

## The European Child Guarantee: Local Dimensions and Realities for Roma Children

The European Child Guarantee is one of the flagship initiatives under the European Union to combat poverty and social exclusion among children. Adopted in 2021, it seeks to ensure that every child in Europe, especially those in vulnerable situations, has access to essential services such as:

**Early Childhood Education and Care:** Ensuring access to free and quality education and early childhood development services to help children overcome socio-economic barriers.

**Health Care:** This would include routine medical check-ups, vaccinations, and specialist care for children with disabilities or chronic conditions.

**Adequate Housing:** All children should live in safe and suitable conditions that meet all their basic needs.

**Quality Nutrition:** Food that is nutritionally adequate and healthy for the child; free school meals when family income is low.

It was developed in light of the understanding that children are one of society's most vulnerable groups, and their well-being and development are crucial to investing in Europe's future. The document stresses the importance of early intervention and an integrated approach that combines the efforts of public institutions, civil society, and international organisations.

In 2023, the Integro Association conducted research on the process of creating the National Action Plan under the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria. Our main interest was to determine whether the needs of Roma children were considered while this plan was being developed. The process was evaluated in terms of the involvement of key stakeholders, the inclusion of specific measures for Roma children, and the political commitments taken up to address real challenges on the ground.

Our research showed that representatives of Roma civil organisations were not included in the plan's elaboration process. This fact resulted in a lack of an authentic perspective on the needs of Roma children. The absence of such a perspective resulted in a serious deficit of consultations and planning of measures that would precisely meet the specific needs of Roma children and their families.

The key problems identified through the plan included the following: very few mechanisms were elaborated to remove actual barriers for Roma children to access education, health, and social services; very low program financing; and no attempts to monitor indications showing what real impact this Guarantee had on Roma.

In 2024, we expanded the framework of our study to investigate whether the European Child Guarantee and the measures foreseen within it reach Roma children at the local level. For this purpose, we documented 10 cases of Roma families living in poverty as a real "reality check" on implementing the guarantee.

This approach aims to establish if policies planned at a national level are being translated into real action and support for children and families in communities that need them most.



## Methodology of the Study

The methodology of the study included the following steps:

- 1. Development of a Questionnaire:** A questionnaire with 24 questions was developed, representing eight major areas: general information about the family, education and early childhood development services, inclusive education, healthcare, nutrition, housing conditions, social inclusion, and identification of key challenges.
- 2. Location Selection:** The Bulgarian case studies included various settlements in different parts of the country.
- 3. Semi-Structured Interviews:** Ten Roma families were interviewed by adult family members, using guiding and clarifying questions to obtain in-depth information.

The data collection tool, in tune with Bulgaria's National Action Plan under the European Child Guarantee, was drafted to be relevant to national and European priorities. These interviews have been carried out with households selected based on specific criteria: poverty, marginalisation, irregular attendance at school or kindergarten, and children suffering from chronic illnesses. This approach allows for a diversified and representative sample to identify various dimensions of poverty within Roma communities.

This introduction serves as a background understanding of the present study and highlights the importance of adopting a realistic approach to implementing policies for at-risk children. Based on the research findings, recommendations could be suggested to enhance the effectiveness of the European Child Guarantee for Bulgaria, further contributing to the better protection of rights among Roma children living in poverty.

## Case Studies from the Local Level

### Case I

The family comprises a husband, wife, and two children aged 18 and 14. The mother works as a personal assistant to the younger child, who has autism and special educational needs. The father works in construction, although his income is irregular because there is very little work during colder periods of the year.

There is a great sense of involvement and collaboration between the parents and an attempt to support the child with special needs.

The family lives in an illegally built house in a rural area. The illegal status of the home makes them feel insecure about the future of their housing situation. The family income is limited, supplemented by the mother's salary, the father's earnings from construction work, and social benefits for the child with special needs. Both children attend school regularly, although the younger child receives support from a resource teacher and attends a centre for children and youth with disabilities.

The parents were unaware of any available services, such as home care or other early childhood development services, and had never accessed them.

The area lacks good infrastructure, and the family uses a personal vehicle to transport the children. The municipal government provides free transportation to younger children to access services at the municipal centre.



In its informal status, the house is closely connected with their family's needs. Without a sense of security about their future living place, they are unable to invest in making the house decent enough for the family's livability, especially for the young child with a disability.

Furthermore, low-income family exacerbates this problem because their income levels can only accommodate inconsistent and inferior rehabilitations and services to support an autistic child. Resources are currently confined to a school resource teacher and childcare centre attendance.

## Case II

The family consists of a mother and her three children, aged 14, 9, and 4. The mother is a single parent who works as an educational mediator, trying to stabilise the children's lives as much as possible. She is assisted by her mother, a pensioner due to disability.

The family lives in a legally built house, but it is not their property. The house belongs to relatives who live outside Bulgaria, and the family is temporarily accommodated there. The house is supplied with water, sewage, a bathroom, and heating with solid fuel, but the space is very limited, and all three children share one room.

The mother works three jobs to earn an income, but the money is frequently insufficient to meet the family's needs for clothing, healthy nutrition, and extracurricular activities.

All three children regularly attend school and kindergarten. A municipal transport card provides transportation for the oldest child who studies in the municipal centre.

The mother is unaware of home care services and early childhood development programs, which suggests that informational campaigns are needed.

The main needs of the family are to be guaranteed a safe and spacious enough home for all. They also need extra financial support to provide for the children's needs, such as:

- Nutritious and diverse food.
- Appropriate clothing for all seasons.
- Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities that support their development.

## Case III

This family has four members: a mother, a father, a 12-year-old, and an 8-year-old. Both parents take part in child-rearing. The mother is a teacher who has a stable income, while the father is jobless but can only occasionally work without a contract, earning unstably irregular earnings.

The family lives in their own home, which is bought on a mortgage with a monthly payment obligation. However, the high housing and utility bills cost made them financially vulnerable.

Both children regularly attend school, though the family cannot provide them supplementary educational materials, private lessons, or extracurricular activities.

The parents are uninformed about home care for small children, among other services, which points to the need to raise awareness about such programmes or devise them if they are not in place.

No transportation is available from the Roma neighbourhood to the school in the city centre, complicating access for the older child. The younger child attends a school near his house, but it is a segregated primary school up to 4th grade and is associated with lower-quality education.



The family's primary needs include:

1. Securing stable employment for the father to ensure a steady income, enabling the family to manage their mortgage payments and meet household and educational expenses for the children.
2. Addressing transportation issues to facilitate access to better educational opportunities for the children.
3. Increasing awareness of or creating services such as home care or other supportive programs for families in need.

## Case IV

It comprises the mother and her 9-year-old daughter. The mother has been solely taking care of the child since birth, as the father eloped with them immediately after the birth of the child. The child suffers from a disability issue, and this fact has been certified accordingly.

The family dwells in a legally erected home owned by the mother's parents. The mother and child stay in one room, and the home has basic utilities such as water and electricity. The mother's parents cover housing expenses. Their main sources of income are the child's disability pension and very small alimony from the father. These funds cannot cover basic needs, especially in view of the child's health condition, which needs special medications and treatment.

The mother cannot be employed as a personal assistant because the child has received a low percentage of disability certification. Taking a permanent job will also be impossible since he has been sick so frequently and requires continuous care.

The child regularly attends school in the Roma neighbourhood. This school was chosen because of its proximity to the house, despite its segregation and poor quality of education. Lack of transportation restricts the child from studying outside the Roma neighbourhood, where schools offer better education.

The mother lacks home care services or other programs supporting early childhood development.

Although the neighbourhood does have some developed infrastructure, its municipality provides no transportation for school-aged children attending school in the town centre. For this reason, Roma students are excluded due to specific needs to participate in education processes.

The primary needs of the family include:

1. Opportunities for the mother to work and increase the family's income would improve the child's access to treatment and medications.
2. Providing reliable transportation for children in need and allowing them access to schools that offer a higher education quality.

## Case V

The family consists of two parents and a 7-year-old child. Both parents actively support child-rearing, reflecting stability and family life commitment. However, the father is often absent because of seasonal labour migration abroad, burdening the mother.

The family lives in an illegally constructed house. Illegal construction means uncertainty about housing rights and limits access to basic services such as water supply, sewage, electricity, and adequate infrastructure.



The house is part of an extended family property, with other relatives living there. The space is small, compromising the child's comfort and privacy.

The legal status regarding housing exposes the family to vulnerability, with social isolation at a higher risk. The family migrates seasonally, taking up temporary employment abroad, such as mushroom picking and grape harvesting, hence unstable and irregular income. Financial instability creates uncertainty and limits opportunities for future planning. This also negatively affects the psychosocial stability of the child since the prolonged absences of the father disturb the family climate.

The child goes to school regularly and is attending the first grade. The lack of problems with attendance is evidence of the family's responsible approach to education.

During early childhood, the child attended a project for extra Bulgarian language classes, which is a very positive indicator of the family's openness to various education initiatives. The family has not used any other services or programs to stimulate early childhood development.

The main family's needs derive from the house's illegal condition, which questions its future and destination as a home.

In addition to improving housing conditions, the family requires opportunities for stable income for both parents, which would lead to:

1. Better access to quality education.
2. Improved healthcare.
3. The possibility of living in a better and more stable environment.

## Case VI

The family is a three-child household reared by their maternal grandparents: twin girls, age 15, and one boy, age 7. The parents are divorced, and the father has been absent for many years. The mother resides abroad, seeing very little of her children.

However, the family lives in their own house, which is not registered. This puts them in a very vulnerable situation and restricts their possibilities of accessing services that aim to improve housing conditions. It also reduces their legal protection. The house is big enough but does not have a bathroom, which complicates the care of the children and the maintenance of personal hygiene. The family argues they cannot save money for bathroom construction due to insufficient income.

Limited income prohibits the family from meeting all their basic needs. Regarding income, they have only seasonal employment: One relies on the grandmother during summer, while another depends on the grandfather as a casual construction labourer.

All three children are attending school. The older children take responsibility for their younger brother, escorting him to school, helping with his education, and assisting him with homework.

The family's primary needs include:

1. Securing legal status for their home to improve their housing situation and ensure legal protection.



2. Building a bathroom with running hot water enhances living conditions and personal hygiene.
3. Addressing the legal issue of guardianship, as the grandparents are not officially recognised as the children's legal guardians. This prevents them from fully exercising their rights and responsibilities as caretakers.

## Case VII

The family comprises five members: two parents and three children aged 7, 5, and 10 months. Both parents are involved with childcare but must struggle to satisfy the basic needs of all family members.

The family stays in an illegal house under extremely poor living conditions. Due to a lack of legal status in housing, there is a feeling of insecurity and an inability to access fundamental services or realise improvements.

The family's only source of income is social benefits and the father's casual earnings as a woodcutter. These earnings are insufficient to provide for the basic needs of food, clothes, heating, and education.

The two older children attend school and kindergarten, while the mother is fully occupied with caring for the 10-month-old baby, limiting her ability to contribute to the family's income.

The home is outside the regulated area, and due to the lack of infrastructure in the court, access to school and kindergarten is only possible by narrow, muddy paths. It is difficult for the family to fully provide healthy nutrition, appropriate clothes, and healthcare for the children.

The family's primary needs include:

1. **Legal Housing Status and Infrastructure:**  
Addressing the illegal status of their home and improving the infrastructure in the neighbourhood to ensure safer and easier access to educational institutions and services.
2. **Stable and Sufficient Income:**  
Providing opportunities for more stable and reliable income sources for the family to cover essential needs such as:
  - Nutritious and diverse food.
  - Proper clothing for all seasons.
  - School supplies and other education-related expenses.
3. **Support for Education and Healthcare:**  
Ensuring access to better health services and educational support to enhance the children's development and well-being.

## Case VIII

The family consists of seven members: one grandmother, one grandfather, two parents, and three children aged 4, 3, and 11 months. The family shares resources and responsibilities in an extended household.



The family lives in an illegally constructed house over twenty years ago. Without legal standing, loan limitations do not allow further renovation of the highly dilapidated house.

The family has two working adults and receives social benefits, but the funds are insufficient to cover the basic needs of food, medicine, and utility expenses.

Only one of the children goes to kindergarten, while the other two are not yet at the age of kindergarten or nursery. The family does not own a car or have any potential for public transport to the city. This results in irregular kindergarten appearances during all seasons of the year, but specifically during winter, when it becomes a problem even to walk to school.

The family's primary needs include:

**1. Legal Housing Status and Repairs:**

Addressing the illegal status of their home will enable long-term planning and investments in improving housing conditions.

**2. Income Stability and Growth:**

Increasing income opportunities for the family to ensure:

- Adequate and healthy nutrition for the children.
- Necessary school supplies and access to extracurricular activities.

**3. Improved Transportation Options:**

Ensuring access to reliable transportation to facilitate regular kindergarten attendance for the children and access to essential services in the city centre.

## Case IX

The family comprises two parents and four children aged 1, 2, 4, and 5. The parents are young, 25-36 years old, and take care of the children without support from relatives or institutions.

The family lives in a dilapidated house with one bedroom, kitchen, and living room. They have running water, but electricity is frequently cut off because they do not pay the bills. In winter, rubbish products such as old clothes, plastic, tyres, and furniture are normally burned to heat the house.

The father has casual construction or agricultural work; because of this, the income is irregular and really insufficient. The mother does not work since she has to care for the children. The family lives on child benefits that barely cover their basic needs and often rely on neighbours and relatives for food and clothes.

The children often get sick, but the family can seldom provide all the necessary medications. They do not receive monthly social assistance because they have never been registered with the local Labor Bureau.

Two of the children are of school age but rarely stay in kindergarten because their families cannot afford clothes and shoes for them.

The primary needs of the family include:





1. **Adequate Housing Conditions:**

Ensuring access to proper housing, potentially through social housing programs, to provide a safe and healthy living environment for the children.

2. **Stable Employment Opportunities:**

Facilitating access to permanent jobs for the parents to improve the family's financial stability.

3. **Material Support:**

Assisting with:

- Nutritious and diverse food for the children.
- Appropriate seasonal clothing and footwear to ensure regular attendance at kindergarten and better overall well-being.

4. **Access to Healthcare:**

Enhancing access to regular medical care and necessary medications to address the frequent illnesses of the children.

## Case X

The family consists of a mother and five boys aged between 4 and 16. The father abandoned the family three years ago and has never been in contact with the children. Six months ago, the mother was sentenced to three years' imprisonment on theft charges. After the mother's imprisonment, the children were left in the care of their aunt, who moved into their house to look after them.

The family lives in an illegal two-room home. The space is severely inadequate, with children sharing beds or sleeping on the floor. The house has electricity but lacks consistent running water and a bathroom.

The children are in the legal custody of their aunt. The family's main source of income is child benefits; however, they often borrow food, clothes, and shoes from neighbours and relatives.

All the children go to school, but there are frequent absences due to lack of food, lack of proper clothes, or simply lack of motivation to go to school. The absence of parents has greatly reduced their level of supervision and discipline.

The family's key needs include:

1. **Material Support:**

- Providing nutritious and diverse food for the children.
- Ensuring access to appropriate clothing and shoes to facilitate regular school attendance.

2. **Psychosocial Support:**

- Implementing services to compensate for the absence of parental care, such as mentorship programs, after-school activities, or counselling to support the children's emotional and social development.

3. **Improved Living Conditions:**

- Addressing the lack of adequate housing, including access to running water and proper sanitation facilities, to improve their quality of life.





## Needs

The analysis of the described cases identifies several groups of needs that require measures to address them:

### 1. Ensuring Access to Quality Social Services

**Recommendation:** Ensure that all vulnerable families, including large families, single parents, and families with informal guardians, have access to social services that support children and their guardians.

#### Measures:

- Expand existing services by establishing new Community Support Centers (CSCs) in areas with a high concentration of vulnerable families.
- Develop mobile teams of social workers and other specialists to provide support directly within communities.
- Provide targeted vouchers for access to social services such as kindergartens, early childhood development programs, and psychological support for children and parents.

### 2. Improving Housing Conditions

**Recommendation:** Establish a national program for renovating, legalising, and building housing for vulnerable families with children, aimed at improving hygiene and living conditions, safety, and long-term stability.

#### Measures:

- Develop a mechanism for legalising existing illegal housing, particularly in Roma neighbourhoods.
- Introduce interest-free loans and subsidies for home repairs, including improving access to water, electricity, and heating.
- Expand social housing programs, prioritising large families, single parents, and families with children with disabilities.

### 3. Ensuring Access to Quality Education

**Recommendation:** Remove barriers to education by providing transportation, free school materials, and extracurricular activities for children from low-income families.

#### Measures:

- Introduce free public transportation for students from vulnerable communities living in remote areas.
- Provide packages with school supplies, clothing, and footwear for children from socially disadvantaged families.
- Develop programs for additional academic support targeting students at risk of dropping out of the education system.

### 4. Strengthening Healthcare for Children



**Recommendation:** Ensure access to free healthcare services, including preventive check-ups, medications, and specialised medical care for children from vulnerable families.

**Measures:**

- Expand the scope of the national health insurance system to cover medications for chronic illnesses in children and therapies for children with disabilities.
- Establish mobile medical units in remote areas to provide preventive check-ups and immunisations.

## 5. Combating Child Poverty Through Financial Incentives

**Recommendation:** Increase targeted social benefits and introduce additional financial incentives for families with children living in extreme poverty.

**Measures:**

- Increase child allowances for large families and provide additional financial assistance for single parents.
- Introduce food voucher programs that can be used to purchase essential products.
- Provide targeted financial support to cover heating costs during the winter.

## 6. Promoting Employment for Parents

**Recommendation:** Encourage parental employment by creating flexible jobs and temporary employment programs tailored to their needs.

**Measures:**

- Develop subsidised employment programs targeting parents with low qualifications.
- Organize training and requalification programs for parents at risk of social exclusion.

## 7. Raising Awareness About Available Services

**Recommendation:** Conduct large-scale information campaigns targeting vulnerable families to educate them about their rights and opportunities to access social services.

**Measures:**

- Establish a network of local mediators to inform families about available services.
- Organize regular community meetings to directly discuss problems and solutions.

## 8. Facilitating Formal Guardianship

**Recommendation:** Streamline administrative procedures for granting guardianship to relatives caring for children.

**Measures:**

- Provide free legal assistance to relatives who take on the care of children at risk.
- Accelerate procedures for formally recognising guardianship to ensure social benefits and support access.



## 9. Prioritizing Access to Healthy Food

**Recommendation:** Ensure stable access to nutritious food for children from vulnerable families.

**Measures:**

- Expand the scope of programs providing free breakfasts and lunches in schools.
- Provide food packages for families with children at risk of malnutrition.

## 10. Creating Integrated Local Services

**Recommendation:** Introduce multisectoral support centres that combine social, health, and educational services in one location.

**Measures:**

- Establish integrated support centres in areas with a high concentration of vulnerable families.
- Ensure intersectoral collaboration among institutions to provide more effective support for families.
- Fund innovative models for working with children and families at risk.

The study, conducted between June and November 2024, clearly demonstrates that the measures outlined in the Action Plan under the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria fail to reach Roma communities living in poverty.

Although the plan includes ambitious goals and key measures to ensure access to education, healthcare, social services, and improved housing conditions, the actual implementation of these measures is significantly limited.

## Key Gaps and Challenges

### 1. Lack of Participation of Roma Communities in Policy Development

- The process of creating the Action Plan did not involve representatives of Roma civil organisations, resulting in gaps in identifying the specific needs of Roma children.

### 2. Insufficient Funding for Targeted Programs

- The financial resources allocated for implementing the measures are inadequate to address the scale of challenges Roma communities face.

### 3. Limited Access to Services

- Roma families continue to face barriers to accessing quality education, healthcare, and social services.

### 4. Ineffective Monitoring

- There is no established mechanism for measuring the impact of the plan on Roma children and their families, making it difficult to track progress.



## Conclusions from the Reality Check

Based on the analysis of the 10 cases, the study reveals that although the plan outlines appropriate measures on paper, their implementation does not lead to tangible improvements in the lives of Roma children and their families.

Instead of fulfilling its role as a tool for reducing poverty and social exclusion, the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria remains far from achieving its goals for Roma communities.

## Call to Action

The current situation requires an urgent reassessment of the approach and introducing effective implementation mechanisms to ensure that the outlined measures reach the most vulnerable groups. This includes:

- **Active Inclusion:** Actively involving Roma civil organisations in the planning and monitoring policies.
- **Targeted Funding:** Allocating resources specifically for programs that address the unique needs of Roma children.
- **Transparent Accountability Mechanisms:** Establishing clear monitoring systems based on measurable indicators.
- **Cultural Sensitivity and Anti-Discrimination:** Promoting cultural awareness and anti-discrimination practices in implementing measures.

