

*** REGIONAL CONFERENCE ***

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ROMA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

13 December 2021, Belgrade/ZOOM

:: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS ::

GENERAL REMARKS

The Regional Conference “*The Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Roma in the Western Balkans*”, organised by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Roma Integration action, funded by the European Union and the Open Society Foundations, is the first regional conference after two years gap caused by the pandemic crisis. It brought together relevant representatives from the governments in the region, as well as civil society, international organisations and other stakeholders, in order to present the findings of the regional survey on the [Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Roma in the Western Balkans](#), exchange experiences in tackling the challenges, identify crucial issues and propose recommendations for further actions.

With the beginning of the crisis, RCC’s Roma Integration changed the course of its activities by organising regular meetings for coordination and wide social dialogue on the influence of the crisis, on the needs within the Roma communities, on the available resources and undertaken actions by various stakeholders and on ideas to respond to the needs. One of the needs clearly identified was to assess the situation and provide quantified information on the impact of covid-19 on Roma, which is the reason the regional survey was done and the conference to present the results and discuss further steps was organised.

At the opening of the conference it was clearly stated by all of the speakers that the covid-19 crisis and the actions taken to respond to the crisis influenced significantly Roma, as well as the Roma integration policies and in particular the efforts to achieve the targets of the [Declaration of Western Balkan Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process – Poznan Declaration](#).

The crisis had the most devastating impact on the most vulnerable, particularly the historically vulnerable and marginalised Roma in the Western Balkans. The situation of Roma was challenging even before the crisis, and with the crisis the *gaps, inequalities and ethnic distance widened*. Particular impact was documented in education and employment. RCC’s insights show that all children, but particularly Roma in the region, with half of them facing difficulties fully accessing education and only a quarter receiving any support during the crisis. This is exacerbated by the extremely challenging financial situation of the families, particularly the poor ones. Many Roma lost their regular jobs, as well as other informal economic activities that provided existential means before the crisis. The access to health services, also, that was difficult before the crisis for Roma, became even more difficult with the crisis.

This is a clear sign that there is need to rethink the policies and measures implemented by the governments, as well as RCC, and this conclusion is even more relevant for the mainstream policies and measures than the targeted ones. The policies should be strong, assertive, effective and all-inclusive; the recovery plans must stimulate business and economic growth for the society, but not leaving the vulnerable groups behind. Business as usual would not suffice and while priorities remain the same, the urgency has greatly increased. The new or revised National Roma Strategic Frameworks must take these aspects into consideration and devise proper mechanisms to tackle the critical issues.

Mainstream policies relevant for the region particularly include the *digital and green agendas*. The digital agenda is one of the main priorities for the RCC and is part of the Common Regional Market. It



introduces relevant measures that should outreach also Roma. Besides the obvious need to ***include Roma in the digital education and doing business***, there is a need to ensure connectivity and digital infrastructure, particularly ***electricity and internet in the Roma settlements***. ***Digital skills*** among Roma should be increased, particularly among ***children, young people and entrepreneurs***. In this sense RCC's Roma Integration implemented a **Digital Boost Academy** for the Roma entrepreneurs from North Macedonia. RCC's Secretary General had a special meeting with Roma business people to discuss their challenges and possible ideas for solutions for digitalisation. The green agenda deals, among others, with circular economy which means much more efforts will be made to ensure proper waste management and recycling. This may be of great importance for Roma informal workers in collecting and recycling waste, but the issue needs to be properly tackled in order to ensure transition to ***proper green jobs for Roma*** and thereby ***contributing to the green agenda goals***. Of course, most of the measures are at local level, which is even more relevant for Roma.

The responses of the governments to the economic crisis, of course, focus on rebuilding economies and on the economic growth. However, the crisis showed that reconciliation with such efforts with the need for social inclusion and cohesion is needed more than ever. Fiscal redistribution must be accompanied by support to vulnerable groups, which should be provided access to technologies, resources and jobs. Smart economy means inclusive growth that also contributes to diversity of innovations and new good ideas, which is also shown in the newest research of the Open Society Foundations. Inclusive growth promotes productive relations and good jobs for all, as well as overall economic growth. Investment in Roma contributes to the overall growth, thus the economic reforms must bring smart growth and quality jobs.

The crisis also showed the region the instability in terms of the notion of tolerance and good relations, as negative sentiments, hate speech and scapegoating increased towards Roma. This is another clear sign that discrimination must be tackled, being latent, open and direct, institutional, systemic or any other type. Legal and institutional recognition and tackling of antigypsyism would be a step ahead.

The good will expressed by the Governments in the region now should be translated in actual practical policies and efforts, including budget and other necessary situation to effectively change the situation of Roma with a view for greater social contribution to the economic growth.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ROMA IN THE REGION - SURVEY FINDINGS

The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a game changer globally. Virtually all individuals, societies and organisations had various experiences related with the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures responding to it. The newly created context is a challenge for all, not just for Roma.

The [Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Roma in the Western Balkans](#) report has been produced timely and is highly relevant for the context, in order to advance the understanding of the socio-economic impact and to inform and advise future mainstream and targeted policies, which go beyond socio-economic, civil and political dimensions and intermingle with environmental and health policies.

The report is produced as a result of a standard quantitative survey on around 3.000 Roma in the 6 economies of the Western Balkans, covering 1,7% of the total Roma population in the region,¹ with gender balance (45% females) and age from 15-64, in locations with dense Roma population. The field research was done by a contracted company for this purpose, in the period from April – May 2021.

¹ Official statistics are used in order to create the survey sample, aware of the possible discrepancies with the reality and the fact that many Roma are not declaring their identity. The cross-regional findings would not be significantly affected if the estimations are taken for creating the survey.





The survey shows that the most devastating effects of the Covid-19 crisis in the Roma community are in the areas of employment and education. The following are the key findings of the survey by priority areas.

EDUCATION

- Every second Roma child has difficulties understanding online classes
- School achievements worsened for half of the Roma children
- Dropout rate increased 11%, largely because of worsened financial situation
- 2 out of 5 Roma children benefited from education related measures
- The pandemic caused additional barriers the access to education
- The quality of the learning dropped because of lack of IT skills among teachers and parents

EMPLOYMENT

- Every second Roma household had reduced income
- 6 of 10 are concerned that they may lose their job in the next 12 months
- 7% lost their jobs (half were unregistered)
- 1 out of 10 has benefited from employment measures
- Half of the Roma families have outstanding debt for utility bills
- Every third Roma family is at risk of hunger because of outstanding debt for food
- Employment and income are most severely affected compared to other topics

HEALTH

- One third of Roma rate the performance of health services negatively
- Pandemic consequences on the mental, emotional and physical health are from medium to major, with lockdowns influencing every third person and mental health being an issue for 14%
- Opinions on the vaccine mirror mainstream opinions with one third Roma not willing to vaccinate, one third neutral and one third willing to vaccinate
- Every fifth Roma does not have suitable conditions for self-isolation

HOUSING

- Housing is least affected, despite indirect (economic) effects on the living conditions
- 10% faced delayed process of legalisation because of the pandemic
- 7% report changed housing situation due to the pandemic, 53 report forced evictions
- Every second family lives in high humidity
- Every fifth family doesn't have proper roof

Cross-region comparisons

Based on the average positive perceptions by economy, Montenegro is the frontrunner with positive opinions by Roma. This may be influenced by the commitment of the institutions and civil society organisations to help Roma during the pandemic, and the small size of the Roma population, although this is only a presumption. The reasons for the findings in this chapter would benefit from further inquiry. Regarding the neutral responses, Serbia and North Macedonia rate highest. Such attitudes have significant influence on the results and may be a result of three different categories of respondents: 1) do not have an opinion; 2) are not interested; 3) are reluctant to respond. Again, further insight into the reasons is needed.

The income of families has reduced mostly in Albania, with 81% of Roma affected, while the smallest change is in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and here it is important to identify the reasons and ways of retaining the same income. The income reduction obviously has an effect on the ability to cater for the





living necessities, thus many families are already late with payments for food and utilities. The situation is very daring in North Macedonia and Albania, and not much better in the rest neither.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the situation of Roma in the region and additionally increased the existing inequalities, although it has been said to be the big equaliser. For many Roma the crisis meant lost jobs, difficult access to education, more work, less money, more expensive life. The poorest, including undeclared workers have been mostly hit. This represents a new challenge for social inclusion and for proper and effective public policies in this area.

The anti-covid measures undertaken by central and local authorities had low implementation, despite the significant public funding. Civil society and other actors had intensive activities at the beginning, but limited later, perhaps because of the limitation of their resources.

Many Roma children in segregated settlements were left out from the measures responding to the crisis, primarily the online and distant learning. Although the online learning is gradually improving, the components of socialising and interaction, which are perhaps the most significant dimensions for children from vulnerable groups, such as Roma, are almost altogether missing.

Governments and school leadership should ensure continuity of learning by investing all means and institutional capacities in removing system inadequacies and inequities in education. Advance institutional resilience and efficiency for delivering inclusive knowledge transfer and better preparedness to operate under uncertain and turbulent circumstances is also needed. Education facilities should widen the access, include support structures for digital learning and provide the necessary resources to the children and their parents from disadvantaged communities.²

The most important interventions and the most significant investments must be in the area of employment. The discussion on universal basic income should be brought back on the agenda. Undeclared work should also be recognised and supported, as well as incentivised. Regulating work from home should also be one of the interventions in the region.

The measures should be systematised and the governments should make sure that there is sufficient outreach to the segregated areas and different populations.

The issues of Roma were not successfully mainstreamed into the public policies responding to the crisis, which is a precondition for successful integration. The governments should particularly make sure that Roma issues are mainstreamed into the Digital and Green Agenda in order to ensure quality education and access to the labour market. The Western Balkans Investment Fund should also be used to provide housing for Roma.

All the findings of the survey must be combined with the fact that the context is challenging and changing in many other spheres as well – economic recession, deepened political disputes, divisions and instability. Often Roma are disproportionately more negatively affected and used as scapegoats for many of the turmoil. Therefore antigypsyism must be at the core of the efforts.

RESPONSES AND CHALLENGES TO COVID-19 IN EDUCATION

At the conference, valuable inputs were made by a range of government officials and representatives of international and civil society organisations. The discussion in the area of education was focused on mitigating the challenges, raising the quality, changing, adapting and modernising the system, preparing

² Useful guidance on how to address the challenges in education may be found in the ten OECD principles for effective and equitable educational recovery from Covid-19, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/ten-principles-effective-equitable-covid-recovery.htm>





new generations for new challenges, but also technologies and using reforms in education, such as strategies for digitalisation, to advance the situation of Roma, rather than to leave them behind. It is important to note that various measures that have been implemented in education during the pandemic should become systematic and long-term.

Roma Education Fund

According to the representative of the Roma Education Fund, the key challenges in the area of education are providing quality and inclusive education for all, mitigating the disproportional effect of the crisis on Roma, introducing new ways of teaching, meeting the minimum conditions for receiving education in home environment, capacities of the parents to support distant learning, adjusting the curricula to online education, unskilled teachers for digital technology, lack of access to learning materials and digital infrastructure, as well as lack of contacts among children, teachers, parents and schools.

To address the challenges, the Roma Education Fund established an emergency fund to provide online reinforcement classes, equipment and learning materials, internet packages and parent support. The funds have been distributed and tackled humanitarian aid by supplying food, hygienic and educational materials as well. However, the key resources focused on advocating for inclusion of Roma children in the mainstream support, providing support to parents, assisting children in learning at all levels, provision of smart devices and internet, etc. Mentoring and tutoring have been found as specifically successful because of the interpersonal interactions. Through the actions it has been found that attitudes of suppressing Roma students exist in the education system.

The Roma Education Fund recommends increased cooperation within the schools and identification of the needs of the Roma communities, followed by diverting resources to cater the educational needs for those left behind. Support for engagement of parents in the education process, engagement of mediators, prevention of dropouts, and monitoring of the education in crisis situation are also needed. It is important to ensure the equality directives of the EU are thoroughly implemented and guide the education measures, including those responding to crisis. Antigypsyism, anti-Roma rhetoric and scapegoating, as well as gender inequality should be tackled through education, particularly in times of crisis.

Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia

Before the pandemic, the Ministry has been very active in addressing the inequalities of Roma in education, whereby some results have been achieved, such as 80% of Roma participating in compulsory preparatory preschool and 84% in primary school, while the dropout rate has been reduced to 7%. The measures included scholarships, affirmative enrolment, and enrolment without the necessary documents. There is also existing monitoring mechanism for the quality of the education provided, where 3 of 7 indicators refer to vulnerable groups (support to students, communication of schools and resources to support vulnerable students).

During the pandemic the system faced lack of resources to conduct the education in the modalities that were available (online and distant learning). At the beginning operational plan was adopted and instructions to the schools given, including plans for conducting the education in minority languages. The support to teachers and students in providing technological resources and digital competences is still limited and highly needed.

Two months after the start of the pandemic, UNICEF conducted a survey in 98% of the schools (out of the total of 1.800), finding that 83% of Roma participated in the alternative education, but the remaining 17% is still much. Majority of the children had education online or through the TV, but 27% had alternative forms of education (through the pedagogical assistance). Furthermore, 63% of Roma received assistance with homework and more than 50% received learning materials. The pedagogical assistants, Roma language teachers, but also faith teachers supported children in accessing





online/distant learning and communicated through other communication platforms with the students. In the secondary schools the focus was to retain the students, since this level of education is not compulsory. 91% of Roma followed online/distant learning (75% through TV or online, and the rest through alternative forms), similar to the majority population.

The lessons learned were that vulnerable groups became even more vulnerable during the crisis and that the existence of a department responsible for vulnerable groups plays crucial role in supporting children during crisis. Besides affirmative measures and additional support to Roma students, the department worked on preventing violence, intolerance, as well as maintaining health. Of course, the educational system, besides the educational has an important upbringing component, which has been neglected during the crisis. Materials were distributed regarding extra-curricular online activities and workshops, as well as online guidelines for competences in democratic culture and responsible attitudes for health. Trainings were organised and materials were given to teachers in psycho-social protection, protection from early sexual relations and early marriages. Through donor support 30 schools with least resources received 1.890 tablets and 60 laptops and 900 teachers were trained, as well as the pedagogical assistants. All the Roma pedagogical assistants received laptop and internet card and now online basic module for pedagogic assistants is being prepared.

The activities to support vulnerable children did not stop with the relaxation of the anti-covid measures. On the contrary, many initiatives were prepared and are happening at the moment in order to address the needs of the vulnerable students.

Ministry of Education and Sports of Albania

At the beginning of the pandemic, the authorities in Albania adopted a protocol for safety from covid-19, whereby schools were closed, physical distance was prescribed and online/distant learning was necessary. The Ministry of Education and Sports in Albania provided assistance to Roma to follow education during the pandemic, thus over 70% Roma were included. The activities included meetings through online platforms such as Zoom, sending educational materials, preparing and broadcasting educational content through YouTube and TV. Classes are also available after the online time.

In Albania more than 10.000 students did not manage to follow the online/distant education, thus additional classes were provided during the summer, amongst others also for Roma children. Roma, Egyptians and children with special needs also had 3 additional weeks of classes in September, before the school year started. During 2021, education was mostly organised online/at distance, so efforts have been made to invest in that type of education, although it was challenging both for teachers and students.

The experiences of different students with online/distant learning were different, with Roma and Egyptians facing more challenges than other children, particularly because of lack of the necessary electronic devices and the lack of skills of their parents to assist them. Therefore specific measures were implemented. All Roma and Egyptian children in primary education received free textbooks. Those in high schools received laptops and tablets (donations from the company Vodafone and other donors). 141 students got mobile phones, 1.180 got internet access and 1.032 students received social services. Psychologists and social workers constantly contact Roma and Egyptian students and provide advice and support. Special efforts are made to contact with parents of children who are at risk of dropping out, in order to prevent it. Additionally, support was provided by other partners and donors, including voluntary contributions by students and teachers in food, hygiene items, etc. The support is planned to continue in 2022.

Activities were implemented to inform and ensure enrolment of all children (at age of 6) at primary education, including “street children”. Teachers made efforts to communicate physically and over mobile phones with Roma and Egyptian students and parents. Part of them were not able to follow online courses, thus teaching was organised in schools with classes fulfilling criteria for physical distance. In many schools activities for 8th of April – International Roma day were organised live and





online to disseminate information about Roma and Egyptians. Campaign against discrimination with exhibitions and posters and other activities for intercultural dialogue were also implemented.

For the implementation of activities focusing on Roma and Egyptian children and children with special needs schools departments were also activated to monitor the situation. Interest was shown also by other institutions, including local preschool facilities and local organisations. Albania adopted the new Action Plan for inclusion of Roma and Egyptians for the period 2021-2025.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF in Montenegro focused its activities on those in highest risk of poverty, out of which 90% are Roma, with a view to promote quality education and prospect for employment. Actions also took into account the fact that the existing inequalities increased with the pandemic. Only 16% Roma attend preschool, resulting in higher risk from dropout due to poverty and lack of preparedness. Every second Roma child completes primary and only 3% complete secondary education. These data show that the educational system was not supportive even before the crisis.

With the covid it was realised that the education system was not resilient and does not provide adequate support to all children. Therefore UNICEF partnered with civil society and other organisations as well as the relevant authorities in order to increase the resilience of the system and assist children.

The first step was to understand the reasons behind the challenges through a survey that showed that 16% of the families with children do not have tools for online learning. Thus UNICEF provided printed paper educational materials distributed through the Red Cross volunteers (that were the only individuals entering in the closed-down Roma settlements).

UNICEF also delivered a comprehensive training for preschool teachers enabling them to understand the situation and challenges of Roma and engaged psychologists to have sessions with Roma children, which continues now when schools are opened. Activities were also performed to stimulate and improve the capacities of Roma parents to spend quality time with their children. Catch-up classes for Roma in primary school were provided as well. For secondary school students catch-up classes were organised for vocational subjects, and mentorship was also provided.

UNICEF continues to support Montenegro in its efforts. The economy is now launching its first online learning platform (only Viber and WhatsApp were used before that). It also finalised its educational strategy that aims at distant education delivered with quality. Quality standards for digital textbooks and interaction materials have been produced and teachers were trained.

There is still need for systematic approach and cooperation of different actors. Support to Roma is an important issue for the government, but more partnership is needed and participation of Roma community in developing initiatives and measures.

EuroRom, civil society organisation

EuroRom had a range of activities during the pandemic, and is also a focal point for the Romacted II project. It had several projects focusing on education, including “Increased participation of Roma in education and transition to employment” implemented in 7 high schools and funded by EU, “Increased Roma in high school and transition to employment” implemented with 2 universities and funded by EU, “Support to Roma students through scholarships mentoring and tutorship” implemented in 22 high schools and funded by the Roma Education Fund, and “Advanced technologies for effective education of Roma children from preschool to end of high school”. The aim of all of the projects is to increase the academic success of Roma students in the regular schools and ensure transition to higher education and to employment. The projects include activities such as giving scholarships to students and providing mentoring and tutoring, meetings and mediation with employers, advocacy for systematising the programme and training for career development for students.





The Covid-19 pandemic brought fear. The schools were not ready for online schooling because of lack of technical capacities and financial resources. These challenges were faced both by the schools and the families with children in all levels of education. EuroRom established cooperation with the educational authorities and concluded memorandums of cooperation. To adjust its projects to the pandemic the organisation prepared the mentors and tutors to work online, relocated resources and distributed food and hygienic materials, advised on health prevention and lowering fear, communicated through social networks and TV/ media and equipped students with smart devices and capacities to use them. Activities were also implemented during the summer, as catch-up classes. Mediators also worked with parents in order to teach them how to use smart devices, which were distributed through the projects. These activities had great success in that none of the students from the schools in the project dropped out.

From the experience that EuroRom had, recommendations were drawn, such as: the model of the Roma Education Fund can be implemented in different location with success; funds for scholarships need to be provided; wide cooperation is necessary with all levels of governance and all policies in education, as well as educational facilities and Roma civil society; internet should be provided to all Roma settlement, because currently there are places with (no electricity and no internet); adequate IT equipment should be brought to the children; digital skills among parents, students and teachers for online education need to be developed and support and informing platforms for parents should be established. Roma mediators are also needed as, where this mechanism exists, they play crucial role.

In response, the NRCP from Bosnia and Herzegovina claimed that the numbers regarding Roma of the civil society and the institutions were not consistent. Cooperation is also a challenge, including gathering information from all the relevant stakeholders. Also, the strategic approach should be retained rather than focusing all the resources on the response to the crisis. Three key challenges to be tackled include: financial resources are lacking for adult education or for preparing young adults for employment; inclusion in preschool education; preventing dropout in primary and high school. In general 30% of the Roma population only continued their education, while 70% did not. Roma girls and women need scholarships to finish school; children also have need for language, culture, history of Roma in the schools (for both Roma and non-Roma)





RESPONSES AND CHALLENGES TO COVID-19 IN EMPLOYMENT

Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative (REDI)

According to REDI, the Covid-19 crisis had significant impact on Roma communities, raising concerns on how Roma would handle closure of shops and loss of income. It was a very difficult period for entrepreneurs and people working in the informal economy. REDI was also considering how the new public services and measures offered by the governments can be used for Roma entrepreneurs.

REDI developed the Roma Digital Boost programme. It identified the challenges of limited use of tools of digital technology by Roma entrepreneurs due to lack of education, as well as limited access to infrastructure (smart devices, electricity, internet). Therefore a training programme was developed to help Roma entrepreneurs to create visual identity, reach online customers and develop tools for online business. Although this programme was successfully piloted and showed good results, it is only a drop in the ocean. Governments need to do much more to take over the programme and make it systemic and long-term. Funds required per entrepreneur are not significant (about 500 EUR per person) and can be allocated within the governments' budgets for digitalisation.

The other area where EU invests most are green technologies, such as renewable energy and climate protection. The way to involve Roma in these efforts is to engage them in recycling where they already play a role. North Macedonia REDI opened a company called REDI Recycling, but involvement of Roma is limited in this endeavour just on collecting and transporting waste. There is still much more room to involve Roma in green technologies, and discussions should be led in that direction.

The challenges regarding Roma in the context of planning and budgeting recovery from the covid-19 plans include:

- High cost of electricity, expected to raise in the near future, that will affect Roma and other poor people, thus investing in solar panels for Roma households and business through the available funds for this purpose
- The “Youth Guarantee” programme needs to reach young Roma, which often (in Romania and Bulgaria) are left out, by increasing the active reach out by the employment advisors, employing Roma employment advisors and cooperating with REDI, REF, and civil society organisations
- Reinforcing programmes that may work (such as the loan programme in Serbia) by ensuring the implementing agencies are actively identifying potential beneficiaries, assisting them in the process, monitoring their performance and providing further support
- Expectations from vulnerable persons to apply, provide documents, and fulfil all sorts of conditions for the new types of services, when the governments know which are these people and should automatically include them in the support.

A new study conducted by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) identifies a significant digital gap between Roma and non-Roma, which is smallest in Kosovo* and largest in Montenegro, where only 33% of Roma have internet access. The EU obliges the governments to provide internet to poor communities, which should be mirrored in the region, and the RCC may work on this within the digital agenda.

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia

Within the employment policies of the country, the most important for Roma are the basic strategic documents: the plan for the youth guarantee and the operational plan for active measures and policies for employment. Both the plans mentioned are annual.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.





North Macedonia is the first in the region to implement the youth guarantee programme. It is implemented since 2017, first by piloting it in few municipalities and then throughout the country. It targets youth at the age from 15-29 that are not in employment, education or training (NEET), which are the hardest to employ. Mapping was done to identify such persons, and it has been found that there were 130.000 such persons in 2016, not including those not registered at the unemployment register.

The programme consists of three pillars: early intervention, stimulation and soft measures and direct employment measures. The early interventions enable young adults to complete their education or acquire vocational training. The soft and stimulating measures are implemented in partnership with the civil society through youth workers, and include identifying potential beneficiaries, stimulating their participation in the youth guarantee, registering at the unemployment register, preparing an individual employment plan and providing soft services, such as writing CV, career orientation or skill courses. The direct employment is done through preselection of job candidates, directing to job interview, and mediation between employers and unemployed, as well as other active measures for employment.

The operational plan for active employment measures and policies also includes 3 types of measures. The first is direct employment through grants in the amount of 5.000 EUR for self-employment or subsidised employment in existing companies by covering the salary of the worker for 12 months (with obligation for the employer to keep the worker for another 24 months). There are also employability increasing measures including training for known employer, internships for young people (3-6 months), or training for vocations desirable at the labour market. The last type is public works whereby unemployed work for 20 hours per week, providing mainly social services (such as assistance to elderly, accompanying preschool children, etc.).

A novelty is the matching fund established to support young Roma entrepreneurs to start their own business, with funds from the state budget and EU (through REDI). This year 30 beneficiaries will be supported. This is a top up to over 60 Roma entrepreneurs supported by the regular self-employment measures. There is also an additional EU funded projects for active employment measures that have provided support to over 60 Roma (self-employment, subsidies, trainings, etc.). Another plan for the near future is to engage at least one Roma in each employment centre as mediator, which should increase the access of Roma to employment services.

Within the reform programme for social protection and employment, in order to reduce the informal work, there will be stimulation to register the work in certain industries such as seasonal agricultural work. This will also include support to the employers to employ the workers throughout the year, instead of only during the season.

With the RCC's Roma Integration support the government developed a National programme for transforming undeclared work among Roma, which was adopted three weeks ago. The programme is part of the Roadmap for achieving the Poznan Declaration targets in North Macedonia.

Institute of Romani Culture Albania (IRCA), civil society organisations

Access of Roma to employment is one of the biggest challenges in the region. More than 66% are unemployed due to lack of information regarding employment programmes, competences on the labour market, engagement in informal work (waste collection, trade, musicians, artisans, cleaners). Therefore IRCA implements projects to support employment of Roma.

One of the projects provides a coaching cycle for employment for job seekers, including getting to know the labour market, theoretical and practical knowledge and possibility to acquire skills regarding employment. 530 Roma in 6 cities are part of this cycle and local employment initiatives and more than 300 got employed or self-employed. Skills acquiring included life skills such as writing, reading, calculations, as well as labour market skills such as CV writing, interview, registering and interacting with employment offices, as well as internships.





Another initiative is the Folart Musical Studio that is used to record music and as an environment to practice and training for musicians, composers and other artisans. 300 people are attending the studio, both new and existing artists. The studio also have events such as celebrations and exhibitions, offers mediation with clients and connections with businesses.

Romart and Souvenir is yet another business initiative of IRCA. It is a website that serves as an online shop for Roma artisans.

IRCA also helps Roma in accessing public services (education, social protection, health, etc.) and is involved in the Romacted II project which shows good results in access to employment through mediation, information, and support to Roma.

IRCA identifies four groups of Roma that need different types of employment/economic support:

- Unskilled workers without experience and information, often involved in the informal sector.
- Freelancer professionals such as painters, mechanics, musicians, and others, with lack connections, resources, access to finances, marketing.
- University graduates with lack of experience, connections, additional and practical skills.
- Roma entrepreneurs with businesses that need support and access to finances.

According to the experience of IRCA it is easy to register job seekers, but is difficult to employ them. Therefore they recommend that the governments device and implement policies and measures to formalise undeclared work, to increase the financial literacy among Roma, to provide labour market information and skills for Roma and to establish partnerships and cooperation among national and local employment offices and other stakeholders.

Malikowsky Couture

Mr Muamed Malikovski, a young Roma entrepreneurs, has the first business in the region as a Roma fashion designer. He redesigns traditional Roma fashion into high-level fashion. His reason to open a business was because Roma face discrimination and thus they need to act for themselves and employ themselves. Still there are challenges such as lack of finances, lack of information, lack of access to institutions, etc.

The business was supported by the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERAC) and REDI. Mr Malikovski attended a series of trainings for digital skills. During the covid-19 crisis digitalisation and moving the business online was the key to sustain the business and succeed.

Mr Malikovski urges the responsible institutions to establish funds to support Roma businesses and entrepreneurs and to decrease the burden of taxes (such as employment related contributions).

Employment and Social Affairs Platform, Regional Cooperation Council

The Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) is an action implemented by RCC and ILO, and funded by the EU. There are available data on the platform regarding rates of employment and unemployment, macroeconomic data, as well as policy responses during the covid-19 crisis. The data show that the recession is slowing down (although there are differences across the region). The crisis meant increase in unemployment, which is stabilising. But, the data only capture official unemployment and not the loss of many unregistered jobs. Furthermore, not all losses of jobs are registered. There have been measures to support unemployed, including vulnerable groups.

The structural unemployment is high across the region for the general population, but affecting much more youth and vulnerable persons. Due to covid it became substantially worse. The NEET youth rate increased during covid, with the Western Balkan average of 23%, much higher than the EU average. In such circumstances the youth guarantee is much needed. There is also high share of informal employment in the total employment from that increased from 17 to 37%. The share is high both in





GDP and jobs. Roma are disproportionately represented in the informal sector with 60%, compared to their neighbours with 25%. There is obvious need to respond to this situation.

Therefore there is a need to adapt and adjust the policies and design new policies to effectively address the negative influence of the crisis and the long-term structural challenges and the changes in the employment. The governments should also support digital transition and green economy with access to technologies, finances, etc. They also need to partner with the civil society to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and those furthest away from the labour market, such as the NEET youth, long-term unemployed, women, elderly, Roma, informal workers. Skills need to be developed and the new opportunities should capture the existing talents.

ESAP is supporting a Western Balkan network for tackling undeclared work, which should be used by the governments in the region to tackle, amongst other things, the undeclared work among Roma.

Additional comments and recommendations

Simply having employment programme does not guarantee that benefits will reach those that are furthest from the labour market and most in need. This relates to the recommendation that the employment services should be proactive rather than reactive and should open to potential beneficiaries, rather than expecting beneficiaries to approach them and prove their case. The needs of Roma should be mainstreamed in the general public policies, which means that such policies should be adjusted to offer measures suitable for Roma and open measures to Roma by adjusting the criteria for benefiting from the measures.

There are claims that 50% of the Roma that lost their jobs during the crisis did not register as unemployed. There is also support to the recommendation for promoting financial literacy among Roma.

The undeclared work among Roma is mostly in the area of collecting waste. These people as a rule live from social aid and the informal work is an additional source of income that serves only to bridge the financial gaps to the extent possible. The current legal framework persecutes undeclared work, but on the other hand does not provide any incentive to legalise the work. On the contrary, legalisation of the work by the current legal provisions has an effect like punishment for the people, particularly the unskilled low-paid workers. Declaring employment means cutting social aid (which is most of the half of the income of the poor families), claiming around 40% of the income as employment related taxes and contributions (additional half of the income) and demand for much more difficult work around the declared work (for example running a small business requires managerial, economic and other skills). Therefore the model that RCC's Roma Integration proposes should be considered. It has been promoted in the National Programmes in North Macedonia and Serbia, and there is a good will in Montenegro to replicate this action. It is also important to identify the actual number of informal Roma workers.

Responding to the recommendation to include persons in need regardless of their registration in the unemployed register, an official from North Macedonia responded that according to the legislation the Employment Agency can only work with those that are registered as unemployed. However, in the Social Work Centres there are case managers working with persons receiving social benefits. They should cooperate with the Employment agency in order to include such people in the employment programmes. Roma are prioritised in many programmes (such as employment and social care), including Roma women, single parents, youth, etc.

As a conclusion, Roma represent a real potential for the region, and thus governments should provide programmes for transition from state dependency and informality to decent declared sustainable jobs. To this end the green and digital agendas should be used.





INCLUSIVE RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLANS

*Ministry for Communities and Returnees of Kosovo**

The representative of the Ministry for Communities and Returnees of Kosovo* also noted that the Roma community was in a bad condition even before the covid-19 crisis, and that the crisis has worsened the situation. This urges the governments to identify the needs of Roma and respond. The Roma settlements lack basic infrastructure which complicated the things during the pandemic much more than for others. The situation is exacerbated by the existing legally invisible persons in the region.

Despite the good examples of measures and policies, the situation shows that the efforts are very modestly effective, if at all. The governments should ensure growth and economic recovery as well as stability and strength.

In Kosovo*, the government is providing grants for establishing small cooperatives rather than supporting individuals. They also analyse the offer of the labour market in order to match skills; and in this regards it is important to educate Roma in IT technologies. 190 million EUR was given by Kosovo* to companies during the pandemic, and the relevant actors asked additional funds for minority groups that have no regular access to such support.

However, much more support is needed, and besides economic support there should be support for civil registration, education, employment, employability, and housing.

National Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance Coordinator (NIPAC)

Montenegro is working intensively to reduce the impact of Covid throughout the population, including to Roma. However this is a challenging task because of the huge negative effects in many areas. The economy had the deepest recession last year, but this year the economic indicators are improving (growth, public debt, etc.).

The government adopted this year the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma for 2021-2025 with specific support measures. There is need to plan funds to implement the strategy, which is useful for the NIPAC office in terms of planning interventions for EU funding. So far, several EU funded programmes were implemented, including the support to social inclusion in education and employment with 2 multiannual operational programmes and one specific project for improving the living conditions and infrastructure, along with the support from the Regional Housing Programme.

These programmes were not enough and therefore there is an effort to increase the funds to support Roma from the national and regional IPA programmes. It is necessary to work together for this purpose, and RCC Roma Integration is indeed providing support. Some of the common provisions may be transposed into regional programmes and perhaps make a better case for EU to provide funds.

European Commission DG NEAR

The new IPA III is one possible source of funding for the needs identified at the conference and with the research. There are changes in this instrument compared to IPA II, including in prioritizing Roma and including them in the recovery and resilience plans.

The Regulation regarding the IPA III was adopted on 15 September 2021. It allocates 14 billion EUR for the next 7 years for the candidate and potential candidate economies. The funds are allocated for the enlargement policy priorities, in particular the Economic and Investment Plan and the Green Agenda. Roma are explicitly mentioned in the Economic and Investment Plan in regard to employment, education and digitalisation. There are two relevant policy principles: 1) compliance with the plans are prioritised for funding (Roma in EIP) and 2) performance based monitoring with clear targets and achievements.





In order to use IPA funding for Roma inclusion a two-step process is followed. First the EC analyses the relevance of the proposal and the maturity of the proposals. This is based on the document on strategic response and the list of projects proposed for the upcoming 3 years. The second phase is to elaborate the proposal which will be selected for funding if it is in a mature phase.

There is a comprehensive instrument of 7 million EUR for regional measures that should implement specific actions for Roma. Roma issues should also be mainstreamed and incorporated in the general policies.

European Union Delegation (EUD) to Serbia

As all the others, the EUD in Serbia was unprepared for the crisis, but organised relatively quickly. 5.500 humanitarian packages were distributed in the first couple of months, by allocating 100.000 EUR from the ongoing project.

The region and Serbia in particular need long-term effort to the work on the existing inequalities, that increased during the covid-19 crisis. According to data provided through an EU methodology, Serbia is one of the countries with the highest inequalities.

As for Roma in Serbia, more than 700 settlements do not have water and/or electricity. This is a challenge that existed before the crisis, but was felt much severely during the crisis. The good news is that the next programming cycle has more funds for interventions in the areas of employment and housing, for developed ideas and mature projects. EUD Serbia has focus on housing and employment and currently 30 million EUR is being implemented, majority of which on infrastructure, housing, and legalisation, but also part of the funds for soft measures, particularly in employment.

The good examples shared at the conference are interesting and may be replicated, particularly the ideas of the RCC Roma Integration regarding undeclared work and the initiatives of REDI, particularly regarding the loans for Roma entrepreneurs.

European Union Delegation (EUD) to Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the planning documents are adopted.

It is established that Roma are still victims of deeply rooted social exclusion and discrimination and that the situation deteriorated with the covid-19 crisis, particularly in education (lack of equipment, digital skills, illiteracy of parents), health services, housing (lack of propose living conditions, water, electricity), as well as hate speech in social media portraying Roma as carriers and spreaders of infection.

Besides participating in the regional projects Romacted, Roma Integration and others, two major issues in social inclusion will be addressed with IPA funding, one being Roma. As there is need for baseline values of the relevant indicators for Roma, a project to gather data and inform policies will be implemented from next year. Along with this, antigypsyism actions will also be taken. There will also be targeted support to implement the Roma Action Plan, with 4 million EUR for housing, education, health, and antidiscrimination. The EIDHR instrument will also be available.

The key is to continue the support and build trust among stakeholders in order to ensure Roma move from dependency to empowerment. Support with civil society is very important for this.

Council of Europe, Romacted 2 program

Romacted is a multiannual action funded by the EU that started recently the second phase of implementation. One of the pillars of Romacted 2 is mitigation the effects of the covid-19 crisis. The situation is still being assessed at local level. This will inform the programme and guide the response in





80 municipalities in the second phase (20 more than the first), retaining the principle of human rights approach and promoting disaster risk management.

It is important to note that the Council of Europe, but also EU and other donors are not humanitarian organisations. However, during the pandemic crisis the focus had to be changed. Romacted local facilitators were included in the local crisis management teams and distributed humanitarian aid. Cooperation was established with health centres and information on the importance of vaccination was distributed among Roma. At the meetings with the Ministries of Health possible involvement of mobile teams to bring vaccination closer to the community was discussed. In Turkey emergency assistance is still being provided.

The analysis done by the RCC's Roma Integration provides a framework for tackling the effects of the crisis, and Romacted will also identify the impact at local level and the local context to inform its actions.

Additional comments and recommendations

With regards to the IPA III, there are possible constraints and risks, particularly in expecting mature projects that may further deepen the lack of absorption capacity. Furthermore, it is a question if and how Roma issues would be addressed. The response to these issues is that the focus on relevance and priorities may be beneficial since Roma are identified as priority. As for mature projects, while it may be a challenge, it prevents misuse of funds. If proposals are not mature enough they will not be rejected for funding, but rather delayed for a year or more in order to ensure maturity. IPA III brought more flexibility and more funds.

For the Bosnia and Herzegovina NRCP, the mapping of the needs of Roma with the IPA funded project is of great importance. The NRCP complains that there is lack of interest among Roma or local communities to work on the social inclusion of Roma at times when the number of vulnerable persons including Roma are increasing and they face increased challenges. According to the NRCP, there is need for Roma professionals to be engaged and to take over the Roma inclusion process and policies. There is need for proper budgeting and proper monitoring. And as for EU funding, although funds are available, developing mature projects may be a challenge, which perhaps may be mitigated by proposing regional projects. The NIPAC of Montenegro, however, expressed optimism by identifying the action plan for Roma and the upcoming mapping of the needs as useful reference to prepare mature projects for IPA funding. The existing framework for 2022-23 should ensure continuity of implemented actions and will likely be subject to amendments, thus Roma targeted projects should be proposed.

