

17th European Platform for Roma Inclusion: Roma equality, inclusion and participation in territorial planning and development

Organised by the European Commission in cooperation with the Hungarian Presidency

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Report

Political opening

- ***Ms Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality (video message)***

Commissioner Dalli emphasized that her priority is to promote opportunities for Roma to realize their full potential, which is central to the EU Roma Strategic Framework. She underscored the importance of joint efforts at European, national, and local levels to achieve the targets set within the Framework, ensuring equality, inclusion, and participation for Roma communities. She highlighted positive progress in several Member States while acknowledging that each geographical context is unique. Therefore, addressing territorial inequalities is crucial. She stressed that Roma must be actively involved in territorial planning and the development of essential services as part of the decision-making process.

- ***Ms Irena Moozova, Deputy Director-General – International Dimension of Justice Policies, Rule of Law and Equality, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission***

Ms. Moozova called for continued efforts to combat discrimination against Roma, highlighting two key instruments: the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion, and participation. She referred to the European Commission's proposed Anti-Poverty Strategy and the appointment of a new Commissioner for Housing. Member States have committed to concrete measures, objectives, and targets that must be met by 2030, with systematic reporting required to ensure progress for Roma communities. She welcomed the Hungarian Presidency's promotion of Council Conclusions on "Improving access to enabling services and employment services to reduce territorial inequalities and promote social inclusion," noting that Roma challenges vary depending on their living conditions.

- ***Ms Mélissa Camara, Member of the European Parliament***

Ms. Camara stressed the need to keep equality at the forefront of the European Parliament's agenda, calling for Roma communities to be prioritized in discussions on territorial integration. She emphasized the importance of ensuring access to housing, healthcare, and education for Roma and called for tailored resources to reach these communities. Ms. Camara also urged for solidarity and cooperation with civil society, the European Commission, and other partners to create a united front in addressing these issues.

- ***Mr Attila Sztojka, State Secretary for Social Opportunities and Roma Relations, Hungary***

Mr. Sztojka expressed disappointment that some participants displayed disapproval showing red cards before hearing his speech. He argued that the Roma issue is not a political one but a human issue. He highlighted Hungary's history of supporting Roma, dating back to the establishment of Europe's first Roma organization in 1971. He emphasized the positive contributions Roma communities bring to Europe, framing the issue as an economic one. Given the labour market's need for workers, he posed the question of how to integrate Roma into the workforce. In Hungary, Roma are viewed as human capital, and there is a need to invest in them. He acknowledged the poverty many Roma face but stressed that the focus should be on improving housing, training, and labour market integration. Mr. Sztojka also called for collaboration with large Roma organizations to implement and adapt programs. He concluded by reiterating Hungary's commitment to improving the living conditions of Roma through territorial planning, a priority of Hungary's EU Presidency. He urged for a focus on the future, suggesting this might be the last chance for progress.

- ***Ms Lucie Fuková, Government Commissioner for Roma Minority Affairs, Czechia***

Ms. Fuková expressed regret over the absence of openly Roma representatives in the newly elected European Parliament and supported the creation of a permanent working group on Roma issues, with Roma representation. She applauded the Czech Republic's success in gaining recognition for a non-legal definition of antigypsyism and emphasized the importance of grant policies targeting Roma communities. Ms. Fuková also stressed the need to evaluate the impact of social programs funded by the EU and to coordinate efforts from the European to local levels, as this can significantly impact local planning and regional development. She concluded by reaffirming the need to keep equality and support for Roma as a priority for the European Commission.

Opening of the afternoon session

- ***Ms Věra Jourová, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency***

Ms. Jourová addressed the ongoing crisis faced by Roma communities in Europe, highlighting that over 80% of Roma children are at risk of poverty, a figure unchanged since 2016 and four times higher than the general population. She deemed this a moral, social, and political failure for the EU, asserting that a "Union of equality" cannot exist while the largest ethnic minority experiences systemic exclusion and poor living conditions.

She emphasized the importance of the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the need for national frameworks to lead to real change at local levels, where Member States hold primary responsibility. The 2021 Council Recommendation urged Member States to empower local authorities and civil society in developing Roma inclusion strategies.

Ms. Jourová highlighted the potential of cohesion policy to address territorial inequalities and noted that 15 Member States have planned investments to enhance Roma access to essential services. She initiated dialogues with NGOs to improve the effectiveness of EU funds in achieving measurable progress, compiling best practices from across Europe.

She urged Member States to use the €19.6 billion ERDF fund (2021–2027) for Roma inclusion, stressing collaboration to prevent marginalization. The European Commission is committed to fostering equality and inclusion.

Thematic panel 1: ***“The way forward in tackling territorial inequalities and mainstreaming Roma equality, inclusion and participation in territorial planning at local, regional and national level”***

- Ms. Simona Barbu, Policy Officer, FEANTSA, Rapporteur from workshop 1a *“How can territorial planning help address spatial segregation and environmental inequalities faced by Roma?”*.
- Ms Andrea Spitalszky, Legal Programmes Coordinator, Minority Rights Group Europe, Rapporteur from workshop 1b, *“The role of territorial planning in fostering digital inclusion and tackling digital inequalities”*.
- Mr Pascal Boijmans, Head of Unit – Czech Republic and Slovakia, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission.
- Ms Kinga Tóth, Deputy Director of Research, HÉTFA Research Institute.

In this panel, the rapporteurs presented the following challenges and recommendations from workshop 1a and 1b.

Challenges:

- **Antigypsyism and Anti-Roma Racism:** These are key drivers of the inequalities faced by Roma, particularly in relation to territorial disparities. The effects of antigypsyism are profound, keeping Roma communities in exclusion and marginalization. This makes it difficult to develop effective projects aimed at improving housing and environmental conditions.
- **Lack of Accurate Data and Diagnosis:** Data collection on Roma communities across EU Member States remains inconsistent and often misleading. This results in inadequate strategies for tackling issues such as segregation and desegregation, making it challenging to develop informed and effective policies.
- **Lack of Political Will and Accountability:** A significant barrier is the lack of political will among decision-makers, coupled with the absence of accountability. Policies and measures are often not fully implemented, hindering progress in Roma inclusion.
- **Real Participation of Roma Communities:** For spatial planning efforts to succeed, Roma communities must be genuinely involved and participate in the process. Without visible results, communities may become frustrated and disengage from the process.
- **Environmental Justice:** Roma communities often face poor living conditions, including exposure to pollution, lack of infrastructure, and inadequate access to heating. Addressing these issues is crucial for improving their quality of life. Informal settlements make it difficult for Roma communities to access existing funds, creating a barrier to using EU resources for sustainable improvements.
- **Use of EU funds** has been identified as a challenge when it lacks a sustainable approach and fails to consider the long-term impact once these funds are no longer available.

On digital inclusion:

- **Lack of Electricity:** A fundamental barrier to digital inclusion in many Roma communities is the lack of access to electricity.
- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Many areas lack basic Internet access, and even when available, Roma communities often lack electronic devices.
- **Digital Literacy:** There is a low level of media and digital literacy among marginalised Roma, compounded by a lack of data on this issue.
- **Online Safety and Hate Speech:** Roma communities face significant hate speech online, which worsens their exclusion.
- **Digital Inclusion Not Prioritized:** *Digital* inclusion for Roma is often overlooked in territorial planning, and there is insufficient funding and political will to address this gap.

Recommendations:

- **Combating Antigypsyism:** Raise awareness and develop targeted strategies and measures to combat antigypsyism at national and local level. Training and capacity-building efforts at local level are also essential. National action plans against racism should include specific follow-up actions and monitoring tools to track progress.
- **Data Collection:** Improving the collection and use of data is crucial. For example, mapping technologies used in Romania and Hungary can help better understand territorial inequalities.
- **Roma Participation:** It is essential to engage Roma community leaders in decision-making from the earliest stages.
- **Better monitoring of EU funds** is needed to ensure they align with and support the implementation of fundamental rights.

On digital inclusion:

- **Purpose of Digital Inclusion:** The importance of digital inclusion should be addressed both in general policy and in Roma-specific strategies.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Improving access to digital infrastructure is essential for enabling Roma communities to participate in education and access services.
- **Data Collection:** More data should be collected to better understand digital inequalities. Results should be shared with the communities affected.
- **Combating Antigypsyism and Hate Speech:** Antigypsyism, including hate speech, must be tackled when implementing projects even through application of legal sanctions and training. Other tools for Roma empowerment include: mainstreaming of Roma culture, training of administrators, empowering Roma to regranting and grant programme, disseminate counter narrative.
- **Mr. Boijmans** discussed EU-funded efforts to support Roma inclusion in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where Roma populations are growing. In Slovakia, high demand for funds reflects a strong interest in inclusion, with the EU now covering 100% of project costs to ease co-financing. The Czech Republic prioritizes building NGO capacity and grassroots integration. Persistent challenges, such as land ownership and public procurement, are addressed with legal and financial assistance. Successful approaches involve whole-community urban planning with strong local leadership. To combat corruption, the EU enforces zero tolerance, applies fines, and provides legal support. Roma national strategies are overseen by DG JUST, with NGO representation in monitoring committees to ensure project compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which, if violated, may lead to EU payment suspension.

- **Ms. Tóth** emphasized that territorial inequalities continue to impact Roma populations across the EU, with limited access to essential services in disadvantaged areas. Integrated, multi-actor approaches that prioritize local needs and community involvement are essential. Roma women, particularly affected by segregation, require targeted inclusion programs for better opportunities.
- **Ms. Andrea Spitalszky** stressed that territorial planning must address Roma marginalization and historical injustices, as rapid digitalization often excludes Roma from essential services. Political will, anti-Roma sentiment, and hate speech from politicians worsen these inequalities. She highlighted the need for consulting NGOs and including gender perspectives in planning and monitoring.
- **Ms. Simona Barbu** underscored local involvement to address Roma inequalities, proposing training and action groups to foster understanding and reduce hostility. Environmental inequalities also disproportionately affect Roma communities, who face higher risks from climate change due to systemic issues. Strengthened EU fund coordination and monitoring can help address these disparities effectively.

Thematic panel 2: ***How can regional and local actors best promote Roma equality, inclusion and participation?***

- Ms Amana Ferro, Senior Policy Advisor, European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network, Rapporteur from workshop 2a, “*Strengthening participation of Roma in territorial planning at local and regional level*”.
- Ms Janette Grönfors, Senior Specialist, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, National Roma Contact Point Finland, Rapporteur from workshop 2b, “*The role of multi-level and multi-actor governance in promoting Roma equality and inclusion*”.
- Mr Csaba Borboly, President of Harghita County Council (Romania), Member of the European Committee of the Regions.
- Ms Etleva Sheshi, Director for Social Inclusion and Gender Equality Policies, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, National Roma Contact Point Albania.

In this panel, the rapporteurs presented the following challenges and recommendations from workshop 2a and 2b.

Challenges:

- **Antigypsism and Anti-Roma Sentiment:** Historical perpetration of antigypsism has created systemic barriers that hinder Roma communities.
- **Lack of Local Community Processes and Structures:** Many local communities lack processes for involving Roma residents, resulting in minimal collaborative decision-making and ongoing poverty. Effective governance requires collaboration with Roma communities in decision-making. Roma communities must express their priorities, which are not always represented in policy discussions.
- **Lack of Roma Representation in Local Government**
- **Lack of political** will allows municipalities to operate without financial co-funding, limiting the use of funds to Roma communities alone.
- **Poverty** is a significant barrier to civil and political participation for individuals and communities, compounded by a lack of capacity-building opportunities and resources.
- **Discrimination in Housing:** Roma individuals face severe discrimination in the housing sector, limiting their access to adequate housing. A comprehensive, integrated approach is essential, extending beyond basic social housing solutions. Legalizing informal constructions is also crucial.
- **Better use of EU funds:** While Roma enabling conditionality is a positive step, more work is needed to improve fund access and absorption.
- **Lack of Institutional Accountability:** Local institutions must be held accountable for their actions concerning Roma communities. Need for training for local authorities.
- **Responsible Budgeting:** Without responsible budgeting, there can be no effective implementation of housing solutions. **Awareness Raising:** need to increase awareness on antigypsism and effective use of EU funds.
- **Coordination Between Local and Regional Levels:** Enhancing collaboration between local and regional authorities is crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by Roma.
- **Empower Local Communities: Authorities and NGOs must work together to prevent segregation.**

Recommendations:

- **Systemic Approach to Combating Antigypsyism:** Combating antigypsyism should be a coordinated effort integrated into all policies.
- **Mainstreaming Local Roma Strategies:** Local strategies specific to Roma communities must be mainstreamed across all Roma-related policies.
- **Role of NGOs:** Recognizing NGOs as key partners in the process is essential for effective collaboration and implementation. Investment in Roma NGOs: Increased investment in Roma NGOs working on the ground is critical for empowering these communities.
- **Anti-Bias Training:** Implementing anti-bias training can help reduce discrimination in decision-making processes.
- **Inclusion of Roma in Local Authorities:** Actively recruiting Roma individuals into local government positions, including advisory roles, is essential. This can be further strengthened by appointing Roma mayors and creating local action plans that prioritize Roma issues.
- **Legalization of Informal Constructions:** Promoting the legalization of informal constructions is vital for ensuring secure housing.
- National governments can support local authorities by **providing targeted funding** and capacity building. The EU can facilitate this through consultations and monitoring programs.
- **Financial Transparency:** Ensuring that financial resources are visible and accessible is crucial for effective implementation.
- **Civil society should act as a watchdog**, ensuring the state fulfils its responsibilities. They can mediate and facilitate access for beneficiaries but should not replace public policy.

- **Mr. Csaba Borboly** advocated for collaboration across local, national, and EU levels to reduce poverty and promote Roma inclusion, emphasizing tailored local strategies and early childhood education to strengthen long-term integration. He highlighted resource constraints and cultural invisibility as barriers, suggesting investments that build relations between Roma and non-Roma and support Roma empowerment. Civil society and youth projects, he believes, are essential for fostering understanding and cooperation.
- **Ms. Etleva Sheshi** recalled stakeholder cooperation in Albania to promote social rights, particularly in social housing, and to prepare for EU accession by enhancing minority rights for Roma. She stressed the importance of Roma representation in public administration, regional cooperation, and solid frameworks at the national and EU levels to address local needs effectively.
- **Ms. Amana Ferro** emphasized political will as crucial to Roma inclusion, alongside funding and anti-discrimination efforts, particularly against antigypsyism. She underscored civil society's role as a policy partner rather than a substitute for the state and advocated for Roma representation in political structures. Ferro highlighted the courage of young Roma identifying publicly, as well as the need for the state to ensure no one is left behind.
- **Ms. Janette Grönfors** stressed that Roma should actively participate in funding processes, noting that current applications for EU funds are often complex and led by non-Roma. She recommended "learning by doing" programs over quotas and advised that Roma community representatives should vary to better reflect community needs.

Political conclusions:

- ***Ms Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms (video message)***

Commissioner Ferreira emphasized Cohesion Policy's key role in promoting equality and addressing the needs of marginalized communities. She stressed the importance of local development driven by community members, especially empowering Roma groups. She praised the Platform's efforts in uniting Roma communities and civil society to combat territorial inequalities.

She highlighted that Cohesion Policy supports this through investments in infrastructure and essential services like housing, education, and healthcare. She urged the inclusion of Roma communities in all stages of local development and encouraged engagement with Cohesion program managers to ensure these programs benefit Roma communities effectively.

- ***Ms Tanya Hristova, Mayor of Gabrovo (Bulgaria) Chair of the SEDEC Commission, European Committee of the Regions***

Ms. Hristova emphasized that many Roma still face poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion. She highlighted the need to address key issues like education, labor market access, and housing, stressing equal treatment and full integration of Roma communities while combating antigypsyism. The Committee of the Regions called for increased Roma participation and tailored solutions in national frameworks. Hristova noted that challenges vary by local context and territorial inequalities, urging concrete actions to improve Roma livelihoods, reduce poverty, and boost children's education. She also stressed better coordination of EU funds and the central role of local authorities in fostering Roma social inclusion.

- ***Mr Gábor Daróczi, Executive Director, Global Human Dignity Foundation***

Mr. Daróczi explained that his foundation trains mentors in digital literacy and conducted housing research for Habitat for Humanity in nine EU countries. He noted the presence of institutional antigypsyism and how recent floods disproportionately affected Roma communities living along riverbeds. Housing conditions for Roma remain poor, with many homes lacking proper documentation and legal recognition.

He stressed the lack of political will and the absence of key decision-makers in addressing these issues. Corruption, poverty, and education are major barriers to Roma participation. He highlighted Roma involvement in Macedonia's Habitat for Humanity initiatives and the Roma Housing Strategy. He emphasized that Roma integration remains a political issue.

- ***Ms Ana Gallego, Director-General, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission***

Ms. Gallego summarized that antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma communities are central challenges. She emphasized the urgent need for long-term measures to eliminate discrimination, which is vital for reducing spatial segregation and maximizing EU funding impacts.

She stressed the importance of collaboration with local authorities and civil society, as highlighted in the Commission's Report on national Roma strategic frameworks. This report urges Member States to enhance their efforts to meet the EU's 2030 targets.

Ms. Gallego reminded participants of the upcoming Meeting of National Roma Contact Points to discuss improving cooperation and addressing territorial challenges. She also mentioned the EURoma network meeting in Budapest on October 24-25, focusing on how EU funds can support inclusive approaches for Roma communities.

She concluded by noting that today's joint recommendations will inform upcoming discussions on Council Conclusions regarding improving service access to reduce territorial inequalities and promote social inclusion.