

Webinar Report

Roma Child Poverty & Social Exclusion

On November 30th, Eurodiaconia hosted a webinar on Roma child poverty and social exclusion. This topic is of great importance to us and our members as Roma children are amongst the most at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Europe. Despite efforts at both European and national levels, Roma families and their children continue to endure some of the harshest conditions in Europe today and these have only been worsened by the ongoing pandemic. The event launched our [new policy paper](#) on this topic and brought together a panel of speakers with experience on the ground providing social services to Roma children living in poverty, as well as national and European level speakers, for a pertinent discussion about what is being done to tackle Roma child poverty through the Child Guarantee and Roma Strategic Framework on Equality, Inclusion, and Participation and what we can expect in the coming years in the implementation of these strategies.

Eurodiaconia's Head of Advocacy, **Ms. Anne-Sophie Wislocki**, moderated the event and began by welcoming participants and introducing our speakers – Ms. Lavinia Banu (Roma Unit – DG JUST), Major Roxana Sandu (Salvation Army Romania) and Ms. Elena Iordanescu (National Roma Contact Point for Romania). Before the panel discussion, our new policy paper was presented by our Policy Officer working on Roma inclusion, **Ms. Abriel Schiefflers**. The paper is based upon the work and experiences of our members. We gathered this knowledge throughout the year and through various means, including a public panel discussion and an internal network meeting. It offers a timely insight into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma children, as well as addressing persistent issues, such as school segregation, institutionalisation and digital poverty.

Our members have seen, over the past two years, worsening trends for Roma children. Ms. Schiefflers, therefore, noted the opportune timing of recent EU initiatives, including the Child Guarantee and the Roma Strategic Framework. These initiatives should play a pivotal role in improving the lives of Roma children in the coming years. She also said that it is important to address Roma child poverty through the lens of anti-discrimination and to provide actionable recommendations that lead towards active inclusion. This was also a strategic time in which to update our policy recommendations in this area. In our consultations with members, they highlighted the impact of the pandemic on Roma children, with an emphasis on digital poverty. Ms. Schiefflers noted that many Roma children have missed a year or more of school due to a lack of access to digital learning platforms and devices. Our members also identified spatial and ethnic segregation in education as driving the cycle of poverty that traps many Roma communities.

The recommendations put forward in the paper address the European and national levels. At a European level, our members call for the prioritisation of desegregation and institutionalization in the development of policies and funding proposals. To support this, there needs to be accessible disaggregated data, through which we can see whether Roma children are being prioritised and if interventions are having a positive impact. The EU must also step up in monitoring the implementation of anti-racism and anti-poverty strategies and the use of funds designated for Roma inclusion. At a national level, Eurodiaconia and its members see that more needs to be done to actively end

educational segregation. Instead of utilising EU funds only for infrastructure, they should be used to design and implement active desegregation measures. Furthermore, any measures to address Roma child poverty and social exclusion should ensure an intersectional approach, recognising the diversity of the people they are designed to serve.

Following the presentation of our policy paper, we moved into the panel discussion. Our first speaker was **Ms. Lavinia Banu**, Policy Officer at the Roma Coordination Unit of DG Justice at the European Commission. Ms. Banu brought insights into the ongoing development and implementation of the Roma frameworks at both European and member state levels. She said that young Roma and children are at the heart of these frameworks; that they are designed to empower them to overcome socioeconomic gaps, fully exercise their rights and realise their potential as active agents of change. In preparing for this event, the Roma Coordination Unit and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights distributed a questionnaire to member states about the inclusion of child poverty in their national Roma strategic frameworks. Of those that responded, nine stated that they specifically address child poverty. A further five responded that they are still developing their plans and four said that no such measures were included.

We heard that the Commission is committed to reinforcing legislation and initiatives that will directly impact the lives of Roma across Europe. As things stand, the development and submission of the national Roma strategies is ongoing. It is anticipated that initial assessments of them will be published in autumn 2022, with an emphasis on measures concerning child poverty. Ms. Banu said that the Commission will also be looking at how effectively member states synchronise their national strategies with intersecting initiatives, specifically the Child Guarantee and the Anti-Racism Action Plan, as well as more broadly in areas of education and employment. She emphasised the importance civil society organisations (CSOs) play in ensuring these initiatives function and are enforced. There is a lack of quality data regarding Roma inclusion from within member states and CSOs play a vital role in gathering and publishing reliable data. The Roma Civil Monitor has played an especially important role in this regard and Ms. Banu was glad to report that it has secured funding for a further four years and that a call for coalition partners will be released soon.

Ms. Roxana Sandu, a Major in the Salvation Army Romania, was our next speaker and presented an overview of the Salvation Army's work supporting Roma communities in the country. The Salvation Army first began working in Romania in 1999, in Bucharest. Since then, they have expanded their work to five other cities: Bacău, Buzău, Craiova, Iași and Ploiești. Their mission is to respond to human needs - to improve people's quality of life, offer hope, promote peace and wellbeing, and do so without discrimination.

The Salvation Army's vision is that every child should have access to education and a loving and caring environment, in which they have the respect and support of their peers. Ms. Sandu explained that, in their context, this means working to combat early school drop-out rates, poverty and social exclusion and human trafficking. They also provide emergency support in crisis situations. To fulfil this vision, the Salvation Army has developed a project providing multifunctional anti-poverty services for reintegration and transformation ([SMART – Servicii Multifunționale Anti-Sărăcie pentru Reintegrare și Transformare](#)). They have established two day-centres, in Iași and Ploiești, for disadvantaged children, deployed mobile teams to reach out into communities and to the homeless and established a counseling and information centre in Bucharest. Through this work, they aim to directly reach 1600 individuals, increasing their quality of life and access to social services. They are also working to establish networking dialogues between local municipalities and civil society stakeholders, to weave their ideas and values into the fabric of the cities they work in, thereby reaching an exponentially greater number of people.

Ms. Sandu emphasised the impact that time invested in building confidence can have on both children and families. This is slow and incremental work but lays the foundations for transformation across generations. She highlighted two key challenges – online education and the lack of reliable funding. The pandemic has only exacerbated the exclusion experienced by children who do not have access to digital devices, the internet, or space at home to participate in online schooling. The struggle to meet the challenges the Salvation Army sees every day is only compounded by a lack of available state funding and unreliable external donors. The generational change they are working towards requires consistent funding commitment, patience and a long-term vision. This underpins the two recommendations that Ms. Sandu concluded with – make long-term investments in Roma children and invest in working with parents as well.

Our final speaker was **Ms. Elena Iordanescu**, from the National Roma Contact Point (NRCP) within the Romanian Ministry of Investments & European Projects. The NRCP has been involved in developing Romania's forthcoming national strategy for Roma inclusion and Ms. Iordanescu was able to give us some insight into its progress. She confirmed that the strategy is awaiting approval from the Romanian government after changes in government had delayed this process. Once approved, the strategy will focus on employment and education, placing children at its centre. The focus on employment will serve to improve the socioeconomic situation in which children grow up, whilst the focus on education will address the experience of Roma children in school. Specifically, priorities two and three of the strategy will focus on inclusive education and priority six on creating quality employment for parents.

Ms. Iordanescu also highlighted the challenges that spatial segregation brings and plans to address this by way of better integrating so-called informal settlements. This will be addressed in the national Operational Programme for Inclusion & Social Dignity, which will complement the national Roma strategy. In practice, this means formally registering buildings, improving access to services and extending access to basic amenities and infrastructure. The government intends to target up to 200 informal settlements, in which Roma are overrepresented, as they view this as a comprehensive way of addressing marginalisation. In developing this plan, a mapping project has been initiated together with the Commission. The intention is to map approximately 42 areas of the country in which there are high concentrations of marginalised communities. The purpose is to document the breakdown between service providers, authorities and communities and therefore better target future interventions. Ms. Iordanescu said that the ambition is always to place children at the heart of any intervention and that by undertaking exercises, such as mapping, they will be able to develop healthy environments for children to grow up in.

The webinar concluded with a Q&A session in which attendees had the opportunity to put their questions to the panel and panelists could reflect upon one another's contributions. One attendee asked whether Roma children would be explicitly mentioned as a key target group in the Romanian Child Guarantee and national Roma framework. Ms. Iordanescu said in response that the Child Guarantee plan would be finalised by March 2022 and will complement measures in the national strategy for Roma inclusion without duplicating them. There was also a question about the relationship between child poverty and educational segregation and how these issues can be tackled. In response, Ms. Banu stated that, in line with the Anti-Racism Action Plan and the EU Roma Strategic Framework, the Commission intends to take steps to enforce desegregation legislation within member states. A general assessment, which will also address educational segregation, is due next year in the form of a report on the state of play regarding the Racial Equality Directive. Ms. Iordanescu and Ms. Sandu both emphasised the importance of training and equipping school teachers, so that they can support Roma children and build trust with communities.

Overall, the webinar was a success and brought together a three-tiered perspective, giving participants an insight into work being done on the ground to change the lives of Roma children and at the levels of national and European governance to facilitate such work. We came away encouraged by the stories of change brought by our member, Ms. Sandu, and well informed of forthcoming developments at both a European and national level, in Romania. We would like to extend our gratitude once again to our speakers and to all those who attended.