



14th European Platform for Roma inclusion

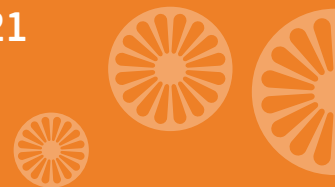
20-21 September 2021

CONSULTATION THEME 2

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



Justice
and Consumers



1. Objective and process

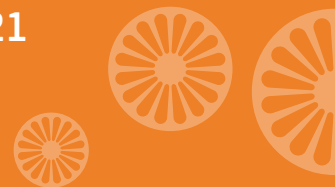
This discussion note aims to frame the discussions within the thematic workshop “*Mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities: tackling unequal access to education and spatial segregation*”. It is to support the proceedings at the European Platform for Roma Inclusion, both in their technical and political sessions.¹ Based on a brief outline of recent developments and debates, its main purpose is to formulate questions for the debate in order to centre the debate on what matters most.

2. Context

Roma have been hit hard by the COVID pandemic. They are affected in a threefold manner. First, the disease prevalence has been higher due to the entrenched health inequalities and living conditions. Roma have faced an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and a much higher risk of death from COVID-19 (FRA, 2020a; OSF et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, its disproportionate effect on Roma can be attributed to entrenched health inequalities (El-Khatib et al., 2020; Saitovic & Szilvasi, 2021). Second, the social and economic impacts, such as deprivation from educational or economic opportunities, have been harder on Roma livelihoods due to the precariousness of their subsistence as well as discrimination (EC, 2020a). Economic opportunities and livelihood strategies, informal as well as formal, have collapsed during confinement (ERGO, 2020; FSG, 2020). Third, in some Member States, Roma have been publicly scapegoated as disease spreaders in hate speech. They also suffered significant restrictions in their civil liberties related to the lockdown. Public authorities, in some Member States, applied an overly aggressive public response, often centred on law enforcement rather than social policies. Entrenched institutional racism has led to, and have been hit by over-policing or disproportionate use of force (ERRC, 2020).

(Amnesty International, 2020). It is important to highlight that the EU Roma Strategic Framework sets out guidance to better meet emerging challenges, such as tackling the disproportionate impact on Roma of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring digital inclusion and delivering environmental justice (EC, 2020b). To receive support, Member States were asked to draw up recovery and resilience plans addressing the economic and social impacts of the crisis, the digital and green transitions and the relevant priorities identified in country-specific recommendations under the European Semester. This support will give possibilities to Member States to foster the inclusion of marginalised groups, including Roma and other people with a minority racial or ethnic background.

1/ The European Commission, DG Justice, convenes the Annual Platform for Roma Inclusion. End of September, the event will gather around 400 Roma rights activists, political representatives from the European Parliament, Commission staff, and public officials from Member States, amongst others. Due to the pandemic restrictions, this year, the Platform will be held in a hybrid format, combining some participants in a face-to-face setting with others taken part via online means. In the run-up to the event, the Commission had consulted with Roma rights organizations on the priorities for debate. Two themes were decided upon. [Fresno Consulting](#) has been commissioned to facilitate the process. An initial discussion note has been enhanced via written contributions and in an online consultation in the last days of August. To this consultation some 50 persons had been invited, representing Roma rights organizations as well as sector-specific European Civil Society platforms. The paper has been coordinated by José-Manuel Fresno and Stefan Meyer. The views expressed in this briefing paper do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.



Access to education

The shift from face-to-face education to online education during the lockdown excluded marginalized Roma children from taking classes. These distance learning measures leave more than half of Roma children out of school (ERRC, 2020; FRA, 2020a; FSG, 2020; OSF et al., 2020). Digital literacy generally is lower amongst Roma students, as well as their parents have lower capacities to monitor and assist their children with school tasks. Lack of access to internet connection and devices is widespread in impoverished Roma families. Housing conditions, namely overcrowding, and lack of access to utilities, namely electricity, and to the digital divide. Therefore, the already high dropout rate among Roma students is likely to increase. School closure also deprived Roma children of accessing to essential goods, namely school meals, as well as services, such as mental health and child protection. Likewise, the already low take-up of early childhood education and care offers, which is proven to be essential for future educational performance, has been interrupted. In Member States with educational segregation, Roma students were even more deprived.

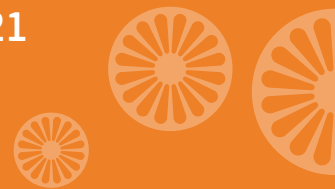
Housing conditions and segregated communities

Roma have been more affected by and vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic in specific territorial contexts (FRA, 2020a). The pandemic revealed the extent of dire, hazardous, and overcrowded living conditions in segregated communities. Exposure to air contamination and COVID morbidity and mortality have been associated, and Roma are frequently overexposed to bad air quality. Frequent housing crowding and physical isolation from services made the confinement even harder for Roma. To mitigate COVID19 once contracted, decent housing conditions – including clean water supplies, sanitation, disinfectants, energy, and space for self-isolation – are crucial. However, these are frequently not available in Roma neighbourhoods, particularly in segregated communities (Saitovic & Szilvasi, 2021). After the initial lockdown, in some Member States, no moratorium on forced evictions was issued and families were expelled from their homes (Rorke, 2020).

After a decade of lack of progress, slum living conditions must be eradicated, and minimum living standards set that meet public health requirements (FEANTSA, 2020). The EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation calls on Member States to increase effective equal access to adequate desegregated housing and essential services. This has been reinforced by a recent report by the European Parliament (EP, 2020) and is in line with the international shift towards greater housing security (Farha, 2020; Rajagopal, 2020). Likewise, environmental justice standards need to be established that make housing and neighbourhoods withstand the expected extreme weather conditions brought on by climate change. Environmental racism has resulted in higher exposure to toxins and deprivation from decent living standards (Heidegger et al., 2020). Therefore, funding should not only consider adaptation but restitution.

COVID and Antigypsyism

Yet in 2018, the European fundamental rights agency identified antigypsyism as a persistent barrier to Roma inclusion (FRA, 2018). The pandemic has exacerbated this situation. Reportedly, Roma and Travellers have been signalled publicly for the spreading of the disease (FRA, 2020b; Irish Centre for Human Rights & National University of Ireland Galway, 2020). Political rhetoric blamed Roma as a group. Thus, scapegoating the Roma and ethnicization of the Coronavirus crisis, have added to the social and economic effects of the pandemic on the community, in many Member States. Hate speech on social media and negative media reporting has increased (ERRC, 2020). In general, states have not complied with their obligation to protect citizens from hate speech (CoE et al., 2020).



Vaccination coverage and Outreach strategies

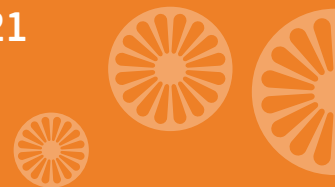
It is reported that vaccine coverage amongst Roma is low (Holt, 2021). Reasons are ascribed to access barriers and vaccine hesitancy. An increased vaccine scepticism amongst Roma is reported (Saitovic & Szilvasi, 2021), partially due to historic negative experiences with rights violations, discrimination in the National Health systems, and a general lack of mutual trust between the government, public health authorities and Roma citizens. However, robust evidence of vaccine refusal is difficult to establish and might in itself respond to prejudices.

National health authorities could consider adaptations to lower access barriers, such as ambulant vaccination offers by mobile clinics and targeted health communications (Saitovic & Szilvasi, 2021; UN OHCHR, 2020). Furthermore, vulnerable groups have to be established as a priority in the national vaccinations strategies, and Roma need to be explicitly included amongst these. In the case of migrant and EU-mobile Roma vaccine coverage might be even more difficult (Armocida et al., 2021). In the case of stateless Roma and those at risk of statelessness (i.e. Roma who are undocumented, without legal identity/proof of citizenship), access to healthcare and, specifically, to vaccination is even more restricted (Bairska Svetlina, 2021; Beriša & Phiren Amenca, 2021; ENS, 2021b, 2021a; Phiren Amenca, 2021).

European Recovery and Resilience Funds

As part of NextGeneration EU, the new Recovery and Resilience Facility will support investments and reforms essential to lasting recovery and foster economic and social resilience and cohesion. To receive support, Member States will have to draw up recovery and resilience plans addressing the economic and social impacts of the crisis, the digital and green transitions and the relevant priorities identified in country-specific recommendations under the European Semester.² This support was aimed to give possibilities to Member States to foster the inclusion of marginalised groups, including Roma and other people with a minority racial or ethnic background. In general, Roma inclusion have not been considered substantially in the plans (ERGO, 2021; Roy & Eurodiaconia, 2021). Whether and how the equity, inclusion, and participation of Roma is reflected in these programmes not only depends on the planning documents, but rather on how these are rolled out when the monies hit the ground. Thus, it remains to be seen how policies concerning Roma are implemented in practice. In any case, if the Covid impact is higher in the Roma population not only in disease prevalence but in economic terms, recovery plans should tackle Roma more specifically. In line with the green deal and the digital transition, the programming and spending of the Next Generation Funds need to ensure digital inclusion and deliver environmental justice for Roma.

2/ NextGenerationEU is a more than €800 billion temporary recovery instrument. Nearly 90 per cent of this is spent via the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility. In Spring 2021, Member Statesmember states have defined their priorities which have been approved by the Commission in summer. See the National Plans of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility at this link: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en



3. Question for debate

In the light of the above, the following questions could be discussed at the Platform. All the questions centre primarily on the respective action on Member State level. This is where the real impact is made. The Platform acknowledges that the Commission Communication and the Council Recommendation provide a strategic framework, while the effective policy, strategy and action plan need to be defined at Member State level.

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 much is access to housing for Roma prioritised in the National Strategic Frameworks or in the national debates and policies? 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?

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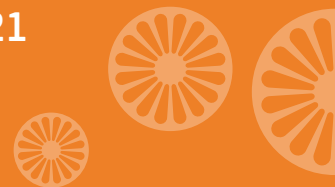
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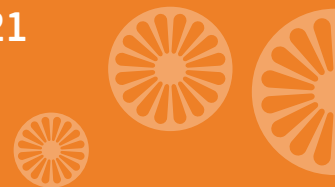
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