



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- notes that the commitments given on equality, social inclusion and Roma participation need to be renewed and strengthened at European, national, regional and local levels;
- urges the Commission to closely monitor progress at Member State level, enforce the application of the relevant EU legislation and swiftly assess the necessity for further legislation since the absence of sanctions risks delaying even further the Roma integration and inclusion process. Invites the Commission to consider the creation of a European advisory board, consisting, *inter alia*, of experts in Roma policies and involving also representatives of local and regional authorities with tangible experience on Roma issues on the ground. Further insists on the need to improve the representativeness of Roma people in the design and implementation of the national Roma strategic frameworks;
- stresses that the national strategic framework must reflect local and regional differences, identify areas facing specific problems and contribute to the application of tailor-made solutions;
- notes that making a national Roma strategic framework mandatory is one of the key elements for progress in this area;
- recommends that one objective of the framework should be the inclusion of information about Roma history and culture in primary and secondary school textbooks and that indicators should be provided to this effect;
- suggests to stop the use of the common denominator "Roma", as it fails to recognise the diversity within the population of people with Romani background. Instead proposes the adoption of the expression "people with Romani identity";
- stresses that the financing of national strategic frameworks also requires an integrated approach to the various development funds;
- calls for local and/or regional exchange forums to be set up and operated in all Member States that would monitor the implementation of national strategic frameworks, in order to strengthen dialogue and ensure a certain level of cooperation.

Rapporteur-general

Jácint Horváth (HU/PES), Member of Nagykanizsa Municipal Council

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation
COM(2020) 620 final

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation
COM(2020) 621 final

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments – Roma as a European ethnic minority

1. welcomes the Commission's Communication, which further demonstrates the commitment of both the European Commission and the European Council to integrate Roma communities¹ and to eliminate discrimination against and exclusion of Roma. Likewise, welcomes the latest Council recommendation on this issue and emphasises the importance of providing information at local and regional level and of setting specific targets. To this end, calls on the European Commission and the Council to ensure proper monitoring of the results achieved;
2. emphasises that the Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority group. Many Roma people continue to be deprived of their fundamental rights, live in poverty and face extreme discrimination and social exclusion. As this is a European problem and these people are European citizens, it is all the more shocking that Member State governments and the EU have so far failed to implement successful integration and inclusion policies, fully empowering Roma people to exercise their rights and responsibilities linked to EU citizenship;
3. points out that a Union of Equality, which is one of the main objectives of the European Commission², cannot be achieved on the continent without the active participation of Roma communities, which represent an estimated 10-12 million people;
4. confirms that progress on Roma integration over the last ten years has been limited. A certain amount of progress has been made on some of the sectoral priorities identified in the Communication, but overall the objectives set have not been met. In the future, therefore, it will be necessary to overhaul the allocation of resources to this area and increase them where necessary, further develop an integrated approach and encourage the use of innovative solutions. Particular emphasis should be placed on ensuring the professional and financial sustainability of successful programmes so that long-term results can be achieved;
5. also notes that the commitments given on equality, social inclusion and Roma participation need to be renewed and strengthened at European, national, regional and local levels;
6. given continued unsatisfactory results when it comes to addressing educational, labour market, housing and health problems caused by discrimination and the social context, calls on Member

¹ As in the Commission's Communication, in this opinion "Roma" is used as an umbrella term to refer to a number of different groups of Romani origin such as Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels and Boyash/Rudari. It also encompasses groups such as Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom, and Abdal, as well as traveller populations, including ethnic Travellers or those designated under the administrative term "gens du voyage", and people who identify as Gypsies, Tsiganes or Tziganes, without denying the specific characteristics of each of these groups.

² A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 COM(2020) 565 final.

States to step up efforts in this regard, in particular by further empowering regional and local authorities;

7. recognises that Roma communities have an extremely high level of exposure to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where these communities are concerned, the pandemic and its socio-economic and health impacts exacerbate existing disparities and widen the gap still further. What is more, the impact of the pandemic is cancelling out some of the results that have been achieved to date. Resources for Roma should therefore be increased as part of the recovery process;
8. notes that the promotion of Roma equality and integration is not only essential in terms of fundamental rights, but is also of clear economic importance. Successful implementation of the strategy will also be crucial for the economic performance of Member States with a high proportion of Roma in their population (above 1%);
9. welcomes in particular the European Parliament's 2020 resolution on the implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies: combating negative attitudes towards people with Romani background in Europe³; which clearly sets out specific goals and measures. The Committee also recommends that this report's forward-looking findings be taken into account when drafting national Roma strategic frameworks;
10. supports the Declaration of Mayors and Elected Local and Regional Representatives of Council of Europe Member States Against Anti-Gypsyism⁴. Calls on the EU institutions to work more closely with the Council of Europe on improving the status of Roma, including supporting the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the inclusion of Roma and Travellers, and the excellent "Dosta!" awareness-raising campaign;
11. welcomes and appreciates in particular the adoption by the prime ministers of Western Balkan countries with a high Roma population of the declaration on Roma integration adopted in July 2019 as part of the EU enlargement process⁵, in which they pledged to improve the situation of the Roma before gaining EU membership;

National Roma strategic frameworks, horizontal objectives

12. welcomes the fact that the Communication takes into account the findings of the evaluation of the previous framework, the annual assessments of the implementation of the national strategies and the analysis of the reasons for the limited effectiveness of previous measures, and also the fact that it is based on wide-ranging consultations;
13. emphasises, however, that the Communication fails to address the experiences, both positive and negative, with the implementation of previous national Roma strategies. It draws no

³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0147_EN.html

⁴ http://a.cs.coe.int/team81/congress_form/Inscriptions/Declaration_Against_anti_gypsyism.aspx

⁵ <https://www.romaeducationfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Western-Balkans-Declaration-on-Roma-Integration-and-EU-enlargement.pdf>

conclusions, contains no reference to best practices and makes no mention of any effective measures taken by Member States that could be adopted or taken up elsewhere;

14. notes that making a national Roma strategic framework mandatory is one of the key elements for progress in this area and is disappointed that a number of Member States did not prepare strategic frameworks in the previous cycle, due to this being optional;
15. confirms its support for the European Commission's efforts to help EU Member States and candidate countries develop successful national Roma strategies by publishing guidelines on integration strategies; notes, however, that drawing the lessons from the numerous negative experiences in the implementation of the EU Roma strategy in the previous cycle would have helped ensure a more consistent approach when drafting the current strategy;
16. is disturbed to note that surveys conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) confirm that discrimination in the labour market is a cause for concern not only in the process of seeking work, but also in the workplace, where 22% of respondents felt discriminated against on the grounds of their ethnic or immigrant background. As regards access to goods and services (covering public administration, public transport, shops, restaurants, etc.), Roma faced the highest level of discrimination (28% of respondents);
17. further notes that the Communication does not take into account the possible lack of civil society organisations and experts, which is a major obstacle to progress in some Member States, mainly because it hampers the work of NGOs. Ultimately, this can have an impact on Roma's chances of inclusion;
18. states that national Roma strategic frameworks should contribute to implementing the EU anti-racism action plan and the European Pillar of Social Rights, and to accomplishing the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The links with these different documents, the contribution to their objectives and the scope of this contribution should be specifically mentioned in the National Roma Strategic Frameworks;
19. notes that, in its Communication and proposal for a Council recommendation, the European Commission has indeed set objectives that are ambitious, but at the same time necessary, multifaceted and balanced, at both the horizontal and sectoral levels. In order to achieve these objectives effectively by 2030, the widest possible range of local and national Roma civil society organisations should be involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring and follow-up of the national Roma strategic frameworks, incorporating the proposals made and allowing for a periodic review of the strategy;
20. points out that the Communication does not envisage a situation in which the measures provided for in the strategic frameworks have no meaningful effect. In the light of the experience of the previous cycle, the possibility that some Member States might not implement the national strategic frameworks remains a matter of serious concern for the Committee. Urges, therefore, the Commission to closely monitor progress at Member State level, enforce the application of the relevant EU legislation and swiftly assess the necessity for further legislation since the absence of sanctions risks delaying even further the Roma integration and inclusion process.

Invites the Commission to consider the creation of a European advisory board, consisting, inter alia, of experts in Roma policies and involving also representatives of local and regional authorities with tangible experience on Roma issues on the ground. Further insists on the need to improve the representativeness of Roma people in the design and implementation of the national Roma strategic frameworks;

21. supports further cooperation with the FRA in the context of the periodic review of national Roma strategic frameworks. The availability of adequate data is of paramount importance both for assessing the state of play and for measuring progress. Due attention should be paid to this issue as, on many occasions, the problem has arisen that funds earmarked for Roma integration have been spent on non-Roma target groups;
22. emphasises that the objectives and measures set out in the national Roma strategic frameworks should take into account specific local and regional characteristics within Member States and disadvantaged micro-regions requiring specific measures;
23. agrees with the view that the challenges of equality, social inclusion and participation of Roma vary greatly depending on the size of the Roma community and its share of the total population, the wider economic context and the extent of traditional exclusion and discrimination. They also depend on where and how Roma live (whether rural, urban, mobile or segregated) and on specific aspects such as international mobility, migration or citizenship documentation issues;
24. stresses, however, that the national strategic framework must reflect local and regional differences, identify areas facing specific problems and contribute to the application of tailor-made solutions;
25. welcomes the Commission's call to Member States with large Roma populations to include more ambitious commitments in their national Roma strategic frameworks, which should mainstream Roma equality and inclusion into regional and local policies;
26. supports the European Commission's request for Member States to report every two years on the implementation of their national Roma strategic frameworks, complemented by data from civil society and the FRA; urges the European Commission to seek the broadest possible involvement of civil society organisations and local and regional authorities dealing with Roma issues;

Comments on the sectoral objectives

27. reaffirms that the four key themes identified by the European Commission when grouping its objectives – education, employment, healthcare and housing – play a key role in the Roma inclusion process, together with the role played by social services, especially at the local and regional levels;

28. notes that, according to the second EU Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II)⁶ Roma children lag behind other children in all educational 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 education. On average, 18% of Roma aged 6-24 have a lower standard of education than is normal for their age. The proportion of Roma leaving school early is disproportionately high compared to the general population. The CoR condemns school segregation , which continues to be practised in some Member States, despite the legal ban on this practice and the recent case law of the European Court of Human Rights;
29. welcomes the recommendation adopted in July 2020 by the Council of Europe⁷ to include the history of the Roma people and/or travellers in school curricula and teaching materials. This is particularly relevant for Member States with a large Roma population;
30. recommends that one objective of the framework should be the inclusion of information about Roma history and culture in primary and secondary school textbooks and that indicators should be provided to this effect. The aim is to ensure that, especially in countries where Roma account for more than 1% of the population, pupils acquire positive information about the Roma every year in these fields. Preventing anti-Roma racism through education should be a priority in all Member States, regardless of the size of Roma population;
31. notes that digital educational models introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are contributing to the early school-leaving of Roma children, most of whom lack the necessary IT tools and access to high-speed internet, or are unable to work independently on the subjects of their school programme without adequate parental support;
32. stresses, therefore, that once the restrictive measures introduced in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic are lifted, educational catch-up programmes will be of paramount importance;
33. notes that according to the second EU Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II)⁸, only a quarter of Roma over the age of 16 are "employed" or "self-employed". The employment rates of Roma women are significantly lower than for men (16% compared to 34%). Overall, the survey shows that the share of Roma aged 20-64 in paid employment is 43%, which is well below the EU average (70% in 2015);
34. stresses that, according to the above-mentioned FRA survey, discrimination in healthcare was highest among Roma (8%), while their life expectancy is lower than that of the overall population;
35. supports the European Parliament in its call for Member States to ensure effective and timely remedies to all survivors of forced and coercive sterilisation, including through the establishment of effective compensation schemes;

6 <https://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2015/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey>

7 https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016809ee52f

8 <https://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2015/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey>

36. emphasises the fact that a significant proportion of Roma live in households that do not have access to essential utilities and basic services. This puts them at serious risk of housing deprivation;
37. agrees with the request to Member States to ensure access to adequate desegregated housing for Roma people and to include in each National Roma strategic framework the objective of preventing forced evictions without alternative housing, as stipulated in the Council Recommendation and Annex 1 to the Communication. Calls for this objective to be met preferably half-way through the period covered by the framework's implementation because a large number of Roma in the European Union have lost their homes as a result of evictions and live in sub-standard conditions;

Comments on the institutional framework

38. emphasises that without a comprehensive reform of the resource-allocation system and the development of institutional and absorption capacities, no substantial changes in the use of resources can be envisaged. For catch-up programmes to be effective, procedures also need to be streamlined and simplified and the approach of intermediary organisations needs to change. The catch-up policy needs to be simplified, made clearer and more transparent and brought closer to citizens;
39. notes that Roma who are particularly affected by exclusion and make use of their right to free movement to live and/or work in other Member States often face discrimination and exploitation there. The CoR highlights the importance of transnational cooperation at national, regional and local level to prevent exploitation organised across borders;
40. calls for consideration to be given to prioritising other support techniques (priority projects, negotiated procedures, global grants, regulatory support) rather than procurement programmes that create an uneven playing field when it comes to supporting integration programmes;
41. suggests to stop the use of the common denominator "Roma", as it fails to recognise the diversity within the population of people with Romani background. Instead proposes the adoption of the expression "people with Romani identity";
42. recommends that Member States ensure, in addition to appropriate professional guarantees, continuous and unhindered funding for successful social catch-up initiatives and related projects. Indeed, it turned out that several previously successful projects only managed to obtain new funding after being presented as unprecedented innovations and developments. It is also essential to ensure continued funding for effective projects carried out by civil society organisations that do not have their own funds or assets or financial reserves;
43. considers it particularly important that Roma organisations committed to integration have the opportunity to gradually increase their capacities, in line with the principle of gradual development and growth. It should also be possible to implement initial projects requiring only very small amounts of funding so that the most disadvantaged areas can also embark on a path

towards a conscious development of Roma integration. This process must be catalysed and supported by a project preparation programme and implemented with the support of mentors;

44. stresses that the financing of national strategic frameworks also requires an integrated approach to the various development funds. Emphasis should be placed on the need for more effective coordination of infrastructure and human capacity development projects so that the resources of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) are jointly accessible through integrated development programmes for complex projects aimed at strengthening social cohesion. Coordination of these resources requires the development of appropriate implementation tools that support the strategic approach;
45. welcomes in particular the European Commission's commitment in the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 to lead by example as an institution by taking measures to significantly improve the representativeness of its staff through targeted recruitment and selection measures. When implementing these measures, the European Commission will ensure that they also apply to Roma, and calls on the other EU institutions to take initiatives to promote diversity and integration in the workplace. The CoR supports this approach and considers that it also applies in its own case;

The role of local and regional authorities

46. draws the attention of the governments of the Member States to the fact that local and regional authorities should be involved in drawing up national policy frameworks for Roma. They are the organisations closest to the Roma, they are on the front line when dealing with the problems and have real approaches and resources at their disposal to improve the situation;
47. reiterates that local and regional authorities are the level of governance with most responsibilities for the integration of Roma populations, and should support their inclusion in a non-paternalistic bottom-up approach;
48. calls for local and/or regional exchange forums to be set up and operated in all Member States that would monitor the implementation of national strategic frameworks, in order to strengthen dialogue and ensure a certain level of cooperation. Only proven working relationships between all stakeholders can lead to effective integration, and the strengthening of the decentralised approach ensures a more effective implementation of the programmes;
49. recommends that local authorities in areas with Roma populations support local community development programmes that provide the relevant Roma groups and small communities with access to basic practical knowledge that is of crucial importance and which must be mastered in everyday life;
50. urges local and regional authorities to ensure that content that breaks down prejudices against Roma is published in the media they run;

51. draws the attention of local and regional authorities to the fact that the dissemination of knowledge about Roma history and culture and the promotion of intercultural learning can be effective in reducing racism.

Brussels, 5 February 2021

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Blížkovský

II. PROCEDURE

Title	A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation
Reference(s)	COM(2020) 620 final COM(2020) 621 final
Legal basis	Article 307 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b) of the Rules of Procedure
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	
Commission responsible	Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)
Rapporteur:	Jácint Horváth (HU/PES)
Analysis	
Discussed in commission	
Date adopted by commission	
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	
Date adopted in plenary	3, 4 and 5 February 2021
Previous Committee opinions	Roma Integration Strategies, CdR 5280/2013 – Roger Stone (UK/PES) An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, CdR 247/2011 – Alvaro Ancisi (IT/EPP)
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	