



European Commission releases Spring Package – What’s in it for Europe’s Roma*?

On 24 May 2023, the European Commission published the so-called *Spring Package*, comprising the 27 [Country Reports](#), 27 [Country-Specific Recommendations](#), and the accompanying [Communication on the Spring Package](#), in the framework of the **2023 European Semester**. ERGO Network and its national members have reviewed the Package, to see to which extent it explicitly mentions Roma rights and inclusion, ethnic minorities, discrimination, and racism, as well as to assess whether national civil society was involved in the drafting of the Country Reports.

Key Findings

1. **The Communication on the Spring Package mentions the Roma once**, in the context of improving their labour market participation – nothing on health, housing, education, poverty.
2. **7 Country Reports include references to the Roma (BG, CZ, GR, HU, IE, RO, SK)** in 2023, the same number as in 2022, but still insufficient as Roma live in 26 EU Member States.
3. **Only one Preamble to Country-Specific Recommendations (HU) mentions the Roma**, a step down from 2022, when Hungary received an actual Recommendation on Roma inclusion.
4. **Ethnic minorities, discrimination, and racism are absent from all documents**, with only discrimination mentioned in passing in the Country Reports for Belgium and Slovakia.
5. **Civil society organisations were poorly associated to the drafting of the Country Reports**, and the Spring Package references to their role are few and vague (4 Country Reports, no CSR).

Overall remarks

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** warmly welcomes the **explicit mention of the European Roma in the *Communication on the Spring Package***. The text stresses that *“increasing the labour market participation of women, young people and underrepresented groups, such as persons with disabilities, migrants and the Roma, still represents a major opportunity for inclusive and sustainable growth and equality”* (page 19). This wording is identical to last year’s Communication, however **the 2022 text also included the recognition that Roma communities throughout Europe had been particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic**. Regrettably, this year’s document includes only the one mention, as quoted above.

While we appreciate that Europe’s largest minority was explicitly referenced in the Communication, it is unfortunate that it is **anchored solely in the perspective of reducing labour market shortages** and employment gaps, rather than stemming from a rights-based approach, aimed at curbing poverty and improving social inclusion. Furthermore, **nothing is said about other crucial elements**, such as education, health, housing, Roma poverty, access to services, access to income, or access to rights and equality and participation. There is **no link to the EU Roma Strategic Framework** or the Anti-Racism Action Plan, and the text includes **no additional references to ethnic minorities, or to fighting discrimination and racism**.

The Communication reaffirms the **commitment to the EU’s four guiding dimensions** of environmental sustainability, productivity, fairness, and macroeconomic stability, as well as the close link with the implementation of the **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, now fully integrated in the European Semester. The recently adopted **REPowerEU** is the European plan to reduce Europe’s dependence on Russian fossil fuels as soon as possible, which is a key objective of the European Commission. The document states that *“This year’s European Semester pays **particular attention to the topic of long-term competitiveness and productivity**, while also providing an updated, more detailed analysis of energy security and affordability.”*

The implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** (Social Pillar) **Action Plan** and of the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) have also been incorporated in the European Semester. Each Country Report includes dedicated monitoring for both frameworks, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans also contribute to their delivery. However, the **Social Pillar is barely mentioned** outside the Fairness section. While the Communication includes an Appendix tracking the EU's progress on the SDGs, there is nothing similar for monitoring the Social Pillar.

The Fairness chapter, dedicated to social inclusion and the implementation of the Social Pillar Action Plan, makes some **very important points about the need for decent wages and adequate social protection**. There is a commitment to **support the most vulnerable households** through the cost-of-living crisis, and **energy poverty** is mentioned several times. The same section includes welcome wording on **improving access to healthcare and long-term care**. These commitments are very positive and can play a key role in ensuring better access to rights and inclusion also for Europe's Roma. Disappointingly, although the only reference to the Roma is in this very section, it is narrowly confined to boosting their labour market participation. The chapter includes a lengthy section on education and training, covering roughly half of the entire section. However, the heading is misleading, as **the main focus continues to be on skills and training for the labour market**, rather than on primary and secondary education, or the role of education in shaping personal development, thriving communities, and resilient democracies. The priority is simply to respond to labour market needs.

Overall, **social inclusion is not sufficiently mainstreamed** through the other three dimensions. Nothing is said about **early childhood education and care**, or about children in general – except a few passing mentions to the needs to ensure childcare so that the parents (particularly women) can join the labour force. In contrast with last year, the Communication **does not refer to access to housing**, except one reference in the macroeconomic section, and there is **not a single reference of social economy**. Instead of a humane approach that would include wrap-around support for people who have lived through a trauma, **welcoming refugees from Ukraine is limited** to getting them into jobs as soon as possible.

The Communication states that “the successful delivery of the European Semester and RRF priorities requires a **permanent and structured involvement of social partners and other stakeholders**”, stressing the importance of dedicated regular meetings, such as the annual RRF events, throughout all the stages of the European Semester and the RRF implementation process. However, **the role of civil dialogue is significantly understated**, and it is only explicitly mentioned once, in the very last sentence of the document (as opposed to 5 references to social partners). Moreover, last year’s experience has shown that **both the European Commission and national Governments have failed to reach out to civil society organisations** to involve them in the RRF stakeholder events or in the European Semester – such as the drafting of the Country Reports.

We further **salute the inclusion of Roma concerns in the Employment Guidelines** for 2022, a yearly document highlighting common priorities and targets for employment and social policies, providing the basis for the Country-Specific Recommendations. While the references are not in the Guidelines themselves (repeated in the Annex on the document), the recitals include **strong calls to tackle discrimination and poverty (including explicitly that of Roma)**, and to **support equal access and opportunities** through adequate and inclusive social protection (including minimum income), education and training, labour market participation, digital and green skills, and support to children. These are very strong references that we hope to see enacted by Member States.

Roma in the Country Reports 2023

The European Commission has prepared **Country Reports** for each of the 27 Member States, providing an **overview of challenges for each country**, including the green and digital transition, social and economic resilience and competitiveness, the implementation of the NRRPs and REPowerEU, past Country-Specific Recommendations, progress on the Social Pillar Action Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as on **the key strategies of the Union of Equality**. This analysis is **meant to underpin the Country-Specific Recommendations**, by identifying key priority areas where targeted intervention is required.

Only **7 Country Reports include references to the Roma (BG, CZ, GR, IE, HU, RO, SK)** in 2023, which is the same number as in 2022. However, last year's seven included Croatia and Slovenia, which have been replaced this year by Greece and Ireland. For the five countries whose Country Reports specifically included the Roma in both years (BG, CZ, HU, RO, SK), we are **pleased to see that the number of references in each has increased**, and the 2023 Country Reports cover more areas of Roma inclusion than in the previous years. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the Roma live in 26 EU Member States, some of them comprising significant Roma communities, there were **no other references in the remaining Country Reports**.

There are **no mentions of ethnic minorities, racism, and antigypsyism** in any of the 27 Country Reports, and only a couple of references to discrimination in the reports for Belgium (regarding particularly the discrimination of workers with a migrant background on the labour market) and **Slovakia (where Roma discrimination figures are quoted)**. While these two references are positive, it is shocking to note that **discrimination is not a cross-cutting dimension across all Country Reports**, on a multitude of intersectional grounds, as it constitutes one of the key root causes of poverty, exclusion, marginalisation, and poor social and societal outcomes. The commitment of the Communication on the Spring Package to monitor the Union of Equality and through the European Semester, including the Country Reports, rings hollow.

ERGO Network members are **generally pleased with the quality and accuracy of the references** in the Country Reports which include Roma-specific content. It is very positive to see Roma issues in their countries explicitly taken on board in the analysis, and what is included is generally adequate. However, it is felt by several of our members that **a number of equally important aspects of Roma inclusion and wellbeing were completely overlooked**, thus undermining a cohesive, comprehensive approach that would yield results. Our members say that, while Country Reports may be effective at capturing the difficult socio-economic situation of the Roma, these challenges are left unaddressed in the **absence of solid policy proposals** in the Country Reports themselves, or without this analysis leading to Country-Specific Recommendations on Roma.

In **Bulgaria**, the Report contains **multiple references to the challenges faced by Roma** in the country, and our members state that some findings are even copy-pasted from last year – regarding poor participation in the labour market, obstacles in accessing education and early childhood support, and exacerbated poverty levels. There is a **new and welcome focus on the high levels of health insecurity** among Roma. While these are important areas, other crucial issues are missing, such as deepening manifestations of **racism and antigypsyism**, or the ongoing deterioration of already **poor housing conditions**. Even for the problem areas that the Country Report does identify, no concrete measures are proposed.

In the **Czech Republic**, it is felt that the references to the Roma included in the Country Report are accurate and welcome. However, these **mentions are not accompanied by concrete recommendations** to the Czech Government to change things, while the Czech National Recovery and Resilience Plan only mentions the Roma in the context of improving digital skills. **An integrated approach is missing** to also support Roma employment, housing, or health, although great challenges remain in all these areas. For example, segregated living breeds further segregation in education and a high number of NEETs, hence the Roma lack of access to skills training and employment opportunities, which reinforces a state of poverty and exclusion – but these connections are not made. More is needed also to **support Roma refugees from Ukraine**.

In **Hungary**, our members think that the **Country Report provides a good picture of the challenges faced by the Roma** in their country, since the situation remained largely unchanged in the areas referred to by previous Country Reports. These areas include **access to quality mainstream education, combatting early school leaving and ending school segregation, tackling poverty and child poverty, and supporting better access to employment**. A welcome addition in this year's Report is a section on the devastating impact of rising costs of living on Roma communities. However, it is regretted that **the text does not note the lack of availability of healthcare in Roma communities**, particularly in remote and deprived settlements, while poverty prevents the Roma from being able to afford expensive private services.

In **Ireland**, our members' position is that, while it is welcome that Travellers and Roma are mentioned multiple times in the Country Report, this is only done in the context of **referring to existing mainstream policies** where Travellers and Roma are named. However, the challenge of effective implementation and delivering positive outcomes for Travellers and Roma in employment and education remains an issue. Both mainstream as well as targeted measures are needed to ensure that the racism and discrimination experienced by Travellers and Roma are addressed, however **it is disappointing that the targeted measures are missing**, and that no links are made to the European or the National Roma Strategic Framework.

In **Romania**, our members are broadly satisfied that **the Country Report correctly portrays challenges related to Roma** housing, education, health and employment, with good and representative data. References to strengthening the capacity of local authorities to deal with these challenges, and particularly to curb segregation in education, were also deemed positive. However, the text **misses a crucial opportunity to identify antigypsyism as the main cause of inaction** by these local authorities, despite available funds and supportive legislation, and the Country Report proposes no measures to tackle it. **Another missing aspect** that would have merited more attention in the document is **Roma energy poverty**.

In **Slovakia**, the Country Report contains **the highest number of references to Roma of all Reports**, namely 37, covering higher rates of poverty and marginalisation than the majority, poor access to services, discrimination in all areas of life, and difficult access to employment (including upskilling and reskilling). Links are also made to the **Roma-specific measures in Slovakia's National Recovery and Resilience Plan** and its provisions on desegregation in education and improving access to services. The Roma are also mentioned in the Annexes dedicated to the implementation of the Social Pillar and the Sustainable Development Goals, and the use of Cohesion Funds. Our members are **satisfied with the number and quality of these references**.

Civil society is mentioned in only 4 Country Reports (IE, IT, LT, PL), but the references in each are one or two, and **very unsubstantial**. Cooperation with civil society is mentioned in Ireland on adult learning, and in Italy on disseminating data and analysis on the Sustainable Development Goals and on well-being indicators. In Lithuania, the Country Report speaks about debates with social partners, civil society, and political parties on general public services, while in Poland the document references the role played by civil society in welcoming refugees from Ukraine. **No Country Report assesses the quality of the involvement of civil society** with the European Semester, not does it formulate recommendations to this effect, and civil dialogue is not clearly identified as an essential part of healthy policy-making. This is a worrying trend confirmed by realities on the ground, as **none of our members report having been involved in the drafting of the Country Reports**, and they do not know of other Roma stakeholders being involved either.

The European Commission is **missing a great opportunity** to call on Member States to foster wide stakeholder participation, in order to ensure both **evidence-based solutions, as well as ownership and transparency**. The desk officers in the European Commission, as well as the European Semester Officers stationed in Member States, can play a strengthened role in **bridging the civil dialogue gap, by pro-actively reaching out to civil society organisations**, particularly those representing marginalised and vulnerable communities, such as the Roma, in order to ensure that their concerns are taken on board in an adequate way in the Country Reports.

Roma in the Country-Specific Recommendations 2023

For the **Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs)** this year, once again the European Commission explicitly opted to focus on **the same three dimensions for all Member States**: fiscal policy, including fiscal and structural reforms; continuing or accelerating the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, including the new REPowerEU chapters; and the clean energy transition. In addition, “*where relevant*”, **some Member States received a fourth recommendation**, on outstanding and/or newly emerging economic or employment challenges.

This approach is similar to last year, moreover the Recommendations themselves do not seem to differ much between 2022 and 2023 for the same country. This pattern of uniformisation and repetition **weakens the link between the Country Reports and the Country-Specific Recommendations**, where the former were supposed to underpin the latter and inform their content. At a minimum, all countries should have received a 4th Recommendation on key challenges of their specific national context. Encouragingly, however, the Commission **continues to monitor the Country-Specific Recommendations issued since (and including) 2019**, which also comprise CSRs on Roma inclusion addressed to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

Out of 27 Member States, **only the Country-Specific Recommendation for Hungary mentions the Roma**. This was also the case last year, however in 2022, the Roma were mentioned directly in one of Hungary’s actual Recommendations, whereas this year they are only referenced **in the Preamble, but not the Recommendation itself**. The text very accurately stresses increased Roma poverty and material deprivation, as well as lack of comprehensive interventions (education, training, social assistance, support structures) to access the labour market. It is **a great pity that these did not yield an actual CSR**, particularly as Hungary did not receive a 4th recommendation on a different topic. The 2022 CSR for Hungary on Roma inclusion could have been maintained, particularly given the fact that **the situation of Hungarian Roma not only has not improved, but has worsened**, as acknowledged by the Country Report itself.

ERGO Network response to the Spring Package 2023

The living conditions, quality of life, and wellbeing of Roma have not improved in the other Member States either, including the other three countries who received a Roma Country-Specific Recommendation in 2019 (BG, RO, SK). Given the very limited progress, **we would have expected at least for these CSRs to be repeated** in 2023. However, as the Roma are mentioned in at least 6 countries' National Recovery and Resilience Plans, the Recommendation calling for Member States to implement the NRRPs can be construed as an implicit urging to also act on the Roma measures in the Plan. Nonetheless, **the opportunity was lost to highlight gaps in the NRRPs**, as well as to target those countries whose Plan does not mention the Roma at all. This approach would have also strengthened links with the delivery of the EU and National Roma Frameworks.

Other important concepts for Roma rights and inclusion, such as **ethnic minorities, discrimination, and racism are completely absent from all 27 Country-Specific Recommendations**. Antigypsyism specifically is equally not mentioned. This trend is, unfortunately, consistent with the Spring Package of 2022, which also included no references to any of these issues. These are strikingly absent dimensions in the current climate, where **discrimination is rampant all across Europe** for all racialised communities, including the Roma.

Our national members and partners expressed their disappointment at the fact that none of their countries received a Country-Specific Recommendation that mentioned Roma concerns. Equally, for most, the Country Report this year didn't include any reference to the Roma either.

"It is regrettable that the Roma and Travellers are not mentioned in the Belgian Country Report or CSRs. On the ground, Travellers are not provided by public authorities with halting sites or mobile home authorisations, itinerant commercial activities are not recognised and supported, and opportunities to access mobile education are non-existent. Effective access to social and economic rights for Roma depends on guaranteed access to residence, which is not even provided for EU citizens, much less for Roma from outside the EU (Serbia, Kosovo). Yet these factors are not taken into account by the European Commission, and while the CSRs abstractly mention discrimination and employment of vulnerable groups, there are no concrete measures."

Centre de Médiation des Gens du Voyage et des Roms, Belgium

“There is nothing in the 2023 Country-Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria that is aimed at the Roma community, as there continues to be a misunderstanding that the many specific problems faced by vulnerable Roma communities can be solved without specific approaches and deliberate measures. Unfortunately, and despite civil society appeals for years, the Recommendations are once again very general. The whole cycle of the European Semester, despite its good intentions, is quite formal and has almost no impact on national governments when it comes to the implementation of social inclusion policies for vulnerable Roma communities.”

Integro Association, Bulgaria

“We find it a pity that Austria’s Country Report does not explicitly mention Roma and the problems they face. Despite the National Roma Framework, access to services, education, and employment remains a concern, leading to increased poverty, including Roma child poverty and female poverty. The Government does not adopt or scale up successful initiatives, such as the Roma Education Mediators, while intersectional discrimination is overlooked and unaddressed.”

Romano Centro, Austria

"While it is contrary to the French principles to target ethnic entities with specific policies, this is not a reason for the European Commission to exclude the Roma from the Country Report and Country -Specific Recommendations. This, particularly at a moment when the French government admits that this position does not prevent specific policies on different forms of racism. It is in this context that France has set the fight against antigypsyism as the first objective of its National Roma Framework, and it has also included it in the National Anti-racism Action Plan."

La Voix des Rroms, France

"Unfortunately, the Country Report or CSRs do not address the problems and challenges faced by Roma and Sinti communities in Germany. Important issues such as unequal treatment in education, healthcare, the labour and housing markets, ongoing antigypsyism in German media, and the multiple discriminations of Roma who fled Ukraine are not mentioned, while they were and are very relevant. We call on the European Commission to expand cooperation with competent NGOs and civil rights actors so that these issues can be prioritised in future Country Reports."

Amaro Drom, Germany

“It is disappointing that the European Commission doesn’t pay more attention to Roma, ethnic minorities, and discrimination in the Country Report for Lithuania. Just because the Lithuanian Roma community is small (about 2000 people) doesn’t mean that they don’t experience the same difficulties as huge communities in other countries. But the tendency is to treat Roma as ‘equal citizens’ through mainstream policies, which obscures their need for tailored measures.”

Vilnius Roma Community Centre, Lithuania

“The European Commission regrettably fails to point out that The Netherlands has a major issue with institutional racism, which keeps being ignored as the system intentionally thwarts all efforts by discriminated families to seek justice. Roma and other ethnic minorities are being confronted structurally at all levels with this attitude. There is an ongoing process to obtain the recognition of the Roma as national minority, but none of this is included in the Country Report.”

India ki Rasta, The Netherlands

"Neither the Country Report for Poland nor the Country-Specific Recommendations address the Roma living in the country or the challenges they face. This is a pity, because one gets the impression that the situation of the Roma is deliberately not discussed, as such recognition would require the government to act. There is similar resistance to the concept and general definition of antigypsyism, which is being ignored by the government. The European Commission could do more to put these important issues on the national agenda."

Jaw Dikh Foundation, Poland

“FAGiC is incredibly disappointed at the lack of prioritisation of Roma issues by the European Commission in the Spanish Country Report and Country-Specific Recommendations, as Spain is one of the Member States with the highest Roma population. The efforts of the same European Commission to enact National Roma Frameworks are being stifled by the lack of inclusion of Roma concerns in mainstream documents like the European Semester process. Once again, we miss an opportunity to advance Roma inclusion and the fight against antigypsyism in Spain and Europe.

Federation of Roma Associations in Catalonia – FAGiC, Spain

In a highly disappointing move, **civil society is not mentioned in any of 27 Country-Specific Recommendations**, or in any of the Preambles, while last year at least Hungary received a CSR on civil society. We stress that **civil dialogue is an essential component of democracy and policy-making** in all countries, so it is astounding that this was not highlighted in other CSRs. Conversely, **social partners are referred to in every single Preamble** of this year's Country-Specific Recommendations. The vague mention in the same Preambles to the consultation of of "other relevant stakeholders" is insufficient to ensure that civil society will be pro-actively involved in a structured and meaningful way.

Conclusions

Overall, while **our members welcome references to Roma communities in some countries**, they lament that most of the Spring Package 2023 doesn't explicitly mention them, whereas **the Roma are present in all Member States except Malta**, and experience rates of poverty and social exclusion of over 80% in all of them except the Czech Republic. This situation was exacerbated by **the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the rising cost of living** and energy price spikes. As the Package itself highlights these very challenges, it would have warranted **more attention paid to one of Europe's most left-behind communities**.

The recurrent focus on supporting just transitions and mitigating the consequences for vulnerable groups is very positive, however it is our members' experience that, **unless the Roma are explicitly named as key target beneficiaries of support measures, mainstream initiatives and broad national and EU funds end up not reaching them**. Europe's Roma must be specifically prioritised in the EU's Recovery Package and associated funds, if the EU is serious about delivering on its commitments for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation by 2030.

Our members equally express disappointment that issues of **discrimination and antigypsyism are not present in the Package**, while these phenomena have increased in recent years. The fact that the country analyses and recommendations **do not seek to establish explicit synergies with the EU and national Roma Frameworks**, and with the National Action Plans against Racism, is considered a tremendous missed opportunity.

Finally, they deplore the **lack of recognition and support given to civil society organisations** in the documents, given that most of them are not only on the frontlines, providing essential support to communities in need, but they equally possess the knowledge, expertise, and direct links to beneficiaries which are needed to inform the design of public policies and **ensure both ownership and effectiveness** of interventions.

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*This response was drafted by **Amana Ferro** (a.ferro@ergonetwork.org), Senior Policy Adviser with the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network's Brussels office. It builds on a data collection exercise carried out in June 2023 and on the responses received from ERGO Network members in **Austria** (Romano Centro), **Belgium** (Centre de Médiation des Gens du Voyage et des Roms en Wallonie), **Bulgaria** (Integro Association), **Czech Republic** (Slovo 21), **France** (La Voix des Roms), **Germany** (Amaro Drom), **Hungary** (Katalin Nagy / Socfactor, Autonómia Foundation, RomaVersitas), **Ireland** (Pavee Point), **Lithuania** (Vilnius Roma Community Centre), **The Netherlands** (India ki Rasta), **Poland** (Jaw Dikh Foundation), **Romania** (Policy Center for Roma and Minorities), **Slovakia** (Roma Advocacy and Research Centre), and **Spain** (Federation of Roma Associations in Catalonia - FAGiC). The present joint response was endorsed by ERGO Network's contributing national members in July 2023.*

* The umbrella term "Roma" encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.), in accordance with terminology used by the [European Commission](#).