

14th European Platform for Roma Inclusion, 20-21 September 2021

Conference report

1. Key messages

On 21 and 22 of September 2021, the 14th European Platform for Roma Inclusion (EPRI) brought together some 200 participants to discuss the state of European Roma-related policies, in particular the new 2020-2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality Inclusion and Participation (EURSF). Some of the key messages that emerged were:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has made the systemic discrimination towards Roma more evident, and the need to undertake both mainstream and target policies to address antigypsyism is even more urgent. Ensuring equal access to education and eradicating spatial segregation are key prerequisites to eliminate the structural discrimination that many Roma face today.
- National Roma strategic frameworks (NRSF) need to be more committed and specific on how to address Roma equality in their respective policies, the measures to be taken, the effective implementation of Structural and Investment Funds for Roma as well as mainstream policies relevant to the situation of Roma, and how they will ensure that Roma are not left behind in the implementation of measures and action of the Resilience and Recovery Plans (RRP)s.
- Member States must recognise antigypsyism as a specific form of racism expressed, among others, through systemic discrimination, and transpose this concept throughout their policies, measures, and actions, while undertaking legal action to redress particularly institutional anti-Roma racism. Also, full transposition and effective implementation of existing EU legislation should improve.
- It is necessary to promote positive narratives about Roma to counter hate speech, stereotypical images and an overall biased portrayal of the Roma by the media and through political discourses, as well as to recognise the cultural and artistic production of Roma and its contribution to the European society, as part of the European heritage.
- The participation of the Roma in preparing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the national strategic frameworks need to increase: “doing with Roma, and not doing for Roma”. An active engagement of the civil society requires permanent systems of dialogue and to create the conditions so that participation engages the diversity of Roma in a democratic way at all levels, European, national, and local.
- The role of the National Roma Contact Points (NRCP) is critical for the design and implementation of the national strategic frameworks. They need to have a clear mandate, and to count on sufficient staff and resources to ensure that Roma issues are mainstreamed in the sectoral policies. NRCPs’ collaboration and joint work with the Roma CSOs is of paramount importance for the overall success in meeting the EURSF targets.

- In the new phase, the EU Roma framework must work in a better synergy with the Semester process and the European Pillar of Social Rights, and other transversal strategies, such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child or the European Youth Guarantee.

We must talk about the discrimination that Roma still face today. (...) Roma rights matter, Roma lives matter, Roma Culture matters
Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission

2. Background and objectives

Since 2011, the EU has had an official framework for Roma. It asserted that all Roma should have the opportunity to realise their full potential and engage fully in political, social, economic, and cultural life. The previous EU framework up to 2020 focused primarily on the socio-economic integration of marginalised Roma. Despite this important development, results and meaningful progress remained limited in the daily lives of Roma. In October 2020 an important development has been established with the adoption of the [new EU Roma strategic framework \(EURSF\)](#). This framework, to which the Member States committed by unanimously adopting the Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation on 12 March 2021, broadens its approach by focusing on three pillars: equality, inclusion, and participation. Furthermore, it emphasises the strategic importance of fighting and preventing anti-Roma discrimination and antigypsyism as a specific form of racism. The EU framework sets precise indicators and targets and orients the strategies of Member States. These are currently being drawn up and should be submitted to the Commission by end of September 2021.

The European Platform for Roma Inclusion (EPRI) is an [annual event](#) that aims to stimulate cooperation and exchange of experiences among all relevant stakeholders for equality, inclusion, and promote participation of Roma people in Europe. The Platform contributes to making both European and national policies more inclusive and reflecting better on the Roma needs and participation. The 14th EPRI 2021 aimed to facilitate a participatory forum at the EU level where stakeholders can be consulted, and their voices can be heard.

More than two hundred participants from the Roma community, rights activists, civil society as well as national, regional, and local authorities and EU institutions gathered for two half days. The [programme](#) was divided into a first day of interactive exchange among all participants and a second day focused on policy proposals. The event was held primarily online with a small number of speakers being on the stage in Brussels. Yet, diverse online facilitation techniques provided an opportunity for the main stakeholders of the Roma inclusion process to discuss and reflect upon the most significant challenges affecting Roma people in Europe.

Against this background, the objectives of the 14th EPRI were to:

- Provide the space for the Member States and the Commission services to declare their renewed **commitment to Roma equality, inclusion, and participation**, in view of the reformed package put forward by the Commission for the next decade.
- Provide the opportunity to stakeholders to discuss the status of formulation of the **national Roma strategic frameworks**, specifically concerning their alignment and harmonisation with mainstream policies, tackling the main barriers to inclusion and equality, such as racism, discrimination, and expressions of antigypsyism, and mitigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Roma communities.

Preparatory consultations with Roma civil society identified the two main discussion themes for this year's Platform, namely:

'Assessing the National Roma Strategic Frameworks: Mainstreaming and Targeted Policies to Address Antigypsyism' and

'Mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities: tackling unequal access to education and spatial segregation'.

A consultation phase in the run-up to the conference had framed the questions to the participants by providing two short background briefs on [antigypsyism](#) and [COVID recovery](#).

Key documents

On 7 October 2020, the **Commission** adopted a reformed and strengthened [EU Roma Strategic Framework](#). It sets out a comprehensive three-pillar approach complementing the socio-economic *inclusion* of marginalised Roma with the fostering of *equality* and the promotion of *participation*. On 12 March 2021, the **Council** of the European Union adopted a [Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation](#). This gives a strong signal as it conveys a consensus of the Member States. The **European Fundamental Rights Agency** committed to supporting Member states, amongst others with [defining indicators and measuring progress](#). Likewise, on 17 September 2020, the **European Parliament** issued a [resolution](#) for combating negative attitudes towards people with Romani background with political dedication and strong legal means.

3. Assessing the National Roma Strategic Frameworks: Mainstreaming and Targeted Policies to Address Antigypsyism

The fight against antigypsyism has been advocated for by Roma Rights activists for many years. The new EU framework takes up the concept of antigypsyism – as a specific form of racism against Roma people – in a decisive manner and requests member states to define their measures and actions, both in a targeted approach to Roma and through mainstreaming the equality of Roma in all national policies.

Key questions on targeted and mainstream action to combat antigypsyism

1. How is mainstreaming defined and monitored in the new strategic framework at the national level? How are general sector policies – health, education, housing, and employment, as well as others such as access to justice, child protection and environment – scrutinised under the perspective of Antigypsyism?
2. What specific target actions are developed at the national and local level for addressing Antigypsyism effectively? Is Antigypsyism, including institutional racism, recognized in the National Strategies and are instruments, processes and institutions defined for effective remedy, recourse, redress, and restitution?
3. How can Structural funds in Member States better contribute to Roma equality, inclusion, and participation? Does the same apply to funds in the enlargement countries?

When asked to imagine the headlines in 2030 once the EU framework comes to its end, a part of the participants foresaw titles such as “All Roma children in schools ... Roma strategy targets accomplished!”, “Last Roma ghetto closed”, “Roma woman elected president of the Czech Republic” or “No new framework necessary”. Other participants proposed headlines such as “Governments failed to tackle antigypsyism at its core” or “Yet another Roma decade”.

**Roma culture and history must be
in our schools and our public debate (...). We
must talk about the contribution of Roma to
European culture**
Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission

In the discussion groups, it was stated that a necessary first step is that citizens and institutions recognise antigypsyism as a specific form of racism expressed, among others, through systemic discrimination. Addressing antigypsyism therefore should include planned processes of deliberation and changes in power structures and laws. Segregation needs to be understood as a conscious process of constructing and reinforcing ‘the other’, who is seen as inferior, as an outsider, one that does not belong organically to the society, and should therefore be kept in the margins. One of the specific measures proposed to better understand and counter antigypsyism is to set up observatories that would record and document racist attitudes and actions against Roma. For that purpose, the involvement of the [bodies for the promotion of equal treatment](#) is crucial.

A series of issues were raised, including school segregation, segregated neighbourhoods, and institutional racism and discrimination by officeholders. As a matter of fact, ongoing segregation, both educational and spatial, has increased in some member states in the last years – even when singled out as a breach of EU law and resulted in EC infringement procedures. Police misconduct, ethnic profiling and brutality were discussed as a very real materialisation of institutional racism. In that regard, participants recalled the death of Stanislav Tomáš on 19 June 2021 in the Czech city of Teplice, who died following a police intervention when one of the officers knelt on his neck for several minutes. Many

participants felt that equal access to justice of Roma is largely missing. The fact that Many Roma are very reluctant to file legal complaints to accuse right violations reflects the scale of lack of trust in institutions. This needs to be changed.

The promotion of positive narratives was proposed to counter hate speech, stereotypical images and biased portrayal as disseminated and promoted in mass media and in political discourses. Also, the recognition of the cultural and artistic production of Roma is paramount. Talking about Roma culture as part of European heritage is an important precondition to change perceptions and counter hate speech.

**Politicians and media make us a social problem.
In reality, we are a great cultural treasure.**
Roma Rights Activist from Italy

Social media networks are increasingly used to incite and promote hate speech, on some occasions endorsed by officeholders, in particular during periods of electoral campaigns. This led the EU to agree on a [Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online](#) with the large internet operators. However, governments seem yet helpless to put an end to the hate-mongering and fake stories, while private social network companies are only now discovering the specific racism against Roma and its scale. From civil society, initiatives emerge to set up social media observatories or [peer education](#) to counter online hate speech. Practices of fact-checking technologies and observing online hate speech are developing, but more action is needed to understand the phenomena and devise tools to stop them.

Legal action was claimed as an important pathway to deliver recourse and redress, particularly from institutional anti-Roma racism. In this regard, some participants considered that the EU framework and the equality provisions are still too weak an instrument. Much of the European framework, namely the concept of antigypsyism, is yet to be transposed into national Roma strategic frameworks and mainstreamed into all policies and their implementation. Also, some participants considered that existing EU laws do not yet give a sufficiently strong legal basis to prosecute discrimination, as well as hate speech and hate motivated crimes.

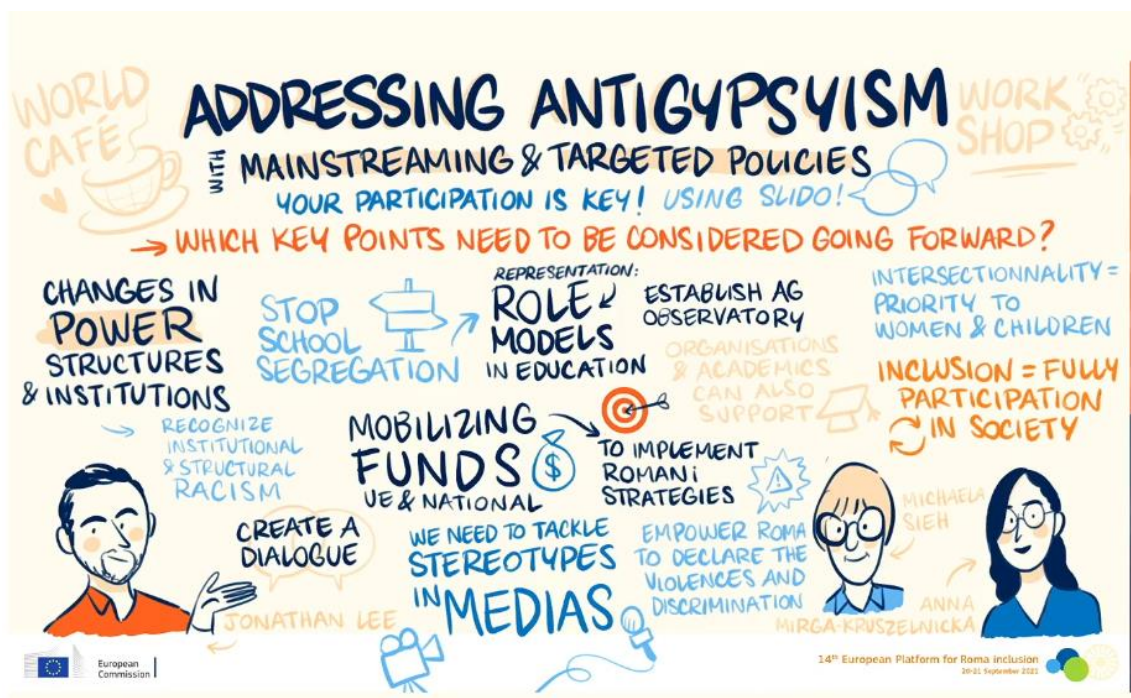
Participants reflected on the vulnerability of Roma women and girls. Whilst suffering from discrimination from mainstream society, they are also being discriminated within their own Roma communities, in which patriarchal views are still very present, “therefore many of these women believe their roles are limited to their households”. Intersectional discrimination was discussed, also concerning Roma LGBTIQ people.

The historical legacy of the persecution and extermination of Roma is still not common knowledge in member state societies. The extermination of half a million Sinti and Roma during the Holocaust, carried out by Nazi Germany and their allies and collaborators, is still not remembered in the public consciousness to an adequate and full extent. The sterilisation of Roma women in the fifties and sixties, mostly in communist regimes but also in other countries remains to be documented, recalled and properly acknowledged. Looking back at an uncomfortable past, acknowledging the Holocaust and the genocide of the Roma community, and striving for truth, remembrance and reconciliation, is a necessary step to build trust from Roma towards the mainstream society. Roma history needs to become part of school curricula,

not only in its dark sides but also in the richness of the cultural, artistic, and societal expressions of Roma people.

Environmental discrimination

Platform participants laid out that many Roma communities live in poisoned environments without sanitation, without clean water, without waste collection. Longstanding segregation or forced eviction pushes Roma people into higher exposure to toxins and deprivation from decent living standards. As climate change triggers extreme weather conditions and Roma housing often is more vulnerable, funding should not only consider adaptation but restitution.



4. Mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities: tackling unequal access to education and spatial segregation

The COVID pandemic has hit the Roma communities particularly hard. Various speakers recalled the distress that the pandemic has created for Roma people, many of whom have suffered threefold from the pandemic. First, the disease took a heavy toll, partially due to the difficulties to adhere to social distancing under the conditions of poverty, such as overcrowded

housing and lack of access to tap water and sanitation infrastructure. Secondly, confinement imposed serious deprivation, due to a discontinuation of income generating work and an ensuing lack of means for subsistence for their families, coupled with lack of support from authorities. As schooling went digital, many Roma children were excluded and effectively left without access to the right to education, throughout all the educational levels, creating the risk of further school dropout and increasing the educational gap between Roma and non-Roma. Thirdly, in a number of countries, Roma were scapegoated as ‘disease spreaders’ and a danger to the public health.

Key Questions related to COVID response and resilience and recovery plans

1. Based on the existing tools and mechanisms, how can access to quality and inclusive education of Roma students, specifically from marginalised localities, be improved in the persisting pandemic?
2. How will the right to housing for Roma be ensured and taken forward in a post-Covid scenario? Are there any promising practices in tackling spatial segregation in light of Covid-19?
3. How to ensure that implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans reach marginalised Roma communities?

For all these reasons, the crisis comes as a wake-up call to tackle entrenched issues in schooling segregation and sub-standard housing in the reconstruction phase. Some participants called upon a chance to leapfrog into digital literacy and digital education if a strong commitment would ensure investment.

The discussion touched upon vaccine coverage, which is reported to be low amongst Roma. This may be due to high levels of distrust in authorities. Also, sending Roma children back to school causes fear to some Roma families, which needs to be addressed with intercultural sensitivity and integrated into a general strategy to adapt to the “new normal”. Access barriers to health care and vaccination need to be lowered, with means such as health education and communication or mobile outreach clinics. Again, the root of the problem of accessing services in health and education is the trust between Roma and mainstream institutions, or rather lack thereof.

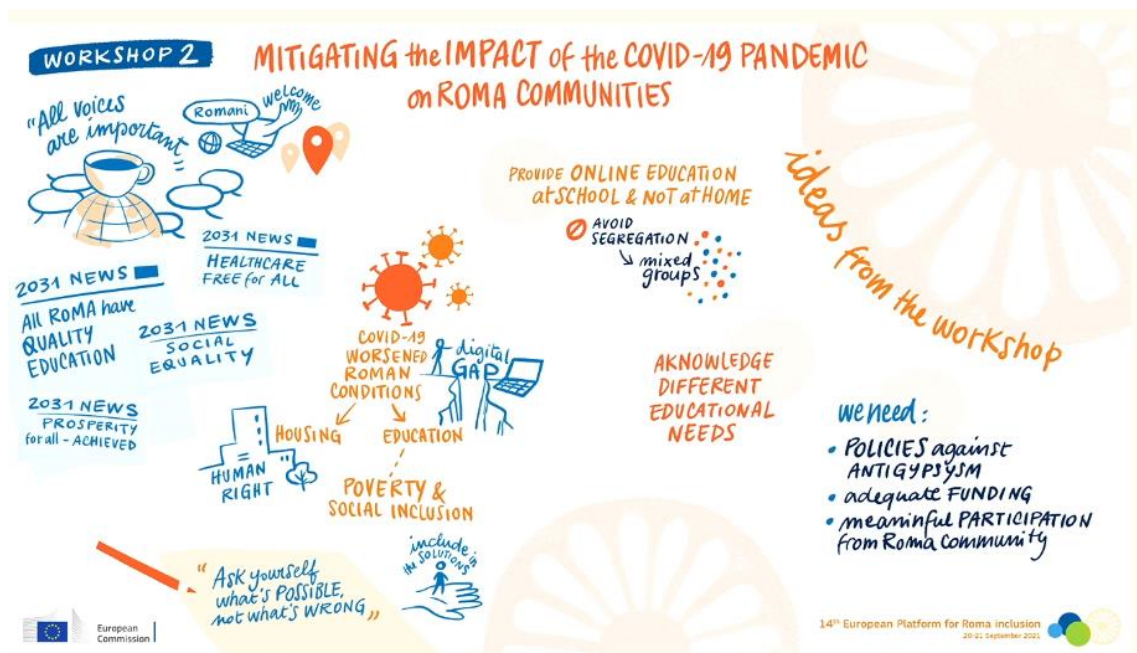
The COVID pandemic has constituted a perfect storm of Human Rights challenges for the Roma and travellers community.
Michael O’Flaherty, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Now, as recovery looms, and hopes are built on a resetting of a social and economic relation, much attention is focussed on the European recovery funds that are to trigger a transition to a safer, juster, greener future adapted to the digital and social challenges foreseen to come. Participants generally stated that, for now, the issue of Roma equality, inclusion and participation has been barely captured in the national plans.

If Roma are not actively targeted in the recovery funds, they will fall through the cracks.
Roma activist

Participants urged EU Member States to tackle unequal access to education and the issue of spatial segregation, to prioritise Roma inclusion in the Resilience and Recovery Plans, and put an emphasis on implementation, especially at the regional and local level, where programming for Roma needs often gets lost. The EU Recovery Facilities must work with mainstream policies and processes, such as the EU Semester Process and Cohesion Policy, for Roma not to be left behind. Furthermore, COVID recovery and reconstruction for severely hit Roma communities should be supported by ERDF and ESF+ funds, as foreseen in the investment priorities. In this context, it is important to establish initiatives that are not simply for Roma but also to work with Roma.

Tackling the root causes of health inequality in an intersectional and integrated manner was defined as a prime goal for future action in Roma inclusion, as well as pandemic preparedness. Housing segregation and housing conditions continue to be a critical challenge.



5. Moving forward

The Platform participants – both civil society and public authorities – reiterated the need for partnership and participation. While there were mixed feelings about the current situation regarding Roma inclusion and equal treatment, there was consensus that Roma representatives and public authorities both at the EU and member state level need persistent dialogue.

Now, Member States are expected to present plans on how to tackle antigypsyism as a core commitment in their national Roma strategic frameworks, but also as a cross-cutting priority in all policy areas. Member states with a sizeable Roma population are requested to define how they will address anti-Roma racism, educational segregation, and housing discrimination. The National Roma Contact Points should have a clear mandate to (1) together with equality bodies, liaise with civil society and Roma representatives, (2) to work directly with line ministries that govern mainstream policies that affect Roma, and (3) to work with statistical agencies to generate routine data collection on Roma, as well as academia to conduct research and evaluation to gather evidence. A first assessment by the Commission of the submitted national strategic frameworks is planned for next year. Additionally, by end of 2022, the national action plans against racism are to be submitted, following the [EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025](#). Roma should be at the heart of these plans.

Two particular challenges are data collection and monitoring. In that respect, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) is committed to continuing its minority and discrimination surveys on the [situation of Roma in the member states](#). Also, it will help transfer the skills of Roma rights monitoring by solid data generation to the member states' statistical agencies and equality bodies, because the primary data-gatherers must be the member states. In that line, member states need to be willing to and capable of establishing transparency. This is expected to be achieved by timely and meaningful reporting against the targets and actions set in the national strategies and plans, on structures, processes, and outcomes.

Europe's diversity is a gift
that history has made to our continent
Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission

The measures and actions developed under the [EU Recovery and Resilience Plans](#) need to be aligned with the national Roma strategic frameworks and ensure Roma are not left out of opportunities within the RRP. The social inclusion measures in the Recovery and Resilience Plans – such as labour markets, health, education, and skills – account for some 30 per cent. Member states decided that the reflection of specific groups, including the Roma, are all mainstreamed. It is during the implementation that the effective impact needs to be assessed. Roma participants voiced concerns that these plans may have little impact on Roma if there is no targeted approach with specific measures.

On the other hand, the most important moment for the ESF+ and ERDF funds is the programming of strategic documents for the next seven years, which are the Operational Programmes. During the [European semester process](#), in several member states (Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia) needs were identified in respect to Roma, where further reflection is needed. Social inclusion is highlighted in others (Spain and Bulgaria). Additionally, specific challenges related to Roma inclusion are identified in Greece, Croatia, and Italy. Specific Objective J in the ESF+ '*promoting the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as Roma people*' is particularly relevant for Roma inclusion.

Additionally, the general frameworks, namely the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) shall be interwoven in the programming of the funds as well as the National Roma strategic frameworks. Of utmost importance is the recently adopted [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#). Related to the Child Rights Strategy and integrated into the programming of the European Funds, by reserving up to five per cent of EFS+ dedicated to this tool, is the [European Child Guarantee](#). The programming of the Child Guarantee is currently defined in the member states. Roma children have been explicitly mentioned in the conception of the instrument. Now, as the programmes are being defined in [national action plans](#), it is to be seen how the new instrument will be used to address the needs of Roma boys and girls. On the other hand, the reinforced [European Youth Guarantee](#) needs to prove that it reaches young Roma boys and girls to get them into employment, provide skills, and open economic opportunities.