a last chance to leave school with qualifications and to improve their self-esteem through training and job support. In this way, Roma young people who have fallen a very long way behind in their education can still be motivated to go on training courses and to prepare themselves for the world of work.

More information is available at: [www.foyer.be](http://www.foyer.be)

### Wallonia: Traveller and Roma Mediation Centre [Centre de Médiation de Gens de Voyage et Roms]

The Traveller and Roma Mediation Centre, which focuses primarily on Wallonia, has been in existence since 2001 and is recognised as fulfilling a crucial role as a mediator between institutions, Roma and Travellers and the public as a whole. A number of examples of good practice come to mind:

#### *1) Administrative and social/professional mediation*

Roma who are having administrative problems, looking for work or accommodation etc. are given support and advice and are directed to various government bodies or associations. The presence of the team, working with Roma mediators and liaison with the public interpreting and translation service enhance the integration process, both for the Roma themselves and for the service providers involved with the Roma.

#### *2) Training*

The Centre has been well known for years for the quality and relevance of its services and for the effectiveness of the training courses that it runs for organisations that work with the Roma, which allow them to look beyond the stereotypes, in order to better understand the internal dynamics within the Roma community. Organisations such as Fedasil (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), medical centres, Social Welfare Offices (OCMWs), regional integration centres, schools etc. regularly commission the Centre to train their teams.

### *3) Information and awareness raising*

The information and awareness raising projects run by the Mediation Centre aim to prevent stigmatisation by providing clear, precise and accurate information and by presenting a balanced view of the Roma community. A good example of this is the ‘Des Roms debout!’ [Roma Standing] exhibition which the Centre organised in conjunction with a number of different partners (photographers, Roma mediators etc.). The success that the exhibition has had in cultural centres and regional integration centres etc. since it was launched on 8 December 2011 demonstrates the relevance of the Centre and the need for its existence.

### *4) Coaching and supervision for win-win integration*

The Traveller and Roma Mediation Centre can give service providers and institutions advice and support should they experience problems integrating Roma families. This may involve help with finding a job, education, housing, healthcare, pre-school care etc.

<b>F. COORDINATION OF THE STRATEGY</b>
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The current national strategy is a master plan which outlines the challenges associated with integration of the Roma and specifies Belgium's objectives for Roma integration, and within which each authority (the Federal Government, the Regions and the Communities) is free to take action in accordance with its powers.

In order to optimise, harmonise and coordinate the respective Roma integration policies, the policies for implementing this strategy will be coordinated between the various bodies.

The policies will be coordinated by the working group that was set up during the inter-ministerial conference on social integration ['Integratie in de Maatschappij'], which took place on 21 March 2011.

The working group is responsible for:

- monitoring and annually reviewing implementation of the national strategy;
- making any changes and adjustments that may be required to the national strategy;
- ensuring that the national strategy is consistent with the European framework;
- ensuring that the Roma policies of the various competent policy-making levels in Belgium are coordinated.

The working group will meet at least twice a year.

The working group is chaired by a representative of the Secretary of State for Social Integration.

- **Federal Government representatives:**
  - a representative of the Prime Minister of the Federal Government
  - representatives of the Deputy Prime Ministers of the Federal Government
  - a representative of the Federal Minister for Social Affairs and Health
  - a representative of the Federal Minister for Public Enterprises, Scientific Policy and Development Cooperation, with responsibility for major conurbations

- a representative of the Federal Minister of Justice
- a representative of the Federal Minister for Internal Affairs and Equal Opportunities
- a representative of the Federal Secretary of State for Social Affairs, Families and the Disabled
  
- **Community and Regional Government representatives:**
  - a representative of the Minister-President of the Flemish Region
  - a representative of the Minister-President of the Walloon Region and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation
  - a representative of the Flemish Minister responsible for poverty reduction
  - a representative of the Flemish Minister for Administrative Affairs, Local and Provincial Government and Civic Integration
  - a representative of the Flemish Minister for Housing and Cities
  - a representative of the Flemish Minister for Education, Youth and Equal Opportunities
  - a representative of the Walloon Minister for Health, Social Action and Equal Opportunities
  - a representative of the Walloon Minister of Employment
  - a representative of the Walloon Minister for Housing
  - a representative of the Minister for Youth of the French Community
  - a representative of the Minister for Compulsory Education and Adult Education of the French Community
  - a representative of the Minister-President of the Brussels Capital Region
  - a representative of the Minister for Urban Renewal, Urgent Medical Assistance and Housing of the Brussels Capital Region
  - a representative of the Minister for Public Works and Transport of the Brussels Capital Region, who is also a member of the executive the Flemish Community Commission, with responsibility for Welfare, Health and Families
  - a representative of the Secretary of State for Equal Opportunities of the Brussels Capital Region
  - a representative of the Minister for Families, Health and Social Affairs of the German-speaking Community

- representatives of the members of the executive of the Common Community Commission with responsibility for assistance to individuals
  
- \* **Representatives of the Federations of Belgian Cities and Municipalities**
  
- \* **Representatives of organisations that work with the Roma**
  
- \* **Representatives of organisations that represent the Roma communities**
  
- \* **External experts**

A subgroup, 'Steden en gemeenten' [Cities and Municipalities] was also created to focus on cities and municipalities with large numbers of Roma.

The secretarial tasks of the Working Group are undertaken by the Public Planning Service for Social Integration [federale Programmatorische Overheidsdienst Maatschappelijke Integratie].



<b>G. ACTION PLAN</b>
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The overall objectives of this strategy relate to the period 2011-2020. The specific actions taken to achieve these objectives will be reviewed annually by the IMC (Inter-Ministerial Conference) Working Group on Roma and will be revised and supplemented where necessary.

The working group will re-convene following the review by the European Commission and will adjust the strategy where necessary based on the Commission's comments.

The actions contained in this plan are grouped by objective and then by Region. In the case of Brussels, the actions specified are actions that are implemented in the Brussels Capital Region and they are not subdivided further by competent authority.

<b>Objective 1: To encourage participation</b>
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<i>To increase the participation and empowerment of the Roma community within society</i>
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## **AT FEDERAL LEVEL**

### 1.1 Creation of a Roma Council

The Federal Government plans to create a Roma and Travellers Council whose remit will be to ensure on the one hand that Roma and Travellers are involved in the definition of Belgian policies and, on the other, to put the Roma on an equal footing with other Belgian citizens. The Council can offer advice with the dual aim of ensuring on the one hand that the Government adopts policies which are based on a proper understanding of the facts and, on the other, that the Roma communities participate fully in and are fully integrated into society.

The Roma and Travellers Council will be closely involved in monitoring this national Roma integration strategy.

## 1.2 Participation in the ROMED programme

ROMED is a Council of Europe programme which focuses on training intercultural mediators for the Roma community. Belgium has applied to take part in the programme in order to improve the quality and efficiency of the intercultural Roma mediators working in different fields (education, healthcare, the workplace etc.).

Consideration will be given to whether and, if so, how Roma intercultural mediators acting on behalf of the Roma can be recruited in the context of the intercultural mediation programme that is currently running in hospitals. We will also consider whether it is feasible and sensible to deploy Roma intercultural mediators using the videoconferencing system that is currently being trialled in hospitals and primary care establishments. Finally, efforts will be made to create an exchange between the ROMED programme and the intercultural mediation activities in the healthcare sector coordinated by the Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety and the Environment. Clearly, however, funding for these intercultural mediation activities is not unlimited. Consequently, the videoconferencing project is still in the trial phase and will not automatically receive funding. In addition, budgetary decisions have yet to be made.

## **FLANDERS**

### 1.3 Support for Roma associations and Roma leaders

Flanders is keen to ensure that the Roma community plays its part in society and that the Roma act as responsible citizens. To this end, it will support Roma self-help associations and endorse and support key individuals within the Roma community.

### 1.4 The Minorities Forum as empowerer

Under the terms of the Flemish Integration Act [Vlaamse integratiedecreet], Flanders recognises the Minorities Forum [Minderhedenforum] as an empowerer and champion of the interests of all minorities, including the Roma. The Minorities Forum therefore has an informal network of Roma who were involved, amongst other things, in drawing up the

Flemish Action Plan on Central and Eastern European Roma. The Minorities Forum's Roma network will also be heavily involved in monitoring the actions implemented under this plan.

## **BRUSSELS**

### 1.5 Flemish Community Commission support for the Roma and Traveller Department of the Brussels-based not-for-profit regional integration centre Foyer

The Flemish Community Commission supports the Roma and Travellers Department of the regional integration centre Foyer, which acts as a link between Roma groups in the Brussels area and civil society, through mediation, support, referrals and information. The Department also coordinates a team of Roma mediators.

Foyer regularly brings together key figures from the Roma and Romani communities to discuss issues which are of interest to their communities, to share experiences and to highlight developments and needs. Informative and awareness raising activities are then devised to meet the needs identified during these meetings.

#### **Objective 2: Access to education**

*To ensure that every child and every young person from the Roma community benefits from compulsory education*

## **FLANDERS**

### 2.1 Additional funding for travellers

The Flemish Community provides additional funding (grants) for schools with a significant number of travellers. This ensures that support is tailored to requirements.

## 2.2 Encouraging children and young people to attend school and ensuring that they remain in school

The Flemish Community will focus on getting children into education, through reception services (onthaalbureaus) in particular. Specific actions under the education action plan 'Challenging Behaviour in Schools' will monitor the attendance of these children and young people and check that challenging behaviour has been reduced.

## 2.3 Increasing parental involvement

The Flemish community will increase parental involvement through local parental involvement projects.

## 2.4 Monitoring of pupils from Central and Eastern Europe

Flanders will collect data on the arrival and departure of pupils from Central and Eastern Europe.

## **WALLONIA**

*These actions also apply to Brussels-based schools in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.*

## 2.5 Deployment of Roma mediators

This involves supporting school mediators of Roma origin who act as a link between the school and families with Roma children in schools in the French-speaking Community. The aim is to roll this project out on a large scale in schools and to encourage dialogue between the educational teams and the associations involved in this field.

2.6 Learning difficulties: the link between schools and homework classes, AMO (help in an open environment) etc.

The French-speaking Community will encourage and support joint projects involving stakeholders who can help to ensure a successful educational outcome for children, primarily Roma children, with learning difficulties.

2.7 Parental literacy: building bridges between schools, social support centres (antennes sociales) and the not-for-profit association ‘Lire et Écrire’/‘Lezen en Schrijven’ [read and write]

Here too the aim is to set up and support joint projects involving stakeholders who play a role in the educational, social and professional integration of illiterate families, including Roma families.

2.8 Complementarity of various educational tools for children and their families

Making sure that the various educational tools intended for use by teachers of children with learning difficulties, particularly pupils from Roma families, are compared, shared and disseminated.

## **BRUSSELS**

2.9 Preparing Roma children for school

The Flemish Community Commission (VGC) is keen to ensure that education can be accessed by Roma children and that Roma children continue to attend school in the long term. The Flemish Community Commission is investigating, in consultation with organisations involved in this field, the initiatives that are required to achieve this aim.

## 2.10 Increasing cooperation between schools (and support services) and Roma families

The Flemish Community Commission and the Flemish Community help the Brussels-based regional integration centre Foyer expand its work on Roma and education (see above) under the terms of a long-term agreement:

1) The Roma & Travellers Support Centre offers support to social partners, schools and local authorities (secondary level) and the target group itself (primary level) in an effort to increase the number of Roma children and young people attending school by providing information and training and promoting communication and cooperation.

2) Deployment of (Roma) mediators to strengthen the relationship between Roma families and schools in order to raise levels of attendance (with additional support from the Federal Impulse Fund and Truancy Prevention Programme for the Brussels Capital Region).

## 2.11 Continuation of 'Roma Children' pilot project

Under the auspices of the Truancy Prevention Programme, the Brussels Capital Region supports a mediation programme for Roma families in schools in the Brussels area that have a large number of children from ethnic backgrounds. The programme is implemented by the regional integration centre Foyer in conjunction with the municipalities of the Brussels Capital Region.

The objectives are as follows:

- to ensure that Roma children attend school more regularly and to reduce truancy rates;
- to ensure that Roma children who arrive in Belgium and/or who do not attend school are assisted with the transition process;
- to get parents more involved in their children's education;
- to persuade parents to register their children for nursery school, and to improve the incentives for sending their children to school;
- to give teachers a better insight into the situation and culture of the Roma.

## 2.12 Development of relevant teaching methods

With the help of Foyer's Training Centre and in pursuance of the Decree on Education and Work [Decreet Leren en Werken], the Flemish Community supports personal development profiles to prepare socially vulnerable young people (80% of whom are Roma) for the labour market.

## **GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY**

### 2.13 Relevant services

In the German-speaking Community there are a number of decrees which aim to ensure that migrants and asylum seekers are suitably integrated into society. The number of Roma in the German-speaking Community is almost certainly not very high and, as already stated, it is difficult to ascertain precise numbers. Consequently, the German-speaking Community does not propose any specific actions for Roma integration but is sensitive to the needs of this community and ensures that it is provided with the services that it requires.

Examples include:

- The Decree of 17 December 2001: Education of newly arrived school-age children.  
This Decree allows a number of schools in the German-speaking Community to create 'transitional classes' with a view to improving newcomers' language skills and their ability to integrate into society. It applies to both primary and secondary schools.
- Independently of this Decree, language and cultural integration classes are also possible during school hours under specific conditions. This project also involves the mothers of the children.
- The Decree of 11 May 2009 provides for individual support for every pupil. It also allows pupils' attendance to be monitored and proposes relevant, personalised solutions to truancy problems.

**Objective 3: Access to work**

*To close the gap between the employment rate of the Roma and that of the remainder of the population*

**AT FEDERAL LEVEL****3.1 Social and professional empowerment of the Roma**

With support from the European Social Fund, welfare officers responsible for the social and professional empowerment of the Roma are appointed within the Social Welfare Offices (OCMWs). These welfare officers will be responsible for providing individual support to the Roma and will receive special training and support for this purpose. Moreover, in order to ensure that there is a relationship of trust between the local Roma communities and the authorities, the Social Welfare Offices are recommended to employ an intercultural mediator.

**FLANDERS****3.2 Action plan for Bulgarians and Romanians**

Bulgarians and Romanians who remain in Belgium on the basis of the free movement of persons and who do not have a work permit will be channelled towards shortage professions by the Flemish Employment and Training Service (VDAB) in consultation with local authorities, social partners, the Social Welfare Office and NGOs.

**3.3 Checks on service providers**

In Flanders, a specific monitoring process will be implemented under the auspices of the IWSE (Work and Social Economy Inspectorate). This is required on account of fraudulent 'service providers' who offer their services primarily in the meat, horticultural and cleaning sectors.



### 3.4 Devising an enterprise profile

Flanders devises enterprise profiles for immigrants involved in the integration process (new arrivals and established migrants), focusing in particular on Central and Eastern European migrants.

## **WALLONIA**

### 3.5 Expanding the cross-sectoral platform

The cross-sectoral platform for cross-sectoral employment is being expanded to all public and/or subsidised employment and training partners. Given the unstable situation in which the Walloon Roma find themselves (nomadic lifestyle living in caravans, homelessness, social reintegration etc.), these partners need to understand the problems that they face (administrative situation, illiteracy, knowledge of French and of application processes (CV, letters of application), socially acceptable behaviour, shyness, fear, a lack of understanding of the tools provided, attitude to work, illegal work etc.) and to know what skills they already possess, their professional requirements (which sector do they want to work in?) and the characteristics and place of residence of Roma who are looking for work. In this respect the platform can enable a valuable exchange of information between partners that are in direct contact with the Roma (social support centres, Social Welfare Offices (OCMWs), SLSPs (Walloon public housing companies), Traveller contacts etc.) and employment and training partners. In other words, all stakeholders can use the platform to take the necessary measures to promote the inclusion of the Roma in the labour market and to remove any obstacles that may exist (the situation of women, raising awareness, informing and preparing the general public, childcare, selecting suitable training courses etc.).

### 3.6 Gathering information

The local offices of FOREM [the Walloon public employment and training service] (notably the Maisons de l'Emploi and Relais de l'Emploi) and/or the regional FOREM directorates in cities where there are a large number of Roma can provide information on people who have (or who are thought to have) already used Walloon employment and training services. This

information gives an insight into the problems that they face when looking for work and, where necessary, can be used as a basis for devising measures to solve these problems within the constraints of the services available.

### 3.7 Access to training

Based on objective situations derived from these new data, the other partners who work with the Roma (social housing companies, Social Welfare Offices, social support centres etc.) can in turn be informed of needs that are not being met. Thus, if necessary, action can be taken to prepare the Roma for the world of work (learning to read and write and learning French by establishing links), and if it is essential for them to go on a specific training course, the suitability and relevance of the course can be evaluated, provided that the budget is sufficient to cover the costs involved.

## **BRUSSELS**

### 3.8 From Immigrant to Self-employment

Under the two-year trial project 'From Immigrant to Self-employment' ['van immigrant tot middenstand'], the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) aims to get new arrivals from Romania and Bulgaria into self-employment. A significant proportion of these immigrants are Roma target groups.

**Objective 4: Access to healthcare****AT FEDERAL LEVEL****4.1 Intercultural mediators in the healthcare sector**

Although we do not have reliable data in this country on the health of the Roma or on the problems that they experience with the healthcare system, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that they face a great many problems in terms of their health and healthcare.

Under the auspices of the intercultural mediation programme run by the Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety and the Environment, intercultural mediators who act on behalf of the Roma are currently employed in a number of hospitals. There are Albanian, Bosnian, Romanian and Serbocroat intercultural mediators. Some of these are now also deployed via a videoconferencing link in both hospitals and primary healthcare facilities.

For vulnerable groups like the Roma these social services in hospitals are particularly important in order to guarantee accessibility, quality and continuity of care. The Federal Public Service's working group on 'Social Services in Hospitals' considers, amongst other things, the problems faced by patients from ethnic minorities and people residing illegally in Belgium, a group to which many Roma belong.

In an effort to support coordinators of intercultural mediation in hospitals, the Federal Public Service's Intercultural Mediation and Policy Support Unit recently organised training sessions on working with Roma patients in conjunction with the not-for-profit regional integration centre FOYER.

**FLANDERS****4.2 Accessible healthcare for ROMA patients**

With the support of the Flemish Government, a trial project on accessible healthcare for the Roma is under way in St-Niklaas. In the day-to-day care of Roma patients there are major

issues surrounding the taking of medicines, preventive medicine, teenage pregnancies, poor eating habits and poor dental health. The idea is to adapt the care provided to this target group, by paying particular attention to the Roma's specific medical needs, through training initiatives and by offering individual social and emotional support.

#### 4.3 Networking between healthcare providers

Healthcare providers share information on individual cases and deepen their understanding of poverty.

### **GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY**

#### 4.4 Psychological and psychiatric help for recognised refugees and asylum seekers

The German-speaking Community is supporting a new project sponsored by the European Refugee Fund, which relates to recognised refugees and asylum seekers. Amongst other things, it offers support with a view to integration by providing information and training (intensive language courses) and social support. As well as working towards linguistic, social, educational and professional integration, the project also aims to offer employees a number of tools to simplify their work, including supervision and training. Dedicated psychological and psychiatric support of refugees and asylum seekers is achievable with the help of accredited interpreters. An art therapy group is offered to women in vulnerable circumstances.

In 2012, two therapists from the German-speaking Community's Centre for Mental Health (Centrum voor geestelijke gezondheidszorg) attended a training course on ethnopsychology. Ethnopsychology works on the premise that every individual comprises two elements: a psyche and a culture.

#### **Objective 5: Access to housing and essential services**

*The close the gap between the number of Roma who have access to housing and public networks and the number of people in the population as a whole who have access to housing and public networks*

## **AT FEDERAL LEVEL**

### 5.1 Security deposits

The Social Welfare Office (OCMW) can help people who apply for assistance with payment of a security deposit, which protects the landlord if tenants are unable to pay their rent. More information on this facility will be provided to the Roma community in an effort to facilitate access to housing by the Roma and their families.

## **FLANDERS**

### 5.2 A global housing policy

Flanders has devised a housing policy which is designed to promote the availability of appropriate, good-quality accommodation in a pleasant living environment at an affordable price and with security of tenure. The Roma can make use of all standard services in the same way as other target groups.

### 5.3 Crackdown on rogue landlords

As part of the crackdown on rogue landlords, one of the priorities of the Flemish Housing Inspectorate will be to increase levels of monitoring in areas and regions with a high concentration of Central and Eastern Europeans. The aim is to punish unscrupulous landlords and to reduce the amount of bad practice in this field.

### 5.4 Grants for the establishment of caravan sites

The Flemish Housing Charter [Vlaamse wooncode] recognises caravans as a form of accommodation. The Flemish Government is currently supporting the establishment of caravan sites by towns and cities, municipalities and social housing companies through a grant that covers 90% of the costs involved. A number of provinces top up the additional 10%. The Flemish Government has combined all relevant regulations, as well as a number of pointers and tips, in a brochure entitled 'Wonen op wielen' [Living on wheels].

## WALLONIA

### 5.5 Reform of the Walloon Housing Charter

The revised Walloon Housing Charter [Code wallon du Logement/Waalse Wooncode], which has been effective since February 2012, introduced a measure which allows travellers or Roma who currently live in caravans and wish to continue to do so to take advantage of a new facility, i.e. the Housing Charter's new Article 22a: 'Help with creating or upgrading accommodation other than houses'.

The aim of this is to develop alternative forms of accommodation. As well as help with housing, this makes it possible:

- to create alternative forms of accommodation in Permanent Living (HP) zones
- to equip travellers sites which have no link with Permanent Living (HP) zones
- to create alternative living zones in specific zones defined by the Government.

This measure is consistent with the Government's desire to recognise alternative forms of accommodation, and the possibility of locating such accommodation in residential areas, thereby resolving the issue of the (full or partial) sedentarisation of Travellers and Roma.

Article 44 of the Walloon Housing Charter, 'Assistance with equipping and establishing sites that can accommodate mobile forms of accommodation used by travellers', is also relevant in that on the one hand it allows the creation of sites for families and, on the other, the creation of halting sites. This measure was recently the subject of an administrative simplification.

### 5.6 Permanent Living Plan

If Roma live in a zone within the Permanent Living Plan [Plan Habitat Permanent/Permanent Wonen] that was adopted by the Government in December 2010 and subsequently wish to leave their place of residence to move into a house, they can avail themselves of the facilities under the Plan.

## **BRUSSELS**

### 5.7 Advice on policies regarding sites for travellers

In the Brussels Capital Region, the Flemish Community is supporting the Brussels-based regional integration centre Foyer in its efforts to advise local and regional authorities on the adoption of adequate policies on sites for travellers.

### 5.8 Roma & Travellers Support Centre

In order to improve communications and cooperation between service providers and families with a view to improving access to mainstream services, the Flemish Community and the Flemish Community Commission are helping the Brussels-based regional integration centre Foyer expand its support centre facility (see above) for social services, official bodies, schools and local authorities on the one hand and Roma & Travellers on the other. The Flemish Community Commission (VGC) is also supporting an outreach project to encourage socially isolated Roma and Travellers to make use of mainstream services.

### 5.9 Support for the temporary occupation of dilapidated buildings

Clearly, these support measures take into account the relevant health and safety requirements. A good example of this is the temporary occupation of the old cloisters ‘cloître du Gesù’, which, for the past two years, have been used to accommodate around 150 people, the majority of them Roma. This communal living project, which is run by a number of associations that focus on social integration through housing, benefits from a broad range of support measures: a temporary occupation agreement has been concluded with the private owner of the premises, insurance to guard against permanent occupation has been concluded and individual and group support is being funded. In addition, the Secretary of State for Housing is investigating other solutions that are relevant to this particular group. This calls for an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach which combines the powers of different levels of authority.

**Objective 6: Migration**

*To control the influx of Roma migrants from Central and Eastern Europe*

**AT FEDERAL LEVEL****6.1 European approach to migration**

The Federal Government does not dispute the free movement of persons. Furthermore, the Federal Government is endeavouring to bring the approach to migration in line with the European approach.

Given that access to welfare services has led to an influx of Roma migrants, the EU Directive's provisions on access to welfare services, i.e. that EU citizens are not entitled to these services during the first three months of their residence, will be applied.

In accordance with the Government Agreement [regeerakkoord], the Government will also ensure that the effectiveness of the checks on European citizens is reinforced and increased during the three years after a residence permit has been issued.

**FLANDERS****6.2 Cooperation with countries of origin**

Flanders endeavours to work together with the countries of origin in an effort to portray the right image of Flanders in the countries of origin, thereby dispelling any unrealistic expectations that potential migrants may have. More specifically, information will be made available in these countries. In addition, a dialogue will be initiated in the countries of origin in an effort to improve the status of the Roma in those countries.



## BRUSSELS

### 6.3 Reception policy for new arrivals

In addition to the existing policies on social integration and the promotion of cultural diversity, an effective reception policy will endeavour to meet the specific requirements of these new migrants: specific administrative requirements, a lack of knowledge of the language of the country concerned, lack of familiarity with certain common cultural traditions, problems with recognition of their vocational skills or a lack of understanding of the role of the school and the role of parents in the education process. A reception policy for new migrants encourages this two-way dynamic: obtaining the right information and, if necessary, acquiring the basic skills required to build an independent life in Belgium, with respect for existing rules. The policy guides new immigrants in Brussels through the integration process, to help them:

- comply with the initial administrative requirements more quickly so that, on the one hand, they quickly fulfil all legal requirements and can exercise their rights straightaway and, on the other, they can access basic services (housing, healthcare, education etc.) in the best possible circumstances;
- recognise their knowledge of French and register for a language course;
- identify clearly their professional qualifications and skills in order to facilitate their entry into the labour market;
- acquire the necessary basic knowledge of society and social relationships in Belgium and of the way that public bodies work;
- participate in social and cultural activities and associations, at local level in particular.

The reception provided for immigrants in Brussels will also be available to the Roma.

On the Dutch-speaking side, the Brussels Welcome Bureau BON runs integration programmes for new arrivals and established immigrants residing legally in Belgium. This integrated, readily accessible approach is also open to the Roma.

**Objective 7: Access to social integration****AT FEDERAL LEVEL****7.1 Helpdesk for Social Welfare Offices (OCMWs)**

A Roma Helpdesk will be set up within the Public Planning Service for Social Integration, since it is the towns and cities/municipalities and the Social Welfare Offices that first come into contact with the Roma community. The Social Welfare Offices will be able to ask Helpdesk operators questions about the Roma (within the limits of the Public Planning Service for Social Integration's jurisdiction). The Helpdesk will provide information, will ensure that good practice is shared and will liaise with other partners, in an effort to provide the best possible service to Social Welfare Offices and to towns and cities/municipalities to allow them to improve the help that they offer to the (inaccessible) Roma community.

**7.2 Circular on EU citizens and access to social services**

Many Roma living in Belgium are EU citizens who, depending on their status, may or may not be entitled to obtain help under the Belgian social assistance system, and, in particular, benefits from their Social Welfare Office. In order to advise the Social Welfare Offices of this situation, on 29 June 2011, the Secretary of State for Social Integration issued a circular on EU citizens which was designed to clarify

- \* the different right of residence categories for EU citizens and members of their family, and the impact of these different right of residence categories on the entitlement or otherwise to social assistance or a living wage of EU citizens and members of their family;
- \* the impact (if any) on their residence status of EU citizens and members of their family claiming benefits from the Social Welfare Office;
- \* the monitoring mechanisms for ensuring compliance with residence requirements.

The new Article 57d [of the Law on Social Welfare Offices] transposes Article 24(2) of Directive 2004/38/EC into Belgian law. This Article permits Member States not to confer

entitlement to social assistance upon EU citizens and members of their families in specific circumstances.

## **FLANDERS**

### 7.3 Directing Roma to integration services

Local authorities, Social Welfare Offices and welcome bureaus will direct as many Roma as possible to integration services, through which they can obtain an ‘immigration certificate’ (inburgeringsattest). Efforts will also be made to improve cooperation between Social Welfare Offices and welcome bureaus, with Social Welfare Offices being in a position to make the entitlement to benefits dependent upon compliance with integration requirements.

### 7.4 Deployment of ‘neighbourhood stewards’

Flanders will deploy ‘neighbourhood stewards’ in major cities where the concentration of Roma is high. They will mediate and keep the peace in particular streets, districts and neighbourhoods but their main task is prevention. They will liaise with new arrivals and longstanding residents within the framework of existing social initiatives and in conjunction with the usual municipal bodies and the police. The aim is to promote integration between existing residents and new arrivals in particular streets, neighbourhoods and districts of these major cities.

## **WALLONIA**

### 7.5 Pilot Roma integration project

In order to reinforce the positive integration dynamic, the pilot Roma integration project of the Traveller and Roma Mediation Centre [Centre de Médiation des gens de voyage et des Roms/Bemiddelingscentrum voor Woonwagenbewoners en Roma], ‘Pour l’insertion des Roms’ focuses on the one hand on developing the skills of Roma families (language, social skills, knowledge of institutions, familiarity with cultural traditions etc.) and, on the other, on better access to primary services, inter alia in the employment, housing and social services sectors.

The project is implemented through the following three partners: services and institutions, the Roma community and associations. Interventions under the project, drop-in sessions, training and support are provided within the framework of intercultural mediation. The access of job-seeking Roma to the labour market is the main focus of the project, the emphasis being on access to professions where skills play a key role.

## **BRUSSELS**

### **7.6 Roma integration and mediation through outreach work**

The Common Community Commission funds an outreach worker who focuses on the target group, people of Roma origin. The outreach worker's tasks are as follows: integration, intercultural mediation, referral to designated services, encouraging Roma children to attend school.

### **7.7 Recruitment of Roma mediators**

The Flemish Community Commission and the Flemish Community, the Brussels Capital Region and the Federal Impulse Fund (FIPI) assist the Brussels-based regional integration centre Foyer in recruiting Roma mediators to promote social integration and to encourage Roma families to send their children to school. These mediators form a crucial link between the various services, agencies, schools and local authorities and the Roma families. By working closely and systematically with the bodies involved, they aim to give both parties the opportunity to foster the integration process themselves, through better communication, mediation, family support, training and actions which aim to emancipate and empower the Roma.

### **7.8 Deployment of 'neighbourhood stewards'**

The Flemish Community Commission will deploy 'neighbourhood stewards' on behalf of the Flanders Region as part of a four-year project (see Section 7.4 above). It has been proposed that a 'Neighbourhood stewards feedback group' for the Brussels Region be set up to monitor the project.

**Objective 8: To ensure that policies are coordinated**

*To encourage coordination between the various competent authorities in order to achieve the best possible policies for the Roma*

**AT FEDERAL LEVEL**8.1 IMC Working Group on Roma

In order to promote the socio-economic integration of the Roma, on 21 March 2011, the Inter-Ministerial Conference on Social Integration, which includes representatives from Federal Government, the Regions and the Communities, set up a working group on Roma. This working group was tasked with devising an integrated action plan containing proposals for improving support for Roma integration in Belgium, coordinating the initiatives of the various policy-making levels and monitoring developments within Europe.

**FLANDERS**8.2 Flemish working group on Central and Eastern European Migration

In pursuance of the Flemish Government's decision of 3 December 2010, the Flemish working group on Central and Eastern European Migration meets on a quarterly basis. This working group comprises the Central and Eastern European contacts within the relevant policy areas, plus representatives from local authorities experiencing problems with Central and Eastern European migrants (Roma) and representatives from civil society (Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie [migration/integration information centre], the Minorities Forum [Minderhedenforum], the Flemish anti-poverty network Vlaamse netwerk van verenigingen waar armen het woord nemen and VVSG [the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities]) and a representative from the Roma community.

The working group is tasked with coordinating the horizontal approach of the Flemish policy on Central and Eastern European migrants (Roma) over all policy areas and compiling

statistics, and produces an annual report which follows up and reviews Flemish actions in this field, adjusting them where necessary.

### 8.3 Flemish Government contacts

Local authorities and other bodies and agencies receive an adequate response to their queries regarding Central and Eastern European migrants. There are contacts for each policy area and there is a central contact within the migration/integration information centre Kruispunt Migratie & Integratie.

## **WALLONIA**

### 8.4 Consultation platform on Roma integration

It is clear from the project run by the Traveller Mediation Centre (Centre de médiation des gens du voyage) that not all towns and cities deal with migrant Roma in the same way. Moreover, it appears that the situation varies from one area to another. Thus, for example, in Liège there is close cooperation with the Social Welfare Office, whereas in Charleroi, which also has a Roma community, there is virtually no cooperation. A working group on Roma issues encompassing the Social Welfare Offices in Liège, Charleroi, Namur and Verviers would therefore seem sensible.

The working group must analyse the problems that are universally encountered and find specific solutions to them, so that targeted projects can be launched in 2012. The Traveller Mediation Centre has emphasised that an open mind is essential when looking for ways of speeding up the social integration of the Roma compared with other migrant groups. In this context, the development of a pilot project targeted exclusively at the Roma and their integration has been proposed.

## **BRUSSELS**

### 8.5 Roma working group for the Brussels Region

The Flemish Community Commission is considering creating a working group on Roma for the Brussels Region which would be responsible for initiatives involving the Roma.

## **BENELUX COUNTRIES**

### 8.6 Benelux countries: Urbiscoop

On the basis of an initiative proposed by the Benelux countries, on Monday 17 October 2011 the Ministers of Urban Policy and Social Integration of Flanders and the Netherlands, together with the mayors/sheriffs/councillors of major cities, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the ‘Sudden, unmanageable influx of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the cities of the Benelux countries and adjoining regions’ at the Benelux General Secretariat. In this MOU they state that they are keen to cooperate over the opportunities offered by and challenges posed by intra-European migration. Central to this project is the ability of towns and cities to ‘absorb’ and integrate immigrants arriving from these countries, how so-called waterbed effects, whereby problems are transferred from one place to another but are not actually solved, can be avoided and how towns and cities can offer these immigrants a dignified existence.

<p><b>Objective 9: Combating discrimination</b></p>
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<p><i>Preventing discrimination against the Roma community</i></p>
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## **AT FEDERAL LEVEL**

### 9.1 Working group on Discrimination and the Police/Judiciary

The working group on Discrimination and the Police/Judiciary (which was set up by the Minister of Equal Opportunities and Internal Affairs in conjunction with the Minister of Justice) will focus on the Roma and the difficulties that they face. The aim of this working group is to improve cooperation between the police, the judicial authorities and the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Combating of Racism (Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen en voor Racismebestrijding). The focus is on training civil servants in both the police and the

judiciary, the correct application of relevant circulars (e.g. COL 6/2006), the management of statistics and the role of the specialist magistrates (referentiemagistraten).

## **FLANDERS**

### 9.2 Training

In an effort to combat discrimination, Equal Opportunities in Flanders is offering training on the issues, opportunities and risks associated with working with Central and Eastern European migrants for staff working for anti-discrimination centres [meldpunten].

#### **Objective 10: Encouraging the collection of data**

*To encourage the collection of more (relevant) data on the Roma population in Belgium, so that their situation can be better understood and an effective Roma policy can be implemented*

## **AT FEDERAL LEVEL**

### 10.1 Recording of target groups by Social Welfare Offices

The Federal Government, in conjunction with the associations of Social Welfare Offices, will consider how data on the various target groups (including Roma) that approach Social Welfare Offices for help could be recorded.

## **WALLONIA**

### 10.2 Collection of data

On the basis of objective situations derived from these new data, other parties that come into contact with the Roma (social housing companies, Social Welfare Offices, social support centres etc.) can in turn be notified of requirements that have not been met. Thus, if necessary, action can be taken to prepare the Roma for the world of work (learning to read and write, learning French by establishing links).



## FLANDERS

### 10.3 Statistics on the number of Roma

The Flemish Action Plan on Central and Eastern European (Roma) migrants contains statistics on the influx of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the Flanders Region, and data concerning the 20 municipalities with the highest influx. Specific data on countries of origin are also available for a number of cities.

### 10.4 Survey on the push and pull factors associated with intra-European migration

Flanders will conduct a survey to identify the push and pull factors at play between Flanders and the regions of origin. Policy measures will be taken based on the results of the survey.

### 10.5 Survey of factors that attract people to migrate

This survey hopes to identify the factors that cause a particular group to migrate to a particular town or city. In the context of the Urbiscoop project initiated by the Benelux countries, it would seem sensible to expand this survey to include Dutch cities and municipalities. Insight into waterbed effects.

<h2>H. NATIONAL CONTACT POINT</h2>
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The Roma Working Group set up by the Inter-Ministerial Conference will act as a National Contact Point for the European Commission.

The National Contact Point will be coordinated by the Secretary of State for Social Integration and the Fight against Poverty.

The secretarial tasks of the National Contact Point will be undertaken by the Public Planning Service for Social Integration.

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<b>J. APPENDICES</b>
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Appendix 1: Flemish Action Plan on Central and Eastern European (Roma) Migration