

1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2021

## MEETING REPORT

### Online Joint Roma and Extreme Destitution Network Meeting

*Lacho dives Romalen. Te aven bahtale.* With these words, Abriel Schiefflers officially opened the online panel “No Child Left Behind: Digital Poverty and Roma Child Poverty in the Child Guarantee and Beyond” on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. These welcoming words were given in the Romani language as an expression of gratitude and appreciation towards the Roma<sup>1</sup> persons among the panelists and in the audience.

Abriel Schiefflers, Eurodiaconia’s Policy and Membership Development Officer, moderated the panel and opened the discussion stating that, despite the Roma Strategic Framework<sup>2</sup> and the Child Guarantee<sup>3</sup> giving a sense of filling gaps and establishing a safety net, Roma children are still highly at risk of falling through the gaps and being left behind.

The first speaker, **Katarina Ivanković-Knežević**, Director for Social Affairs in the **European Commission’s Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion**, started her intervention responding that Roma children are indeed one of the key groups to benefit from the European Child Guarantee.

She recognised that the multiple challenges of segregation, discrimination and marginalization faced by Roma children are strongly reflected in the access to inclusive education and their educational outcomes. Also, she pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the disadvantage in terms of access to education of those Roma children living in marginalized communities.

To address those challenges, the Child Guarantee recommends the provision of high-speed connectivity, digital services, adequate technical equipment necessary to access distance learning and educational content online. The Child Guarantee calls upon the Member States to ensure, on the one hand, equal and inclusive education and training, including access to school-based activities such as trips. On the other hand, Member States are recommended to ensure transport to early

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘Roma’ is used as an umbrella term which includes different related groups throughout Europe, whether sedentary or not, such as Roma, Travellers, Sinti, Manouches, Kalés, Romanichels, Boyash, Ashkalis, Égyptiens, Yéniches, Doms and Loms, that may be diverse in culture and lifestyles.

<sup>2</sup> On 7 October 2020, the Commission issued a reinforced and reformed Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030. On 12 March 2021, a Council’s recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030 was adopted.

<sup>3</sup> In 2015 the European Parliament called for a child guarantee that would contribute to the implementation of the 2013 Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children. On 24 March 2021, the European Commission finally published its proposal for a European Child Guarantee. The Parliament adopted a resolution on the European Child Guarantee on 29 April 2021, welcoming the Commission proposal and calling on the Council to swiftly adopt it. The European Child Guarantee was adopted by the Council on 14 June 2021.

childhood education, care and education establishments. They asked to provide free and effective access to education and school-based activities, including early childhood education and care. They are also asked to provide at least one healthy meal per school day, effective access to healthy nutrition, healthcare, and adequate housing.

Ms Ivanković-Knežević argued that the commitment of the Commission was adequately translated into EU initiatives and into the three EU headline targets proposed in the Action Plan implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). She also highlighted that the EPSR Action Plan and the Child Guarantee are complemented by the EU Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030, which not only focuses on the mainstreaming of Roma inclusion, but also foresees targeted measures to support effective equal access of Roma to their rights and services.

In conclusion, Ms Ivanković-Knežević stated that, although European funds are going to provide an additional incentive to eradicate child poverty, Member States should redistribute their national budgets for this purpose. Thus, Member States have the responsibility to allocate sufficient funding for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

**MEP Romeo Franz** began his intervention mentioning that the resolution on the Child Guarantee was adopted in the European Parliament with a clear majority of its members, which was a strong signal towards political leaders of the Member States.

He stressed that the root cause for a disproportionate number of Romani children at high risk of poverty and social exclusion is antigypsyism.

He also echoed Ms Ivanković-Knežević by saying that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation of many Romani children, some of them living in crowded dwellings without access to clean water or distance school learning. In his opinion, the vicious circle of disadvantage and marginalization must be broken at an early stage, through targeted measures for equal opportunities and access to basic services which the Member States should provide.

Furthermore, Romeo Franz voiced his concern that the Child Guarantee is not a legally binding instrument and that its implementation therefore relies on the goodwill of the Member States. To end poverty in all its forms, he stated, Member States need to provide free and effective access to education, which also includes digital access to education in rural areas and in settlements of Romani people.

In conclusion, he emphasized that a sustainable progress for the life of Romani people, including children, can be achieved only by discontinuing a paternalistic approach and by fostering the equal participation of Romani people.

Following Romeo Franz' intervention, a video message from **MEP Brando Benifei** was shown to the audience, in which the S&D MEP shared a brief outline of the work which led to the adoption of the Child Guarantee and to the provision of resources dedicated to children in the European Social Fund+ (ESF+).

He expressed his contentment that the Child Guarantee specifically mentions Roma children and that, when designing the national measures, Member States are called to identify the specific disadvantages of children with a migrant or ethnic minority background.

Brando Benifei also mentioned the synergies between the Child Guarantee and other European schemes, such as the ESF+, the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), the EU Roma Strategic Framework and the related national Roma strategic frameworks. In his opinion, all these instruments are crucial to provide tailored measures to the specific needs of Roma children in the different local contexts.

Furthermore, he emphasised that the NRRPs must put at the core of their strategy children with special needs, those living in poverty and in marginalized communities, such as the Roma, and those living in remote rural areas. He made clear that there needs to be urgent action. Otherwise, the cycle of disadvantage of Roma children will be reinforced by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In closing, Brando Benifei pointed out that the EU should aim to bring all 18 million children out of poverty and social exclusion. The EU target which foresees 5 million children out of poverty by 2030 is not sufficient, because any level of child poverty is unacceptable.

**Marietta Herfort**, Managing Director of **Phiren Amenca Network**<sup>4</sup>, opened her intervention expressing her satisfaction that Roma children are explicitly mentioned as a target group in the Child Guarantee. She then presented the research “Challenges, needs and opportunities of young Roma in Europe”<sup>5</sup>, conducted by Phiren Amenca with other partners, which was based on over 300 interviews with young Roma from different EU Member States. In her opinion, combating poverty and socio-economic barriers is not sufficient, as there is a need for policies and measures to combat deeply rooted antigypsyism. The findings of the research by Phiren Amenca show that 95% of the 300 Roma youngsters living in the EU have observed and encountered discriminatory words, behaviours and gestures. In fact, systemic racism and school segregation are part of the everyday life of many young Roma. Marietta Herfort echoed the other speakers in recognising the need to improve access to services and education for Roma persons, but she insisted that these services must become truly inclusive. Therefore, minority language classes should be offered, and teachers should be trained on Roma history and identity. Additionally, space should be given to the youngsters to reflect positively on their Roma identity.

Also, she emphasised that administrative barriers must be removed for families and children to access schools, such as residency requirements or forced evictions during the school year.

While recognising that support for children must start from an early age, Marietta Herfort called on states and service providers to ensure long-term support. In fact, to make sure that Roma youngsters have a chance to participate in civic activities and in policymaking, the support should be provided from early age until high level education and even beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> Phiren Amenca is a network of Roma and non-Roma volunteers and voluntary service organizations creating opportunities for non-formal education, dialogue and engagement, in order to challenge stereotypes and racism. Eurodiaconia’s Italian member Diaconia Valdese is one of Phiren Amenca’s member organisations. <https://phirenamenca.eu/>.

<sup>5</sup> The findings of the research “Roma youth participation in Europe: Challenges, needs and opportunities” conducted by Phiren Amenca are available here: <https://phirenamenca.eu/roma-youth-participation-in-europe-challenges-needs-and-opportunities-research-findings/>.

In conclusion, she stressed the urgency for service providers to cooperate with Roma communities and Roma NGOs in their work.

The following panellist, **Veronka Torma**, represented Eurodiaconia's member **Diakonia Covasna/ Diakonia Sfantu Gheorghe** in Romania. As the Department Director of Social Services for Vulnerable Children and Families, she reported her work experience with disadvantaged children, mostly Roma, in the Covasna region. She presented the project "Educational support for vulnerable children in Romania. Steps towards institutionalization", which is part of the Roma inclusion regional program of *Hilfswerk der evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz* (HEKS/EPER).

First, she highlighted that Diakonia Covasna works towards a tolerant cohabitation of ethnical and social groups, to avoid the exclusion of children from schools and from the community. In this perspective, local councils and county councils, parents and people from the community help to organize the afterschool programme.

Secondly, Veronka Torma shared that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increasing number of school dropouts. In fact, some students started working, some others became parents. During the pandemic, Diakonia provided the most deprived with food and hygiene materials. Also, an offline-online mentor network was organised to help children in need. One of the biggest challenges which arose during the pandemic was the accessibility of digital education: even though public authorities provided each family with a laptop or a device, many of the children did not access online education. Some of the children living in segregated areas didn't know how to use the digital devices which had been given to them. Sadly, when children in Romania went back to school after the first lockdown, teachers did not invest time educating their students on how to use digital devices. This issue was not addressed after the first lockdown and has not been addressed ever since. She voiced her concern that, if a new closure of the schools would occur again, children would face the same difficulties and exclusion.

**Dr. Halla Holmarsdottir**, Project Coordinator of the DigiGen Project<sup>6</sup>, highlighted some of the key issues based on the findings of the DigiGen research. She stated that, generally, unequal access to technology exacerbates existing inequalities in educational opportunities. In the past, the primary response to this problem had been to increase technology access in the schools. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, in-school access was not a possible solution anymore. The pandemic changed the general understanding for the need of internet connectivity and for technological devices among children.

While many countries moved their classes online, the lack of access to digital devices became an increasing factor of social exclusion.

Dr. Halla Holmarsdottir highlighted that, in many cases, the possibility to access technology for people with constrained connectivity relies on other factors: for example, the possibility to go online in public spaces like libraries, restaurants, or to use devices owned by family members or friends. She also pointed out that some students were forced to share devices or connections with other

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<sup>6</sup> DigiGen is a European research project which is developing knowledge about how children and young people use and are affected by the technological transformations in their everyday lives. The outcomes of the research are accessible online: <https://digigen.eu/working-papers/>.

family members, which means that social negotiations for digital access occur even when families do own devices and can afford them.

The results of the DigiGen pointed out some alarming discrepancies in ICT use, interest, and confidence among European students. She stressed that, the higher the deprivation is, the lower the interest and confidence of the students in ICT use is. In the current situation, interest and a strong confidence in digital devices is a prerequisite for children to continue with their educational development. Therefore, measures to prevent the deepening of digital gaps are crucial to alleviating the significant existing differences in digital competences and knowledge and preventing further marginalization.

Finally, she mentioned the lack of disaggregated data on digital deprivation, which does not allow to identify who the children with the biggest digital gaps are. Nevertheless, in general, the number of digitally disengaged children in Eastern Europe, where a significant Roma population live, is particularly high.

After the first round of interventions, the moderator opened the floor to questions and answers and gave the panellists the chance to comment on the other speakers' contributions.

**Katarina Ivanković-Knežević** took the opportunity to express her delight that the needs identified by the Commission and the ones identified by the other speakers align. Furthermore, she stressed the responsibility of the Member States, civil society, and service providers to prioritize children who are most in need. To make sure that the Member States address the groups identified in the Child Guarantee in their national plans, she said, the good practices must reach the stakeholders at national and local level, where the importance of including Roma children in the implementation of the Child Guarantee must be acknowledged.

Afterwards, **Nicole Borisuk** from Eurodiaconia's member **Living Hope Odessa** asked whether the EU Commission planned to give a recommendation, or even a stronger legal instrument, to partnership countries such as the Ukraine, to introduce and implement the Child Guarantee.

**Katarina Ivanković-Knežević** responded that, while the Commission does make sure that for example child labour issues are addressed in international agreements, they have not reflected yet on such an approach relating to the Child Guarantee. She assured the audience that she will explore the potential of such an initiative.

The following question was raised by **Amana Ferro** from **ERGO Network**, who asked how it can be ensured that Member States include Roma children in their national action plans and that indeed the services offered are "free" and not only "affordable". Also, she asked how appropriate synergies can be ensured with the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Child Guarantee and the European Semester, since the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) have already been submitted.

**Katarina Ivanković-Knežević** replied that the European Semester remains the tool to assess the improvements and to address the remaining challenges in the Member States. Within the Semester, the Commission monitors the implementation of the EPSR and will certainly assess, analyse and provide additional recommendations around children rights. When it comes to the NRRPs, the

Commission will share a comprehensive analysis on how the Member States addressed the social aspects within their national plans, once all the plans will have been submitted. Furthermore, Ms Ivanković-Knežević responded that the preparation of the Member States' partnership agreements for the new MFF and the new EU funds like the ESF+ are crucial. Replying to the question on how to make sure that the Member States address the needs of the Roma children, she argued that everyone should play their role, from local service providers to advocacy actors at EU level, to make sure that those Member States which have a large population of Roma children really include them in the operational programs and the national plans.

Furthermore, **Katarina Ivanković-Knežević** was told that the EU Alliance for investing in children is concerned about the risk of having a Child Guarantee promoting children's placement in institutions. Thus, she was asked how the Child Guarantee is going to prioritise the transition from institutional to family and community-based care. Ms Ivanković-Knežević replied that the Commission considers the transition from institutions to the family environment and the community-based environment crucial in securing the rights of the children. If it is in the best interest of the child, though, the placement in institutions remains a last resort option which must nevertheless ensure a good environment for the child and promote a quick transition to family and community-based environment.

In conclusion, the moderator Abriel Schieffeler closed the public panel noting that the Child Guarantee is only the beginning of a long way ahead. In fact, the fight against antigypsyism and child poverty requires long-term, ambitious, and sustainable solutions.

## Internal Network Meeting

The day prior to the public panel, Eurodiaconia members gathered online for an internal meeting, during which representatives from Czechia, the Netherlands, Serbia and Austria had the opportunity to present their best practices and the challenges they face in their work with children and families.

**Dan Žárský**, Director of **Diakonie ČCE** presented the work of the Centre Vsetín, in Czechia, a center which has provided care to approximately 300 seniors and 200 children and their families, mainly Roma, for the last 16 years.

Dan Žárský started his intervention describing the peculiar situation of the Roma people living in the city of Vsetín, most of whom moved there from Slovakia in the 60s and 70s. Contrary to most of the Roma living in Czechia, who do speak Czech, the community in Vsetín speaks Romani.

He highlighted that, until 2011, Roma children in Czechia were supposed to attend special – segregated schools. Still today, most of the Roma population do not have permanent jobs, and many of them live in segregated areas and experience some tensions with the rest of the population.

Diakonie ČCE provides services specifically addressing Roma such as Mosaic, a social activation service for families with children; Rubikon, a low threshold facility for children and youth; and a preschool preparation service called Trickle.



Dan Žárský presented Trickle as one of the most important activities addressing Roma people: a pre-school service for children aged 3 to 5, whose parents are often illiterate. The aim of the service is to fill the gaps in the knowledge of the children through elements from the Montessori method. At the end of each year, a farewell ceremony called Academy for children takes place, where children show their talents, and receive appreciation and recognition. He added that city town officials and the mayor are usually involved in these ceremonies.

**Iara de Witte** from **The Salvation Army** in the Netherlands presented the “Toy for Inclusion Play Hub”, a European project developed by International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) in nine countries and implemented by different partners. In the city of Enschede in the Netherlands, the implementation of the project was started in 2020 by the Salvation Army. The idea behind it is that social inclusion can start with the eagerness of the children to play and learn. Therefore, the play hub welcomes children and families of all backgrounds and allows them to connect to each other and build trust. In the Netherlands, the play hub welcomes between 25 and 50 children, most of whom are Roma. Iara de Witte highlighted that the project offers childcare education in a rather informal way, which helps vulnerable children in their transition from home care to formal schooling. In her local team, Roma parents are involved as mediators, as well as social workers, job and sport coaches, and volunteers. Furthermore, she pointed out the importance of addressing the needs of the entire family and not only focus on the children and their early child development. In this perspective, the team of the Toy for Inclusion Play Hub in Enschede offers activities addressed to the families of the children and helps them, for example, acquire job skills and enter the job market.

**Milisav Milinkovic** spoke about the integration support provided by the **Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation (EHO)** to families who return to Serbia after having unsuccessfully sought asylum in an EU country.

Since the agreement between the EU and the Republic of Serbia on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation entered into force in 2008, the number of families who are returning or being deported to Serbia has increased. These families cannot easily re-integrate in the Serbian society, after having spent several years abroad.

Among other services, the EHO helps them improve the conditions of the dwellings where they live, provides counselling on administrative matters and solutions for urgent needs such as food, heating and hygienical products. Also, they identify skills and competences of the members of the family, providing start-up grants and necessary equipment for self-employment.

Furthermore, EHO provides children with school supplies, clothes, pedagogical assistance and language classes.

Most of the persons involved in the work are Roma activists, pedagogists and social workers who are active and live in Roma settlements. They assess the needs of the families, and they monitor the process of integration. So-called family conferences are organised on a regular basis together with the institutions and other stakeholders to discuss and agree on concrete steps which both the institutions and the members of the families will take.

Milisav Milinkovic also shared the difficulties faced by many Roma children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the difficulties accessing distance-learning, EHO not only provided the children with tablets, but also created a digital application for additional support. In particular, the application

was used to organise mentoring face-to-face and give the families the chance to ask for support, for example while helping the children with their homework.

**Martin Schenk-Mair**, Social Expert on Poverty, Health, Child and Youth Aid at **Diaconia Austria** provided the audience with a broader perspective on child poverty in Austria and the challenges faced by the families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Families living in poverty often rely on precarious and low-paid jobs, which are usually the kind of jobs which cannot be done in home-office. This exposed them and their children to a higher risk of infection. During the lockdown, families were subject to increasing costs not only to purchase digital devices, but also for the food which was no longer provided by the schools. While the bills for heating and electricity increased, the average income of most of the families with children in Austria decreased.

Furthermore, Martin Schenk-Mair highlighted that the pandemic increased the psychosomatic disorders of many children and caused sleeping problems, loneliness, health problems and a general lack of trust. In conclusion, he argued that the feeling of distance caused by the social distancing measures associated with a change of their everyday life is particularly dangerous for vulnerable people such as children.

Answering a question from the audience regarding the trauma experienced by children, **Milisa Milinkovic** from the **EHO** in Serbia explained that most of the families forced to return to Serbia are experiencing trauma. In fact, once they receive an order to leave the territory of the country where they had filed their asylum application, they are supposed to return to Serbia in a short period of time. If they do not, the police usually arrest the family during the night and deport them, which causes even a bigger trauma for the children. In these cases, the EHO in Serbia provides psychological support in cooperation with public institutions. Also, the school staff is informed about their history and provides additional support.

**Martin Schenk-Mair** emphasized that while the challenges related to psychosocial and mental health issues are increasing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are the ones who suffer the most.

He also added that Diaconia Austria puts a focus on the prevention of poverty and social exclusion, and, in this sense, it considers the Child Guarantee to be an important initiative. Nevertheless, the aspect of institutionalisation of care services in the Child Guarantee is critical. Diaconia Austria has not invested in new foster homes in the last years and is in favour of a deinstitutionalization of care services.

Afterwards, **Lina Vosyliūtė** from the **Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)** briefly presented the project “CHACHIPEN - Paving the way for Truth and Reconciliation Process to address antigypsyism in Europe”<sup>7</sup>. The project was developed in the context of a feasibility study commended by Soraya Post, former Swedish MEP, on the potential of truth and reconciliation commissions. It is

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<sup>7</sup> For further information about the CHACHIPEN project: [https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CHACHIPEN\\_-short-description\\_updated\\_with\\_milestones\\_EClogo.pdf](https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CHACHIPEN_-short-description_updated_with_milestones_EClogo.pdf).



now established by the CEPS think tank, in cooperation with the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, ERGO Network, and two national partners from Spain (Federación de Asociaciones Gitanas de Cataluña - FAGIC) and Romania (Asociatia Fast Forward). In this phase, the partners are analysing how different historical, distributive, restorative, and transitional justice approaches could be helpful to address antigypsyism.

Lina Vosyliūtė told the audience that the partners are eager to know whether there is interest among Roma-led civil society to build a coalition and cooperate in this project. She also highlighted that CHACHIPEN could be a good opportunity for churches to address antigypsyism, given the oppression they perpetuated in the past against Roma people in different European countries.

**David Blowers** from the **Salvation Army** shared that the language barrier is one of the biggest challenges in his work with Roma in the UK. The mix of languages used by the members of a family can be very problematic when he tries to provide interpretation. Not only the native language of the parents and the children can differ, but also the main language spoken by the siblings, who in some cases have been to school in different countries and might have a different vocabulary. Even if the family speaks Romanes, in some cases the influence of other languages is so strong that it might be challenging to identify a common language which is spoken and understood by everyone in the same way. Another challenge identified by David Blowers is the lack of trust in the institutions and the authorities, which are mostly seen as a threat and not as an ally. As argued by Lina Vosyliūtė in her presentation of the CHACHIPEN project, reconciliation and trust building are indeed crucial aspects.

**Dan Žárský** highlighted another challenge faced in Czechia related to the long-term sustainability of the projects in the work with Roma. Most of the grants received by **Diakonie ČCE**, some of which come from the EU, are only for one or two years. However, these projects would need to last for at least ten years to ensure a meaningful impact on the life and the education of Roma children.

In conclusion, **Milisav Milinkovic** pointed out that promoting Roma role models for example in science and education is crucial to raise awareness about the importance of education. Positive examples help the marginalised Roma youngsters believe that they can change the status quo and become active citizens. Also, he suggested a holistic approach to fight the poverty cycle: if the parents don't have an adequate income, the chances that their children will stay in education is lower. Therefore, support and a harmonisation process for the whole family is needed.

Abriel Schieffeler finally closed the meeting thanking the members for their participation and noting that their inputs will be included in Eurodiaconia's forthcoming policy paper on Child Poverty.