Addressing Housing Deprivation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe

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TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

This research covers the housing situation of Roma, the largest European minority, in nine countries; five members of the European Union (Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), and four candidate countries (Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Ukraine). It encompasses an evaluation of existing information sourced from multiple governmental and non-governmental bodies, as well as gathering fresh qualitative data through individual and group interviews, including focus groups. This data was obtained from a range of stakeholders, including central and local decision-makers, civil society representatives, and, most importantly, the primary beneficiaries.

The primary target countries were Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria. The secondary target countries were Czechia, Hungary, and Serbia.

Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority, are highly susceptible to human rights breaches. Besides unstable living conditions, the majority of Roma across Central Eastern Europe commonly reside in substandard housing conditions that do not meet global standards. They also encounter challenges in securing new homes and face, or fear, evictions more frequently than the average population. Other major challenges include obscure property rights, undocumented properties and settlements, insecure tenancy rights, unofficial community status leading to eviction risks, and living conditions that adversely affect health, education, and access to services. Discrimination and prejudice, both from the public and officials, exacerbate their plight, with discriminatory policies and complex regulations hindering access to public housing. Housing Roma in segregated or remote areas deepens socio-economic isolation, leading to ghetto-like communities and infringing on their basic human rights, including proper housing.

Segregation contributes to widespread poverty, social exclusion, and precarious access to public services, impacting physical, economic, psychological, and sociological aspects of life. Intergenerational poverty affects Roma health, well-being, and fundamental human rights. Employment issues, including job insecurity, unemployment, and workplace discrimination, are prevalent, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. With only a quarter of Roma over 16 employed and significant gender disparities in employment, many Roma youth are disengaged

from education, employment, or training. Most live below the poverty line, lacking basic amenities like tap water and electricity and facing food insecurity. The gap in housing access between Roma and non-Roma is widened by discrimination and limited social housing options. Structural and institutional antigypsyism (*currently an official EU policy term*[1]) at all societal levels forms a major barrier to their enjoyment of fundamental rights. A large proportion of Roma experience discrimination in daily life areas, such as work and housing.

This research on addressing housing deprivation among Roma communities in Central Eastern Europe sheds light on the severe and persistent challenges faced by one of Europe's most marginalised groups. By examining the nature and extent of the housing issues of Roma, the research provides vital insights into their lived realities, highlighting the urgent need for targeted policy interventions and resource allocation. Furthermore, it underscores the broader implications of housing deprivation, including impacts on health, education, and overall quality of life, thereby underlining the importance of addressing these issues not just for the benefit of the Roma community but for the advancement of social justice and equality within the broader European context.

In addition to finding and analysing the specificities of good practices in housing solutions of recent years, this research plays a pivotal role in outlining concrete recommendations for future housing programs targeted at the Roma community. It meticulously highlights good approaches, drawing from successful interventions and innovative strategies that have shown promise in various European contexts. The research delves into the complexities of housing issues faced by the Roma across the region, suggesting nuanced, context-sensitive solutions that acknowledge both the unique challenges and the diverse needs of this community. These recommendations cover a broad spectrum of aspects essential for tackling housing deprivation among Roma, ranging from formulating effective strategies and solutions through policy formulation and legal frameworks to community engagement and resource allocation. It serves as a crucial step towards improving the living conditions of the Roma, promoting their integration and participation in society, and ensuring their fundamental rights are upheld. The research aims to equip policymakers, practitioners, and advocates with the necessary insights to design and implement more effective, sustainable, and inclusive housing programs that can contribute to the long-term social and economic inclusion and empowerment of Roma.

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[1] Antigypsyism (a form of racism against Roma) is a historically rooted structural phenomenon that appears at Institutional, social, and interpersonal levels. It has its origins in how the majority views and treats those considered 'gypsies'. It is rooted in a process of 'othering' that builds on negative as well as positive, exoticizing stereotypes. While there is consensus about the understanding of antigypsyism among proponents of the need to reinforce the fight against it, there has been a debate about the term. The European Parliament (in its 2015, 2017 and 2019 and 2020 resolutions), the Commission (in its annual communications between 2015 and 2019, and its 2018 conclusions paper), the Council (in its 2013 recommendation and 2016 conclusions) and the Council of Europe have recognised antigypsyism as a barrier to inclusion, and hence the importance of tackling it. The Commission uses the spelling proposed by the Alliance against Antigypsyism, while accepting that different terms might be appropriate in different national contexts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite a robust legal framework at international, European, and national levels, along with established strategies and action plans, the enforcement and implementation of Roma housing laws remain significantly deficient. The challenges posed by marginal locations and poor living conditions impact various life aspects, compromising access to quality education, healthcare, and employment. There is a clear link between spatial segregation and early school dropouts, limited labour market engagement, and expensive access to essential services.

In recent decades, housing challenges for the Roma in Central Eastern Europe have become increasingly pronounced. Our research, spanning nine countries in the region, delves deep into these challenges. Post the privatisation wave of the '90s, a notable finding is the **significantly low stock of social housing and a prevalent reluctance to augment it**. While ambitious plans like constructing hundreds of thousands of social houses might seem like a solution, they are realistically unattainable, particularly given the hesitancy of Central Eastern European governments. **Instead, this study rather underscores the need to move people from segregated settlements to integrated, affordable housing with sustainable rental plans as more viable alternatives, along with regional approaches.** It is not merely about increasing the number of structures but ensuring quality and social integration, along with access to public services and utilities and persistent and comprehensive social work to ensure sustainability. While some advocate for the model of regularising settlements, it is crucial to ensure these methods **do not perpetuate segregation** since a persistent concern that emerged was the continued lack of access to public services, even following the implementation of certain resettlement programs. There is a pressing need to expand and enhance the social housing stock, and any housing intervention should be grounded in a thorough evaluation of affordability. Crucially, designing effective housing interventions demands a customised approach rooted in a comprehensive local needs assessment and the active participation of both Roma and non-Roma community members.

To effectively integrate Roma into broader society, **international housing rights** must be upheld, enforced, and adapted to each nation's unique context, requiring robust local governance and active Roma community involvement in decision-making. Sensitivity to local contexts, diversity within the Roma community, and intersecting forms of discrimination, particularly concerning gender, age, and disability, are essential. Addressing gender equality and the situation of Roma children and young people is crucial yet under-addressed in social inclusion efforts at both EU and national levels.

The 2021 survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) on housing deprivation paints a concerning picture of the Romani population across ten countries, including Czechia, Hungary, Romania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. It reveals that a staggering 52% of the EU's Roma population live in conditions of housing deprivation, significantly higher than the EU average of 17%, which manifests in various ways: 19% of Roma live in dimly lit homes, 25% struggle with issues like leaky roofs or dampness, and a significant proportion, 34% do not have the luxury of an indoor bathroom or shower. Adding to these challenges, 33% lack an indoor toilet. The survey also

highlights the problem of overcrowding, with 82% of Roma families living in cramped spaces, a situation even more pronounced in five out of the 12 surveyed countries where this figure exceeds 85%. Access to water is another critical issue, with one in five Roma households lacking indoor tap water, a stark contrast to the 1.5% average in the EU, with countries like Romania and Slovakia showing particularly high percentages of 40% and 28%, respectively. Furthermore, discrimination in housing is a significant barrier, as evidenced by 24% of Roma facing bias when seeking housing. These findings underscore the stark reality of the living conditions among the Roma, highlighting the urgent need for interventions to improve their housing situations.

Adequate, non-segregated housing is crucial for combating persistent poverty and exclusion, for it is vital for upholding human rights and dignity. The **European Social Charter** affirms the right to housing support to fight against poverty and social exclusion, ensuring a decent life for those with inadequate resources. Typically, local authorities in Member States take the lead in this domain, as in many social policies. These states must adhere to the **Racial Equality Directive**, guaranteeing non-discriminatory access to housing based on race or ethnicity. In October 2020, the European Commission introduced the **EU Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020**, which aims to achieve effective equality and inclusion by 2030. This framework relies on regular data updates from FRA on Roma integration progress in Member States. In 2021, the Council urged Member States to utilise indicators created by the FRA, the Commission, and the Member States themselves. This EU policy, influenced by international human rights law and EU principles, aligns with the **UN's Sustainable Development Goals** and the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, emphasising the importance of inclusivity and equality. The EU's framework for Roma inclusion focuses on ensuring equal access to quality integrated housing and vital services and sets specific goals concerning housing quality, overcrowding, and availability of tap water. The **2021 Council recommendation** encourages Member States to address social deprivation by investing in housing and ensuring Roma have equal access to quality integrated housing and services.

Addressing housing deprivation effectively in Central Eastern Europe requires a nuanced approach, as there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The complexity of housing issues means that practices cannot be simply classified as good or bad, as the good practices collected from across Central Eastern Europe showed. Successful strategies often share common elements such as an in-depth understanding of local needs, active community involvement, and the flexibility to adapt to evolving circumstances. This research found that a **holistic approach** is crucial, extending beyond just building or renovating homes. Central to these strategies is the **promotion of desegregation**, which involves relocating individuals from segregated areas to integrated communities, fostering diversity and inclusivity in neighbourhoods. Such integration allows for better access to essential services like education, healthcare, and employment opportunities and encourages interactions among diverse community members. Essentially, the development of new housing solutions hinges on desegregation, aiming to move away from segregated living spaces and ensuring interventions do not inadvertently maintain or reinforce segregation.

Based on the **good practices** compiled by a pool of international researchers, effective strategies to tackle housing deprivation among Roma communities vary widely due to the complexity of the issue. Successful approaches are not easily replicable, as each requires a nuanced understanding of specific local challenges. However, research indicates that sustainable housing programs share certain core elements, including a deep understanding of local needs, active community involvement, and the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions. Key to these programs is the **holistic approach** that extends beyond the physical construction or renovation of homes. It incorporates strategies for integration, **actively combating segregation** by encouraging diversity within neighbourhoods. This integration is crucial for providing **access to essential services like education, healthcare, and employment**, which are often out of reach for those living in segregated areas. Sustainable housing solutions are characterised by the **inclusivity of the Roma experts and organisations**, with programs designed to cater to a variety of needs and involve future residents in the planning process. Effective tenancy schemes often combine both private and municipal properties, contributing to a more balanced and flexible housing market.

The research emphasises the importance of **government-level commitment to supporting housing agencies or cooperatives**, which has been lacking in the region. Only housing initiatives paired with **community building and identity empowerment efforts** stand a chance of enduring. These initiatives must foster a sense of ownership and pride among residents, encouraging their **active participation** in the development and maintenance of their communities. Integral to these housing initiatives are **education and training programs**, which not only improve residents' skill sets but also their employment prospects. **Ongoing support** and guidance through a consistent presence in the community can lead to better social mobility. **Collaboration with local municipalities and stakeholders** is essential for securing financial arrangements and accessing social services. These partnerships are vital for both the economic stability of residents and for bridging the health and well-being gap that Roma communities face. Ultimately, addressing housing deprivation among Roma communities requires a multifaceted approach by creating an inclusive environment that offers economic opportunities and a strong support network. Such a comprehensive approach is necessary to achieve long-lasting improvements in housing and community conditions.

To break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion, access to decent, desegregated housing is essential. This involves long-term solutions like adequate social housing, affordable rental programs, and targeted housing allowances, coupled with community building and empowerment, integrated into national strategies. These strategies should focus on 'housing-led' and 'housing first' approaches, ensuring equal access to desegregated housing and essential services without discrimination. Emphasising desegregation, such strategies should concentrate on building or investing in integrated social housing coupled with accessible, high-quality social services and effective field social work. Crucially, these measures should involve active participation and consultation with members of the Roma community, aiding their transition from segregated settlements. While promoting the building of social housing might appear to be a

beneficial approach, our findings indicate its limited implementation and emphasise the need for other durable, sustainable solutions that prioritise integration and accessibility. Nevertheless, reports highlight the pressing need for policymakers to reconsider housing investments, emphasising the potential public savings from enhanced health and well-being, as well as the advantages to economic growth and social mobility.

ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Right to Housing under International and European Law

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights does not explicitly refer to the right to housing. Nevertheless, it lays the foundation for interpreting this right in subsequent agreements, treaties, and conventions. The Convention encompasses criteria like habitability, affordability, accessibility, tenure security, and cultural adequacy and emphasises the right to adequate housing without discrimination. This interpretation arises from clauses related to the protection of property[2], the right to respect for private and family life[3], and the prohibition of discrimination[4]. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is responsible for the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which declares that the states should "recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living condition". The right to adequate housing is derived from the above statement, with definitions that explicitly describe the universal right to adequate housing.

Adequate housing is defined as

o   housing that enjoys "sustainable access to natural and common resources, clean drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities, food storage facilities, refuse disposal, site drainage and emergency services". Accordingly, all people should possess a degree of security of tenure that guarantees legal protection against forced eviction, harassment, and other threats,
o   is both affordable and habitable, ensures the physical safety of residents and is culturally adequate,
o   allows for the residents to access employment and social facilities, and should not threaten the residents' right to health, and thus must not be constructed in polluted areas.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) mandates all nations to forbid and eradicate racial prejudice in every manifestation and to assure everyone's right to legal equality, particularly concerning the right to housing[5]. The Council of Europe, in its Revised European Social Charter, addresses the right to housing[6]. In relation to housing, in order to combat social exclusion and poverty, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union[7] states that "the Union recognizes and respects the right to social and housing assistance so

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[2] Article 1 of the Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
[3] Article 8 of Section I: Rights and Freedoms, which also protects "the right to respect for his home", encompasses, among other things, the right of access, the right of occupation and the right not to be expelled or evicted without provision of relevant safeguards, and is thus intimately bound with the principle of legal security of tenure
[4] Article 14 of Section I: Rights and Freedoms
[5] Article 5 (e) (iii) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
[6] Articles 16 and 31 of the Revised European Social Charter
[7] Article 34 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources, in accordance with the rules laid down by Community law and national laws and practices." Furthermore, the European Union adopted the Race Equality Directive in 2000, emphasising the housing rights of ethnic minorities. This directive spans several sectors, including the provision and access to goods and services, housing included. Serving as an anti-prejudice tool, the directive encompasses a legal entity capable of handling complaints related to discrimination, offering independent support to discrimination victims, undertaking studies, and releasing independent analyses and recommendations.

Various international directives and pledges specifically focus on the Roma population. The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers Recommendation guides Member States in enhancing housing conditions for Roma and Travellers across Europe and offers guiding resolutions and principles:

- Guaranteeing that nationwide housing strategies encompass the specific needs of Roma.
- Prioritising Roma housing situations within the broader housing policy framework without discrimination.
- Providing universal access to satisfactory housing for Roma, emphasising affordability, service provision, and choice.
- Preventing social exclusion and ghettoization by refraining from placing Roma in unsuitable, risky locations or in projects that segregate them based on ethnicity.
- Facilitating Roma community involvement in housing program development and execution.
- Encouraging empowerment and skill development within Roma communities by advocating for collaboration on local, regional, and national scales.

The recommendations emphasise the crucial role of local governments in executing housing initiatives within their areas, with oversight from the central government. Further international guidelines were outlined in the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-15), the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area, and the Vienna Declaration on Informal Settlements in South Eastern Europe.

The Roma inclusion policy of the European Union

"Segregation is a real and troubling problem. Roma communities are more affected by this phenomenon, especially in isolated neighbourhoods in urban areas. The impact of segregation is negative and hinders their access to services and development opportunities." — Lendrit Qeli, representative of the Municipal Office for communities and returnees

The core values of the EU include respect for diversity, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and gender equality. It is the duty of Member States to uphold these values for all their citizens, including the Roma community. Key policy instruments and benchmarks emphasising these values within the EU include:

1. The EU Roma Strategic Framework highlights housing as a critical area to address Roma disparity and social marginalisation;
2. The EU Parliament's Resolution on the state of Roma living in settlements of October 2022calls on the Commission to develop an Action Plan aiming to abolish deprived and isolated Roma settlements;
3. The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan identify access to housing as one of its foremost priorities[8];
4. The Urban Agenda for the EU emphasises urban poverty as a central concern;
5. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, combined with the European Child Guarantee, designates Roma children as a primary focus group.

Although many Member States have transferred housing policy formulation, implementation, and private development regulation to local authorities due to decentralisation and the principle of subsidiarity, the central governments still hold the primary responsibility for safeguarding and upholding the right to adequate housing, even though only a few constitutions include that. This includes preventing forced evictions and providing remedies to those impacted. However, the EU can indirectly influence how Member States and local governments design and implement their housing strategies, especially through relevant EU policies concerning anti-discrimination, equality, social inclusion, regional growth, and urban development.

General data on Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority[9]:

- Approximately 6 million Roma reside in the EU, forming a significant part of its population.
- 41% of Roma in the EU feel discriminated against due to their ethnic background.
- Around 80% of Roma live below their country's poverty threshold and in social exclusion, often in precarious, unsafe, and overcrowded conditions in segregated areas in regions heavily affected by environmental degradation and pollution, often near waste dumps, landfills, or contaminated areas, and lack basic environmental services and public utilities.

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[8] Article 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights
[9] P9_TA (2022)0343 EP resolution of 5 October 2022 on the situation of Roma people living in settlements in the EU (2022/2662(RSP))

Spatial segregation significantly affects Roma people's access to healthcare, education, employment, and basic services, including water, sanitation, and electricity.

- About one-third of Roma lack access to tap water, and one in ten live without electricity. The issue of Roma living in settlements is widespread across Europe, highlighting the need for a continent-wide solution.
- Every third Roma child experiences hunger at least once a month, and nearly half of Roma aged 6-24 do not attend school. Intergenerational poverty in Roma settlements impacts their health, well-being, life opportunities, and fundamental human rights.
- The Roma NEET rate for young people is 63%, significantly higher than the EU average of 12%, with a considerable gender gap.
- Only 25% of Roma aged 16 or older are employed or self-employed, with women reporting much lower employment rates (16%) compared to men (34%). Gender equality and the situation of Roma children and young people are crucial yet under-addressed areas in social inclusion efforts.
- Roma experience high rates of low work intensity, job insecurity, and unemployment, often in atypical or precarious jobs, affecting access to unemployment benefits and pensions. Employment discrimination is prevalent, with Roma concentrated in socio-economically disadvantaged regions.
- The gap in housing access between Roma and non-Roma remains largely unchanged due to a lack of policy measures, limited social housing, and discrimination. Addressing Roma integration requires sensitivity to local contexts, diversity, and barriers to social mobility.
- Around 10-20% of the estimated 400,000 Roma in Ukraine are stateless or at risk of statelessness, and those fleeing the war without documentation to confirm their Ukrainian citizenship or residence status find themselves in an especially precarious position.

Although both the EU and its Member States have made efforts, progress remains patchy, as evidenced by the **2021 Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) report**[10]. The FRA surveys highlight the continued effects of antigypsyism, with Roma and Travellers often facing challenges in areas like employment, education, healthcare, and housing.

In 2021, housing deprivation was examined by the FRA in 10 countries, among them five countries that are covered in this study (Czechia, Hungary, Romania, North Macedonia, Serbia) while data was extracted from two more (Slovakia, Bulgaria), using four criteria:

- insufficient lighting,
- moisture issues,
- the absence of an indoor shower/bathroom, and
- no indoor toilet.

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[10] 2021 FRA Report

A dwelling is considered deprived if it meets any one of these conditions.

According to the survey, more than half (52%) of the EU Roma population face housing deprivation, that is, the accommodation exhibits at least one of the following problems: leaking roof, no bath/shower, no indoor toilet, damp walls, or rot in window frames, dwelling too dark or humid). Roma children under 15 and persons with health problems are particularly affected by housing deprivation. Housing deprivation is closely related to residential segregation. While it affects only 32% of Roma living in the mainstream population, in neighbourhoods where all or majority of inhabitants are Roma, the number is double, 61%. Specifically, 19% of Roma stated they reside in dimly lit homes; 25% pointed out issues like leaky roofs or dampness; 34% live without a bathroom or shower indoors, and 33% lack an indoor toilet. Over half (52%) of Roma households in surveyed EU nations face housing deprivation, which is notably higher than the EU's general populace, where only 17% face similar issues. Overall, 82% of Roma lived in overcrowded households in 2021. In five of the 12 countries surveyed (among them Hungary, North Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia), the share of Roma living in overcrowded homes is above 85%. One in five Roma lived in households without indoor tap water in 2021. There is a marked improvement over the years, though, in 2021, the percentage of Roma without access to tap water in surveyed EU nations dropped by eight percentage points from 2016 levels (22% compared to 30%). Nevertheless, this percentage is still over 15 times that of the general EU-27 population, which stands at 1.5%. The highest percentages of Roma without tap water are found in Romania (40%) and Slovakia (28%). In Romania, the general population also faces significant tap water accessibility issues (21%); hence, the disparity between Roma and the general population is less pronounced. A significant portion of Roma encounter prejudice when searching for a place to live. In 2021, 24% of the surveyed Roma reported facing bias because of their Roma background when seeking housing in the past five years. This, however, indicates an overall positive shift from 2016, when the figure was 41%, though the degree of change varies by country. Survey data also reveal that localities, where Roma live lack access to improved water sources, sanitation, and waste removal and their neighbourhood are rarely selected for development projects.

Findings from the **FRA 2021 survey** on housing deprivation in 10 countries, among them Czechia, Hungary, Romania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with data also extracted from Slovakia and Bulgaria:
- More than half (52%) of the EU Roma population face housing deprivation.
- 19% of Roma live in dimly lit homes.
- 25% of Roma report issues like leaky roofs or dampness.
- 34% of Roma live without an indoor bathroom or shower.
- 33% of Roma lack an indoor toilet.
- 52% of Roma households face housing deprivation - vs 17% of the EU average.
- 82% of Roma lived in overcrowded households. In 5 out of 12 countries, it is more than 85%.

> - 1 in 5 Roma lived in households without indoor tap water - vs. 1.5% of the EU average. (RO: 40%, SK: 28%)
> - 24% of surveyed Roma faced bias when seeking housing.
>
> **A dwelling is considered deprived if it meets any one of these conditions.**

The EU Roma framework

"First, we need to prove discrimination – meaning in identical situations, Roma receive a different treatment. For example, if utility pipes end exactly where the Roma neighbourhood begins, then we must suspect a discrimination case. It is this type of treatment that leads to poor housing." —
Vasile Galbea – legal advisor since 2004, Romani CRISS, Romania.

The conditions in Roma settlements breach the human and fundamental rights outlined in EU Treaties, the European Convention on Human Rights, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Social Charter, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Additionally, they go against the principles established in the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is concerning that these rights, when it comes to Roma individuals in settlements, are not upheld in reality. This is further emphasised in the resolution of 17 September 2020 on the Implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies: combating negative attitudes towards people with Romani background in Europe and the resolution from 21 January 2021 on Access to decent and affordable housing for all.

The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, launched in 2011, was a pivotal policy framework designed to address the socio-economic disparities faced by Roma communities across Europe. Emerged as a response to the persistent marginalisation and discrimination faced by the Roma, the Framework aimed to foster inclusion, combat discrimination, and promote equal opportunities for Roma individuals and communities.

Following this framework's stipulations, each Member State developed **National Roma Integration Strategies** or integrated sets of policy measures that were subsequently evaluated by the Commission. The devised strategies primarily centred on four key areas: education, employment, healthcare, and housing, encompassing vital services. Beginning in 2013, the EC has published annual assessment reports to monitor the progress of Member States from contributions by governments, NGOs, international organisations, and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). Each country appointed a **National Roma Contact Points (NRCPs)** to oversee the framework's national implementation. Over the past decade, due to the differing levels of commitment by Member States to execute the Action Plans, the primary responsibility of Member States has shifted to a shared duty between EU institutions and national governments.

The baseline data for the EU Roma framework is structured based on its seven objectives:

- Fight and prevent **antigypsyism and discrimination**.
- Reduce **poverty and social exclusion** to close the socioeconomic gap between Roma and the general population.
- Promote **participation through empowerment**, cooperation, and trust.
- Increase effective equal access to quality and inclusive mainstream **education**.
- Increase effective equal access to quality and sustainable **employment**.
- Improve Roma health and increase effective equal access to **quality healthcare** and social services.
- Increase effective equal access to adequate **desegregated housing** and essential services.

Based on the assessment of the EU Roma Strategic Framework from 2011-2020, the new EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020-2030, adopted by the Commission on October 7 2020, moves away from solely socio-economic integration, focusing instead on a broader strategy that fosters equality, inclusion, and active participation of the Roma community. It sets quantitative targets to be reached by 2030:

Targets of the EU Roma Framework:

- Reduce the gap in housing deprivation faced by Roma by at least one-third,
- Cut the gap in housing overcrowding by at least half, and
- Ensure by 2030 that the majority of Roma do not face housing deprivation and no longer live in overcrowded households.

Targets are defined as horizontal (equality, inclusion and participation) and sectoral (education, employment, health and housing) targets and are now measured quantitatively by means of a portfolio of indicators that require a minimum level of progress by 2030. The indicators concerning housing are the following, even though some do not have actual values across the countries as they are not everywhere available:

- **Headline indicators** include the percentage of individuals living in housing deprivation, defined as homes that are inadequately lit, have leaks or lack basic amenities like indoor toilets, the share of people residing in homes without the requisite number of rooms based on Eurostat's standard, as well as those without indoor tap water.
- **Secondary indicators** show the share of people living in homes without internal toilets, showers, or bathrooms or in residences with structural issues, such as damp or rotting walls, and those who have been evicted from their accommodation in the past year. Additionally, it accounts for individuals who felt discriminated against in their housing search due to their Roma identity in the previous five years.

- **Indicators under development** aim to address residential segregation, geographical aspects specific to the Roma community, and accessibility to basic services and infrastructure such as health care, public transport, and education. There is also a focus on the percentage of people living in illegal or unregulated housing.
- **Process indicators** emphasise the importance of instituting explicit guidelines and measures to address residential segregation, safeguard against irregular evictions, and ensure legal housing. To support Roma communities, the indicators recommend streamlining eligibility criteria for EU-funded projects, emphasising businesses operated by or employing Roma, and encouraging community-level self-help schemes. Regular assessments are essential, particularly regarding halting sites and the provision of safe water. Specific actions include the establishment of inclusive mainstream housing services, targeted support for marginalised areas, infrastructure improvement in disadvantaged settlements, and a "housing first" program. Anti-discrimination training is vital for housing services personnel, and consistent monitoring of disadvantaged areas is necessary. Emphasising the quality of decision-making, the indicators stress the involvement of Roma in shaping housing policies, collaborating with Roma CSOs in developing interventions, and ensuring their participation in monitoring committees and the review of executed measures.

While the primary responsibility for initiating tangible changes for the Roma rests with the Member States, demanding a fortified political resolve, the EU stands ready to guide them and provide essential tools. To achieve the intended outcomes by 2030, robust collaborations must be established among all pertinent parties. This framework is informed by the insights gathered from evaluating the preceding framework, comprehensive consultations, yearly evaluations of the implementation of national strategies, and an understanding of the limited success of prior actions. This initiative addresses requests from the European Parliament, the Council, and civil society for a robust post-2020 EU effort. It acknowledges that while not all Roma face social exclusion, they all can encounter discrimination and feelings of powerlessness. The framework employs an intersectional methodology, acknowledging the intertwining of ethnicity with other identity facets, which can lead to distinct experiences of discrimination.

"Existing antigypsyism in all areas of life negatively impacts the position of Roma. Apart from poverty, there is discrimination in the property market, 'nobody wants to sell a house to Roma'. "— Senada Sali – Legal Director of the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) in North Macedonia.

Of the seven **Member States with significant Roma populations** (over 1% of their total populations), among them Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia were invited to incorporate more robust commitments in their NRSFs. All these states, among others, presented NRSFs with heightened commitments, though varying in intensity, to counteract and combat discrimination, tackle antigypsyism, and dispel anti-Roma biases and misconceptions. The majority of these strategic frameworks came with a plan or suite of actions outlining the utilisation of EU and national resources to endorse Roma equality and inclusion. These states have strategies to confront

and deter segregation in the education and housing sectors. Yet, **when it comes to housing, the financial plans for these initiatives often lack comprehensive specifics**, while Bulgaria and Romania are missing explicit anti-segregation steps. While the EU Roma Framework represented a significant step towards Roma inclusion, it also faced criticisms for **its limited enforceability and varying degrees of commitment from member states**. Nonetheless, it provided a foundational framework for addressing Roma inclusion on a pan-European scale and laid the groundwork for future initiatives aimed at combating discrimination and promoting social cohesion.

Overall analysis of the Roma Strategic Framework

The 2020-2021 Roma Survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), released in 2022, offers foundational data on the Roma situation in eight EU nations, including Czechia, Hungary, and Romania, and two candidate countries, North Macedonia and Serbia. Most Member States have established monitoring and reporting structures coordinated by the National Roma Contact Points (NRCPs), which incorporate feedback from diverse stakeholders, such as Roma civil society groups.

Yet, comparing these frameworks across Member States is problematic due to variances in statistical methodologies. A new Roma Survey will be undertaken by the FRA in 2024, the outcomes of which, combined with Member States' biannual reports, will aid both the Member States and the Commission in tracking progress towards the 2030 goals of the EU Roma Strategic Framework. Most Member States have implemented measures to combat discrimination against the Roma, but there is **inconsistency in application and a lack of emphasis on intersectional discrimination**. While NRSFs often include Roma-specific policies, clarity regarding direct benefits to the community is lacking.

The EU Roma Strategic Framework sets ambitious goals for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation, especially considering past challenges and the unexpected economic repercussions of the Russo-Ukraine war in 2022. The Roma Civil Monitoring (RCM) 2021-25 initiative, implemented by a consortium of highly acknowledged organisations working internationally for Roma equality, participation and inclusion at the international level, namely the Democracy Institute of the Central European University (CEU, as project leader), ERGO Network, Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) and European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), indicates a need for greater Roma involvement in NRSF development. Many states aim to strengthen Roma organisations, but there is less focus on capacity-building. Education is a primary sectoral focus, though desegregation efforts in education and housing are limited. In the RCM, the national strategies are assessed in line with the following monitoring criteria:

- Participation of Roma in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the NRSF,
- NRSF's relevance to the needs of Roma people in their diversity,
- Expected NRSF effectiveness (i.e., the likelihood that it will accomplish its stated objectives).

Member States will report their progress to the Commission every two years starting in 2023. The National Roma Contact Points will be more institutionalised and carry more political weight in countries with higher Roma populations, including Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary. Countries can be sanctioned for non-compliance by means of sectoral funding cuts; if a Member State is not making adequate progress regarding one of the seven objectives, all mainstream EU funding for that objective will be withdrawn.

Many European governments do not prioritise Roma inclusion and housing, particularly amidst the current political environment. European Council quantitative targets aim to reduce gaps by 2030 significantly:

- Cut the proportion of Roma who experience discrimination by half (from 26% to 13%),
- Decrease the proportion of the general population who feel uncomfortable having Roma neighbours by at least a third (from 46% to 30%),
- Cut the poverty gap between Roma and the general population by half (80% of Roma at risk of poverty vs. 16.8%).

These targets seem even more challenging given the EU's attention on the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine conflict, coupled with the political instability in countries with significant Roma populations. These countries face potential sanctions and must institutionalise National Roma Contact Points (NRCPs), which can attract criticism from right-wing Eurosceptics. With high inflation rates, like Bulgaria's 16.9%, Slovakia's 15.4%, and Hungary's 22.5% in November 2022, and political instability, such as government collapses in Slovakia and Bulgaria, it is challenging to prioritise spending on Roma issues. Additionally, rising populism and an increase in right-wing support, evident in the Czech Republic and potentially Hungary, could further derail support for Roma policies.

The RCM Synthesis Report found that Roma inclusion is not often the main focus of mainstream policy changes, especially in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, where Roma exclusion is largely due to ineffective sector-specific policies. The 2020-2030 EURSF recognizes Roma diversity, leading several NRSFs to concentrate on the unique circumstances of Roma women, youth, and children. Some countries are planning to collect gender-disaggregated data on Roma inclusion outcomes systematically. However, few address the needs of specific Roma groups like the LGBTI, disabled, or elderly. Intra-EU mobile Roma and other excluded groups often remain overlooked in new NRSFs, as does linguistic and intra-ethnic diversity in relevant countries.

The report summarises the findings as follows:

Roma participation:
- o In many countries, including notably Bulgaria and Hungary, the governmental agencies responsible for NRSF development did not incorporate civil society's inputs. In general, the enhanced engagement of Roma and pro-Roma civil society, especially in crafting NRSF

documents, does not often result in a significant enhancement of their active role in public policy and citizenship.

o To move beyond superficial involvement and ensure genuine and impactful Roma participation, there is a crucial need to build the capabilities of the Roma civil society and actively engage Roma at both central and local tiers. Greater emphasis should be placed on amplifying the voices of Romani women and the younger generation.

Content of the new NRCFs:

o The 2020-2030 EURSF marks a shift in recognizing society's responsibility for Roma inclusion, identifying antigypsyism and other barriers as significant obstacles to inclusion. Unlike the previous 2011 EU Framework, the new EURSF has set quantitative EU-level targets for Roma well-being by 2030, emphasising equality of outcomes rather than just opportunities. However, these changes are only partially incorporated in the new NRSFs. Thanks to the international Roma movement, some NRSFs recognise and address antigypsyism, while many NRSFs treat the fight against antigypsyism as a standalone action, focusing on awareness campaigns, monitoring, and education, e.g. in Czechia, Slovakia, and Romania. Some countries, such as Bulgaria and Hungary, recognise the problem but offer no solutions, while others ignore it entirely.

o Often, the task of inclusion remains on the Roma themselves, with only a few NRSFs recognising mainstream society's role in inclusion. While Roma-specific issues are not primary drivers of mainstream policy reforms, several NRSFs are beginning to consider the diverse needs within the Roma community, such as those of women, youth, and children. However, certain groups like Roma LGBTI, disabled, elderly, and undocumented Roma often remain overlooked.

Relevance of the national strategies:

o Most NRSFs do not align with the broader goals of the 2020-2030 EURSF. They mainly focus on the four primary policy sectors (education, employment, healthcare, and housing), combating discrimination and, in some countries, promoting Romani culture. However, this promotion often leans towards preserving traditional aspects rather than modern developments.

o While older EU Member States prioritise social protection and poverty reduction, Central and Eastern European countries overlook the deep-seated poverty issues faced by the Roma, especially since the post-Communist era. Official stances, often challenged by experts, tend to lean towards a narrow neoliberal perspective, suggesting that education alone can resolve Roma's social exclusion.

o **Educational segregation** remains a substantial issue in countries with significant Roma populations. The measures introduced by these nations are not comprehensive enough. While some success has been noted in secondary education, efforts to enhance Roma participation in tertiary education are evident in specific countries. The challenge of Roma NEETs has also been a focus in several states.

- o **Residential segregation** remains a significant barrier to Roma inclusion in many EU nations. However, only a handful are proactively addressing this. Many countries choose to study or enhance living conditions in segregated areas, but some efforts inadvertently intensify segregation.

Alignment:

- o While many countries align with the EU's Roma Strategic Framework targets, **Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania show partial or divergent alignment.**

- o Assessing contributions towards EU targets is complicated by distinct national goals or the absence of any. Member States with large Roma populations generally demonstrate commitment to EU targets, but Romania's divergence could impact the EU's 2030 goal attainment. Most of these states have empowered National Roma Contact Points (NRCPs) for NRSF implementation, with Slovakia and Czechia particularly committed. However, **resource allocation for NRCPs remains stagnant, potentially limiting their effectiveness**, which depends on their role and position within the institutional system.

Member States are urged to address the prevalent poverty and deprivation among the Roma, with an emphasis on preventing child poverty, intergenerational poverty, and social exclusion. While numerous states have outlined measures to combat these issues, their commitment varies. It is essential for the Roma, particularly vulnerable groups like women, youth, and the elderly, to be involved in decision-making processes for the effective promotion of equality. Regarding education, while steps have been taken to ensure equality and eliminate segregation, the approach lacks consistency and depth across countries, with many strategies not sufficiently addressing barriers like digital exclusion, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the employment sector, Member States are introducing measures to enhance job opportunities for the Roma, but specific support for self-employed Roma remains limited. The need for barrier-free healthcare access is recognized, with measures like training healthcare professionals and introducing mobile health services. However, more specific actions for groups like disabled or elderly Roma are infrequent. On housing, while many states have initiated actions to improve essential services and deter segregation, the approach towards addressing discrimination remains insufficient in most strategies. **The challenge of overcrowded households and sustainable housing solutions remains inadequately addressed.** The overarching theme across these areas is the varied commitment and specificity in National Roma Strategic Frameworks, with a need for more coherent, comprehensive, and actionable measures.

As far as EU candidates and potential candidates are concerned, **Western Balkans leaders have shown a strong commitment to Roma inclusion by aligning their NRSFs and action plans with**

the EU Roma Strategic Framework[11] **within the Poznań process**[12]. These plans focus on combating antigypsyism throughout the region and have been formulated with civil society input. While all Western Balkans NRSFs include monitoring tools and national indicators, there is a need to boost data collection, reporting, and evaluation to track progress more effectively. **While the Roma population faces widespread poverty and social exclusion in the region, current measures do not adequately address the discrimination faced by multiple vulnerable groups, such as older individuals, women, children, the LGBTIQ community, and stateless Roma**. The oversight of national Roma contact points also needs enhancement, especially regarding their involvement in the programming and monitoring of EU funds. While NRSFs and Action Plans recognize the necessity of identifying financial needs and point to national budget allocations, there remains a heavy reliance on donor funding. The Commission's significant support through pre-accession assistance (IPA) funds is aiding local and national capacities and supporting education, business initiatives, and other areas. This funding will persist, extending to new priority areas like the digital domain.

New candidate countries, among them Ukraine, will need to **focus on Roma equality, inclusion, and alignment with the EU Roma Strategic Framework**. The European Commission has already highlighted the need for these nations to strengthen the rights of their minority and vulnerable groups. Lastly, the Commission plans to maintain a vigilant eye on these developments and will continue providing financial support for Roma inclusion in the aforementioned countries as part of the enlargement negotiations under 'Judiciary and fundamental rights'.

All national social inclusion frameworks were encouraged to incorporate certain common features, including setting baselines and targets, tackling antigypsyism and discrimination, ensuring socio-economic inclusion, combining targeted and mainstream measures, allocating dedicated budgets, and involving Roma and pro-Roma civil society in consultation and cooperation processes. Member states with significant Roma populations, among them specifically Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, each having more than 1% of their total population as Roma, were anticipated to incorporate more ambitious commitments in their National Roma Strategic Frameworks (NRSFs). All these countries have submitted NRSFs that indeed contain more ambitious commitments, though they vary in their level of ambition. These commitments primarily focus on combating discrimination and addressing antigypsyism, including anti-Roma prejudices and stereotypes.

Included in these plans are specific strategies to tackle and prevent segregation in both the education and housing sectors. Regarding residential desegregation, the framework aims to tackle the social exclusion and segregation that many Roma communities face. It encourages EU Member

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[11] Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo (this designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence), which agreed, within the Poznań process, to bring their national Roma strategic frameworks/action plans into NRSFs /Action Plans in line with the EU Roma framework.

[12] Outcome of the Sofia Summit on 6 November 2020 Sofia Summit, Poznań Declaration of Western Balkans partners on Roma integration within the EU Enlargement Process.

States to develop and implement policies that promote equal access to housing, improve living conditions, and prevent segregation. This includes addressing issues like spatial segregation, substandard living conditions, and lack of access to essential services. The framework emphasises the importance of integrating Roma communities into mainstream society while respecting and preserving their cultural identity. In the context of housing, this means not only improving the quality of existing housing in Roma communities but also ensuring that Roma people have equal opportunities to live in different residential areas. It is important to note that while the framework sets out these goals and recommendations, the implementation and specific policies are largely the responsibility of individual EU Member States. Each country may approach these challenges differently, based on their national context and the specific needs of their Roma population. In the field of housing, **Bulgaria and Romania notably lack specific desegregation measures**. While many NRSFs are adequate in education, employment, health, and housing, they could be more comprehensive in addressing the complexity of challenges facing the Roma. Desegregation in education and housing is not sufficiently addressed. Several member states have set national targets aligning with EU-level targets, though **Hungary and Slovakia have only partially done so, and Romania's targets do not correspond with EU targets**. This discrepancy could negatively impact the collective capacity to reach 2030 targets. Some member states have set immeasurable targets or none at all, showing a lack of effort, especially in countries with larger Roma populations.

The National Roma Contact Points (NRCP) vary in mandate strength among member states. While some have been given adequate mandates and access to EU funds, they lack sufficient staffing and financial resources. In countries with larger Roma populations, NRCPs are expected to be further strengthened, but resource and capacity limitations persist.

EU Council Conclusions on Roma Housing October 2023

Under Spain's EU Presidency leadership, the Council emphasised Roma housing equality, focusing on eradicating segregated settlements. The Spanish EU Presidency has led the adoption of Council Conclusions that significantly advance the **issue of Roma access to adequate and desegregated housing**. These conclusions address the residential segregation affecting Roma communities and include a **first-time definition of "segregated settlements"** in the EU regulatory framework.

> **Definition of segregated settlements:**
>
> Slums and substandard housing settlements of an informal and stable nature, with physical, functional and/or social isolation, where the objective conditions related to housing, poverty and access to rights and public services are significantly worse as compared to the rest of the population.

The Council Conclusions stress the persistence of the gap in access to housing between groups in vulnerable situations, including Roma and the rest of the population, due to factors such as poverty and social exclusion, the lack of significant policy measures or investments, the limited availability and poor quality of social housing, discrimination in the housing market and segregation. The Council recognises that "*the obstacles that Roma people often encounter when seeking access to adequate housing reinforces the vicious circle of intergenerational poverty and violations of human rights*". Furthermore, it points to the fact that "*Antigypsyism is an unusually prevalent form of racism [...]. The Member States of the European Union have all recognised antigypsyism as a barrier to inclusion, and hence the importance of tackling it.*" The Council urges the use of EU and local funding sources to improve housing and eliminate segregation, which aligns with the [2021 Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion, and participation](), aiming to improve Roma housing conditions and eradicate segregation within the National Roma Strategic Frameworks.

Despite existing tools and efforts, housing inequalities for Roma persist, prompting the Council to call for transnational cooperation and mutual learning to eradicate housing segregation. This includes improving conditions for nomadic and EU-mobile Roma. Member States are urged to **take concrete measures within their national strategies to enhance Roma housing and eradicate segregation**, using available European and national financial tools. They are also encouraged to invest in infrastructure for disadvantaged neighbourhoods and implement inclusive housing initiatives for vulnerable Roma, providing information and training to combat discrimination and ensure the participation of affected families in decision-making. The European Commission is invited to support Member States in addressing housing segregation and deprivation, fostering access to non-segregated housing, promoting transnational cooperation, and sharing good practices. Additionally, the Commission and Member States are to use the EU Roma Strategic Framework Portfolio of Indicators and work towards achieving the Framework's targets, ensuring effective monitoring of funding programs aimed at Roma community desegregation.

The Spanish Presidency Agenda on Roma issues contains the following initiatives:
- Moving forward with Council Conclusions regarding the Roma population that explore channels for eradicating segregated settlements and shantytowns and, specifically, on the eradication of segregated and deprived settlements.
- Co-organising the EUROMA Platform Meeting in Madrid in November 2023 together with DG Justice.
- Co-organising the National Roma Contact Points meeting on 22 November 2023.

The [Council Conclusions on Measures for Equal Access for Roma to Adequate and Desegregated Housing, and to Address Segregated Settlements]() approved by the EPSCO Council on October 9, 2023, outline several key directives for the Member States and the Commission:

- Identify EU, national, regional, and local **financial resources** and utilise financial tools like ESF+, ERDF, and rural development programs to improve housing and eradicate segregation in Roma settlements.
- Address difficulties Roma face in accessing universal housing policies by implementing **targeted initiatives** and incorporating inclusivity criteria in national strategies.
- Provide **training on equal treatment and combating discrimination** for staff in housing services.
- **Involve Roma communities**, especially youth and women, in policy-making processes.
- Use the EU Roma Strategic Framework Portfolio of Indicators for **systematic monitoring**, support for policy implementation, and empowering Roma civil society in decision-making.
- Ensure **effective monitoring of spending programs** aimed at desegregating Roma communities.
- The Commission is encouraged to assist Member States in addressing housing segregation and deprivation, fostering access to non-segregated housing, and promoting transnational cooperation and best practice sharing.

ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL ROMA STRATEGIES

Bulgaria

In **Bulgarian Roma neighbourhoods, approximately 25% of the homes are informal dwellings**, putting them at high risk for forced demolitions. A significant portion, 89%, of the demolition orders issued by local authorities targets Roma houses. Although the legalisation of these dwellings is theoretically possible, in practice, it is hindered by complex administrative procedures, making it a slow and challenging process. Despite meeting the necessary legal requirements, demolitions continue due to being more cost-effective and having popular support from the general public. Public sentiment, notably influenced by discriminatory attitudes and ultranationalists, exerts pressure on local authorities, impeding the development of additional social housing for Roma populations. Moreover, the annual financial allocation of 14.2 million euros, intended for the development of 100 social dwellings in Bulgaria, is criticised as being "extremely insufficient". However, there have been some successful developments, such as the construction of 334 individual social houses across three municipalities. Despite these efforts, there remains a significant gap in Bulgaria in terms of housing support mechanisms for vulnerable and needy groups, as well as for young professionals and families starting their careers and lives.

The RCM report indicates that Roma in Bulgaria are experiencing high levels of unemployment, with only a small percentage of the Roma population above the age of 15 being economically active. This is attributed to low levels of literacy and education, compounded by widespread negative attitudes and discrimination. Housing conditions for Roma are significantly poorer compared to the general population, with many Roma households lacking basic amenities like sewage systems. Health challenges are also notable, with Roma communities being more vulnerable to diseases like measles and hepatitis. Furthermore, the participation rate of Roma children in pre-primary education is considerably lower than the national average, impacting both their academic performance and their mothers' employment possibilities. This information reflects the ongoing challenges in effectively addressing the social inclusion and integration of the Roma community in Bulgaria.

Czechia

In the **Czech Republic**, housing allowances are available and adapted to regional differences. However, funds are often spent on costly, low-quality housing amid growing right-wing opposition. Successful local initiatives in social housing, led by local governments and NGOs, are yet to be adopted at the national level, leaving Roma housing as a predominantly local issue. This often forces many Roma into ghettos or expensive, substandard "social hostels" due to discrimination and the scarcity of long-term social housing. European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are being utilized to shape social housing projects based on effective pilot programs implemented by 12

municipalities to prevent ghettoization and segregation. Despite these efforts, existing areas of concentrated poverty and segregation continue to grow, representing an unresolved challenge.

Although a well-intended and comprehensive document, the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) of the Czech Republic has faced critical observations in the most recent Roma Civil Monitor report. Despite the introduction of the NRIS, a complex and detailed document aimed at fostering Roma inclusion, there have been significant shortcomings in its implementation. The report highlights that no substantial progress has been achieved in the field of Roma inclusion since the adoption of the current NRIS. A key issue identified is the lack of effective mechanisms to enable Roma political participation. Furthermore, the strategy lacks efficient coordination mechanisms for inter-ministerial implementation, and there has been an absence of sustained activities for local-level implementation. The report also points out critical areas, such as the **ongoing issue of segregation in housing and education**. The number of Roma children educated in segregated settings or according to a reduced curriculum remains worryingly high. The Czech Republic's approach to Roma integration has been criticised for focusing on non-ethnic concepts of social exclusion/inclusion and a territorial approach, which overlooks the specific situation of Roma as an ethnic group facing direct and indirect discrimination and lack of participation. This approach has led to vagueness in Roma-specific policies and regulations and a lack of monitoring of their effectiveness and impact. The RCM reports suggest that for future strategies, lessons should be drawn from these shortcomings, with a focus on improving implementation mechanisms and addressing specific areas of Roma inclusion more effectively.

Hungary

Since the regime change, **Hungary** has shifted its approach towards the Roma from positive discrimination to addressing their challenges both as an ethnic minority and within larger social contexts. Hungary's 2011 National Social Inclusion Strategy, updated in 2014, addresses disparities like child poverty and Roma issues, focusing on areas like education, employment, and housing. Influenced by earlier initiatives, this strategy, however, broadened its scope to include all disadvantaged groups, raising concerns about diluting its original intent. Efforts include reforms in the welfare system, improving living conditions in impoverished areas, promoting kindergarten attendance from age 3, backing "second chance" schools, and offering scholarships for Roma students. Despite these, certain regions, particularly in northeastern and southwestern Hungary, face deep poverty and stagnation, with the Roma community severely impacted by high poverty and dropout rates and low employment. The Strategy advocates assisting those needing social services in their homes. Today, over two-thirds of the 23,000 children in aftercare live with foster parents, a significant increase from only 50% in the early 2000s. Social urban rehabilitation programs funded by Regional Operative Programs (TOP) aim to increase the social housing portfolio to support desegregation. Municipalities are making progress with projects financed by European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). Despite these efforts, the municipal social housing portfolio remains

significantly limited, particularly in small and disadvantaged settlements, making it increasingly difficult for the poorest people, including the Roma, to access housing. Most Roma are in low-status residential zones, segregated areas, and substandard dwellings and do not benefit substantially from major social housing developments or ESIF-funded initiatives. There are some exceptions, but their impact is minimal at a larger scale. Mainstream housing benefits provided by municipalities are inadequate for ensuring housing security or addressing affordability issues. Additionally, the criteria for family housing allowance schemes are set at a minimum, excluding many of the poorest individuals and families.

The RCM reports on the National Social Inclusion Strategy (NSIS) of Hungary, covering the period 2020-2030, highlight several key issues and challenges in the strategy's implementation and its impact on the Roma community in Hungary, such as its broad policy approach, which, while inclusive, does not exclusively target the Roma community. The strategy addresses the Roma as part of Hungary's most deprived population but **refrains from focusing solely on them**. This approach has made it difficult for evaluators and independent stakeholders to accurately assess the effectiveness of the strategy's initiatives specifically for the Roma community, thereby **hindering monitoring and evaluation efforts**. Another significant concern raised is the deterioration of indicators related to the Roma community's situation in Hungary. This deterioration is linked to the **general degradation of state and municipal services**, such as shortages of school and kindergarten teachers and declining access to medical services. These trends have been examined in relation to social services and child protection. The reports also point out the **lack of Roma representation in decision-making processes**, especially in public services, which undermines genuine partnership and inclusion. This lack of representation extends to spaces of symbolic representation, such as public collections, school textbooks, and mainstream media, limiting support for inclusion policies among the majority population. Moreover, the reports highlight the challenges faced by Roma in political participation. While the government has provided opportunities for broader political participation, the main institutional representative of Roma, the National Minority Roma Self-government, has faced repeated prosecutions for financial misconduct. This situation, along with growing school segregation and a strengthening of social inequalities in the educational system, paints a complex picture of the challenges faced by the Roma community in Hungary.

While the Hungarian government has made efforts to develop political discourse with representatives of Roma organisations, the effectiveness of these councils and their impact on Roma integration remains hard to assess. The relationship between Roma residents and local authorities is often characterised by **clientelism**, and local Roma organisations face challenges in obtaining funding for their activities. These findings suggest that the NSIS, while a step in the right direction, requires more focused efforts and strategies to effectively address the specific needs and challenges faced by the Roma community in Hungary.

Kosovo

The **Kosovo Strategy for the Integration of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian Communities** from 2009–2015, approved in 2008, was the government's first commitment to guaranteeing the rights of all communities based on international human rights standards, Kosovo's Constitution, and its legislation. An accompanying Action Plan outlined nine areas of focus, including education, housing, and security. However, due to financial constraints, the strategy's goals were not fully realised. Building on this, the 2022-2026 Strategy for Inclusion of Roma and Ashkali Communities aims to further the government's objective of fostering a multi-ethnic society with equal rights for all. This strategy, guided by the EU Framework for Roma Integration, prioritises five key areas: education, employment, health, housing, and addressing discrimination. The strategy was crafted by the Office for Good Governance within the Office of the Prime Minister, rooted in the broader governmental program and strategic operational plan.

The National Strategy for Reintegration of Repatriated Persons 2018-2022, overseen by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, sets forth policies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of repatriated persons, including specific housing solutions. This strategy strengthens Kosovo's ties with EU Member States, emphasising its commitment to the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). It also establishes an institutional structure for the reintegration process, clarifying roles, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms. In 2022, 354 people from the Roma communities benefited from this strategy. Meanwhile, the Strategy for Communities and Return 2014-2018, directed by the Ministry for Communities and Return, offered housing for returnees. This involved reconstructing homes on abandoned properties and building new ones on returnees' land. For ethnic minorities, 1920 individual houses were built on municipal land, and seven apartment buildings were constructed in Shterpce and Gracanice. As per the MCR, 412 families, or 1768 individuals, are currently awaiting housing assistance.

North Macedonia

The Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma 2022 – 2030 in Macedonia places a significant emphasis on housing as a key strategic goal. It outlines specific objectives to improve housing conditions for the Roma community. These include urbanising Roma settlements with measures like **mapping illegal homes**, **amending urban plans to incorporate Roma settlements**, and **legalising illegally built dwellings** where feasible, supported by relevant laws and financial aid to vulnerable groups.

The strategy also focuses on **providing permanent, decent, affordable, and desegregated housing for Roma living in informal settlements that cannot be legalised**. This involves introducing a 10% social housing quota, constructing standard houses, and renovating collective housing facilities. Additionally, the strategy aims to improve communal infrastructure through enhanced fund allocation methodologies, financial support for infrastructure development, and grants for project development at local government levels. Efforts to **reduce pollution and**

contamination in Roma settlements are also part of the strategic goals, with plans to install measuring stations and subsidise photovoltaic systems and air conditioners. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is tasked with monitoring the implementation of these measures. A revision of the Strategy is recommended in 2025 to incorporate lessons learned and adapt to new contexts, ensuring the continuous improvement and effectiveness of the initiatives for Roma inclusion.

Romania

"Although there have been improvements in obtaining identity cards through previous programs, the requirement in Romania to have a residential address for issuing an identity document remains a significant obstacle in providing long-term identity documentation for the Roma community." — Damaris Lois Bangean, World Bank, Romania.

In Romania, several mainstream programs aim to alleviate the financial burden on low-income families, addressing housing affordability issues through heating aid and minimum inclusion income. However, large-scale policies effectively addressing the poor housing conditions of vulnerable populations, particularly the segregated Roma, are lacking. These communities often lack access to public utilities and sanitation. The effectiveness of these programs is questionable, as only 25% of Roma families received minimum inclusion income, and just 44% benefited from heating aid. Regarding anti-segregation, only one proposed project for European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) funding would have breached anti-segregation requirements. Despite these efforts, there is little evidence to suggest a significant reduction in total segregation, with over half of the Roma population living in spatially segregated communities. Government social housing programs in Romania are largely ineffective. For example, a program initiated in 2008 aimed to build 300 dwellings, yet it remains incomplete. This is particularly concerning given that over 60,000 Roma families live in informal housing. Additionally, the allocation rules for social housing are unclear, further complicating the situation for these vulnerable groups.

The implementation of Romania's National Roma Strategy has faced criticism for several reasons. Key concerns include the **reduced participation of Roma organisations** in the final stages of strategy development and the omission of their proposals. The strategy's measures are criticised for **lacking specificity and actionable indicators**, raising doubts about their effectiveness. Concerns also exist about the sufficiency of funding, which is predominantly reliant on national resources. Additionally, the strategy fails to address the needs of vulnerable Roma groups, especially women and children, adequately, lacking a concrete, intersectional approach.

Serbia

Pre-accession countries, including Serbia, joined the **Declaration of the Partners of the Western Balkans on the Integration of Roma Men and Women within the European Union Enlargement**

Process, the so-called Poznań Declaration, in 2019. The strategy is aligned with the Poznań Declaration and the EU Strategic Framework for Roma. The national legal basis of the Strategy is based on the Constitution of the individual countries, the respective legislation on the protection of the rights and freedoms of national minorities, the laws on councils of national minorities, the anti-discrimination laws, etc. The strategy identifies in detail the progress that has been achieved in various areas, including housing, and the challenges that need to be resolved.

In Serbia, the Roma, numbering between 250,000 and 600,000, are the second largest national minority, following the Hungarians. A key element of the strategy in Serbia in the area of housing is the recognized need for the **legalisation of all illegal or inadequate settlements where Roma people live** that cannot be legalised. There is an urgent need to provide permanent, dignified, affordable, and desegregated housing solutions for vulnerable groups. Research has shown that the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian national minorities, as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Kosovo, are most affected by the phenomenon of statelessness in Serbia. These people have been faced with the impossibility of registration in birth registers and access to personal documents, which deeply impacts their access to their rights. Since **personal documents and citizenship are prerequisites of eligibility for social housing**, it leaves these people even more susceptible to further social marginalisation.[13]

Slovakia

In Slovakia, there is a proposed legislative change aimed at legalising informal dwellings, which could significantly advance housing inclusion if implemented successfully. This effort is supported by a national project offering legal counselling and additional support to underdeveloped Roma communities. From 2000 to 2018, the government funded the development of 295 housing sites, creating 4,689 flats of lower standard, with a budget of 68.3 million EUR. Despite these efforts, the program predominantly facilitated segregated housing on the peripheries of municipalities, highlighting Slovakia's ongoing struggle to address disparities in housing conditions and reduce segregation.

Ethnic discrimination in Slovakia is prevalent enough to bar Roma from accessing private housing markets, pushing them to depend on municipal housing. These municipalities often discriminate against segregated areas by restricting access to essential services like water and waste collection yet face minimal legal repercussions for such practices. Housing benefits in Slovakia are designed to cover costs in lower-standard or older municipal housing, but they fall short in facilitating moves to standard housing or more economically prosperous areas. Additionally, these benefits exclude indebted individuals or those without a formal fixed address, further marginalising vulnerable populations. Consequently, many Roma find themselves 'trapped' in lower-quality social housing.

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[13] *Lica od rizika od apartidije u Srbiji: Pregled trenutnog stanja i preporuke za buducnost* . (2020). CeSid i UNHCR.

This situation is worsened by significant delays in utilising European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) resources to address these challenges. This delay exacerbates the existing issues of inadequate housing and persistent segregation faced by the Roma community in Slovakia.

The National Roma Strategy and associated Action Plans (APs) aim to enhance the quality of life in marginalised communities. However, their impact might be limited due to certain factors, such as **departmental inflexibilities** and a strategic focus on more manageable initial activities. Delays in approving the NRSF and APs have **shortened the implementation timeframe**. Potential challenges in executing activities include the **lack of direct local government involvement** and the **necessity for sustained political commitment**. The role of NGOs, while important, cannot substitute for systemic state-led changes needed to improve Roma living conditions and societal status.

Housing situation of Roma in the Western Balkans

The housing landscape in the Western Balkans has undergone significant transformation due to the shift from socialism to a market-driven economy. Key challenges include widespread land and housing privatisation, rampant illegal housing, and decentralisation of housing policy responsibilities to local authorities. This transition weakened the region's ability to address housing needs, notably due to limited funding and capacity. The Roma community, in particular, faces subpar living conditions, often living in unauthorised and informal housing, making them vulnerable to forced evictions and other challenges. Efforts to legalise these dwellings and draft social housing policies have been made, but provision for vulnerable groups remains inconsistent, largely relying on government subsidies and collaborations with international organisations and NGOs.

Understanding the housing predicament of the Roma in countries including North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo requires a deep dive into the factors influencing their living conditions. For example, official and unofficial population counts for Roma and Egyptian communities vary significantly, emphasising the importance of accurate data for policymaking. Despite owning their homes, many Roma live in dilapidated structures with limited access to utilities, far below the living standards of the non-Roma population. The migration from rural to urban areas has further exacerbated these conditions. International studies have revealed that the post-socialist era has seen a decline in the well-being of Roma and Egyptian communities as they grapple with unemployment, illiteracy, deteriorating health, and inadequate housing. The EU has recognized these challenges in its progress reports, highlighting the urgency to improve Roma living conditions and addressing the controversial issue of forced evictions[14]. Amidst escalating global challenges, including the conflict in Ukraine, Middle Eastern turmoil, security issues, and the migration crisis, the housing needs of the Roma community must remain a priority.

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[14] OSCE/ODIHR Regional Report on Housing Legalisation, Settlement Upgrading and Social Housing for Roma in the Western Balkans

GOOD PRACTICES IN ADDRESSING HOUSING DEPRIVATION

Good practices for addressing housing deprivation are scattered throughout Central and Eastern, but pinpointing the most effective practices for a specific location or gathering a selection of sustainable solutions does not guarantee a replicable blueprint for wider application. This limitation is due to the complexity of housing issues, where practices never seem strictly good or bad in terms of efficacy. Identifying what constitutes a good practice remains a challenge, yet there are recurring factors and attributes of programs that frequently emerge as foundational to lasting solutions.

Specificities of good practices

These encompass a deep understanding of local needs, community involvement, and adaptability to changing circumstances, indicating that successful housing strategies are often those tailored to the unique conditions of each area and, most of all, the application of holistic approaches that go beyond mere construction or refurbishment of living spaces, which is a key element of all identified good practices. Central to this comprehensive strategy is the **relocation of persons into integrated environments**, which actively works against segregation. By promoting **diversity** within neighbourhoods, communities are fostered that are inclusive and representative of society as a whole, which provides a chance for previously excluded individuals and families to easily **access vital public services** such as educational institutions and health centres, job opportunities, cultural locations, and diverse communities. A key to the development of new housing solutions is **desegregation**, in other words, relocation out of segregated areas into integrated communities, or, at least, intervening along the **non-segregation** principle, which is not contributing to or perpetuating segregation. Mere renovation support in the Roma settlement located in a specific part of numerous Eastern European settlements, practically in the outskirts over the river that crosses the village or a railroad line that separates the area from the mainstream settlement, or even behind a wall constructed with the explicit intention explicitly isolate the area, rarely ever contributed to meaningful change in the living standard of dwellers in the long run. Likewise, relocation within the segregation, or relocation from one segregation to another, is unlikely to improve access to public services and, therefore, cannot contribute to any meaningful social mobility, as described below under the Bad Practices chapter of a relocation case in Hungary.

A strategy that is likely to work sustainably preferably includes a **tenancy scheme** and the **development of easy-to-build houses** that come in various sizes to cater to the different needs of individuals and families. Such housing options should be designed with inclusivity at the forefront, ensuring that they are accessible to all. Inclusivity also means involving the future residents in the planning process. A variety of tenancy schemes, blending private and municipal property, may also contribute to sustainable housing solutions by creating a balanced and flexible housing market. Advocacy for government-level commitment to the establishment of a housing agency or cooperative has been brushed aside all over the region in recent decades.

This research has shown that only the housing initiatives that are combined with efforts towards **community building, social activities, and identity empowerment** have a fair chance to sustain.

Community engagement is critical, allowing for a sense of ownership and belonging among those who will live in these homes. It is not just about providing a roof over one's head, which has proven unsustainable multiple times in the past across Eastern Europe, especially in Slovakia[15], but also about creating a sense of home and connection to the surrounding community. It is essential that residents take pride in their homes and community, in which they have invested their intellectual and physical capacities, which in turn fosters a collective effort towards upkeep and improvement. **Education and training programs, combined with mentoring**, should be integrated into housing initiatives to enhance residents' skill sets and employment prospects. A **consistent presence** in the community through these programs ensures **ongoing support and guidance and offers considerably better chances for upward social mobility**.

Collaboration with the municipality and local stakeholders is also vital for success. A strong partnership can lead to assistance in financial arrangements, such as microloans for homeowners or income generation programs that support the economic stability of residents. **Access to social and medical services** must be a given, not a privilege, in these communities. These services are especially crucial for addressing the broader social determinants of health and well-being among the residents, especially in view of the significant gap between the significantly poorer health condition and life expectancy of Roma people compared to the general population. Access to services is severely hindered in segregated areas and perpetuates a lack of prospects for generations; therefore, it is crucial to find solutions for relocation into integrated neighbourhoods.

In summary, addressing housing deprivation is not just about building houses; it is also about constructing communities and empowering residents, which requires a multi-faceted approach that blends elaboration of tenancy schemes, construction of infrastructure, providing social support, community building, economic opportunities, and strong partnerships. Only through such a holistic approach can we hope to achieve lasting solutions to the complex issue of housing deprivation.

Sustainable good practices in addressing housing deprivation include a combination of some of the following preconditions and activities:

- Deep involvement and **cooperation with municipalities and local stakeholders**, including locally active businesses and civil actors. Raising awareness of current support plans and local municipality procedures among the Roma population is key to ensuring access to substantive information.
- **Political willingness** to create systematic construction programs of easy-to-build houses in different sizes with inclusivity and preferably with dwellers' involvement in the planning phase construction process. Advocacy for the elaboration of local social housing programs might prove more effective with individual municipalities than at the government level.

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[15] Based on Focus Group Discussion with Roma mayors dated … (see Appendix 2)

- **Relocation to an integrated environment** along the EU's desegregation principle, or, at minimum, providing housing support strictly along the non-segregation principle that does not contribute to or perpetuate segregation.
- Elaboration of housing programs with a combination of **tenancy schemes** involving municipal and private property, potentially with the establishment of a housing agency or cooperative, again at the local level.
- Establishment of the legislative basis or facilitation of **legalisation procedure of individuals and properties**, especially in the Balkan countries, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria. There are still tens of thousands of undocumented Roma people deprived of access to basic services and social security.
- **Engagement of the Roma population** with targeted approaches that include community building, social activities, identity empowerment, training and educational programs, and mentoring, with continuous local presence to ensure a deep understanding of local needs and elaboration of tailored and strategic intervention. This approach should be universal.
- **Assistance in financial arrangements**, microloans, and income generation programs to end dependency on social support and foster economic empowerment.
- **Ensuring access to public services** such as education, social and medical services, cultural locations, as well as job opportunities.
- **Monitoring** allows for the continuous assessment of a program's performance against its objectives and helps identify successes and challenges in real-time, allowing for adjustments and improvements, ensuring that the intended outcomes, such as improved living conditions, reduced segregation, and increased accessibility, are being achieved.
- **Transparency** in housing programs engenders trust among stakeholders, including the Roma community, government agencies, and funders. It ensures that the processes, decisions, and use of funds are open to scrutiny and that there is accountability for the results.
- A **scalable funding scheme** is crucial for adapting to the varying levels of need within different Roma communities and for expanding successful programs to reach more beneficiaries. Scalability ensures that a program can grow in a controlled and planned manner, which is essential for long-term sustainability.
- Housing programs for Roma that **align with mainstream housing solutions** ensure that these communities are not segregated or marginalised through specialised treatment. It promotes integration and equality by ensuring that Roma have access to the same quality of housing solutions as the rest of the population. This congruence also facilitates the sharing of best practices and resources between mainstream and Roma-specific housing initiatives.

Good practices from Central and Eastern Europe

"The ideal housing scheme for Roma communities would include the construction of housing that meets the criteria of safety, sanitary and comfort. These housing programs would be in a package with employment opportunities and education(...)" — Lendrit Qeli, representative of the Municipal Office for Communities and Returns.

As pointed out earlier, due to the complexity of housing issues, housing practices never seem strictly good or bad in terms of efficacy. Nevertheless, a pool of researchers, housing experts and local activists have contributed by pinpointing the following good practices to address housing deprivation. Most of these examples have proven to provide a sustainable solution by applying a combination of involvement, investment, and commitment of many individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Bulgaria: Addressing Eviction Risks and Promoting Integration for Roma Communities

Bulgaria has undertaken several housing initiatives to assist those at risk of eviction:

Municipal Land Plots with Ceded Building Rights: Stara Zagora's municipality, post a 2013-2014 micro census, allotted 290 land plots adjacent to a Romani neighbourhood. Over thirty families have since legally constructed their homes. This program was initiated in response to the needs of those at risk of eviction from informal housing. Despite delays in infrastructural development, this initiative aligned well with the needs of the target community.

Private Land Plots with Ceded Building Rights: The Trust for Social Achievement introduced a project to buy large land plots, subdivide them, and then incorporate them into urban plans. This enabled impoverished families to construct homes legally, mirroring the efforts in Stara Zagora. The project began in Peshtera town and expanded to Dupnitsa due to supportive local governance.

Habitat Housing Micro Credits: Habitat Bulgaria offered interest-free microcredits to aid families in legalising, renovating, or buying proper housing. This initiative benefited around 3,345 families between 2014 and 2020. Partnering with local organisations enabled effective community outreach, and the program is now active in eight regions.

Home for Everyone project in Dupnitsa municipality, funded by OP Human Resources Development in the period 2013–2015 and implemented in partnership with Habitat Bulgaria, featured the construction of 150 dwellings distributed among 15 single-family and multi-family buildings on the site of the former city barracks, which now accommodate people with proven housing needs: people experiencing homelessness and those living in very poor conditions, families of children with impaired health and disabilities, teenage parents, large families, etc.

Common successes in these Bulgarian best practices have been collaborative and consultative strategies like micro censuses and extensive community engagement. These have played a pivotal

role in understanding and subsequently tackling the unique housing requirements of these communities. There is evidence to suggest that both municipal-driven and private efforts have been making headway in providing legal housing avenues for those on the brink of eviction. Further amplifying the success of these projects is the synergy with local organisations, ensuring that projects are not only executed efficiently but are also under continuous scrutiny. At the same time, though, infrastructure development has sometimes been sluggish, especially concerning the provision of essential utilities. Another dilemma is the sustainability of the social housing projects, which often grapple with concerns over upkeep costs. Additionally, as the needs of the beneficiary population continually evolve, there is a persistent challenge in guaranteeing enduring accommodation solutions that stand the test of time.

In sum, while Bulgaria's multifaceted housing initiatives paint a picture of dedicated effort and progress, the journey to ensuring permanent, sustainable solutions still beckons. Collaboration and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances remain crucial to navigate the complexities of this issue.

What is common in these best practices?

- **Tailored solutions for eviction risk:** The initiatives specifically target families at risk of eviction, providing them with legal means to secure housing.
- **Municipal and private land allocation:** Both Stara Zagora's municipal land plot allocations and Trust for Social Achievement's private land plot project demonstrate innovative approaches to legal housing development.
- **Microcredit assistance:** Habitat Bulgaria's interest-free microcredits help a number of families legalise, renovate, or purchase suitable homes, addressing a key financial barrier.
- **Broad community engagement:** Extensive community engagement, including micro censuses, ensures that the projects are well-aligned with the specific needs of the target communities.
- **Partnerships with local organisations:** Collaborating with local organisations enhances outreach and ensures that the initiatives are grounded in local realities.
- **Diverse housing options:** The "Home for Everyone" project in Dupnitsa, with its mix of single-family and multi-family buildings, caters to a range of beneficiaries, including those in extremely vulnerable conditions.

Challenges:

- **Delays in infrastructure development:** Infrastructure provision, crucial for the viability of new housing developments, has sometimes lagged, impacting the quality of life of residents.
- **Sustainability of social housing projects:** Concerns over the long-term sustainability and upkeep costs of social housing projects pose a significant challenge. The ongoing

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task of providing permanent and sustainable housing solutions requires constant effort and resource allocation.

- **Evolving needs of beneficiaries:** As the beneficiary population's needs change over time, ensuring that housing solutions are adaptable, and enduring is a continual challenge.
- **Balancing public and private initiatives:** Effectively balancing municipal-driven and private efforts to create cohesive and comprehensive housing strategies can be complex.
- **Access to essential utilities:** Ensuring that newly constructed homes have access to essential utilities like water and electricity remains a fundamental challenge.

Hungary: Innovative initiative for tenancy scheme and continuous presence

The Housing Agency of Budapest's 8th District council (Józsefváros Lakásügynökség) initiated a program in 2023 to manage and sublet both municipal and private apartments, aiming to mitigate the housing crisis. The agency sets the rent, which is based on an annual analysis of the 8th District's housing market. Tenants are selected from a registration list determined by the city's housing regulations. The initiative primarily aids Józsefváros residents who earn more than existing municipal tenants but cannot meet market rents. Municipal employees can also benefit. Eligibility requires living in Józsefváros for a year or working for the municipality and having a consistent six-month income within specified limits. A point system prioritises applicants based on housing needs, family situations, and vulnerable members.

The program stands out as a promising initiative and earns its place among best practices due to its innovative and comprehensive approach to the housing crisis. By managing and subletting both municipal and private apartments, it presents a practical solution that can immediately impact the local community. The agency's methodology in setting fair rent prices, grounded in a yearly market analysis, demonstrates a data-driven and responsive approach to the economic realities of the district. The program's inclusivity, serving not just traditional low-income municipal tenants but also those caught in the financial gap between subsidised housing and market prices, indicates a nuanced understanding of the housing issue. It extends benefits to municipal employees, further integrating the initiative within the local community fabric. The eligibility criteria, requiring a year's residence or employment within the municipality, alongside a track record of consistent income, ensure that the program benefits stable, contributing members of the community. The introduction of a point system adds a layer of fairness and transparency, ensuring that the most pressing housing needs and vulnerabilities are addressed first.

Despite its recent inception, the program's thoughtful design, which balances market dynamics with social equity, coupled with its potential for scalability and replication, makes it a strong candidate for best practice. It reflects a forward-thinking model that other districts and cities could adapt,

offering an immediate bridge solution for those at risk of housing insecurity while broader and more long-term strategies are developed and implemented.

Why Good Practice?

- **Targeted assistance:** By focusing on Józsefváros residents caught between municipal tenant incomes and market rents, the program provides targeted assistance to those most in need. Considering family situations and vulnerable members ensures that marginalised individuals have better access to housing support.
- **Market-responsive rent setting:** Annual analysis of the local housing market ensures rents are competitive and reflective of current conditions, making housing more affordable and accessible.
- **Consistency and transparency:** Utilising a registration list based on city housing regulations adds transparency and consistency to the allocation process.
- **Inclusion of municipal employees:** Including municipal employees in the program acknowledges their contribution to the community and provides them with housing benefits.
- **Stability requirement:** Requiring a year's residency or employment and a consistent income ensures beneficiaries have stable ties to the area, supporting community continuity.
- **Fairness through a point system:** The point system prioritises applicants based on their immediate housing needs, making the process fairer and more focused on urgency.
- **Quality control and oversight:** Continuous management and subletting of apartments by the agency ensures consistent quality and oversight of housing conditions.
- **Local expertise:** Being initiated by the local Housing Agency ensures a deep understanding of local challenges, leading to more effective and relevant solutions.
- **Addressing the housing crisis:** With the housing crisis being a significant issue, such initiatives are likely to be successful due to the high demand for affordable housing solutions.

Challenges:

- **Resource constraints:** Effective implementation may be challenging due to limited resources, particularly in managing a large number of municipal and private apartments.
- **Risk of dependency:** Long-term reliance on the program could lead to dependency, hindering the motivation for residents to seek independent housing solutions. The financial sustainability of the program could be a concern, especially if rental income is not sufficient to cover the management and maintenance costs.
- **Administration complexity:** The point system and other eligibility criteria could add complexity to the administration, potentially slowing down the process. Despite the point system, there is always a risk of bias or unfair prioritisation in the selection process.

> The program may need regular updates to stay relevant to the changing needs and conditions of the district's residents.
> - **Market fluctuations:** Basing rents on annual market analysis means that rents could increase sharply if the market spikes, potentially making them unaffordable for some residents.
> - **Eligibility restrictions:** The residency and employment requirements, while ensuring stability, might exclude new residents or those with irregular income patterns.
> - **Maintenance and quality concerns:** Continuously managing a large number of properties could lead to challenges in maintaining quality standards over time.

FETE - Emerging Settlements program

In 2019, the Hungarian government introduced the intervention concept for addressing segregated housing, which led to the *Emerging Settlements Program*[16] (Felzárkózó Települések Építő Közössége), an initiative aimed at addressing social, economic, and infrastructure disparities in underdeveloped areas, primarily focusing on small, often rural communities that are lagging behind more prosperous urban centres in terms of development.

The program targets settlements with high levels of poverty and social exclusion, which include significant Roma populations. It seeks to improve living conditions by providing funding for the construction and renovation of homes, as well as for developing local infrastructure and community services. The overarching goal is to support social integration, increase access to quality housing, enhance public services, and ultimately reduce socio-economic disparities across the country. By directing resources to the most impoverished communities, the FETE program works to foster social cohesion and promote equal opportunities for all residents, including those from marginalised groups. It is an example of targeted social policy designed to aid the most vulnerable segments of the population and assist in their socio-economic advancement.

The program is based on the *"Presence"* (Jelenlét) method, which was advocated for national use by the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service. It allows for tailor-made local solutions and targets Hungary's 300 most disadvantaged settlements, characterised by subpar housing conditions, low education levels, and high birth rates. The presence method is a comprehensive approach that involves professionals immersing themselves within communities, particularly those that are marginalised or facing unique challenges. This method is centred around building strong, trust-based relationships through consistent interaction and engagement with community members. It necessitates professionals to be physically present, participate in local events, and offer support and guidance, thereby gaining a deep understanding of the community's dynamics and needs.

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[16] Emerging settlements - Steps for catching up

Such an approach enhances collaboration with local leaders and stakeholders, fostering a sense of joint ownership in the development and implementation of solutions tailored to the community's requirements. The ability to be responsive and adaptive is crucial, as it allows for the modification of strategies in real-time, ensuring they remain relevant and effective amidst evolving situations. Empowering the community is a fundamental goal of the presence method, as it involves aiding residents in recognizing their own abilities to effect change. This empowerment is further supported by a culturally sensitive practice, which is particularly significant when working with ethnic minorities. Understanding and respecting the community's cultural background is key to the method's success. The Presence method includes a mechanism for ongoing monitoring and feedback, which is vital for the continual assessment and enhancement of community programs. By maintaining a close connection with the community, this method ensures that services are not only delivered effectively but also evolve based on the community's feedback and changing needs.

By 2023, FETE has expanded to 178 settlements with plans to encompass 300 by 2025, benefiting around 300,000 residents, a significant portion of whom are of Roma origin. However, the program has drawn criticism for not addressing larger segregates.

Why Good Practice?
- **Tailored local solutions:** The "Presence" method, advocated by the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service, allows for tailor-made solutions that cater to the specific needs of local communities.
- **Comprehensive approach:** The program aims to address both social and infrastructural challenges, indicating a holistic approach. It focuses on crucial aspects like early childhood development, employment, healthcare, and housing, which are integral to promoting social inclusion.
- **Wide reach and impact:** The FETE program will cover 300 settlements by 2025, potentially benefiting around 300,000 residents. This demonstrates the program's significant impact, particularly among disadvantaged communities, including a substantial number of Roma residents.
- **Targeting disadvantaged settlements:** The program specifically targets Hungary's 300 most disadvantaged settlements, characterised by poor housing conditions, low education levels, and high birth rates, thereby focusing resources where they are most needed.

Challenges:
- **Limited scope in addressing urban segregation:** The program has been criticised for its focus on smaller, rural, segregated areas while not sufficiently addressing larger urban segregates. This limitation suggests a gap in its approach to tackling housing segregation comprehensively.

- **Overlooking other problematic areas:** Critics point out that the program overlooks other areas identified as problematic in the 2015 housing strategy. This raises concerns about the program's comprehensive effectiveness and its ability to address the broader spectrum of housing issues across Hungary.

Kosovo: Aggravated challenges to housing deprivation of the diverse communities of IDPs

In Kosovo, housing projects aimed at benefiting Roma internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been examined and categorised into three distinct periods based on government objectives.

Reconstruction (1999-2006): The housing for war returnees was initiated with the primary goal of shutting down the Plementina camp and offering sustainable housing solutions to selected beneficiary families —this initiative aimed to foster the smooth return and reintegration of these families back into their original communities. The core strategy involved constructing homes tailored for minority communities, modernising existing apartment blocks, and revamping social institutions. As a result of these efforts, thirty-three homes of varying dimensions were constructed and subsequently handed over to the designated families. The costs for these new units ranged from EUR 9,800 for 45 m2, EUR 12,000 for 65 m2, and EUR 13,000 for homes larger than 65 m2.

Reintegration of IDPs (2006-Present): This phase aimed to regularise informal settlements, ensuring sustainable housing for displaced families. A project between 2005 and 2010 focused on transforming informal IDP settlements. It resulted in the construction of private homes and apartment buildings. The approach was comprehensive, involving both local authorities and the Roma community. Challenges included the unsustainability of housing units due to the families' socio-economic conditions and rapid population growth.

Upgrading Housing Norms (2012-Present): The objective was to improve housing standards for community development. Between 2013 and 2020, the focus was on providing sustainable housing for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians living in substandard conditions. This led to the construction of 146 houses and social buildings, with community involvement. A notable challenge is the municipality's dump nearby, posing health and safety risks to residents, with some families being exposed to hazardous waste due to their reliance on metal garbage collection. There is also the challenge of potential criminal activities within these vulnerable groups.

Kosovo's housing projects offer significant learnings for addressing Roma housing challenges, emphasising sustainable, integrated, and community-driven solutions. While progress has been made, sustained efforts are vital to ensure the Roma community's long-term well-being and housing maintenance.

Attributes of Good Practices in the examples of Kosovo:
- **Diverse housing options:** Constructing homes of varying dimensions and modernising apartment blocks cater to different family sizes and needs.
- **Reconstruction and reintegration:** The initial focus on reconstructing housing for war returnees and subsequently working towards the reintegration of IDPs, as well as the ongoing efforts to upgrade housing norms and provide better living conditions for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians living in substandard conditions, showcases a commitment to addressing immediate and long-term housing needs. The emphasis on sustainable housing, especially in the regularisation of informal settlements, reflects a long-term perspective on community development.
- **Community-centric approaches:** Involving both local authorities and the Roma community in the planning and implementation of housing projects ensures that the solutions are tailored to the specific needs of the beneficiaries.

Challenges:
- **Socio-economic sustainability risks:** The unsustainability of housing units due to the families' socio-economic conditions, coupled with the general inability to find secure and long-term employment, poses a significant challenge, particularly in the context of rapid population growth. Navigating the immediate need for housing post-conflict with the goal of long-term, sustainable community development presents a complex challenge.
- **Environmental and health risks:** The proximity of some housing projects to the municipality's dump exposes residents to health and safety risks, especially for families dependent on metal garbage collection.
- **Security concerns:** The vulnerability of these groups can lead to issues like criminal activities, necessitating additional social support and security measures.
- **Long-term maintenance and support:** Ensuring the long-term maintenance of these housing units and continued support to the residents is crucial for the project's sustainability.
- **Integration and social cohesion:** Integrating Roma communities into broader society while maintaining their cultural identity is a delicate balance to achieve.

North Macedonia: Urban development with bureaucratic drawbacks

The Council of **Probishtip** developed a building with 48 apartments in 2022, following North Macedonia's program for vulnerable citizens. The construction was backed by a loan from the Development Bank of the Council of Europe, with a public call for beneficiaries such as those affected by disasters, the Roma community, and single parents with minors.

In **Gevgelija**, the government provided apartments to 34 families in 2023, catering to six categories of vulnerable citizens, including orphans, those affected by natural disasters, persons with disabilities, the Roma community, and single parents. With the EU's funding, the 2019 Habitat project aimed at urban development in Roma communities, focusing on better living standards, social inclusion, and equal opportunities. They produced detailed urban plans for communities in Shuto Orizari and Veles.

Habitat initiated the **Sustainable Urban Development of Roma Communities project** in 2019, funded by the EU's IPA Funds. Aimed at enhancing the Roma communities' living conditions in Shuto Orizari and Veles, the project prioritises housing improvements and social inclusion. However, by August 2023, some initiatives, especially in Shuto Orizari, faced delays due to pending institutional permissions. Additionally, the organisation developed a comprehensive **web application for a national housing database**, cataloguing details of 4,500 buildings across 33 municipalities as of February 2022. A manual was also released in 2015 that provides insights into the **management of collective housing buildings**, covering ownership types, financial management, and relevant legal regulations.

In North Macedonia, the landscape of housing for vulnerable communities is characterised by both dedicated efforts and considerable challenges. The omission of housing as a priority in the EU's IPA Funding, particularly in both IPA II and IPA III allocations, stands out. Despite substantial allocations, like the EUR 608.7 million designated from 2014 to 2020 for diverse sectors, the housing sector found itself overlooked. Additionally, the path to housing improvement is further complicated by bureaucratic hiccups. Projects such as the one in Shuto Orizari languish due to waiting on permissions from institutions. A societal challenge surfaced in 2021 when the Kocani Protests erupted. Local inhabitants of Trajanovo Selo voiced their dissent against constructing residences for families at social risk. Their opposition came even after the project secured the necessary funds and completed urban planning, not only throwing a wrench in the project's progress but also stoking inter-ethnic discord. These instances from North Macedonia underscore the nation's commendable attempts to ameliorate housing issues for its vulnerable citizens. However, they also shine a light on the bureaucratic and societal hurdles that impede these noble endeavours.

> **Why Good Practice?**
> - **Targeted housing solutions:** Both Probishtip and Gevgelija initiatives demonstrate a targeted approach to providing housing for vulnerable citizens, including those affected by disasters, the Roma community, single parents, orphans, and persons with disabilities. This targeted approach ensures that housing aid reaches those who need it most.
> - **Collaborative funding and support:** The construction in Probishtip was backed by a loan from the Development Bank of the Council of Europe, illustrating effective collaboration and support from international financial institutions. Similarly, the

Gevgelija government's provision of apartments showcases governmental commitment to housing vulnerable groups.

- **Comprehensive urban development projects:** The 2019 Habitat project in Shuto Orizari and Veles, funded by the EU's IPA Funds, focuses on improving living standards, social inclusion, and equal opportunities for Roma communities. This comprehensive approach addresses not just housing but also broader social issues.

Challenges:

- **Bureaucratic delays:** Projects like the one in Shuto Orizari face implementation delays due to bureaucratic processes and pending institutional permissions, hindering timely completion and impact.

- **Societal challenges:** The Kocani Protests in 2021 against constructing residences for families at social risk highlight societal challenges and inter-ethnic discord, which can impede housing projects.

- **Omission in EU funding priorities:** Housing has not been a priority in the EU's IPA Funding allocations, leading to a lack of dedicated resources for addressing housing issues in sectors that received substantial funding.

Romania: Relocation without integration?

In **Vințu de Jos**, Alba County[17], the Pakiv Romania Association launched a comprehensive project to bolster social inclusion and tackle poverty, primarily focusing on the marginalised Roma community. Supporting over 550 individuals, with nearly half being Roma, the initiative offered a range of services. The project has notably achieved educational support for Roma children through preschool and after-school programs, vocational training, and support for job market access. Entrepreneurial support included funding for business plans, with some Roma beneficiaries receiving financial support for start-ups. Social and medical mediation services were provided, as well as financial aid for home rehabilitation, though this was limited to properties with ownership documents. Additionally, the Integrated Community Center Sibișeni was rehabilitated and operationalized, offering educational and support activities for the disadvantaged community. Despite the project's success, the lack of transportation for beneficiaries and the necessity of transitioning to online courses during the pandemic were challenges. Post-project, beneficiaries continued to improve their housing conditions with their own resources, and the project's representatives recommended dedicated funding lines for activities targeting Roma inclusion and development. This holistic approach holds the potential for replication in similar communities.

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[17] Vințu de Jos, Alba County

Why Best Practice?

- **Comprehensive support:** Besides assisting with home renovations, directly improves living conditions, contributing to better health and quality of life, the project addresses multiple aspects of social inclusion and poverty reduction by
    - providing a well-rounded support system, including educational programs for young Roma,
    - job training and entrepreneurial mentoring,
    - diverse social and medical services,
    - aid for home renovations,
    - community building and identity empowerment, which are all crucial for building self-sufficiency and encouraging economic growth within the community
- **Focus on marginalised communities:** It addresses the unique challenges and needs of the Roma community.
- **Community unity and bias reduction:** Involving Roma members in activities that address ethnic biases and promote equality is key to fostering social cohesion and understanding.

Challenges:

- **Sustained funding:** Projects like these require continuous funding, and securing long-term financial support can be challenging.
- **Replicability:** While effective on a local scale, replicating this model in other communities requires adaptation to different local contexts and needs. Effectively measuring the impact of such comprehensive programs, especially in terms of long-term societal change, can be complex.
- **Changing biases:** Addressing and changing deep-rooted ethnic biases and discrimination within the broader society is a long-term challenge.
- **Community engagement:** Ensuring sustained engagement and participation from the Roma community and other stakeholders is crucial for the success of the program.

In **Mănești**, Dâmbovița County[18], in response to the needs of young people from vulnerable groups, a local Roma councillor in Romania initiated a proposal for the allocation of land plots for house construction. Consequently, the local council passed a resolution to allocate 23 land plots in the first phase, providing necessary utilities like water, electricity, and access roads. In the second phase, 46 additional plots were allocated. As a result, 18 families have since moved into newly constructed homes on the first 23 plots, with five still in the process of construction. The second phase involved cadastral work and utility connections, with social services conducting investigations to identify eligible recipients for these plots. Land allocation is granted for free use for

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[18] Mănești, Dâmbovița County

as long as the personal property house exists. Upon completion, the local council may decide to sell the land directly to the homeowner at a price determined by a technical appraisal from an authorised evaluator. A field visit on October 27, 2020, revealed a positive relationship between local Roma leaders and authorities, with Roma actively involved in the project's implementation, from planning to monitoring. A Roma leader and local councillor donated a 2500 square metre land parcel for a playground and football field, benefiting all community children without discrimination. This initiative has also helped to break down ethnic barriers within the community.

Key elements of this practice include explicit (but not exclusive) focus on Roma individuals, integration of Roma issues into the local council's activity plan, and the project's potential for multiplicative effects. Through local Roma community involvement in projects with the local authority, communication barriers between Roma and local authorities in Măneşti have been effectively overcome.

Why Good Practice?

- **Community involvement:** Active participation of the Roma community in initiating, planning, and implementing the project ensures that their specific needs are addressed effectively.
- **Local government engagement:** The initiative demonstrates a successful collaboration between local Roma leaders and municipal authorities, fostering mutual trust.
- **Accessibility to housing:** By allocating land plots for house construction, the project directly addresses the housing needs of vulnerable groups, including the Roma community, especially young people.
- **Utility provision:** The inclusion of necessary utilities (water, electricity, roads) with the land plots makes the construction process more feasible for families.
- **Breaking down ethnic barriers:** The creation of communal spaces like playgrounds and football fields, accessible to all children, promotes inclusivity and helps to eliminate ethnic divides within the community.
- **Sustainable ownership model:** The option to purchase the land after house construction provides a pathway to homeownership, contributing to long-term stability for families.
- **Multiplicative effects:** The project sets a replicable model that can be adopted in other communities, potentially leading to broader societal changes.

Challenges:

- **Perpetuation of segregation:** Despite the involvement of local Roma people, including a Roma councillor, as well as the proactivity of the municipality, relocation of Roma people to a certain part of the settlement fails to facilitate desegregation and thus does not effectively promote social mobility.

- **Resource allocation:** Ensuring fair and transparent allocation of land plots to the neediest families can be challenging.
- **Financial constraints:** Some families may face financial difficulties in constructing homes or maintaining them post-construction.
- **Long-term viability:** Ensuring the long-term viability and sustainability of the houses and the community facilities is crucial.
- **Dependency on local leadership:** The project's success heavily relies on the initiative and involvement of local leaders, which may vary in different regions.
- **Broadening scope:** While effective at the local level, scaling up the initiative to wider regions may require additional resources and strategic planning.

The city of **Cluj-Napoca**[19] initiated a social housing initiative focused on addressing the housing requirements of its Roma communities. The program offers affordable rental options, supports maintenance, and enhances social integration via community activities and social services. This initiative has successfully drawn substantial funding from donors over time and has been meticulously managed by a specialised expert team. Discussions are ongoing about the possibility of relocating families to areas outside the city centre, weighing the benefits of affordability against potential integration difficulties. Notably, despite the high cost of housing in Cluj, constructing homes in nearby locations has proven to be economically viable.

Why Good Practice?
- **Holistic approach:**
  - o The program included affordable rentals, which is crucial in making housing accessible to low-income families.
  - o Offering maintenance assistance helps residents keep their homes in good condition, which is essential for long-term sustainability.
  - o The inclusion of community activities and social services promotes integration and builds a sense of community, which supports the well-being of the residents.
  - o The development and management of the program by a dedicated expert team ensures that it is well-planned, executed, and adapted to the community's needs.
- **Attracting donor funds:** Successfully drawing significant donor funds demonstrates the program's viability and effectiveness in garnering support and contributes to the sustainability of the program.

Challenges:

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[19] https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/cluj-napoca/43-milioane-de-euro-pentru-romii-de-la-pata-rat-2270572.html

> - **Perpetuation of segregation:** Relocating families outside the city can deepen social exclusion, limit access to essential services and opportunities, reinforce stigma, negatively impact health and social mobility, and lead to economic stagnation.
> - **Integration into the wider community:** Ensuring that the Roma communities are not just housed but fully integrated into the wider community poses a significant social challenge, especially if they are relocated to the outskirts of Cluj.
> - **Sustainability concerns:** Maintaining the sustainability of the program, especially in terms of ongoing funding and support, is crucial for its long-term success.
> - **Adaptability to changing needs:** The program must continually adapt to the evolving needs of the Roma communities and the dynamics of the city's housing market.

In **Resita**[20], 150 families from segregated areas were relocated around the city under the Community-Led Local Development framework. This relocation emphasised diverse integration and involved close collaboration between the local municipality, stakeholders, and a Local Action Group. Key to its success was effective communication with families, the role of a local NGO in bridging community-municipalities, and the establishment of a cooperative for apartment renovations. The project benefited from an integrated funding approach, Resita's size, affordable housing, and the NGO's proactive involvement.

Across the four best practices, a few shared successes and challenges emerge. These projects consistently adopted a holistic and integrated approach to address community challenges, spanning housing, education, and social services. Active community involvement was a cornerstone, ensuring that solutions were tailored to genuine needs. Collaborations with local stakeholders, be it NGOs, local authorities, or community leaders, proved vital, pooling expertise and resources. A recurring theme was the promotion of social inclusion, with endeavours going beyond immediate problems to foster broader community cohesion and reduce stereotypes.

However, challenges also surfaced. The decision to relocate families, as seen in Cluj-Napoca and Resita, sparked debates on its impact on social integration. Affordability and resource constraints posed another concern, with the expensive housing market in Cluj-Napoca and incomplete constructions in Mănești serving as cases in point. Also, while housing was a key element, the continuous need for support, be it in maintenance, legal aid, or other services, was evident. Lastly, the projects, while groundbreaking, did elicit mixed reactions from the communities, highlighting the need for careful consideration of diverse perspectives.

> **Common features of the Romanian Good Practices:**
> - Strategic relocation of families to promote diverse integration.
> - Inclusive Roma community-centric approaches

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[20] Resita

- Involvement of local authorities
- Affordable housing solutions
- Empowerment through participation
- With a holistic approach beyond housing, the projects encompassed educational support, job training, and other essential and social services.

Common challenges:
- Increased risk of perpetuation of segregation
- Financial and material resource constraints
- Bureaucratic issues, complex legal and administrative processes
- Sustainability concerns

Serbia: International collaboration

EUSHAI projects for local self-governments for social housing projects and active inclusion of vulnerable groups:

In 2023, the municipalities of **Raska**, **Šabac**, and **Loznica** witnessed noteworthy successes in their EU SHAI housing programs[21]. Central to these achievements was the robust collaboration between the EU, UNOPS, and local governments, illustrating the effectiveness of collective endeavours in housing advancements. Across these municipalities, 55 fully furnished apartments were allocated to the most vulnerable, with a notable emphasis on the Roma community. The programs were comprehensive, not just offering housing but also promoting social inclusion. They facilitated access to kindergarten and primary education for children, provided family-strengthening support, and offered training in sought-after occupations, including driving. These efforts were significantly bolstered by financial support. Šabac, for instance, received 850,000 euros from the EU, coupled with a 250,000-euro contribution from its local budget.

Local self-governments, social protection institutions, and civil society groups can submit proposals for social housing projects and active inclusion of vulnerable groups for EUSHAI grants. The second call targeted 63 families, providing housing for the Roma minority, victims of domestic violence, young people leaving institutions, and families with disabled members. Housing solutions include constructing multi-family or single-family homes, buying individual units, or upgrading existing homes on public or private land. However, the continuous reliance on such significant external funds suggests potential financial challenges in sustaining these initiatives. Moreover, while these programs serve as shining examples, they cater to only a small segment of those in need, highlighting the challenges of broadening their reach. Looking ahead, the crucial task remains to ensure that the beneficiaries of these programs are not just housed and trained but are fully integrated into society, capable of sustaining their livelihoods without perpetual external aid.

Why Good Practice?
- **Collaborative approach**: The partnership between the EU, UNOPS, and local governments demonstrates how collaboration can lead to successful housing programs. The involvement of local self-governments, social protection institutions, and civil society groups ensures a multi-faceted approach and broad support base.
- **Targeting the Roma**: Specifically addressing the needs of the Roma community and other vulnerable groups ensures that assistance reaches those who need it most.

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[21] The "European Union Support for Social Housing and Active Inclusion" (EU SHAI) program, running from December 2019 to February 2025, aims to enhance social inclusion in Serbia by providing sustainable housing and active inclusion measures for the vulnerable. Funded with 27 million euros from the EU and implemented by UNOPS, the program supports Serbia's EU accession criteria and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It targets groups like the Roma, women victims of violence, the youth, persons with disabilities, and others in inadequate conditions. The program collaborates with various Serbian ministries and local governments. It focuses on three outcomes: strengthening institutional capacities, providing housing to the needy, and offering sustainable solutions like employment and education.

- **Comprehensive support**: Beyond providing housing, the programs offer educational opportunities, social inclusion efforts, and vocational training, addressing multiple aspects of beneficiaries' lives and equipping them with skills needed for sustainable livelihoods.
- **Financial support:** Significant financial contributions from the EU and local budgets underscore the commitment to these initiatives and provide the necessary resources for their implementation.
- **Diverse housing solutions:** The variety of housing solutions, including the construction of multi-family homes, buying units, and upgrading existing homes, shows adaptability to different needs and contexts.
- **Focus on active inclusion:** The programs emphasise not just housing but also active social inclusion, which is crucial for the long-term well-being of the beneficiaries.
- **Impactful results:** Allocating fully furnished apartments across several municipalities demonstrates tangible and significant impacts.
- **Tailored for local needs:** The local governments' ability to submit proposals for social housing projects ensures that the solutions are tailored to the specific needs of their communities.

Challenges:

- **Financial sustainability:** The heavy reliance on external funds raises questions about the long-term financial sustainability of these programs.
- **Limited reach:** While successful, these programs cater to a relatively small segment of those in need, highlighting the challenge of scaling up.
- **Dependency risk:** There is a risk of creating dependency among beneficiaries on external aid, which can be counterproductive in the long term.
- **Complexity of integration:** Ensuring full social integration of beneficiaries, beyond just housing and training, is a complex and ongoing challenge that requires continuous monitoring and support in the long run. Coordination among the various stakeholders and continuous assessment of the effectiveness and impact of these programs is crucial but can be resource-intensive. The evolving needs of beneficiaries and the housing market are dynamic; programs must adapt regularly to remain effective.
- **Maintaining quality:** As the programs expand, maintaining the quality of housing and services could become challenging. Catering to the diverse needs of various vulnerable groups, each with unique issues, requires careful planning and resources.
- **Ensuring long-term employment opportunities:** Providing training in sought-after occupations is beneficial, but there must also be a focus on ensuring long-term employment opportunities for the beneficiaries.

Projects of the social housing that targets refugees and displaced people from Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina:

The Regional Housing Program, a collaborative effort involving Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Croatia,[22] aims to provide permanent housing solutions for the most vulnerable refugee families in the region. With support from international organisations like the OSCE, UNHCR, and the Development Bank of the Council of Europe and significant funding from the European Union, the initiative has achieved notable successes. For instance, in 2020, Serbia provided housing for 1,342 refugee families, distributed 129 construction material packages, and erected 64 prefabricated houses under this program. By 2023, in Pancevo, 36 refugee families from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia were granted new apartments. Additionally, in Bujanovac, there were plans to build 12 apartments for Roma families displaced from Kosovo, building on efforts started in 2014.

However, challenges persist. There are concerns about the inclusiveness of the housing programs, as they sometimes prioritise specific social groups, overlooking other vulnerable populations. A particular issue is the plight of the Roma community in Belgrade, with 165 unauthorised settlements housing around 30,000 individuals. The local administration's attitude towards these settlements has been criticised for being dismissive and occasionally discriminatory. In New Belgrade, around 140 Roma inhabitants live in dire conditions without essential amenities, constantly fearing eviction. Similarly, near Belgrade, a Roma community grapples with extreme poverty, subpar housing and sanitation, an unreliable water supply and sewage system, untraversable roads, crime, and violence. The children of this community are particularly at risk. Faced with economic hardships, many residents are forced into begging or scavenging for materials to sell.

Why Good Practice?

- **International collaboration:** The cooperation among Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Croatia, supported by international organisations, exemplifies a strong regional collaboration. Backing from entities like the OSCE, UNHCR, the Council of Europe's Development Bank, and the EU demonstrates strong international commitment and support.
- **Focus on vulnerable refugees:** The program targets the most vulnerable refugee families, providing them with much-needed permanent housing solutions.
- **Tangible achievements:** The construction of houses and distribution of construction material packages show concrete results and progress.
- **Addressing long-standing issues:** The program actively tackles the longstanding housing issues faced by refugees in the region, offering a sense of stability and security.

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[22] The Regional Housing Programme (RHP) is a multi-year joint initiative for Partner Countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia) supported by the international community towards closing the chapter of the protracted displacement in the region. It was developed in partnership between the Partner Countries and the OSCE, the UNHCR and the European Commission. The aim of the RHP is to contribute to the resolution of the protracted displacement situation of the most vulnerable refugees and displaced persons following the 1991-1995 conflicts on the territory of former Yugoslavia, including internally displaced persons in Montenegro from 1999.

- **Diverse housing solutions:** Offering various housing options, including prefabricated houses and new apartments, caters to different needs and preferences.
- **Improving quality of life:** By providing housing, the program significantly improves the quality of life for refugee families, offering them dignity and hope for a better future.
- **Continued expansion:** Ongoing efforts, like the planned apartment buildings in Bujanovac, demonstrate the program's commitment to continued support and expansion.
- **Positive impact on integration:** Permanent housing can greatly aid in the integration of refugees into local communities, fostering social cohesion.

Challenges:

- **Inclusiveness issues:** Concerns about prioritising certain social groups over others, potentially overlooking some vulnerable populations.
- **Plight of the Roma community:** The program's seeming inadequacy in addressing the specific needs of the Roma community, particularly in Belgrade.
- **Discrimination and neglect:** Criticism of local administrations for dismissive and occasionally discriminatory attitudes towards unauthorised Roma settlements.
- **Inadequate living conditions:** Dire living conditions in some areas, lacking essential amenities and marked by poverty, crime, and violence.
- **Risk of eviction:** Constant fear of eviction among some vulnerable groups, like the Roma inhabitants in New Belgrade, adds to their insecurity.
- **Limited scope and reach:** Although successful, the program may not have the capacity or resources to address the needs of all vulnerable groups in the region.
- **Infrastructure challenges:** Issues like unreliable water supply, poor sanitation, and untraversable roads in certain communities indicate broader infrastructure challenges.
- **Children at risk:** The particularly precarious situation of children in these vulnerable communities, with risks of economic exploitation and lack of access to education.
- **Economic hardships:** The struggle of many residents to find stable and dignified livelihoods, often resorting to begging or scavenging.
- **Sustainability and long-term integration:** Ensuring the long-term sustainability of housing solutions and the full integration of beneficiaries into society remains a challenge.

Ukraine: Shifting priorities

While good practices for addressing Roma housing deprivation were collected from the target countries of the research, none were found in Ukraine. The absence of recent initiatives to alleviate housing deprivation among Roma in Ukraine can be traced back to a complex web of societal and political challenges. The country has grappled with significant turmoil, including the annexation of Crimea and continuous conflict in the East, which not only disrupts governance but also redirects resources away from social housing to more immediate concerns, such as aiding internally displaced persons.

Ukraine's economy, battered by the conflict, currency devaluation, and a decrease in foreign investment, further hampers the state's capacity to fund long-standing social welfare programs. Moreover, the administrative upheaval caused by the conflict likely results in a scarcity of records or communication concerning effective housing actions. The longstanding marginalisation of Roma communities means their needs often remain unaddressed, falling behind more immediate national concerns in the queue for policy and fiscal attention. Additionally, international agencies, which are instrumental in backing such housing projects, may have shifted their focus primarily to providing immediate humanitarian aid rather than supporting long-term development endeavours like improving housing due to the pressing needs created by ongoing military engagements.

The situation is compounded by the large number of internally displaced persons within Ukraine, which necessitates an immediate shelter response and diverts attention from the chronic housing issues faced by the Roma. Legal and bureaucratic hurdles, such as the intricacies of land rights and settlement recognition, pose further obstacles to the advancement of housing schemes. Taken together, these factors paint a picture of a context where systemic neglect, exacerbated by conflict and economic downturns, leads to a notable gap in progressive housing practices for the Roma population in Ukraine.

Bad practices

Bulgaria: Homeless to homeless

Mobile homes for people experiencing homelessness: In Bulgaria, initiatives for people experiencing homelessness are limited mostly to shelters and institutions. In 2015, an NGO named Urban Nomads in Sofia introduced a project offering mobile homes as a solution to homelessness. However, this approach essentially substituted one form of homelessness for another and was not deemed a suitable solution by the homeless community.

Social Housing: While Bulgaria has a shortage of social housing, it remains a viable option for the most vulnerable. Stara Zagora's municipality established social housing facilities, renovating, and equipping about 59 units by 2021. However, the intended Romani beneficiaries declined the offer due to potential maintenance costs, resulting in Ukrainian refugees using the facilities instead.

Hungary: From slum to slum

Nyíregyháza's Misguided Relocation Program: The European Commission withdrew 1.7 billion HUF (app. EUR 4.4 million) in funds from Nyíregyháza due to its flawed social urban rehabilitation program. In 2017, Nyíregyháza received a substantial EU grant for the purpose of slum elimination. However, rather than addressing segregation, the council relocated inhabitants from one underprivileged area to another. A local NGO spotlighted this move as perpetuating segregation in both housing and education, counteracting EU principles. Residents were shifted from the "Keleti Telep" slum to another, the "Huszár Telep," which was already known for its segregation. Additionally, a church school in the latter region had been previously accused of segregation. Hungarian legislation post-2014 occasionally permitted the establishment of segregated schools on minority or religious bases. Following a review, the European Commission determined that the initiative violated non-discrimination guidelines and amplified educational segregation. This judgement could influence future regional decisions regarding the appropriate use of EU funds designated for Roma integration.

The Hajdúhadház Relocation Case: Several Hungarian municipalities have attempted to leverage EU funds for urban development in Roma settlements without ensuring resettlement solutions. In Hajdúhadház, after securing €1.6 (app. EUR 4.1) million for urban improvements in a Roma region, local authorities told families to vacate without proposing relocation options. Local human rights advocates intervened, discovering there was no accommodation prepared for the evicted Roma families. After being informed of the potential breach of EU laws by these advocates, the European Commission acknowledged the concerns, and the Hungarian managing authorities have put pressure on the municipality to redesign the project, a resolution still remains pending. Had the initial strategy been executed, over 80 people, inclusive of 50 children, would have faced homelessness, with a looming threat of children being separated from their families due to housing instability.

Romania: Relocation to segregation

In Romania, fully equipped houses were provided for the Roma population on the outskirts of the cities, which deprived the dwellers of crucial services and led to difficulties in finding resources like jobs and schools. This experience suggests that accommodation should ideally be located within urban areas, ensuring better access to opportunities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Historically, the development of segregated urban and rural areas in Central Eastern Europe has significantly shaped the housing experiences of the Roma community. Alongside this, social disparities and the division of the housing market have further compounded the situation. Various factors at the policy and environmental levels have encouraged the growth and maintenance of these segregated neighbourhoods, deepening the inequality between them and other parts of the housing market. Despite notable progress in the housing conditions of Roma in recent decades, the issue of segregation persists. Numerous factors, including education, household size, social networks, the size of the settlement, unemployment, and the absence of supportive networks, play a role in this continued segregation. Local policy interventions have revealed certain limitations, and micro-simulations of segregation processes underscore the need for comprehensive solutions that address these multifaceted issues. For local projects focused on neighbourhoods to be effective, they should be meticulously monitored and followed up.

The research revealed that addressing housing deprivation extends beyond mere construction, and only through holistic and integrated measures can the decline in these areas be effectively addressed and mitigated.

Such a multi-faceted approach encompasses focusing on creating desegregated environments with proper housing conditions, infrastructure development, and accessibility to quality public services, coupled with continuous social work, community engagement, inclusivity, and empowerment of the Roma, for creating sustainable living conditions.

A pivotal reference for shaping mid to long-term strategies for assisting Roma communities is the **European Parliament's resolution from October 5, 2022**. This resolution emphasises the crucial need to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion as a foundational step towards ensuring access to quality, integrated housing. Addressing housing exclusion and preventing homelessness involves long-term measures like adequate social housing, affordable rental programs, and targeted housing allowances within comprehensive national strategies. These strategies should prioritise housing-first approaches, ensuring equitable access to quality housing and essential services for all citizens without discrimination. Emphasis should be on strategies promoting desegregation, focusing on the development or investment in integrated social housing alongside accessible, high-quality social services and effective fieldwork. Essential to these endeavours is the active engagement and participation of the Roma community, ensuring these strategies effectively facilitate their transition out of settlements.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: What is 'Roma'?

In this document we consequently used the definition of 'Roma' based on the EU's characterization, where 'Roma' serves as a collective term that includes various individuals of Romani descent 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 Gipsies, Tsiganes or Tziganes, without denying their specificities.

Where do Roma people come from?

Linguistic and genetic evidence suggests that the Roma people originated in the North-West part of the Indian subcontinent; in particular, the region of present-day Rajasthan. Their subsequent westward migration, possibly in waves, is now believed by historians to have occurred around 900-1000 CE. They are believed to have been part of the low-caste Dalit community. There were several migration routes during the centuries. From India, the Roma embarked on a migration that took them through Persia, the Middle East, and into Europe; meanwhile, some of them arrived in the Southwestern part of Europe through the Northern part of Africa. They first appeared in the historical record of the Byzantine Empire in the 11th century. They reached the Balkans and Eastern Europe by the late Middle Ages. The Roma have never been a homogeneous group but rather a collection of distinct communities and subgroups. Differences between subgroups can be made based on the primary language they speak, the period of time they have been present in a country or the main works they do or did in the past as Roma were nomadic, travelling in caravans and earning a living through various crafts, including metalwork and entertainment. Nowadays, these differences are vanishing, or at least losing their importance.

Obviously, we do not know the exact reasons why these people left their homes, but most probably for the very same reasons other nations did. Wars, famine, lack of sources. Throughout their history in Europe, Roma people have faced persecution, including enslavement, forced assimilation, and mass killings, most notably during the Holocaust. They even have their own word for the Roma Holocaust: Porrajmos, which means destruction or scattering.

The word Roma most probably originates from a Sanskrit word, but in the Romani language, it means man or person. I many European languages, they are called differently (Gipsy, Циган, Zigeuner, Cikáni, Cigány, etc.), and this word most probably comes from a small territory in the Balkan which used to be called similar to this. As these words during the centuries were filled with negative stereotypes during the first World Romani Congress in 1971, the attendees (highly respected and well-known Roma artists, musicians, scholars, etc.) agreed to use the word Roma instead of the existing expressions. On the very same day, they agreed upon the anthem and also the flag.

GYPSY MIGRATIONS 900-1720
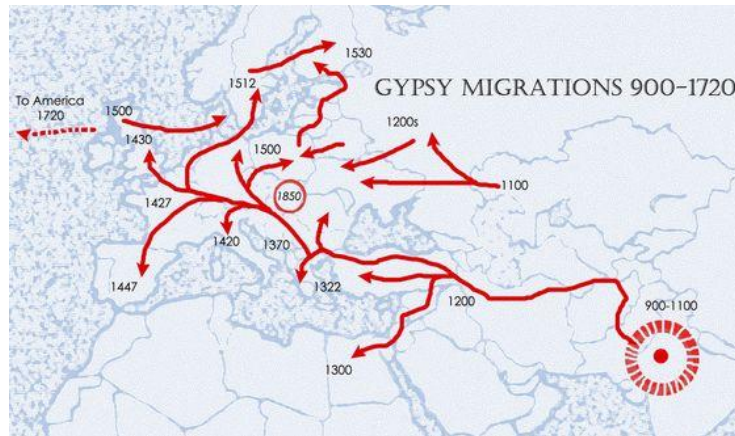
What religions do Roma have?

These days, Roma have most probably the very same religion as those non-Roma they live together with. In the Balkan countries, they are more likely to be Muslims, and in the CEE countries, they are more likely to be Christians. Those living in bigger cities are more likely to be non-religious than those in smaller villages. Just like the non-Roma do.

What language do they speak?

The language they spoke when they left India was a version of Sanskrit, which is a sacred language of Hinduism. Nowadays, the number and percentage of Roma-speaking Romani varies from country to country. A big percentage of Roma are bilingual or multilingual, depending on the neighbourhood's requirements, but it also means that there is a significant and growing percentage of Roma who speak only one language, which is the language of their closest neighbours.

Why do they have 'so many' children?

Although it was not part of this research, we can say that, in general, Roma have more children than the national average in each country. However, it is also true that the average number of children in a Roma family has decreased in the past 50-60 years and also that the number of children is highly dependent on the parents' educational level. The more they are educated, the closer the number of children is to the national average. Besides that, the availability of contraceptives is also determining, not to speak about the life expectancy at birth, which is 5-15 years shorter than the national average.

Do they have the same traditions as non-Roma?

Roma these days have no common, international characteristics or habits such as special Roma celebrations or festivity. Country by country and religion by religion, they might have some special annual gatherings such as the procession in Máriapócs, Hungary or the pilgrimage gathering in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France. Nevertheless, these are not exclusively Roma festivals and are rooted in religious acts that have extra meaning for Roma.

How much did Roma contribute to Europe's culture and other things?

Roma culture has enriched European society with music, dance, and folklore. In many countries, the traditional national music (such as the flamenco in Spain, the Hungarian folk music or the Balkan countries' brass music) can hardly work without the active involvement of Roma. Romani was and has been a very active transiting language between other languages, not to mention that it has enriched all European languages with words and expressions. Roma peoples' work is and has been inevitable when talking about hard physical work such as mining, field work, metal industry, or building roads and (public) buildings.

How many Roma are in Europe?
It has been a century-long debate about who is Roma and based on what data gathering activity. For historical reasons, Roma (and many other minorities) in many countries do not prefer to identify themselves as a member of an ethnic minority group during censuses. The reasons may vary between the low level or the total lack of trust towards a country's official data gathering system or still remembering those historical events where groups of ethnic minorities were killed, deported, or terrorised on the territory of the whole of Europe and centrally collected data was the source of these atrocities.

The best available data on the numbers of Roma in Europe was collected by the Support Team of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for Roma Issues in 2012. This gathered both the official data (the last available censuses at that time) and also the minimum and maximum estimations of Roma representatives regarding the number of their people. This table[23] calculates that the number of Roma in Europe as 11.2 million.

Country	Total population (World Bank 2010)	Official number (self-declared)	Census year	Minimum estimate	Maximum estimate	Average estimate (CoE used figure)	Average estimate as a % of the total population
Romania	21 442 012	619 007	2011	1 200 000	2 500 000	**1 850 000**	**8,63%**
Bulgaria	7 543 325	325 343	2011	700 000	800 000	**750 000**	**9,94%**
Hungary	10 008 703	190 046	2001	500 000	1 000 000	**750 000**	**7,49%**
Serbia (excl. Kosovo[24])	7 292 574	108 193	2002	400 000	800 000	**600 000**	**8,23%**
Slovakia	5 433 456	89 920	2001	380 000	600 000	**490 000**	**9,02%**
Ukraine	45 870 700	47 917	2001	120 000	400 000	**260 000**	**0,57%**
Czech Republic	10 525 090	11 718	2001	150 000	250 000	**200 000**	**1,90%**

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[23] Europe, Support Team of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for Roma Issues (2012), Estimates and official numbers of Roma in Europe
[24] All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions, or population, in this table shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

"The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia[25]	2 060 563	53 879	2002	134 000	260 000	**197 000**	**9,56%**
Kosovo	1 815 000	45 745	1991	25 000	50 000	**37 500**	**2,07%**

What are the contemporary challenges regarding Roma?

Despite some progress in combating discrimination and improving living conditions, Roma communities continue to face social and economic challenges, including poverty, limited access to education, and unequal treatment. The gap between Roma and non-Roma in several fields is still significant and, instead of closing, has been on the increase.

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[25] At the writing of the Council's document the name was correct as written, but in 2019 the name of the country officially changed to North Macedonia.

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