

Roma Education Fund's Response to Roma policy – tackling discrimination and socio-economic exclusion

The Roma Education Fund (REF) welcomes the initiative of the European Commission calling for public recommendations for the Post 2020 EU Strategic Framework. Prepared by REF, this feedback also includes the contributions and inputs of Open Society Foundations (OSF), European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and EUROCHILD.

Main educational challenges Roma face

The Report on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies¹ published by the European Commission in 2019, announced that out of the four policy areas the most significant progress was achieved in education. It is critical to note that successes highlighted in the implementation review are not reported across all EU Member States with Roma populations, and still with limitations (e.g. development of kindergarten capacities, which are still insufficient). In addition, there is much more to be done in order to tackle antigypsyism, systematic discrimination and to close the educational gap between Roma and non-Roma in education.

Low access and participation in education is a symptom of broader social problems

There are serious concerns on the level of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) taking into account the access and attendance rates of Roma comparing to the mainstream population. Roma children lag behind their non-Roma peers on all education indicators. Only about half (53 %) of Roma children between the age of four and the starting age of compulsory primary education participate in early childhood education². There are approximately 1.5 million Roma children under 6 years of age across Europe³ and there is a powerful economic argument for investment in Roma early childhood in order to break the cycle of exclusion. The participation rate in ECEC is only 59.8% in East-Slovakia where most Roma live compared to Bratislava region where it is 89.2%⁴. In the Czech Republic, only 26% of Roma children participate in ECD programs, while this ratio is 86,4% in general⁵. Additional aspects, that we recommend the Commission to take into account the correlation between social, economic and environmental factors affecting education such as the lack of institutional capacities in

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0406>

² EU-MIDIS II by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016 <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey-roma-selected-findings>

³ How to invest and unlock the potential of Roma Children; <https://epha.org/how-to-invest-and-unlock-the-potential-of-roma-children/> EU FRA (2017).

⁴ European Commission, Education and Training Monitor, Slovakia, 2016

⁵ European Commission, Education and Training Monitor, 2016

ECD (Early Childhood Development), poor access to healthcare and preventive services for Roma children, spatial isolation of Roma communities raising issues of availability and accessibility of social services in segregated areas. The lack of parental involvement and outreach to parents to bridge the interest of both Roma and non-Roma communities is another area which requires more concentrated efforts from national authorities.

Proper health, nutrition, and early stimulation play a critical role for brain development and Roma children's well-being. This is why ECD is one of the most effective ways to combat child poverty and social exclusion. In reality, however, disadvantaged Roma mothers face inadequate living conditions, lack of services, discrimination and, are far more likely to have babies with low birth weight. For Roma children, the prevailing widespread prejudice and segregation start from the earliest years⁶.

Participation and anti-discriminatory access – e.g. place guarantee

Member States access to quality ECEC is not a universal goal within their National Roma Integration Strategy) NRIS. Specifically, few Member States have universal programs or policies that ensure access, let alone targeted measures to increase the access of universal programs by Roma parents and children. How national ECEC systems are built leads to exclusion mechanisms for Roma children. For instance, several countries provide the opportunity for children of a certain age to attend pre-school, although it is optional, based on the family's decision. While programmes exist to support the enrolment of disadvantaged children, do not sufficiently challenge financial social, and information barriers in access to education. As a result, disadvantaged Roma and other groups do not have equal opportunity in accessing quality ECEC⁷. Countries where mandatory schooling includes kindergarten year(s) must provide awareness raising campaigns and knowledge about administrative and national education systems. Additionally, long waiting lists and discrimination based on ethnicity may prevent Romani children from equal access to early childhood education in kindergarten.

The lack of adequate equipment and infrastructure meeting the needs of disabled children is another barrier preventing the equal access to education. This is also relevant for Roma children with disabilities, facing multiple discrimination in many areas including education and health.

Quality education goes hand in hand with good health

The main argument for Member States which do not have at least two years of compulsory kindergarten is lack of spaces, shortage of teachers, and poor physical infrastructure.

Some positive examples promoting sustainable national policies have been observed in Members States which were able to use EU and national funds to build spaces and increase the number of

⁶ Roma Early Childhood Inclusion report (2010), <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/roma-early-childhood-inclusion-overview-report>; EU FRA (2017) Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/eumidis-ii-main-results>

⁷ Roma Education Fund's experience in the Roma Civil Monitoring Project

teachers (Slovakia). Although NRISs should not only focus on the EU funds, alternatively the strategies must include a concrete plan on the implementation and funding mechanisms seeking for sustainable political response to poor access to early childhood education and school attendance of Roma children. Measures promoting two-compulsory years before starting primary school, accompanied with concrete actions preventing discrimination and ethnic segregation, faced by a number of Roma children.

The needs of children with disabilities must be taken into account when implementing programs for improving infrastructure in school and kindergarten buildings. Increasing public funding will provide a political response to poor access to early years' education and enhance access to attendance of children with disabilities among Roma communities. At the same time Member States must encourage the access to healthcare and preventive services for young children by making health services available in schools and kindergartens. Investing in infrastructure and providing children with facilities, well-qualified staff, including health professionals and physiologists is another solution to poor educational achievement.

Low quality of provision for Roma children

Segregation is also socio-economic, where poverty and inequality further increases the gap between Roma and non-Roma settlements. As of residential segregation only Roma schools easier to occur in such areas. However, antigypsyism and institutional racism are the main reasons why Roma children face discrimination in accessing education, segregation or misplacement in schools for children with special needs or mental disabilities. In such circumstances, children are denied access to quality and integrated education necessary for their optimal child's development. Furthermore, teachers' motivation, readiness, school materials, equipment etc. in segregated schools are much on lower level than in general. Integrated quality education is not only pivotal from legal perspective, but also from social and economic integration being the interest of the entire society. In Central and Eastern-European countries (including Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania) and in Bulgaria the segregation level of Roma children varies from 26% up to 62%⁸, meaning that from one-third to two third of Roma students attend in either mainly or Roma only schools/classes.

The strategy should encourage Member States to promote measures that build teachers' capacities to educate to value diversity in school. Teachers, mediators and health professionals working with students must be trained to promote inclusiveness, equality and social cohesion, and to work with parents and communities from different social and ethnic backgrounds. While the practice of

⁸ Open Society Foundations, Post-2020 EU Roma Strategy: The way forward, 2019.; Bernard Rorke, Segregation in Hungary: The Long Road to Infringement, ERRC, 2016; FRA, Second European Union Minorities and Discriminatory Service, Roma Selected Findings, 2016; European Commission, Education and Training Monitor Bulgaria 2016; REF Country Assessment - Advancing the Education of Roma in Bulgaria, 2015; Roma Civil Monitor, A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union: Focusing on structural and horizontal preconditions for a successful implementation

mediators and mentors can create positive educational results, the reliance on mediators and mentors reduces teacher's self-efficacy when working in classrooms which include Roma students. This places the burden on the Roma student and minimises the teachers' and school systems responsibility to provide quality education. Furthermore, the quality and impact of mentoring depends on the mediators' level of bias and cultural sensitivity. Multiple programs with strong involvement of community members as mediators, could indirectly exclude Roma through continuously increasing requirements on qualification.

Denying both Roma children's cultural identity and their opportunities to participate in mainstream education

A different form of segregation is the misplacement of Roma children to special schools. Such practice is highly persistent in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria. Assessment systems are only mainstream language driven relying on the dominant culture, ignoring children with another mother tongue. As a result, children are considered as mentally disabled, while in reality the problem derives from the inability and outdated nature of assessment systems and its lack of inclusive approach. Such practices are not only a violation of child's rights to education, but also a factor increasing the risk for child's mental health and prevent their optimal development. Ethnic segregation and discrimination in the area of education deprives Romani children from equal access to quality services and brain stimulation activities that can positively influence child's health from the earliest age of its life. The post 2020 Roma inclusion framework must encourage Member State to design and implement desegregation policy in education that not only promote the child access to regular schools, but also provide him with appropriate pedagogical and physiological support in case of discrimination in school. Harassment in school is another area that requires strong efforts from national authorities, but also a cooperation with Roma and non-Roma parents. Harassment in school leads to an increased level of stress and anxiety for children and may be a decisive factor for the child's schooling in regular school. This issue, often under-estimated, can cause child's school dropout and affect its capacity to accessing social and economic rights and services in adulthood.

Early school leaving

The compulsory school age is the main factor to early school leaving. Within the Member States Romania's compulsory school age of 17 is the highest while in the other CEE and SEE countries, the compulsory age is 15 or 16. Mentoring, tutoring, and scholarships are the main tools Member States employ to combat early school leaving. The programs are low in scale to achieve educational equity between Roma and non-Roma. In addition, many of the programs are not targeted towards Roma, but socially disadvantaged. This approach is not in line with the *10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion* principle or "explicit but not exclusive targeting."⁹

⁹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7573706d-e7c4-4ece-ae59-2b361246a7b0>

Higher education participation of Roma is around 1%. The severity of the participation is not present within the Member States' NRIS. There is an absence of programs to foster higher educational aspirations and reduce barriers to access to universities. In addition, accessing the education profession at all levels is very little encouraged in countries, a position that may attract overall a higher participation to education of Roma children.

Romania is the only Member State that has positive action, reserving spaces within certain university faculties for Roma students. Higher education scholarships for Roma are predominantly coming from REF and a small number from another NGO's.

Strategic Framework – National Roma Integration Strategies

The Strategic Framework is a soft-policy instrument allowing Member States to decide to what extent and how they intend to set up their National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS). Since, there is no binding nature of the Framework, the design and implementation of the NRIS is absolutely dependent on political will, political priorities and view of respective member states. Thus, there has been a serious lack of funding allocation, monitoring and proper implementation from the side of Member States of NRISs. In other words, Roma integration as such is being perceived as an option by Member States, instead of a mandatory common responsibility of the European societies. Additionally, Member States might lack of certain capacities that requires EU bodies to provide better guidance to Member States and facilitate them in prioritizing specific interventions in tackling educational discrimination of Roma.

No specific (financial) support to sustain inclusive pedagogies in the education systems through responsive in-service training programs.

Additionally, the NRISs do not place a strong emphasis on initiatives to create and incentivise teachers' and other professionals' knowledge and school systems capacities to provide inclusive, multicultural, and non-discriminatory education. There are a lack of incentives for kindergarten and school staff working with students to seek out and obtain training in inclusive education. In several countries the in-service training does not provide certificates or any particular financial incentives. In some Member States, teachers must pay the training fees from their own pocket, which is an additional financial barrier to participate in in-service training programs¹⁰. Furthermore, often the main trainings are developed and provided by civil society organizations and not incorporated in the pedagogy training systems which is not a sustainable solution and cannot provide an effective response to the gap in education.

¹⁰ Statement is based on REFs review of the 28 member state Roma Civil Monitoring reports.

Addressing antigypsyism in both Roma/minority policy framework and mainstream legal frameworks

As above mentioned, one of the main reasons of institutional discrimination, segregation and exclusion of Roma from quality education is antigypsyism. The previous Framework has not focused on the manifestations of antigypsyism. Thus, the post 2020 Framework needs to be concentrated on antigypsyism in all policy areas and any aspect of life with specific action plan and budget support. Also, the NRISs need to be in line with the regulations of the Racial Equal Directive (RED), and other mainstream legal frameworks protecting basic human rights. This implies that the post 2020 Framework shall be based both on Roma/minority policy frameworks as well as on mainstream general policy and legal frameworks applicable for everyone. Antigypsyism shall not be treated as a separate category¹¹, rather as a cross cutting issue including all the above mentioned policy areas and additional aspects.

Recommendations:

- The post 2020-Framework needs to focus on antigypsyism approaching all policy areas and additional aspects (representation, empowerment, arts and culture, encourage diversity etc.)
- The Roma inclusion framework must provide monitoring mechanisms for better protection of child's rights, including education and training, involving national authorities and civil society.
- The post 2020 Roma inclusion framework should tackle the mental health effects caused by different forms of discrimination in access to education, including ethnic segregation and harassment in school.
- The post-2020 Framework should have a binding nature on Member States with specific measurable objectives, targets and indicators.
- The Framework should support the introduction of integrated services – delivering access to good nutrition and health services from gestation, responsive caregiving, social protection, child welfare, early stimulation and learning opportunities.
- The Framework needs to have a specific focus on both Roma/minority specific needs and on mainstream legal and policy frameworks such as the European Child's Guarantee and European Youth Guarantee.
- Antigypsyism experienced by children, as a specific vulnerable socio-economic group, needs to be included in the NRIS as well as in their national policy framework. Members States should adopt preventive mechanisms as well as mechanisms for reporting discrimination in access to education.
- The new Framework needs to set up three priorities in education for each Member states. These priorities shall be identified based on the findings of the Roma Civil Monitor, FRA reports and CSO inputs delivered already to the European Commission. These priorities would

¹¹ <http://antigypsyism.eu/>

serve for Member States as a framework within which NRISs shall be developed with action plan and budget allocations.

- In Member States where infringement procedures already ongoing, the post 2020 Framework has to include measures for better monitoring the implementation of the decision and recommendations issued by EU institutions to the respective member states and insure that Member States properly address educational issues that is basis of infringement. Additionally, The European Commission needs to better monitor the compliance of both Roma/minority and mainstream policy frameworks to guarantee basic human rights, including access to quality education.
- The strategy must include specific and mandatory measures and objectives with specific indicators that required for available ESIF and ISF funding. Educational targets that are not achieved should lead to reduced competition for funding.
- The European Commission must reform the structure of both direct and structural funding, as well as the method of distribution. Additionally, efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of funding must be monitoring and evaluated to reduce the amount of spillage, misuse of EU funds and ensure that funds are reaching the target groups and having their maximum influence.
- The post 2020 Roma Inclusion Strategy should encourage Member States to establish compulsory and free kindergarten for at least 2 years prior to primary school. The strategy should provide funding and other policy mechanisms aimed to support building increased institutional capacities, as well as to ensure equal access to kindergarten (rural, transportation, costs, and protection against antigypsyism and discrimination).
- In order to improve educational outcomes of Roma students Member States must establish NRIS goals addressing school professionals bias, as well as improving capacity and skills in multicultural education. To achieve Member States stated NRIS goals, governments must initiate programs which reduce teachers bias towards Roma students, parents, and community. Furthermore, member states must establish pedagogy curricula which mandates future teachers to complete courses on teaching in multicultural classrooms. Such trainings should target health professionals and phycologists working with students, to prevent discrimination in school.
- An educational goal of the strategy should be to foster educational aspirations through the role of education professionals, relevant authorities, academia and general society in creating environments which foster inclusiveness, diversity and reduce social inequalities. The European Commission should condone any language or policy designs that assign Roma educational aspirations to the Roma language, culture, and history.
- The strategy must include higher education goals, targets, and indicators, which must translate to member state strategies, policies, activities, and monitoring. Further, they must create large scale targeted scholarship programs or expand their current scholarship funding and create recruitment efforts targeted towards Roma secondary and tertiary students.

- Roma mobile workers face with additional and specific barriers to education and training The strategy must include targets and mechanisms to address educational barriers faced by Roma children in host countries. The post 2020 Roma inclusion framework should encourage Member States to simplify the administrative procedures for school enrollment in order to guarantee the right to education for all. Mechanisms for reporting cases of discrimination in school enrolment should be available to prevent refusals to enrolling children in school as well as segregation of students. Such mechanisms should involve national educational authorities, civil society organisations and parents.
- The European Commission must encourage Member State to implement desegregation policies and preventive measures against ethnic segregation and this should be a top priority of the framework and a condition for funding.
- The European Commission need to encourage governments to use ESIF and IPA resources to be invested primarily into sustainable structural changes, rather than the daily operation of the schools (such as to cover wages or purchases of equipment with a short-term depreciation period).
- The European Commission should support peer learning between its member states on the implementation of their Roma integration strategies, in order to encourage progress, create data collection and monitoring tools to help benchmark progress and generate positive peer pressure.
- Greater targeting of Roma youth and improved outreach services, especially in the Youth Guarantee Scheme.

Annex - Acronyms

REF – Roma Education Fund

OSF – Open Society Foundations

EPHA – European Public Health Alliance

ISSA – International Step by Step Association

ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care

ECD – Early Childhood Development

NRIS – National Roma Integration Strategy

EU – European Union

CEE – Central Eastern Europe

SEE – South East Europe

RED – Racial Equal Directive