

MEETING INFORMATION

ROMA INTEGRATION EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

:: NORTH MACEDONIA ::

Date: 11 May 2020, II Meeting

Organised by: Roma Integration 2020, Regional Cooperation Council

Attendees: Governmental representatives, National Roma Contact Point (NRCP), European Union Delegation, International organizations, Foundation Open Society Institute, local mainstream and Roma organisations

Technical info: The meetings are held via the online meetings application Zoom, lasting 90 minutes, with up to 100 participants. The Policy Expert of the Roma Integration 2020 is responsible to coordinate the organisation of the meeting with the NRCP, invite participants and share the details for online joining the meeting.

Objective: To facilitate a broad societal dialogue regarding the response to the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences to the Roma community in order to ensure broad needs assessment, proper short, medium and long term response, and adequate consideration of Roma in the mainstream measures. Specifically, to coordinate information and ensure transparency of information regarding the assessed needs from the field, the actions undertaken by various stakeholders, to propose targeted and mainstream measures, and to ensure the needs of Roma remain on the political/decision-making agenda.

Actions of the Government, municipalities and independent state bodies:

- The National Roma Contact Point (NRCP) – the Minister without portfolio has **identified discriminatory attitudes** towards Roma, mostly in the access to the “Guaranteed Minimum Income” and is working on correcting the mistakes with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.
- The NRCP is contacting bilateral and multilateral donors to **secure humanitarian packages**, with low response. The Turkish Government Agency TIKA was the only donor that donated around 200 packages, distributed last week in Suto Orizari to the most socially vulnerable families.
- The NRSP is particularly interested in the **recommendations** for the period of recovery in order to **advocate** for their implementation.
- **The public funds allocated in the Ministry of Transport and Connection for the purpose of communal infrastructure in Roma settlements, around three weeks ago have been taken away and put in the bulk funds for dealing with the crisis, against the recommendations by the NRCP to retain the funds for the initial purpose, as this purpose is closely related to the conditions of the Roma people to cope with the crisis (access to water, electricity, etc.). Only 4 million MKD have been left for the initial purpose, for which the NRCP has pessimistic view because those may also be taken away with the next rebalance. The same has been done with the funds allocated to the Ministry of Local Self-Government for the purpose of implementation of the strategy at local level, leaving only 1 million MKD. In general, the funds in each priority area allocated within the responsible Ministries for the implementation of the Roma Integration Strategy has been cut.**
- The NRCP has made huge efforts and used available legal instruments to stop the reallocation of funds, such as the provision to reallocate up to 70% of a budget item within the same item for the purpose of responding to covid-19 and writing official letters to the sector Ministers, but nothing yield success, because of lack of willingness on the part of the (acting technical) Minister, Prime Minister and the leader of the ruling political party. These officials did not see Roma as disproportionately affected or with increased risk in the crisis.
- The NRCP is suspicious that the mainstream crisis measures would benefit equally the Roma community, given the empirical evidence for any other mainstream measure.
- The idea (proposed by the civil society, see below) to establish a small working group that would prepare a small action plan with urgent measures that should be undertaken by the government is acceptable. However, the risk is that the action plan will lack the needed budget, since the government shows lack of willingness to allocate budget for Roma. The action plan should contain the already formulated infrastructure projects and measures for economic empowerment.
- For the period of March and April, the **number of registered unemployed Roma increased for 500 newly registered persons**, which relatively to the Roma population is extremely high.
- Complaints about **violation of labour rights of Roma** have been made to the NRCP, and through cooperation with the Labour Inspectorate at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, these cases were solved by returning the dismissed Roma to work.
- Many children are excluded from the online education process.



EU Delegation actions:

- Urgent aid to cope with the crisis of **20 million EUR is given** to the government.
- There is **technical problem** in signing the agreement due to the political situation (period after calling elections, when technical government is operating with limited mandate).
- Direct **mid-term aid of 40 million EUR** will also be given to the government institutions. This aid will support **economic issues** – the influence of the crisis to the small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The funds will be distributed through the existing governmental programmes, thus the aid will top up the funds already allocated for this purpose. Most of the funds will be distributed through the Employment Agency, supporting small businesses and persons that lost their job due to the crisis, as well as undeclared workers. Additional funds in form of loans, active measures, employment opportunities, re-qualification will be provided to the most affected persons in order to re-enter the labour market. The legal entities forced to lay out workers during the crisis will be stimulated through subventions to take back to work the workers. In this regard it is very important, from the aspect of Roma, to organise outreach activities in order to inform and ensure the persons in need apply for the offered measures.
- **IPA 3 is being programmed currently**. Some of the ideas are expected to be defined by the end of June to be implemented in 2021 and 2022. The programming is done with the IPA departments of each ministry. This funding will serve long-term priorities.
- The majority of the **ongoing projects are responding** in different ways to the crisis:
 - o Scholarships for 300 Roma first-grade pupils of 200 EUR were distributed although the schools were closed (FOSIM is implementing)
 - o Some of the social enterprises supported through a IPA funded project are providing free of charge services to Roma, for example disinfection, protective masks (HERA is implementing)
 - o 5,000 EUR relocated from training to humanitarian aid in a project dealing with housing (HABITAT is implementing).
- All the adjustments to the ongoing projects are undergoing the **full bureaucratic procedure** as usual, thus it is challenging to timely respond to the crisis, but the partners are proactive and creative.
- The **information** from all the partners responding to the crisis is being collected and systematised and it will be **published**.
- Today, at 12:00 is the deadline for the grant-scheme for the 3.5 million EUR for housing.
- Unfortunately the opportunity for conditionality of the EU funds allocated for responding to the crisis is very limited, thus the best approach would be to put pressure from within to include the issues of Roma among the priorities of the government.

Other actions:

- In order to coordinate the distribution of humanitarian aid Romalítico is trying to make an **interactive map of distributed aid** and has sent a request to civil society organisations and local teams of Avaja to acquire information and expects in the next week or two to publish the map with updating possibility.
- Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative (REDI) had a plan to **install drinking water taps** in two settlements, but in those settlements it was discovered that the water system is installed, but the pressure is low, thus more often than not the people do not have water. Therefore, REDI will buy **water pumps instead**, to strengthen the pressure and ensure water reaches the people.
- REDI has informed on the proposed economic measures to the government at the last meeting, and by this meeting there is no response.
- Romacted is currently working on purchasing **water pump** to push water to the Roma settlement in **Berovo** (currently being supplied from a public water fountain 500 meters from the settlement)
- At regional level, which includes North Macedonia, [Romacted](#) has reallocated **60,000 EUR for humanitarian packages**, covering 1,900 Roma families; another **250-300,000 EUR are reallocated for local projects responding to the crisis** and its consequences.
- In North Macedonia, the Romacted partner ADDR Sonce already has **reallocated funds for packages** that will be distributed, initially to the families that have not been covered so far, namely the families in Stip living in the abandoned Psychiatric Hospital.
- Currently Romacted is in the process of **amending the agreements with the municipalities** with a view to distribute additional funds for measures responding to the crisis.
- Romacted is **distributing information** about the pandemic and the measures to cope with the crisis with the municipalities.
- In some of the municipalities Romacted partners are involved in the **local crisis management bodies**.
- According to Romalítico and regarding the **cutting of funds** allocated for Roma integration, the **decision making process is not transparent** with budget cuts done on 9 May with a conclusion, still without any publically available data on what, how, from where has been cut. The crisis management body has civil society members, but it is unclear what their role was and if they have been given opportunity to react, having in mind that the interest of the people they represent have not been





considered. The government is also reallocating funds unreasonably in certain cases, for example cutting from funds for civil society that would be able to provide crisis related services, while giving funds to religious schools in time when schools are shut down. Furthermore, the public constructions (of squares for example) was not discontinued because of the crisis, thus the cut of funds allocated for crucial infrastructure for the Roma communities has no justification from that perspective as well.

- Romalitico made efforts to prolong the measure for the “Guaranteed Minimum Income” for undeclared workers by the end of the year (instead of only April and May) which has been adopted. Romalitico advocates for including the unregistered persons in the social scheme or provide for them equivalent social measures. However, the **responsiveness of the institution in this period is at zero**, paving the way to deepening the level of poverty within the Roma community.
- Roma Integration 2020 participated at meetings with regional stakeholders on Roma integration issues and prepared an advocacy document listing proposed measures that should be undertaken by the government.
- Since the leading officials in the government do not make difference regarding the effects of the crisis on Roma, claiming that all are equally hit, which is unacceptable, there should be **public announcement** challenging such views, along with the cuts of the budget.
- The actions must not end with humanitarian aid, but should focus on sustainable socio-economic recovery.
- There are **Roma with ban on social benefits** (effectively blacklisted in the Social centres) since 2012 or 2013, that cannot receive social aid. Therefore, Romalitico appealed to the Government to lift the ban on social benefits on any grounds for all people. Through this effort, the ban for 3,000 Roma was removed and they gained access to social aid, but the implementation should be monitored.
- Avaja will have online **local meetings** with local Roma activists and representatives of local institutions in order to assess long-term needs.
- Regarding the **persons without documents**, the legal deadlines passed for the prescribed by-laws for the implementation of the recently adopted law on temporary status providing access to basic socio-economic rights, regardless of the written interventions of Romalitico, which will organise a protest next week in front of the Ministry of Justice, which only need to proscribe the form and content of the temporary ID cards. Missing to solve this as soon as possible, and having in mind the political situation (technical government, upcoming elections, etc.) and the possibility for a second lock-down, will leave the people in even worse situation and poses a risk that their status will not be solved.
- Romalitico was receiving complaints from Roma, most of which were regarding the “Guaranteed Minimum Income”. After the reaction to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy we have been informed that the Ministry sent a letter to the Social Centres that all applications must be accepted, after which there has been no further complaints regarding this.
- Romalitico submitted the information regarding the received reports about **violation of labour rights** (pushed into signing resignation, by which they lose the rights on unemployment benefits or signing agreements for part-time work while working full time) of Roma to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in order to start **legal procedures**. Most of the cases are in the garment industry in Delcevo and Stip.
- UNDP secured a small fund and made a donation of **humanitarian aid to 80 families**.
- UNDP engaged 50 Roma persons in **public works** in 11 municipalities organised in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which does not affect the social aid benefits.
- The economic opportunities for Roma, such as waste collecting, were downsized during the crisis and it is expected that the prices of plastic, for example will remain low, the opportunities will remain limited and the protective equipment will remain a need for undeclared waste collecting workers.
- The **debts** of the Roma (communal services, rents, etc.) are **increasing** without prospects for repaying.
- There is information from the field that many **Roma are denied access to the active employment measures** with the pretext that the quota has been reached, among others.

Policy/measures proposals (besides addressing the identified needs above):

- **The reallocation of funds initially allocated for Roma integration, taken away and put in the bulk funds for the response to the crisis, is against the recommendations from all the relevant actors dealing with Roma issues. Therefore, the Government must as a matter of urgency reverse this process and return the funds taken away from the Roma integration purpose, because this purpose is well serving the needs of Roma, including in the sense of coping with the pandemic in all the priority areas: health, housing, education and employment. Specifically, for the funds reallocated from the Ministry of Transport and Connections, to provide the list of settlements without water and electricity with a demand to immediately start building the necessary infrastructure to ensure access to communal services for the Roma communities, for which the Ministry without portfolio already has prepared projects.**





- **The general conclusion is that there is backsliding in all the areas regarding Roma integration – increasing unemployment, deterioration of health, stagnation and removing the prospect for improvement in housing by cutting funds and lack of full access to education, besides the humanitarian crisis.**
- A small **action group** consisting of stakeholders involved in the Roma integration issues should be established in order to act towards the government regarding the cutting of funds. The group should prepare a list of urgent measures that must be undertaken by September 2020, including primarily infrastructure and socio-economic aspects. The plan should include the needed budget, both from the public and from the EU funds. The plan can build on the advocacy document prepared by the Roma Integration and the existing information of the NRCP on already prepared infrastructure projects. The plan should make a reference to the Operational Conclusions from the Roma Seminar and the Poznan Declaration. The plan should be presented to the Sector Working Group on Roma issues organised by its chair – the Minister without portfolio.
- The situation with **rapidly increasing number of unemployed Roma** during the crisis must be tackled urgently. Therefore besides the mainstream measures, the action plan for Roma should propose additional measures including: explicit targeting of Roma within the mainstream measures; outreach activities for the mainstream measures to Roma; additional tax relief measures for undeclared workers formalising the work; not cutting social benefits for new low-income formal workers; public works (particularly regarding the recovery measures). Debt relief is also needed.
- Roma health and education mediators and the Roma information centres should work intensively with the people in the communities during and after the crisis. The NRCP should communicate with these structures to receive information on their work and the identified needs from the field.
- The Government is urged to **consult with the civil society** regarding the planned measures and funding and to respond to the civil society requests and proposals.
- The Government to prepare **input to the programming of the 40 million EUR long-term aid for economic recovery** from the crisis in order to ensure that the funds reach Roma and Roma communities also economically recover and grow, including by adjusting the policy for undeclared workers (tax, registration, subsidies, etc.).
- The Government must ensure **access to the newly adopted measures** addressing the Covid-19 crisis to the Roma, including to the “guaranteed minimum monetary aid”.
- The Minister without portfolio to prepare a **report on the discriminatory treatment** towards Roma regarding the crisis and the measures undertaken to cope with the crisis.
- Romalitico to complete the work with the **interactive map on distributed humanitarian aid** to Roma communities across the country with the information collected from the civil society and additionally by collecting data from all the institutions at central and local level and international organisations.
- Romacted to **collect information on humanitarian aid** distributed by the municipalities (from municipal or donors’ funds).
- Romacted to **segregate the information** on distributed humanitarian aid by municipalities (without personal information) and distribute segregated information with the other stakeholders.
- The **distribution of humanitarian aid** should be well **coordinated** in order to avoid prioritising certain locations and neglecting other locations. (Romalitico to share gathered information and interactive map).
- The Government should urgently **designate objects** to be used **for self-isolation** for those individuals or households that do not have conditions for self-isolation.
- The Government should review and potentially adopt with appropriate budget the proposed **socio-economic measures** for the Roma community sent by Romalitico and REDI.
- Since the **persons without documents** do not have access to the social measures, Romalitico proposes that the Government provides them either with **vouchers** to purchase items **or** with **food** and other necessities in the amount of 7,000 MKD.
- For the settlements without **water**, Romacted proposes to the municipalities to either **install public drinking fountains** or to supply water with **cisterns**, which is currently not done.

