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Position Paper

Obstacles challenging Roma inclusion



Executive summary

First impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine, inflation, energy poverty and the cost-of-living crisis, the situation of Travellers and Roma¹ is increasingly challenging. In this paper, Caritas Europa provides an overview of some of the many obstacles the Roma people face across Europe, based on observations from the services Caritas provides to people in or at risk of poverty and/or in general situations of marginalisation. Various structural obstacles challenge Roma inclusion, including the negative impacts of high living costs, discriminatory treatment – exacerbated following the war in Ukraine – as well as the low ambition in some countries of implementing the [EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation](#)² or of prioritising the Roma people as beneficiaries of services and funding.

Considering that an in-depth mid-term evaluation of the ten-year Roma strategic plan is foreseen for 2025, with the overall aim being full equality, Caritas Europa hopes to **provide a reality check and to warn Member States that much, much more effort will be needed to achieve the seven targets**, since the situation for Roma people has not improved, but in most cases has rather worsened. For this reason, Caritas Europa has formulated a number of recommendations, placing priority on the following:

Recommendation 1:

EU Member States should prioritise the implementation of national Roma strategic frameworks, with a stronger focus on the antidiscrimination and awareness-raising component, overcoming structural obstacles and allocating sufficient funding to achieve the specified targets.³

Recommendation 2:

EU Member States should help Roma people access social rights and be able to participate regularly on the labour market, i.e., by assisting their attainment of personal and identity papers⁴ from their countries of origin, allocating more financial support to public employment agencies and applying a client-centred re-design with differentiated job counselling and employment incentives that are inclusive and non-discriminatory.

¹ The reference to “Travellers and Roma”, as an umbrella term, encompasses a wide range of different people of Romani origin such as: Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels and Boyash/Rudari. It also encompasses groups such as Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as traveller populations, including ethnic Travellers or those designated under the administrative term gens du voyage and people who identify as Gypsies, Tsiganes or Tziganes, without denying their specificities.

² More details on the Roma strategic framework can be found on page 9 and here: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/new-eu-roma-strategic-framework-equality-inclusion-and-participation-full-package_en

³ More details on the targets of the Roma strategic framework can be found on page 9 and in the link above.

⁴ Many Roma do not have birth certificates, identity cards, passports or other forms of personal papers proving their identity which presents many bureaucratic challenges.

Recommendation 3:

EU Member States should take into account the high cost of living in setting adequate minimum wages, support those without formal income through minimum income schemes, establish more affordable and social housing, devise a strategy to systematically move away from Roma settlements, subsidise energy bills for lower-income families and adults, and ensure access to essential services⁵ and basic needs to enable a life in dignity.

Recommendation 4:

EU Member States should ensure proper implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive and its application to all refugees fleeing from Ukraine without discrimination based on grounds of nationality, race or ethnicity, and provide immediate and humane accommodation in cases where citizens prove unwilling to open their homes to sponsor or accommodate Roma refugees.

Recommendation 5:

EU Member States should allocate financial support to social service providers like Caritas and Roma organisations to provide health and social care support for Roma people, as the need for such services is increasing.

Introduction

Caritas as a witness to the dire reality of Roma people in EU Member States

Caritas⁶ staff and volunteers work every day with people in need, with those who are marginalised, who are suffering from poverty and social exclusion. Our motto during the pandemic was “Caritas doesn’t close”, implying that our doors were always open and our compassion and support always available. During this time and since then, our members across Europa have been witnessing an increase in the number of people relying on their social services and material support, among whom include Travellers and Roma people, who compose Europe’s largest ethnic minority. Of an estimated 10-12 million in Europe, some six million Roma⁷ live in the EU, most of whom are EU citizens. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there are also many newly arrived Roma in the EU and in countries neighbouring Ukraine seeking protection.⁸

⁵ Such as water, sanitation, energy, transport, digital communications and financial services.

⁶ Caritas Europa is a network of 49 member organisations in Europe that works to promote human dignity, to fight against poverty, and to support the most vulnerable. We advocate first and foremost for person-centred policies: www.caritas.eu

⁷ Throughout this paper, we refer to Roma people, but this simplified term shall encompass the wide range of different people of Romani origin such as: Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom, Abdal, ethnic Travellers or those designated under the administrative term gens du voyage and people who identify as Gypsies, Tsiganes or Tziganes, without denying their specificities.

⁸ Caritas members are likewise engaged in humanitarian actions, providing support to those fleeing the same invasion; see: <https://www.caritas.eu/war-in-ukraine/>

Based on data from our [2016 Caritas Cares! poverty report](#), the Roma people emerged as one of the population groups most impoverished in Europe.⁹ Our [2020 Caritas Cares! poverty report](#), with a focus on access to public services in the areas of employment, housing, early childhood education and care, describes the many barriers and situations of discrimination the Roma face in accessing essential services.¹⁰ Our [2021 Caritas Cares! poverty report](#), with a focus on inclusive labour markets, further highlights challenges the Roma people face accessing the regular labour market and in attaining upward mobility.¹¹ Meanwhile, our members working on the frontline in response to those fleeing the war in Ukraine have highlighted the challenges the Roma people escaping the war face in their search for protection in the EU or in neighbouring countries. Thus, based on the experiences of Caritas members, who regularly collect data from the ground and monitor policy implementation, highlighting what functions well and where there are gaps, we touch upon these varying challenges. Caritas will continue to adhere to its mission to provide supportive services to those in or at risk of poverty and to intervene to support Roma people as long as there is a need. We will also advocate to address the structural challenges and pervasive discrimination that contributes to the marginalisation of this population group.

This paper starts with a description of some pervasive structural obstacles observed by our member organisations that impede Roma inclusion across the EU. Next is a section highlighting the recent challenges linked to inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, which is followed by examples of some inconsistent and differentiated treatment toward the Roma people fleeing the war in Ukraine. Mainstreamed throughout this paper is the prevalence of discriminatory tendencies across Europe, known as anti-Gypsyism and/or anti-Ziganism, despite targets to combat this in the EU Roma strategic framework. The next section considers whether Member States have lowered their ambitions with regard to prioritising the national Roma strategic frameworks more generally in the midst of poly-crises. Finally, we include an annex with initiatives and projects Caritas members are carrying out in the different countries to try to alleviate the persistent marginalisation and exclusion of Roma people.

Structural obstacles

Despite the fact that European non-discrimination law prohibits discrimination across a range of contexts and grounds, many Roma in the EU continue to be victims of prejudice and marginalisation. Despite years of attention to address the high prevalence of discrimination, disadvantage and inequalities facing these communities across Europe, little progress has been achieved so far.¹² Our members have identified the following structural

⁹ The other groups that emerged from that data includes long-term unemployed, the working poor, single parents, migrants/undocumented, and children.

¹⁰ The data, based on input from our member organisations in 16 EU Member States, was analysed in terms of the accessibility, availability, adequacy and affordability of services among those in or at risk of poverty. The Roma people were specifically mentioned in five of the 16 country reports, namely in the reports from the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Caritas Hungary and Ukraine did not participate in the research, but it is highly likely that the Roma would have been identified in these countries as well. The challenges reported are presented here.

¹¹ Our member organisations collected data from the ground and monitored access to the labour market in 18 EU Member States. The Roma people were specifically mentioned in 12 of the 18 country reports, namely in the reports from Ireland, Latvia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Italy, Portugal and Lithuania.

¹² At the time the NRIS were introduced in 2011, each country was asked to produce a Roma strategy, which was first assessed by the European Commission in 2012, followed by a mid-term review evaluation in 2018, and annual assessment reports until 2020 on the implementation in the subsequent years of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. The NRIS were centred around four key areas: education, employment, healthcare, and housing. The European Commission (EC) had also put in place an annual reporting mechanism to the European Parliament and the Council to assess progress made until 2020. In parallel, the EC set up a permanent dialogue with Member States through the network of the 28 National Roma Contact Points. This network represented an important step forward to support the coordination and implementation of the strategies and actions on the ground. Concretely, however, this dialogue did not work well as the National Contact Points were often unaware of EU policies and discussions and the situation for Roma people only improved marginally. Since the European Commission released its communication on the EU Roma strategic framework for equality,

challenges that continue to negatively disadvantage the Roma people across Europe, and which have been widely documented by others, including the Fundamental Rights Agency:¹³

- Wide prevalence of racism, discrimination, anti-Gypsyism/anti-Ziganism and social exclusion of Roma people;¹⁴
- High prevalence of intergenerational extreme poverty and severe material deprivation, difficulty covering daily living costs, worsened by the impacts of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis;¹⁵
- Difficulties to access affordable and social housing, reduced to living in inhumane settlements, often lacking essential services such as water, sanitation, energy, transport, digital communications and financial services;¹⁶
- Insufficient awareness of available services, insufficient understanding of the administrative rules and absence of necessary documents (identity card, permanent residence), making it sometimes impossible to rely on social services;
- Difficulties to access the child guarantee, minimum income or other social benefits and employment due in part to discrimination but also to a lack of personal or identity papers;
- Difficulties to access Early Childhood Education and Care; sometimes are told there are no places available, even if this is not the case;
- Marginalisation in school and limited access to training opportunities or higher education programmes with only a small percent completing secondary education (around 3% in Portugal), suffer the most under limited capacities of schoolteachers and education systems, high prevalence of early school leaving;¹⁷
- Overall low educational levels and high illiteracy levels with worsened educational outcomes during COVID-19 due to remote teaching/learning, lack of digital and Wi-Fi access, computers or appropriate home learning environments;
- Barriers to future opportunities, difficulties accessing the labour market as young adults¹⁸ or to benefit from available employment services, all negatively impacting on recruitment processes, with insufficient demand for common skills, discrimination/bias, high exploitation, poor working conditions, pay gaps, inadequate wages and in work poverty. In Portugal, there have been some cases of Roma managing to get a job, only to be fired when the employer finds out their Roma ethnicity;
- Prevalence to work in the informal economy, in non-standard employment, without a formally concluded

inclusion and participation 2021-2030 and launched the EU Roma strategic framework, some countries have been slow in even publishing their national Roma strategic frameworks let alone implementing them.

¹³ The FRA published in Oct. 2022 the findings of its survey with more than 8,400 Roma on their living situations in Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, and Spain. "The findings present a bleak but familiar picture of exclusion, deprivation, discrimination and racism", according to the press release: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2022/roma-survey-findings>

¹⁴ Among an estimated 230,000 marginalised Roma people in Slovakia, 84.7% live below the poverty threshold (corresponding to €3.80 per day) and 56% are subject to severe material deprivation (compared to 7% for the overall population in Slovakia). See also: Magano, O. & Mendes, M. M. (2022). Structural racism and racialisation of Roma/Ciganos in Portugal: The case of secondary school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Sciences*, 10: 203.

¹⁵ In Slovakia, the poverty rate among Roma is more than six times higher than for the general population and is also higher than in other Member States with sizable Roma populations.

¹⁶ Segregated settlements remain one of the biggest challenges for the tens of thousands of Roma living in them. For Roma children in concentrated residential areas, the probability of their parents being unemployed or earning less than the minimum wage in informal work is almost 70%. According to data from the National Housing Institute, 32% of Roma families in Portugal reside in non-classic accommodations (mainly settlements, not having, in some cases, access to drinking water) and 46% live in social housing. (Source: Instituto da Habitação e Reabilitação Urbana (2015). Caracterização das Condições de Habitação das Comunidades Ciganas em Portugal. Available in: https://www.portaldahabitacao.pt/documentos/20126/58203/caraterizacao_condicoes_habitacao.pdf/43b00c61-59e6-2adf-1d0a-959445ce1068?t=1549879128711).

¹⁷ Schooling levels of Roma in Portugal remain generally lower than among the rest of the Portuguese population, either due to historical and cultural reasons, or to the ethnocentric characteristics of the Portuguese schools that adapt poorly to the cultural diversity that constitutes the Portuguese society (Source: EAPN/Portugal & Fundacion Secretariado Gitano (2020). Para a Inclusão no Mercado de Trabalho das Comunidades Ciganas – Referencial Técnico).

¹⁸ A recent report in Ireland, for instance, shows that 80% of the Roma community are not in work. Additionally, only 1% of Roma have completed higher education (Source: www.gov.ie – Travellers and Roma in higher education supported, as Minister Harris announces rollout of €450,000).

employment contract, as day-labourers, construction and/or seasonal workers, without any social security protections, and dependent on the seasonal fluctuations of the informal labour market. This results in greater precarity and vulnerability, especially in times of economic decline and inflation and with clear evidence of having been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19;¹⁹

- Isolation and repeated quarantines in Roma settlements during COVID-19 with societal fears about the introduction of new mutations of the virus from abroad;²⁰
- Difficulties to access health care services and relevant healthcare information; prevalence of discrimination and disrespectful treatment when seeking medical services of any type;
- Differentiated treatment and protection to other refugee populations with inconsistent access to rights and accommodation with citizens unwilling to open their homes to sponsor or accommodate Roma refugees;
- Difficulties to engage in empowerment or capacity-building activities when available with a longer-term perspective considering their daily struggle to survive, to make ends meet.

Many other structural challenges exist, but these are some of the most common ones across the EU. The next section shows that the situation for Roma has only worsened as a result of the increase in living costs linked to the war in Ukraine, energy and food shortages and high inflation.

Inflation and cost-of-living crisis

We observe the consequences of inflation and extremely high living costs on the lives of the Roma people in particular. The current context is even more difficult than at the height of COVID-19, since people in precarious financial situations have even less of a cushion to cover their costs than previously. Not surprisingly, more people are in need of support now and the situation for people at risk of poverty or who are already in situations of poverty, such as the Roma, has only increased, especially for those in rural areas and where government funding is lacking.

We take Portugal as a concrete example of the kind of challenges the Roma people are facing due to the cost-of-living crisis across Europe, where the minimum wage and income as well as the country's social benefits are below the EU average. This makes Portugal (similar to many other EU Member States) exposed to the impacts of inflation and the impending economic crisis. Portugal is affected by the energy crisis that Europe is currently facing. The socioeconomic measures that have been implemented thus far are insufficient to mitigate the problem, especially for the most vulnerable groups, among which include most of the Portuguese Roma communities. In its daily practice, Cáritas Diocesana de Viseu has already observed an increase in the demand for economic support (to pay energy bills) and essential goods (such as non-perishable food, personal hygiene products and clothing) by Roma people with low incomes.

Caritas is naturally concerned about the dire situation that so many Roma people are facing as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. The same applies to the situation of more than 200 000 Roma people living in settlements in Slovakia, where the situation naturally worsens when the temperatures in winter drop, often even below 20 degrees Celsius, so the number of people in need of help is enormous.

With high prevalence of discrimination and inflation, the Roma people are more likely to have precarious job contracts and low wages. They may also be the first to be let go and the most likely to be exploited in an environment rife with competition for scarce jobs.²¹

¹⁹ An above-average share of Roma tries to earn a living abroad, but during COVID-19 the state-enforced lockdown led to restrictions on travel. Due to the types of jobs they have, they were also typically ineligible for unemployment or social protection benefits, which helped many other citizens during the pandemic.

²⁰ <https://www.caritas.eu/the-roma-are-among-most-threatened-by-covid-19/>

²¹ See Caritas Europa's Poverty Report with a Focus on Labour Market Inclusion: <https://www.caritas.eu/inclusive-labour-markets/>

For those who do have employment or are pursuing education, they are likely to face additional challenges on a daily basis to get to work or to school, as the costs for transportation are also increasing. Some are consequently forced to abandon schooling, employment, or to not accept a job at all because of the (too) expensive commuting costs, linked to the increase in gas, fuel and energy prices overall.

For those with housing, many are forced to reduce their energy consumption (heating, cooking, lighting, transport), which risks leading to worse living conditions, involving greater health risks. This is particularly problematic for those who cannot invest in insulating their housing, let alone be able to afford more energy efficient heating systems, appliances, etc. Many Roma families thus have to choose between eating or heating. This naturally inhibits their participation in society and leads to a reduced quality of life, as well as increased physical and mental health risks, worse even now than before the war in Ukraine which triggered the increase in living costs.

For those living in settlements, the situation is even more dire. Fuel and energy poverty is rampant among Roma housing settlements, where people cannot afford to adequately warm their makeshift living spaces at a reasonable cost given their incomes and the poor infrastructure. This has long been the case and, consequently, fires and other security risks are common in such settlements. The European Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dally, acknowledged at a European Parliament debate in October 2022 that the living conditions of Roma people in settlements in the EU is “unacceptable”.²²

Inconsistent and differentiated treatment

Caritas has also observed in some countries a differentiated treatment toward Roma versus non-Roma populations fleeing the war in Ukraine and urges Member States to combat emerging discriminatory practices that hinder the Roma fleeing from Ukraine from accessing their rights under the [Temporary Protection Directive](#) (TPD).

Based on the experience of Caritas Slovakia, the mistreatment of Ukrainian Roma refugees has been systemic during the country’s refugee reception and response. Large groups of Roma people have been left without any assistance at the border and denied boarding on buses transporting other refugees from Ukraine to large refugee processing centres. There have also been challenges and differentiated treatment of Roma as the authorities insist on checking for dual citizenship and depending on this, deny access to protection in Slovakia if they are citizens of other safe countries. Caritas Spis (a diocese in northern Slovakia), together with several Lutheran churches, has organised help to large Roma groups in their own facilities.

Based on the experiences of Caritas Czech Republic, the number of Roma refugees coming from Ukraine to the Czech Republic has decreased compared to the number of arrivals in June 2022 when many Roma families were “stuck” at the main train station in Prague due to limited capacity. The main reason for this has been attributed to a similar “need” to double check if some Ukrainian citizens have an additional citizenship, such as Hungarian for example. In such cases, they have been sent to the country of their second citizenship, similarly as described in Slovakia. Those who have only Ukrainian citizenship have been given temporary protection and the first humanitarian payment allowance, which does not require additional documentation. But those with dual nationality are expected to receive protection elsewhere, which goes against the specifications in the TPD. In addition, while Ukrainian refugees are commonly accommodated in communal housing or flats, the Roma refugees were eventually accommodated in a tent camp on the outskirts of the capital.

²² Commissioner Dally threatened the Member States with the European Commission’s assessment of the EU27 national Roma strategic frameworks in the form of a stock-taking report that will be published by the end of 2022.

According to Caritas Czech Republic, most of the refugees from Ukraine have since returned back to Ukraine or have left for another country. Only a small portion remained in the Czech Republic, becoming part of the “invisible” population, as the Caritas staff have little further information about their whereabouts or ongoing needs. Nevertheless, based on their assessment, there have clearly been individual cases of mistreatment of Roma refugees from Ukraine during the reception and integration process, though not necessarily a systemic discrimination of the group at large. The problem often doesn’t lie on the side of the government but on the actual behaviour of certain people, evident especially by the mediatisation of the Prague main train station incident, when there were protests about the number of people seeking protection and the lack of accommodation options available, specifically for the Roma.²³

The colleagues from Caritas Czech Republic suggest considering whether individual cases of discrimination or mistreatment are being possibly prompted by a deeper-rooted systemic racism latent in the society and culture, and if so, to raise awareness about this and combat it, e.g., by implementing the various EU strategies to combat discrimination²⁴ and, in particular, to fight against anti-Gypsyism/anti-Ziganism.²⁵

In Belgium, the Caritas staff cannot confirm evidence of a discriminatory approach pursued by the public authorities in response to the activation of the TPD in February 2022. Yet, they do acknowledge the existence of some challenges and vulnerabilities for Roma families to benefit from the rights ensured by the Directive. To make use of the TPD, one has to be able to quickly prove one’s eligibility for this protection. But, as highlighted, this can be difficult when Roma families have another nationality or do not have a Ukrainian residence permit. An unclear administrative situation or the lack of certain documents has the potential in Belgium to lead to a rejection of the request for protection and shelter. In addition, Roma families are in a vulnerable position, because they do not fit in the “typical image” of a Ukrainian refugee. In Belgium, shelter is largely provided by hosting families, and there have been cases alluding to those refugees with a Middle Eastern or African appearance being judged negatively with harsher outcomes, i.e., families preferring not to sponsor such population groups. Thus, discriminatory tendencies within the general Belgian society remain an issue of concern. According to the Caritas staff in Belgium, there have been complaints and accusations in Belgium about Roma refugees by other Ukrainian refugees who were staying in the collective centre/shelter, for example, because “they have another culture”. So, it appears as if discriminatory tendencies persist among some of the refugees as well. More needs to be done to raise awareness and overcome such biases.

²³ See for instance the article, entitled: “They won’t accept us: Roma refugees forced to camp at Prague train station”: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/25/they-wont-accept-us-roma-refugees-forced-to-camp-at-prague-train-station> or this one entitled: “Hundreds gather in Prague to voice frustration with government”: <https://www.expats.cz/czech-news/article/hundreds-gather-in-prague-to-voice-frustration-with-government>

²⁴ The European Commission has advanced on numerous policies to protect people’s rights and to sanction against discrimination and hate crime/speech. See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/know-your-rights/equality/non-discrimination_en

²⁵ The National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) were introduced in 2011 with the aim to address the multitude of challenges facing the Roma people and strive to improve their social and economic living conditions in the different Member States, in part by addressing the pervasive discrimination they experience on a daily basis. Then in 2020, the European Commission released its communication on the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2021-2030 and launched the EU Roma strategic framework, a 10-year plan, including a proposal for a Council Recommendation, to support Roma in the European Union. As a result of which Member States and enlargement countries were asked to design national Roma strategic frameworks by September 2021 in line with the new framework’s guidelines and portfolio of indicators and to report on their implementation every two years.

Low prioritisation to advance on national Roma strategic frameworks

The EU Roma strategic framework sets out the main objectives for national action that Member States should implement through national strategic frameworks. These frameworks should focus on the following seven key areas: **equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health and housing** in an effort to meet the 2030 targets and the recommendations for Member States on how to meet the targets, which include:

- Cutting the proportion of Roma with experience of discrimination by at least half;
- Doubling the proportion of Roma filing a report when experiencing discrimination;
- Reducing the poverty gap between Roma and general population by at least half;
- Cutting the gap among Roma in participation in early childhood education by at least half;
- Cutting the proportion of Roma children who attend segregated primary schools by at least half in Member States with a significant Roma population;
- Cutting the employment gap and the gender employment gap of Roma by at least half;
- Cutting the gap in life expectancy among Roma by at least half;
- Reducing the gap in housing deprivation affecting Roma by at least one third;
- Ensuring that at least 95% of Roma have access to tap water.

However, there is/has been a significant lack of ambition in terms of drawing up these national strategic frameworks and supporting Roma communities in line with the EU framework. Several Member States have only recently published their frameworks, well past the initial deadline.

For instance, the Belgian Roma strategic framework, which was quite late, starts by pointing at the responsibility of other Member States from which Roma families originate, calling on them to provide good living conditions.

"Not surprisingly, the goals that Belgium sets for itself are unambitious and not structural. Looking at the Roma community, there is a need for a collective responsibility and commitment by all Member States and the EU. To make integration work, it is crucial to create a sense of belonging towards the largest ethnic minority in Europe and not to demonstrate a policy that is focused on exclusion as a way of dealing with a social problem."

Caritas Flanders

Another example reflects on the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma Communities in Portugal, which has been in force since 2013. In line with the EU Roma strategic framework, it is based on five key principles: interculturality, non-discrimination, cooperation and participation, territorialisation, and equality between women and men. To Caritas staff in Portugal, the National Strategy is ambitious in its core and in its objective and it is, undoubtedly, an important guiding document. However, nearly ten years after its implementation and subsequent revision in 2018, not all the proposed goals have been achieved yet and some of its measures have been difficult to enforce.

Caritas highlights a positive element of Portugal's Roma Strategy, namely its concerns to involve civil society and several public entities responsible in the process of Roma inclusion and integration, as well as an active role of the communities themselves, through their representatives, in the clarification and operationalisation of the measures. However, there is still a long way to go for the full inclusion/integration of Roma in Portugal. Discrimination is still a harsh reality, with Roma people being the most discriminated social group in the country; local policies still fail to ensure decent housing conditions to the families living in settlements, and numerous Roma families still struggle to live a decent life with their human rights ensured. Thus, Caritas in Portugal

encourages the take up of all these topics in the designing of the next strategy.

The Slovakian national reform programme includes actions to support marginalised Roma communities, such as projects that have been launched to improve housing conditions and to increase the employment rate, education and the financial literacy of the marginalised Roma community. Yet, access to social and essential services remains hampered due to missing infrastructure. Some of the communities still lack an infrastructure for viable drinking water, access to electricity, heating systems and road infrastructure and/or paved roads, which are becoming more expensive to deliver on as well considering inflation and the energy crisis and their multiple consequences. The European Commission's focus on [ensuring essential services](#) is thus increasingly more important for responding to situations of extreme poverty.²⁶

Caritas Europa believes the seven key areas of focus in the EU Roma strategic framework (equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health and housing) all remain highly relevant in an effort to meet the 2030 targets and the recommendations for Member States to better support the Roma people. Beyond the need for Member States to prioritise more political attention and ambition toward implementing the national Roma strategic frameworks with a stronger focus on the antidiscrimination component, and allocating sufficient funding to achieve the specified targets, they should also address the various structural obstacles obscuring Roma inclusion.

Conclusion

Considering the multitude of structural barriers and in light of the upcoming in-depth mid-term evaluation of the ten-year Roma strategic plan in 2025 - with the overall aim being full equality - Caritas Europa expects EU Member States to recognise that urgent action is needed now to achieve these targets, since the situation for Roma people has not improved, but in most cases has rather worsened.

The reality is that the Roma people remain marginalised and disadvantaged, which has surely been exacerbated as a result of the war in Ukraine, inflation and the costs-of-living crisis, Europe's continued lack of affordable and social housing, high discriminatory tendencies across society, and other structural issues that contribute to disenfranchising the Roma people. This is surely also influenced by the fact that governments are now being pulled in conflicting directions, as they face multiple crises and need to make complex decisions about funding and policy priorities. From our perspective, it is vital that policy makers put the dignity of the Roma people at the core of all decision making and understand that one policy measure alone will not solve the cost-of-living crisis and upend the structural obstacles impeding the social inclusion of Roma. Instead, governments need to consider the whole situation and to propose measures to support the Roma people in all the varied ways. They should start by prioritising the recommendations we put forward, which should help initially in supporting the Roma people. We also urge Member States to prioritise their national Roma strategies for equality, inclusion and participation and to immediately address the ongoing challenges described in this paper.

Continued funding is also needed to achieve the specified targets. Moreover, additional financial support should be allocated to social service providers like Caritas to provide health and social care support for Roma people. This will help in providing ongoing support in a context where the need for social services is increasing and the running costs of providing social services are getting more expensive. In the meantime, Caritas will do its best to continue to provide services to Roma people and engage in projects and initiatives to support their full participation and social inclusion, as exemplified in the annex.

²⁶ For additional information about access to services, please refer to Caritas Europa's country reports here:

<https://www.caritas.eu/access-to-services-country-reports>

Meanwhile, we reiterate the need for policy makers and other stakeholders to include Roma people in dialogues and solutions about policies and practices that impact upon them, so that Roma can be enabled in their aims of being agents for social change.

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About Caritas Europa

Caritas Europa is a network of 49 member organisations in 46 European countries and one of the 7 regions of Caritas Internationalis. Our members assist and provide services to millions of people in need.

Caritas Europa aims at lifting people out of poverty by empowering them and by influencing unjust structures and unfair policies that keep people trapped in positions of disempowerment.



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Annex: Some of Caritas' promising practices toward Roma inclusion

Considering the rather bleak depiction in this position paper, we would like to also highlight some of Caritas' promising practices related to Roma inclusion, consistent with our aim to spread hope and to fill necessary policy gaps when governments struggle to respond.

Caritas Flanders – Lübecksite in Belgium

In 2020, the Municipality of Ghent launched a programme to provide decent shelters for Roma people who were living in a slum without water and electricity. The programme offers stable living conditions for a duration of three years to support the Roma families to move out of a survival mode to be stable to work on more lasting future perspectives.

The location, indicated by the commune, is a temporary container village, built for about 100 persons. Separate residential units (housing containers) are provided for each family or single person. In addition, there are communal sanitary and cooking units and eight service units (for management, supervision, communal activities and storage). The surrounding area is set up as a communal garden.

In collaboration with the Municipality of Ghent, Caritas Flanders has been running the project since the programme was launched to foster the integration of excluded Roma communities. Caritas Flanders is in charge of the supervision of the site and has its staff present, day and night.

Currently, 62 people live on the Lübecksite, mostly Roma, mostly from Romania and about one third of the group consist of children. They are all EU passport holders but are unaware of their civil rights.

The aim of the project is to work on ensuring better living conditions in the long term. In order to reach that goal, an integrated approach is important. The project works on access to the labour market, children participating in education, Dutch language learning, participation in leisure activities, housing skills, social administration and guidance.

Caritas organises joint activities with the children and adults to promote coexistence on the site and to enhance participation in sociocultural activities in the city. Also, activities with neighbours are organised to maintain a good relationship with the community.

Caritas Flanders Lübecksite in Belgium

"Having a legal residence address is life-changing", said a 37-year-old mother and her family who moved from Genoa, Italy to Belgium three years ago. In Italy, they did not have a residence address and they felt discriminated against. Her husband works part-time for a plastic glass factory in Ghent where he could access the regular labour market, thanks to the project and help of the staff. The parents are encouraging their children and grandchildren to go to school and to earn an honest and decent living sticking to the rules.

Caritas Flanders – Project reference address in Belgium

Caritas Flanders provides a reference address for 80 Traveller families (equivalent to about 300 people) who live in Belgium but have no official place of residence. Most of these people have Belgian nationality. The physical presence of Caritas Flanders' office at the reference address enables the families to retrieve their mail and to also seek out advice and support from onsite social workers.

In addition to distributing mail, Caritas Flanders provides support with administrative questions. Most of the residents are illiterate and in need of support reading their mail. At the reference address, everyone can consult the staff to find solutions for any kind of problems or to just engage in a chat. Caritas Flanders supports the Travellers and Roma to realise their social rights by, for example, applying for child benefits, arranging to join the social security system or agreeing on a payment plan (in cases of indebtedness). This is crucial in finding a way out of poverty and social exclusion.

Having established a network of social services in the area, Caritas Flanders helps the Roma by making referrals to other social workers or services, even accompanying them to appointments, to ensure the efficient and effective support needed is granted. They also engage in outreach and family-follow up support and advice. Finally, Caritas Flanders also takes on a mediating role and advocates for Roma people's rights and needs to ensure a life in dignity. Some of their advocacy priorities are calling for structural change to help Roma children access education, to provide more residential terrains, i.e., more affordable and social housing, and to foster Roma people's access to the labour market and to acquire new skills.

Caritas Hellas – Job Counselling–Employment Hub in Greece

Since the design of its Job Counselling–Employment Hub, Caritas Hellas has pursued a well-rounded approach, taking into consideration the analysis of the labour market and legal framework, and offering a holistic model of support and accompaniment for job seekers. As such, Caritas Hellas offers potential job seekers various services, such as job counselling, financial counselling, vocational training, job related legal counselling and social entrepreneurship counselling.

Caritas Czech Republic – Community work project in Osada Míru, Czech Republic

The aim of Caritas Czech Republic's community work project is to activate the community of inhabitants in the socially excluded locality of "Osada Míru Ostrava – Kunčičky" (with approximately 750 inhabitants), where the population is mainly composed of people of Roma ethnicity.

Considered a socially excluded community, the Roma are often in a situation that alienates/demotivates them from actively focussing on their neighbourhood and common environment. Many of their life situations have negatively impacted their self-esteem and their ability to hope for higher life achievements. This often translates into a lack of interest in things beyond their closest private sphere. As such, this community work project organises activities to counteract the negative consequences of exclusion. Some of the project's activities include:

- outreach to the Roma people, mapping problems, building and supporting a leadership group;
- activities to improve their housing situation, to build and improve relationships, and to evaluate the community work process and results.

So far, the project has supported 28 active people, who are long-term participants. They prepare and organise the activities for the benefit of the community of Osada Míru or they negotiate with external partners to do so. These are mainly members of the leadership group.

In addition, a total of 376 inhabitants of this socially excluded locality have been involved in individual project activities or have otherwise benefited from ongoing community work. By the end of the project, Caritas Czech Republic plans to have supported a total of 500 socially excluded localities.

The innovative feature of the project is that community social work has become popular in recent years as one of the more effective ways of addressing social exclusion. The principles and methods of community work in the Czech Republic are worthy of being upscaled. Community work is not supposed to replace individual social work; rather, they work together in parallel. Community work seeks to influence the affairs of the group; its members want to participate in solving common problems and proposing their own solutions. Through this, community members tend to lose their sense of despair and gain a concrete idea of their rights and responsibilities.²⁷

Caritas Czech Republic – Church elementary school and kindergarten

A church elementary school and kindergarten (of Přemysl Pitter in Ostrava, set up by the Bishopric of Ostrava and Opava) promotes an inclusive approach and systematically accepts pre-schoolers and school children both from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Roma children. The idea is to provide maximum individual support to each child in order to develop their skills, as well as to support collaboration and respect between the children themselves.

Caritas Slovakia – numerous Roma inclusion projects and pastoral care

Projects related to education, social work, food distribution, health support and nurseries, as well as a FEAD funded project on social enterprises, have been carried out by dioceses in the northern and eastern areas of Slovakia, where the most Roma live. There have even been projects targeting human trafficking of Roma, which included a social media campaign.

Overall, the Roman and Greek pastoral care have proven the most successful because of their long-term care approach. Pastoral workers are living together in the same communities with the Roma and building relationships, both of which prove essential. The previous commissioner of the National Roma Integration Strategy was Peter Pollák, current Member of the European Parliament.

²⁷ More information can be found at: <https://ssi.charita.cz/komunitni-prace/komunitni-prace/>